

Sitcoms have a rich history of teaching moral lessons. As the most popular genre on the most popular medium in America, sitcoms have always had the unique ability to beam ideas directly into our homes for 20 minutes at a time. Throw in a funny story and some jokes and these lessons become easy to remember.

Usually there's not much to remember. Tell the truth, be compassionate, put others before yourself. There usually isn't much room for nuance in those 20 minutes. Especially in a genre where everything is more or less the same at the end of an episode as it was in the beginning.

Enter *The Good Place* from Michael Schur. It follows Eleanor, a woman who's just died and been sent to "the good place." Except, there's been a mistake. She wasn't a good person, and she doesn't belong in the good place. So she convinces Chidi, her assigned soulmate and a moral philosophy professor, to keep her secret and teach her to become a better person so she can earn her spot and avoid going to hell forever.

*The Good Place* covers a ton of moral lessons and the philosophers who grappled with them from Aristotle to Immanuel Kant and all the other guys you'd see on a intro to philosophy reading list. But how can *The Good Place* teach these nuanced lessons where previous sitcoms couldn't find the time? How is it still funny? And why is it better?

Don't worry, I'm going to cover the series without spoilers. I'm Jackson and this is *Ideas At Play*.

Sitcoms - as a genre - have been teaching us about ethics for decades. Almost all sitcoms touch on the basic stuff I mentioned before, but some really focus in on doing the "right thing" more than others. In fact, there's almost always been a popular sitcom on the air that's fallen into this category.

Each of these shows is a little more nuanced than the one that came before it. *The Andy Griffith Show* taught Opie right and wrong in black and white. *All in the Family* debated hot button issues, an exercise in learning and practicing compassion. Recently, *Parks and Rec* has dealt with doing the right thing even when it's hard and thankless, like working in local government.

The sitcom institution has a ton of momentum behind it, moving towards these more nuanced lessons, but *The Good Place* doesn't just take the next step on that path, it takes a giant leap forward. We're not just learning about doing the right thing on *The Good Place*, but explicitly exploring the ethical philosophy behind it.

But despite it's high-minded goals, *The Good Place* never feels preachy. After all, everybody hates moral philosophy professors. It's a recurring joke on *The Good Place*.

Still as viewers, we've been prepped by decades of these 20 minute lessons. We're ready for the next step.

To make that transition more seamless, *The Good Place* uses its premise to its full potential. The premise of a sitcom is usually simple - a sentence that introduces central characters and the general situation that they're going to be mining humor from. For example, *Cheers* is about a bar in Boston where you can relax and where everybody knows your name. But *The Good Place* decides to push the envelope with its premise.

It drops us directly into a thought experiment of its own making: a woman is placed into Heaven by mistake. It's still sounds simple, but opens up a ton of ethical questions. Can she earn her place? Do people change? How do people change? What is good?

Moreover, the show's setting provides near-constant feedback for each of Eleanor's decisions. The more unethically she behaves, the more cracks appear in the paradise neighborhood.

Not only is this used for humor, but it keeps the story moving, providing concrete feedback for ethics in a way that doesn't exist in the real world. On top of that, the show also finds ways to bring back this idea in different contexts, with Eleanor even utilizing it to create a diversion.

This clever reuse of the rules of the good place is one great strength of the show and demonstrates the mindset that makes it so good. *The Good Place* is always looking to take on established ideas from new angles, whether they exist in its world or as conventions of the genre as a whole. Here, by picking its grab carefully, *The Good Place* is able to create the perfect environment for the kind of nuanced ethical conversations it wants to have.

Even the plot of *The Good Place* builds off the sitcom institution. For decades, sitcom episodes have an A plot, a B plot, and maybe even a C plot. These are storylines that play out at the same time, with the audience being bounced back and forth between them. A good show will have them all interact at the climax of the episode. A great show will have them also all deal with the same themes.

*The Good Place* does this to perfection. Each episode begins with a quick lesson on moral philosophy where a theory of ethics is introduced to Eleanor. Then as we follow her and the other inhabitants of the neighborhood, we see this theory played out, before we come back to it at the end, with a little twist. Sounds pretty simple but here's how it's different from past sitcoms.

Take this episode of *Cheers*. Carla puts out a personal ad for a date in the newspaper. Nobody answers so the guys at the bar answer it under the name Mitch, an airline pilot. Meanwhile, Diane gets a mime to perform at the bar, which is completely random. Carla's pen pal relationship with Mitch gets out of hand and the guys deal with the ethical implications of lying to their friend, even if it's for the right reasons. In the end, she finds out and forgives them, mainly because a real guy actually did respond to her ad.

Now compare that to the fifth episode of *The Good Place*, which I'm now going to spoil the plot of now. Nothing major but if you'd like, jump ahead to 7:10. Eleanor learns about utilitarianism

from Chidi. She senses that something is bothering him but they have to put it aside as they host a former marriage counselor and interrogator. Meanwhile, we reflect on Tahani's life, who can't figure out why she isn't higher on the good person rankings. She focuses on trying to help Michael fix the neighborhood, just to prove how good she is. Eventually she realizes that whatever good she did was done to upstage her sister, not to help people. Likewise, Eleanor realizes that her happiness means Chidi's unhappiness, since he'll never get to meet his true soulmate.

The conclusion *The Good Place* arrives at has a lot more nuance to it than *Cheers*, and uses both of its plotlines to explore it from different angles. Now, that's not to say *Cheers* isn't great - it is - just that *The Good Place* uses more complex plots to get at more nuance in the same amount of time.

That nuance is at the heart of *The Good Place*, which often looks carefully at our motivations for doing things rather than just the simple outcomes. It's another sneaky question posed by the premise of a good place. If you do good things for the purpose of getting karma points, do they count as much?

And arriving at those nuanced answers is much more interesting. It makes for a show that isn't just regurgitating philosophy trivia, but one that's actually adding to the conversation.

Even still, *The Good Place* wouldn't be able to do this if it had come out even ten years ago, before audiences started bingeing and closely watching TV at large. That kind of dedicated audience plus accessibility through streaming has allowed modern sitcoms to become more serialized, building their stories over multiple episodes instead of resetting to the status quo at the end of each half-hour.

This allows *The Good Place* to string ideas together, and amps up the pressure on Eleanor as the neighborhood begins to fall apart around her. She has to become a better person, and fast, or she'll be sent straight to *The Bad Place*. These are pretty normal ways to use serialization, but the most impressive way *The Good Place* serializes its story is by using it the same way any moral philosopher might: to provide counter-arguments.

Without giving anything away, season 2 offers a counter-argument to the ending of season 1. The show shifts its perspective to sort of reinvent the show while still keeping the main structure intact. Most episodes still introduce an idea, explore it, and then tweak it at the end. The premise and setting are still used to their absolute potential. Even the central themes of growth and change are still the focus. But season 2 is able to look at those things from a new perspective and show them in a different light. It's the same approach *The Good Place* took in applying every other part of the sitcom institution.

That serialization also redefines what a sitcom can be. Character growth has always been a part of sitcoms, but it's gradual and tends to happen over years, almost in the background of the

jokes. But because of its premise and structure, *The Good Place* puts character growth front and center. Now, that growth is the mission of the show, and one that rewards its audience. As the show morphs and changes to look at ideas from different angles, so do its characters. We become invested in them because we can see them trying to improve. They're not just talking about it, they're actually doing it.

Whether it's *Cheers*, *Parks and Rec*, or *The Andy Griffith Show*, television about morality aims to renew our hope. Whether it's in the virtue of the nuclear family or in the inherent goodness of a community or restore faith in local government, watching these shows is meant to be revitalizing and *The Good Place* is no different. It finds hope in the idea that we can change and improve ourselves and that it's never too late to be better.

By taking the building blocks of a sitcom and using its audience's expectations of the genre, *The Good Place* is able to delve deeper than its predecessors and pave the way for whatever comes next.

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