ABSTRACT

The Good Place: An Approach to Grapple with the Chaos of 2020-21

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In an unfortunate turn of events, the year 2020 was not the year of 'perfect vision' that it was so highly anticipated to be. The uncertainties and tragedies due the devastating COVID-19 pandemic and an overwhelming increase in political and social disruption have only continued in 2021. These events undoubtedly have brought an acute focus on death and increased overall anxiety due to the reality of a premature death. This thesis addresses the ways in which 2020 and 2021 have created a mental shift in the United States and proposes a unique strategy to cope with the shift. The proposed strategy is anchored in the award-winning show, *The Good Place*, developed by Michael Schur. *The Good Place* (*TGP*) grapples with life after death, moral action, and the relationship between the two. *TGP* serves as a platform that those who have found themselves in existential crises during this year can use to explore moral and ethical enlightenment.

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THE GOOD PLACE: AN APPROACH TO GRAPPLE WITH THE CHAOS OF 2020-

21

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

What matters isn't if people are good or bad. What matters is, if they're trying to be better today than they were yesterday. You asked me where my hope comes from? That's my answer.

-Michael, *The Good Place*

CHAPTER ONE

Observing the American Perspective on the Afterlife

How Did We Get Here?

It is safe to say that the events that have ensued in the first two years of this new decade have radically transformed the lives of billions globally, and millions in the United States. On top of an election year, United States citizens have encountered a plethora of chaotic economic, social, ethical, health, and political events. The year that was meant to be a cultural reset, the start of a new decade, a modern version of the roaring twenties, has instead devastated the wallets, hearts, and minds of most Americans. Specifically, the year 2020 has exacerbated the mental, social, and physical health issues of many in the United States. For example, self-reported symptoms of anxiety and depressive disorder increased considerably in patients across the United States from April to June of 2020, compared with the same time frame in 2019 (Czeisler et al., 2020, 1050). A study by Czeisler et al. sought to assess mental health, substance use, and suicidal ideation during the pandemic, by conducting representative panel surveys among adults aged ≥18 years across the United States during a weeklong time period (2020, 1050). It was found that overall, 40.9% of survey takers reported at least one adverse mental or behavioral health condition, such as symptoms of anxiety disorder or depressive disorder (30.9%), symptoms of a trauma- and stressor-related disorder (TSRD) tied to the pandemic (26.3%), and substance use increase or commencement to cope with stress or emotions related to COVID-19 (13.3%) (Czeisler et al., 2020, 1052-53).

The findings of this Czeisler study, the millions lost to COVID-19 complications, along with an overwhelming increase in suicidal ideation across individuals found by Wang et al., points to a more profound and complex subject: death and an afterlife.[1] The uptick in interest and awareness of death and dying calls for a deeper analysis. Typically, it is found that the philosophical or moral frameworks through which individuals operate inform their ethical or non-ethical decision making (Ayala, 2010, 9015). Thus, a heightened awareness of death that has plagued our nation is worth noting. Like any topic, however, it is also critical to dissect the current relevance, the historical context, and widespread belief to fully grasp the impact of such a framework in an individual's life.

How 2020-21 and the COVID-19 Pandemic Restructures Everything

As mentioned before, the COVID-19 pandemic and the last year of life on Earth has restructured the way most humans on this earth approach life, and especially how Americans have in the last year of our lives. A year into this mess, it is still unclear who truly belongs in the 'at-risk' populations, though it is clear that the immunocompromised are. In a time where many Americans are unaware of their underlying conditions due to lack of access to health care, logically many are increasingly fearful of premature deaths related to the COVID-19 virus and the rising number of sister strains. Whether Americans have relied on dualism, realism, or the more applicable existentialism[2], the aftermath of a COVID-19 world includes the re-framing of ideologies of thousands. Early into the

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[1] The literature on the deleterious effects of the pandemic on mental health is ever-growing and further supports the conclusions above. See, e.g., (Ornell et al.), (Rababa et al.) (Farr) (O'Connor et al.) (Paredes et al.)

[2] These ideologies are discussed later in this chapter.

pandemic, sociologists have explored and written commentaries on the ways in which different branches of social theory can shed light on the implications of COVID-19 restrictions for social life (Ward, 2020, 726-35). Some researchers even have taken it upon themselves to share gripping personal accounts, describing how they "…struggled to hold on to [their] existence but eventually grasped… recovery [and] reclaimed everyday activity over a period of 4 weeks" (Finlay, 2020, 321).

Accounts like these, systematic reviews on the mental health, and sociological perspectives of Americans in this, for lack of a better term, unprecedented time give us a great foundation for this thesis. This foundation allows for a framework and additional context on how a sitcom such as *The Good Place* heavily plays into many of the unforeseeable mental health, philosophical, and sociological side-effects of this global pandemic. As the following chapters give space for a thorough analysis of *TGP*, they will also create a dialogue for how the pandemic has influenced many of the principles discussed in the show. The creators of the show successfully provided a more palpable understanding of moral philosophy and ethics; thus, this thesis has a similar goal of providing an analysis of the show, the American mind, and how the COVID-19 pandemic is related.

An Analysis of Different Afterlife Beliefs

The world seems to grow increasingly hectic and non-sensical, and the years 2020-21 have embodied a hyperbole of this sentiment. The idea of moral responsibility and the afterlife and why it changes how individuals behave is one subject that is justly expected to remain important during such a time as this, if not more. According to a recent worldwide

poll, belief in the continuation of one's consciousness, whether it be a soul or energy, life after death remains to be a quite common idea and it is often influenced by one's moral philosophy (Eshleman, 2016, 164).[3] Nonetheless, long before the world of COVID-19, the world's greatest thinkers pondered the moral implications of our actions and how said implications impacted afterlife destinies. These philosophers have explored theories ranging from realism to dualism and most popularly existentialism, all of which have allowed room to grapple thoroughly with the idea of an afterlife, including the effect moral actions have on the nature of any post-mortem experience. Statistically, many studies suggest that religious belief, and especially a belief in an afterlife, affects how one perceives the justifiability of a transgression, spanning across a wide range of moral actions (Atkinson et al., 2010, 43).[4] Overall, the studies strongly suggest that an absence of a religious belief leads to an increase in justifying moral digressions and the presence of religious beliefs leads to an increased disdain for moral digressions (Atkinson, 2010, 45).

When learning about the afterlife beliefs of Americans, it is also important to note that Americans are reported to be two times more likely than their European counterparts to believe in an afterlife, and the belief is not declining according to this study (Harley, et. al, 1993, 269). This exaggerated difference is quite perplexing and leads one to ponder as to why the contrast is so stark. One could first start by observing how different nations hold different religious values and recognize that historically, Europe has a rocky relationship with existentialism and religion which may have led to a disinterest or lack of belief in an

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[3] Often, we are working with "folk moralities" (what ordinary people think about morality), which are influenced by systems like dualism, realism, and existentialism, but are not strictly equivalent with them.

[4] This is not to say that a lack of belief in the afterlife or being particularly non-religious leads to a disinterest in moral action or right living, but (Kaur, 2020) and (Ward & King, 2018) help explain the claim more.

afterlife. On the other hand, the Founding Fathers of the United States and their fervent supporters took pride in creating a nation based in part upon freedom of religion. This has been so integral that it has become associated strongly with American culture. Though it is important to try to understand these differences, it is also critical to understand the different types of perspectives that have reigned over the American mind throughout its history (Crowell, 2020, 3).

Three Major Moral Philosophies on the Afterlife for Americans

Though there are undoubtedly numerous moral philosophies that can be explored in relation to afterlife belief in Americans, this section of the thesis focuses on and explores three major branches that cover the more generally held beliefs. The three were chosen based on their high frequency in literature and their relevance to *The Good Place.* The first of these is moral dualism, which focuses on the separation of body and soul and how this impacts the afterlife. Next, moral realism merits a thorough exploration as it is a dominating view which dictates that there are a set list of values and correct beliefs that must be followed in order to successfully enter the desired afterlife. Moral realism is no longer as popular as other philosophies but is worth noting due to the polarizing effect this view has when debating the topic of an afterlife. Finally, this chapter will explore the increasingly popular existentialism, which has been understandably emphasized in this time of the COVID-19 pandemic.[5] The focus is placed on these philosophies so that a stasis

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[5] As mentioned before, these three branches are by no means all-encompassing, and do not necessarily address some of the popular beliefs held by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), however, these three are the more prevailing beliefs found in the United States, which is why they were chosen.

of context is reached and so the readers may be informed of the common moral philosophies that Americans hold in regard to death and the afterlife.

Dualism

The first major branch of moral philosophy to explore in this afterlife context is dualism, or the idea that, "for some particular domain, there are two fundamental kinds or categories of things or principles" (Robinson, 2020, 1). Particularly, the branch of moral dualism that focuses more on afterlife philosophy is that which clearly distinguishes the mind-body complex. Some individuals believe that if humans are nothing more than just bodies, and death destroys these bodies, that humans are destroyed with them and there is nothing left in them as person, with the caveat that the physical parts of the bodies and the particles that make it up will be scattered and perhaps even temporarily come to be part of the bodies of other living organisms (Loose et al., 2018, 23). Those that adhere to the beliefs of dualism, however, propose that we are immaterial minds or souls who are incarnate, so then even the complete annihilation of our physical bodies does not signify our total destruction as persons (Loose et al., 2018, 23) In fact, one of the many arguments for dualism is centered on the thought of our existing without our bodies, in an afterlife for example (Loose et al., 2018, 23). This is generally the argument that comes to mind when the phrase moral dualism is brought up in the realm of discussion centered on the afterlife.

Some dualists, however, do not adhere to the idea that the soul continues after death. Instead, some take the perspective that if dualism is in fact the true way to view the soul, or as relatively true as possible, it does not always mean that souls always will survive the death of their bodies, which just adds another nuance to the belief (Hasker, 1989, 208–

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09). Another perspective an adherer of moral dualism might have is that the fundamental dependence of the body is so essential that souls only come into existence as embodied persons when the bodies reach a certain constitution, therefore the soul and body simultaneously cease to exist (Hasker, 1989, 208–09). Noting these contrasting views of the same theory of afterlife philosophy are integral to comprehending the duality and complexity of afterlife philosophy. Without understanding both aspects of dualism, one ignores the characteristics that provide the full picture of this philosophical view.

The idea of moral dualism seemingly is what has allowed for the dialectical space to claim that our dependence on our bodies is contingent on or is essential only given the present laws of nature, which can be manipulated by a supreme being (Hasker, 1989, 209). In other terms, moral dualism only can be true if the laws of nature are specifically governed by a higher power, or what many call a god. One study explores the idea of dualism further by observing the effects that believing in dualism had on mortality salience (MS), or one's awareness of the inevitability of death (Heflick et al., 2015, 267). The researchers theorized that body-self dualism and death awareness interact to influence afterlife belief (Heflick et al., 2015, 267). Specifically, although MS motivates afterlife belief, the authors suggest that actual belief also hinges on body–self dualism. Hence it was expected that MS would increase afterlife belief only to the extent that people perceive themselves dualistically.

This understanding of dualism aids in putting afterlife philosophies into perspective. If certain Americans view themselves in a dualistic way, this likely informs how they view their moral actions. Thus, understanding this large branch of philosophy

helps one begin to grapple with how some Americans make moral decisions that reflect a dualistic outlook.

Realism

Another philosophy of afterlife that is frequently referred to in the field is that of moral realism. Moral realists propose that things should be taken at face value (Sayre-McCord, 2020, 1). The common and essentially defining ground of moral realism is that at least some moral claims actually are true value (Sayre-McCord, 1, 2020, 2). There are differing facets of moral realism, and even large proponents of anti-realism, but the statis of these moral facts, and the belief that they remain facts even if and when they are seen or used incorrectly remain true value (Sayre-McCord, 1, 2020, 2). Along these lines, those who adhere to moral realism can maintain that there is a destination for the soul after it's physical host dies and that the destination is based on. An observer of such philosophy therefore would strictly adhere to a set of rules and would use this to judge others accordingly. Therefore, this line of philosophy is more controversial than the other two, however, it is not uncommon to find this way of thinking in the United States.

The four presuppositions about religious discourse and belief are important to note to best comprehend the perspective of religious realism (Eshleman, 2016, 165). According to Eshleman, these four presuppositions are:

1. Religious discourse includes sentences that express (or are understood to entail) propositions.

2. These propositions refer to and/or describe a non-natural transcendent reality (and thus are, in principle, not fully subject to investigation via the empirical sciences)

3. The appropriate attitude to take toward the propositions stated in (or entailed by) religious discourse is truth-normed belief and at least some religious propositions successfully refer to and/or describe a non-natural transcendent reality.

4. At least some religious propositions successfully refer to and/or describe a nonnatural transcendent reality" (Eshleman, 2016, 165).

Eshleman argues that the first three presuppositions delineate what the conventional religious person is trying to do with at least some religious language and the appropriate attitudinal stance to take toward the relevant propositions (2016, 165). The presuppositions provide a solid framework through which realists grapple with the ideas of death and the afterlife with, as well as moral action during their time on earth in general.

Typically, those who adhere to a moral realist view follow the beliefs expressed in the last three of the four presuppositions. Many of the major U.S. religions have beliefs that fall under this idea of moral realism (Gamwell, 1993, 476). Therefore, it is widely held in the U.S. that, regardless of what religion, there is a certain set of events that will occur when a human takes their last breath. The realism approach to the afterlife will be delineated in one's holy text, whether it be the Torah, Bible, Quran and even the Eastern religious texts.[6] Here, in the holy books of different faiths is where specifics on heaven or hell can be found, and where many moral realists place the justification for their rules and regulations (Gamwell, 1993,478).

As expected, moral realism encounters many counterarguments. For example, a hermeneutical non-realist often rejects one or all three of these first three conditions, arguing that the realist misconstrues the use, or purpose, of religious language outside of philosophical circles (Eshleman, 2016, 165). This is often the case for those who feel that

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[6] This chapter of the thesis focuses primarily on the Abrahamic faiths due to the percentages of Americans who adhere to these traditions (NW et al.); Eastern faith traditions will be mentioned in this thesis as well.

religious adherers are being too critical or taking holy texts out of context, an understandable argument. As moral anti-realists develop their philosophy against realism, they often will settle on opposite beliefs on moral rules and the afterlife. Disillusion (Eshleman, 2016, 165). George Sayre-McCord explains this contrast well when he argues that

> [what] distinguishes realists from antirealists about morals has disappointingly little to do with the particular moral claims each willingly endorses. In fact, moral anti-realists expend a great deal energy trying to show that their views about the status of moral claims are perfectly compatible with saying all the same things any decent, wholesome, respectable person would (1986, 1-2).

From this perspective, I would propose that anti-realists are not as fervently defending what is right or wrong, like their realist counterparts, as much as they are trying to justify why anything could be right. The debate between realism and anti-realism is important to note because of how fundamental these philosophies are to both faith-based and non-faith based afterlife perspectives (Eshleman, 2016, 166). With this understanding of realism versus anti-realism, I now turn my attention to death and the afterlife in moral existentialism.

Existentialism

When exploring existentialism, one can feel like the *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* in C.D. Friedrich's masterpiece.[7] Existentialism somewhat relates to the previous two philosophies in that its definition is by no means closed nor rigidly defined by boundaries. Instead, one may define existentialism "…as the philosophical theory which holds that a further set of categories, governed by the norm of authenticity, is necessary to grasp human

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[7] The *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, also sometimes translated as *The Walker above the Mist*, is an oil painting from the Romanticism artistic era painted by Caspar David Friedrich. The work depicts a young man on a rocky precipice facing away from the viewer. He is gazing out into a landscape enveloped by a thick sea of fog. The painting is often used to embody Kantian self-reflection, as the wanderer gazes into a murky scene. (Michael Edward Gorra, 11-12, 2004) (Black et al., 1056, 2010)

existence" (Crowell, 2020, 2). This same article explaining existentialism expounds on the idea that the word itself often triggers themes like "…dread, boredom, alienation, the absurd, freedom, commitment, nothingness, and so on…" and how they find their philosophical value in the same search for a fresh framework, like the early existentialists aimed to do (Crowell, 2020, 2).

Understanding and exploring existentialism in our current world climate is primarily the reason why the topic of death in the COVID-19 pandemic has become central to this thesis (Vandekerckhove,2020, 2). Similar to our analysis of moral realism, there are three main insights that those who relate to an existential philosophy may observe. The first is that existentialism places a primacy upon the individual and the existential self that is continually being formed within the workplace (MacMillan et al., 2014, 27). Next, the philosophy of existentialism allows for a coherent examination of individual and organizational-level decision making and ethics as an integral part of the philosophy (MacMillan et al., 2014, 27). Third, existentialism is "inherently 'applied' and focused on 'process' in that it allows for an understanding of the meaning of work" (MacMillan et al., 2014, 27). Another common tenant in existentialism is the importance of death as a pivotal aspect of life's meaning (Vandekerckhove, 2020, 4). This same article states that "[another] is that people are thrown into the world; that they exist before there is essence and cannot but create or construct essence and meaning" (Vandekerckhove, 4, 2020). We find that we have endless choices and possibilities, and therefore there is an inescapable responsibility of the individual (Vandekerckhove, 2020, 4).

Essentially, it becomes a great challenge to live authentic lives in the indifference of the everydayness, but it is also through this framework that we have seen many

philosophers apply greatly debated topics, including ours of death and an afterlife. Analyzing life with an existential lens allows moral beings to pursue a deeper dialogue with the impact of moral action and death. Existentialism is also a central theme of *The Good Place*, and it is frequently discussed and grappled with throughout the show's storyline.

<p style="text-align:center">What Now?</p>

Now that we have been given the opportunity to dive deeper into some of the main afterlife philosophies, we can turn towards tying several of these themes together. In the next couple of chapters, I will explore the many themes that are thoroughly addressed in *The Good Place* via character development, compelling lines, and the explicit philosophy lessons that are interwoven in its captivating plot. Following this analysis of the show, I plan to properly explain the way in which this last year has impacted the citizens of the United States mentally and socially to place them in a posture to grapple with afterlife philosophy and how their moral actions relate to this.[8] This will then provide the room to explore how *The Good Place* is a great medium of moral and ethical education, and why this topic merits further research.

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[8] Early 2020-2021, a year full of a pandemic, social and political unrest, and inconceivable loss.

CHAPTER TWO

Our Actions and How They Fit in with *The Good Place* Seasons 1-2

Our beliefs about our actions

The first chapter of this thesis was centered around exploring different moral philosophies on the afterlife and how the context of a global pandemic and every other unforeseen circumstance that ensued in the last year amplifies the importance of understanding these philosophies. Now, what follows is a closer look at the theories of moral action, how such theories affect action, and how this dialogue is embedded throughout *The Good Place*. Ultimately, in this chapter I argue that due to strong tie between American moral identity and action, that it is helpful to analyze the first two seasons of *The Good Place*, as it explores such issues.

Moral Identity Allows for Moral Action

From a young age, humans are told that certain actions are good and other actions are bad and to act accordingly in order to avoid punishment (Britton, 2015, 495). The way in which actions are organized into the good and bad categories varies based on what the philosophical and moral backgrounds of our parents. A child raised in an affluent neighborhood in Cairo, Egypt is not likely to align morally with a child who was raised in Beverly Hills, California, nor is the child in Beverly Hills necessarily likely to align morally with the kids from the neighbor's house across the street (Brey et al., 2015, 19-26). Yet with a close eye one can find threads of similarities and at least a common motivation to 'do good' and 'be good,' regardless of what those specific definitions mean

for each family (Brey et al., 2015, 4). Of course, this sentiment is met with outliers or examples of families where morals and values are not central, but it is seldom contested that we are moral beings (Ayala, 2010, 9015).

The idea of humans as products of our environment and upbringing, better described as nurture theory[9], creates a pathway for the exploration of moral identity and moral action. Moral identity typically refers to the extent to which being a moral person is important for an individual's identity (Hardy & Carlo, 2011, 215). In terms of individual characteristics, one study found academic achievement to be a positive predictor of moral identity a couple years lar, and internalizing behaviors and beliefs, such as withdrawing and feeling worthless, as a negative predictor (Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1999, 375-386). Accordingly, in a study of young adult moral exemplars in social organizations, exemplars were higher than comparison peers on agreeableness and were more advanced in moral reasoning, faith development, adult attachment, and identity formation (Matsuba & Walker, 2004, 427-428). It is through these findings, and others that moral identity can be viewed as a means to link moral judgments to moral conduct (Hardy & Carlo, 2011, 215). Nonetheless, as the age of technology progresses, and as the world becomes ever so complex, moral identities and what they are based on are changing (Krettenauer and Victor, 2017,1590-1591). This shift is not only global, instead it is quite evident in the American context.

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[9] Nurture theory is a part of the Nature vs. Nurture debate; the nature of nurture: from a passive model of imposed environments to an active model of shaped experience (Plomin et al,1, 2014.).

Moral Action in the American Context

As much as the citizens of the United States would like to take responsibility for their own moral formation, the melting pot of a nation is equally a melting pot of philosophical and moral ideas (Pew Research Center, 2014,1). Thus far I have yet to explicitly define moral action. As stated before, beliefs on morality differ from household to household, and even within households, therefore it is difficult to solidly define moral action. One sociologist describes moral action as "…an action that defines the actor as a certain kind of socially recognized person, both within and across fields" (Tavory, 2011, 277). The sociological perspective of moral action is also relevant when analyzing the American perspective on morality.

As recent as 2018, Americans believe that the United States once was a moral nation with citizens that adhered to a mostly shared set of beliefs, but that this sense of morality is concerningly declining (McCarthy, 2018, 2).[10] Historically, much of American ethics, law, and moral action fell upon John Locke's Social Contract Theory and its close relation to religious undertones (Meyer, 2016, 111-112). This has changed now more than ever as moral action and beliefs on moral topics have shifted to a more liberal or open-minded perspective (Newport, 2015, 2-5). This increasing stance of open-mindedness and the ethical complexities of this world have produced a need to reconcile the two, especially for those who have found themselves in an existential crisis.[11] Enter *The Good Place.[12]*

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[10] This Gallup poll was based on telephone interviews conducted May 1-10, 2018; a random sample of 1,024 adults, aged 18 and older, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia was used.

[11] In this context, existential crisis is defined as a moment at which an individual questions the very foundations of his life: whether his life has any meaning, purpose or value (Butėnaitė-Świtkiewicz et al., 2016).

[12] (*The Good Place*, 2016)

The First Season of the Good Place

The show begins with Eleanor Shellstrop waking up to a wall that is painted in a calming cream which says "Everything is Fine" in another calming green color. Eleanor is then welcomed by Michael, her neighborhood's architect, who informs her that she had died and landed herself into The Good Place. Michael goes on to explain how she was a phenomenal human rights activist and lawyer on earth, who saved many lives and because of her selfless life, she racked up enough points to make it to the Good Place. Eleanor gets a tour of literal heaven, her dream house, meets the neighborhood's all-knowing and powerful assistant, Janet, and most importantly meets her soulmate, Chidi Anagonye, a professor of moral ethics and philosophy from Senegal (Season 1, Chapter 1).

Upon Michael's departure, Eleanor gets Chidi to promise that as her soulmate he must not do any harm to her, which he agrees to unequivocally. Eleanor sighs with relief but immediately throws a fork in the harmonious melody of *TGP* by announcing to Chidi that she in fact did not live the saintly life that Michael just described to them. Chidi is sent in an instant panic, and the rest of the first season is a development of this moral dilemma.

Along the way, they discover that another resident is not meant to be there too, Jason Mendoza, who was identified at first as Jianyu, a Buddhist monk. Jason confides in Eleanor and Chidi, who help him hide this truth from his soulmate, Tahani Al-Jamil, a British socialite billionaire who constantly throws lavish parties for the residents. Chidi sets to teach his two new students all about moral ethics and philosophy, and though he thoroughly struggles at first, he is increasingly successful at teaching them.

The creators of *The Good Place* love to make fun of moral philosophers throughout the show and often bring up that no one wants to talk about such deep topics. This is one reason why this medium is a great way to discuss the deeper questions of life. The comedic and bite-sized bits of moral philosophy embedded in the show prompted this thesis in this direction and inspires one to ponder the deeper questions of life. For example, in terms of moral action, the first episode addresses it clearly. When welcoming the newly deceased residents into their new eternal homes, the neighborhood's architect, Michael explains that during each human's time on earth, every action they performed had either a positive or negative point value, depending on how much 'good' or 'bad' was put into the universe and that their point total at the end of their life determined their afterlife destination ("Everything Is Fine"). The writers really dig deep into this topic in the third season of this show, which we will explore better in later chapters.

Everything is not as it Seems

Exploring Season 2

As the four main characters grow and get to know each other better, many suspicious events occur such as garbage falling from the sky, pits opening in the ground, an almighty judge— strangely named Shawn—arriving to inform them that the Good Place has the wrong Eleanor and introducing the 'real' Eleanor. Eleanor and Jason find out from Janet that there is a 'Medium Place' where a Mindy St. Claire was sent, since she was a crummy human being whose last action on Earth skyrocketed her points and left her with a medium overall score. The four are left to decide who is sent to the Bad Place, and as

they are arguing we reach the first season's pivotal moment: Eleanor realizing that they are all torturing each other and this has never been 'the Good Place,' but instead they all four have been in 'the Bad Place.' This introduces the idea of everything not being as it truly seems and is a great exemplar of a mind shattering realization that almost every person has at least once in their life. This chilling twist is even accompanied by the demonic (literally) laugh of Michael, who up until this point we all believed was a Good Place Architect. In this moment we discover that he is indeed a Bad Place demon, and so is the almighty judge, all the other residents in the neighborhood, and the 'real' Eleanor.

After the world-shattering plot twist is revealed, Michael explains his experiment to the four humans. Essentially, he believed that the Bad Place's ways of torture were antiquated (flying bee-like bears with chainsaws, etc.) and so he wanted to move to a deeper, more psychological form of torture. Thus, he stole a Good Place Janet—as the Bad place ones are insufferable gas machines—and started plotting to design his first neighborhood. He found these four humans, whom he rightfully assumed would be torturous for each other and placed them together in this fake good place neighborhood.

Since the humans discovered that they are actually in the Bad Place, Michael begs his boss, Shawn, for a second chance at the neighborhood, and he begrudgingly agrees. While Michael and Shawn are deliberating, the humans panic with Janet, and Eleanor wittingly writes herself a letter and tells Janet to 'eat' it so she can give it to Eleanor in the reboot. Michael wastes no time and erases the humans' memories. Therefore, the second season goes on to see Michael's next attempt of the experiment. Michael changes a lot of the new neighborhood from the first attempt, separates the four humans, but they end up figuring it out on the first night due to the note Eleanor left herself. Michael reboots it for a third time,

and at this point we progress to Michael eventually rebooting it over 800 times, sometimes due to an instant mistake, sometimes after a couple of months, but without fail the humans would figure out what was going on.[13]

The Philosophical Lessons of Season One

This buildup of the humans always finding each other and discovering Michael's true plot in each reboot provides a great framework to dive deeper into the moral ethics and philosophy in the show. Almost immediately in the series, Michael introduces us to the philosophy of the afterlife by confirming that not one religion fully captured the afterlife in their holy texts, and each one only correctly guessed about 5% of the truth (*TGP,* Season 1, Chapter 1). This inconspicuously introduces the concept of existentialism,[14] as Michael emphasizes the notion of pondering life's greatest questions and applying what has been learned from this coherent examination (Vandekerckhove, 2020,4). The rest of the first season grapples with the basics of different world philosophies, digging deep in Western and Ancient philosophical concepts and briefly introducing Eastern philosophies (Season 1, Chapter 5).

As Chidi begins to help Eleanor and eventually Jason to 'earn' their spots in 'The Good Place' (TGP) he introduces Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals* and Chidi's own ethical decision-making process that inspired him to help them (Season 1, Chapter 2).[15] Chidi questions if he has a moral imperative to help others, if he might pose a potential greater

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[13] It is important to note that throughout the 800 plus reboots, Eleanor and Chidi fall deeply in love, which becomes relevant in the next chapter of this thesis.

[14] On which, see Chapter 1 above.

[15] See *Immanuel Kant* and his perspective on Metaphysics(Rohlf, 2020, 2)

harm to the community—utilitarianism—whether he or others are being tested, by consulting Locke, Scanlon, Hume, Singer, Heidegger, and obviously Aristotle (Season 1, Chapter 2).[16] Chidi at first criticizes Eleanor's earlier actions because her motivation to be good is inherently corrupt and is almost ready to give up on her because he finds her irredeemable due to her continual selfish actions, but he concludes with Aristotle's position that moral excellence is cultivated through practice, so Eleanor had a chance (Season 1, Chapter 2).

As Eleanor grows and learns to be a 'good' person—which just means someone who gained enough points to earn a spot in the Good Place, Chidi expounds on Utilitarianism[17] and even Eastern concepts of dharma (Season 1, Chapter 5). As tensions rise, and the neighborhood begins to glitch because of their presence, Eleanor begins to learn about the Social Contract Theory which her American ancestors used for their ethical basis, and she cheekily proposes that a form of tyranny is better (Season 1, Chapter 6). The stress of not belonging causes the characters to also grapple with Machiavellian ethics, the importance of honesty, and much on dualism, existentialism, and realism (Season 1, Chapters 7-12).[18] The philosophy talk briefly comes to a halt as the unexpected occurs, which is further developed in season two.

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[16] See: J. Locke- Contract Theory; TM Scanlon-*What We Owe to Each Other*; D. Hume-*A Treatise of Human Nature*; P. Singer- *The Life You Can Save*; M. Heidegger-Ontological Difference; Aristotle-*Nicomachean Ethics*

[17] Chidi states that it posits that the correct choice is the one that causes the most good and or pleasure and the least pain and or suffering; The caveat being that you can justify countless bad actions as long as the good outweighs it

[18] On which, see Chapter 1 above.

The Philosophical Aspect of Season Two

The discussion of moral and ethical philosophies is amplified in the second season of *TGP*. As the humans relive the neighborhood experiment, Eleanor points out the epistemological nightmare of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence that they are living (Season 1, Chapter 16). Eleanor explains it is such a nightmare because they are experiencing karma but cannot learn from their mistakes because their memories keep getting erased (Chapter 16).[19] After the many adventures with the humans and trying to outsmart the other Bad Place demons, Michael eventually finds himself in a conference room with the demons and he is explaining the increasingly relevant moral particularism theory, which defends that there are no fixed rules that work in every situation (Season 1, Chapter 24). [20]One of the final note-worthy concepts that is introduced is that of moral desert (pronounced dessert). In the context it is discussed, humans are expected to not use moral desert as a motivation to do good, instead their motivations must be pure and centered on simply being good (Season 1, Chapter 26). [21]

Inherently Broken, but Graciously Capable of Growth

Michael, a demon, can also change

As season 2 progresses, we see shocking developments occur surrounding the theory of moral growth. that even Michael, an ancient demon, is capable of changing and

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[19] More on this in the next chapter.

[20] See *Moral Particularism*, (Dancy, 2017,1); This has become an increasingly popular theory due to the difficulties of actually living out a moral and ethical live today.

[21] Which can be found in the following section

growing. This starts after the 802nd reboot, where Vicky, another demon takes over and threatens to tell Shawn about all the reboots. At this point, Michael is at a loss and unsure of what else to do he decides to team up with the humans to figure out a solution. Since he is a literal demon, Michael struggles at first to learn ethics and moral philosophy with the humans. Michael's way into the squad of humans was by bribing to help all four of them to enter TGP, which on Earth would undoubtedly cost him negative points (Season 2, Chapter 17). As Chidi is teaching everyone about ethics, Michael finds it hard to especially latch on to the points because he is an immortal being and at the end of the day, acting 'good' has no ultimate impact on his life (Season 2, Chapter 18). Michael specifically explains this notion when he says, "If you live forever, then ethics don't matter to you, because basically there's no consequences for your actions. Wait a few trillion years, the guilt will fade!" (Season 2, Chapter 18). This revelation is ironically the first step, however, to Michael's pivotal breakthrough because it causes him to go into an existential crisis— comedically fashioned after the midlife crises that many middle-aged men go through on earth (Season 2, Chapter 18).

Michael's improvement seems to have a lull when the crew explores Philippa Foot's Trolley Thought Experiment (Season 2, Chapter 19). When asked about who to save, without hesitation Michael chooses to kill them all. He even stoops low to torturing the humans again by sneakily putting them in a realistic simulation of the experiment, and its variations including the physician version of saving patients. When Eleanor realizes this, she also recognizes that this self-sabotage was what she would do on Earth when she absolutely felt like she could not learn a topic (Season 2, Chapter 19).[22] Eleanor points this

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[22] This similarity will be expounded on in the following subsection.

trait out to Michael, who becomes reflective and sincerely apologizes to Chidi. As the season progresses, issues arise that allow for Michael to bond with the humans, and for him to be stretched to think like a human would.

Unfortunately, the humans fear that all the lessons with Michael were for naught since Shawn returns and is impressed with Michael's success in the 'second' reboot (Season 2, Chapter 22). Michael brings in the humans and betrays them in front of Shawn— or so they think. During his supposed betrayal, Michael wittingly mention's Kierkegaard's Leap of Faith philosophy, which Eleanor luckily catches. The demons throw a final banquet, and Michael drops strangely specific hints to the humans, and they conclude that he is planning an escape plan for them. The humans escape, and the demons assume they have escaped to Mindy's. With all their minds working together, the humans correctly go to hide under the tracks of the train that transports between the neighborhoods, the Bad Place and Mindy's Medium Place.

As the crew (Michael and Janet included) bought some time before the demons returned, Michael says he and Janet need to work together to build their hot air balloon to get to TGP, which only allows truly 'good' people to board (Season 2, Chapter 23). After waiting for hours and struggling to get everyone to be 'good enough' to board the balloon, Michael admits that no one will ever be because the contraption is fake and that he was trying hard to come up with a real solution. Everyone is disappointed with Michael at first, but they conclude that he is an honorary human and that the greatest thing one can do is to: "try your best" (Season 2, Chapter 23). After the squad becomes highly intoxicated, Tahani wants to speak to the 'ultimate' manager that is the real all-knowing Judge, as an entitled billionaire would, which Michael states is essentially impossible to do. Eleanor

unsurprisingly convinces everyone to be on board with Tahani's plan and Michael agrees to do the most human thing of all: "Attempt something futile with a ton of unearned confidence and fail spectacularly" (Season 2, Chapter 23).

Like the good friend Michael has learned to be, he devises a plan to get everyone safely to the real 'Judge,' by first travelling to the Bad Place to steal the required badges to travel between the dimensions (Season 2, Chapter 24). Though mostly successful in doing so, as the humans, Janet, and Michael run from the demons into the portal he realizes that he was one badge short in his mission (Season 2, Chapter 24). Michael concludes in this high-pressure moment that he has solved the Trolley Problem from before, the answer is to sacrifice yourself, as he pushes Eleanor into the portal with the last badge (Season 2, Chapter 24). The humans meet the Judge,[23] and are tested yet again to see if they belong in the Good Place, which the Judge concludes that only Eleanor passes, though Eleanor omits this fact from the humans (Season, Chapter 25).

Comparing Michael to us (and all the characters who grew a lot in the second season)

There is an eerie relatability in Michael's character, though he is a literal demon who aimed to torture humans for millennia. This becomes most relevant in the second season of *TGP* due to the growth that Michael undergoes as he decides to team up with the humans. In this character development, the writers introduce the notion that truly any being is capable of changing and being better.[24] As mentioned earlier, there is a point where Michael is actively choosing to misbehave and even torture Chidi in doing so (Season 2,

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[23] Who is a black woman (played by Maya Rudolph) and is comedically named Gen, short for Hydrogen since it's the only thing that existed at her birth.

[24] An idea that has, unfortunately, become not so popular due to an increase of 'cancel culture' (Norris, 2020, 15).

Chapter 19). When Eleanor realizes this, she recognizes that this self-sabotage was what she would do on Earth when she absolutely felt like she could not learn something (Season 2, Chapter 19). In this moment, Eleanor helps Michael realize that he does want to change, thus he profusely apologizes to everyone, and they reluctantly forgive him (Season 2, Chapter 19).

As the gang, Michael, and Janet grow closer in their friendships, they are encountered with dilemmas of love, confusion, and even murder, thus pushing Michael's ethical and moral development harder, similar to how we are pushed during our times on Earth (Chapter 20). We see a love triangle unfold, which is apparently still possible in the afterlife, which leads to Michael doing the quite human action of asking Eleanor for help because she inspired him during all the neighborhood reboots (Season 2, Chapters 20-21). Eleanor tells Michael that his acknowledgement of the difficulty of being ethical is pinnacle to human existence, but that it is also a great way to get rid of the little voice in your head (Season 2, Chapter 21). We see more of Michael's developing humanity when Shawn returns, as when he realizes that the humans are safe, and the demons are gone he bursts into tears because he thought he was going to lose the humans forever (Season 2, Chapter 22).

Moving Forward

In this chapter, I have argued that in general Americans have sensed a decrease in a unified moral identity. This sense allowed for me to explore and grapple with the issues presented in *The Good Place*. It would take more than a thesis to summarize every witty joke and cheeky subliminal message in the first two seasons. Though there are these

additional ethical and philosophical nuances embedded throughout the first two seasons, the previous summary and analysis should suffice for the purpose of this thesis. Moving forward, I will present the last two seasons, three and four, in similar manners and examine the main philosophies that they discuss.

CHAPTER THREE

Our Actions in Relation to *The Good Place* Seasons 3-4

An Introduction to Seasons 3 and 4

This chapter analyzes the philosophical and ethical underpinnings of seasons 3 and 4 of *The Good Place (TGP)*.[25] Season 3 presents hope for Michael, Janet and the humans, as the Judge gives them an opportunity to experiment to see if the humans can improve on a second life on earth. Whereas Season 4 affirms the idea that humans are capable of growth if given the proper resources. As this idea has become accepted as truth, the last season includes more experiments, and the characters have to figure out how to create a fair and fulfilling afterlife. In this chapter, I argue that the philosophical lessons of interpersonal morality and interdependence, and I begin by summarizing seasons 3 and 4, before turning to the philosophy and ethics performed therein.

Season 3

Now that the almighty Judge has decided to let Michael and Janet monitor the humans' point totals in a second attempt on Earth, we find a whole new set of equally formative ethical and moral dilemmas arise (Season 3, Chapter 27). Michael decides that Eleanor, Chidi, Jason, and Tahani function best and grow the most when together, so he sneakily returns to Earth to scheme and make them meet and he is successful (Season 3,

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[25] Instead of introducing the philosophical concepts and summarizing the important plot points along the way, I give a broad overview of the two seasons, and later breakdown the ethical and moral lessons given throughout. This approach is better fitted for analyzing these seasons because as the show progresses the basic lessons of philosophy are already established. Therefore, the writers focused more on the narrative aspect of education. The show performs philosophical questions as much as it poses them.

Chapter 28).[26] Chidi meets a new love interest, Dr. Simone Garnett, a neuroscientist, and the two decide that they are going to combine their passions and figure out the relationship between ethical decision making and near-death experiences(Season 3, Chapter 28).[27]

All of this is going according to Michael's plans, until Shawn and his Bad Place demons try to sabotage the experiment by introducing a new member of the 'human' squad: Trevor (Season 3, Chapter 28). Trevor, though one of Shawn's demons, is sickly sweet and quickly shows to be problematic for all the humans in the experiment, and especially is a hinderance for Eleanor who has always shown the greatest potential to grow (Season 3, Chapter 29). Fortunately for the Brainy Bunch, Trevor's efforts to rip the group apart and cause them to decline in points is unsuccessful (Season 3, Chapter 29). [28] The Judge eventually catches Michael, Janet, and Trevor, and she threatens them as Michael and Janet escape (Season 3, Chapter 29). Michael and Janet choose to camp out on Earth to write a manifesto about the humans and to monitor them closer than they could from the other dimension (Season 3, Chapter 30).

The Brainy Bunch grow a lot together and they once again show the power of their connection by becoming great friends, but the progress is threatened the experiment ends for the analysis of data (Season 3, Chapter 30). As anticipated, Tahani throws a beautiful party where Eleanor is clearly devastated and throws a tantrum (Season 3, Chapter 30). Michael and Janet crash the party disguised as waiters in a last attempt to keep the humans

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[26] The reunion is reminiscent of the last two seasons, as Chidi starts by teaching only Eleanor about ethics, and due to a unique reason, he also ends up teaching the others.

[27] Much like this thesis will also explore. Their method of doing so is that Chidi will give the subjects an ethics problem, then Simone scans their brains for a baseline moral instinct, then she will show them pictures related to their personal near-death experiences and scan again to see if there are different results.

[28] A term of endearment that the group coined for themselves.

together, and Michael shockingly convinces Janet to help him restart the Earth timeline when they realize that there is essentially no hope left in this effort (Season 3, Chapter 30). Unbeknownst to the immortals, all four humans overheard the conversation and when they see an interdimensional portal open in front of them, they demand an explanation (Season 3, Chapter 30).

Michael first tries to fib, since he plans on restarting the timeline anyways, but Janet quickly makes him realize that truth is the only option (Season 3, Chapter 31). The humans' lives are shaken up as they are updated on the 300 years they have just spent with each other living in a strange afterlife time loop (Season 3, Chapter 31).[29] Each human takes the news and their damnation differently: Eleanor reverts to her original state, Chidi absolutely loses it and has a mental episode, Tahani gives all her money to charity and eventually Jason, and Jason is just there for the ride (Season 3, Chapter 31). As Michael and Janet finish their manifesto, all four humans return and conclude that while they are doomed, they want to try and help everyone else they know (Season 3, Chapter 31).[30]

Each human chooses to intervene in the lives of those who were dear to them in their first life on Earth. First, we see Jason try to redeem his father and best friend, who led similar—if not worse—lives to him, and he is surprisingly successful in changing their life trajectories (Season 3, Chapter 32). Michael confesses to Eleanor that the one person she should change is her mother, which is a shock to Eleanor, because to her knowledge her mom died even before she first did (Season 3, Chapter 33). Michael informs her that her

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[29] Here, the concept of the Jeremy Bearimy, which is how time moves in the afterlife. It is essentially a more complex infinity sign, with the tittle over the 'i' being "Tuesday, or sometimes July, and sometimes it's never" (Janet, Season 3, Chapter 31).

[30] This decision creates a similar atmosphere to season 2, in the sense that all six of the main characters are collaborating to improve the system (Season 3, Chapter 32).

mother had faked her death to avoid paying off her huge debt and is now living a second life in the suburbs with her boyfriend, Dave, and his daughter, Patricia; essentially giving them the life that Eleanor always wished she had (Season 3, Chapter 33). Although reasonably angry at first, Eleanor eventually realizes that her mother is genuinely different and happy now, so she begs her to keep up the good work and to break the bad family cycle with Patricia and Dave (Season 3, Chapter 33).[31]

After more manipulation from the demons and realizing that even the one person[32] on earth who is living perfectly according to the points system is not ranking high enough to enter the Good Place, the squad plots to sneak into the accounting office (Season 3, Chapter 35). They also break into the accounting office, discover that no one has entered the Good Place in 521 years but that the accountants do not feel inclined to change anything, and decide to change it themselves (Season 3, Chapter 36). The accountants have informed the Judge of the crew's whereabouts so Michael pushes everyone down a chute to the Good Place mailroom, in efforts to contact the Good Place committee (Season 3, Chapter 36).

The friends are met with the kindest of Good Place workers, and an equally kind committee, which unanimously agree that they must review the system, but that it would take them a minimum of 1,400 years (Season 3, Chapter 37). As Michael reconvenes with the humans to complain about the committee's lax decision, Tahani states that "[there] are

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[31] Simultaneously, Tahani attempts to reconnect with her widely beloved and artistically renowned sister, Kamilah (Season 3, Chapter 33). Chidi accompanies Tahani in her endeavor, which lands them an arrest at Kamilah's exhibit in Budapest, but also a reconciliation and success for the Al-Jamil sisters (Season 3, Chapter 33).

[32] Doug Forcett was introduced in Season 1 as the one person on Earth who accurately guessed ~92% of the afterlife due to a severe 'shrooms trip, and who dedicated the rest of his life to living accordingly

so many unintentional consequences to well-intentioned actions. It feels like a game you can't win," in reference to her failed attempts to comforting everyone in the group (Season 3, Chapter 37). Here, the audience can almost see the lightbulb illuminate above Michael's head when he realizes that this statement is the very reason why no one has entered the Good Place in more than 500 years (Season 3, Chapter 37). Therefore, the Bad Place is not at all tampering with points, instead the world itself is increasingly over-complicated, which fundamentally makes it more difficult to be a good enough person[33] (Season 3, Chapter 37).

This eureka moment causes Michael to summon the Judge himself, so that he can present this shattering dilemma to her (Season 3, Chapter 38). After some strong convincing, the Judge agrees to let Michael, Janet, and the humans to repeat the original experiment again in Mindy's Medium place and for the intent of helping humans improve (Season 3, Chapter 38). The rules are set by the Judge, the new subjects selected by the Bad Place, and the neighbor overseen by Michael and the other five, who will help coach the new residents (Season 3, Chapter 38). All is well until Michael panics when the first human arrives and forces Eleanor to act as the architect (Season 3, Chapter 39). Also, the Bad Place demons are at it yet again by choosing humans that would trigger each of the humans; for Chidi they picked Simone, as she just conveniently died, and others will be discussed later (Season 3, Chapter 39).

Season 3 comes to a bittersweet end because Chidi demands that his memories all the way to his first death are erased for the integrity of the experiment (Season 3, Chapter

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[33] This is an incredibly relevant concept, which merits more research as our world truly does become complicated. They give the example that the same action in 1845 is a whirlwind of doom now because phones made in sweatshops are ordering roses full of pesticides and transported in trucks that are killing the environment to benefit selfish billionaires who are racist/homophobic/sexual predators/etc.

39). The bittersweetness stems from the fact that at this point, Chidi and Eleanor were given all their memories from their 300 years together which revealed to them that they fell in love repeatedly in most of the reboots (Season 3, Chapter 39). Chidi and Eleanor share a sweet last day together and hope for success in the experiment so they can reunite again (Season 3, Chapter 39).

Season 4

The new experiment is in full effect, and similar to the last three seasons we see a lot of success, the Bad Place demons attempting but failing to manipulate the experiment (Season 4, Chapter 40-46). The humans that were chosen were John—a gossip columnist who ruined Tahani's life, Brent—an affluent white man who is incredibly offensive, Simone—who refuses to believe that she is actually in an afterlife and strictly believes in science, and Chidi—who replaced a demon that the Bad Place disguised as a human[34]. After a year of working to edify the characters of these four individuals, the experiment ends and the point totals are calculated (Season 4, Chapter 47). Michael and Janet come to the judge and they debate if humans are capable of growth in the afterlife, and after strong persuasion and looking closely at the results with the Judge and Shawn, they conclude that humans actually are incredibly capable of such growth (Season 4, Chapter 47).

Unfortunately for the squad, the Judge concludes that the only solution to fix the system is to 'cancel earth,' hit restart and do it all over again because the world is such a mess (Season 4, Chapter 47). However, Janet does not agree so she distracts the Judge to

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[34] The demons disguised another demon as a 'boring' older white lady named Linda. As soon as she started becoming violent and punching other residents, it was clear she was not a human. Also, the demons need to come up with new tactics (See Trevor in the previous season for their unoriginal idea.)

give the squad some time to plot a better way (Season 4, Chapter 47). Their solution is well thought out: humans' time on Earth is not the test anymore but the class, and when you die, your points from Earth serve as a baseline (Season 4, Chapter 49). This baseline is then given to both a Good Place and Bad Place architect who will design scenarios to make the human confront their moral shortcomings (Season 4, Chapter 49). Humans are given many reboots until they ace the test, which will happen because they will get to keep a vague memory that will help character build (Season 4, Chapter 49). It takes some convincing, but the Judge and even Shawn both agree to this new compromise.

The rest of the final season is comprised of the new afterlife system being implemented and the final big dilemma of the afterlife is presented: when a perfect paradise goes on forever, people become glassy eyed, and their brains turn to mush (Season 4, Chapter 51). This is when Eleanor proposes a 'last hurrah,' an entirely optional door that anyone at any time can walk through that will peacefully end one's journey, which everyone loves (Season 4, Chapter 51). After this, the original squad all either go through the final door themselves (Jason, Chidi and even Eleanor), become a neighborhood architect (Tahani), continues to live in paradise (Janet), or become a human who lives on earth and gets to go through the system too (Michael) (Season 4, Chapter 52).

Interpersonal Morality and Interdependence

Interpersonal Morality

If nothing else is gained from watching *TGP*, one potentially life-shifting philosophy is that of social mutuality, a major concept that is highlighted throughout the

show. Though contractualism is rooted in Kant and Rawls[35], a narrower definition of this philosophy was proposed in 1998 by T.M. Scanlon in his work *What We Owe to Each Other,* which states that

> An act is wrong if its performance under the circumstances would be disallowed by any set of principles for the general regulation of behaviour that no one could reasonably reject as a basis for informed, unforced, general agreement. (Scanlon, 1998, p. 153).

This is a concept briefly introduced in the first season and is expounded upon in the last two seasons. In the beginning of Season 3, Michael tries to subliminally push Eleanor to find Chidi, who fortunately has a lecture titled "What We Owe to Each Other" which she finds online (Season 3, Chapter 27). [36] Contractualism, or interpersonal morality, is revisited when the four humans reconnect and when their afterlife destinations are compromised (Season 3, Chapter 31).

Shortly after the humans are eternally damned, Eleanor captures how Americans generally lack this sense of contractualism because "…everybody does…whatever they want…You only look out for number one, scream at whoever disagrees with you, there are no bees because they all died, and if you need surgery, you just beg for money on the internet" (Season 3, Chapter 31). The humans, despite this bleak reality of most Western societies, conclude that all though they are personally unsalvageable, they must consider what they owe to all the other humans who are trapped and going to have similar fates if they do not intervene (Season 3, Chapters 31-32). [37] This sense of selflessness and

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[35] (Ashford and Mulgan, 2018); this article also introduce the angle that Scanlon's account offers: (1) the authority of moral standards and of (2) what constitutes rightness and wrongness.

[36] Michael sneaks onto Earth during his first Judge approved experiment; he is disguised as a bartender, and he convinces Eleanor to ask her self what we owe to each other. This successfully helped her find Chidi.

[37] For lack of a better term

mutuality is equally embodied when Chidi decides that he wants to momentarily give up his life with Eleanor and precious memories for the sake of teaching the new subjects and the integrity of the new experiment—due to the eternal complications for all of humanity (Season 3, Chapter 39).

This eerily realistic snapshot into American society begs for further exploration, thus making *TGP* a critical resource for American citizens. If not yet convinced of how *TGP* thoroughly addresses and embodies the ethical and moral issues centered on contractualism in the United States, then the fourth season revisits and exemplifies the positive outcomes of this philosophy. Contractualism is particularly demonstrated in the first experiment introduced in Season 4 with the new subjects John Wheaton and Brent Norwalk. As mentioned before John and Brent are insufferable people who excelled in triggering the other humans in the show (Season 4, Chapters 40-42). The insensitive and offensive aspects of John and Brent's characteristics allow for the opportunity for the other residents—primarily Tahani, Eleanor, and Simone—to grapple greatly with contractualism (Season 4, Chapters 41-47). The difficult personalities and mannerisms[38] of the two thoroughly tempts even the more 'enlightened' characters like Eleanor, nonetheless, the overall message of the show conveys that the humans owe it to each other to collectively strive towards a better way of living (Season 4, Chapter 46).

Interdependence

Another influential message that *TGP* highlights in the final two seasons is that of human interdependence and the outcomes of connection. Interdependence is the

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[38] Which include bullying, sexism, and racism

fundamental social theory that all social interactions are characterized by how each person's behavior affects their own and others' outcomes (Gerpott et al., 2018, 716-742). From the beginning of season 3, Michael is convinced that the humans need each other to grow, thus he sneakily finds ways to push them back together (Season 3, Chapters 27-28). Throughout the experiment, the Brainy Bunch heavily relied on each other in and out of class to morally and ethically edify each other and to fill that innate desire of social connection[39] thus supporting Michael's theory that they needed each other (Season 3, Chapters 27-30). The humans yet again embody the interdependence of social beings by highlighting the ways in which their family members and friends depended on them to change their lives to qualify for the Good Place (Season 3, Chapters 32-33). Apart from these examples, the third season of *TGP* offers many smaller scenes where the humans and even Michael and Janet[40] show that they all need each other to flourish.

The interdependence is also emphasized in the final season in a few different ways. First, the Judge required that all four new subjects improved enough to support the squad's theories on human potential which calls for all subjects to collaborate and help each other (Season 4, Chapter 41-43). The final moments in this experiment draw on the concept of interdependence, or lack thereof, with Brent who clearly was not getting the message unlike the other three subjects (Season 4, Chapter 46). Michael and Eleanor decide to recreate the pit situation from season 1, to push John, Simone and Chidi to help Brent and for him to be grateful for their help, a clear attempt to foster a sense of interdependence (Season 4,

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[39] See articles that contain data in support of the human need for social interaction and dependency (Benton, 2018, 58); (Steptoe et al., 2004, 592-611); (Coan and Sbarra, 2015, 87-91)

[40] It is questionable whether or not Janet actually needed the crew, or if she just enjoyed being with them. Regardless, she was a critical part of this interdependent dynamic.

Chapter 46).[41] Though slightly torturous, this plot was necessary for Brent's improvement because it allowed Chidi—the only one who tried to save him—to get through his stubborn thoughts and get Brent to realize how horrible of a person he truly is (Season 4, Chapter 46). This example shows the positive aspects of interdependence, however, the writers of *TGP* also ensure to emphasize that interdependence can shift into an unhealthy co-dependent relationship in the finale of the show.

As many Jeremy Bearimys pass by, Jason and eventually Chidi decide to pass through the door for their last hurrahs (Season 4, Chapter 52). Eleanor is extremely upset by Chidi's decision, and she does everything in her power to convince him to stay—which works temporarily (Season 4, Chapter 52). The convincing does not last long, however, because Eleanor is filled with remorse and realizes that she owes it to Chidi to let him go (Season 4, Chapter 52). The two go on a date in Paris afterwards and when Chidi asks Eleanor what she is thinking, she poignantly quotes T.M. Scanlon: "Working out the terms of moral justification is an unending task" (Season 4, Chapter 52). This takes Chidi aback, but Eleanor explains that she made an unjustifiable rule to get Chidi to stay with her in their perfect paradise if his desire is to leave, thus she must let him go (Season 4, Chapter 52).

How Mortality Provides Meaning to Life

One of the most relevant lessons today that is explored in *TGP* is the one centered around death giving meaning to life. This is especially true due to the increased sense of death and death related-anxiety within this last year—2020-21 (Farr, 2021, 276). These

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[40]In the first season, one of Michael's torture strategies is to create a giant sinkhole to make Eleanor believe that her presence in the neighborhood is causing it to glitch (Season 1, Chapter 4)

lessons are found both in passive quips and in the tremendously profound dialogues between the characters. As previously mentioned, in season 2 Eleanor sets a precedent that is later expounded on in these final seasons when she says that "All humans are aware of death, so we're all a little bit sad, all the time" (Season 2 Chapter 18). This concept of the implications of mortality in our lives is what inspired the original thoughts of the thesis and again is a notion that is devastatingly heightened right now due to the insanity that has ensued in 2020-21.

The idea of an ultimate end becomes a particularly important concept towards the end of Season 4, when it seems like all will finally be well. Instead, the humans find themselves in a perfect paradise that is too perfect and with Good Place citizens who have become thoughtless automatons, with the help of Hypatia, one of Chidi's philosophy idols (Season 4, Chapter 51). Though coherent at times, Patty—as she calls herself—often reverts to mindless banter and a unintelligent sentences which is the opposite goal of what the main characters have fought for these last three and a half seasons (Season 4, Chapter 51). Patty claims that this is how everyone, including the Brainy Bunch, will end up and it is because when perfection continues forever, you inevitable become a glassy-eyed mush person (Season 4, Chapter 51). All the hard work that the squad just endured, in an instant seemed useless.

As mentioned before, Eleanor and the squad propose the idea of the 'last hurrah' which changes the entire dynamic of the afterlife (Season 4, Chapter 51). No longer are humans expected to continue endlessly, instead they always have that option to pass peacefully through the door, which in a way re-instills purpose and meaning, even in the afterlife (Season 4, Chapter 51). This plan is met with great favor and the humans

themselves make the decision to pass on through the door too. First is Jason, who is a simple man and just felt fulfilled quicker than most (Season 4, chapter 52). When asked how he knew it was time, Jason eloquently—which is uncharacteristic of him—stated that "I just suddenly had this calm feeling, like the air inside my lungs was the same as the air outside my body" (Season 4, Chapter 52). This beautiful sentiment carries on when Chidi eventually makes the decision, as he felt similarly (Season 4, Chapter 52). In Chidi and Eleanor's beautiful final moments, instead of focusing on his typical ancient philosophy, Chidi turns to the East and comforts her by using an old Buddhist proverb that says:

> Picture a wave in the ocean. You can see it, measure it - its height, the way the sunlight refracts as it passes through - and it's there, you can see it, and you know what it is, it's a wave. And then it crashes on the shore and it's gone. But the water is still there. The wave was just... a different way for the water to be for a little while. That's one conception of death for a Buddhist: the wave returns to the ocean, where it came from and where it's meant to be (Season 4, Chapter 52).

To which Eleanor quips, "Not bad, Buddhists!"

The show promptly ends after this scene, giving it great narrative significance. Namely, it ties many of the main ideas of *TGP* together by emphasizing how death is just another stage of life. This scene also supports the message that death can be a beautiful thing, despite feelings of loss, and that in a sense it can feel like returning to the essence of one's life, which is something to look forward to. Finally, by using a Buddhist quote, the writers are emphasizing Western philosophy cannot answer all of life's questions.[42]

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[42] The balance of Eastern and Western philosophies is a common theme throughout the show. See, e.g., Season 4, Chapter 49

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I described the ways in which the writers fluctuated between familiar themes from the first two seasons and developing new ideas. For example, here was an obvious emphasis on mutuality and mortality in the last two seasons. However, the writers were clear in their intended lessons by revisiting and expounding on previously introduced topics. As the audience got to see the characters grow, the power of their narratives, and place themselves in their minds, they also learned about various philosophies, and how to work with feelings of existential angst by coming to terms with the reality of their own mortality.[43]

In the next and final chapter of this thesis, I will revisit how the COVID-19 pandemic and other deeply traumatic experiences during the 2020-21 year have fundamentally altered our lives, the implications of these changes, and how *TGP* can help us live in this new world in which we find ourselves.

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[43] In review of the notes from re-watching the show multiple times, it is worth noting once again that there are many lessons and quotes that also merit attention but that did not specifically relate to the global pandemic and 2020-21. Nonetheless, these unmentioned lessons add great value to *The Good Place* and support the idea that this show would be a great way to learn more about moral philosophy and ethics. Since these other examples are out of the scope of this thesis but still quite important to other issues, I strongly suggest that *TGP* is worth watching and grappling with for those who have not yet done so.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Toll of 2020-21 and Transforming Suffering through *The Good Place*

Introduction

The 2020-21 year is one that has been hijacked by the COVID-19 pandemic, countless social injustices, civil rights movements, elections and so much more[44], and it has forced many of us to come to the end of ourselves in something akin to a collective existential crisis.[45] The confrontation of many with their inevitable mortality amplifies the relevance of *The Good Place* and ought to prompt further reflection upon our place in this world and our obligation to others. To adequately correlate the valuable lessons in *TGP*, I begin with a brief discussion of death anxiety in the context of overall mental health, and existential angst produced in the 2020-21 year.

Undoubtedly, in the last year alone many Americans[46] have struggled in one way or another with mental health and stress like never have before (Mental Health America, 2021, 34). The question arises of "what makes 2020-21 different?," because issues of disease, racism, climate change, and politics are far from new. Mick Cooper proposes that the key model of distress in the psychotherapy field—whether existential, psychodynamic, or other—is primarily centered on processes 'internal' to an individual (2021, 6). This explains that the nuance that the pandemic—and all else which ensued in 2020-21

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[44] NY Post: *2020 events: Yep, these all happened in the year from hell* (Salo, 2020)

[45] *COVID, Existentialism and Crisis Philosophy* (Vandekerckhove, 2020, 1-6)

[46] Unsurprisingly, this remains true for citizens of other countries, (O'Connor et al., 2020, 1-8); (Ornell et al., 2020, 232-235)

introduced for us—is centered on a relatively undiscussed and foreign concept for us 21st century individuals: forced and pro-longed loneliness.[47]

Loneliness and Isolation in the Pandemic

Inevitably, the 2020-21 government mandated social isolation is the first time in over a century[48] for such a great number of Americans to go extended periods of time without physically seeing loved ones and other humans in general, which has resulted in a great increased sense of loneliness and other related mental health issues (Killgore et al., 2020,113-117). The AARP reported only 14% of older adults, 65 and older, as socially isolated[49] in 2017, typically because of retirement, loss of loved ones and friends, declining health, disability, or other factors (Flowers et al., 2017, 2). The number exponentially increased when others surveyed a similar age group, 50 years and older, in August of 2020 and 61% of adults reported experiencing social isolation (Escalante et al., 2021, 520-521). This issue has proven to be considerably concerning to both physicians and mental health professionals, who note the various mental and physical ailments that arise in such conditions and have called for an urgent change in how the quarantine is being managed (Kotwal et al., 2021, 20-29). The concern stems from ways in which such conditions, especially anxiety and depression, correlate to increased rates of suicide, hypertension, and other physical health effects that neurohormonal-immunological pathways may mediate (Escalante et al., 2021, 520-521). In other words, as individuals experience an increase in

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[47] Loneliness, in this context, is best defined as a discrepancy between desired and actual levels of social connection (Escalante et al., 2021, 520-521).

[48] (Yang et al., 2016, 177-178)

[49] Social isolation is defined as an "objective deficit in the number of relationships with and frequency of contact with family, friends, and the community" (Escalante et al., 2021, 520-521).

anxiety and other mental health issues their bodies are being put under unnecessary and harmful pressure

Though many researchers and experts in psychology support this notion that loneliness and its negative effects have increased during this time of social isolation, others have pushed back. For example, faculty members from the Florida State University College of Medicine at Tallahassee wrote a letter to the editor of the *Psychiatry Research* journal in response to Killgore et al.[50] Sutin et al. suggest that Killgore et al. are catastrophizing and the group is not using relevant or recent data (2020, 113295) This pushback stems from early in the pandemic—March and April—so I would imagine that Sutin et al. might hold a different stance now. However, at the time of the letter Sutin et al. group suggests the dramatic increased loneliness reported in the Killgore et al. survey was an inaccurate extrapolation since the loneliness data compared was from prior to 2003 and April 2020 (2020). The Sutin et al. letter then introduces an updated 2018 sample of the same data that Killgore et al. used and instead found a substantial decline in reported loneliness from 2018 and April 2020—though the authors admit differences in sampling rather than differences in actual loneliness may best explain the decline (2020).[51]

Another unfortunate reality that has clearly brought death, ethics, and morality to the forefront of the American mind is the seeming abundance of racial and social injustice, which has in no way halted in 2021. The present anxiety related to an increased chance of

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[50] Which was previously used in this thesis to explain the concern of loneliness in the pandemic.

[51] We need more experts like Killgore et al. and Sutin et al to engage critical issues stemming from COVID-19. Though Sutin et al challenge Killgore's call to sound the alarm, they also support greater monitoring and deeper analyses of the issue of loneliness (2020). This critical yet supportive approach is what helps our nation's leading experts advance together towards a common goal of helping Americans progress in what is undoubtedly going to be the most difficult period of our lifetime.

death for people of color due to COVID-19,[52] has only been exacerbated by the ongoing trauma that the community has faced due to social injustices such as the cases of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbury, and most recently Daunte Wright and Caron Nazario (Hackney, 2021, 1-3). As a person of color, I can confirm that the height of my personal anxiety and stress was during the weeks of social unrest in June when I knew peers of mine could be shot in the streets for fighting in what they believe in and it was worsened by the thought of them catching COVID and being more at risk for complications. The unrest has also added health-care related anxiety for some African Americans who fear to be seen as 'lawless rioters' by their providers, who may discount or otherwise mistreat them (Davis-Martin, 2020, 28-29).

Not only have average civilians been negatively affected by the events of the pandemic and 2020-21 generally, but a broad spectrum of healthcare workers such as mental health professionals, emergency medical staff, and varying levels staff across the country undeservingly have been too (Fish & Mittal, 2021). Frontline workers in the emergency departments of hospitals have been overworked, caught the virus, experienced an increased sense of social isolation, and unfortunately lost their lives (Wong et al., 2020). This impact has not only affected the expected frontline workers, but on the other end of the spectrum, surgeons and other specialized physicians have had to give up procedures and seen a decrease in patient interactions, with 4.1 million elective cases being cancelled or postponed in North America alone due to a higher demand for respirators and medical supplies in COVID wards (Paredes et al., 2020, 1366-67).

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[52] CDC, 2021

One unexpected outcome is that the extended period of required isolation has also been a fruitful time for many to genuinely grapple with identities, past traumas, current unhealthy relationships—whether romantic or platonic—and has helped many people truly find themselves and happiness (Roy, 2020, 1-17). Some self-proclaimed introverts have found a need for social connection, extroverts a well-needed peace and quietude, and others have fallen deeply and unexpectedly in love (Roy, 2020), while others have begun baking bread, learning new languages, and taking on a host of other hobbies.[53]

Implications

As observed in many pandemics, people are looking for answers and ways to explain the insanity of it all. In past pandemics, we have seen moments of genius arise and even spiritual revivals occur.[54] In fact, *King Lear Under COVID-19 Lockdown* discusses how Shakespeare wrote this hauntingly relatable play while in a lockdown himself (Sinha, 2020, 1758-59). It follows, then, that during the last year full of increased existentialism that there will be incredible works of art and an increase in religious practice in America, as there has already proven to be unlike in other developed nations (Pew Research Center, 2021,1-12). Some findings suggest that the active goal to combat increased death anxiety is what is bringing such brilliance and the drastic return to religious beliefs, which is understandable (Rababa et al., 2021, 50-63).

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[53] *By Bread Alone: Baking as Leisure, Performance, Sustenance, During the COVID-19 Crisis* (Easterbrook-Smith, 2021, 36-42). Unfortunately, some relationships have become an unforeseen casualty of the pandemic because, the enforced shared isolation with their partner revealed dissatisfactions and infidelities (Kashino, 2020).

[54] *How COVID-19 Has Strengthened Religious Faith* (Pew Research Center, 2021, 1-12)

Alongside the joy and self-discovery, this overwhelming, confusing, and terrifying time has also forced many of us to confront new emotions, passions, and the darkest parts of ourselves. It also clearly does not help that people are unexpectedly getting sick themselves, losing loved ones, and all the works from this past year. In such a strange time as this, many have resorted to believing that the world is entering an apocalyptic era, which is not new and has been observed during previous pandemics (Dein, 2021, 5).

The COVID-19 lockdown has laid bare individuals' key symbolic frameworks and presents unparalleled challenges for both people and society worldwide related to mortality, economics, and has emphasized the issues of social inequality, globalization, individualism, and general social interaction (Dein, 2021, 6). Though typically the apocalyptic frameworks are results of strict adherence to the Christian perspective, an increasingly naturalistic worldview allows for a secular apocalyptic perspective (Dein, 2021, 10).[55] Essentially, the COVID-19 crisis has caused an increase of existential debates concerning how to navigate life "post-COVID" (Dein, 2021, 12).

Relatedly, individuals might start to experience a sense of the sociological phenomena called anomie due to self-isolation and quarantine. As Simon Dein puts it

> This, [sense of anomie], was summed up well over two thousand years ago by the Roman poet Virgil's notion of a 'maze of dread': 'The world itself seems entirely unreliable: not only dangerous but also deceptive. The appearance of being a safe and thriving land becomes only a façade that hides the threat of death (2021, 6).

Such a state of mind has led many to question their worldviews and the social status quo (Dein, 2021,12). As we learn more and more about health care inequalities, class divisions, unequal distributions of power, it is becoming increasingly clear that it may take years—

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[55] However, Dein (2021) does note that these two forms of apocalypticism mirror each other, including their shared hope for change.

or perhaps decades—for us to collectively process all that these times have inflicted upon us. (Dein, 2021, 13).

And yet, some believe that these difficult times offer and opportunity to recreate society and provide a better future (Dein, 2021, 13).[56] If it is the case, as the world increasingly becomes digitalized and more are shifting to a work-from-home protocol, the opportunities to provide guidance and education for such existential dilemmas has also increased (De' et al., 2020, 2).

Suggestions for Transforming Suffering in an Age of Uncertainty

The overwhelming loss of direction and uncertainty naturally seeks strategies to cope with such crises. As discussed above, studies suggest that spiritual and emotional well-being are strong predictors for death-anxiety. This was especially the case last year among the elderly populations since they are at most risk for the virus (Rababa et. Al, 2021, 57). For this reason, individuals are likely looking for ways to cope with their new-found anxieties and internal struggles. For answers, we now return to *The Good Place (TGP)*.

The last two chapters of this thesis heavily alluded to using *TGP* as a potential tool for moral development, but its use is especially relevant to our present moment. *TGP* explores many of these difficult and deep philosophical questions and theories in a relatively novel manner. As we have increasingly become a digitalized society that learns history and medical knowledge from TikToks, it would be logical to propose a form of media to help individuals to develop moral philosophies (Comp et al., 2020). This is also not a completely foreign concept, as researchers have studied the role of narrative in

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[56] Or as Zen Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh puts it, "No mud, no lotus" (cf. Hanh, 2014, 9-20).

persuasion regarding collective attitudes (Slater, 2002, 157-81), as well as the significant impact of educational television shows on children (Kearney & Levine, 2019).[57] Since the American public has entered what has been considered the 'Golden Age' of television, it is worth exploring how shows such as *TGP* can influence its viewers.

I propose that *TGP* serves as a great medium to explore these affects for two major reasons. First, it is necessary that Americans recognize the shift that has occurred in society due to the decline of reading[58] and replacing the decline with media and social media (Clement, 2021). New York Times contributor, Jonathan Rothwell, reminds us that

> Plato made a case for regulating the quality of artistic productions to avoid the corruption of youth and weakening of their character. Twenty-three centuries later, it is easier than ever to placate children as well as lose [oneself] in entertainment options—in the ocean of online videos, podcasts, cable, and streaming shows and movies. (2019)

This shift, which was clearly amplified during the pandemic,[59] means that many Americans are no longer as quick to rely on works of literature to be edified, instead many are basing political affiliations, world philosophies, and other intellectual pursuits on the media they consume, especially from television shows. Another way that *TGP* manages to influence its audience is in the relatability of the characters and the simplicity of how theories and ideas are taught, as explored more in the previous chapters, which is enough to attract viewers and have them wanting more. By playing with the pathos and logos of the audience, deep philosophical transformation and education can take place and it will.

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[57] Slater, Michael D. 2002. "Entertainment Education and the Persuasive Impact of Narratives." In *Narrative Impact: Social and Cognitive Foundations*, edited by Melanie C. Green, Jeffrey J. Strange, and Timothy C. Brock, 157–81. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

[58] *New Evidence on Waning American Reading Habits*; *Time Spent Reading*; *Book Reading Behavior* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2019)

[59] (Clement, 2021)

The Power of Narrative Persuasion

Again, the idea of seeking moral edification from gripping narratives is not new by any means (Farr, 2021, 276). As far back as the 1940s, literary works like Albert Camus' *The Plague* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* served and still serve as narratives that provide moral lessons, truths, and models to function under (Farr, 2021, 278). If such works of fiction can capture audiences and create such influential cultures of existentialism, it suffices to say that shows like *TGP* could absolutely do the same.

To further make this connection, we can turn to other television shows as examples. Specifically, the effects of television on issues of race and bigotry and how it can sensitize viewers. Researchers specifically studied the impact of the 1970s CBS situation comedy *All in the Family* and the ABC miniseries *Roots* on diverse viewership and found that these television shows sensitized viewers to systemic problems of racism and bigotry in ways that traditional argumentation did not.[60] This is incredibly helpful considering that efforts to end racism via other outlets were not able to target the audience from their homes, yet television programs evidently had the power to change perspectives on extremely polarizing topics.[61]

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[60] See Neil Vidmar and Milton Rokeach, "Archie Bunker's Bigotry: A Study in Selective Perception and Exposure," *Journal of Communication* 24 (1974): 36–47; Philip Wander, "On the Meaning of 'Roots,'" *Journal of Communication* 27 (1977): 64–69; Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach, Joel W. Grube, and Milton Rokeach, "'Roots: The Next Generation'—Who Watched and with What Effect?," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 45 (1981): 58–68, cited in Slater, "Entertainment Education," 164.

[61] Other examples include the effects *Will and Gracie* and *Glee* had on marriage equality sentiment; See, e.g., Jane D. Brown, "Mass Media Influences on Sexuality," *The Journal of Sex Research* 39 (2002): 42–45; Sara Moroni, "America's Closet Door: An Investigation of Television and Its Effects on Perceptions of Homosexuality" (B.A. Honors Thesis, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, 2014), http://scholar.utc.edu/honors-theses/46.

The claim that *TGP* can provide comfort and edifying moral lessons in a time such as 2020-21 absolutely demands greater research similar to the extensive studies mentioned before. Yet, it is with great confidence that I call attention to the work of art that is *TGP* as it has greatly impacted its millions of viewers, including myself, with its beautiful narrative of human connection and growth that creates dialogue and offers viewers vicarious experiences in ways that evidence suggests effectively changes public perceptions on a variety of issues (cf. Slater 2002).[62] It is my hope that through my analysis of *TGP* and my recommendation to use it as a starting point to develop a moral philosophy, that at least one more person is convinced to watch the show.

Conclusion

After discussing the differing philosophical views held in the United States (Chapter 1), undertaking a deep analysis of the life changing *TGP* (Chapters 2 and 3), and exploring the implications of the show during a global pandemic (Chapter 4), this thesis has fulfilled its purpose. I look forward to seeing where television producers take shows in the next few years as we see a greater push to creating more meaningful content related to the trauma of 2020-21. The power of narrative to shape our attitudes and values is put on grand display in works like *TGP*, the impact of which is worthy of further research. I am unsure that anyone can say with certainty during this pandemic if they belong in the Good Place, the Bad Place, or somewhere in between. Regardless, by watching *TGP* can help us discern what truly is important in this one precious life.

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[62] *A Goodbye to the Good Place* (Holmes, 2020). Plus, the seasons are incredibly short, and episodes only span around 21 minutes each, so it is one of the easiest shows to watch.

And with that, having fulfilled its purpose, this thesis steps through the door and takes its leave.

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