



December 2021

A Good Place for Moral Philosophy: Associate Professor Lydia Moland on The Good Place and why all of her students should be haunted

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Recommended Citation

Boyle, Gerry (2021) "A Good Place for Moral Philosophy: Associate Professor Lydia Moland on The Good Place and why all of her students should be haunted," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 107 : Iss. 2 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol107/iss2/11>

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A GOOD PLACE FOR MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Associate Professor Lydia Moland on *The Good Place* and why all of her students should be haunted



*Associate Professor of Philosophy Lydia Moland recently moderated a WBUR CitySpace event featuring producer Michael Schur and actor William Jackson Harper of the NBC comedy *The Good Place*. The award-winning show is about a character, Eleanor, who is mistakenly sent to “the good place” in the afterlife and then has to figure out how to become a better person. Moland spoke with Colby Magazine Editorial Director Gerry Boyle '78 about television, morality, and how the most important ideas should fit on a bumper sticker.*

So you, Michael Schur, and William Jackson Harper on stage. How did that happen?

My brother wrote to me and said, “I think you should probably watch this show because it’s about moral philosophy.” And I thought, well, that can’t be true. Maybe it references moral philosophy somewhere but it can’t actually be a sitcom about moral philosophy.

But it turned out it was. *The Good Place*.

Right. And the more I heard about it, the more I could tell that there was a real cultural moment happening here, and I knew that my students were going to start asking me about it so I figured I should watch it for that reason also.

And clearly it passed muster with you as a moral philosopher. And a former WBUR producer. I didn’t realize that was one of your past lives, that you worked at WBUR during college and right through graduate school.

Yeah, I was always sort of weaving them together.

So that’s how you came to pitch the idea of a *Good Place* live discussion to your former colleagues at WBUR?

Yes, but I said, “If we do this show, I don’t want to talk about what it’s like to have Ted Danson’s phone number. I want to talk about philosophy.”

Which seemed like a long shot.

That was the part that I thought Michael Schur might not want to talk about. It proved to be entirely the opposite.

But you didn’t know that?

When I sent him the email I thought, there’s no way that’s going to happen. And then, lo and behold, he was legitimately excited.

And Michael Schur enlisted Harper, who plays the moral philosopher Chidi Anagonye on *The Good Place* to be part of the discussion.

Right. And then Michael said, “Lydia, maybe you should moderate.” So it was his idea.

Then actually Michael Schur cast you as the moderator.

Yes, let’s go with that. And he was totally fine with whatever I wanted to do.

And that could be talking philosophy for an hour in front of a live audience.

*I’ve since learned that he not only has written a foreword to [philosopher] Peter Singer’s forthcoming book, but he went to a Sartre conference and talked to them about the way *No Exit* plays a role in *The Good Place*.*

You can’t fake your way through that.

No.

So the show was sold out and went really well. It was quite interesting and very funny.

They’re both really funny. They play off each other.

And you were right in there with them. Were you on air at WBUR?

*No, but I actually learned so much about teaching from producing talk shows. My boss at *The Connection* [a daily call-in show] would always say, “Put it on a bumper sticker.” Whatever the hugely complex philosophical question is, put it on a bumper sticker and that’s the question for the listeners.*

How does that work in the classroom?

I think of it as a model of how to present material and get students to the place where they’re itching to ask a question, and I definitely learned one way of doing that by producing for the talk show. How do you

listen to one person and allow their ideas to interact with another person’s and get other people to play off of that?

Whether it’s moral philosophy in a Colby classroom or *The Good Place*.

Yes.

The premise of the show is that we can become better people. Do you think that happens to your students?

I hope so. Students say that that happens sometimes. I mean, I probably don’t hear from the ones for whom it doesn’t work. But yes, I think students do leave my classes sometimes feeling like they have a better idea of how they want to be a good human being in the world.

So you were being facetious at the WBUR panel when you said everyone hates professors of ethics and moral philosophy?

That’s a line from the show, so you know. People say that to Chidi because he keeps proposing these questions, right?

And that can be annoying.

Yes, but absolutely, I want my students to go through the world worrying that things are not as good as they seem. I mean, I think those of us who are immensely

*privileged to live in relative safety and comfort and affluence need to worry more. And one of the things I love about *The Good Place* is that it suggests that a lot of us are not as good as we think we are. And that if we were really held up on this point system, a lot fewer of us would get good points than we think because we do make decisions—about the environment, about the way race functions, about the way gender functions—that are harmful to other people even if we’re not intending to be harmful. And I really want my students to think harder about that.*

Long after they leave Colby.

Yes. I have these PowerPoints, and sometimes I literally have a little ghost on them at the point where I really want students to stay haunted about a particular question. I say to my students at the end of my moral philosophy classes, “Stay haunted.”

There’s the bumper sticker.

Ha. Right.

Do you feel like an evangelist for moral philosophy when you’re sending your students out into the world?

I feel like an ambassador. I want them to be ambassadors of thoughtful, humble, fierce engagement in the world’s problems.



*Associate Professor of Philosophy Lydia Moland, right, moderates a discussion with *The Good Place* creator Michael Schur, left, and actor William Jackson Harper at WBUR’s CitySpace in Boston Sept. 17.*