

Perfect Freedom in The Good Place and St. Thomas' Commentary on the Gospel of John¹

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Abstract

Mike Shur's Netflix-aired *The Good Place* has been a focus of philosophical attention by both popular-culture (written by pop-philosophers) and professional philosophers. This attention is merited. *The Good Place* is a philosophically rich TV show. *The Good Place* is based in three places: The Good Place, The Medium Place and The Bad Place. Every human being ends up in one of these places after they die based on their good points (points received for doing good actions e.g., chewing with your mouth closed) and bad points (points received for doing bad actions e.g., virtue-signaling). Spoiler alert: by Season 4 of *The Good Place* (the fourth and final season), the main characters of the show – Eleanor, Chidi, Jason and Tahani – eventually reach the real Good Place (not the fake “Good Place” they had been tortured in by the human-formed, architect demon Michael in Season 1). However, when they reach the real Good Place after much struggle with ethical dilemmas, recognition of their moral flaws and moral development, they find themselves wanting to leave: they were unsatisfied with what The Good Place had to offer and wanted to be freed from it. This paper is concerned with the following questions: What accounts for their desire to be freed from The Good Place? What kind of freedom were they trying to achieve, and how did The Good Place represent it? Reflecting on these (and similar) questions, I argue that St. Thomas (who made it into The Good Place!) gives an ingenious and plausible answer: it was not merely that The Good Place was characterized by pure hedonism (a core deficit of The Good Place, identified by its creators), but more specifically that they had a positive desire for a freedom from temporal goods/experiences which do not satisfy the longings of the human heart and a freedom for the enjoyment of perfect freedom. While The Good

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Keywords: St. Thomas Aquinas, Free Will, Heaven, The Good Place

1. Introduction

Mike Shur's Netflix-aired *The Good Place* has been a focus of philosophical attention by both popular-culture (written by pop-philosophers) and professional philosophers.² This attention is merited. *The Good Place* is a philosophically rich TV show. *The Good Place* is based in three places: The Good place, The Medium Place and The Bad Place.³ Every human being ends up in one of these places after they die based on their good points (points received for doing good actions e.g., chewing with your mouth closed) and bad points (points received for doing bad actions e.g., virtue-signaling). Spoiler alert: by Season 4 of *The Good Place* (the fourth and final season), the main characters of the show – Eleanor, Chidi, Jason and Tahani – eventually reach the real Good Place (not the fake “Good Place” they had been tortured in by the human-formed, architect demon Michael in Season 1). However, when they reach the real Good Place after much struggle with ethical dilemmas, recognition of their moral flaws and moral development, they find themselves wanting to leave: they were unsatisfied with what The Good Place had to offer and wanted to be freed from it. This paper is concerned with the following questions: What accounts for their desire to be freed from The Good Place? What kind of freedom were they trying to achieve, and how did The Good Place represent it? Reflecting on these (and similar) questions, I argue that St. Thomas (who made it into The

Good Place!) gives an ingenious and plausible answer: it was not merely that The Good Place was characterized by pure hedonism (a core deficit of The Good Place, identified by its creators), but more specifically that they had a positive desire for a freedom from temporal goods/experiences which do not satisfy the longings of the human heart and a freedom for the enjoyment of perfect freedom.⁴ While *The Good Place* ends in much perplexity, I argue that the freedom they desired was a rudimentary articulation of the freedom that St. Thomas identifies in heaven.

Here is how I will make sense of St. Thomas' answer. Unlike contemporary philosophers of free will, and akin to the Medieval philosophical tradition, St. Thomas distinguishes free will (*liberum arbitrium*) from freedom (*libertas*), and then freedom from perfect freedom (*libertas gloriae*). St. Thomas most explicitly discusses perfect freedom in the Commentary on the Gospel of John, c.8. St. Thomas writes that the “freedom of glory” (*libertas gloriae*) is what the faithful will have “in [their] homeland” (s. 1209), namely, heaven. (And recall that for St. Thomas and the Catholic philosophical (and theological) tradition, this is identified as union with God in the “beatific vision”, *visio beatifica*). His characterization of perfect freedom, though, is revealing and helpful in understanding the finale of *The Good Place*: perfect freedom in heaven – possessed in the *visio beatifica* – requires “nothing there to incline [human

² Popular audiences will re-call (to name a few) the pieces in *Vox*, *MentalFloss*, *The Ringer*, *Deseret*, *The Atlantic*, *Washington Post*, as well as the podcast *The Good Place: The Podcast*. Scholarly audiences will re-call, most notably, Steven A. Benko and Andrew Pavelich's *The Good Place and Philosophy: Get an Afterlife*. (Chicago: Open Court, 2020) and Kimberly S. Engel's *The Good Place and Philosophy*. (New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell, 2021). However, as the (theological) deficiency of Part II: “Somewhere Else” in “*The Good Place and Philosophy*” shows, there is a need for “*The Good Place and Theology*.” For example, Grosz, Yang and Montoya's essays (which constitute Part II) are theologically deficient. For example, their objections to a theological conception of objective meaning (purpose and value) are largely unimpressive and unexhaustive. For an appreciation of the fuller discussion, see W.L. Craig's *Reasonable Faith*. 3rd Ed. (Illinois: Crossway, 2008).

³ My analysis is largely unconcerned with The Medium Place for one reason: is not philosophically interesting (and in the show it is not supposed to be interesting, it is supposed to be slightly less than interesting though tolerable – hence The *Medium Place*). However, this has not exempt other philosophers from giving it attention. See Catherine M. Robb's “The Medium Place: Third Space, Morality, and Being in Between” in *The Good Place and Philosophy*, 75-87.

⁴ In calling these goods/experiences ‘temporal’, I do not mean that they are in (linear) time in *The Good Place*. All I mean is that the representation of the goods/experiences in the real Good Place are temporal, such that they resemble, even if they are slightly better than e.g., the lovely sound in *The Good Place*, the goods/experiences the actual world has to offer (which ultimately do not satisfy). I was inclined to use ‘worldly goods/experiences’, but it is not clear they are in a ‘world’ at all.

beings] to evil, nothing to oppress [them]” and “there will be freedom from sin and punishment.” (s. 1209). The problem with *The Good Place* is that it is not heaven, and hence does not have the freedom enjoyed in heaven: it possesses no satisfaction of one’s deepest longings/desires, and no genuine freedom (as St. Thomas understands it). Even though St. Thomas got into *The Good Place*, he would have left it like Eleanor, Chidi and Jason: except not for the freedom from existence, but for the freedom found in heaven.

2. “The Good Place”, The Real Good Place, and Freedom

The Good Place is philosophical in many respects. First, *The Good Place* is unmistakably reminiscent of Jean-Paul Sartre’s 1944 play *No Exit*, especially its well-known, iconic line: “Hell is other people” (*L'enfer, c'est les autres*). Second, one of the protagonists of the show, Chidi (described below), is a professor of ethics and moral philosophy who explains philosophical concepts and theories throughout the show.⁵ Third, the philosophy as Chidi understands it is filtered through two professional philosophers used for consultation in the show: specialist in moral psychology Pamela Hieronymi of The University of California, as well as Clemson University’s political philosopher Todd May. Hence, the philosophy presented in the show is generally, though not always, at a relatively high standard. Fourth, there are professional philosophical objectives in *The Good Place*. For example, reminding viewers (and readers of philosophy) that there are many lesser known (and lesser studied by scholars) women philosophers e.g., Hypatia of Alexandria (370-415CE). Another example is the references to the often forgotten Eastern (as opposed to Western) philosophical tradition (notably the metaphor that Chidi gives to Eleanor in the finale, explored below). Fifth, at the most general level, the show is based on philosophical dilemmas and problems: free will and determinism, subjective and

objective meaning, the metaphysics of personal identity, the nature of the good, and so on.

For the purposes of context, I will briefly re-cap the the main characters and the four seasons – the finale of the fourth being my primary concern.⁶ The four main characters are Eleanor, Chidi, Tahani and Jason. Eleanor Shellstrop (Kristen Bell) was from Phoenix, Arizona and spent her life on earth as a selfish, detached pharmaceutical saleswoman with no friends, family and responsibilities to others. Chidi Anagonye (William Jackson Harper) was a Nigerian, French-speaking professor of ethics and moral philosophy, who spent his life in indecision which costed him relationships, opportunities and ultimately valuable experiences. Tahani Al-Jamil (Jameela Jamil) died a wealthy, British philanthropist and model who is confident in her place in *The Good Place*. Finally, the clueless and unintelligent (though kindhearted) Jason Mendoza (Manny Jacinto) was a drug dealer and aspiring DJ from Jacksonville, Florida. Michael (Ted Danson) is a *Bad Place* architect who runs the deceptive, torturous *Good Place*. He has an affinity for all things human – from the unpractical human body parts e.g., our fingers, to the strange norms of human behavior e.g., telling someone you will meet them for coffee and have no intention whatsoever following up on it. Janet, the omnipresent AI of the show (D’Arcy Carden), spends her time providing the *Good Place* residents their wishes and being Michael’s assistant.

In Season 1, the human-formed, architect demon Michael deceives Eleanor, Chidi, Tahani and Jason by leading them to believe that they are in *The Good Place* (really a variant of *The Bad Place*). Recall that each person, after they die ends up in either *The Good Place*, *The Medium Place* or *The Bad Place*, depending on their good actions (receiving good points) and bad actions (receiving bad points). The Hindu-theological conception of karma is at work here: what you do determines where you end up in the next life.⁷ The season revolves around

as well as Christianity e.g., the parable of the prodigal son, *Lu.* 15-32. Consider, too, that the Catholic theological notion of *purgatory* is entirely looked over in much commentary on *The Good Place*. *Purgatory*, from the early 12th century Medieval Latin *purgatorium* and based on *Hab.* 1:13; *II Mac.* 12:39-46; *Matt.* 5:24-25) is literally a state of purification prior to heaven. While the content of such purification is largely unspecified in Catholic doctrine, much of Eleanor’s moral improvement in *The Good Place* (may) be a secular rendition of how *purgatory* is aimed at purging away everything that prevents a human being from entering into, and enjoying, the joy of heaven. Consider that Michael McGowan’s disassociation of *The Good Place* from traditional Western monotheistic faiths in *ibid.*, 192 does not even *consider* *purgatory*.

⁵ Dominantly *ethical* concepts and theories. The bulk of the (serious) philosophy of the show pertains to a practical branch of philosophy: ethics and moral philosophy. The extent to which philosophy beyond ethics plays a role is overestimated cf. *The Good Place and Philosophy*, xiii.

⁶ For an excellent summary of the role of philosophy (and philosophy professors) in *The Good Place and Philosophy*, see *ibid.*, xi-xv.

⁷ Note that this is distinct from the Judeo-Christian conception of the afterlife, where God is personal (or tri-personal, on Christianity) – not merely an impersonal scorekeeper – and knows the intricacies of the human heart from which our thoughts, actions and words come. Judaism recognizes this e.g., God looking at the human heart (and not merely external behaviours) *1 Sam.* 16:7,

Eleanor who believes she is sent to The Good Place accidentally, who decides to fix her moral character and ultimately belong in The Good Place. Eventually, after much help from her fake soulmate Chidi, she realizes that The Good Place is just a deception created by Michael. In Season 2, Michael restarts The Good Place (wiping everyone's memories) to see if his experiment will work; however, in every restart Eleanor figures out that The Good Place they live in is really The Bad Place. Pressured to not be troubled by his boss, Michael sides with the four humans and appeals to the Eternal Judge to let the humans go back to earth to fix their moral characters. The goal of Michael and the humans is to get the humans to the real Good Place. In Season 3, the characters participate in Chidi's study with his neuroscience colleague Simone. Learning that no one has been admitted into the Good Place in centuries, they argue against the dichotomous point-system of the afterlife and propose that they be in a simulated Good Place to prove that they can each individually develop morally.

Finally, in Season 4, the experiment of Season 3 concludes with the humans improving morally and hence the points-system is abandoned: there are new tests of moral development. Finally reaching The Good Place, the characters are deeply puzzled. They are each unsatisfied with what The Good Place offers: no amount of satisfaction of their desires ultimately satisfies them e.g., no experience, object, person, et cetera.⁸ Appalled by the lack of satisfaction the Good Place provides, the main characters propose that there be an option to peacefully end their time in the afterlife. Should anyone want to stay, they are able to; however, should they not want to continue in the afterlife, they go into "the ennui of eternal bliss", only described in metaphorical terms e.g., the wave returning into the ocean from which it came. With (what appears to be) Buddhist philosophy at the forefront, the season ends with Eleanor, Chidi and Jason exiting The Good Place, Tahani becoming an architect/designer of the afterlife and Michael leading to live as a human being on earth.⁹

In what follows, I want to explicate and attempt to understand the notion of freedom in the finale of The

Good Place, particularly in what happens when the main characters of the show finally reach the real Good Place. First, the characters are deeply unsatisfied despite having their every longing and desire satisfied, at least the desires and longings they are aware of e.g., desiring material goods explicitly reflects an implicit desire for fulfillment (in which the former is a means to the latter). Neither Chidi's favorite philosophical landmarks, nor Eleanor's reconciliation with her family, nor Jason's wildest dreams come to life, are able to satisfy a deeper longing in all of them. In fact, even those moments of inner tranquility press them to leave The Good Place – not merely remain satisfied in it. Second, the characters positively desire to be freed from The Good Place. As I will explicate below (in the context of St. Thomas), there is a distinction between free will and freedom, and one which is present in The Good Place; however, I will not discuss the already debated concept of free will in The Good Place, a tricky philosophical problem.¹⁰ Instead, I will discuss the notion of freedom, particularly in the finale of The Good Place. However, it is sufficient to note that freedom from The Good Place is positively associated with interior peace, quietude and tranquility. It is not described in cognitive and psychological terms, but spiritual and metaphysical terms.

The Good Place, as they experience and understand it, imposes itself as an impediment to a deeper longing for peace, tranquility and quietude. Consider how Jason, Chidi and Eleanor all describe their desire to leave The Good Place. Consider Jason: "I'm leaving, going through the door...its time."¹¹ After his last night of existence with his friends at an EDM (Electronic Dance Music) party he threw in which he put on a dance performance, he says to Chidi and Eleanor: "That was special, I'll never forget this night – uh, until I walk through the door and dissolve into the universe."¹² Chidi asks: "How did you know?"¹³ His reply: "It wasn't like I heard a bell ring, or anything, I just suddenly had this calm feeling, like the air inside my lungs, was the same as the air outside my body. It was peaceful." ¹⁴ Chidi says likewise to Eleanor: "I have to go...I'm just ready to leave, I have the same feeling that the others described – a kind of quietude in my soul...I've had it a long time. Remember that day we were with our

⁸ Notice that Eric Yang's analysis of meaning in the afterlife in his "Eleanor and the Meaning of Afterlife" (in *ibid.*, 61-68) omits reference to the finale of *The Good Place*. While Tahani and Michael both pursue subjective goods in the end (whose ultimate aim or end is unclear), the others have already achieved their subjective goods they regarded as choice-worthy and desired something *more*.

⁹ For a larger discussion of Hinduism and Buddhism in *The Good Place*, see Michael McGowan's "*The Good Place*

and Religious Tradition" in *ibid.*, 193ff. Noteworthy in McGowan's analysis occurs on 196ff, where he discusses the difficulties the show has in reconciling its use of Buddhist and Hindu philosophy.

¹⁰ See *The Good Place and Philosophy*, Part IX.

¹¹ "Whenever You're Ready", 4, 13.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

parents. My mom kissed you goodbye and got lipstick on your cheek and your mom rubbed it off. I don't know why that was it, but that was it." While Eleanor briefly dissuades him, he cannot shake the desire to leave and Eleanor eventually concedes that she is impeding his deepest desire. Consoling Eleanor, Chidi says "for spiritual stuff [contra the philosophers he studies his whole life], you gotta turn to the East." Chidi says: "Picture a wave. In the ocean. You can see it, measure it, its height, the way that the sunlight refracts when it passes through it's there, and you can see it, and you know what it is — it's a wave. And then it crashes on the shore...and it's gone. But the water is still there. The wave was just a different way for the water to be for a little while. That's one conception of death, for a Buddhist. The wave returns to the ocean, where it came from, and where its supposed to be." Eleanor: "Not bad, Buddhists."¹⁵ Finally, Eleanor believes (and then tries) to be ready and is not. Frustrated with her inability to walk through the door, she realizes that she is not done in The Good Place. She pleads to The Judge for Michael's becoming human, her last and final good act in The Good Place. She is then ready and Janet takes her to the door to leave The Good Place. After explaining how Michael and every other human being makes it on earth e.g., failing and getting up again, having good days and bad days, possessing idiosyncrasies and responsibilities one does not want, Janet asks: "What do you think happens when people walk through the door? It's the only thing in the universe I don't know."¹⁶ Eleanor: "I don't know either. The wave returns to the ocean. What the ocean does with the water after that is anyone's guess. But as a very wise not-robot once told me [ironically talking about Janet], the true joy is in the mystery."¹⁷ In the end, Eleanor walks into the door and so ends The Good Place. I conclude three-fold. First, for all three characters, they knew they were ready to leave The Good Place based on a perfect moment of satisfaction that they describe as quietude, tranquility and peace. They then

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Bearing in mind other sources. For example, in the SCG q. 24, a. 1, St. Thomas links free human agency to our cognition.

¹⁹ Arguably one of the most persuasive arguments for free will, and one which makes its appearance (though Eleanor) in *The Good Place*. See Joshua Tepley's "What's The Use of Free Will?" in *The Good Place and Philosophy*, 249-259, whose argument is that this is Eleanor's argument for free will. However, St. Thomas' argument is slightly different in two respects. First, he argues that not only moral responsibility, but moral/legal desert ("rewards", "punishment would be in vain"), would be philosophically unjustified if there were no free will.

want to be freed from The Good Place and existence itself. Second, the description of what lies beyond the door is described by Chidi in the Buddhist metaphor of the story of the wave (to which Eleanor qualifies this by saying that what happens to the wave, if anything at all, is anyone's guess). It is here that I want to turn from exegesis of The Good Place into exegesis of St. Thomas. Chidi, Eleanor and Jason collectively agree that freedom from The Good Place allows them to achieve their inner peace, tranquility and quietude; however, what kind of freedom were they trying to achieve, and would their leaving achieve it? If they really possessed an inner tranquility, peace and quietude, why did they want to be freed from an existence in which they could enjoy it? These and other questions I will come back to, but first I will explicate St. Thomas view of free will and freedom — and then return to the questions. This distinction will elucidate an agreement between St. Thomas and The Good Place: perfect freedom of the human person is not merely the ability for wrongdoing, but more a specific kind of existential or perfective fulfillment.

3. St. Thomas on Free Will (Liberum Arbitrium) and Freedom (Libertas)

St. Thomas distinguishes between free will/choice/judgement (*liberum arbitrium*) and freedom (*libertas*). Like Augustine (DGL c.2), St. Thomas affirms that human beings have free will (STh I.I.83. sed). As I read St. Thomas, there are (at least) two arguments for this claim.¹⁸ First, "evident reasoning" (De Ver. 24.1), or reasoning/argumentation from what is evident, shows that free will exists. For example, if there is no free will, one cannot rationally justify the practice of "counsels, exhortations, commands, prohibitions [and] rewards", and that if there were no free will "punishments would be in vain." (STh I.I.83. sed contra).¹⁹ However, since these are rationally justified practices, and that punishment is not in vain, there is free will. Second, possessing a rational

Second, St. Thomas' argument separates into two arguments for free will The former argument is essentially Eleanor's (with the caveat regarding moral/legal desert). The latter argument I reconstruct as follows:

1. Without free will, "counsels, exhortations, commands [and] prohibitions" would be futile/causally inefficacious.
2. "Counsels, exhortations, commands [and] prohibitions" are not futile/causally inefficacious.
3. Therefore, there is free will. [From (1) and (2)].

nature entails free will (STh I.I. 83. sed contra). For example, consider that our “judgement (iudicium) is in the power of the one judging in so far as one can judge about one’s own judgement.” (De Ver. 24. 2). St. Thomas says “choice itself is a judgement from which free will takes its name.” (STh I.I.83.4. resp. 2). Since we have first-and-second order judgements, we have free will.²⁰ However, St. Thomas distinguishes between free will and freedom. Although they are both rooted in reason (De Ver. 24.2), freedom is not about alternative possibilities, second-order judgements and agency. For example, for St. Thomas the blessed in heaven have their wills remain fixated on the Good without free will, yet are perfectly free. Questions arise: What does St. Thomas mean by “freedom”, and why is it desirable? What does it mean to be perfectly free without free will? I now turn to the task of elucidating what St. Thomas means by “freedom.” A central text invested in “freedom” is St. Thomas’ CGJ, c.8.

In the CGJ c. 8, the discussion of freedom (*libertas*) begins in Lecture 4. Lecture 4 is on Jn. 8:31-38. To briefly summarize the events before laying out St. Thomas’ commentary, it begins with Jesus telling His disciples that if they are to be disciples, they must “remain in [His] words.” (8: 31). He furthers this by saying “and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (8: 32). The Jews reject their slavery, and Jesus replies that “whoever commits sin is the slave of sin.” (8: 34). He says the Son (not servant) abides in the house forever (8:35) and that “if therefore the Son makes you free, you will truly be free.” (8: 36). Jesus then tells them that His word is not in them and that He speaks only what He has seen with His Father and they do the things that they have seen with their father (8: 37-38). To make sense of this, it should be remembered that in the Old Testament, moral obligations were followed on essentially legalistic terms, that is, obeyed simply in virtue of adherence to the moral law (esp. the 613 commandments contained in Jewish tradition, Ten Commandments in Ex 20:1-17, Levitical law, et cetera). Jesus spent much of his life and ministry objecting not to the moral commandments of the Jews (though He set the bar higher e.g., Matthew 5:17-48), but to the legalism of the Jews, especially in His interactions with the Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes, et cetera. Hence, when St. Thomas juxtaposes the disciples to those who do not keep Jesus’ words, it is predicated in this contextual

distinction between those who are and are not His disciples. At s. 1196, St. Thomas writes that there are three characteristics to disciples, that is, those who keep Jesus’ words (s. 1196). First, they will “have the excellence of being disciples of Christ”, “have a knowledge of the truth” and “they will be free [*libertas*]” (s. 1196). The end of being a disciple is knowing truth, and truth comes from Jesus Christ (s. 1196; Jn. 1:17). However, one of the effects of knowing the truth is freedom: “...the greatest thing is the acquisition of freedom, which the knowledge of truth produces in those who believe.” (...maximum est libertatis adeptio, quam efficit cognitio veritatis in credentibus) (s. 1196). It is here that St. Thomas says that this is why Jesus says “the truth will set you free.” (8: 32).

Liberare is being used in a specific way in this context. For one thing, Jesus is directly addressing the Jews. Second, Jesus is not giving an abstract analysis of freedom; instead, He is exhorting the Jews to understand the freedom that truth – Himself – gives. Hence St. Thomas qualifies *liberare* with “in hoc loco.” St. Thomas proceeds in his commentary. First, “to free” does not mean “release from confinement”; instead, it means “a being made free.” (s. 1199). Being made free is threefold: First, freedom from “the error of falsity.” Second, freedom from “the slavery to sin.” Third, freedom “from corruption.” (s. 1199; Rom 8:21). In this way, perfect freedom (regardless of whatever positive appraisal we can give of it) cannot involve falsity, slavery to sin and corruption. The Jews rejected that they needed such freedom, saying they were seeds from Abraham (s. 1200; Jn. 8: 33). St. Thomas says of this that while they “deny their slavery”, “this reveals them as dull in mind and liars”, really confusing spiritual freedom (*spiritualis libertas*) with physical freedom (*corporalis libertas*) (s. 1201). St. Thomas says that whether their denial was of physical slavery, slavery generally or slavery applied to themselves (as in the slavery of sin), they were mistaken all the same (s. 1201). Indeed, St. Thomas points out that the Jews, in their reply to Jesus, overlooked the “truth part” and instead asked “about the kind of freedom” (s. 1202). Jesus, though, shows that they are slaves – not physically, but spiritually (in the sense of slavery to sin) (s. 1203). Before providing Jesus’ reply, St. Thomas elsewhere explains why “slavery to sin” does not preclude human free will:

²⁰ Two notes. First, I am aware that St. Thomas distinguishes between freedom of judgement (*liberii iudicii*) and free will (*liberum arbitrium*) (c. 48, 3; De Ver. 24.1; STh I.83.1 ad 4); however, he sources free will in second-order judgements.

A debate I will not be concerned with is whether, in light of the philosophical criticism of St. Thomas in the condemnation of 1277, philosophers were right to read

St. Thomas as a voluntarist (*De Mal. q. 6 ad 24; STh I-II.6.7 ad 3, I-II.9.6 ad 3, I-II.6.2*). See Bonnie Kent’s *Virtues of the Will: The Transformation of Ethics in The Late Thirteenth Century*. Washington, DC: CUAP, 1995; David Gallagher’s “Free Choice and Free Judgement in Thomas Aquinas” *Archiv fur Geschichte der Philosophie*. 76. 76: 247-277.

The slavery of sin does not imply force, but either inclination, inasmuch as a preceding sin in some way leads to following ones, or a deficiency in natural virtue, which is unable to free itself from the stain of sin once it has subjected itself to it. Thus there always remains in man the freedom from force by which he naturally has free choice. De Ver. resp. 7.

Jesus' reply is twofold. First, it begins with "amen, amen, I say to you." (Jn. 8: 34). St. Thomas notes that this phraseology involves a Hebrew word "amen" which means "truly" or "may it be this way." (s. 1203), and was used "as a kind of oath" and it was said "to reinforce His statement". (s. 1203). Second, He speaks of the universal human condition of sin (s. 1203; Rom 3:22). St. Thomas says that one may object to him as follows: "...a slave does not act by his own judgement, but by that of his master; but one who commits sin is acting by his own judgement; therefore, he is not a slave." (s. 1204). St. Thomas replies that "a thing is whatever is appropriate to it according to its nature, it acts of itself", and for something exterior this is "a kind of slavery." (s. 1204). Human nature, though, is rational, and "when one acts according to reason, one is acting by his own proper motion and is acting of oneself" and this "is a characteristic of freedom." (s. 1204). To sin, then, is to act outside reason, and when "one is moved by another, [one is] held back by the limitations imposed by that other." (s. 1204). Quoting St. Paul, St. Thomas says whoever commits sin is a slave to sin (s. 1204). St. Thomas then comes back to the distinction between spiritual slavery and physical slavery:

...the more freely one does the perverse thing he wills, and the less difficulty he has in doing them, the more he is subjected to the slavery of sin, as Gregory says. This kind of slavery [i.e., spiritual slavery] is the worst, because it cannot be escaped from [unlike physical slavery s.1204]: for wherever a person goes, he carries his sin with him, even though its act and pleasure may pass... (s. 1204).

In this way, St. Thomas asks: What of liberation (liberatio) from sin? He says that freedom from this bondage is, as Isaiah 14:3 says, only possible with God's help. More specifically, "the hope of liberation is held out by the one who is free of sin, and this is the Son." (s. 1204). He then distinguishes threefold: the slave from the free person, the status of the Son distinguished from the

slave and that the Son can set us free (s. 1205). In the Cat. Aur. Luke, Theophylactus says: "...perfect freedom of body and soul. For as the first coming of our Lord was for the restoration of our souls, so will the second be manifested to the restoration of our bodies." (c. 15, l. 3). As St. Thomas writes elsewhere:

A double difference should be noted between the law of fear and the law of love: First, the law of fear makes slaves of its observers, whereas the law of love makes them free. For one who acts just out of fear acts as a slave, whereas one who acts out of love acts as a son. Thus the Apostle says: where there is the Spirit of the Lord, there is freedom (2 Cor 3:17), because such people are acting out of love like sons. The second difference is that the observers of the law of fear did not observe the law voluntarily, but the law of love is observed voluntarily. Another difference is that the first law is heavy, the second is light: for my yoke is easy and my burden light (Matt 11:30); and the Apostle says: you did not receive the spirit of servitude again in fear, but you received the spirit of adoption of sons (Rom 8:15)." Op. III, Collationes in Decem Praeceptis, Prologue.

The law of love is Christ's, and it "makes us free" and is "observed voluntarily." A case in point is the story of The Return of the Prodigal Son Jesus tells in Lu. 15:11-32. The Prodigal Son does not find freedom in "set[ting] off for a distant country" and "squandering his wealth in wild living" (being a slave to sin, that is), but in receiving the Father's unconditional love (Lu. 15:13, 22-31). The status of a slave, says St. Thomas, is transient and unstable, and these spiritual slaves will be separated from the faithful in virtue of their spiritual slavery (s. 1206). Contrarily, the status of the Son "is everlasting and stable", "immune from sin" and we participate enjoyment in His house "through him." (s. 1207). Jesus is, then, the "sacrifice for sin" who frees us "from the devil." (s. 1208). It should be noted that although St. Thomas distinguishes freedom in Christ against the slavery of sin, he does say that freedom can be the "best form of slavery": "...this is true freedom and the best form of slavery, because by justice man is inclined to what befits him and is turned from what befits concupiscence which is distinctively bestial." (CR, c. 6, l. 4). However, I read St. Thomas as not saying that it is a literal form of slavery, but more alike Christ-like servitude e.g., as Jesus, perfectly free, subjects Himself to washing His disciple's feet (Jn. 13: 1-17).²¹ Recall that elsewhere

survey of misunderstandings) of the subject is found in Paul Copan's *Is God a Moral Monster?* (Michigan: Baker Books, 2011). Consider two examples. First, the Greek

²¹ The Biblical references to 'slavery' are largely misunderstood from socio-cultural bias and lack of scholarly treatment. An excellent, fair treatment (and

in the Gospels Jesus calls His disciples to be His friends (Jn. 15:15). Again, this in distinction to the “bondage” St. Paul talks about 1st Cor 7:15. In fact, there is a peculiar formulation St. Thomas gives to express this: “...servitude and liberty in the Lord are conducive to salvation.” (CR, s. 348). Nonetheless, “the freedom granted by Christ is a freedom of the spirit, by which we are set free of sin and death.” (CR, s. 1017). It is not through our own human activity that we are compelled towards this kind of freedom:

...where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty is explained thus: the free man is one who exists for himself, but the servant exists for the sake of the master. Therefore, whoever acts of himself acts freely, but one who is moved by another does not act freely. Therefore, one who avoids evils, not because they are evil, but because of God’s commandment, is not free. But one who avoids evils because they are evils is free. But this is done by the Holy Spirit who perfects man inwardly with a good habit, so that from love he avoids evil, as if the divine law had commanded.

Consequently, he is called free, not as though he is not subject to the divine law, but because he is inclined by a good habit to do what the divine law ordains.” (CCor, s. 112, my italicization).

St. Thomas makes here a clear statement that virtuous character acquisition makes one more free, and one is not wholly responsible for such infused virtue (the infusion is done by God Himself). As he says, such freedom is exclusively from Jesus: “...freedom comes through Christ alone.” (CCol, s. 131). St. Thomas then makes various distinctions between kinds of freedom. He distinguishes between two categories of freedom (and though the categorization is nameless, it clearly juxtaposes two contrary types of freedom). On the one side, “perverted freedom” (*perversa*). On the other, “true and spiritual freedom” (*vera et spiritualis, libertas gratiae*) “the

freedom of grace, consist[ing] in the absence of sin”). However, even this freedom is imperfect because the flesh lusts against the spirit (s. 1209, Gal. 5:17).

In this section, I have laid out the distinction between free will (*liberum arbitrium*) and freedom (*libertas*) in St. Thomas. I showed that while St. Thomas affirms free will, freedom arises from knowing the truth and being free from falsity, corruption, death and sin. However, being liberated from them is only possible through someone not subjected to falsity, corruption, death and sin. For St. Thomas, Jesus Himself, being God, is not subjected to them. Consequently, spiritual freedom arises from knowing Jesus. I argued that a case in point to illustrate St. Thomas on freedom is the story of The Return of the Prodigal Son (Lu. 15:11-32). This illustrated how freedom was grounded in God’s (the father in the story) unconditional love (Lu. 15:13, 22-31). I now turn to the task of explaining the nature of perfect freedom in both St. Thomas and The Good Place.

4. Perfect Freedom in The Good Place and St. Thomas

Understanding ‘perfect freedom’ in in *The Good Place* is difficult for a few reasons.²² First, what kind of freedom – obtained by leaving the real Good Place – were the main characters trying to achieve? While they positively identified genuine or authentic freedom not with temporal experiences/goods, it was not immediately clear what kind of freedom they desired and for what end they desired it. To be clear, the question I ask is which kind of freedom were they represented as trying to achieve (being a philosophical show, their aim for a specific kind of freedom is a visual representation of a philosophical idea). Put more succinctly: freedom to enjoy what? Here there are related questions. First, why did they want to be freed from The Good Place in which they could possess, remember and consistently re-call their perfect moment of satiation?²³

δοῦλος (*doulos*) that appears in the New Testament approximately 141 times is translatable as either ‘slave’ or ‘servant’ which in English (and for readers of English) is revealing: our moral intuitions suggest that there is something wrong with slavery, but nothing wrong with various kinds of servitude. Second, as Joseph Chenard has pointed out to me, the Hebrew Old Testament word עֶבֶד (*‘ebed*) means not only “slave”, but also “servant, subject.” These examples reveal the need for conceptually, historically and theologically disambiguating slavery (with its negative connotations) from servitude – a task not often performed.

²² One of which is the conflation of free will and freedom in the literature. See Jake Jackson’s “Marginal Comforts Keep Us in Hell” in *The Good Place and Philosophy*, 134, who simply limits his notion of freedom to Sartre’s e.g., freedom is something we are condemned to, it is something we try to escape and we are limited by it. As this paper illustrates, (i) Sartre’s (Jackson’s) use of freedom is one, narrow sense of freedom that is not exhaustive of how it appears in *The Good Place* and (ii) is an (evaluatively) inferior form of freedom compared to freedom in spiritual/metaphysical terms.

²³ I use ‘satiation’ with caution here. I use ‘satiation’ in non-hedonic terms i.e., the Latin *satis*, that is, in the sense of the ultimate fulfilment of the human person – not in the (hedonic) maximization of pleasure. While I do not intend

Why did they want to annihilate themselves back into the fabric of the universe (in Jason's terms) rather than live with such a moment? Janet said to Jason, before he leaves The Good Place, that because she knew everything, her memories were like re-living them.²⁴ Why not aim to achieve that instead? As I attempt to understand their desire to leave and be freed of The Good Place, the perfect moment of satiation was not good enough for them or constitutive of a reason to stay in The Good Place: they desired to be freedom from The Good Place either because they were content with their perfect moment of satiation such that they were not merely ready to die, but in fact desiring to die (a bewildering claim), or that they left to achieve a more perfect freedom in which they were able to enjoy that moment of satiation.²⁵

While I take the former claim as at best mysterious and at worst incoherent, the latter is also worrisome for two reasons. First, if the latter interpretation is correct, it begs the question (or at least raises the question) of what kind of perfect freedom – and consequent peace, tranquility and quietude – they were aiming to possess. Second, The Good Place's use (through Chidi) of the Buddhist metaphor is inconsistent on the latter interpretation. Central to Buddhist philosophy and teaching is the doctrine of anatta (Pali)/anatman (Sanskrit) or 'non-self', the belief that there is no permanent, unchanging soul, self or substance. If that is true, there arises problems of coherence in The Good Place (and I will focus on problems for the finale specifically). First, who is it that possesses (or is supposed to possess) the inner peace, tranquility and quietude? If individuals are manifestations of the fabric of the universe or without essential individuality, it is not clear that there is anyone who experiences them.²⁶ There are two problems. First, it is difficult to make sense out of these notions e.g.,

to hand-waive hedonism and its defenders, I also want to clearly disambiguate perfect satisfaction of the human person e.g., achieving deepest longings and desires, from the maximization of pleasure e.g., in Robert Nozick's Experience Machine.

²⁴ Ibid., "Whenever You're Ready", 4, 13.

²⁵ Of course this is not atypical in ordinary, idiomatic English e.g., "I'm so happy I could die!". However, in English the idea is intrinsically metaphorical: the idea is that one would rather die than live if it meant being able to possess such superlative happiness.

²⁶ Dane Sawyer, in his "The Buddhist Notion of No-Self", 202-9, replies to this point precisely. He argues that while it is true that Buddhists reject the *self*, they do not reject the existence of *persons*. In fact, Buddhists believe that there are five aggregates that explain our experience and constitution: form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness. There are three problems. First, the distinction between the self and persons is a distinction without a difference as Sawyer uses them. Selves and

peace, without individual owners (even if one believes that it happens e.g., a non-self can be at peace, it is still the how that remains difficult e.g., how it is that a non-self is at peace). Second, if there is no one who experiences them, it is hard to make sense out of the desirability of peace, tranquility and quietude because there is no one to whom they can be desirable (but again, on Buddhist philosophy, the aim is to leave desire altogether). This is an evaluative objection: if there is no one to experience peace, tranquility and quietude, why are these desirable or choice-worthy? Who is there, anyway, to do the evaluation? While *The Good Place* rightly identifies the source of the badness of the fake Good Place in its pure hedonism (to which St. Thomas concurs) and consequent failure to achieve deeper longings of the human heart e.g., freedom, St. Thomas gives a plausible answer of what kind of freedom human beings ultimately desire.²⁷

I argue that the freedom they desired was a rudimentary articulation of the freedom that St. Thomas identifies as the freedom found in heaven, and that it explains the root deficiency of the real Good Place. Here is how I will proceed. First, I will first explicate the desires of Eleanor, Chidi and Jason more precisely. Second, I will argue that the freedom they desired (as I understand it) is a rudimentary articulation of what St. Thomas identifies as heaven.

First, their desires were rudimentary in the sense that they were under-articulated. Consider the difficulties of Eleanor, Chidi and Jason in describing their interior peace, tranquility and quietude. They know that that was their experience, but they lack any further words to describe it. The presumption of the finale is that they have the same feeling described in different terms, and associate it with Chidi's Buddhist wave metaphor. Second, they have a

persons are always unified wholes, not conglomerate aggregates i.e., selves and persons do not come in parts: they come in wholes; however, on Buddhism's no-self, it is unclear how conglomerate aggregates add up to a whole person (and why they *should* add up to a person). Second, the Buddhist-aggregate view implies an implausible view of consciousness in which consciousness does not require a subject. If there is consciousness without a subject, it is difficult to disambiguate consciousness from mere awareness, a significant distinction e.g., my being conscious of a watch on my desk (subject aware of object) is different than the awareness of a smoke detector (no-subject being aware of incoming smoke). It is not clear how the latter could be identified as consciousness. Third, Sawyer himself cannot consistently accept the position itself e.g., he talks about the significance of Eleanor's *self*-narrative, which is metaphysically impossible on Buddhism (208).

²⁷ *STh*, I-II, q. 2, a.6, sed. *SLE.*, 293.

desire to experience freedom. They associate their dissatisfaction with the real Good Place with its inability to satisfy their souls: Jason realizes that GO-Karting with monkeys (and other animals) gets boring really quickly. They experience a desire to be freed from experiences and goods which do not satisfy their souls (one of the many problems with pure hedonism or pleasure maximization). While this is not true for everyone in the show e.g., Tahani who does not leave and Michael who goes to Earth, the finale leaves their eventual futures an open question. Third, they desire not merely freedom, but perfect freedom. I argue this for two reasons. First, in being freed from the real Good Place, they believed that they were being set free from everything which, in being imperfect, would be an impediment to their peace, tranquility and quietude. It is plausible that the freedom they achieved e.g., in leaving The Good Place, would be perfect. Second, they ascribe maximal value to their interior peace, tranquility and quietude. It not merely rationalizes their desire to leave The Good Place with its unlimited and unsatisfying hedonism, and meaningful aspects of their existences e.g., their friends, experiences, memories, et cetera. To summarize, their desires were not merely for unsatisfying experiences and goods, nor for the valuable parts of lives like their friends, experiences and memories; instead, it was something more they desired, and they used the language of peace, tranquility and quietude. It is here that I argue that St. Thomas associates their desire with the freedom found in heaven, and I will show this by explicating St. Thomas' notion of perfect freedom.

St. Thomas writes that the "freedom of glory" (*gloria*), that is "perfect and full freedom" is what the faithful will have "in [their] homeland", namely, heaven (s. 1209).²⁸ This will consist in "nothing there to incline [them] to evil, nothing to oppress [them]" and "there will be freedom from sin and punishment." (s. 1209).²⁹ St. Thomas argues that this will be perfect freedom because it will be a perfect liberation by Christ, the Truth Himself (cf. "the hope of

liberation is held out by the one who is free of sin, and this is the Son." (s. 1204)). This perfect freedom is positively identified with the *visio beatifica* (the Beatific Vision, contemplation of the Divine Essence) of the faithful (s. 1209). As Simon Francis Gaine, O.P. comments:

...if one looks deeper into human nature, to the natural human desire for the good and happiness, one can see that human beings can never will against their happiness. So once they have become united in knowledge and love to the supreme good and are perfectly happy, they can never will against God who is now clearly seen to be the supreme good. So there is continuity in nature from earth to heaven: nature perfected and not destroyed. It is in the perfection of the natural human desire by the gift of the vision of God, that human peccability passes into graced impeccability, the defective freedom of earth into the gift of the perfect freedom of heaven...the blessed in heaven can no longer sin: their freedom is too perfect for that. It is perfect because they are for ever united to their ultimate end, and so their free choices will for ever be more powerful, because, like God's, their free acts will flow from the ultimate end now possessed and from the order of which they never depart, to spread abroad the goodness and glory of God for all eternity.³⁰

It is here that I want to comment on the desire for perfect freedom in Eleanor, Chidi and Jason. First, their whole lives in the afterlife – first the fake Good Place and then the real Good Place – are spent trying to improve their moral characters; however, none of their fulfillment ultimately resides in the formation of, and acquisition of, their moral characters and their efforts in helping others. For example, while Eleanor had unfinished business to do before leaving The Good Place i.e., pleading for Michael's chance to be human, it was not what she identified as her peace, tranquility and quietude – it was only a means to, or necessary condition for, it. Second, once the characters

²⁸ St. Thomas' inclusion of glory (*gloria*) to his account of freedom points out that, despite one's level of glorification in the *visio beatifica* (re: *STh* I, q. 12, a.6; *1 Cor.* 15:41-42), one has come to possess what the will has longed for through all of its striving.

²⁹ However, the Jews with whom Jesus speaks seem to argue that they can free themselves by means of ceremonies and sacrifices of the law (s. 1210). However, St. Thomas, quoting Chrysostom, argues that "the ceremonies are not eternal; therefore, they cannot confer a freedom which will continue forever." (s. 1210). St. Thomas elsewhere quotes Chrysostom saying of the Sheep and Shepard parable *Jn.* 10:6-10 that it is about "the security and freedom of those who cling to Christ." (*CGJ*, s. 1390).

³⁰ Gaine, Simon Francis, O.P. *Will There be Freedom in Heaven?: Freedom, Impeccability and Beatitude*. New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2003), 136. Carlo Leget is more explicit about the specific role of the 'will' in the *visio beatifica*: "The role of the will in eternal life is twofold: prevenient and subsequent with regard to the activity of the intellect. Since human agency is directed by the will, the will is the faculty by which the other agencies are set in motion. Thus the will plays an important role with regard to the question as to whether the intellect is directed at God." *Living with God: Thomas Aquinas on The Relation Between Life on Earth and 'Life' After Death*. (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 221.

were connected to their ultimate end (described under different terms) they associated this with perfect freedom. For St. Thomas, however, the ultimate end of human beings is God Himself, and it is in His eternal rest that human beings find their tranquil, peaceful rest (cf. Matt. 11:28-30). For St. Thomas, Eleanor, Chidi and Jason's description of their peace, quietude and tranquility, is simply a foretaste of heaven for four reasons.³¹ First, as already explained, the perfect freedom of heaven – in which there is enjoyment of peace, tranquility and quietude – is being united with the end of all human longing: God Himself, St. Thomas says. Second, St. Thomas would argue that they desire to be free without losing their free will, and that is the freedom of heaven. Third, contra Chidi's Buddhist metaphor, St. Thomas argues that perfect freedom requires the self, and the characters themselves would plausibly prefer the eternal enjoyment of perfect freedom over ending their existences (although this is an unexplored possibility in *The Good Place*).³² Fourth, *The Good Place*'s representation of Eleanor, Chidi and Jason's desire to leave is largely motivated by a specific desire to leave The Good Place. St. Thomas understands this as the freedom from the inclination to sin, oppression and punishment. Much of the life of human beings – in The Good Place and St. Thomas – is spent in doing good; however, as the colloquial saying goes, it is hard to be good. St. Thomas gives a reason why, and it is the Doctrine of Original Sin. After the Fall of Human Beings (Gen. 3), human beings were inflicted with a "habit" (habitus) that is

...the disposition of a complex nature, whereby that nature is well or ill disposed to something, chiefly when such a disposition has become like a second nature, as in the case of sickness or health. In this sense original sin is a habit. For it is an inordinate disposition, arising from the destruction of the harmony which was essential to original justice, even as bodily sickness is an inordinate disposition of the body, by reason of the destruction of that equilibrium which is essential to health. Hence it is that original sin is called the "languor of nature" [Cf. Aug., In Ps. 118, serm. iii]. (STh, I-II, a.1, q. 82, resp).

He calls it further "an inordinate disposition of nature", "a corrupt habit" which is "inborn." (STh, I-II, a.1, q. 82, sed. 2,3,). While original sin specifically destroys "the gift of original justice", sin generally "diminishes the good of nature" (STh, I-II, a.1, q. 85, sed), in the specific sense of destroying the "inclination to virtue." (STh, I-II, q. 85, a. 1,

sed). Such a destruction of "the gift of original justice" had (and has) extensive impact on the human person:

As a result of original justice, the reason had perfect hold over the lower parts of the soul, while reason itself was perfected by God, and was subject to Him. Now this same original justice was forfeited through the sin of our first parent, as already stated (I-II:81:2; so that all the powers of the soul are left, as it were, destitute of their proper order, whereby they are naturally directed to virtue; which destitution is called a wounding of nature. Again, there are four of the soul's powers that can be subject of virtue, as stated above (I-II:61:2), viz. the reason, where prudence resides, the will, where justice is, the irascible, the subject of fortitude, and the concupiscible, the subject of temperance. Therefore in so far as the reason is deprived of its order to the true, there is the wound of ignorance; in so far as the will is deprived of its order of good, there is the wound of malice; in so far as the irascible is deprived of its order to the arduous, there is the wound of weakness; and in so far as the concupiscible is deprived of its order to the delectable, moderated by reason, there is the wound of concupiscence. Accordingly these are the four wounds inflicted on the whole of human nature as a result of our first parent's sin. But since the inclination to the good of virtue is diminished in each individual on account of actual sin, as was explained above (I-II:1:2), these four wounds are also the result of other sins, in so far as, through sin, the reason is obscured, especially in practical matters, the will hardened to evil, good actions become more difficult and concupiscence more impetuous. (STh, I-II, q. 85, a. 3, sed).

The consequences are a "wounding of nature", a lack of disposition to virtue and a consequent ignorance, malice, weakness, concupiscence, obscuring of reason, a hardened will towards evil and doing good is more difficult and evil harder to avoid. Thus "the sin of our first parent is the cause of death and all such like defects in human nature" (STh, I-II, q. 85, a.5, sed). In the CGJ, c. 8, it should be re-called, there are three things to be made free from: "the error of falsity", "the slavery to sin" and "from corruption." (s. 1199; Rom 8:21). What is needed, then, is not merely being removed from these features of human misery, but of a genuine "a being made free." (s. 1199), that is, a transformation away from all knowledge of, and concupiscence towards, sin. Hence, in the freedom of glory we will be free from sin, corruption and the error of falsity, as well as be renewed in our freedom. What we get from

³¹ That such experiences are foretastes of heaven is not foreign to the Christian tradition. See, for example, C.S.Lewis' "The Weight of Glory" (1941) in *Transposition and other Addresses*. (London, England: Geoffrey Press, 1949).

³² See Tobias Hoffman and Cyrille Michon's "Aquinas on Free Will and Intellectual Determinism." *Philosophers' Imprint*. 17.10 (May 2017): 1-36.

the CGJ, c.8 is the emphasis firstly on (i) the extent of human bondage to sin through original sin and our choice to sin (and the ramifications therefrom) as well as (ii) the need to be made free (enjoyed not fully in this life), that is, of the recognition that the stain of sin and death cannot be eradicated by one's efforts alone (CCor, s. 112, CGJ, c. 8, s. 1204, 1205). It is the truth Himself which sets one free – and the perfectly free is to be enjoyed in the visio beatifica where the afflictions of human beings – towards falsity, corruption and sin – no longer exists. It is by appreciating the extent of sin, corruption and falsity that one can understand its priority in the freedom of glory.³³

Consider the role that this notion of a 'wounded nature' plays in *The Good Place*. As a (thematic) case in point, consider Eleanor's moral development. As we learn throughout the show, Eleanor has deep-seated adolescent psychological harm done to her that plays out throughout her life (and afterlife). Her moral dispositions are oriented towards self-preservation, disassociation from others and hence individualism. With a wounded nature, she finds it hard to shake her old, bad habits that prevent her from authentic relationships e.g., her first (anxious) question to Chidi concerns his fidelity. According to St. Thomas, perfect freedom means not being bound by the consequences of the Fall, and Eleanor, Chidi and Jason plausibly agree (if only tacitly): perfect freedom means freedom from the consequences of the Fall: falsity e.g., Eleanor's false beliefs about her dignity, sin e.g., Tahani's self-obsessed behaviors, and corruption e.g., being in The Bad Place.

5. Objections

There are many objections which might be lodged against the thesis of this paper. I will consider three objections and reply to them individually. First, it might be questioned whether my paper suffers from an unwarranted Eurocentrism by presupposing that the protagonists' desires are for God conceived in the Western theological tradition, and not (more plausibly) for the ideals of the explicitly Eastern spirituality advocated in the show³⁴. Consider that Michael McGowan associates the protagonists' desires with the values of Eastern spirituality:

³³ Of course, this paper does not concern itself with a defense of St. Thomas' concept of original sin; however, let me say this by way of intuitive defense: much of the contemporary world's social justice advocates implicitly affirms some variant of the Doctrine of Original Sin, or is at least practically (if not theoretically) motivated to accept it. Consider much the (bare-bone) philosophical premise on which much modern social justice agendas are predicated: systematic oppression, institutional rejection of fundamental human rights, harmful and biased exclusion of others, subjugation and suppression, et

Hinduism teaches that release from the process of life, death and rebirth (called moksha) is the aim of the characters, and what they desire is infinite being, bliss and knowledge. There are two problems. First, the conglomeration of Buddhist philosophical anthropology (or lack thereof!) and Hindu spirituality does not work. There is no self on Buddhism, and hence there is no one to achieve the aims of Hinduism: recognition of one's inner infinite, achieving infinite being, bliss and knowledge. Further, on Buddhism the aim of life is leaving desire, and hence desire cannot be the aim of the characters (on the show's philosophy); however, Hinduism does posit certain kinds of desires as choice-worthy e.g., desire for moksha. Second, uniting with the "Infinite" (as Hinduism understands it), suffers from vagueness and hence unclarity about the Infinite's efficacy in bringing about the ultimate desires of the human heart. For St. Thomas, God possesses superlative attributes which make Him a maximally great being, and in His omnipotence He is able to bring about the deepest longings of the human heart.

A second objection to the thesis is that my thesis overlooks subtle details of *The Good Place* which are inconsistent with my thesis. For example, in the finale Hypatia of Alexandria (370-415CE) tells Chidi and Eleanor that "when perfection goes on forever, you become this glassy-eyed mush person." My thesis implies that an eternal union with God in the visio beatifica is an eternal perfection of the human person. In fact, St. Thomas' thesis about the freedom enjoyed in heaven is precisely freedom as a human perfection that lasts forever. If Hypatia is right, what St. Thomas describes as perfect freedom as a human perfection will not be perfect, it will be defective and undesirable. I have two replies. First, there is equivocation of 'perfection' in the objection. When Hypatia uses the term 'perfection', she refers to the perfection in *The Good Place*; however, as I have already explained, *The Good Place* aims at pleasure maximization which leads to unhappiness and dissatisfaction, and hence is not perfect. Hypatia's point in context is that an eternity in *The Good Place* in its 'perfection' (a clear misnomer) will turn one into a glassy-eyed mush-person. Second, St. Thomas' point about perfect freedom (especially as Gaine explained it) is that

cetera. St. Thomas' argument is that while we are ontologically good in being *creatura* (a creature created by God), we nevertheless suffer from our wounded, sinful natures and hence live in a world permeated with wrongdoing (which explains the nature of wrongdoing at the most fundamental explanatory level). In this sense, St. Thomas' position here is by no means foreign, and by no means unmotivated philosophically – even if implying a theological conclusion.

³⁴ McGowan, "The Good Place and Religious Tradition", *The Good Place and Philosophy*, 199.

there is nothing desired once the will is united with its ultimate end: in the same way that God is His own infinite joy, so the human person, in being united with God forever (their fullest perfection), comes to enjoy His infinite joy forever.

Third, there is a worry that my thesis is incoherent. My claim is that the desire for freedom from The Good Place expressed by Eleanor, Chidi and Jason map onto how St. Thomas describes the freedom of heaven. However, I have made a misstep in the argument in associating their desire to leave The Good Place with a desire for perfect freedom, quietude, tranquility and peace: the point of the finale is that they do not desire anything any longer (and here we have the strong Buddhist interpretation of the end of The Good Place). They desire no longer to be with their loved ones, experiences, memories and so forth. They are content to be the wave that returns back into the ocean, desiring nothing. I have two replies. First, the difficulty in understanding this interpretation of the finale is two-fold. First, the characters are not clearly aiming to leave their desires. They do not live as ascetics in The Good Place once they realize that The Good Place's pleasures are unsatisfying; instead, they desire freedom from The Good Place, and a desire to continue their peace, tranquility and quietude in their souls. Second, their desires are valenced, that is, they are ranked by their value. While Buddhism rejects desire, the characters make value-judgements about desires instead of abandoning them altogether e.g., leaving The Good Place is better than staying there; however, this requires that the strong Buddhist interpretation of the finale is false (since they clearly possess desires and do not aim to leave them). Second, it is not clear that the producers of the show were consistent in their rendition of the finale for two reasons. First, take the Buddhist wave metaphor again. On Hinduism, the wave represents the soul, the inner atman; however, on Buddhism, the wave is a manifestation of the universe, not an ensouled human person. The Buddhist interpretation of the end of *The Good Place* is at best one interpretation, which lacks theoretical motivation for the various reasons I have outlined. Second, from the earliest seasons e.g., "Existential Crisis" (2, 5), the thesis is that death is what makes life meaningful, not the afterlife (consistent with Buddhism). However, by the finale, it is difficult to make sense out of this earlier claim. The characters recognize that while life is meaningful even though we die, it is not ultimately meaningful if there is no acquisition of perfect freedom in which one is able to enjoy peace, tranquility and quietude in one's soul. However, St. Thomas' point would be that the desires that the protagonists had were not achievable on Hinduism (plausibly) and Buddhism (certainly): only God can satisfy the longing for perfect freedom.

6. Conclusion

By Season 4 of *The Good Place* (the fourth and final season), the main characters of the show – Eleanor, Chidi, Jason and Tahani – eventually reach the real Good Place (not the fake "Good Place" they had been tortured in by the human-formed, architect demon Michael in Season 1). However, when they reach the real Good Place after much struggle with ethical dilemmas, recognition of their moral flaws and moral development, they find themselves wanting to leave: they were unsatisfied with what The Good Place had to offer and wanted to be freed from it. This paper was concerned with the following questions: What accounts for their desire to be freed from The Good Place? What kind of freedom were they trying to achieve, and how did The Good Place represent it? Reflecting on these (and similar) questions, I argued that St. Thomas (who made it into The Good Place!) gives an ingenious and plausible answer: it was not merely that The Good Place was characterized by pure hedonism (a core deficit of The Good Place, identified by its characters and creators), but more specifically that they had a positive desire for a freedom from temporal goods/experiences which do not satisfy the longings of the human heart and a freedom for the enjoyment of perfect freedom. While *The Good Place* ends in much perplexity, I argued that the freedom they desired was a rudimentary articulation of the perfect freedom that St. Thomas identifies in heaven. Here is how I made sense of St. Thomas' answer. Unlike contemporary philosophers of free will, and akin to the Medieval philosophical tradition, St. Thomas distinguishes free will (*liberum arbitrium*) from freedom (*libertas*), and then freedom from perfect freedom (*libertas gloriae*). St. Thomas most explicitly discusses perfect freedom in the Commentary on the Gospel of John, c.8. St. Thomas writes that the "freedom of glory" (*libertas gloriae*) is what the faithful will have "in [their] homeland" (s. 1209), namely, heaven. (And recall that for St. Thomas and the Catholic philosophical (and theological) tradition, this is identified as union with God in the "beatific vision", *visio beatifica*). His characterization of perfect freedom, though, is revealing and helpful in understanding the finale of *The Good Place*: perfect freedom in heaven – possessed in the *visio beatifica* – requires "nothing there to incline [human beings] to evil, nothing to oppress [them]" and "there will be freedom from sin and punishment." (s. 1209). My argument was that the problem with The Good Place is that it is not heaven, and hence does not have the freedom enjoyed in heaven: it confers no satisfaction of one's deepest longings/desires, and no genuine freedom (as St. Thomas understands it). Even though St. Thomas got into The Good Place, he would have left it like Eleanor, Chidi and Jason: except not for the freedom from existence, but for the perfect freedom found in heaven. However, even in the

end there is still a perplexing rift between free will and freedom, and why the characters – and human beings generally – desire not merely happiness, but superlative happiness in which there is perfect freedom, quietude, peace and tranquility. The Good Place should be commended for inviting its viewers to philosophically reflect on such a desire.³⁵

Abbreviation of Ancient/Medieval/Biblical Sources

Ancient/Medieval

St. Anselm

DLA. De Libertate Arbitrii.

St. Augustine.

DGL. De Gratia et Libero Arbitrio.

St. Thomas Aquinas

Cat. Aur. Luke. Catena Aurea in Lucam.

CGJ. Super Evangelium S. Ioannes.

CGM. Super Evangelium S. Matthei.

CCol. Super ad Colessenses.

CCor. Super ad Corinthios.

CT. Compendium Theologiae.

De Mal. De Malo.

De Pot. De Potentia.

De Ver. De Veritate.

Op. Opuscula.

SGC. Summa Contra Gentiles.

SLE. Sententia Libri Ethicorum.

SR. Super ad Romanos.

STh. Summa Theologiae.

Biblical

Gal. Galatians.

Gen. Genesis.

Hab. Habilitations.

Jn. The Gospel of John.

Lu. The Gospel of Luke.

Macc. Maccabees.

Matt. The Gospel of Matthew.

Ps. Psalms.

Rom. Romans

Sam. Samuel.

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³⁵ In closing, I would like to note that while the purpose of this paper was not to explain the desire for superlative happiness and perfect freedom, those interested should reflect on Josef Pieper's explication of the difficulty: "In desiring happiness, then, we are only obeying a gravitational impulse whose axis is entirely within our own hearts. But we have no power over it – because we ourselves are this gravitational impulse. When we desire to be happy, something blind and obscure takes place within the mind, which nevertheless does not cease to be a light and seeing eye. Something happens "behind" which we cannot penetrate, whose reason we do not see, and for which we can name no reason. Why do you want to be happy? We do not ask – because no one knows the answer." *Happiness and Contemplation*. Trans. Richard and Clara Winston. New York, NY: Pantheon, 1958), 24.

[Indem wir also Glückseligkeit wollen, wirkt in uns eine Schwerkraft, die ganz und gar in unserem eigenen Herzen ihren Ort hat. Aber wir haben keine Gewalt über sie – weil wir selber diese Schwerkraft sind. Indem wir glücklich sein wollen, geschieht etwas Dunkles und Blindes inmitten des Geistes, der dennoch nicht aufhört, Licht und sehendes Auge zu sein. Es geschieht etwas, »hinter« das wir nicht zu dringen vermögen, dessen Grund wir nicht sehen und für das wir den Grund nicht nennen können. Warum willst du glücklich sein? So fragt man nicht – weil niemand die Antwort weiß]. German text from "*Gluck und Kontemplation*" (in Volume II) of *Werke in acht Bänden, mit zwei Ergänzungsbänden*. Assembled by B. Wald. (Hamburg: 1995-2008), 161.

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