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MIRIAM KOBIERSKI

 0000-0003-2187-8608

Uniwersytet Łódzki

mirka045@gmail.com

CAN YOU BECOME A PERFECT HUMAN BEING?

[Review of the book *How to Be Perfect: The Correct Answer to Every Moral Question* written by Michael Schur, Simon & Schuster, 2022.]

The book titled “How to Be Perfect” written by Michael Schur seeks to answer ethical questions about the world surrounding us and aims to present philosophy in a coherent and easy to understand way with a dose of humor. Ever dreamt of finally understanding Kant’s categorical imperatives? The search is over as the creator of the hit TV series “The Good Place” takes the reader on an intriguing journey through the philosophical concepts such as utilitarianism, existentialism, ubuntu,

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and teaches us if not how to be a perfect human being, then at least a better one.

This is Michael Schur's debut book, as the author is a television writer and producer — he originally worked on TV shows such as *The Office*, *Master of None*, and *The Comeback*. He has also co-created *Parks and Recreation*, *Brooklyn 99*, and *Rutherford Falls*. However, he is best known as the creator of “*The Good Place*”, and he uses his experience as a television writer and the research conducted for the philosophical TV show in order to write this book.

As advertised by the author, this book serves as a “foolproof guide to making the correct moral decision in every situation you ever encounter anywhere on Earth, forever” (Schur 2022). Containing almost 300 pages, the book is packed to the brim with philosophical examples and explanations, but it is also written in such a way that resonates with almost any type of reader. Although Michael Schur conducted extensive research before publishing his writing, the reader may feel a sense as if they are learning along with the author, and embarking together on a literary journey of discussing what exactly it means to become a better human being and whether it is even possible to achieve this in our everyday lives.

The book is divided into three key parts and thirteen chapters overall. Each chapter discusses a different philosophical conundrum, including the (in)famous trolley problem, questioning the ethics of lying to your friend in the name of a good cause, if you should run into a burning building in order to save everyone trapped inside, our moral obligation to helping others, and finally if it is morally acceptable to purchase a new iPhone considering that millions of people are starving.

In the first part the reader is introduced to how the three main schools of Western moral philosophy think we can become good people.

Starting off with the question whether you should punch your friend in the face for no good reason, the obvious answer is “no”. But why exactly? It is not enough to simply say that it is a bad thing to do — the concept of “good and bad” has a myriad of various descriptions provided by philosophers. Aristotle focuses on what makes a person good rather than letting their actions determine their goodness. In his view, in order to achieve happiness and become a flourishing human being, you must obtain the perfect balance of virtues. One fails to reach this balance by punching a friend in the face for no reason, hence making it a bad action. Another enigma to ponder is the trolley problem. It asks the question whether we should let the runaway trolley we are driving kill five people stuck on the tracks or pull a lever which will deliberately kill one different person. A consequentialist would argue for the maximum happiness principle, which would choose the five people over the single person. Kant’s categorical imperative, the maxim saying that we ought to spare the lives of innocent people, does not allow us to sacrifice one person even if it is to save five others. Kant believed that people should determine rules for moral behaviour based on pure reasoning and then act accordingly to these set rules — no special circumstances would allow for breaking these rules. This means that by following formalised rules, a person behaves in a morally accepted way, but if they fail to do so then they also fail to be a moral person. It may seem right to have such a rigid system implemented, but it does not always apply to morally ambiguous situations or when trying to determine the lesser evil. This can be seen in the example provided by the author in the case of lying to a murderer. If we accept a no lying maxim, we would have to adhere to this rule at all times. If confronted with a murderer who asks us whether our sibling is hiding upstairs, our natural instinct would be to lie in order to protect our family. However, according to the categorical imperative,

in this situation we are not allowed to lie, even if it would mean saving another person's life; they would not be universal maxims if we can pick and choose when to follow them. A less drastic example is when our friend asks us whether we like their ugly shirt. Most people would choose to lie so as to avoid telling the brutal truth, but a no lying maxim entails that we always tell the truth, even at the expense of hurting another person's feelings.

In the second part of the book the author starts by discussing whether you should run into a burning building in order to save everyone trapped inside. By following the utilitarian views, we should run into the building as maximum happiness would be achieved by saving innocent lives. On the other hand, we do not know if we will be successful in saving those lives. Judith Thompson's "Violinist" experiment shows that we are not morally obligated to save a stranger's life at the cost of our own, which can be applied to the burning building situation as well. In this part Michael Schur introduces a term which he has dubbed "Moral Exhaustion". This concept relates to the fact that trying to do the right thing and making good ethical choices is exhausting. Even if we spend countless hours researching every company and politician we support, examining the products we purchase, there is still no guarantee that we will make the right moral decision despite our best intentions. Although in theory there is an "ideal" amount of time to let the water running or the most responsible decision when it comes to buying an environmentally friendly car, this extensive research takes a lot of time and energy so as to make the right decision. However, one cannot be utterly convinced that it is, in fact, the most ethical choice. Having provided this new term, the author begins to wonder whether it is possible to treat it as a sort of scale — if we make enough right choices are we permitted to make a "bad" choice once in a while. What is meant

by this is the notion of saving the time and effort that it would normally take in order to correctly evaluate and determine the ethical choice, as well as the idea of earning this luxury through previous good actions. To illustrate this, the example of jaywalking is presented and is as follows: on a hot sunny day a person decides to jaywalk to the pharmacy across the road, seeing that the nearest crosswalk is far away. The person justifies their action by thinking that they are just quickly going into the shop and there was no traffic, thus making it less of a crime and an understandable course of action. According to Kant's categorical imperative, it is a morally wrong decision, but many people in moments of moral exhaustion would not register this action as wrong and allow themselves to break this rule.

The last part of this book draws attention to Peter Singer's philosophy. Singer states that there is a certain amount of money one needs for everyday life (this includes food, shelter, medical supplies, and a small amount to be spent on leisure). After calculating how much these costs add up to, and putting aside some money for emergency situations, any amount of money above this threshold should be given to those who need it more. A step further in effective altruism (a movement originated by Peter Singer and William MacAskill) would be donating one's spare kidney. One should do it as the risk of dying from only possessing one kidney is 1 in 4,000. This means that when a person does not donate their kidney, they are valuing their own life to be 4,000 times more important than the life they could have saved. The next conundrum discussed is the issue of whether we should be responsible for what we like, especially if they are morally ambiguous. The provided example concerns the topic of whether a vegetarian may eat a piece of meat if the meat has already been purchased and prepared. By doing so, the vegetarian is not contributing to the demand of the meat industry and the meal would otherwise go to

waste. Eating food that has already been ordered by someone else is not the same as them ordering their own food, thus creating levels of problematic situations. This part also discusses the notion of existentialism and the absurdity of everyday life, as well as explains why Albert Camus thought that “one must imagine Sisyphus happy”. The author tries to present existentialism in a more optimistic way and downplay the overall bleak and despairing tone.

As mentioned earlier, the author created the TV series “The Good Place” which tells the story of what happens to people in the afterlife. The main character, Eleanor, considered to be a “bad” person because of her selfishness and callous actions, arrives in the Good Place (the show’s equivalent to Heaven) by mistake and wants to become worthy of her spot in fear of being transferred to the Bad Place (the show’s equivalent to Hell). In order to accomplish this goal, she requests philosophy lessons from Chidi, an ethics professor so as to learn the basics of moral philosophy and in return how to become a better person. “How to Be Perfect” would be a perfect read for Eleanor as moral conundrums are presented in such an easy and clear manner that even the laziest of students would want to reach for this book. Furthermore, the linguistic features are not an obstacle as the text is written in everyday language, as if you were simply discussing the meaning of life with a friend at a local coffee shop, and any difficult philosophical terms are immediately followed by an explanation and a definition.

The author’s arguments and writing are mainly based on his own understanding of philosophical concepts. He provides relevant passages from the works of renowned philosophers and then presents his own thoughts and interpretations. Doing so allows the reader to have a better understanding of difficult concepts and terms as they are explained in a more approachable manner. Because of the focus on making philosophy

easier to understand, there are not many academic sources in the book, i.e. there are no references to peer-reviewed articles and few books written by experts in the given field are mentioned. Todd May who is a Professor of the Humanities at Clemson University acted as a consultant, verifying and approving these interpretations.

Although the book is aimed at anybody who is interested in philosophy, the language itself may discourage some advanced and demanding readers due to its lack of academic vocabulary and sophisticated grammatical structures. Colloquial phrases appear multiple times and the overall tone is leaning towards humorous and entertaining rather than a serious academic piece of writing. Curse words can be found as well, however the author does state that it is for a good reason — this is quite literally included in the description of Part Three. The author includes personal anecdotes so as to explain certain moral concepts or to provide relevant references. One such example includes the story of the author's dog which was very ill-behaved when on a leash (even prone to aggression) and well-behaved when allowed to roam freely. However, the author's neighborhood had a strict rule that all dogs must be kept on a leash; the author felt as though he should be allowed to break the rules given the special circumstances. These stories may be helpful when trying to understand a new definition or concept, but it does decrease the substantive value of such a statement — it is not confirmed by facts or scientific evidence, which are often crucial. The use of too many colloquial phrases may leave the reader with a sense that the author is mocking the seriousness of certain philosophical concepts rather than portraying them in a proper, academically acceptable way. On the other hand, because of this the book is original as it is intended to make philosophy seem more appealing to mass audiences. The writer

fulfilled his intentions of doing so and portrays the book as an easy and pleasurable read.

This book is an interesting read for anybody who is remotely interested in philosophy, is just starting their journey in this area or as stated by Michael Schur, decides to be a good person (Schur 2022). The author provides definitions for complicated philosophical terms and concepts so there is no need for a dictionary while reading and you will not even realize how much you are learning about the world surrounding us.