

## ARTICLE

# The Good, the Gothic and the Transnational Rules of the Afterlife in *The Good Place*

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*The Good Place* (Schur 2016–2020) is a sitcom farce about the afterlife. The scenario concerns the designer tortures of a postmodern hell which conceal the illusion that an ensemble of recently deceased humans, who have supposedly arrived at ‘the Good Place’, are actually in ‘the Bad Place’. The plot is built around the quasi-legal ‘rules’ that govern admission to the Good Place, where, like social media, everything you ‘like’ is in your profile, and goodness is calculated using metrics tallied from markers of moral virtue. The legalistic ‘rules’ are overseen by a parodic Judge. This article is concerned with the competition at the heart of the series narrative between the quest for moral virtue and the legal parody of the rules that govern admission to the afterlife. It also examines how the Gothic mode of the comedy works to assert the priority of the rules. Anthony Bradney’s discussion of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* provides the basis for comparing the law-like discourses of ethics and rules and in considering how popular culture representations use the law in entertainment formats. The afterlife fiction of *The Good Place* is seen as an example of Catherine Spooner’s notion of ‘happy Gothic’, but the show is ultimately dystopian, particularly due to the role and power of the Judge. In its double layer of debate about moral virtue and legalistic rules in the afterlife, *The Good Place* is a syncretic fantasy of ethical and legal order.

**Keywords:** afterlife; rules; Gothic; morality; judge; demons; didacticism

Chidi: But this is paradise

Eleanor: Oh it looks like paradise, but it’s really a filthy dumpster full of our worst anxieties...

Jason: ... I told you, it’s a prank show...

(Season 1, Episode 13)

*The Good Place* (Schur 2016–2020) is a sitcom farce about the afterlife which screens internationally in streamed and free-to-air television formats. The Gothic comedy of *The Good Place* is a benchmark of chipper American humour, yet it portrays a profoundly uneasy fantasy of the afterlife as a mirror of the contemporary culture of surveillance, that follows its subjects beyond the grave. I argue that its discomfiting humour largely arises through the competition at the heart of the main series narrative between a didactic quest for moral virtue and a legalistic parody of the rules that govern the afterlife. An overt rhetoric of moral pedagogy, expressed through the characters of Eleanor and Chidi, is a feature of many episodes, and the spread of the show across other digital media has increased the audience for this pedagogy, as I will discuss below. Theatrically, it overshadows the power of the rules and the Judge who presides over them. But the dominance of the rules is equally didactic, if implicitly so. I suggest how the Gothic mode of the comedy works to assert the priority of the rules, and, as the afterlife in *The Good Place* is depicted as governed by Western-styled law in the form of the rules, how questions of national and cultural identity are raised by the show. In particular, the simulated diversity of the cast of characters and the inclusive aims of the show’s creative interests appear to reinforce the virtue ethics of the moral pedagogy, while inner parodies of national types provide perspectives on the conflict of rules and ethics. In a wider reflection, this layered parody can allegorise the power of the state over its activist, albeit dead, citizens, or channel what Stuart Hall (1993) once termed the ‘complex structure in dominance’ of institutional power relations in the media (91).

Before these aspects are considered more closely, a brief synopsis of *The Good Place* will explain the comic plot and suggest the relevance of Hall’s theory to its afterlife fiction. Reference to the action of the series is indicated throughout with Season (S) and Episode (E) numbers (rather than the Netflix ‘chapter’ numbers) for ease of identification.

## A Layered Farce

The scenario in *The Good Place* concerns the designer tortures of a postmodern hell which conceal the fact that a group of recently deceased humans, who have supposedly arrived at 'the Good Place' – a utopian world of civility and social justice – are actually in 'the Bad Place'. The plot is built around the quasi-legal 'rules' that govern admission to the Good Place, where, like social media, everything you 'like' is in your profile, and goodness is calculated using metrics tallied from markers of moral virtue. The four deceased humans, Eleanor Shellstrop (Kristen Bell), Chidi Anagonye (William Jackson Harper), Tahani Al-Jamil (Jameela Jamil) and Jason Mendoza (Manny Jacinto) are greeted by Michael (Ted Danson) who introduces himself as the 'architect' of the Good Place. The legalistic 'rules' are overseen by a Judge (Maya Rudolph) who determines the eternal fates of the humans. By the end of the first season, however, Eleanor, realises – in Jason's words – that it is all a 'prank show' and that they are really in the Bad Place where the dead are tortured with their worst anxieties. Michael is revealed as a demon, and the designer of this innovation on eternal damnation in which the humans torture each other. He holds the power to repeatedly trigger a Nietzschean eternal return of the same scenario by rebooting and redesigning it, a form of horror sublime.

The overarching plot is therefore the quest of the humans to gain entry to the *real* Good Place by beating the points system and Michael's reboots through moral self-improvement under the tutelage of Chidi, a philosopher, whose lessons are a didactic feature of many episodes. The 'narrative complexity' (Mittel 2006) consists in the game of rules and the relationships between the humans, in particular the constantly interrupted romance between Eleanor and Chidi. Meanwhile, Michael falls out with his demon peers (who prefer the old ways of torture by beatings, burnings and flayings) and sides with the humans in their quest. Humans and demons alike are subject to the omnipotent authority of the Judge. *The Good Place* subsequently concluded its fourth season. However, at the time of writing, at its most recent stage, the Judge had examined the evidence for Michael's claim on behalf of the humans that the rules system 'sucks' (S4, E8). A climax to the epistemic rivalry between philosophy and the legalistic discourse of the rules, the implications of the Judge's decision shows the law trumping moral pedagogy, at least at this late stage of the series.

*The Good Place* premiered on NBC in the United States, and it is streamed internationally on Netflix. It has increased its transmedia presence with a podcast series (NBCUniversal 2020) and a web series released on the NBC website that preceded the release of the fourth season on Netflix, and *The Good Place* has its own YouTube channel as well. In Australia, it also goes out on the free-to-air comedy channel of the national broadcaster, the ABC. A critic with more of a sense of humour would probably appropriate one of the show's sanitised swear-words ('Holy Forkin' Shirtballs', etc.) to exclaim at this apparent popularity, indicated by its highly convergent presence and such evidence of its digital 'spreadability'. This is what Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013) call the tendency of digital media – through websites, fanzines, YouTube, podcasts, mobile access and so on – to draw audiences to engage interactively. Furthermore, as the streamed televisual economy is greatly deregulated by the range of options so, too, are the financial, moral and taste economies of its programme content. The complex legal environment in which any of this is produced and transmitted is largely invisible to audiences – barring some limited and formulaic induction through login protocols in streamed media.

In considering what allegory or analogy arises from the syncretic layers of folkloresque law and moral philosophy in *The Good Place*, its spreadable presence adds to the illusion that audiences relate to television through moral or pedagogical vectors more than legal ones. Ironically, this is the central dilemma of the Good Place in the show – that moral virtue is no guarantee of admission, and only compliance with its rules will get you there. In another sense the illusory competition between ethics and law recalls Hall's assumption that institutional powers are 'imprinted' in media texts (Hall 1990). Hall's view developed from the notion of media as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) in Althusserian Marxism. This then gave rise to his larger theory of communication, which seeks to contest the simplistic models (sender-receiver) that assume an unproblematic transaction in meaning between media producers and consumers. Hall, in contrast, modelled an encoding/decoding process that posed discrete points of negotiation in the message, which are subject to the stages and complexities of governance and aesthetic elements. In effect this suggests the power of the consumer to accept, reject or negotiate the dominant meaning.

For Hall, the 'encoding process' was 'ideological work' whereby 'connotational meaning' as it has been 'ideologically inflected and structured by the broadcasters works to make state processes seem 'natural' and 'taken for granted' (McRobbie 2005, 13–15).<sup>1</sup> For Hall, the protagonists were politicians, broadcasters and audiences in a theory devised in the 1980s and with regard mainly to current affairs television. But its application to fiction has been widespread, and if the contenders in the streaming era are re-imagined as broadcasters, creators and audiences, it seems aptly traced in the naturalised plot of ethical and legal competition and Western-styled governance of the afterlife that are connotations of *The Good Place*. Accordingly, my account is not a 'dominant' or preferred reading according to Hall's schema. This would be to accept the obvious and didactic discourse of lessons in moral philosophy that form much of the plot, comedy and publicity for the show.

Instead, in the following sections, I situate *The Good Place* amidst the proliferation of Gothic-styled entertainments broadcast on transnational television, and use Catherine Spooner's concept of 'happy Gothic' – which she argues is a trend in twenty-first century culture – to suggest its part in a systemic order of contemporary taste. I then look at the embedded legal parody and the role of the Judge, and follow Anthony Bradney's (2011) discussion of earlier landmarks in Gothic television, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*, for the law-like discourses of ethics and rules in these shows,

and how popular culture uses the law or its officers to posit ethical questions in entertainment formats. Thereafter I compare this use of the law in the series with its didactic discourse of moral philosophy, focusing on its production through the characters of Eleanor, Chidi and Michael (Jason, Tahani and Janet are also important characters but are less directly relevant here). I consider the export of moral pedagogy to educational settings (see Young 2019) as a form of reception encouraged by NBC, who developed a spin-off YouTube series of videos by the philosophy consultant on the series (see 'Mother Forkin' Morals' 2018). While *The Good Place* is defended by its production interests from religious allegory, its Gothic and morality discourses invite comparison with medieval morality literature and brief reflection on the law/ethics tensions therein.

In terms of the overarching plot of the series, the prominence of moral philosophy is the 'prank show' in that it does not – to date – eclipse the authority of the Judge and the legalistic rules over the fate of the humans. In bare terms, this suggests that *The Good Place* reinforces lawfulness in that its strongest message is that the rules – however negotiable – are to be followed. It is a dystopian predicament for the dead, whose allegiance to the transnational rules of the afterlife is shored up in the series by their excursions to national outposts to improve their prospects for Eternity.

### Happy Gothic and Tele-Demonology

On the face of it, the afterlife fiction of *The Good Place* resembles Catherine Spooner's (2017) description of 'happy Gothic', which she identifies as a post-millennial trend in transnational entertainment. For Spooner, 'happy Gothic' is mainly detected in romances and comedies, but 'happy' also signifies a 'mobile' and 'oppositional' sense in which such productions explore a range of moods, and she uses 'comedy' in a 'medieval sense of a work that ends happily' (10). Spooner traces a consistent comic thread running through the Gothic tradition going back to the eighteenth century, noting that Gothic always has had a tendency to 'self-parody' (24). Among the forerunners are Oscar Wilde's *The Canterville Ghost* (1887), and Stella Gibbons *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932), and television precedents include the 1960s sitcoms *The Addams Family* (1964–66) and *The Munsters* (1964–66), and the soap opera *Dark Shadows* (1966–71). While it can be celebratory and 'playful' or positively inclined, however, 'happy Gothic' is potentially ambiguous and contradictory (7).

The positive, playful tone of *The Good Place* conforms to 'happy Gothic' with its comic setting in the afterlife, its central romance between Chidi and Eleanor and its sanitised religious syncretism in the folk-evangelical euphemisms for heaven and hell ('the good place' and the 'bad place'), although Michael states 'it is not the classic Christian hell' (S3, E4). An atmosphere of comedy of manners is suggested by the predominance of settings in sitting rooms, bedrooms and offices, and the noticeably white and pink palette of the Pollyanna-esque *mise-en-scene*. But the 'folkloresque' demons – that is, a 'made up' folklore with a 'fuzzy' relationship to accepted folklore (Foster and Tolbert 2016) – and dystopian plot suggest its hybridity and ambiguities. Eleanor's apartment, decorated with portraits of clowns, and the larger-than-life image of the tragic clown Pagliacci becomes central in the *mise-en-scene* at the moments of darkest farce, suggesting the horror at the heart of the comedy. Out of doors, the village mall with its nauseating ubiquity of frozen yoghurt treats is a theme-park fantasy of heaven. Dystopia emerges in the revelation of the surveilled society and the elusive destiny of the 'real' Good Place. Its implicit religious parody is also ambiguous.

Rebecca Wigginton (2017) observes that 'the roots of the Gothic are religious' (150) and that Gothic literature has always aestheticised religious 'ritual and pageantry' (157). She notes the historical tendency of Gothic fiction to feature clerical settings and characters, and 'religious sins like hypocrisy and pride' (150). But she points out that the Gothic became 'very secular in the twentieth century' (150). Indeed, the discourse of personal betterment through moral philosophy in *The Good Place* is recognisable as a secular adaptation of this religious trope of repenting sins, and in a very didactic vein that is reminiscent of morality literature pre-dating Gothic fiction (discussed further below). But the series is as playfully evasive about its religious connotations as the 'rules' are inexplicit as 'the laws' denoted. Michael Schur, the series creator, who claims to have researched various faiths, is quoted as denying its religious orientation, and stating that the show is 'about versions of ethical behavior' and spirituality, 'not religious salvation' and that this is clear from the opening episode (quoted in Ostrow 2016).

Its secular Gothic legacy is nevertheless allied with the proliferation of demons and supernatural beings in transnational television, which is so widespread in the twenty-first century as to be almost normal. This is especially the case in American law enforcement genres, with *Lucifer* (Kapinos 2015–), *Supernatural* (Kripke 2005–), and the now-concluded *Grimm* (Carpenter, Greenwalt and Kouf 2011–2017) among the many titles. The edge or joke in these portrayals of demon protagonists is their humanity, and so it is also with the sanctimonious Michael in *The Good Place*. A demon ironically named after the archangel Michael (Ostrow 2016), through him, from Episode 1, the series plot depends on the biblical quasi-folklore portrayal of demons as liars (Taylor 2017), albeit updated to corporate vice in a secular setting. In a manner reminiscent of *The Truman Show* (Weir 1998), in which Truman is the unknowing protagonist of a reality TV show of his life, Michael is seen pitching his revised torture scenarios to a round-table resembling an advertising agency or television production team. He coaches the demon players on their strategy and motivation in deceiving the humans in the illusion of 'the Good Place' (S2, E1). Thus the innocent (dead) wayfarers in the afterlife are at the mercy of the corporate tensions in the demon world.

A happy ending to *The Good Place* is as yet in doubt, and the rules of the afterlife appear to mitigate against the potential for a happy ending. In spite of the comedy, it is a dystopian vision of the afterlife, fraught with moral angst

and inescapable rules. But a twist develops as Michael's demonic lying is turned to virtue from Season 3 in his efforts to change. As the series proceeds, he becomes alienated from the demons and his demon boss, Sean (Mark Evan Jackson), and eventually sides with the humans in an effort to evade his own eternal banishment (Season 3) and in growing recognition of the nature of human goodness (Season 4). Doubts linger about his capacity to change, but under Eleanor's leadership the humans invest trust in him, in the belief that the Good Place exists and that they can get there with his help and through moral improvement (S2, E3; S2, E8). This anxious channel of hope widens when the Judge allows the humans another year to meet the new points system, monitored by an accountant. When the system of rules is questioned by Michael on behalf of the humans and culminates in a hearing of evidence by the Judge (S4, E8), the conflict between law and ethics is placed at the centre and foreground of the series at its most climactic stage. This compels the didactic rivalry in the series between moral and legalistic discourses.

### The Law's Own Burrito: The Judge and the Rules

Popular cultural representations of the law have long been of interest in postmodern critical legal studies, both in the sense of the law in fiction, and the law as fiction (see Threadgold 1997; Rogers 2008). While television comedy can simulate, satirise or allegorise the human condition, the relationship to 'truth' is more tenuous owing to the hyperreality (Baudrillard 1988) generated by the media, which is arguably intensified by spreadability. Furthermore, the rules of *The Good Place* and the Judge are syncretic imaginings. The folkloresque population of demons and legalistic fictions in *The Good Place* is nevertheless comparable with other Gothic television series, of which *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* were early landmarks.

Bradney (2011, following Gaakeer 1998) suggests that the portrayal of the law in literature and popular culture, is a study of the "particularity of human experience" (para 37). Shows like this 'are not an exposition of jurisprudence but are, rather a study of the place that law has in the lives of those in the programs' (para 40). Bradney argues that *Angel* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fundamentally take issue with the prevailing notions of law and ethics. In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the slayers have a 'deep rooted' 'desire to behave lawfully' and Buffy applies a 'recognizable set of rules' such that her work has a 'legal quality' (para 3). A governing body, The Watcher's Council, oversees vampires and demons, while the human world has 'rules' (para 3), and a conflict emerges between these different legal systems. Buffy eventually resigns from the Watcher's Council because she doubts the 'legitimacy of their legal order' (para 5). *Angel*, by comparison 'riff[s] on the tropes of traditional legal dramas and law enforcement shows' and probes the 'sources of law' and questions the 'defining moral and ethical frameworks' (para 6).

In *The Good Place*, by comparison, it is the place of law in the *afterlife* that is represented by the rules (which are shown to be continuous with earthly rules). *The Good Place* satirises some legal drama tropes, particularly television judges, and Michael becomes a kind of advocate for the humans. But in the contest between moral philosophy and the rules, the consistent improvement of the humans does not result in their elevation to the Good Place, which suggests that the rules are faulty, and, indeed, this becomes the crux of the plot at its most recent stage. It might be assumed that moral improvement should satisfy the rules and the points system, but the Judge's decision-making power does not guarantee that it will result in progression to the Good Place (S4, E8). At times, the discourses of morality and law explicitly intersect, such as when Michael, in warning Eleanor about the challenges of entering the Good Place, asks whether she has ever committed a 'serious crime' like 'murder or sexual harassment' (S1, E1). This is an allusion to the Hollywood realm, perhaps, and the series is liberally sprinkled with jokes about transnational television – e.g., the taste of people in the Bad Place for reality television – and Michael confesses (S1, E6) to having watched all ten seasons of *Friends* when designing the Good Place. To this extent, *The Good Place* is less obviously reflexive about legal drama tropes than it is about more general television fare.

Its most obvious judicial allusion is the Judge herself, and her role is both satirical and crucial to the narrative logics. Comic judges, like comic doctors, are a long-standing device in comedy, and their authority is prone to be satirised. This may be due in part to judges figuring among the 'speaking and acting parts in the institutional "drama of law"' (Rogers 2008, 443). Aside from legal dramas representing law and the judiciary on television, numerous reality television shows feature actual judges presiding over actual litigation, and this Judge is comparable to the long-running *Judge Judy* (1996–). She is garbed in judicial apparel, uses a gavel, and is baldly outspoken and bureaucratic in her application of the rules. Hers is not a practice of judgement as 'priestly divination' (as termed by Threadgold 2015, 31). She is rather more formulaic yet opportunistic in her uses of authority, requiring the humans in Season 4 to sign a document at the hearing about their final fate, which turns out to be a petition for rebooting *Ally McBeal* (S4, E8). Indeed, following the realist, playful farce of Season 1 and most of Season 2, with the Judge's entry into the action late in Season 2 (S2, E11) the series becomes increasingly absurdist.

There is no sense of who makes the rules or of the authority in whose name the Judge presides. No deity is invoked, and this is crucial to the syncretic Gothic fiction of *The Good Place*. Nevertheless, the Christian religious connotations of the Judge's authority are parodied in her characterisation as a glutton. The episode in which she first appears is titled 'The Burrito' for the food item found in her chair by the hapless humans (S2, E11). Later, seen eating it, she dresses the burrito with bottled 'envy' – not chilli sauce, as it appears, although it still has a 'kick', she says. The Judge therefore embodies at least two of the Seven Deadly Sins, a religious parody that does not obscure that the authorities of the afterlife are wholly secular. The Judge and her assisting underlings include a Chief Accountant (Season 3), and a committee

of earlier successful candidates for the Good Place who are summoned to participate at her hearing of the evidence for amendments to the rules (Season 4).

At the climax of Season 4, based on the evidence of the accountant's results, the Judge upholds Michael's claim that the points system is unfair (S4, E9). But in spite of this favourable finding, and contrary to the objectives of the claim, the Judge makes a discretionary ruling not to elevate the humans to the Good Place but to reboot humanity from the very beginning of evolution. This situation threatened to suspend forever the renewal of Eleanor and Chidi's romance and affect the entire human world. In the subsequent episodes, (at the time of writing), the humans, led by Michael and Eleanor, strategise a new system of rules requiring collaboration by humans and demons to persuade the Judge to reconsider. This system involves a 'test' for the newly deceased to be given a second chance to improve their moral goodness in the afterlife – which, in fact, is the scenario of the show. After various obstacles have been negotiated, the Judge accepts the new system, and, as a reward for 'saving humanity', elevates Eleanor, Chidi, Tahani, Jason and Michael to the real Good Place (S4, E 11). They depart in a golden balloon, waving as a voice calls 'Full'!

Although NBC decided in 2019 to conclude the series – a decision Schur says is 'on our own schedule' (Spencer 2019) – more episodes are promised, so the medieval happy ending may yet change. Moral philosophy may yet come to dominate the legalistic rules, but as it currently stands, the fate of the humans and the transformed demon Michael remains subject – even with their best efforts – to the discretionary rulings of the Judge. Even so, rather than the rules, the reputation of the show still rides high on the preeminence of its moral philosophy lessons, as discussed in the next section.

### **Educating Eleanor and Converting Michael: Moral Didacticism in *The Good Place***

If didacticism is understood as the artistic practice that 'convey[s] information and instructions, along with pleasure and entertainment' (Literary Devices 2019), then it is primarily contained in *The Good Place* in the inner moral training in philosophy delivered by Chidi. Some of these scenes are striking for the *mise-en-scene* that resembles an old-fashioned educational format: a teacher at the blackboard, the seated learners, sometimes shot from behind as if from the back of the classroom (e.g. S1, E4/E5; S2, E4). The simplicity of the instructional format, the clarity of the messages to be learned, and the immediate rewards of learning – for Eleanor, in particular – convey the improving benefits of moral philosophy. Indeed, the manner in which the characters represent or embody the taught philosophical values makes them quasi-allegorical in a way that resembles medieval morality literature. If there is any doubt that this moral pedagogy is traded as the show's *raison d'être*, the meta-pedagogy from the series producer, NBC, and creator, Schur, could dispel it. Nor should the centrality of Eleanor be overlooked as an index of the dominant discourse of the show.

Eleanor is the main protagonist of the series, which begins with her arrival at the Good Place. In life Eleanor was a dishonest pharmaceutical salesperson, and she first believes she has arrived at the Good Place by mistake (S1, E1). She secures the support of her designated soulmate, Chidi, to earn her place there by becoming a better person with the help of his tuition in moral philosophy. Chidi analyses Eleanor's 'selfishness' as the main obstacle to becoming a person of 'moral virtue' and decides to help because he believes she is capable of change (S1, E1). Here is the first of Chidi's didactic lessons in Immanuel Kant's virtue ethics. In subsequent episodes, the equivalent of a course in Western philosophy and ethics proceeds from Chidi's passionate and lucid instruction. Chidi is such an effective teacher that Eleanor, and later Janet (D'Arcy Carden), also assume the role of instructors. By Season 2, Eleanor is instructing Chidi himself, based on her readings of the moral theory texts he has set.

In vignettes within the various episodes, the characters demonstrate the philosophical values that Chidi and his co-pedagogues teach. For instance, Jason, encouraged by Eleanor to make 'a better version' of himself, becomes the exemplar of utilitarianism (the principle of acting ethically for the maximum pleasure or good of others) with a story from his life as a drug-dealing DJ (S1, E5). Elsewhere, Eleanor demonstrates contractualism in helping Michael overcome his workaholicism by learning how to have fun (S1, E6); and the ethics of Machiavellianism accompany the decision about whether to 'kill' Janet, a humanoid artificial intelligence who cannot be killed in the literal sense (S1, E7). Meanwhile, later, the supposed 'blueprint' candidate for the Good Place, Doug Forcett (Michael McKean), whose beaming portrait hangs over the architect's office, is exposed as so hooked on the points system that he becomes its negative example (S3, E8). Even Michael becomes a subject of this improving wisdom when he espouses Kierkegaard's 'leap of faith' to persuade the humans to trust his transformation from torturing demon to advocate for the humans (S2, E8).

Chidi, whose moral angst is extensively satirised in the first three seasons with numerous jokes about why people 'hate' moral philosophy professors, is the most tortured of the human souls. For all his knowledge he is disabled by chronic indecisiveness (especially S2, E5, 'The Trolley Problem') and compulsively vents his anxieties by spouting moral theory. Yet his gifted teaching promises to save them all, and his success as a teacher places him in the pantheon of heroic screen teachers: Mr Chips (*Goodbye Mr Chips*), Jean Brodie (*The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*), and Teach (*To Sir with Love*) are prototypes (Eleanor even calls him 'Teach' in S1, E4). Even so, Chidi's passionate commitment to moral philosophy is a self-torture amplified in the cruelties of the Good Place. After the news from the Chief Accountant that nobody has been admitted to the real Good Place for 500 years, his teaching turns from Kantian ethics to Nihilism (S3, E4). He recovers with Eleanor's support only to sacrifice himself to be rebooted so as not to threaten the group's chances of reaching the *real* Good Place by recognising his former lover, Simone (Kirby Howell-Baptiste), which will expose their plan (S3, E12).

Eleanor mostly embodies the virtue of 'being your true self', and her education and self-betterment at the hands of Chidi supports her heroism among the humans. As the main protagonist of the series, she is the main exponent to the television audience of what can be learned from the show. Eleanor's combination of conscientious learning, subversive resistance to the regime of rules and her wit in recognising that it is really the Bad Place makes her, paradoxically, both the most morally improved and the most subversive candidate for the Good Place. In the finale of Season 3, entitled 'Pandemonium' (named for John Milton's *Paradise Lost* where it is 'the place of all demons'), and following Michael's meltdown, Eleanor replaces him as the 'architect' of the Good Place. She greets Chidi as the season ends, re-entering the afterlife after having been rebooted (S3, E12). Thus, though the series began with Chidi as Eleanor's teacher, Eleanor gains the upper hand across the series, both in their budding romance and in her leadership of the Good Place.

While the show is evasive about its religious connotations, its programmatic structure of learning in moral theory has attracted comment from Molly Driscoll of *The Christian Science Monitor*, who observes that 'TV is not the hearth people typically go to for ethics lessons' but 'The Good Place ... is prompting more thinking around ... what it means to be a good person' (Driscoll 2018). Indeed, the series creator, Schur, has spoken about the aims of the show, saying that: 'I pitched the show as an investigation of what it meant to be a good person ... that the show could ... describe what it is to be a good person' but, he says, that 'didn't mean "do this and not that"' (quoted in Elderkin 2019). He says that the objective shifted as he 'found over the course of working on it with the writers, and the actors, and the entire crew that that's an even more complicated question than I think I thought it was' (quoted in Elderkin 2019).

It is not clear how moral philosophy or its didactic expression came to be developed as a narrative strategy, although philosophers were consulted by the show's writers. Dr Todd May, a professor from Clemson University in South Carolina, and the author of a book on morality, is one of the consultants. He says that he was recruited midway through the series, not having been aware of it previously (EdSurge Podcast 2019). In an interview, he explains that one of the writers, Dan Schofield, recommended his book to Schur, and that the 'part that Mike really picked upon, I think, is that morality helps give shape to our lives' (Young 2019).<sup>2</sup> NBC has since invested in featuring May in four short videos posted on YouTube, each based on a philosophical paradigm pertaining to the series ('Mother Forkin' Morals' 2018). May mentions that an NBC executive suggested the idea, and that Schur agreed to this rather than pitching the idea himself.

*The Good Place* has also found its way into at least one educational setting: the first-year transition curriculum at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) (ironically situated in the town of Paradise) where it is used to 'jump-start discussions of moral philosophy' (Young 2019; and see Shreve 2019). The Associate Director of Academic Transitions, Dr Emily Shreve (who mentions that she is not a philosophy instructor, but an English PhD) describes how students watch an episode then 'talk through it and do activities linked to it to ... think through ... the ethics and why is that relevant to them' (Young 2019). One activity involves responding to questions with 'good' and 'bad' actions and scoring the points for the actions, apparently an adaptation of the show's scenario of entry into the afterlife (see Shreve 2019). Beyond the sphere of entertainment, the secular moralism of a philosophy professor appearing within the fiction of *The Good Place* no doubt lends legitimacy to such educational applications.

But the sermon-like discourse of teaching, and the quasi-allegorical way the characters represent or embody the moral theories, accompanied by the narrative imperative to change – at the behest of a demon – begs comparison with earlier forms of didactic literature and theatre of which the medieval morality plays and biblical pageants are prototypes. These were secular adaptations of the liturgical dramas of the medieval church, of which the fifteenth-century *Everyman* or *Mankind* are examples. The use of allegorical figures personifying Vices and Virtues and 'the good and bad qualities of Everyman' was accompanied by elements of 'sermon' and 'folk activities' (Cawley 1984, xv–xvi). The biblical pageants were often set in the afterlife, in heaven or hell, and both forms, A.C. Cawley notes, are less interested in 'earthly life' than 'spiritual welfare in the life to come' (xvi). Demons, or devils, and their allegorical counterparts, Sin and Vice, were a vital part of these proselytising spectacles, where the energetic performance of devils worked charismatically to provoke audiences to reflect on sin and repentance (Wright 2019, 201–203).

Morality plays and allegorical dramas set in the afterlife transmuted over time into various religious literatures and theatrical traditions, ranging from the gruesome Puritan dramatisations of the lives of martyrs and saints (Darton 1966, 53–55) to the Catholic 'lives of the saints and sacred plays' created by clerical orders (Cavallaro 2019, 3). Set in the afterlife in heaven or hell these 'vehicles ... of conversion' proselytised about repentance and the 'kind of people, and ... even which historical figures' would reach heaven or hell (2). Many of these plays incited audiences to repentance and demons sometimes 'encourage[d] ... the souls to recount their past lives of sin' (6). The setting of educational plays in the afterlife continues in the present among evangelical groups (15).

The comparison with *The Good Place* is striking in the sense that various characters reflect on, and renounce their past ways, most notably Eleanor, with the persistent encouragement of Michael the demon. Ironically, the subversive Eleanor and the demon Michael are the main exponents of conversion in *The Good Place*, with Michael himself converting to the virtues of moral philosophy. More ironically, as an immortal creature, Michael cannot believe in moral philosophy because demons experience no impending sense of the end of their lives, which according to Todd May gives moral conscience its founding imperative ('Mother Forkin' Morals' 2018). This explanation is also heard from Michael in the show. So when he adopts the 'leap to faith' (S2, E8) and converts to moral philosophy as a way forward, it is an

unlikely trajectory for a demon and more evidence of the syncretic hybridity of the show's Gothic allegiances, albeit Michael's trustworthiness remains in question throughout the series.

In terms of the conflict between law and ethics, the historical morality plays and liturgical dramas were presumably in harmony with the prevailing law. These entertainments were produced in contexts in which secular and religious authorities were closely aligned in the eras of the medieval Catholic church and the Protestant revolutions, and there were often intersecting influences of ecclesiastical and secular jurisdictions (see for instance Oakley 2020; Fasolt 2014). In this sense, *The Good Place* is little different in its home culture, since it perpetuates a medieval image of the governing regimes of the afterlife as continuous with earthly life, an explicit premise of the show.

### Leaving Hell for Australia: National Identity and the Dead

*The Good Place* originates from the United States and simulates the social and political values of a modern Western democracy. Aside from Chidi's overt lessons in Western philosophy, the dialogue is laced with reference to contemporary sexual and cultural politics in America, and the diversity of the afterlife is simulated in the identities of the four humans. Only Eleanor is presented as unambiguously white American, 'The Girl from Arizona' (S4, E1). Jason, the other American of the four, is forced to masquerade for the first few episodes as a Buddhist monk, Jianyu, and hails from Jacksonville, Florida, but explains that his family is from the Philippines. Chidi tells that he was born in Nigeria and raised in Senegal and his mother tongue is French, but it is due to how 'amazing this place is' that Eleanor understands him in English (S1, E1) — just as the TV audience does also! Tahani is Pakistani-British and a global socialite and charity fundraiser whose name-dropping and connections embrace royalty and celebrity everywhere.

This simulated diversity no doubt supports its reception within America and similar multicultural democracies and assists the export of *The Good Place* across transnationally streamed media, which implicitly extends its cultural jurisdiction as entertainment. Schur claims the show exhibits a 'pastiche of different cultures' (Ostrow 2016). It might be assumed that, in this diverse group, Eleanor's white-American identity is made other and exotic, except that that she alone among the lead humans is in the image of the senior demons, Michael and Sean, and the Judge. When a fake 'Real Eleanor' (Tiya Sircar) is dispatched to inveigle Eleanor's removal to the 'real' Bad Place, she declares that she is from 'Bangladesh' (S1, E11) and is later exposed as the demon Vicky in disguise. However, a series of excursions within the fiction to international locations can suggest how national types underpin the transnational discourse of comedy and sustain the universalised myth of the dead as subjects of Western-styled rules of the afterlife.

For instance, Michael and Janet's interview with Doug Forcett takes them to rural Canada (S3, E8), and Chidi visits Hungary during Season 3. A further five episodes of Season 3 (S3, E 1–5) are set in 'Australia' after the humans receive a dispensation from the Judge to edit their lives and improve their prospects in a 'medium' place (S2, E12). For the episodes set in international destinations, the production did not move out of Los Angeles, where it is wholly produced at Universal Studios. It is notable that these excursions all result in funny but rather downbeat outcomes and resolve in returns to the Good Place. The move to Australia is the most extended excursion and expands the Gothic and pedagogical discourses of the show. The diegetic motivation arises from Chidi's career as a university lecturer at fictional St John's University in Sydney and Eleanor's decision, in her edited existence, to seek his tuition in moral philosophy after spotting him on YouTube (S2, E12). (Chidi's residence in Australia is one of many places that he mentions he has lived, and there are a number of allusions to Australia throughout the series mostly stemming from Chidi's Australian 'mate' who he met while working in Australia — see S1, E7).

The excursion extends the moral pedagogy into an explicitly educational environment in Chidi's professorial office in Sydney. The move to Australia also appears to parody the early history of Australia as a penal settlement which acquired a mythos of 'hell' in colonial literature. In the context in which the humans go to improve their prospects for Eternity it seems akin to another colonial mythos of Australia as a place to disappear or to seek a fortune (see Goldsmith 2017). But the national character is as hybrid and ambiguous as other Gothic elements of the show. The action moves from Chidi's office to a restaurant named 'Hollywood' and into the suburbs. At the restaurant, Janet appears among the waiting staff after she and Michael apprehend a demon, Trevor (Adam Scott), who has infiltrated the group (S3, E1). Eleanor becomes disgruntled, saying she wants to get out of this 'trash country where everyone is either a criminal or a spider' (S3, E4). But the kindness of the locals during her sojourn in the suburbs is restorative, and it becomes a rite of passage for she and Chidi, who both learn to 'accept [their] fate' (S3, E5).

While folkloresque farce might hardly be expected to authentically portray any 'real' notion of Australia, any more than Doug Forcett might authentically represent rural Canada, these excursions result in disappointments that make a return to the Good Place seem desirable for the dead. Doug Forcett inspires the beginning of Michael's idea that the rules system is broken, while Chidi and Eleanor's newfound fatalism in Australia does not result in their eligibility for the 'real' Good Place, nor does it discourage their renewed contest of the rules in the next stage of their quest. More abstractly, these passages reveal how global television trades in national myths and stereotypes. But, as the afterlife is the primary setting, all the characters remain subject to the Judge's rules, irrespective of their place of origin or destination. It speaks to the absurdist wonder of Michael's architect-designed illusion of the Good Place that all the candidates and the demons simulate a diverse assemblage of identities who fall under the same law-like regime. To this extent, *The Good Place* is salutary of the limitations to the particularity of human experience that emerges from popular cultural representations. Yet it can still tell us something about this experience.

## Conclusion

As described earlier, the outcome to date in *The Good Place* suggests an optimistic condition in which the contenders can, with great effort and some luck, alter their fate. But their success in ballooning to the 'real' Good Place only comes from tendering a new system of rules that the Judge approves. No philosophical argument overcomes her power, and no amount of spreadability and the further twists that may ensue are likely to alter the central struggle between theories of goodness and the legalistic rules of the afterlife. While the Christianised folklore of the Good Place and the Bad Place pervades the series, and while Chidi might be sanctified for his long-suffering passionate commitment to moral philosophy, a Judge and a Chief Accountant are the ultimate powers. They are wholly secular and they do not debate the finer points of ethics. Chidi's lessons, Eleanor's pragmatism and Michael's shifting loyalties do not affect the rules. The legalistic discourse is an equally didactic part of a story of a morally absolute universe in which the rules-based justice of the Judge makes moral theory redundant. In the secular Gothic fiction of *The Good Place*, the transnational rules of the afterlife trump the moral philosopher every time, and the national myths encompassed in its pastiche rhetoric of the diversity of the dead. Their situation in secular Hollywood is not too far removed from the protagonists of the medieval morality tale.

If ethical pedagogy was the goal of the creators, as Schur claims, and the rules represent the authority of the broadcasters who harness the aesthetic elements to sell the show, they would be unlikely to sell a story of the failure of the ethical quest. No doubt Schur and his creative team are as subordinate to NBC as the audiences are to the show. They can be persuaded to the creator's view of ethical optimism while compelled to comply with the broadcaster's rules. In this, streamed media is little different to the broadcast era of television. It might enable a vast range of discrete viewing choices, but it remains subject to the power of broadcasters to cultivate audience tastes for a particular kind of product. Streamed television remains an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), and empowering audiences to navigate its layers of messaging remains a critical task. Insofar as the ideological work of teaching moral philosophy to a global audience is likely to exceed the, as yet unknown, final conclusion to *The Good Place*, there is a reward for decoding the rival didacticism of the legalistic rules of the afterlife. Otherwise, the 'prank show' rules!

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Angela McRobbie observes that '[f]ar from being a conspiracy' Hall et al suggest that 'in such a complex society as our own, the relation between television and state is one of relative autonomy' (12). Broadcasters are not directly answerable to government in state-funded organisations (like the ABC or BBC) 'except in the last instance' (12).

<sup>2</sup> Warm thanks to Jill Bronfman for the lead to this article.

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Image: NBC Official Merchandise, <https://www.nbcstore.com>: ©2020 NBCUniversal Media, LLC.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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