The Power of Ethics in Complex Television Narration through Lamarque's Studies

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Abstract: Starting from the ethical issues in the philosophy of literature highlighted by Peter Lamarque, the article explores the relationship between media and narration in terms of their impact on ethics, asking questions about how new media deal with the moral character of stories. How do the structure and logic of new media transform narration and its ethical significance? Starting from the idea that media are not simple vehicles of content, but actively influence narrative construction, the analysis focuses on the cultural products of the new convergent culture. This investigation aims to reveal how contemporary and metamodern culture favours innovative ways of constructing moral meanings, seeking to identify how these emerging narratives can shape the ethical perspectives of audiences.

Keywords: Ethics, Lamarque, storytelling, convergence, seriality

1. Introduction

Is there a difference between traditional media and new media when discussing the question of the moral character of narratives? More specifically, in what sense do media influence narration? And how does narration influence ethical education? This paper aims to find a possible answer to these questions by investigating the ethical dimension of narratives within the products derived from the new convergent culture, which characterises new media. The question of how our ethical lives could be (and already are in part) transformed by future technological devices is intertwined with the idea that the media through which we tell and consume narratives influence our perception of the ethical dimension (Jonas 2009). The aim of this paper is to understand, through the analysis of a television serial narration, if and to what extent the new convergent media influence narration and how this new typology of metamodern narration represents ethics in contemporaneity. The main challenge of this contribution is to critically examine the ethical aspect and the representation of shared values in a constantly changing media society, characterised by complexity, convergence and remediation.

The essay, therefore, intends to reflect on the ethical reorganisation of contemporaneity as it emerges from the analysis of the American television series *The Good Place*.

2. The Ethical Powers of the Arts

The debate on the moral influence of the arts has been at the centre of numerous philosophical studies (McGregor 2017), highlighting how artistic works can act not only as forms of entertainment but also as tools for ethical reflection. Peter Lamarque, in particular, has contributed significantly to this discussion, proposing a vision in which the moral value of art is analysed in relation to the ability of works to stimulate ethical reflections without subordinating their aesthetic value to their moral value. Lamarque's theories on the ethical power of the arts can broaden the understanding of the

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moral function of artistic narratives in general, also being applied to non-purely literary products such as complex television series.

The ethical power of the arts is an intricate and widely debated topic (Meyer 2018; Baumann 2008), within which several scholars argue that artistic works can influence people in a profound way, stimulating moral reflections and, sometimes, favouring a change in beliefs or behaviours. Peter Lamarque has taken part in this broad debate, particularly in reference to narrative and literary fiction; in this sense, Lamarque does not see art as a moralising tool in a didactic sense, but recognises its potential to evoke and deepen ethical questions, while maintaining the aesthetic integrity of the work. For the scholar, in fact, we should not expect narratives to provide an explicit moral, but rather that the ethical commitment offered by narratives often derives from their ability to evoke complex emotional responses (Lamarque 2004). Consequently, within Lamarque's reflection it transpires that narratives can enrich our ethical sensitivity without necessarily having to transmit moral teachings, so much so that the moral value of narratives lies in their power to deepen our ethical understanding by presenting morally complex situations without offering definitive moral judgements (Lamarque 2007).

Fictional narrative, through its content and the emotions it arouses, is expected to foster significant human involvement, prompting reflection on universal themes and questioning one's own beliefs and worldview (Rowe 1997). In this sense, according to Lamarque, there is a sort of expectation of moral commitment with respect to the substance of the works (Lamarque 2008, 62-65). According to Lamarque, the moral seriousness of a work in terms of content and its formal, creative and imaginative dimension come together in its theme (or themes). The theme, in fact, represents the organizing principle that offers a perspective on the subject, allowing the content to be structured in an overall vision that goes beyond the narrated events, giving it a unitary conception (Lamarque 2008, 150-151).

A crucial – and complex – element in the question of cognitive value emerges considering that, in literary art, linguistic resources are not simple accessory details, as if the content could be expressed in any other way. In literature, in fact, the content is inextricably linked to the modalities of its presentation: form and content are inseparable, and there is an interaction between what we imagine and the aspects of narrative language that stimulate the imagination, making us perceive the narrated events as if they were real. Lamarque effectively describes this aspect of literary creation by introducing the concept of narrative opacity (Lamarque 2014, 141-167).

In *The Philosophy of Literature*, Lamarque argues that the value of art lies not in its ability to promote specific moral messages but in its potential to create a context in which moral reflections and sensibilities emerge: narrative, especially literary narrative, has a unique ability to stage ethical dilemmas, inviting users to think about them without the obligation to adopt a predefined moral position (Lamarque 2008). Narration then has a particularly powerful role in moral education because it allows us to explore complex situations and feelings in a context that suspends absolute moral judgement. This creates a space for personal exploration of ethical implications, a space that is essential to the process of forming moral judgement.

Lamarque emphasises that the value of this process is not reducible to a specific moral lesson; instead, it is the complexity and ambiguity of the narrative that allow readers to mature ethically, thanks to the interaction with characters and nuanced moral situations (Lamarque 2021): the value of literature does not lie in moral guidance but in the promotion of ethical reflection through imaginative engagement (Lamarque 2008, 182).

Considering Lamarque's numerous contributions, therefore, artistic narratives should not be considered mere instruments for transmitting moral values but can solicit moral involvement without the need to expose an explicit moral message. In other words, the ethical value of the arts does not lie only in the contents, but in their ability to evoke emotions and make viewers reflect on moral themes through narrative form and context.

According to Lamarque (1981), for example, a work like Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* does not seek to impose moral judgments on the characters but leads the reader to explore the ethical and psychological complexities of betrayal and love. Lamarque notes that it is precisely this exploration that opens a space for ethical reflection for the reader, without presenting a didactic morality (Moyal-Sharrock 2009).

In Lamarque's perspective, aesthetic experience is intricately connected to ethical experience, and narrative becomes a powerful means to question our moral judgments and promote ethical reflection: art offers a safe space to examine moral dilemmas and reflect on complex issues in a context devoid of real consequences (Lamarque 2008). Works of art, therefore, can contribute to the development of ethical sensitivity without necessarily guiding the audience towards a univocal moral position.

One might think that minimising the role of moral content within the artistic landscape risks ignoring the ability of the arts to directly and positively influence the moral convictions of the public, but in this sense Lamarque argues that the value of the arts should not be confused with simple moral teaching, but that it resides in the complexity and ethical ambiguity of the situations represented.

The ethical power of the arts, therefore, lies not so much in transmitting moral norms, but in offering a space for dialogue and ethical reflection (Lamarque 2021): artistic narration leads us to consider different perspectives and to explore the nature of our moral judgments, broadening our understanding of the human experience. Lamarque thus contributes to a vision of narration as a powerful ethical tool, capable of stimulating reflection and enriching our sense of compassion, justice, and humanity.

3. The New Media and the Serial Revolution

Narration has always been a founding element of our civilisation and culture (Brooks 2024) and, with the advent of metamodernity, television series have acquired an ever-increasing complexity, so much so as to amplify their value as products, managing to become the form of narration that currently appears to be culturally hegemonic. This does not mean, however, that before the Nineties of the 20th century – a period that, according to Mittell, a theorist of television complexity, represents a watershed with respect to series – television series were not endowed with their own complexity (which is, of course, far from reality); rather, the term is used to denote the type of characteristics that Mittell attributes to them (Mittell 2017, 47–49), characteristics that will be discussed in more detail later. For now, suffice it to say that, in light of contemporary revolutions and innovations, television has proven to be the most suitable medium for telling stories that span particularly long periods of time, allowing characters to evolve and to connect empathetically with viewers. Consequently, it becomes possible to question the traditionally dominant ethical apparatus (Bauman 1993), the one represented by simplified dichotomous options. The series *The Good Place*, in particular, is a privileged observatory of the moral complexity of contemporaneity because, on the one hand, like many other series, it serves to entertain the public, while on the other hand it functions to educate them and prompt reflection on the very meaning of life, given that each episode leads to reasoning on a different ethical dilemma. Ethics and its various 'gradations' then become the linchpin around which the entire television series revolves: human beings are no longer confronted with a stark opposition between good and bad but must understand themselves considering the new contemporary nuances of the ethical apparatus.

Before proceeding, however, with the investigation of the new ethical nuances emerging from the current international media landscape in place of the traditional simplified ethical oppositions, it is useful to provide some theoretical coordinates on the latter, since the series of changes that have characterised it from the Nineties of the 20th century onwards has led to a sort of television revolution.

The interpretation of a new medium when it appears, and of all that it entails, has always posed a problem: starting from the 20th century, however, the transformations that have characterised the world have gradually become faster and faster, reaching dimensions that are challenging to investi-

gate from a theoretical perspective at the very moment when the processes of convergence have become so extensive that they overwhelm the ability to analytically identify the heterogeneous components of different media and to conceptualise them in a comprehensive way.

As is now clear, for Jenkins, there are eight fundamental characteristics of the new contemporary media landscape, which are: *innovative; convergent; everyday; appropriative; networked; global; generational;* and *unequal* (Jenkins 2006b). Convergence is at the heart of every movement and change in the new media landscape to such an extent that Jenkins defines the current era as a convergent culture (Jenkins 2006a, 2-3). Before him, de Sola Pool had already discussed the processes of convergence that were blurring the boundaries between different media (de Sola Pool 1983, 23). In this sense, cultural convergence becomes an all-encompassing process: 'There will be no single black box that controls the flow of media into our homes. Thanks to the proliferation of channels and the portability of new computing and telecommunications technologies, we are entering an era where media will be everywhere' (Jenkins 2006a, 16).

Convergence is, therefore, a process that is achieved thanks to two forces coming from opposite sides: 'Convergence, as we can see, is both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process. Corporate convergence coexists with grassroots convergence' (Jenkins 2006a, 18). In the media field, the concept of convergence is joined by that of remediation: within contemporary culture, a single medium is not able to operate in isolation and appropriates techniques, forms, and meanings that are typical of other media, reshaping them. In this regard, according to Bolter and Grusin, traditional media – both electronic and print – feeling threatened by new technologies, have tried, over time, to reaffirm the need for their presence, underscoring their position within today's cultural universe (Bolter, Grusin 2000, 5). What is revealed as new, however, are the ways in which new media operate a remediation and re-modelling of previous media, now when the latter try to reinvent themselves to respond to the needs of the contemporary world and the challenges posed to them by new technologies[1]. Scholars argue that there are three types of remediation: the first is *mediation of mediation*, in which every act of mediation depends on other acts of mediation; the second corresponds to the *inseparability of mediation and reality*, where the idea remains that all mediations are themselves real as artefacts in the mediated culture; and, finally, the third is *reform*, in which the aim is to remodel other media (Bolter, Grusin 2000, 55-56). Consequently, for Bolter and Grusin, a medium is something that tends towards remediation, appropriating forms, techniques, and social meanings of other media and attempting to compete with and reshape them with respect to the needs of contemporary fluidity (Bolter, Grusin 2000, 65). This is what happened with television and seriality, which, over time, especially from the Eighties onwards, have been remediating themselves and appropriating an increasingly complex type of narration.

In addition to convergence and remediation, the question of immediacy and hypermediation are further added, which, at the same time, albeit in opposition, characterise the new media reality. In this way, immediacy leads to the removal of the act of representation, suggesting a unified visual space, as if it were a window on the world. Conversely, hypermediation brings to the fore, making them visible and identifiable, the multiple acts of representation, offering a heterogeneous visual space, in which representation is considered as an entity constituted by different and multiple windows, which open onto further representations and media. In this sense, hypermediation multiplies the signs of mediation, managing to reproduce the sensorial richness of human experience (Bolter, Grusin 2000, 34): this is a function of the empathic amplification that characterises contemporary storytelling.

These two opposing tensions – immediacy and hypermediation – coexist within the media universe, as the latter serves to make us aware of the necessity of the former; or rather, hypermediation can be seen as the very counterpart of immediacy, in a game of co-presence and contestation (Bolter, Grusin 2000, 33-34). In this sense, as McLuhan underlines, the content of a medium is always another medium; for example, what writing contains is speech, just as the content of print is the written word (McLuhan 1966, 14-17).

In other words, the metamodern narratives of seriality become the representation of the narratological complexity in which we are immersed today, also deriving from the mass-media developments that characterise contemporaneity. The advent of new media, in fact, has somehow forced narration itself to rethink itself, at a time when the interpretations of new media movements have become complex to investigate from a theoretical point of view, given that the processes of convergence often seem to overwhelm the ability to analytically identify the individual components of such media systems. In addition to this, visual communication has become part of narration, as is precisely the case with television series. In light of these modifications in the cultural sphere, consequently, the story becomes a centre of irradiation within the mediasphere that generates it and that it in turn regenerates endlessly, a crossroads of intermedial relations, which can take the form of transposition, combination, or reference (Vittorini 2017, 201). Contemporary seriality enables the narration of very long stories, allowing characters to evolve over a prolonged period of time; by entering viewers' homes instead of compelling them to go out – as was once the case with cinema – it manages to create a bond with them based on greater familiarity and intimacy (Sepinwall 2014, 461–475). Television becomes a 'familiar' medium, which the viewer feels is close and everyday, a presence that often grows to be constant and continuous: series then represent the new way to learn and reflect on the world around us.

Within this reformed landscape, which has given rise to a sort of revolution in the television medium, Mittell describes the characteristics of a complex television series typical of the contemporary universe, which must: be original, that is, it must attempt new narrative or linguistic paths; have a narrative construction that retains a memory of itself; possess a textual complexity that draws upon metatextual and self-referential references; have an 'active' audience, that is, one that is not merely a spectator but actively participates in the creation of the world of the series itself through various means (Maio 2009, 16); reject the need for self-contained plots; give rise to continuous stories that span genres; and be a cumulative narration that expands over time (Mittell 2017, 47).

Whereas up to thirty years ago the boundary between a series (with self-contained episodes) and a serial (with a continuous story) was clear, today these formats blur into each other (Mittell 2017, 14), owing to the spread of a complex model of narrative seriality. In this sense, storytelling operates under the assumption that a serial television programme creates a lasting narrative world, populated by a coherent group of characters who experience a chain of events over a given period (Mittell 2017, 24). The characters become an integral part of the lives of viewers, given the everyday nature of the medium and its ease of access, to the point that a deep empathy is established between the audience and the characters, amplified by the characteristics of the new metamodern storytelling.

4. *The Good Place* and its Ethical Nuances

Given these theoretical premises, it is now possible to fully turn our attention to the ethical reorganisation in *The Good Place*, which is certainly a product fully pertaining to contemporary media and which fully represents a complex type of television series, according to the characteristics highlighted so far through reference to the studies, in particular, of Mittell.

The television series analysed, created by Michael Schur and produced by Universal Television, Fremulon and 3 Arts Entertainment, after a first trailer released on 15 May 2016, was broadcast from 19 September 2016 to 30 January 2020 on NBC. It comprises four seasons (each consisting of thirteen episodes) and includes many references to other TV series, including in particular *Friends* and *Justified*.

The plot appears quite complex and surreal from the very first episodes: the main character, Eleanor Shellstrop, after dying in a supermarket, crushed by a pile of trolleys while picking up a bottle of margarita, wakes up in a hypothetical Heaven, made of yoghurt ice cream and perpetually kind and happy people. Here the first being she meets is Michael, her guide and the architect of her surroundings, who reveals to her that she was welcomed into the 'Good Place' thanks to her good

deeds: in particular, she is considered a good person for having saved many innocent people on death row. At this point, Eleanor realises that she has been sent there in error and has been mistaken for someone else: she understands that in order to stay there, and to avoid Hell, she must hide her morally imperfect behaviour.

Eleanor, day after day, realises that she must try to truly become an ethically better person. Three other inhabitants of *The Good Place* find themselves in the same situation: Chidi Anagonye, Tahani Al-Jamil and Jason Mendoza. At their service is Janet, a sort of impartial robot. The four young people must hide their worst side and learn to behave like people worthy of the Good Place: they can't swear, they must always be kind to others, help them, etc.[2]. Certainly, in this sense, the series is connected to the current affirmation of political correctness and reveals some of its ambiguities: the idea is precisely to ridicule what should be correct, but which risks being, instead, overly careful, too empty and without any real reasoning behind it. The television series, with its characteristic comic approach, highlights the inconsistencies of an excessively rigid ideological codification of the contemporary world.

At least officially, those who reside in the Good Place must be ethically irreproachable and, indeed, politically correct: in this sense, absolute goodness seems to be the necessary requirement to remain in the Good Place. However, over the course of the series, through a profound ethical reorganisation that unfolds episode by episode, it becomes clear that being part of the Good Place does not require perfection but rather the desire to improve and the commitment to succeed.

At the end of the second season, the four friends discover that they are actually in a perverse and complex Bad Place, designed by the demon Michael to torture them more effectively, as it is structured around their insecurities and worst nightmares: Chidi's chronic indecision (Engels 2020, 57–64), Tahani's fear of never being enough, Eleanor's sloth, and Jason's unawareness. While it is relatively straightforward to understand why Eleanor, Tahani, and Jason belong in the Bad Place, given their actions in life, the series becomes more philosophically complex when it comes to understanding why Chidi is there. In reality, 'Chidi is, at the very least, an imperfect example of virtue and morality. He is characterized not by habitual moral action but by pained decision-making and insecurity. In the very first episode, Chidi tells Eleanor that he has "spent [his] entire life in pursuit of fundamental truths about the universe" and that as a moral philosophy professor he has dedicated his life to understanding morality ('Everything Is Fine'). Yet, he gets a stress-and-anxiety-induced stomachache when he has to decide whether or not he should help Eleanor' (Engels 2020, 58). As Lamarque's theories suggest, narratives are not necessarily designed to convey an explicit moral lesson but rather to elicit an ethical commitment that arises from their ability to evoke complex emotional responses, as is the case with Chidi in *The Good Place*. This commitment emerges through the audience's emotional involvement and the reflection stimulated by the moral conflicts and complex situations explored in the story. As Lamarque has emphasised regarding the narrative apparatus in general, it is precisely this interaction between emotion and reflection that gives narratives their ethical potential, allowing them to explore the moral dimensions of the human condition without imposing rigid moral conclusions (Lamarque 2008).

Between the end of the first season and the beginning of the second, after discovering that they are actually in the Bad Place, the four young protagonists find themselves with their memories erased so that Michael can attempt to torture them again within the illusion of the Good Place until he finds the perfect form of psychological torment. Once again, Eleanor discovers Michael's deception with the help of Chidi, Tahani, and Jason. Each time this happens, Michael erases their memories, and the infernal loop begins again. It is from the second season, therefore, that the ethical framework outlined in the first season emerges more decisively, and the boundaries between good and bad begin to reveal their fragility and precariousness. Initially, the ethical dimension is presented through a series of simplified moral oppositions (good vs. bad, right vs. wrong, etc.). However, as the storytelling becomes more complex and the viewer's bond with the characters deepens through empathic mir-

roring, the moral and ethical dimensions also become more intricate. The traditional dichotomies begin to dissolve, good and bad are no longer in complete opposition, but rather, roles and moral positions shift and are exchanged.

In addition to this, alongside the Good Place and the more traditional Hell inhabited by truly unsavoury torturer demons with often rather monstrous faces, the Medium Place also appears, occupied by Mindy St. Claire, where Eleanor and Chidi often go for research purposes and where they will end up falling in love. Mindy is a cocaine-addicted lawyer from the Eighties who was bad all her life but has done one huge, good deed. For this reason, a place was created for her that is neither good nor bad, a middle way.

The Medium Place is a space that does not belong to either extreme and becomes the key to solving the various trials that the four young protagonists will face throughout the series. It is a third space of morality and in-betweenness (Engels 2020, 75–86). It is precisely in this space, with its undefined boundaries, that the protagonists are finally safe, far from the torments of the demons and the pressures of the *Good Place*: here, they learn to truly know one another and develop deep relationships, whether through love or genuine friendship. The nuances of this space, where they finally feel accepted for who they are, allow them to begin a process of reflection and growth that will lead them to be better human beings not only for themselves but above all for others. From this grey area, where binary dichotomous choices are erased, their 'rebirth' begins, leading them to question roles and redefine the fixities and cornerstones of ethics.

All this 'ethical upheaval' takes place unbeknownst to Michael's boss, the terrible and evil demon Shawn, who is portrayed in such an exaggerated manner that he is not frightening but comical. Episode after episode, those who rigidly adhere to traditional ethical choices appear exaggerated and absurd: Shawn is so overtly evil that he seems artificial and a caricature, unlike the protagonists and Michael, who better represent the complexity of human nature through their contrasting features. Over the course of the series, Michael himself eventually allies with Eleanor and her friends, promising that if they keep the failure of his experiment a secret from Shawn, he will help them enter the true Good Place. However, by the end of the series, after countless attempts and trials, the final decision is placed in the hands of the Supreme Judge, Maya Rudolph: rather than admitting them to Heaven, she decides to give them a second chance on Earth.

Michael, like the four protagonists, undergoes a profound transformation: from the diabolical demon he initially was, he becomes increasingly connected to human beings, ultimately becoming one himself. It turns out that Michael has a genuine 'passion' for everything earthly, to the point of wanting to live a normal life on Earth without torture or supernatural powers. The redeemed demon becomes the first to deeply believe in the possibility of redemption for the protagonists and, in a certain sense, assumes a paternal role towards Eleanor; he tries to protect and guide them, and he personally advocates on their behalf, both with Shawn and with the Judge.

The world of *The Good Place* appears both parallel and complementary to ours: it represents the protagonists' fears and their need for self-knowledge and improvement, as is evident from the clever use of the philosophical apparatus within the series – an aspect that will be explored in depth later – as well as from more prosaic elements. It is a place of contradictions, represented down to the smallest details: for example, frozen yogurt – declared within the series to be universally loved – is available on every corner in establishments such as 'Let's All Eat Yogurt', 'Yogurt Horizons', and 'Yogurt Yoghurt Yogurté', with an infinite variety of flavours. However, while frozen yogurt is omnipresent, ice cream is impossible to find. This paradox encapsulates the essence of *The Good Place*. In fact, in the sixth episode of the first season, an exchange between Eleanor and Michael highlights this contradiction: 'What is it with you and frozen yogurt? Have you not heard of ice cream?' 'Oh sure, but I have come to really like frozen yogurt. There's something so human about taking something and ruining it a little so you can have more of it.' Frozen yogurt, in being neither truly good nor plainly bad, becomes the symbol of *The Good Place*: just as ice cream is absent, so too are extremes.

These recurring elements in the series also help clarify that the afterlife depicted is, in fact, even too corporeal: this also prompts reflection on the fact that the Heaven presented is highly 'narrativised', whereas, strictly speaking, it should be a place where nothing at all might happen.

At the beginning of the series, in the apparent rigidity that characterises *The Good Place*, everything is regulated by a points system, which determines who will enter the Good Place and who will be condemned to the Bad Place. This elaborate system quantifies every action, good or bad, performed during a person's life and assigns a corresponding score. At first glance, this appears to be a deontological system, as it is clearly rule-based, with specific actions receiving specific scores. It could also be seen as analogous to the workings of karma, in which good actions gradually accumulate, ultimately leading a person toward liberation from the cycle of life and death. However, Michael also argues that the system is based on how much good an individual contributes to the universe, which aligns more closely with a consequentialist perspective, where the fundamental criterion is the result of one's actions (Russell 2019). The individuals with the highest number of points eventually earn a place in the Good Place, while everyone else is sent to the Bad Place: a system that is ultimately revealed to be flawed while the four friends are on Earth under the Judge's instructions. To demonstrate the system's failure, Michael proposes that Eleanor, Chidi, Tahani, and Jason should test four new arrivals in the Good Place. However, Shawn, who gains permission from the Judge to select these individuals, ensures that they are particularly difficult to manage. In this context, Chidi is forced to make a significant sacrifice: he must have his memory erased once again, thereby forgetting the love he and Eleanor share. Meanwhile, Janet has never ceased assisting them and, in the process, has fallen in love with Jason, undergoing a form of humanisation (Braidotti 2017, 9–25). This raises a fundamental ethical question as to whether Janet can be considered a person (Engels 2020).

Even this character, who is initially presented as cold and indifferent to emotions – being, in fact, a robot – evolves over the course of the episodes, gradually developing empathy for the protagonists, to the point of falling in love with one of them. Janet and Jason are initially portrayed as opposites: she appears as a cold, emotionless robot, endowed with superior intelligence that makes her omniscient; while he is a young 'simpleton' with limited intellectual abilities. Yet it is precisely their profound differences that make them complementary and, consequently, bring them closer. In fact, through these two characters, who are only superficially different, the series emphasises the importance of looking beyond appearances and focusing on the essence of the characters as persons[33] On the question of character and person, see Smith 1995, Frow 2014 and Bottiroli 2017, 237-245.

Although they seem to be opposites, they ultimately reveal themselves to be alike: both exist in dimensions that belong exclusively to them. Janet represents rationality and knowledge, while Jason embodies physicality and instinct: only together can they achieve true completeness in all its nuances. She learns from him the human essence in its most immediate dimension, while he gains an understanding of logical reasoning: alone, they are two problematic extremes that are difficult to fully appreciate, but together, they form a complete entity, rich in multiple dimensions and facets.

With the help of Michael and Janet, the experiment continues, and Eleanor, supported by her friends, attempts to administer the Good Place. However, the attempt ultimately fails, and the protagonists seem destined to resign themselves to a 'classic' version of hell – the one Shawn had so desperately wanted. Michael, however, having now changed and embraced 'goodness', firmly believing in the potential for human transformation, persuades the Judge not to end humanity but instead to establish a new system based on the possibility of self-improvement and the significance of interpersonal bonds. Good and bad exchange roles and invert them to such an extent that it is a demon 'converted' to the Good Place, who must guide the Judge – a figure traditionally belonging to the 'good' sphere – toward the correct path, convincing her to really do good. At this point, roles have been reversed, and the nuances between traditional ethical dichotomies become the new centre around which the afterlife is reconstructed.

To reach this stage, however, the protagonists must overcome various trials and improve themselves through their experiences in the Good Place and the lessons they internalise. The series intro-

duces several philosophers through the character of Chidi: the moral philosophy lessons of Professor Anagonye – who taught at Fordham University – accompany the series almost entirely. On Chidi's blackboard, numerous philosophers' names appear from time to time, from the most ancient to the most modern: Aristotle, John Locke, and Tim Scanlon, an eminent ethicist and the creator of the moral theory of 'contractualism'; Peter Singer, who contributed to the rise of the modern animal liberation and effective altruism movements; and Derek Parfit, the Oxford moral philosopher famous for *Reasons and Persons* and *On What Matters*. These lessons serve as a foundation for self-improvement, making philosophy the common thread of the series, a tool for earning a place in Heaven and a method for elevating the soul. But whether true moral betterment is possible remains the fundamental question posed to viewers (Engels 2020, 37–46), ultimately reinforcing Lamarque's theory that narratives encourage audiences to empathise with what is presented and subsequently reflect on it from an ethical perspective (Lamarque 2008).

In particular, ample space is given to the theories of Scanlon, who examines how to judge whether an action is morally right or wrong: he argues that desires do not provide us with reasons, that states of affairs are not the primary bearers of value, and that well-being is not as central to rational decision-making as is commonly assumed. Contractualism, in this sense, allows for much of the variability in moral requirements that relativists have defended while still preserving the full force of judgments of right and wrong (Scanlon 2000).

In addition to Chidi's philosophy lessons, various other elements from diverse disciplines are introduced throughout the episodes, all ultimately linked to the need to reflect on good and bad, as well as on free will. In particular, the second season revisits 'The Trolley Problem', the ethical thought experiment devised by Philippa Foot (1967). The central question of the problem is whether it is ethically justifiable to sacrifice a few people to save a greater number. For example, if a train is headed towards five people on the tracks, but by pulling a lever, it could be redirected to hit only one person, would it be morally permissible to intervene? Chidi attempts to answer this question, not only in theory but in practice: Michael recreates a real-life version of the experiment and forces the unfortunate Chidi to take control of the train, making him relive the scenario repeatedly, each time agonising over which choice is 'right'.

What happens to Chidi in this situation exemplifies the broader structure of the series, in which the four protagonists remain trapped in an endless, infernal loop that is continuously altered and improved by their actions. Each time they discover that they are not in the real Heaven but rather in a highly elaborate infernal circle, their memories are erased, and the narrative begins again, with small variations every time; each season finale shifts the perspective, refocusing the definition of the Good Place as the characters who inhabit it undergo change. What unfolds is an otherworldly utopian space infused with the ancient wisdom theorised by Pierre Hadot, in which theory and practice merge, and philosophy becomes a way of life. Initially, entering the Good Place required perfection, but gradually, the emphasis shifts to the possibility and capacity for self-improvement. The series moves from a rigid, schematic, and ultimately flawed points-based system to a more human approach, one defined by nuances and *chiaroscuro*: what is presented at the beginning of the series as 'bad' or imperfect is, by the end of all the episodes, reconfigured as 'ethically correct'.

In this sense, the new post-revolution television seriality, as a form favoured by popular culture and its audience, becomes the privileged space in which to describe, reflect on, and reproduce socially established and accepted values: if in the most simplified cases the victory of good over evil is presented, in those with a greater level of complexity – as is the case of the series that is the subject of this essay – a rather complex ethical sphere is represented, which is a space of ambiguity and moral *chiaroscuro*.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, considering what has been described and highlighted so far, it is possible to affirm that this complex and distinctive series revolves entirely around the ethical dilemma of what is right

and wrong, what it truly means to be good or bad, and how every action generates a chain reaction. *The Good Place*, with its irony and its apparent simplicity, re-examines traditional, simplified ethical oppositions through a complex philosophical approach – one that aligns with Lamarque's theories regarding the ethics of narratives – unfolding through a storytelling structure that refines itself as the series progresses.

It should be noted, however, that this series moves well beyond purely religious themes, as the admission criteria for the Good Place do not appear to be connected to any specific religion. This is reinforced by Michael, the architect of the Good Place, who explicitly states that no religion has ever understood more than 5% of the afterlife. Ethics and morality are therefore addressed in their most theoretical dimension, without privileging any religious framework over another. This is done so thoroughly that the series simultaneously deconstructs the Western idea of Heaven, portrays eternal existence as potentially dull, and satirises the notion of predestined soulmates. At the same time, the series critiques political correctness, exposing its ambiguities and inconsistencies: a rigid and overly meticulous codification of contemporary ideological norms is playfully ridiculed.

According to Kristen Bell – who plays the main character – the programme is designed to make the audience laugh but also to educate them, and in this sense, each episode prompts reflection on a different ethical dilemma. Ultimately, the series explores the question of whether a second chance is truly possible for everyone.

This intricate narrative structure is deeply interwoven with the moral philosophy lessons of Professor Chidi Anagonye[4], who explores what it means to be good or bad through the lens of past philosophical traditions. These lessons not only serve the function of advancing the protagonists' self-improvement and personal growth but also strengthen their interpersonal bonds. Furthermore, the Heaven depicted – complete with its points-based system, its inexplicable obsession with frozen yogurt, and its inhabitants, who remain deeply tied to the earthly realm, and develop close relationships across different spatial and temporal dimensions – appears overly corporeal and 'narrativized'. In the end, it is the narration itself, and its gradual refinement, that emerges as the true protagonist of the series, episode after episode.

At the heart of the entire series is a sophisticated exploration of storytelling which, in its constant refinement – every time the protagonists' memories are erased, and the story begins anew – serves only to deepen the bond among the young people by stimulating greater empathy in both them and the audience. In fact, as the narration deepens and enriches itself with nuances linked to the humanity of the characters, their fallibility, and their simultaneous desire to improve, the audience grows closer to them, empathising; it is precisely this that prompts viewers to question the validity of traditional and simplified ethical dichotomies. Through the deepening of the friendship among the four young people and their mutual storytelling, we gradually witness – episode after episode and series after series – their improvement as human beings and the strengthening of the bond between characters and viewers.

In other words, each time the story begins anew, always slightly different from the previous iteration, it appears that perfecting the storytelling – by highlighting gradations rather than ethical-moral extremes and by amplifying the characters' empathy – serves to improve them ethically, so much so that the viewer cannot help but ponder the nuanced distinctions between good and bad, which are skilfully highlighted by this metamodern narrative.

Lamarque's approach to the ethics of narratives thus finds a compelling point of comparison in the television series *The Good Place*, which stands out in the contemporary media landscape for its treatment of moral dilemmas and ethical reflection through narration. According to Lamarque, the ethical value of narrative works does not necessarily lie in the explicit transmission of moral norms but in their ability to provide a space for ethical exploration, stimulating reflection on moral themes without imposing definitive judgments. *The Good Place* embodies this vision, as it does not merely teach ethics to its viewers; rather, it employs its narration and characters to provoke reflection on complex moral questions, such as free will, justice, and the nature of being human.

Looking at the series in light of Lamarque's studies, it can be seen as an example of how new media narratives cultivate ethical sensibility through the emotional engagement and reflective involvement of the viewer. The characters encounter genuine moral dilemmas, and the series, as we have seen, explores various ethical theories – such as utilitarianism, deontology, and Aristotelian moral philosophy – without presenting a single correct or definitive solution. Viewers are encouraged to empathise with the characters and grapple with the complexity of their choices, much as they would when engaging with a traditional literary narrative.

As stated above, Lamarque emphasises that truly effective ethical narratives are not didactic but instead provoke moral reflection through narrative and emotional complexity. *The Good Place*, with its fusion of comedy and philosophy, succeeds in fulfilling precisely this role, functioning as a tool for ethical education that does not impose an explicit moral code but instead encourages viewers to reflect on what it means to be good and how one can become good. In conclusion, drawing on Lamarque's extensive studies on the ethical power of art, it is possible to affirm that this highly distinctive television series not only fulfils but even enhances the ethical potential of narrative, demonstrating that contemporary popular culture can also serve as a meaningful space for profound moral reflection.

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Notes

[1] Bolter and Grusin's reflection on the fact that new media – and in particular those linked to the internet – represent a type of medium for which the ultimate goal is to make itself invisible is particularly interesting (Bolter, Grusin 2000, 21–22).

[2] This has given rise to a series of expressions that characterise the series to the point of becoming catchphrases featured on various merchandise items available on the TV series website (https://www.nbcstore.com/collections/the-good-place?utm_campaign=new_arrivals&utm_medium=Banner&utm_source=NBC&utm_term=the_good_place), such as 'What the Fork', 'Holy Mother Forking Shirtballs' and 'Pobody's Nerfect'.

[3] On the question of character and person, see Smith 1995, Frow 2014 and Bottiroli 2017, 237-245.

[4] For the philosophical aspects of the series, the creators of *The Good Place* consulted two philosophy professors: Pamela Hieronymi from UCLA and Todd May from Clemson University. The series has also gained popularity among other academics, including members of the College of Arts and Sciences at American University.

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