



Is it getting harder to be good?

## Description

Episode 37 of the comedy series *The Good Place* delivers a clever parable about ethics. In this unlikely universe people gain entry to Heaven by totting up enough credit points. Good deeds add points to your tally.

But a check on the records shows that no one has made it into Heaven for the past 520 years. Some demons must have hacked the accounting system. But no, the system is working; the point values have changed.

When performed now, the same actions that accrued points hundreds of years ago, now deliver negative points. As explained in the episode, that's due to *unintended consequences*.

Douglass Wynegar of Hawkhurst, England, gave his grandmother roses for her birthday. He picked them himself, walked them over to her, she was happy! boom, points.

But the same action now produces negative points.

Doug Ewing of Scaggsville, Maryland, also gave his grandmother a dozen roses, but he lost four points. Why? Because he ordered roses using a cell phone that was made in a sweatshop. The flowers were grown with toxic pesticides, picked by exploited migrant workers, delivered from thousands of miles away, which created a massive carbon footprint, and his money went to a billionaire racist CEO who sends his female employees pictures of his genitals.

So here's the moral: every day the world gets a little more complicated, and being a good person gets a little harder.



## Unintended consequences

To get something out of this story you don't need to buy into the idea that people always, or ever, do things *intentionally*, or that there's a celestial reward system in play. The point is that the world is now so complicated that you never can know all the consequences of an action. Climate change, species depletion, global inequalities, politics make losers of us all on the ethical scoreboard.

But what if the world was always so interconnected and complicated? It's just more obvious now. Mass media, online information, and frantic messaging from conflicting interest groups, foreground such complications, uncertainties, and unpredictable consequences.

I just read the key text by the sociologist Robert Merton who introduced the idea of unintended consequences. It's what makes prediction so difficult. Think of the rival predictions about the UK withdrawing from the EU, and the rival arguments about how it's motivated.

## Be good, do good

Interestingly, Merton referenced amongst his sources Adam Smith, who promoted the idea that economic forces act on a person in society as "an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention" (23).

Adam Smith was a self-confessed follower of Stoic philosophy, one of the principles of which is that we ought to realise how interconnected our circumstances are to the rest of creation. People should be content with their positive or negative condition in the organic order of things. I've referred to Marcus Aurelius on this topic several times [before](#).

From a practical point of view this parable in *The Good Place* points out that it matters less in the world whether people *are* good than that they *do* good. Actions are of greater consequence than a person's intentions or motivations.

## References

- Aurelius, Marcus. 1994. *The Meditations*. Available online: <http://classics.mit.edu/Antoninus/meditations.2.two.html> (accessed 11 June 2017).
- Merton, Robert K. 1936. The unanticipated consequences of purposive social action. *American Sociological Review*, (1) 6, 894-903.
- Smith, Adam. 1998. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. First published in 1776.

## Notes

- Quotes from Chapter 37 of *The Good Place* (*The Book of Dougs*) are from <https://transcripts.foreverdreaming.org/viewtopic.php?f=713&t=32527>
- To quote a relevant parable, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”
- The question of motivation is another ethical thread in *The Good Place*. People apparently get more points if they do good deeds for the right reasons.
- The tv show features balloons and galloping giraffes. This post contains my own picture of the same.



## Category

1. Society

## Tags

1. Adam Smith
2. Aurelius
3. ethics
4. popular culture

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