

## **Is *The Good Place* in Your Classroom? Having a Doctor of Ethics and Moral Philosophy Come Teach Your Management Ethics Classes (#SpoilerAlert)**

### **Abstract:**

Teaching management ethics can be difficult, as students generally have not had extensive backgrounds in the complex and mottled philosophical constructs that form the basis of management ethics. In this session, we will provide a light-hearted and contemporary way of bringing ethical theories into the classroom. Specifically, we will start with a discussion on the main issues in teaching ethics in undergraduate and graduate level classes and then we introduce the show *The Good Place* as a teaching aid for ethics. Participants will be introduced to the format of the show and how it introduces ethical philosophies, they will then hear a multitude of ways in which these can be incorporated into Ethics, Management, Organizational Behavior, or Leadership classes (recommended for undergraduate level but could be used at the graduate level with adaptations), and finally the participants can join in a closing discussion on best practices on how to evaluate students' understanding of ethics.

#SpoilerAlert; we recommend that participants watch the first season of *The Good Place* before coming if they do not wish to hear any spoilers.

Keywords: Ethics, TV Shows, Discussion

## **Introduction**

Teaching ethics can often be difficult as students typically do not think or know about the theoretical underpinnings behind how and why they make (or should make) decisions in an ethical way. A rote lecture on the theories and concepts can be dry, boring, and easily forgotten. Therefore, we propose a way to utilize video clips from the tv show, *The Good Place*, in order to illustrate relevant ethical theories and moral philosophies.

The purpose of this session is to demonstrate how we can utilize clips from the tv show *The Good Place* to teach ethical theories and concepts to students. In this show, the characters have died and have entered the afterlife, in which they spend their time in the “Good Place” or the “Bad Place.” This decision is made by assigning weights to all the actions that a person committed while living on earth. Good actions are given a positive weight, and bad actions are given a negative weight, such that after death, a more positive score will result in a person living in the “Good Place.” The show revolves around five main characters living in the Good Place; one of these main characters was an Ethics and Moral Philosophy Professor while living on earth, and teaches some of the other characters about these topics. As such, many ethics topics and theories that we would normally cover in Management courses are discussed or touched upon in the show. In this session we will show participants how they can pair the clips with corresponding discussion questions to be done in small groups and provide ideas for additional assignments which can be added to the discussion. At the end of these activities, students should have a good grasp on a variety of topics and theories pertaining to ethics.

## **Theoretical Foundation and Teaching Implications**

*The Good Place* is a show that has been well-received and is popular among many generations, especially the student-age population. For this reason, students tend to relate especially well to the content. Not only are many relevant ethical and moral philosophies, principles, and theories discussed in the show, but it is often done so with humor, increasing the likelihood that students will be able to form strong connections between the clips and the topics and will be more likely to remember them.

Additionally, the group discussion questions allow students to better understand the concepts from the clips. With ethics, students inevitably have many divergent opinions. Through discussions, students may learn much from one another's perspectives and experiences. True understanding will occur through hearing, considering, and questioning contrasting views. With this activity, we encourage students to generate their own perspectives and then challenge one another such that they may form a more complete understanding of the concepts.

### **Learning Objectives**

The student learning objectives for this exercise are threefold, at the end of the class students should (1) understand ethical philosophies and constructs, (2) be able to apply ethical theories to management dilemmas, and (3) be able to communicate and discuss these theories and their applications in a rational and composed manner.

### **Exercise Overview**

For classes like Management, Organizational Behavior, and Leadership which may cover ethics in one or two class periods we recommend an in-class activity where the students see some video clips from *The Good Place* and follow each clip with group discussions. We have found that these discussions work well for small groups, however, it can also be effective to discuss

them as a full class. We recommend starting with the clip from Episode 1.1 that introduces the system of how people are assigned to the “Good Place” or the “Bad Place.” This gives students a brief understanding of the premise of the show and can lead to lively discussions around how “points” should be assigned for good and bad behaviors. Asking students to come up with an idea of a point system for employees is an easy way to move the ideas of the show into management ethics. Depending on the student learning objectives for the course, professors can then choose between clips on Kant’s ethical decision making, Aristotle’s perspective that we can get better at using moral virtue, Aristotle’s perspective that character is voluntary, Lao Tzu’s concept of the self, utilitarianism, contractualism, consequentialism, and ethics of “white lies” (as mentioned earlier). Additionally, there is a post-production series entitled “Mother Forkin’ Morals with Dr. Todd May” (Todd May is a Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Clemson and the philosophy advisor to the show) which currently has 4-5 minute instructional videos on Existentialism, Utilitarianism, Psychological Egoism, and Deontology which can also be used to prime discussions. This is an activity that can be adapted to fit different lengths of time. For the whole activity, we recommend at least 75 minutes, but instructors can adjust the timing by picking and choosing the clips and/or topics they find most relevant to their own course.

For Ethics courses, we recommend a longer exploration into the ethical dilemmas that the show delves into. Specifically, professors can assign singular episodes as pre-work for the students (the first season of *The Good Place* is available on Netflix). Class sessions can then focus on discussion around applying the ethical concepts learned from the show to management issues. These discussions can be bolstered by the “Mother Forkin’ Morals with Dr. Toddy May” series, TedEd or other instructional videos on ethics, and traditional lectures.

### **Session Description**

We intend to use 60 minutes for this session following this schedule:

- (10 min) Introduction of facilitators and attendees answering;
  - Personal introduction; Name, institution, type of classes taught
  - What are the main problems that I face when teaching ethics?
  - What questions do I want answered in this session?
- (5 min) Quick introduction to *The Good Place*
  - Explanation of the show's premise and characters
  - Quick clip to show how ethical theories are introduced in *The Good Place*
  - All participants will receive a handout that indicates where in the first season of *The Good Place* they can find clips of various ethical theories, ethical dilemmas, and other interesting management concepts to use in their classrooms
- (35 min) Presentation and Discussion on Application
  - Introduction of a myriad of discussion questions and assignments which can be used in a management ethics class after having students watch a clip or multiple clips from the handout, which can be adapted for full semester ethics classes or short sections on ethics in management, OB, or leadership classes.
  - Show clips and have participants engage in corresponding discussion questions in small groups.
- (10 min) Wrap-Up
  - Explanation of the effectiveness of these assignments for both undergraduate and graduate level classes.
  - Opportunity for questions and discussion focusing on best practices for evaluating student's understanding of ethical theories through assignments and in exams

Resources Needed: Classroom with capability to play video clips

**After attending this workshop, participants will:**

- Understand difficulties in teaching management ethics and identify ways in which to address these difficulties.
- Be familiar with a number of clips from *The Good Place* which they can immediately implement into their lectures on ethics.
- Have talked through the benefits and drawbacks of numerous management ethics assignments, discussion questions, and testing practices.
- Have created connections with other professors who are teaching management ethics.

**Application to Conference Theme - Teaching Agents for Positive Change**

We strongly believe that an understanding of ethics is necessary for students to become agents of positive change. Ethical frameworks will help students understand how to weigh complex decisions in terms of values, intent, and outcome and understanding of ethical decision-making will raise awareness of when and how to apply these ethical frameworks in their careers.

Therefore, teaching future change agents ethics will allow them to be primed to make positive changes when they go into their jobs.

**Unique Contribution to OBTC**

This is the first time that we are presenting the idea of using *The Good Place* to teach management ethics. We would eventually like to submit a write up of this session to MTR for publication. This is a unique opportunity for participants at the MOBTS conference to have early insight into how they can use *The Good Place* in their management classes to teach ethics.