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Moral Selves and Moral Scenes: Narrative Experiments in Everyday Life

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Through what kind of inaugural scenes is the moral self born? And what are the practices, within that scene, through which one tries to become a moral person, or a different sort of moral self, a person one is not but wishes to be? These are questions that have inspired philosophers, religious communities and "ordinary people" for thousands of years. They are also questions that are at the heart of the recent ethical turn in anthropology and sociocultural studies more broadly. Anthropology has long contested ethical views grounded in a portrait of the autonomous individual who can choose her own moral destiny, tending to foreground instead what Joel Robbins has called the "unfreedom" of moral and social life. In doing so, Robbins comments, anthropologists remain committed to "move us beyond western folk models in our understanding of how human life works" (Robbins 2007:295). However, something special has been going on lately. The growth of nuanced and innovative investigations into the moral attest to something like a burgeoning movement, a "moral turn" that is well under way. While studies of local moral practices, beliefs and customs have been central to anthropology's traditional notions of culture, perhaps the very centrality of this disciplinary task, often blamed upon our Durheimian legacy, has led to a certain conceptual blindness in which the moral as an analytic frame has been insufficiently problematized (Laidlaw 2002, Zigon 2008).

The recent ethical turn not only builds upon anthropology's longstanding challenge of certain Enlightenment versions of morality but also departs from it in several significant ways. In contemporary times, the challenging anthropological scene is not some isolated realm of unchanging tradition where the honored customs of the ancestors govern moral life. Quite other social imaginaries have replaced this idealized ethical kingdom. Instead, two other inaugural scenes have taken pride of place: the "trial" and the "school." Though very different, both take their inspiration from poststructuralisms of various stripes, thanks in no small part to Foucault's influence. In this paper, I explore both these social imaginaries as well as some recent alternatives to them. I examine how each can be used to analyze the same ethnographic material in fruitful ways but argue for the advantages of a third social imaginary I introduce—the moral laboratory.

First Inaugural Scene: The Trial

Poststructuralism has offered an especially menacing version of "unfreedom," not as the routine or revered enactment of cultural customs but as a kind of imprisonment within punitive moral codes. Here, the primary inaugural scene where the moral "I" is born is the trial. Judith Butler describes this Nietzschean inspired space as a kind of courtroom in which we stand accused. We come to see ourselves as having an "I" with causal agency because we are blamed for the suffering of others. We are brought to trial, so to speak, and asked to justify our actions. As Butler puts it:

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> We start to give an account [of ourselves] only because we are interpellated as beings who are rendered accountable by a system of justice and punishment…So I start to give an account…because someone has asked me to, and that someone has power delegated from an established system of justice. I have been addressed, even perhaps had an act attributed to me, and a certain threat of punishment backs up this interrogation. And so, in fearful response, I offer myself as an 'I' and try to reconstruct my deeds, showing that the deed attributed to me was or was not, in fact, among them (2005:10–11).

Through such processes of interrogation our moral selves are born. Self-narratives are created as we --in terror – try to defend our own actions, casting a fearful look backwards at our past deeds, giving ourselves a history. With this primal moral space, poststructuralist projects seek to unmask and expose the insidious work of power, power that is no mere imposition upon someone but – more horrifyingly --produces that someone in the first place. A someone further molded through ever more refined technologies of discipline and punishment orchestrated through specific configurations of material space and institutionalized in neo-liberal regimes (Rose 1990, Agamben 1998, Butler 1997).

Second Inaugural Scene: The Artisan's Workshop

Inspired by readings of Foucault's late works and his introduction of premodern virtue ethics, a second, contrasting primal scene emerges – an industrious workshop where artisans carefully, painstakingly fashion their crafts, following exacting aesthetic standards. What are they creating? What are their works of art? Themselves, as singular moral beings. And how are these selves made? Not through punitive measures exacted from a harsh judge in some court of law. Rather from the voluntary disciplining and monitoring of thoughts, acts and especially bodies in line with the stylistic norms of the "guild" to which one has pledged oneself. The moral self is forged through a kind of apprenticeship in the "arts of existence" where the product of one's labor is nothing less than oneself.

Foucault tells us the arts of existence are: "those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria" (1990: 10–11). Nietzschean inspired visions of the moral scene of the trial, the prison, are replaced by the artisan workshop, with its technologies, poetics, traditions, exemplars, routines and tests. Here we have an alternative to anthropology's classical "unfreedom" position that does not take us unto a grim world of moral enslavement but instead seems to let in some light, offering a new vision of the moral as linked to the aesthetic and even some freedom to act, to shape oneself. This scene also shares some features with its bleaker cousin, continuing to link this self crafting to prior authoritative traditions, standards of excellence and technologies of self discipline, subjugation and training.

The artisan workshop directs us to explore the connection between crafting the self and learning. Here, one trains in various disciplines to develop virtues proper to that particular craft guild – trains the body, the mind and the soul. Social formations tend toward the hierarchical, novices laboring under the tutelage of masters. Authoritative texts and practices, preordained and often elaborately detailed, provide crucial guides for the telos that participants strive to attain. From an ethnographic standpoint, the strength of this portrayal is that it provides a way to explore particular moral traditions not as abstract beliefs, codes or rules but as *practices*. It foregrounds the day to day technologies of self care that people draw upon to cultivate, or try to cultivate, virtuous characters. This is especially helpful when looking at the educational aspects of moral communities intended specifically for the cultivation of virtue and the moral transformation of self. Over the past decade, this portrait

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of ethical self-formation has inspired an outpouring of anthropological studies that attend to how moral subjectivity is inculcated across a broad range of social settings and practices (e.g. Mahmood 2005; Zigon 2008, 2011; Robbins 2004; Throop 2010).

The recent Foucault inspired studies often (though not always) place this moral apprenticeship within the context of power. Many would agree that Foucault's ethics must be framed in terms of his "overarching concern with the analytic of governmentality" (Faubion 2001:86). If one includes not only Foucault's late work but also the insights of his earlier writings and their skeptical gaze upon moral practices, the artisan scene provides a powerful vantage point for seeing how moral technologies of self care lend themselves to becoming tools of subjugation that seek to normalize and punish, techniques for governing the soul in a punitive and troubled sense, as Nikolas Rose (1990, 1998) has elucidated.

The weakness of this craft vision of moral artisans – and of the artisan as apprentice --is that it tends to leave people in school, or in the artisan shop. As such, it misses some key elements of moral practice. It does not give us a sufficiently rich view of the vagaries of everyday life and the difficulties of discerning what might constitute the most morally appropriate action in the singular circumstances life presents. It is insufficient for examining how people face changing worlds, or situations in which it is unclear what kind of self one ought to become. And it tells us little about how people move among different moral worlds with competing moral claims and virtues, or move in and out of well specified traditions. Most troublesome, a portrayal of moral work which presumes that moral technologies are already firmly in place *prior* to being encountered by the apprenticing artisan misses the many ways people experiment with, critique and modify the very traditions they have inherited or in which they have "schooled" themselves as part of their self-making projects.

Problematizing The Moral Scene: Moral Crisis and the Moral Everyday

Many scholars working in the anthropology of morality are also seeking to rethink these two moral scenes to address just such conceptual difficulties. As already noted, a major critique of the Durkheimian legacy is that the moral is equated with the social and therefore, nothing more need be said. With this diagnosis, a great deal of work has been directed to trying to distinguish varieties of moral experience, and especially to demarcate a kind of unconscious norm following from something else, something generally more self-consciously deliberative or critical, or even radically outside of ethics altogether. There are substantial debates among anthropologists about these matters but there seems wide-spread agreement that at least some aspects of moral life need to be connected to freedom of moral self-making, subjectivity and choice (Parish 1994, Mattingly 1998a, Laidlaw 2002, Faubion 2001, 2011, Lambek 2000, 2010, Throop 2010, Robbins 2004).

Faubion (2010, 2011) and Zigon (2007, 2009, 2011) provide exemplars of this. Although their vocabulary differs, each has sketched moral scenarios that abandon or at least complicate these trial or classroom scenarios. In doing so, they have tried to preserve a special space for a kind of ethical reflection and self-creation that offers more possibility for creative and potentially transformative modes of self-making than one finds in the moral imaginaries of trial or classroom. While differing in key respects, both demarcate a space for the "dynamic" or "break down" ethical moment in which the very norms and morals by which one ordinarily lives are themselves problematized and become objects of reflection, drawing inspiration from Foucault's discussion of "problematization" in their work. Thus, Faubion is concerned to distinguish between what he calls the "dynamic" aspects of self-creation and its "more homeostatic and reproductive aspects" --the "themitical" (2011:20). The dynamic scene "is one in which the typically subliminal themitical normativity of everyday routine is in suspension…The scene of crisis is a scene of the unfamiliar or of

disturbance, in which the experience of the disruption or of the failure of the reproduction of routine is also the impetus of thought and action" (2011:81–2). Zigon (2007, 2009) distinguishes the "moral," which he equates with an everyday, unconscious habitus provided by the widely shared norms of one's society or communities, and the "ethical" which involves some "break down" in this habituated moral activity, thus presenting the actor with a situation that requires conscious deliberation. In everyday life, it is unquestionably the moral that predominates, Zigon argues. The ethical, by contrast, is much more rare; it is generated by the infrequent situation when "one actually has to stop and consider how to act or be morally appropriate" (2009:260).

In focusing upon everyday life as a site of moral problematization, I head in a somewhat different direction, one that, at least in this respect, is in broad sympathy with Lambek's (2010) "ordinary ethics" and Das' (2007 and Das' (2010) "moral striving." My diagnosis of the problem with the Durheimian legacy is not that it equates the moral with the social but that it offers a problematic and reductionist portrait of social action itself. What is especially under theorized is the complex role the moral plays even in everyday engagements. To consider the complexities of everyday moral practice, one needs something more than an unconscious moral habitus, a picture of action we have inherited perhaps more from Bourdieu (and contemporary practice theory) than Durkheim. I would certainly agree that ethical dispositions are embodied but this is by no means the whole story.

Neo-Aristototelian traditions, especially as developed within virtue ethics and some strands of phenomenology, provide a more promising point of departure. I suggest that developing a nuanced analytic framework for investigating the formation of personal moral experience and the exercising of moral judgment in the singularities of circumstances offers another way to explore the ethical as a social, as well as personal, matter.[1] To capture the complexity of moral experience, moral self-making and the embeddedness of the moral in everyday practical action, one needs a different inaugural scene that brings the moral ordinary into full view.

Third Inaugural Scene: The Moral Laboratory: Creating the Fragile "New"

> O.Fr. esperience (13c.) "experiment, proof, experience," from L. experientia" knowledge gained by repeated trials"

I offer yet a third imaginary scene, the laboratory, the space of experiment, as a way to portray a first person, phenomenological virtue ethics rooted in neo-Aristotelian traditions. However, before turning to this metaphorical conceit, I need to say something more about the Aristotelian picture of ethics and action. From an Aristotelian perspective, action and experience have primacy in forming all knowledge. As Baracchi has recently argued, within an Aristotelian framework, even "scientific-theoretical knowledge" and "ontology" rest on "living in action," that is, rest upon what is "phenomenologically, experientially, sensibly grounded" (2008:2). Aristotle also begins with the assumption that the ethical is ontologically basic to all action because in acting we are always oriented toward some telos or good. In creating this picture of action, Aristotle is making a claim about humans — humans by our nature strive for human flourishing or happiness and not mere biological survival.

Aristotle also articulates a perspective that belongs to the pre-socratic Greek world, the notion that the essence of human existence is not so much in a quality or set of qualities of "being" but rather in a process, the process of becoming. Cultivating virtue is part of that

[1]This is something I have tried to do in my own work, drawing especially upon virtue ethics and phenomenology (e.g. Mattingly 1998, 2006a, b, 2009, 2010a, b).

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becoming and action (with all its frailty) is at the center of things (Aristotle 1985, Arendt 1958, Knight 2007, Cavell 2004). In his teleological account of action, Aristotle was concerned with potentiality. This is an idea taken up by Heidegger who speaks of "human existence … as essentially characterized by possibilities" (Cavell 2004:352; Wentzer 2011). This teleological picture of action does not accord with a means-ends utilitarianism, however because *the action, the becoming is already an end in itself*. Any linear or progressive picture of this teleological structure is further challenged because "becoming" even opens up the past. The past consists not only of what happened, but its unfulfilled possibilities (Baracchi 2006:24).

Aristotle's ethics further underscores the connection between developing a virtuous character and the difficulties of discerning a "best good" in those circumstances where one must act (Mattingly 2010b). Everyday action involves the problem of practical judgment that was so key to Aristotle's practical (ethical) philosophy. And action occurs in a world in which the moral good is often challenging to discern. Because the situations of action are singular, following rules or customs is not a sufficient guide (Lambek 2000, 2010, Mattingly 1998a, Faubion 2011). Rather the ability to cultivate judgment about the "best good" in the singularities of the moment is required; this is precisely why cultivating a virtuous character is so important. It aids in guiding one's perceptions and capacity for moral judgment. There is nothing infallible about this, however. One may regularly find oneself challenged by others, even those who appear to belong to the "same" moral community and yet have made other judgments about what a best good should look like, and by implication, what kind of choice a virtuous person should make.

On the one hand, this is a premodern picture of action; Aristotelian virtue ethics was the dominant moral tradition in pre-Enlightenment philosophy. It was dispersed, popularized and developed in particular ways in Judaic, Islamic and Christian religious practices. However, it was given new life since the early decades of the twentieth century. Aristotelian ethics, or what is sometimes called his "practical philosophy," has been important to both continental phenomenology and moral philosophy's Anglo-American virtue ethics. While this is not the place to offer an intellectual history, I will simply mention that in the 1920s and 1930s, Heidegger introduced Aristotle to German philosophers in a whole new way, giving us a phenomenological Aristotle whose work had radical implications for understanding human experience (Brogan 2005; Hyland and Manousakis 2006, Wentzer 2011). His students (e.g. Arendt 1958; Gadamer 1973) were instrumental in fostering a neo-Aristotelian revival that still continues. Along other lines, often in connection with ordinary language philosophy and the philosophy of action, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics in Anglo-American philosophical traditions began to be developed in about the middle of the twentieth century (MacIntyre 1981, Taylor 1989, Williams 1982, Nussbaum 1990, Murdoch 1970 and Cavell 2004).

The strength of the Aristotelian position is that it offers conceptual resources to reveal how people – as singular individuals living in particular historical circumstances (familial, biographical, institutional, etc.) – struggle with and try to make judgments in the ambiguous circumstances of everyday life about how to realize the "best good." It is, as Lambek remarks, an "action-centered approach to ethics" (2010:16). It suggests an ethics focused not only upon the practices of moral subjectivation – or, one might call it apprenticeship – that are part of cultivating virtues. It is also equally focused upon the problem of action itself, with the *doing* of ordinary life, which is not a matter of training in a "school" that has a well defined telos but is a much messier affair. It foregrounds the human predicament of trying to live a life that one is somehow responsible for but is in many respects mercurial and unknowable. It directs attention to the problem of action and judgment in an ordinary world where it is quite possible, however one works to develop a virtuous character, to find it

difficult to judge what the best course of action might be. And since action, being social, depends upon the actions of others, consequences are often difficult to predict. Therefore, even if one is assiduous in trying to work on one's moral character, there is always the possibility of mistakes, unintended consequences, moral failure, or moral tragedy in which every choice and every action is somehow, morally, wrong.

I follow this premodern vision of the human predicament to emphasize the fragility of life, the sociality of being and the vulnerability of action in the face of circumstances very often out of human control, and certainly out of control of any one person. In order to investigate these aspects of moral life, one needs an analytic lens that includes not only moral traditions and practices of subjugation but also highlights the singularity of events and the implications for moral judging. Furthermore, one needs a strongly developed picture of moral selves who are neither enslaved nor the product of the particular craft guild in which they have been trained but complexly motivated creatures who, even if they strive mightily, frequently find themselves befuddled about "the good" or about who they should become, morally speaking and continue over time to revise and critique their past selves or revise and critique their future hopes in light of the things that have happened to them. This requires an analytic gaze that allows for a reach outside the craft shop (or courtroom) to scenes of everyday life that are not collapsed into a mere unthinking habitus.

At first glance, a laboratory does not seem a very auspicious metaphor to handle an action oriented virtue ethics that can do all these things, especially one that has roots in premodern Eurasian antiquity. After all, the lab is a quintessential scene of modernity and post-modernity, a cultural imaginary that includes not only lab rats, test tubes, and white coated scientists, but also the onco-mouse, the ibf stem cell, and all sorts of other dazzling and unprecedented creatures. But the laboratory I have in mind, the *moral laboratory*, is a metaphorical realm in which experiments are done in all kinds of places and in which the participants are not objects of study so much as researchers or experimenters of their own lives – subjects and objects. It is a scene of action in which the "new" is inaugurated, where new experiences are created. Notably, one of the primary definitions of experience is "experiment" (O.E.D.). It is this relationship between experience and experiment, the experimental nature of experience itself, which the laboratory trope highlights. In this moral laboratory, participants are not working with the odds but also, in important ways, *against* them. The possible is pitted against the predictable. This is a laboratory of unique human actions: that is, a space for the production of beginnings, which turn out to be miracles of a sort.

We can get a sense of this moral scene in Arendt's description of the inaugural moment when an "I," a moral self, emerges. With action, she argues, humans are able to create something new – to begin something unexpected. And in this creation of "the new" they create themselves. "The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty," she writes. "And the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle" (1958: 178). And yet, moral laboratories that produce the possible (as against the probable), that produce, in other words, singular acts that transform material and social space and create moral selves, are marked with a radical uncertainty that extends far beyond "poesis" associated with the fabrication of crafts. We might be able to begin something – against the odds – something new. But, this "miracle" and the "rebirth" that it provides the doer is precarious from the start. We have little control of where that beginning will go, what the consequences of our initial actions will be and we must, as we say, "suffer the consequences." "Because the actor always moves among and in relation to other acting beings," Arendt tells us, "he is never merely a 'doer' but always and at the same time a sufferer. To do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin…" (1958:190).

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Moral Laboratories and Care of the Intimate Other

Having briefly sketched these three imaginaries and problematized the first two, I turn to ethnographic material to see how these might illuminate the moral work of people engaged in trying to create morally good lives for themselves and those they care about. Drawing upon a long-term study of a group of African American families caring for children with significant illnesses and disabilities, I examine people's attempts to transform not only themselves but also the social and material spaces in which they live. The engine of these efforts of transformation is a "ground project" (as Bernard Williams (1982) speaks of it) that I am simply calling "care of the intimate other." Williams' notion of a ground project is important conceptually because it allows the introduction of a local ethics that has more specificity than the overarching Aristotelian notion of human flourishing. Ground projects refer to the kinds of commitments that people find so deep to who they are that they might not care to go on with their lives without them, or would not know themselves if they no longer had them. They include deeply cherished and self-defining ideals, activities and personal associations.

Within the African American community, for many historical, political and economic reasons, including systematic exclusion from the public life of work and career, the domestic space of the family and the care of children have served as an essential ground project. The importance of family, with a mother or grandmother often functioning as the ethical lynchpin, is a well-known feature of African American life and moral discourse (Poindexter, C., & Linsk, N. 1999; Minkler & Roe, 1993; Okazawa-Rey, 1994). In the context of African American families, one cannot overemphasize the centrality of what Collins (2000) has called "The Superstrong Black Mother" as a highly valued moral ideal. Because "Black families have been so pathologized by the traditional family ideal," Collins notes, the extremely high moral valuation of the "Superstrong Black Mother" has been difficult to subject to critique within the African American community (2000: 96).

If there is one place that might seem the antithesis of the laboratory, especially a laboratory dedicated to the creation of new and unexpected experiences, of the statistically improbable, it is this domestic sphere and subject position of the strong mother where so much of a community's moral habitus is invested. And yet, the everydayness of home life and mothering is sometimes more miraculous, in Arendt's sense, than it might seem. In fact, challenging the statistically probable in the context of mothering is also part of African American moral discourse (Jacobs, Lawlor and Mattingly 2011). I have chosen this trope of the laboratory to emphasize that as part of the moral work African American parents (especially mothers) undertake, everyday spaces can become spaces of possibility, ones that create experiences that are also experiments in how life might or should be lived. Each experiment holds its perils. Each provokes moments of critique, especially self-critique. These are not obvious laboratories; nor are they obvious spaces for moral reflection, moral practice and moral deliberation.

I offer examples from two families to explore how the scenes that they create, reproduce, violate and creatively appropriate make these scenes not only of experience but experience in a special way – experience as experiment.

The Soccer Game

It could be one of a thousand soccer fields scattered throughout suburban America. Grade school children in their uniforms running up and down the grass shouting to one another as parents cheer them on. An ordinary Saturday afternoon event repeated in countless towns across the United States. Except that in the center of this field, surrounded by screaming children who fly by him, is a boy in a wheelchair propelled by another boy and they, too,

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head in the direction of the ball. His father and mother stand at the sidelines watching the action.

The boy's parents, Tanya and Frank, have three children, two girls and a son, who is her oldest. Their son Andy was born with cerebral palsy, an extremely severe case which not only leaves him physically disabled but very cognitively impaired as well. Despite this, Tanya especially knows how to communicate with him and reads his expressions easily. In fact, he shows his temper in no uncertain terms – smiling or glowering with an intensity that is hard to ignore. Tanya herself is one of those women determined to fight for her son's rights to good schooling and she is fierce in her determination to stand up to school board members, principals and other public officials to try to get good care for her son. "It's my Jamacain blood," she laughs in justifying her willingness to battle authorities.

But it was her husband Frank whom she credits with opening her eyes about her son's capabilities to participate in everyday children's activities that she would have shielded him from. Her husband is an athlete. When the economy was better, he was a personal trainer at a gym and he is natural at many sports. A son, his son, should love sports as much as he does, he maintained. Frank decided that he should get Andy involved in the local children's soccer team. While this was a "special needs" soccer team, the children were autistic or had cognitive disabilities rather than physical ones. Certainly none were in wheelchairs or had the physical frailties Andy did. Tanya was terrified and absolutely refused. She and her husband fought about this for several years. What if he falls? She worried. Soccer can be a rough sport. He is so medically fragile – what can he do in his wheelchair? But her husband finally prevailed and she let her son go on the field. During one of those games, just as she feared, children accidentally knocked his wheelchair over and he toppled over. But, to her great surprise, he was not only OK, he didn't even seem to mind. He didn't act frightened at all. "Oh I was scared to death," she recounts, "But I guess my husband was right after all. I didn't realize I was holding Andy back, not letting him be the kid he should get to be." This is a story she has told more than once. It moves her every time; it catches her up short, this realization that despite all her determination that others see her son as capable, she herself underestimated him.

Her willingness to experiment with her own ideas of the limits of her son's capabilities, and the capabilities of the children and parents around him, creates an event that transforms her view of her son and herself. To see this soccer game as a moral experiment is to recognize the moral as not simply a matter of personal introspection and reflection, and certainly not as a simple choice or exercising of one's will. Rather, it becomes a moment of action that also calls for the transformation of social and physical spaces. Soccer is not the same game with a wheelchair and a medically fragile child as part of it; the field, the rules of the sport, all of these are subtly re-invented by the players in accommodation of this non-standard scene of action.

Tanya's dilemma over the soccer game reveals the intricacy of what goes into making a moral judgment within any particular situation – and its vulnerability as well. In the name of one kind of good (keeping her child physically safe --no small feat for Andy) she resists her husband's attempts to let him play this rough sport. She judges a very different "best good" than her husband in this context. But she recognizes that in doing so, she must give up another "best good" which is allowing her son to do something highly valued by his father, something that father and son try to share in many different ways. (For example, when he was young and smaller, his father could simply lift him up to the basketball net so that he could "shoot hoops" and dunk the ball). Tanya deeply appreciates her husband's great involvement in raising his son, and his pride in doing so. And yet, in this case, she discerns it too dangerous. She is by no means the master of this social space of soccer; her judgment

about the best good depends upon her reading of fellow participants in the game. What can she ask and expect not only of children playing on the field but also of their parents? How far will people be willing to accommodate a boy in a wheelchair? How much ingenuity and compassion can she expect from others? Ultimately, for Tanya, the soccer field becomes a space of hope – of opportunities she had not dreamed possible. It also becomes a space of critique – a reflective examination of her own assumptions and what she could ask of her son, of herself, of the community around her. A soccerfield is hardly an obvious space of social experiment, moral critique, or personal transformation. And yet, it emerges as a kind of moral laboratory that is created in the midst of everyday life.

The Clinic Visit

Delores found herself in a situation where one of her daughters lost custody of her children and she seemed to be the only one in her extended family ready to take them in to live with her. She had to give up her career as a social worker, a job she liked, to help care for the five children of her daughter Marcy. As she put it, stoically:

> But I said [to myself], sometimes we just have to deal with situations. And we know we gotta put up with it no matter what. It's the rest of our lives. We gotta deal with it and adjust ourselves to dealing with it. I had to adjust myself… and adjust to these children.

Beneath the skill of running a home-making business were moral currents that very often were attached to projects of moral transformation of the deepest sort, an embodiment of a project of narrative re-envisioning. The re-imagining of oneself, one's family, one's life, is not a private introspective matter, some sort of internal story one tells oneself (though it may be all that too) so much as an active, creative remaking of daily life through the development of just such routines. And in the local morality of the household, it is manifested most vividly, concretely and compellingly in the creation and recreation of domestic routines. To flesh out this point ethnographically, I examine a scene from this family's everyday life, a visit to the physical therapy clinic, using it to make an explicit comparison among the three moral imaginaries I introduced at the beginning of the paper.

Part of routine care for Delores and this family involved Leroy's medical problems. Leroy was born with a congenital hip condition that made it difficult for him to walk or run. Sometimes, the treatment for this requires surgery. However, if treated early enough and if child and family are diligent enough in following a home exercise program for strengthening and stretching the legs, surgery can be avoided. When Delores received custody of Marcy's children, she began taking him to regular physical therapy appointments and to include the therapy exercises into family routines, as directed by the treating therapist. At the time of this session, Leroy is nine years old.

In the following exchange, the therapist is directing Leroy in exercises and we can hear Delores repeating her instructions to Leroy, like a kind of assistant coach.

> **Physical Therapist**: Now I want you to stand on your leg for as long as you can but don't count.
>
> **Dolores**: Now, don't count. Don't count.
>
> (Leroy stands on right leg but does not count)
>
> **Physical Therapist**: Good boy, good boy. Keep going. Okay, lets try the left one.
>
> (Leroy stands on left leg)
>
> **Dolores**: Keep straight.

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Physical Therapist: Now let's try to get to the door.

(Everyone moves over to the door. PT backs Leroy up against the door)

Physical Therapist: Okay, all the way against the door. Right in the middle.

(Leroy lifts his right leg up while leaning against the door)

Physical Therapist: Good. Keep it up. (She notices he is leaning against the door too much.)

Aww you are cheating there, you are cheating. (Leroy changes position to satisfy the therapist.)

Twenty! Good.

Having given him this small exercise, which also serves as a test of his strength, mobility and endurance, the therapist turns to Delores to give her instructions about how to carry out exercises at home and what she should pay attention to.

Physical Therapist: Okay instead of having him do it without anything…stand him up against a door. And the longer he stands. You can use a chronological watch or with a second hand…something he can see. And the goal for him would be for him to stand on one leg for thirty seconds and then the next. The reason for that is that the longer he can stand on that leg the stronger he will be.

Dolores: Okay, alright.

Physical Therapist: So this is really a good exercise. Just have him stand.

Dolores: Okay.

Physical Therapist: If you try it you will see it is not easy.

Dolores: Alright.

At session's conclusion, the therapist announces that she wants to review the exercises Delores has been doing with him at home. As Delores provides her a description, the therapist listens attentively and redirects her about a movement that Leroy should not be doing. She invokes the doctor (a higher authority) to underscore the seriousness of her statement.

Physical Therapist: Come sit right here. Sit. So which exercises are you doing?

Dolores: Umm, the one that you just finished showing. And one with the leg stretch from the left to the right and the right to the left. We are doing that and to stand then on his side doing fifteen counts on the right and then the left. Then we have him stand like you just had him on one knee. Sometimes I have him to face me and don't drop his shoulder just stand on the one leg. Until I count fifteen. And then I go from the right to the left and left to the right about three times with him. And then he will be throwing the ball with his brother and other friends. So they do exercises with the ball. And then he does the exercise with where he brings his knees all the way up to his shoulders. And umm, like jumping up and down on the…

Physical Therapist: He should not be doing that.

Dolores: He should not be doing that?

Physical Therapist: Not yet

Dolores: He just did it for the first time I seen him do it was last night.

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Physical Therapist: No jumping. That's what the Dr. said.

Dolores: Yea, Okay.

I have heard hundreds of conversations like this one in my years in rehabilitation clinics. It sounds much more like an example of routine "techne" than a moral matter. But, inspired by the three inaugural scenes with which I opened the paper, we can see how the moral enters this example of a routine rehabilitation encounter.

Clinic as courtroom—This exchange could be read, critically, as a kind of trial. Grandmother and child are brought into a clinical courtroom where Leroy is caught cheating and Delores is found wanting in her supervision of Leroy's home program. Both are, if not punished, certainly tested, exposed and corrected. The therapist exerts expert control, recruiting Delores not only to carry out a specified home program but also to extend her surveillance over Leroy. What Delores first announces as a kind of exercise, "jumping," turns out, as the therapist registers disapproval, to call for further defense by Delores who then says (accounting for herself) that he has only done it once, just the night before in fact, and that she did not direct this activity but only happened to witness it. As in Butler's trial scene, she gives an account of herself that tries to proclaim her relative innocence. But still the therapist is not satisfied. She reiterates three times that this is not allowed, calling upon the authority of the doctor to underscore her reprimand.

Clinic as artisan's worshop—We could also interpret this session more benignly as the fashioning of a kind of craft project. If Leroy is learning to discipline his body in certain ways, one might argue that he is (semi) voluntarily involved in a process of self-mastery under the tutelage of an expert artisan (the physical therapist) who provides him the technologies necessary for his self-care. His grandmother serves as a lesser mentor, but one crucial to facilitating the transport of this craft technology from the clinic to home where much of the work needs to take place. We can see this as *moral* work if we understand the technologies of self care provided by experts as tools for the discipline not only of body but of soul. He is training his soul, his very character, through moral arts of care that demand such things as willingness to endure moments of physical pain or tedium and willingness to refrain from forbidden pleasurable activities (e.g. "jumping").

Clinic as moral laboratory—The experimental qualities of this session concern Delores' effort to bring a family together. This is a family that includes not only of her five grandchildren who now live with her but her attempt to bring Marcy back to her children – to rescue her from the life she has been living. Sometimes Leroy's mother Marcy accompanied them to these therapy sessions. When she came, she did not participate directly or talk to therapists or doctors. Instead she found a seat in the corner of the room, quietly reading a book, head down. Her behavior annoyed many of the therapists and aides who saw her. "What an uninvolved parent!" they would exclaim indignantly. "She's not even watching! That's her *own* child and she doesn't lift a finger. She's letting her mother do all the work."

What these therapists completely missed was that this was no ordinary physical therapy session—it was an experiment. The clinic served as a moral laboratory where Delores and her daughter Marcy were experimenting with motherhood itself. Marcy's was struggling to transform herself and in the most profound way, to become clean and sober after eighteen years – more than half her life --of being addicted to crack. The book she was reading during these therapy sessions was from Narcotics Anonymous. She was working on her twelve step program, quietly reading to herself. But could she do it? Could she become the kind of mother she wanted to be but was not? The odds were not in her favor.

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One thing that Delores knew about her daughter was that she loved her children, although, Delores admitted, she could be "really mean" when she was high. But this, Delores felt, was not the real Marcy. "It was the drugs doing it," she would remark. "I think it was just the way that the drugs affect you," Delores said. "She used to be so hostile about things and I think the anger was from, she didn't like herself and she didn't like what she was doing to herself."

During this early period of Marcy's sobriety, when Marcy accompanies her mother and son to the hospital, she provides evidence to all of them, not about the person she was at that moment but about a possible person – the person she might be, a "real mother" to her children, one who is not mean, hostile or angry, if only she can remain clean. She might not be ready to take the lead, to play the role that the therapists' expect, but she still, she is finding some way to participate in the routines of family life. Every such moment is an experiment in possibility, one that, in light of the statistics about drug addiction, was highly unlikely. She and her mother were pitting the possible against the probable.

But to reveal the deeply experimental qualities of little moments like a routine clinic visit, like their moral impact, I need to introduce another key trope associated with moral experience: the journey. It is with this image that the *narrative* qualities of moral experiments become apparent as temporal moments and spaces in larger narrative trajectories.

Narrative Experiments in Possible Worlds: Transformative Journeys

> *Experience: ex-* "out of" + *peritus* "experienced, tested," from PIE base **per-* 'to lead, pass over" (see ***peril***).
>
> Insofar as 'to try' (expereri) contains the same root as periculum, or 'danger,' there is also a convert association between experience and peril, which suggests that it comes from having survived risks and learning something from the encounter (ex meaning a coming forth from)
>
> -Martin Jay 2006, Songs of Experience

Laboratory moments of a soccer game or a clinic visit offer "beginnings" with all the fragility that Arendt councils us to expect of action. They provide evidence of a sort, but is this evidence reliable? What Arendt reveals is that action spirals outward – it travels through social space and time, and often in unexpected directions. It is not surprising that the definition of experience of experiment is linked etymologically to another definition of experience – experience as a kind of journey, a passage. This second understanding of experience, as a passage – and a perilous one – is required to follow what happens to these moral experiments as actions that travel or even to recognize that something like an experiment is going on. That is, the genuinely experimental quality of laboratory spaces may not be visible from within the scene itself; instead we need to place such experimental moments in time.

With this image of the risky journey we are offered a particular kind of narrative understanding of moral experience that is not about defending oneself after the fact but experiencing oneself to be living within possible narrative plotlines that stretch backward and forward in time, within a field of narrative potentiality.[2] The intimate connection

[2]One might reasonably ask for more detail about how this inaugural scene with its moral laboratories and journeys is narrative in a different way than, for example, the inaugural scene of a courtroom – which obviously also suggests the need for a narrative account of oneself and, therefore, both presupposes and creates a narrative version of a moral self. In the context of this paper, I can only pose this excellent question but haven't the space to address it. It deserves its own paper.

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between the moral self and narrative has been implicitly assumed or explicitly articulated and defended by many philosophers writing within a virtue ethics or phenomenological tradition (e.g. MacIntyre 1981; Ricoeur 1992; Taylor 1985, 1989, Nussbaum 1990; Arendt 1958; for some overview discussions of this see Zahavi 2008, Mattingly, Jensen and Throop 2009). For my part, in linking this general notion of the narrative creation of a moral self to the idea of the "moral laboratory," I try to foreground those events that serve as experiments in possible futures, small inaugurations into something that might constitute a fleeting experience or might portend a future different than one had envisioned. In foregrounding such moments and speaking of them in narrative terms, I draw upon an important tradition in hermeneutics and phenomenology (e.g. Carr 1991; Ricoeur 1984, 1985, 1988; see Mattingly 1998b for an overview). Action and experience, I am also claiming, especially moments that are risky or portentous, have a narrative shape – they are, as we say, dramatic.[3]

Moral laboratory experiments like the clinic visit or the soccer game are in this sense *narrative experiments*. That is, they constitute moments in larger individual, family and community trajectories – in journeys that unfold backward and forward. As experiments they may be beginnings but they are beginnings in what are, paradoxically, also, always, middles. To further illustrate, I return to the clinic visit. How can we see it as an experiment within a journey — a moment within a larger narrative horizon?

The Past: Life on the Street

Marcy's very presence at these clinical encounters represented one experimental moment in an ongoing journey to leave "the street" and its ways, to find her way to a life as a mother. By her own account, she would never have been able to do this if Delores had given up on her. But Delores never did. Here is Delores, talking about her repeated attempts to rescue Marcy from the streets and bring her home:

> And there was times I would get up and I would go find her. Find some of her friends and I tell em don't lie to me, all I want to know is where is Marcy. And Marcy would see me and she'd say I'm getting ready to come, maybe she was gone for a day or two. I'm getting ready to come home momma, I'm getting ready to come home. I said yeah I know you coming with me right now.

Delores recognizes that many people would have given up on their child. They disapproved of what she was doing. But for Delores, her judgment about rescuing her daughter represented the "best good" in this terrible situation. Delores remembered: "People yeah, people would tell me 'oh you need to kick Marcy out. You ain't gonna never do this. She ain't never gonna never do nothing cause she know she can depend on you." But Delores disagreed. She felt it essential that Marcy knew she had a home she could come to. This was not some theoretical position but an expression of who she was, as a mother, of what her own capabilities were. As Delores put it:

> I've just never had a heart that I could just kick her out. I just not, couldn't do that. I don't know why. But it, it. I didn't even, I don't think I even allowed myself to deal with the pain. I felt that she would be safer around me and when she wasn't around me and I didn't know where she was that the time only time I would worry. I would worry and I pray. I said Lord send her home, wherever she is Lord you know where she is, send her home.

[3]I can only be suggestive here but I have developed this claim elsewhere in an extended way, offering a "narrative phenomenology" of action and experience (Mattingly 2010).

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I offer the following account, a co-narrated story about the moment, after eighteen years, that Marcy finally comes home to her mother and her children, finally willing to go into a drug treatment program and leave the streets behind. While I had heard various versions of this story before from Delores, this is the first time the two of them tell it together. This occurred about a year after Marcy had been clean. At this point, she and Delores had come to share many of the tasks of childrearing, a partnership that both looked upon with great pride. The story of the "final rescue" is told by Marcy and Delores a year after Marcy has been "clean." They talk to two of us on the research team, Carolyn Rouse and myself.

Delores: A lot of the girls used to tell me, "Ooh, I wished we had a mother like you." Well, I just made up my mind, well, if I turn her to the street, she gonna go worse. And if she knows she can come home and eat and sleep--and she'd come home--she would sleep 3, 4, or 5 days. (Marcy laughs.) She was walking and walking. So, one time--I really did. I got tired of it. I said, "I'm tired of this." I went and found her. And she didn't know I was coming. And all—

Marcy: But I was on my way home. (Marcy and Delores talk at the same time.)

Delores: I know it. I said--I know you was on your way home 'cause I'm coming down here to get you. And I told all her friends, "You better not lie. You better show me--tell me where she is." And they--I found her. She was getting something to eat. She said, "I was just getting ready to come home"—

Marcy: I was gonna get on that bus. I was tired then. I was just going home (laughs). I was sad 'cause I had been gone, like, two whole weeks.

Carolyn: Do you remember the moment when you decided, "that's it."

Marcy: Yup. I told my mom. I called to make me--put me on the waiting list. And the first--provided I was through the waiting list, but the first program I called, I'm gone. I packed my bags, had them sitting by the front door.

Carolyn: What made you change your mind?

Marcy: As long as they was telling me to go to the program, I wasn't going. I ain't going till I got ready to go. That's why I ain't going till I'm ready to go. When I get ready that's when I go, 'cause if I go while y'all want me to go, it ain't gonna work.

Cheryl and Carolyn: Yeah. Yeah.

Marcy: It ain't gonna work.

Cheryl: Yeah.

Marcy: So when I got ready I got on three treatment programs.

Delores: We went to uh, Joe at the--they was doing an outpatient clinic for the city, … He said, "Marcy, you want to see some hard-core drug addicts?" He said, "Go down there."

Marcy: Right down on 5th St., and that's where I went. I was standing around just watching them smoke right through it. I cried.

Delores: She said, "I cry every day, Momma. I cry every day. Look at these peoples."

Marcy: They sleep in cardboard boxes and all that stuff. You know, I ain't never had to do all that.

Cheryl: So, what do you think made you--what finally made you ready?

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Marcy: Well, either you get tired…

Cheryl: Yeah.

Marcy: Or--you just get tired.

While Marcy's ironic and pithy ending to this story makes leaving the street inevitable — you either "get tired" or you "get tired"— all in the room knew that those who developed cocaine addictions early in their teens, as Marcy had, were very unlikely to remain drug-free. You might "get tired" but can you actually quit?

The Future: The Drill Team as Moral Laboratory or Returning to the Street

The clinical encounter also belongs within a future that is in suspense. Will Marcy be able to maintain her sobriety, against the odds? Even if she is able to do this, how will she find a way to inhabit this mothering role? Delores has many health problems – what will happen when she must take over for her own mother, stepping in as a leader? Both Delores and Marcy worry about this. But Delores does continue to in her sobriety and she begins to take on roles where she acts not simply as a follower of her mother or even as a partner but as a leader.

Most strikingly, her moral work of transformation takes her back to the street. Marcy decides to coach the local drill team and drum squad that several of her children are involved in (including Leroy, whose leg has gotten strong enough to allow him to play in the drum squad). She, too, was once on a drill team as a young girl. Her coaching of a well known local team, which performs competitively against teams all over the state and in such important events as the local Black History Parade, allows her to reinhabit the streets in a very different way. Drill teams require great precision in choreographed movement and dance – there are endless hours of practice and it takes great commitment to participate in them and coach them. The leaders of drill teams not only train but also develop their own choreography so that teams can present original work. Drill team and drum squad performances, a quintessentially African American art form that borrows from African dance movements, African American dance routines from earlier eras and contemporarily popular dance, perform in street parades in which hundreds gather to watch, showing enthusiasm but also voicing critiques and comments if routines are not performed according to the rules. This is a very public space.

During these performances and parades, Marcy inevitably encounters many people she has known all her life, people who knew her as an addict and those who continue to use drugs. But as coach not only of her children but also of an important community program, she connects herself to the street as a participant of black pride and black history. In such events as the Black History Parade, she helps to commemorate the black protest movements of the 1950 and 1960s, in this sense recalling yet another way to inhabit the streets. And yet, the experimental quality of such moments cannot be understated. Taking to the streets as a drill team leader is risky for Marcy and it is not easy. She longs to leave the neighborhood and her past, to move her family elsewhere, away from the "mess," as she puts it. She stays for the sake of her mother who is unwilling to leave the place she has long called home.

Conclusion: Moral Experiments, Moral Transformation and Ordinary Experience

I have tried to offer a portrait of moral transformation and the moral striving surrounding it that is at once experimental, even perilous, and also deeply embedded in the routines of everyday life. In highlighting *transformation* as critical to moral work, I am not suggesting that there is some possible mode of being in the world that involves its absence. We humans,

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like all living creatures, have transformation visited upon us. Our biology dictates this. So, too, does our social community. We are reassigned subject positions based upon our passage through life, upon our changing ages, our marriages, our children, our physical declines, and the like. What I have tried to suggest, however, is that the very act of carrying out ground projects (like caring for one's children) may involve the transformation of understandings of these projects. And, they may involve experimental remaking of social spaces— soccer fields or clinic rooms, for example. The type of transformation I have been describing is not something that occurs *apart* from everyday action in a moment of moral crisis or an an ethical break, but is accomplished in the midst of the everyday as the expected or the normative, becomes subject to experiment. While such radically transformative moments undoubtedly occur, as for example Zigon has demonstrated, this has not been the focus of my investigation.

In accord with a number of anthropologists, my own picture of moral transformation also involves problematizing dominant moral norms and practices, albeit in quotidian contexts. To illustrate, in the ethnographic cases just sketched the category of the "Superstrong Black Mother" is not directly challenged but this does not mean it is morally unproblematic. It cannot simply be inhabited. Tanya's dilemmas and struggles with her husband illustrate that from her perspective, upon experiencing her son's participation in a community soccer league, she needs to re-envision how a "Superstrong Black Mother" should perceive the best good for her son. She needs to cultivate certain virtues (perhaps a certain kind of courage) that she does not yet possess because the world might open more possibilities for her child than she has realized.

Similarly, Delores and Marcy do not problematize the "Superstrong Black Mother" – in fact, Delores epitomizes its virtues. And yet, both resist a normative gaze that would preclude Marcy from coming to inhabit this position. Delores takes the lead in experimenting – against the odds – within all sorts of everyday spaces in her efforts to create a mothering team with her daughter. In doing so, Delores challenges received wisdom about long-term addicts, a normative view promoted by some members of her community (friends, other family members) who criticize her, saying she should just "give up" on her daughter after so many years. Together, Delores and Marcy build a whole repertoire of experiences that give evidence to support their challenge. Marcy continues this experiment every time she takes to the streets of her old neighborhood as, for example, a drill team leader, striving to participate in street life in a new way, as a good mother.

Small moments like a clinic visit, a soccer game, a drill team performance can represent something enormous. These activities speak to a cherished *ordinariness*, to the cultivation of "significant routines" (Grøn 2005). Families like Delores' are frequently gripped by personal and family dramas that are of consuming interest to those involved. Turbulence, uncertainty, and drama are such pervasive qualities that ordinary routines are not the daily expression of a habitual way of life culturally inherited so much as a fragile achievement, a hard won moment of mundaneness. Under such circumstances, the ordinary is freighted with a special moral weight and it can acquire an unexpected symbolic density. One could easily — and usefully— understand the moral strivings and experiments of Delores and Marcy in the language of critical social theory that reveals the imprisonment of those who must inhabit such devastated economic spaces.

And yet, I turn to the social imaginary of the laboratory to highlight other features of their moral lives that might otherwise be hidden. Das speaks of the work of those living in poverty and violence as a determined "descent into the ordinary." While the ordinary is often distinguished from the extraordinary and the dramatic, she emphasizes how the ordinary sometimes becomes, in fact, something wondrous, an essential source of hope,

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what she calls a "temporality of second chances" (2007:101). Her argument resonates powerfully with my own, as she states emphatically, it is not enough to see how "the experience of becoming a subject is linked… to the experience of subjugation." Rather, one must also see how subjects remake their lives in the face even of violent domination. As Das and Kleinman put it, "while everyday life is fraught with the potential of danger…it is in the institutions of everyday life itself that we find the making of hope" (2000:10). This "descent into the ordinary" speaks to a kind of transcendence, not one that leaves ordinary life behind but tries to move toward it, to inhabit it, to cultivate it. In Arendt's "beginnings," Das' "second chances," and my "narrative experiments" and "moral laboratories," we can hear an insistence upon the ordinary as a space in which something new can be created, however fragile and unpredictable its consequences.

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