

AN OPEN LETTER TO CHIDI ANAGONYE

WARNING: Spoilers for The Good Place.

BY FRANCESCA GAZZOLO

Dear Chidi,

In all my time on this good green Earth, I have never found someone like you. My two decades of media consumption have led me to Hermione Grangers, Scout Finches, Jane Eyres, Kurt Hummels, Willow Rosenbergs, Ygrittes, Eowyns, Ben Wyatts and Pam Beeslys—a vast array of colorful characters who are wonderfully and lovingly crafted, like me in some ways and so very different in others. But you, Chidi, are something else.

I knew we were soulmates—not in the romantic sense, but in the I-am-you sense—when you were giving an ethics lesson to Michael, a demon who had never confronted his own impermanence. Attempting to teach him moral philosophy was a bold move, but we both love to lecture people, don't we? You tell him that “moral strength is defined by how we behave in times of stress,” not merely in times of calm or certainty. Michael asks, “Has anyone ever told you what a drag you are?” You say, “Everyone.” Me too, buddy.

Of course we have our differences. You are a Senegalese professor of moral philosophy and I am an American twenty-year-old whose only published works are in the pages of this magazine. One of your defining traits is your indecisiveness.

I am not initially indecisive—I am usually the one to make the “judgment call” in a group because I can't stand the waffling back and forth. The indecision comes later. The indecision comes after the decision, when I second-guess myself, replaying the events in my head into the wee hours of the morning until the obnoxious white numbers on my lock screen tell me I have five hours before my alarm. It's bad enough when I'm merely thinking over a text conversation I had with my crush. It's worse when I'm thinking about anything that has remotely ethical consequences. But then again, isn't every decision an ethical one?

This semester I decided to take an ethics class. I had grown up with philosophical terms being thrown around the house: my mother is a narrative therapist with a Ph.D. in feminist theory, and my father is just a very smart man. But it wasn't

until this class that I realized there was a whole discipline out there, a field of study that focused on that beautiful, maddening, eternal question that plagues my every waking moment: what does it mean to be good?

When Eleanor confesses her love for you, you ask her if she knows what it sounds like when you put a fork in the garbage disposal. You tell her that is what your brain sounds like all the time. Chidi, my man! I wanted to hug you through the screen of my MacBook Air. How can you possibly commit to anything in this wide world when you have a thousand different ethical trains of thought going a million miles a minute, reviewing every possible scenario and every possible outcome of that scenario, in order to determine what is the right path?

Sometimes the fork stays in the garbage disposal. Sometimes the bits and pieces explode outward like some sort of reverse black hole, shrapnel piercing the forearms of the poor soul cleaning

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the sink. Sometimes I just start babbling, throwing around questions like the aforementioned shrapnel: what is the ethical decision? In this case or in all cases? Based on what theories? Utilitarianism? Situationalism? Moral relativism? Fuck-everything-ism? And those sink-cleaners inevitably leave me, for a few hours or for forever, seeking a person with less anxiety about their moral standing.

I can't blame them. It's selfish.

You learn that too, when Eleanor discovers that you, she, Tahani, and Jason are all in the Bad Place instead of the Good Place. You initially believe that the Judge sent you there because you put almond milk in your coffee despite knowing that it was bad for the environment. (Incidentally, I now have an existential crisis whenever I ask for almond milk at Starbucks.) But Michael calls you a dummy and says

no, it was your moral rigidity that made everyone around you miserable. In your quest to be a good person, you threw your emotional baggage like a stress ball filled with thumbtacks at everyone you met. Me too, buddy.

I do not try to be good because I believe there is some grand reward at the end—some “moral dessert,” as Michael says. I do it—we do it—because we owe it to each other. As you say in the Season 2 finale, “We choose to be good because of our bonds with other people, and our innate desire to treat them with dignity. Simply put, we are not in this alone.” (Ayn Rand might vehemently disagree with you, but your utter rejection of teleological egoism is right up my alley.)

You learned that your moral inflexibility and indecisiveness put you in the Bad Place. I am trying to learn the same before

I end up in the Bad Place—or, more in line with my worldview, before the people around me all feel like my presence is some form of Bad Place torture. This is quite the ethical quandary: if you worry about how to be good all the time, are you really being good? In order to be good, must we sometimes do the unforgivable and “forget about ethics”—forget about Kant and Socrates and Kierkegaard and Confucius and Jesus Christ and just live a little? I'll try. And not to impose my values on you, but I think you should try too.

In reluctant but loving solidarity,
Cseca

Francesca Gazzolo (fgazzolo@wellesley.edu) once had an existential crisis over what time to eat lunch.

