

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

One of the most requested topics that I get is The Good Place, which was a comedy series, that just ended after four seasons.

I've wanted to talk about The Good Place, but I wanted to wait until the show was over with because the writers clearly had an endgame in mind, and I wanted to see what it was.

Needless to say, this episode will be full of spoilers.

If you haven't seen The Good Place, and don't care about spoilers, the premise is that The Good Place is basically heaven, but it looks like a quaint suburban town. It's run by Ted Danson's character Michael, who is an immortal being slash architect.

Do all the neighborhoods look like this?

No. Every neighborhood is unique. Some have warm mothers, some cold summer cities, some farmland, but in each one, every blade of grass, every ladybug, every detail has been precisely designed and calibrated for its residents.

There's a lot of frozen yogurt places.

Yeah, so one thing we put in all the neighborhoods, people love frozen yogurt. I don't know what to tell you

The main character is Eleanor, played by Kristen Bell. She thinks she ended up in The Good Place by accident, due to a bureaucratic error. In fact, based on the life she led, she thinks she probably should've ended up in The Bad Place. At first, the only person she confides in is Chidi, who is played by William Jackson Harper. He was a philosophy professor back when he was alive.

Eleanor, I swear that I will never do or say anything that will cause you any harm.

Because those aren't my memories. I wasn't a lawyer. I never went to the Ukraine. I hate clowns. There's been a big mistake. I'm not supposed to be here.

Wait, what?

If you're thinking, how long can they keep that premise going? Actually, the show flips that premise on its head so many times as Eleanor and her friends try to figure out why this afterlife system is so messed up, and how to fix it. I have

never seen a show keep reinventing itself like that – pushing the boundaries of their worldbuilding and the roles that the characters get to play.

But what really fascinated me about *The Good Place* was how seriously the show took philosophy, and the question of how to be a good person.

The show runner Michael Schur (*SURE NOT SHORE*) consulted with a lot of philosophers -- including Todd May, who is a professor at Clemson University in South Carolina. Todd was actually sent to Los Angeles to give the writers a crash course on philosophy.

So how did he end up going to Hollywood? Well, the show runner Mike Schur had been reading Todd's book, which is called *Death: The Art of Living*.

TODD: He was reading it apparently at night in bed and the **cover** of the book is just, it's a gray with a raven and it just says death on it. And his wife got into bed, saw the book and said, our marriage isn't going to survive. This show is it. He apparently continued to plow through the book. The marriage survived and thrived. Uh, but he liked the themes in the book, particularly the idea that mortality is something that's essential for our lives to have meaning.

In fact, Todd's ideas directly influenced the design of *The Good Place*, as the characters kept trying to figure out how to live a good eternal life.

TODD: There are debates in philosophy about whether an immortal life would be a life worth living. And I came down very strongly on the side that in order for our lives to be worth living, they have to be mortal. I think that idea attracted him, but also the idea that in making our lives meaningful, morality plays a lot, not just mortality, but morality play has a large part to play.

So then when you finally got to the writer's room, just observing, what was it like to see philosophical principles kind of get churned through you know, a writer's room of comedy writers?

TODD: I, well the short answer is it was great. I would show up and talk to them about ideas of that Mike had already put in front of me. He said, look, we're, we're interested in learning about X, Y, and Z. So, I'll give you Eric one example. I was distinguishing between shame and guilt; guilt is something about what you've done. You feel bad about something you've done. Shame is about who you are or you feel bad about who you are.

This question came up in an episode where Ted Danson's character Michael – who is a reformed demon – is regretting his past. And one of the humans, Jason, played by Manny Jacinto, gives him comfort.

I don't like thinking about who I used to be.

Hey Michael, it's okay to, if you were plead guilty about bad things you used to do, but you don't have to feel shame about who you were because you're not a demon anymore or you just like a nice, weird, happy old dude.

TODD: And so that distinction sort of help structure that moment in the episode. But I think it also helped a bit to structure what happens afterwards because if people feel bad about what they've done, they feel guilty, they try to do better. But if they feel bad about who they are, if they feel ashamed, it's not clear always, depending on how deep the shame is that they're going to be able to recover. They are going to start thinking of themselves as bad people. And one of the things that the Good Place insists on is that we should think of everybody or nearly everybody as, as morally redeemable as, as people who can do better if given the right circumstances.

One of the most interesting characters on the show is not human, or an angel or a demon. It's Janet, played by D'Arcy Carden.

I'm Janet. I'm the informational assistant here in the Good Place.

She's like this walking database. You can ask her about the creation of the universe or history...

Oh, there was a guy who lived in Avondale, Arizona, around 2002. His name was Kevin Paltonic. Is he gay?

No.

Really? Huh. I guess he just didn't want to have sex with me.

That's correct.

Janet begins as a Siri or Alexa type-character, but she also changes and becomes more self-aware and enlightened. Todd says the most challenging episode he consulted on was one where the humans got sucked into Janet's inner void, and they all look like her -- so D'Arcy Carden plays all the characters at the same time. In a different show that would've just been played as a gag, but the writers were asking Todd serious questions about personal identity.

TODD: When is it me and when is it no longer me? And the Janets episode where Janet does this D'Arcy Carden does this remarkable job of imitating all the others. That's a way of trying to think about personal identity. People's changing. When did they, when

did they no longer themselves, when are they somebody else? And it's signaled by the blackboard, which actually has the issue of personal identity on it.

In fact, the lecture Todd gave the writers ended up being the lecture that Chidi – the philosophy professor – gives to the other characters while he's in Janet's body.

Conceptions of the self, let's start with John Locke who believed that personal identity was based on having a continued consciousness, memory...(FADE DOWN)

In fact, the more I talked with Todd, the more I realized how much of him ended up in Chidi's character. The writers even consulted with him about which philosopher Chidi would want to meet in The Good Place. Todd said well, Aristotle was in favor of slavery. Plato was a snub. So, he suggested an ancient Greek feminist named Hypatia (hy-patea.)

TODD: So, they decided to go with her. When they did, they emailed me about how to pronounce her name. So I emailed some Greek scholars and one of them said, Oh, it's Hypatia. And other ones said hi patiya another one said who-patty-ah. And so, I emailed him, and I said, I don't really know which of these to choose. I'm not a scholar of Greek. He emailed back, and said you know what? We're gonna, we're gonna use all of them and then we're going to have her say, just call me. Patty.

You know what just called me Patty

Okay, well, Patty! I'm a huge fan, I had a poster of you on my wall in high school, actually it was a poster of Trinity from The Matrix but that's how I imagined how you looked because you're so cool!

But Todd's biggest contribution to the show was the one of the changes that the characters made to the design of The Good Place to get it working properly. The characters invented a kind of death in heaven. So, you can live in The Good Place for all of eternity but if you choose to leave, there is a door that will make you disappear. Knowing that death is an option makes their immortal lives worth living. That came from Todd's book because he thinks mortality is crucial to our sense of morality.

And there's another important theme in his book that helped structure the show. He thinks our sense of morality is reflected and reinforced by social interactions. But he worries that in the real world, we're drifting from a healthy sense of community because so many of our interactions are now virtual.

TODD: The folks in The Good Place are not bound to their iPhones, and not bound to their, uh, to their social media. And one of the things that emerges in The Good Place, and this is a thought that you could trace all the way back to the philosopher Aristotle, is that in order for people to be good, uh, it requires having other people around them. People become good often with the influence of one another where the show departs from Aristotle. And where I think by the way the show is right and Aristotle is mistaken, is that for Aristotle, you always have to have models of people who are good people who are wise, uh, in order for people to have somebody to imitate. Whereas in The Good Place, people who are fundamentally flawed in different ways can make one another good, but they make one another good in being together, in interacting with one another, in spending time with one another in developing emotional connections with one another. And all of those things are done in a face to face way. They're not done through social media and they're not done through their iPhones.

And that is reflected in the production design on the show. The décor of The Good Place is set somewhere between the 1950s and 1980s. Even though the show takes place now, the afterlife beings use very outdated technology.

TODD: They may not have iPhones at The Good Place, but there are people who know how to like make you relive your life eight or 900 times. Uh, there are people who can appear and disappear and grant your every wish. So it's not as though The Good Place is somehow situating itself in the 1950s. I think what it is doing is situating people in face to face relationships with one another. Uh, and not having those relationships be mediated in ways that a lot of our contemporary lives are mediated. And I think what it does is allows those relationships to unfold and allows us to see what the unfolding of relationships might offer to us.

And The Good Place is not a stand-alone show about the afterlife. There's actually been an influx of shows about the great beyond from Good Omens to Miracle Workers. How come? Why are these shows all popping up now? We'll figure that out in a moment.

BREAK

Before we continue, I want to give another heads up again about spoilers. When I mention a TV show or a movie, I'm going to reveal plot points about it.

Greg Garrett teaches at Baylor University in Texas. He also wrote a book called *Entertaining Judgement*, which is about depictions of the afterlife in pop culture. And writing that book was a personal project for him.

GREG: I was raised Southern Baptist in at least the churches that I knew growing up, there was this very powerful afterlife orientation. Really everything in this life was about situating you for the afterlife. And, um, then after about 25 years in the kind of spiritual wilderness, if you will, um, I became Episcopalian, uh, where there is much more focus on what we were supposed to be doing in this life. And it's, it's really interesting because, you know, I started out as somebody who cared so much about the afterlife, like I couldn't sleep at night. I was like, you know, I, I'm not sure I want to, you know, die tonight cause I might go to hell. And now I'm part of a tradition where it's like, Hmm, yeah, we don't really think about this so much.

Is that, is that also partially what led you to explore these alternate versions?

GREG: Yeah, it really did. And I remember my dad early on when I said I was writing a book about the afterlife and my, my dad is still Southern Baptist and he does not curse. But on this occasion he said, what the hell do you know about the afterlife? And I was like, that's fair. I don't know anything. Nobody knows anything. You know, we have these religious teachings, we have these philosophical ideas, and then we have these creative versions.

Before I talked with Greg, I was looking at the history of images of heaven, going back to the Renaissance. And I realized the mansion sized rod-iron gate on top of fluffy white clouds with people in white robes and big feathered white wings – that trope which we all know from black and white movies, really started becoming popular in the Victorian era.

GREG: Yeah. Like, if you're walking through the streets of London and like you are walking through mud and muck and, and, uh, horse dung, you can't see the sky because of the smog, you know, the yellow fog. That's, I mean, that's a great point because if we think of, um, how every age kind of develops these stories of the afterlife, that's, that's certainly a powerful reaction to a really ugly, dank, dim existence.

If our images of the afterlife are influenced by our lives on Earth – it's interesting to note that the most common trope today is the afterlife bureaucracy – like in the movie *Defending Your Life*. Albert Brooks plays a character who just died. He's sent to be evaluated at an office park in the afterlife. He's wearing a white robe ,but his case worker is wearing a suit.

So, is what you thought would be?

Thought what would be? Where am I? Is this heaven?

No, it isn't heaven.

Is it hell?

Nope. It isn't hell either. Actually. There is no hell. Although I hear in Los Angeles is getting pretty close. (Laughs)

After that came the HBO adaptation of *Angels in America*, where the character Prior, who is dying of AIDS, pleads his case to a committee of angels that look like a New York City co-op board. They're sitting at a wooden table with too many folders to go through. Behind them are endless rows of workers, typing at desks.

I'm 30 years old for God's sake. I haven't done anything yet. I want to be healthy again in this plague. It should stop in me and everywhere. Make it go away.

We have tried. We suffer with you, but we don't know. We do not know how.

That was the first time I saw a depiction of heaven where the angels were overwhelmed. The problems of our world are more than they could handle – which is appropriate given the subject matter of *Angels in America*.

But at least they're self-aware. The office workers in *The Good Place* think they're doing a good job when they're really not.

*So, this is the main feed. Every action by every human on Earth is recorded and then sent here to be assigned a point value based on the absolute moral worth of that action. For example, a couple in Osaka, Japan just decided to have a destination wedding. Negative 1200 points. Oh, it's a destination theme wedding, negative 4,300. The theme is *Lord of the Rings*. They're basically doomed.*

Again, Greg Garrett:

GREG: I think one of the things that kind of helps explain the continuing use of, of heaven as a bureaucracy besides the simple fact that it helps us to identify with something that, um, is supposed to be beyond our experience, um, is that it might explain why things are so messed up. Because if, if these stories about the afterlife, we're supposed to be in some sense about, you know, a justice and, um, people getting what they deserve and, and people not getting what they deserve. I mean, a lot of times, uh, in this life, we're very well aware that people don't get what they deserve either because they are really good people who don't, um, receive good things in, in return, or are really terrible people who seem to get away with things. You know, unless it's, there's some sort of personal soul cost attached to it.

And then there are the really dysfunctional depictions of heaven.

Like in the show Good Omens – which is a great adaptation of the novel by Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett. The angels are obsessed with fighting hell – which is depicted as, well, an office place from hell -- that the heavenly bureaucracy is willing to wipe out all of humanity if they can destroy hell at the same time.

An angel played by Michael Sheen tries to dissuade his boss, played by Don Draper, I mean John Hamm.

Well?

I just thought there was something we can do

There is! We can fight! And we can win.

But there doesn't have to be a war

Of course, there does or else how else would we win it?! Hmm?

And in the show Miracle Workers, the angels are frustrated because God, played by Steve Buscemi, is not even interested in running his company, which is called Heaven Inc.

Hey. God

Hi, hi! Eliza.

What's up?

There is a crazy typhoon happening and it's killing lots of people. Can you help?

I don't want to sound cynical, but what's the point?

JR Forasteros is the pastor of a church in Texas, and he also covers fantasy worlds in his books and podcasts. I asked him why are we seeing all these really skeptical depictions of the heaven?

JR: I think it speaks to our disillusionment with institutions that we've seen, you know, basically since, you know, the Vietnam and Nixon and Watergate and all that kind of stuff. And it certainly has been continuing through all of the, you know, sex scandals in the churches and we can't imagine a system doing good, you know, when, when we think about systems, they, it seems like they just have to fail us.

Yeah. It's so interesting cause I mean, I was a film major in college, and we looked at how after World War II, there was a big spike in movies about heaven for an obvious reason. But, uh, in all of those movies, yeah, the, the leadership of

heaven was totally unquestioned. There was literally the voice of God, you know, kind of a running heaven. I, it was just, you know, part of the story.

JR: But then by the time you know, Dogma, right, you have, you have God getting, getting trapped in, accidentally trapped in a body, but once God is free to, everything's fine. And it was the bureaucracy of heaven that was getting in the way. And I think, you get past that to something like The Good Place where it's no, it's the people at the top that are the problem. I mean the closest thing we have to God is probably The Judge and you know, she's, as long as she has her TV shows and her burrito, she doesn't care about anything else.

Let's have a look at your files.

Wait. You don't already know everything about us. You're not omniscient?

Well, not in the way you mean. I try to learn as little as I can about the events of humankind so I can remain impartial cause I'm a charge and yada, yada, yada. That being said, sometimes I get bored. I'm my cheat a little bit. I've been venturing. Ken Burns's Vietnam recently. It's okay. I mean I'm immortal, but that thing is a-loooong.

JR says there's another interesting development in the way heave is being depicted. We're starting to imagine eternal life as being tedious, or worse.

JR: And so, they have this idea that like when we think about heaven, we're imagining a place where any desire that we have, no matter how trivial or how silly can be satisfied and Defending Your Life. They keep saying, I didn't even count how many times someone said you can eat whatever you want, and you won't get fat.

Do you like pie?

I like pie

I like you! I'm going to bring you nine pies, a pie for every day.

JR: And again, I think that's interesting because it speaks to our culture, which we are. We live in the richest nation on earth where the vast majority of the Earth's resources are consumed by us. So, we live in a place the more than any other time in human history. We literally can have whatever you want. I mean, literally I can click a button and then something appears at my door and like an hour and then yet in all of these depictions of the afterlife, people get bored with that really quickly. And they realize that maybe having everything I want as soon as I want, it isn't all that it's cracked up to be. Or maybe that's not like the sum total of what we exist for.

Yeah, I mean I think one of the tricky things too about depicting the afterlife is that when we do to pick the afterlife, once we get there, we're very much ourselves with all of our human desires. So, sort of the idea is that you can get

everything you want and no consequences. And that's true for everybody simultaneously. And I think that seems to be the part where these circuits aren't just, you know, go haywire.

JR: (Laugh overlap) Which I mean, yeah, cause that's, that's our, that's a problem in our society, right? We all want different things. Or even when we want the same explicitly stated goal, we have different ideas about how to accomplish that goal. So if you have some kind of magical shortcut that lets people have whatever they want when they want it, what happens when our desires conflict with each other? And in season four with the introduction of Brent into the show, the, the classical, you know, privileged white male, like his desires are explicitly causing everyone else problems. Then the show begins to ask, well then yeah, how do we, how do we live together well given that we all want different things and eternity is just a really fun canvas to work that problem out on.

I've been called racist, sexist. I don't have a racist or such as bone in my body. I am Brent Norwalk and I'm a good person. I'm in The Good Place. You ever heard of it? And I'm here because I deserve to be here. I'm here because I earned it.

In the past, stories about the afterlife were usually about characters that died but are sent back to Earth to deal with unfinished business. When they solve their problems with the living, they go back to heaven. The end. But in these new stories, the character arcs play out almost entirely within the afterlife.

Like the show Forever, Fred Armisen and Maya Rudolph play a couple that are essentially spirits wandering around Los Angeles.

So this is it. Just keep going. And how long does this go on for? I mean, what's the point of all this?

Well, what was the point of a thing before this?

JR: In Forever. It's these two people who, uh, you know, the wife has come to resent and sort of despise her husband and when he dies, she actually feels free in a way, even as she's grieving. And then when she dies and she's reunited with him in this sort of like very bland afterlife, she leaves him the way that she never left him in, in, in life. But at the end of the first season they, they end up finding their way back to each other because they've found this like sort of deeper understanding of what love is. That that is eternal. And I think it's, that's actually a really beautiful thing in a world where so many of our relationships don't seem to be able to figure out how to, how to go the distance.

Now, here is where Greg Garrett has a problem with The Good Place. They introduced this idea of a sort of death that you choose in the afterlife. He was

disappointed that only one of the human characters chose to stay behind to help other people. The rest chose this kind of death after they had completed their character arcs.

GREG: I felt that it sort of betrayed the original concept of the show, which is that community is what shapes us, you know. So ultimately, you know, one by one they, they reached this moment of epiphany. I've, you know, I've, I've reached the point where I'm as, you know, completely happy or enlightened as I can be. And off I go. And it's, it is in some ways a much, it's a, a statement much more in line with American spirituality, which often is very individual focused. This show bought into the concept, uh, which I think is sort of counter cultural us. Um, but that in, in Christian theology we talk about is ecclesia, which is, uh, the gathering of people around a central idea or achievement that that makes us all better.

PICK UP: So, we've been talking about bureaucracies being a common trope in these stories, but what about that idea of ecclesia, of community making us better people. Is that unique to The Good Place, or is that something you see coming up in a lot of these depictions of heaven?

GREG: I think there is a big part where we're wondering what are we supposed to be doing and how do we do it with each other? Because you know, over the last four years, particularly we've, we've been in this culture that we don't all even seem to agree about the important things about what it means to be human. You know, there are always these disagreements on a kind of philosophical level. You know, it's like, you know, a higher taxes, lower taxes, but these seem to have calcified into these visions of the people who don't vote like us or pray like us or love like us or look like us as as dangerous. It's like, it's almost like we're having a hard time recovering our common humanity.

And JR thinks there's a sense of urgency in try and answer these questions now.

JR: More and more our culture is becoming really pessimistic about what's next for us. I think especially younger generations, I mean if you know, if you're under what 20 you've been told your entire life that we're not going to have a planet when you're 50 so again, I think that it becomes natural to say, well, if you know, if we have an expiration date, what happens next?

One of the reasons why these shows appeal to me is just the idea of watching all these characters put behind the things that worried them on Earth, or even worrying about the Earth itself, and have all the time they want to focus on each other. That's why I didn't have an issue with the door of death in The Good Place,

because it made the time they had together so much sweeter. And it reminded me to appreciate the loving relationships I have in my life.

In fact, I kept thinking another sitcom Ted Danson that was in – a show I watched religiously as a kid – where they reminded us every week that making your way in the world today takes everything you've got. Taking a break from all your worries sure would help a lot. Sometimes, you just want to go where everyone knows your name, and they're always glad you came.

Sounds like heaven to me.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Greg Garrett, JR Forestaros and Todd May. By the way, if you watched The Good Place all the way to the end, you saw him on the show. He played a student in Chidi's class.

TODD: I was petrified. I'm the kind of person that put me in front of 200, 300 people. Give me a theme to talk about and I'll just talk about it. I'm comfortable but give me two lines that I have to memorize, and I freak out. The Chidi, uh, character Will Harper was great. He just said, look, Todd, they're going to do 7, 8, 9, 10, 15 takes of this thing and you're going to screw up some of them. Don't worry about it.

Ultimately, and this all goes back to the line from Professor May's book, mortality offers meaning to our lives and morality helps navigate that meaning.

Wait, what I think it says is that mortality offers meaning to the events of our lives. I'm pretty sure I'm right because it's my book!

Yes, Professor May, you're probably right about what you wrote!

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