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## Eleanor and the Meaning of Afterlife

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We're all going to die. And unless you are Seventies Canadian stoner Doug Forcett, it's unclear exactly what to expect afterwards. Thinking about our inevitable death often forces us to reconsider what really matters and whether our lives are meaningful or not. That's what happens to Michael in Season Two.

### Damned if You Die

When Eleanor Shellstrop and the gang team up with Michael, he agrees to learn ethics from Chidi. But Michael doesn't take the lessons very seriously, and the gang believes it's because he's an immortal being. They do find out, however, that it's possible for Michael to die and go out of existence through retirement—where his essence would be scooped up with a flaming ladle and the molecules of his body placed on different stars (“Existential Crisis”). As Chidi invites him to imagine retiring and entering into a state of “nothingness—empty, black void,” Michael falls into an existential crisis. His conclusion is that “searching for meaning is philosophical suicide,” and he wonders how anyone can do anything “when you understand the fleeting nature of existence.”

In that episode, Chidi introduces Michael to some of the ideas in Todd May's book, *Death*. As May elaborates in that book,

if I had died—that is to say, if I had not been immortal . . . Those joys which meant so much, which gave me the life I realized I did not regret, would be over. (*Death*, pp. 3–4)

Death reminds us that our existence is finite, and not just for

human beings. Many physicists believe that the universe will end in “heat death,” where all the energy will eventually be used up. What remains will be particles floating further and further away from each other. If this is the end of everything, then what does it matter whether we achieve great things or fail in all our endeavors? The book of Ecclesiastes in the Hebrew scriptures reminds us that kings, peasants, and dogs all end up with the same fate—so why does it matter which path in life we take? Living for a finite duration, then, appears to threaten the value or meaningfulness of our lives. So we might be led to believe that we can have meaningful lives only if we live forever.

### **Damned if You Live**

Unfortunately, this side of the coin also appears to be problematic. As it turns out, Eleanor and the gang will live forever, and as long as Michael doesn’t retire, he will too. It’s obvious that if the gang lived in The Bad Place for eternity, then their lives would be miserable and meaningless. But what if they lived forever in “The Good Place” (the place they mistakenly believed in Season One was The Good Place)? Or what about Mindy St. Claire’s situation, living forever in The Medium Place? Whether in The Good Place, “The Good Place,” or The Medium Place, Eleanor and her friends might be doomed to meaningless lives. So, we face the following dilemma: whether we die as finite creatures or live forever, our lives turn out meaningless.

Now why should we think that immortality yields a meaningless life? May explains the worry quite clearly:

. . . if I were immortal I would neither have had a chance to reflect on my life nor known what it meant to me to have lived this particular life. None of that would have mattered . . . and whatever joys I had had, they would have lost a bit of their luster with my knowing that I might experience those same joys an infinity of times again . . . When there is time for everything it is hard to make anything matter. (p. 62)

So an immortal life appears to be meaningless because it will lead to utter boredom.

Suppose Eleanor remained in “The Good Place” for all eternity, never figuring out Michael’s deception and where they really are. Her life would be filled with an eternity of eating frozen yogurt (or clam chowder, depending on which rebooted version), engaging in continual deception by pretending to be

the “real” Eleanor, or learning ethics from Chidi—plus never being able to curse! It’s easy to imagine how boredom can creep in for Eleanor and her friends. When you do the same things over and over again, you eventually get bored. Activities that used to be exciting, such as driving when you’re a kid, become tedious when you are constantly doing it. Even if Eleanor got to do some of the more fun or amazing activities, such as flying (“Flying”), that too would become boring if she did it every day for a billion years.

We can extrapolate the same lesson for the other places. Even if the real Good Place includes many of the common elements of Paradise that the gang is hoping for, doing the same things over and over again will eventually get boring. You might think that there is a plethora of activities available to prevent them from becoming bored—they can simply ask for whatever they want from Janet. But imagine having done everything (that’s the story of Dr. Faust and the ancient Greek gods). Once you’ve done it all, what’s left but to do everything all over again. And after you’ve done that a million times, you still have the rest of eternity to do it again. The same goes for the Medium Place. There’s only so many times one can read the same issue of *People* magazine or watch *Cannonball Run II* (as well as engage in carnal pleasures) without becoming bored.

Some might be tempted to think that boredom is avoidable if we change our personalities or character over time. As we change, we form new interests and desires, and that may help prevent boredom. Perhaps. But with an eternity, even small changes will eventually lead to big changes, and so the person Eleanor is in year one will be drastically different than Eleanor in year five trillion. Those two stages of Eleanor will be so disconnected—and the later Eleanor might not even remember being the earlier Eleanor—that they seem like two different people.

In fact, Eleanor and the gang do experience something similar to that: Eleanor, Chidi, Jason, and Tahani have their memories wiped every time Eleanor (and that one time Jason) figures out that they are really in The Bad Place. With each reboot, they don’t remember any of the experiences from previous versions and so start from scratch by being welcomed to “The Good Place.” Their lives in each reboot are disconnected from earlier and later versions of themselves in other reboots. The reboots are a quicker version of the personality changes that can occur over a lengthy period of time. But both cases appear bad in a way similar to an individual with severe amnesia.

So that’s the predicament for Eleanor. Either she goes out of existence, thereby making her life meaningless and devoid of

lasting value and purpose, or she lives forever and ends up utterly bored for all eternity or disconnected with her future and past selves.

### Does The Good Place Need God?

Some philosophers, such as Albert Camus, concede that life lacks meaning and is indeed absurd and pointless. Camus raised the famous example of the Greek myth of Sisyphus. As punishment from the gods, Sisyphus is doomed to roll a rock up a hill only to watch it roll back down, and he is assigned to this fate eternally. The problem isn't that the task is a difficult one—we could change the example of taking a penny and flipping it over every five seconds. The problem is that it is a pointless task. Nevertheless, Camus believed we can still press on with courage even if life exhibits this kind of pointlessness.

However, many people strongly believe that life is meaningful and has a purpose. Immortality by itself may not guarantee it. Some claim that what more is needed is God, an all-powerful, all-knowing, and wholly good being who can provide the relevant meaning and purpose to our lives.

*The Good Place* includes only a point system, quite similar to karma. But is having a point system enough? What guarantees that justice will be correctly administered without a personal God? Perhaps having Gen, an all-knowing, burrito-eating Judge of the universe is enough for sustaining or conferring meaning in human lives, or maybe a more traditional conception of God is required for meaning.

It's difficult to see how having an all-knowing scorekeeper such as Gen can confer meaning, at least not without knowing more about the role Gen plays or how the afterlife system originated. Who (or what) established the point system? Who (or what) put Shawn and the other demons in charge of The Bad Place? Without answers to these questions, it's unclear how Gen can infuse Eleanor's life with meaning. And since God doesn't appear in *The Good Place*, does that mean Eleanor and her friends are doomed to lead meaningless lives?

### Doing What You Want

Not necessarily. Even without God—and even without immortality—there might still be hope for Eleanor and the gang. Some of the goods in life that they can acquire may be satisfying after experiencing them only a single time. It might be enough for

Jason to watch Blake Bortles win the Superbowl only once. But the gang can also engage in repeatable goods, ones that can be enjoyed while retaining the desire to have more of it.

Even after befriending Chidi, Eleanor may want to make more friends, which she does. Eleanor can also engage in intellectual pursuits, studying moral philosophy; and she can move on to other areas in philosophy as well as studying other disciplines. She can also partake in sensual delights, which she does in some of the romantic encounters she has with Chidi in some of the reboots. Part of the problem with boredom stated earlier was thinking about doing the same thing over and over again. But Eleanor and the gang don't have to do that. They can rotate different repeatable pleasures. Some days Eleanor can eat frozen yogurt. She can then spend several years doing something else, such as sitting on a boat reading Aristotle or Kant or falling in love with her alleged soul mate. She can then try different fine meals at the restaurant, The Good Plates. Then after many years, she can go back and try frozen yogurt again. By rotating different repeatable pleasure, boredom may not be inevitable. John Martin Fischer makes this point in "Why Immortality Is Not So Bad".

But even avoiding boredom, will Eleanor's life be meaningful? That depends on what it takes for life to be meaningful. Some philosophers claim that the meaning of life is entirely subjective, that it depends only on the attitude of a person. One well-known version (advanced by Richard Taylor) suggests that a life is meaningful just in case an individual is able to fulfill her desires or goals—whatever her desires or goals may be. If Sisyphus were injected with a serum that made his life ambition to roll a rock up a hill over and over, then we might stop feeling bad for him but think that he's doing what he loves doing.

If Chidi's ultimate goal is to write a book on ethics, then as long as he is engaged in that project, his life is meaningful. So Eleanor's life in "The Good Place" may count as meaningful since she is fulfilling her desires, which is keeping up with the ruse of pretending to belong in order to deserve belonging (Season One) or trying to figure out how to escape from The Bad Place and make it to The Good Place (Season Two).

One worry that might be raised arises from the belief that some lives are intuitively meaningless even if they involve someone who is fulfilling her goals or desires, because some goals or desires are simply inane and pointless. Many are not inclined to regard as meaningful a life filled with hanging out in the "bud-hole" and playing video games for all eternity—even if that is Jason's ultimate goal. We can also imagine someone who wants

only to eat frozen yogurt and does it every waking moment of every day. Maybe those should be regarded as meaningful lives. But for philosophers who disagree, it is because they believe more is needed than merely doing what you want to do.

### **Loving What Deserves to Be Loved**

We get a clue of what more might be needed when Eleanor returns to Earth (“Somewhere Else”). Her near-death experience leads her to re-evaluate her life, and she decides to pursue more worthwhile activities such as undertaking projects related to environment awareness. This transformed outlook is not uncommon. When coming to the end of their lives, people don’t typically wish they had played more video games or spent more time at work. Usually they wish that they had spent more time with family or traveled more to see marvelous sights around the world. Those who have a terminal illness often try to spend their remaining time with loved ones or having valuable experiences.

So what makes life meaningful might require combining both the subjective element of desire and the objective element of being worthwhile. If you’re doing what you love, and what you love deserves to be loved—it’s worthwhile—then you are living a meaningful life. According to this view, advocated by Susan Wolf, a life of eating only frozen yogurt is not a worthwhile one. But even in “The Good Place,” Eleanor is able to pursue worthwhile endeavors. She is able to seek intellectual engagement by learning more about moral philosophy. Her goal of becoming a better person, strengthening her friendship with Tahani, or cultivating romance with Chidi are the kinds of goals that we usually regard as worthwhile.

So Eleanor and her friends can live out meaningful lives, and this may be so even without bringing immortality or God into the picture. If this is right, then Eleanor and her friends can live meaningful lives even if death is the end and they won’t live forever.

### **Writing Our Own Stories**

We’ve looked at the problem of boredom, but we haven’t yet dealt with the problem of Eleanor and her friends being rebooted eight-hundred-and-two times, which is similar to the problem of disconnection mentioned earlier. A clue to resolving this worry arises when examining the order of events in Eleanor’s life. She went from manipulating older people to purchasing ineffective pills to striving to become a better person

through studying moral philosophy and performing acts of kindness. However, if we reversed the events, where she started out as a student of moral philosophy and trying to be kind to becoming a manipulator whose favorite book is Kendall Jenner's Instagram feed, then we probably wouldn't regard her life as meaningful. So the order of events in someone's life can affect whether we regard it as meaningful or not. It's also important that the characters are not manipulated or coerced into becoming better—they need to be freely choosing to do so in a way that makes them authors of their own lives, engaging in creative self-expression. These issues are discussed by John Martin Fischer in "Free Will, Death, and Immortality."

By bringing in the importance of free choice and the order of events, certain reboots can still make room for meaning. Some reboots may not since they are too short, such as the eight-second version where Michael accidentally does a "butt reboot" ("Team Cockroach"). But in most of the attempts, Eleanor and her friends freely choose to work at becoming better people. We can even think of each reboot as analogous to individual episodes of a television series—a self-contained story that has plot twists and turns but is usually resolved after twenty-two minutes. Each television episode has its own self-contained meaning, and the same appears to be true for many of the reboots that the gang endures.

Eleanor and her friends may even be better off than they realize. Even if they don't directly remember previous reboots, they have ways of finding out. For example, Eleanor discovers Mindy's recording of Eleanor and Chidi professing their love for one another. That event influences Eleanor's feelings and actions towards Chidi in the final reboot (at least through Season Two). Another example is Eleanor's secret message to herself written on the title page of T.M. Scanlon's *What We Owe to Each Other* right before they are rebooted, which causes her to look for Chidi in the second reboot and to once again work towards becoming a better person. Those with retrograde or anterograde amnesia are able to send themselves messages so that even without directly remembering, their past selves and future selves can still make a difference. So memory wipes do not necessarily yield disconnectedness.

### **Hope for Eleanor**

If these views on meaningfulness are correct, then we can conclude that Eleanor and her friends are able to lead meaningful

lives. If they are pursuing worthwhile goods that they love, such as forming bonds of friendship or becoming better people, then their lives are meaningful. Or if what matters is the order of events and acting freely, then Eleanor and her friends can lead meaningful lives by creatively expressing themselves through authoring their own stories—and this is so even if they have to endure rebooting.

However, Eleanor and her friends may end up choosing imprudently or immorally and thereby engage in later events (in later seasons) that alter and ruin the meaning of earlier events. We're going to have to wait and see whether they continue to make good choices and end up with a good story. Perhaps that's the most we can hope for any of us.