

TV's History of Defining "The Right Thing"

<https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/794/television/why-sitcoms-matter>

- "The sitcom is the most populist of genres in the most populist of mediums and has traditionally brought with it a strident, moralistic tone. While other television genres, like the procedural drama and the historical narrative, are infused with moralistic undertones, their quality depends almost entirely upon maintaining a level of ethical nuance and ambiguity that the sitcom does not require."
- "This ethical overlay was all-encompassing in the sitcom until the advent of 'Seinfeld.' 'Seinfeld' made what appears in hindsight to be a postmodern movement toward deconstruction, with a focus on undermining narrative and archetypal expectations. Few shows have shed more light on the traditional paradigm of the sitcom narrative than 'Seinfeld,' which intentionally subverted the genre."
- "The sitcom continues to be one of the most morally direct of all art forms. The brevity of the half-hour format necessitates conveying meaning in shorthand; it does not allow for more nuanced and ambiguous narratives."

<https://www.nytimes.com/1987/05/17/arts/today-s-morality-play-the-sitcom.html>

- "After the final commercial in an episode of "Growing Pains," Kirk Cameron, who plays Mike, steps out of character to emphasize the importance of saying "no" to cocaine, addressing the young people in the audience directly."
- "In this season's (1987) hourlong episode of "Family Ties" in which Alex - Michael J. Fox - mourns for a dead friend, he faces squarely problems of life and death, meaning and belonging, faith and despair."
- "Cosby" is No. 1 because it has mastered the art of renewing hope for the family. Your family. "The Cosby Show," then, provides moral paradigms and displays warm and renewing love."
 - J Note: renewing hope in something is the purpose of these moral lesson shows. Andy Griffith in community, MASH in humanity, All in the Family in family, Cheers and Frasier in neighbors and friends
- "Does that make it religious? 'Sure it does,' Professor Bergesen says. 'Family love is one of the tiny windows through which the Good or the Possible or God, if you want to use the term, peeks at us. It is in the little things of life, isn't it, that we often find the meaning of the big things?'"

TV sitcoms that frequently teach moral lessons

- Andy Griffith Show (60-68)
 - TV The Book
 - "The father is always teaching moral lessons to his son - often ones that reflect on his life experiences and his desire to make his town a peaceful, sensible, decent place to live, so that his son can believe that the world is

a good place despite having lost his mother before he had a chance to know her”

■ 401

- All in the Family (71-79)
 - TV The Book
 - “The series wasn’t just a situation comedy, it was an ongoing national conversation rooted in multifaceted characters”
 - “Prior to the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, pop culture either made an ostentatiously big show of grappling with hot-button topics...or plugged its ears and whistled a happy tune. There was a deep schism between how people talked in private (and what they talked about) and what you saw on TV and on movie screens and heard on the radio”
 - [819 “Two’s a Crowd”](#)
 - Humanizing Archie
 - Whole show is an exercise in learning and practicing compassion, even for the compassionless
- Cheers (82-93)
 - Diane is always going on about what the right thing to do is
 - 407 “2 Good 2 Be 4 Real”
 - The gang deals with the moral implications of having good intentions behind lying to Carla and creating a fake boyfriend. She eventually forgives them because their motivations came from a place of caring, but they kind of tiptoe around it because Carla gets another date
- Frasier (93-04)
 - Frasier is always lecturing other people about the right thing to do, then being forced to eat his words and do so himself
 - [216 “The Show Where Sam Shows Up”](#)
 - The ethical dilemma of whether to tell Sam the truth that will hurt him and their friendship

The Good Place Episode Lessons

102

- Moral Imperative (Kant)
 - Is there a moral imperative to help you? Do I have a greater obligation to my community? Are you taking someone else's spot, someone who deserves to be here?
- C: You want to prove you're not selfish? Here's the perfect test. There's something fun that you want to do, and then there's something less fun that people are doing for the common good. Which do you choose?
- E: So you're gonna help me figure out how to stay, right?
C: Well, that is a really tough question. Most great philosophers would say helping you is pointless, that you can't try to be good, especially when your motivations are so

obviously corrupt.

E: Yeah, but what do most great philosophers know?

C: On the other hand, Aristotle thought that moral virtue is something that you could get better at. He compared it to playing the flute. The more you practice, the more you improve.

E: Aristotle! That's my boy, right there. He was the best. I mean, most people agree he was the best one. So it sounds to me like you are on board the "help Eleanor" train.

C: Well, I've narrowed it down to two possibilities: yes and no.

- Same kind of sfx from Lost flashbacks
- T: sometimes a flaw can make something even more beautiful, like with Cindy Crawford and how short she is
- There are real consequences for making immoral decisions like garbage falling from the sky when Eleanor ditches her cleaning responsibilities
- Being capable of change is the source of hope in The Good Place

103

- Aristotle believes that your character - is voluntary, - because it's just the result of your actions, which are under your control.
- We assume Tahani is a good person because of the context, but there's really no reason to believe that. She's been pompous from the second she popped on screen
- Plant wilting is the physical manifestation of Eleanor's negative attitude
- "All the deceased members of the Portland Trailblazers are in the bad place"
- Hell is other people is the idea of the fake good place but the reason that it doesn't work is because the thesis of the second season is that people help each other
- Everybody here is better by an infallible formula
- She learns basic empathy for Tahani and Chidi
- Feedback for every moral decision, does knowing what you're doing is wrong cheapen doing the right thing?
- Janet living her truth line is funny
- She finds out about Jason

104

- Florida jokes
- "Welcome to the bottom of the barrel" - Eleanor
- Budhole
- Lao Tzu knowing the self is enlightenment
- David Hume a Treatise of Human Nature
 - Bundle Theory of the Self
 - According to bundle theory, an object consists of its properties and nothing more: thus neither can there be an object without properties nor can one even *conceive* of such an object; for example, bundle theory claims that thinking of an apple compels one also to think of its color, its shape, the fact that it is a kind of fruit, its cells, its taste, or at least one other of its properties. Thus, the theory asserts that the apple is no more than the collection of its

properties. In particular, there is no substance in which the properties are inherent.

- Lesson of this episode: Being yourself and knowing yourself aren't necessarily the same
- Anything in the world can be up to 104% perfect, that's how you got Beyonce
- Jason as AcidCat struggles to be himself, it sure seems like it's not a good idea
- Favorite meal is dependent on who you are
- Eleanor breaks the cake because it's a cruel act and it'll break the restaurant and to save Jason from himself
- "My hair is barely cascading down my shoulders" - Tehani
- "Oh, fanciful wordplay!" - Michael
- You need to be a better version of yourself

105

- Full cellphone battery froyo flavor
- Utilitarianism
 - Good causes the most good/pleasure
 - Bad causes the most pain/suffering
 - Jason's example
- Good person rankings
- "It seems you're moving out of your structural period, and more into conceptual abstraction." "Good eye, mother. I grew tired of objective representation. I trust my audience."
- Lesson of this episode: Doing the utilitarian thing for the wrong reasons isn't "good"/ethical
- He can't stop helping her because it'd shirking his ethical obligations
- "Take it away from me. Sorry, take it away, Camila!" - Tahani
- "I am vexed Eleanor!" - Chidi
- "Guess what Chidi, you basic!"
- The more Chidi helps Eleanor, the more likely it is that she'll stay and he won't get his soulmate. That zero-sum happiness is what makes Chidi helping Eleanor a utilitarian nightmare
- "HOW DO YOU ROW A BOAT?" - Chidi

106

- Theory of Contractualism
 - What We Owe to each other
 - A group of reasonable people are making the rules for a new society, but any member can veto a rule that they think is unfair.
- I help you despite your constant mockery
- Unethical behavior destroys the neighborhood
- Lesson of this episode: Keeping promises
- "I won this ugly yellow toddler" - Michael
- "What kind of monster would wreak havoc and not say anything" - Michael
- "I feel like Friends in Season 8. Out of ideas and forcing Joey and Rachel together even though it makes no sense" - Michael

107

- “Lies are like tigers, they are bad” - Chidi
- “I was almost handed a perfect solution to all my problems without having to work for it at all, and now it’s gone. Why do bad things always happen to mediocre people who are lying about their identities?” - Eleanor
- Choice of lying and saving herself or sacrificing herself and saving Michael. The other option is to kill Janet.
- Lesson of this episode: Sacrifice
 - Kant says that lying is always wrong
- “This is why everybody hates moral philosophy professors” - Chidi’s gf
- Boot brothers
- Janet is murdered
- Chidi’s white lie snowballs on him. It weighs on him for years and when he comes clean it makes his friend feel like shit
- Chidi says he won’t tell but that it will eat him alive
- Eleanor comes clean

108

- Eleanor casually references Kant
- Orb removes the ability to lie
- “A cactus on its own means no harm, it’s only when we interfere with it that it is dangerous” - Michael
- “Don’t judge me.” “That’s literally the purpose of this entire exercise” - Michael
- Dress Bitch t-shirts

109

- Lesson of this episode: Helping each other

110

- Lesson of this episode: Not choosing is still a choice

111

- Lesson of this episode: Motivations matter

112

- Lesson of this episode: Not making excuses

208

- Lesson of this episode: Trust
- Lack of trust is what sinks Vicki the Demon

210

- Moral particularism
 - “No single set of legal rules can capture the ever changing complexity of human life”

Miscellaneous Notes

- Motivations matter, specifically that your choices must be made not for the reward but because they are good

- Season 2 makes all of them students and trust/teamwork
- Season 1 offers “hell is other people” and then season 2 offers a rebuttal that actually works, not unlike Chidi’s season 2 that starts “of course the complete opposite might also be true”

Binge Mode Season 1

- Depictions of philosophy in popular culture
 - Plato’s The Cave
 - Philosophers must re-enter the cave and grapple with the ignorance of the citizen-prisoners. They speak truths that people are determined not to understand
 - Lost
 - The Matrix
 - Galaxy something
 - The Leftovers

Binge Mode Season 2

- “If hell is other people, isn’t heaven the right people?”
- Tahani still wants recognition and praise, Eleanor still is evading capture, Chidi
- Show actively has other characters ask each other these questions of motivations
- Do ethics have any stake if you’re immortal?
- Michael shifts from existential crisis to mid-life crisis
 - “We’re all just corpses that haven’t yet to decay”
- Tahani’s shame has consequences because she hiding her parts of the team from the others
- “It’s okay to keep a secret as long as it’s not hurting anyone” - Chidi
- “He admitted he was wrong which is better than 95% of humans” - Chidi
- Moral dessert

Review Articles

- <https://consequenceofsound.net/2018/02/the-good-place-season-2-wrestled-with-morality-by-smashing-the-status-quo/>
 - “Most TV shows stick to debates between the sort of Kantian rules-based ethics that Chidi favors (i.e., “there’s a moral rule against killing, so taking a life is never okay”) and Utilitarianism, the consequence-based moral philosophy that the show has referenced in the past (i.e., “killing is okay, but only if it serves the greater good”). But there’s a third major type of moral philosophy that *The Good Place* embraces in its Season 2 finale — Virtue Ethics. Virtue ethicists believe (in a

broad sense) that whether your moral choices are right or wrong doesn't depend on what rules you follow, or what the results of your actions are, but on how they reflect who you are and why you chose that course of action."

○