

The Good Place, a prime-time sitcom full of ethical theory

The comedy series doesn't feel didactic—despite the fact that it features actual moral philosophy lessons.

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [December 6, 2017](#) issue



Eleanor (Kristen Bell), Chidi (William Jackson Harper), and Michael (Ted Danson) in *The Good Place*. Photo © Colleen Hayes / NBC.

Eleanor Shellstrop, the central character on NBC's *The Good Place*, was a terrible person. Upset by her sister saying she looked tired, Eleanor posted her sister's credit card information on Reddit. She threw trash at the feet of an environmental activist and told him to pick it up himself "since he was so in love with the earth." When her boyfriend suggested they boycott a local coffee shop whose manager was caught on tape sexually harassing a female job applicant, she mocked him so relentlessly he

broke up with her. The night she was supposed to be the designated driver, she left her tipsy colleagues stranded at a bar so that she could hook up with the bartender.

When Eleanor dies, it comes as a surprise to her that she ends up in the Good Place. Barely anyone makes the cut, she's told by Michael, the supernatural architect of the heavenly neighborhood to which she's been assigned. Almost no artist has ever made it. Florence Nightingale? Nope. The French? Not a one.

It takes Eleanor (played by Kristen Bell) approximately three minutes to realize there has been a mistake. She is not the person they take her to be: a committed humanitarian who devoted her life to the poor, orphaned, and oppressed. This cosmic mistake launches *The Good Place*, a critically acclaimed comedy, now in its second season (the first season is streaming on Netflix). It also sets in motion the most sustained conversations about philosophical and practical ethics on television.

All of these conversations are started by Eleanor's roommate, Chidi Anagonye (William Jackson Harper), a Nigerian-Senegalese moral philosophy professor. Chidi starts giving Eleanor "good people lessons." He walks Eleanor through the classics of philosophy, starting with Aristotle. It is worth watching just to hear a TV character utter such lines as "Who's ready to talk about David Hume? Let's hear it for the theory of the bundled self!" What starts as an attempt to get Eleanor to curb her selfish impulses morphs into meaningful debates about the nature of goodness and "what we owe to each other" (Chidi makes Eleanor read Harvard philosopher T. M. Scanlon's book by that title).

This might sound too serious for a Thursday night comedy, but the show hits all the beats of a prime-time sitcom. Some of the humor comes from Michael (Ted Danson), the architect, and his assessment of human foibles and quirks. He marvels at the absurdity of suspenders and waxes poetical about frozen yogurt, which he deems the quintessential human food: we take something delicious like ice cream and make it a little less good so we can eat more of it. The rest of the humor comes from the incongruity between flashbacks of Eleanor's life and the nearly impossible standard of goodness represented by her neighbors in the Good Place. Everyone else devoted themselves to acts of selfless care and justice. Eleanor struggles to remember another person's name.

Like the characters of *Seinfeld*, *Arrested Development*, *Difficult People*, and the recently rebooted *Will & Grace* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Eleanor is so self-

absorbed and awful we wince our way to laughter. At its best, this kind of humor makes us question the American equation of niceness with goodness. Our laughing at people saying and doing the worst possible things depends on recognizing that, underneath the veneer of social niceties, most people are not much better—while hoping that we are the exception.

I binge-watched the whole first season of *The Good Place* during the same week that revelations about Harvey Weinstein's career-long sexual abuse hit the news. This was followed by other revelations of sexual harassment involving Leon Wieseltier (the former literary editor of the *New Republic*), Kevin Spacey (award-winning actor and director), Mark Halperin (former political director at ABC News), and many, many more. It is hard not to feel like the entire culture industry is built on a rotten foundation of self-entitled misogyny and power. We have a self-professed pussy-grabber in the White House and a new tax plan in Congress that largely seeks to empower a culture of winner-takes-all greed. In this environment, laughing at human awfulness feels more queasy than cathartic. Niceness doesn't seem like such a bad place to start on the way toward goodness.

Eleanor's first moral act is spontaneously letting someone else go first in the frozen yogurt line while she decides what she wants. For most of us, such an act barely registers as moral. For Eleanor, it is a revolution: how we act in frozen yogurt lines can serve as a springboard to much deeper revelations about the moral demands other people make on our lives. Moral growth starts with niceness, but it doesn't end there. The show delves into the distinctions between consequence and intention, moral care and moral duty. It ultimately suggests that our goodness is made and tested in relationship with other people, and it takes a lot more than niceness to survive each other.

There is a surprise twist at the end of season one that raises the stakes of moral theorizing for all the characters involved. The show doesn't feel didactic, despite the fact that it features actual moral philosophy lessons. But it does suggest that the time has come to stop diagnosing our problems through humor and actually start solving them. As many of the characters come to realize, assuming you are beyond moral improvement is the first indication that it is time to sign up for Chidi's class.

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