

NOTES FROM: *How to Be Perfect*, by Michael Schur

SUMMARY: This book should be taught as an Intro to Philosophy course in universities. If it was, then more students would be *interested* in philosophy and, more importantly, they'd be interested in questions like what it means to be a good person, and how we can get closer to that "perfect" ideal each and every day. Which is what *How to Be Perfect* is about!

Michael Schur is the creator of *The Good Place*, a limited series about a woman who dies unexpectedly and ends up in this paradise-adjacent place, despite not having lived a particularly ethical life. Needless to say, there's a fair amount of philosophy embedded within the hit show, and Schur is also the co-creator of *Parks and Recreation*, which means that *How to Be Perfect* is also *super* funny. Even some of the *footnotes* are funny, it's wild.

One thing I'm glad Schur brings up in the book is the (dubious) idea that it's somehow more "noble" to keep your charitable donations a secret. Obviously it's possible to overdo these overt displays of generosity, but in my opinion, if more people *saw each other* giving and donating and sharing, then more people would *do it*! It would become a *societal norm*, something that's encouraged and *common*, as opposed to keeping it a secret, which just makes it seem like *no one* donates to charity!

I see the counterarguments too, and I agree! Nobody wants to suffer through a ten-minute lecture about how much money someone donated to their favorite charity last year, but I think the world would be a better place if more people gave in public. With humility, and in the spirit of service and helpfulness, but in public nonetheless!

There's a lot more philosophy in the book than what I've covered here so far, and Schur hilariously compares and contrasts multiple different moral and ethical theories developed over millennia. I felt myself getting closer to moral perfection on every page.

Seriously, though, he makes a heavy, complex, ambiguous topic simpler to understand, think about, and navigate, and he does so in a funny, friendly, fast-paced way that leaves you better than you were before you started reading.

"Tens of thousands of years ago, after primitive humans had finished the basic work of evolving and inventing fire and fighting off tigers and stuff, some group of them began to talk about morality. They devoted part of their precious time and energy to thinking about why people do things, and tried to figure out ways for them to do those things better, more justly, and more fairly. Before those people died, the things they said were picked up and discussed by other people, and then by other people, and so on and so on all the way to this very moment – which means that for the last few dozen millennia, people the world over have been having one very long unbroken conversation about ethics. Most of the people who've devoted their lives to that conversation didn't do it for money, or fame, or glory – academia (and more specifically, philosophy) is not the best route, if that's what you're after. They just did it because they believed that morality *matters*.

That the basic questions of how we should behave on earth are worth talking about, in order to discover and describe a better path for all of us. This book is dedicated, with my extreme gratitude, to all those who have engaged in that remarkable and deeply human conversation.”

Maya Angelou: “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”

“Being anything close to an ‘ethical person’ requires daily thought and introspection and hard work; we have to think about how we can be good not, you know, once a month, but *literally all the time*. To make it a little less overwhelming, this book hopes to boil down the whole confusing morass into four simple questions that we can ask ourselves whenever we encounter any ethical dilemma, great or small: What are we doing? Why are we doing it? Is there something we could do that’s better? Why is it better?”

“‘So, you’re not a philosopher? Or a professor? Or even a grad student?’ No. I’m just, like, a guy. But that’s the point! Everyone holding this book is ‘just a guy,’ or ‘a lady,’ or ‘someone who’s concerned with how to behave,’ or ‘a person who was gifted this book on how to be a better person by a friend and is only now realizing that maybe it was some kind of veiled hint.’”

“In 1746, a group of British booksellers asked Dr. Samuel Johnson to write a definitive dictionary of the English language. Over the next eight years, he did just that - he *wrote an entire dictionary*. Using only *his own brain*. After he was done, a woman approached him, annoyed, and asked how he could have possibly defined a ‘pastern’ as ‘the knee of a horse’ when it is actually part of the foot. Johnson replied: ‘Ignorance, Madam. Pure ignorance!’”

“‘Should I Punch My Friend in the Face for No Reason?’ No. You shouldn’t. Was that your answer? Sweet. You’re doing great so far.”

“This happens a lot in philosophy - the second you ask a question, you have to back up and ask fifty other questions just so you know that you’re asking the *right* question and that you understand *why* you’re even asking it, and then you have to ask questions within *those* questions, and you keep backing up and widening out and getting more and more foundational in your investigation until finally a German fascist is trying to figure out why there are even ‘things.’”

“The search for golden means is cumulative - the closer we get to one, the more it can help us in our search for others. Approaching the mean for kindness helps us get closer to the mean for generosity, which helps us get closer to the mean for loyalty, which helps us approach the mean for temperance, and so on. Eventually we’ll truly flourish, achieving a mastery over the exact balances of hundreds of different virtues. We’ll understand and adapt to any new situation, able to see and decipher the very foundational code of human existence - like Neo at the end of *The Matrix*. See? Being good isn’t so hard. You just have to understand the world as completely as Neo does at the end of *The Matrix*. ”

“None of the people in the Trolley Problem have any awareness of the dangers all around them. It’s infuriating.”

“As technical and brainy as Kantian theory is, I find there to be something sweetly humanistic about the second formulation. Kant holds humans in the highest possible regard, and rejects any action that demeans them or turns them into tools used to achieve some other goal. I’m not saying you’d want him to be your dad and comfort you after you strike out in Little League, but I think this iteration of the categorical imperative means there’s a beating heart under all that pure reason.”

“For the record, the hardest thing I’ve even attempted to read is Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, which, like, don’t even *try*. Wittgenstein is largely thought of as a genius even by professional philosopher standards, and that seventy-five-page-long migraine is the only book he ever published in his lifetime. Imagine being so brilliant that you only write one seventy-five-page book and the smartest people who ever lived are all like, ‘Man, that guy is a *genius*.’”

“But Bentham - who, it should again be noted, had his skeleton stapled to a chair and permanently displayed in a famous university - clearly believes in his system, and writes about it with great conviction.”

Jeremy Bentham: “Intense, long, certain, speedy, fruitful, pure - such marks in pleasures and in pains endure. Such pleasures seek if private be thy end: If it be public, wide let them extend. Such pains avoid, whichever be thy view: If pains must come, let them extend to few.”

“That’s the crux of this counterargument to donating anonymously: How much *extra* good has come from famous people - George Clooney, or Oprah, or LeBron James - publicly announcing their charitable giving? How much more attention has been brought to those causes because of the public nature of their gifts? Certainly: a *lot*. And it doesn’t have to be famous people - if we give \$1,000 to fight poverty in rural Arkansas and our friends and coworkers and family see what we’ve done, perhaps they’ll be inspired and decide to give themselves. There’s gotta be some golden mean here between ‘total anonymity’ and ‘post a selfie while cutting a huge check, with hashtags #ImAwesome, #BetterThanYou, and #GenerousAF.’”

“The goal of charitable giving is to maximize the transfer of money from people who have it to people who need it. Often, the circumstances are dire - the money will be used for emergency disaster relief, to provide food, shelter, or medicine. Requiring a purity of motivation seems like a limiting demand in a realm where we shouldn’t impose any limits. In other words: I don’t really care why you’re giving money, as long as you’re giving it.”

“Now, in terms of motivations to raise money for charity, ‘Vanquish my rivals and establish alpha male superiority in Hollywood’ is...not ideal. That’s probably pretty low on Maimonides’s list, it certainly fails Kant’s test, and it’s verrrrrry far away from a Buddhist state of mindfulness. But also, I think: Who cares? Josh raised millions of dollars for a good cause, and if his ego was inflated as a byproduct, so be it. Charitable giving in the modern world is a numbers game - there are billions in need, and money is concentrated in the hands of very few. And when we’re talking numbers games, utilitarianism has a massive leg up on every other ethical theory. If ignoring everything (within reason) except the results - the total money raised - gets the world to become a more equitable place, that’s fine with me.”

“Thich Nhat Hanh also wrote the passage that inspired the metaphor for death that Chidi gives Eleanor in the series finale of *The Good Place*. He describes a person’s life as analogous to a wave forming - with specific dimensions and properties and qualities - and then returning to the ocean whence it came. The water is the constant - the wave is just a different way for the water to be, for some amount of time, so when it ceases to be a wave and returns to the ocean, we should be happy, not sad. It’s beautiful and peaceful and makes me cry a little every time I think about it.”

“I’m not quite as harsh regarding Geffen as Peter Singer would be. I wouldn’t say he’s morally required to sell his yacht and donate the money. But I would say that as a man worth billions, he has a responsibility to do far more than the average person during a pandemic that has disrupted the lives of everyone on earth. I’d also recommend he spend some of that money on a social media consultant, so that when he tries to post a picture of his \$590 million yacht the same week a record number of Americans lose their jobs, there’d be someone to grab his phone and toss it into the ocean.”

“The most important part of becoming better people, I’ll say yet again, is that we *care* about whether what we do is good or bad, and therefore *try* to do the right thing.”

“In a very short time - really between 1943 and 1945 - Sartre had managed to piss off Communists, atheists, and artists, even while being an atheistic novelist who wrote for underground Communist journals. That’s hard to do. This existentialism is powerful stuff.”

Sartre: “Man is responsible for what he is.”

Sartre: “Man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterwards defines himself. If man as existentialists conceive of him cannot be defined, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself.”

“So here we are, two hundred pages deep in this book, having learned all about deontology and utilitarianism and contractualism and virtue ethics and a bunch of other stuff, and along comes a morose Frenchman to tell us that there’s no God and people define themselves through action and we have to just make decisions with no guidance except ‘the essential anguish of our own existence’ or something.”

“We can acknowledge the fundamental absurdity of the human condition, and just kind of exist within it! I added the exclamation point to try to hide how bleak a sentence that is. But for Camus, that’s the only real answer.”

MK: You can see that some people are born luckier than others, and have certain advantages, etc. But if we’re playing the game of “lucky birth,” we’re stating that none of us have any control over these outcomes, so it’s ridiculous to ask that people “apologize” for being born lucky. They literally had nothing to do with it. Life goes on.”

“Take Michael Jordan, who’s generally regarded as the greatest basketball player who ever lived. No one worked harder, at anything, than Jordan worked at basketball. His determination was unparalleled, his commitment to his craft was off the charts, his intensity and competitive drive are legendary. Thinking of Jordan as a guy who didn’t *earn* everything he got - all the championships, the MVPs, the accolades - seems ludicrous. *And yet.* Jordan is six foot six. He didn’t achieve that height because he, like, worked really hard at being tall. He was also born in America, to parents who supported and encouraged his passion. Those two facts make him *lucky*. If you take Jordan’s exact personality, talent profile, and work ethic, and put them in the body of a five-foot-two goat herder in Bangladesh, he does not become Air Jordan, six-time NBA champion. He becomes the most intense and irritating Bangladeshi goat herder in history, who’s constantly yelling at the other goat herders for not being good enough at herding goats.”

“We need to remember one final thing: If we can even afford to be asking what we should do here, it probably means we’re pretty lucky people. We have a car full of groceries - and thus a functioning car - and the luxury of posing philosophical questions, instead of having to think only about our health or safety or where we’re going to find our next meal. If we determine that relative to others we’re lucky, which means we *can* afford to do a little extra, then we *should* do a little extra.”

“Do a bit more than we’re ethically required to do.”

“Know thyself. Nothing in excess.”

“Finally, there are just a whole bunch of writers, some of whom I know and some of whom I’ve never met, whose work has altered my brain chemistry in that way that only great writing can. Thank you all for spending your time writing comedy, fiction, nonfiction, plays, music, TV, movies, journalism, anything. Writing is a weird job, and I salute everyone who makes it his or her life’s work. Okay, I’ll end this acknowledgements section before I just start listing writers I like. Thanks for reading this book. Or maybe just picking it up in a bookstore and flipping to this page to see if I thanked you.”