THE GOOD PLACE AND TED SIDER'S PUZZLE

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The hit American TV show The Good Place *has garnered quite a following in recent years. Its main premise implies a scorekeeping view of the afterlife. People who have collected enough credits in their earthly lives will make the cut and go to the Good Place, while those who do not will be banished to the Bad Place. We suggest that such a premise would have to come to terms with Ted Sider's puzzle about the compatibility of a binary afterlife with God's divine attributes.*

Most traditional religions imply a binary conception of the afterlife. After kicking the life bucket, one would end up either in heaven or in hell. Where one goes depends on some criterion set by a Divine Judge. Such a criterion might include an evaluation of how a person has lived his or her earthly life. If a person has lived a good life, then s/he would earn enough credits to see the grandeur of heaven. Otherwise, s/he would be banished and suffer the eternal torments of hell. This scorekeeping view of the afterlife is one of the key premises of the American TV show, *The Good Place*.

The Good Place has garnered quite a following in recent years from the casual viewer to philosophy aficionados and professional philosophers alike. In *The Good Place*, people who die would either go to the Good Place or the Bad Place. The main criterion in determining who goes where has something to do with the kind of life a person led. The value of one's earthly life is judged by its domino effect on other people's lives. If a person's actions have impacted the rest of the world, i.e. if one's deeds translated into the

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betterment of his or her community, for example, then, after death, s/he goes to the Good Place. Otherwise, s/he ends up in the Bad Place.

The Good Place is designed as a utopia where all the things that its residents preferred while they were still alive are automatically provided. Furthermore, residents have a designated soulmate, an eternal partner, with whom they can share their entire afterlives. The Bad Place, on the other hand, is just the opposite. Residents of the Bad Place are eternally tortured by things that they hate and fear the most while they were still on Earth. No soulmate is provided; only eternal damnation and constant torment.

Setting aside the plot twist[1] in its story, let us focus on the scorekeeping premise of *The Good Place* because it implies an interesting puzzle about the consistency of such a view. This is a puzzle originally presented by Ted Sider in 'Hell and Vagueness'.[2]

Ted Sider's main claim is that a binary conception of the afterlife (that people would end up either in the Good Place or in the Bad Place) is incompatible with the traditional Christian idea of God (being all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing, all-just, etc.). His argument proceeds as follows.[3]

Given the binary conception of the afterlife, there are only two places that people would end up in: the Good Place and the Bad Place. Each is populated. Not everyone will end up in the Good Place; most will end up in the Bad Place. Of course, being in the Bad Place is really *really* bad. Being in the Good Place is really *really* good. Who ends up where is something that only God could decide. He does this by setting a criterion, which must not be at odds with His being wholly good and wholly just. For example, God cannot set a criterion that would be unjust. Now for the clincher: whatever criterion God may set would be vague (it would come in degrees and admit borderline cases). Thus, God's judgement would be unjust. Sider concludes that if this is so, then 'Christians should either reject the notion of divine judgement altogether, or claim that in

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the afterlife, as in life, there is no black and white, only shades of grey.'

Perhaps one may inquire why God would be unjust if the criterion He sets comes in degrees. Well, if the criterion comes in degrees, then God's divine judgement would admit borderline cases where one of two very similar people would be consigned to the Bad Place, while the other would be consigned to the Good Place. Suppose that God's divine judgement is based on criterion C. If someone has C, then s/he has enough credits to go to the Good Place. If s/he lacks C, then s/he will be tortured in the Bad Place. If C comes in degrees, then there will be a spectrum of cases with respect to C. People who clearly have C would be at one end of the spectrum, while people who clearly do not have C will be at the other end. Interestingly, there will be borderline cases of people who do not clearly have C.

Consider two such people from *The Good Place*, Eleanor and Chidi. They are almost similar except that Eleanor barely has C, while Chidi has almost but not quite attained it. Eleanor and Chidi are almost similar except for that one minor detail – a detail that would consign one to the Bad Place and the other to the Good Place. If this is so, then is God perfectly just if He lets Chidi be banished to the Bad Place merely for not quite scoring the necessary requirement, C? Is He just if He lets Eleanor stay in the Good Place merely by barely having C? If the difference were as minuscule as this, it would seem that God would be extremely unjust to permit such things.

A possible reply to Sider's puzzle is to question its starting premises. For example, one might question Sider's assumption that God's criterion admits degrees. Perhaps God employs the definite, non-vague criterion of having an unforgiven mortal sin for His divine judgement.[4] This reply implies that if one dies with an unforgiven mortal sin, say of being prideful, then s/he will be banished to the Bad Place. Those who have forgiven mortal sins would enjoy the Good Place.

Sider might respond, however, that having an unforgiven mortal sin still admits degrees; hence, would still admit

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borderline cases where God's judgement would be unjust. Consider again Eleanor and Chidi. They are almost similar except that Eleanor was barely given absolution for her mortal sin just before she died, while Chidi almost but did not quite get it. Perhaps Eleanor was just able to ask for forgiveness before she died, while Chidi barely had that chance. Again, Eleanor and Chidi are almost similar except for that minor detail that would consign one to the Bad Place and the other to the Good Place. As before, would God be just if He permits this?

A recent reply to Sider's puzzle denies the binary conception of the afterlife.[5] Instead of thinking about two afterlife places, one could think of a third afterlife place: the Medium Place, where those who have neither clearly obtained the necessary requirement to enter the Good Place nor are so bad to be banished to the Bad Place could be accommodated. One could think of the Medium Place as something akin to the Catholic notion of purgatory – the place where impure people who have attained God's grace just before dying are purged of their sins. From this, it follows that there are three places where people might end up in the afterlife: the Good Place where the really good people will reside; the Bad Place where the really bad people are; and the Medium Place where the borderline people are.[6]

This reply might at first seem attractive, but it still leads to a revenge-type of Sider puzzle. Given the *ternary* conception of the afterlife, there are only *three* places that people would end up in: the Good Place, the Bad Place, and the Medium Place. Each is populated. Not everyone will end up in the Good Place; some will end up in the Bad Place, others in the Medium Place. Of course, being in the Bad Place is really *really* bad. Being in the Good Place is really *really* good. Being in the Medium Place, however, is not as bad as in the Bad Place, but is definitely not as good as in the Good Place. As in the original Sider puzzle, who ends up where is something that only God could decide via some criterion, which is not at odds with His being wholly good and wholly just. As a clincher, whatever

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criterion God may set would be vague (it would come in degrees and admit borderline cases). This again would imply another puzzling scenario where God's divine judgement would consign one of two very similar people to the Bad Place, and the other to the not-so-bad Medium Place.

Consider again Eleanor and Chidi. Suppose that they have led very similar impure lives, but before dying, Eleanor just barely gained a tinge of God's grace and friendship, while Chidi has almost but not quite gained them. Given this minuscule detail, is God just if He sends Eleanor to the Medium Place and consigns Chidi to the Bad Place? Surely not!

The Good Place invites us to think about the afterlife and the very meaning of our earthly lives. As we have seen, it also leads us to think about Sider's puzzle. The challenge for those who believe in the afterlife is to consider how borderline cases put into question the compatibility of their conception of an afterlife and God's divine attributes.

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Notes

[1] The plot twist in the *The Good Place* is that the supposed Good Place is actually a Bad Place.

[2] Theodore Sider, 'Hell and Vagueness', *Faith and Philosophy* 19(2) (2001): 58–68.

[3] The discussion that follows is based on Jeremiah Joven Joaquin, 'Hell, Heaven, Neither, or Both: The Afterlife and Sider's Puzzle', *Sophia* 58(3) (2019): 401–8.

[4] Joseph Corabi, 'Eschatological Cutoffs', *Faith and Philosophy* 28(4) (2011): 385–96.

[5] See Joaquin, 'Hell, Heaven, Neither, or Both'.

[6] The idea of the Medium Place is already explored in *The Good Place.*

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