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NARRATIVE, LUCK, AND ETHICS:

**The Role of Chance in Ethical Encounters,
in Literature and Real Life Experiences**

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**NARRATIVE, LUCK, AND ETHICS:
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in Literature and Real Life Experiences**

**Nona Lyons
University of Southern Maine**

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**NARRATIVE, LUCK AND ETHICS:
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This paper takes up an initial inquiry--a work at its beginnings. The particular project examines the role of chance in people's ethical experience. I became interested in chance through research I carried out several years ago. In two different projects, in interviews with adolescents and with adults, people reported real-life ethical conflicts that had certain features that were puzzling. Later, I realized that these ethical dilemmas came about in part because of what some would call chance or luck: And, they seemed to stay with people, reverberating over time like the ever-widening circles on a pond caused by some striking object. At that time, I discovered the work of philosopher Martha Nussbaum(1986; 1990). Nussbaum is uncovering the place of luck in people' ethical experiences for Moral Philosophy. She does that through literature, re-examining certain classic Greek plays--the works of Euripides and Aeschylus--and the novels of writers such as Henry James and Charles Dickens--The Golden Bowl, David Copperfield.

Nussbaum argues for the inclusion of works of fiction in the study of Moral Philosophy because they alone can capture and reveal particular aspects of our ethical experiences. They can, she believes, especially show human response to difficult choices in the face of luck, when there are no harmless possibilities, when some wrong will be done and cannot be avoided.

As a psychologist, I find Nussbaum's work compelling. She is addressing issues similar to ones I discovered in people's self-reported ethical experiences. When asked to tell about a moral or ethical conflict of their own, some people construct narratives that involve chance, that is, their conflicts seem precipitated by some chance event over which they have no control. Yet Moral Psychology--like Moral Philosophy--has not yet developed a model of moral or ethical development that takes into account experiences of chance in people's lives in spite of the fact that most people readily acknowledge the role of luck in life's happenings, in events they would call "ethical" encounters.

In this paper, I take up these issues to do two things: 1) to share some interviews describing

people's actual ethical dilemmas that are connected to chance; and, then, 2) to say how I believe these events act in people's lives, especially to suggest how they foster moral deliberation. Finally, I want to raise for discussion the question: What might the inclusion of chance mean to the creation of a more adequate theory of ethical development?

Chance in People's Life Experiences and in Moral Theory: Contexts

Let me begin with a definition. Following the work of Nussbaum (1986; 1990), a chance event is defined here as one of those happenings that are part of an individual's life experiences and circumstances over which he or she may not have control. Hence, one can be subject to chance or change through occurrences that were unforeseen or unforeseeable. These events can, Nussbaum suggests, be a powerful component of one's ethical development, especially if they involve things one cares deeply about.

My interest in these ideas first emerged from observations made in a study of students at the Emma Willard School, a private school for girls

in Troy, New York (Gilligan, Lyons and Hanmer, 1990). In open-ended interviews, girls participating in the study were asked to describe themselves, their relationships with others and ethical conflicts they had experienced. Initiated in 1981 by the Emma Willard School, this project, which followed girls over their four years of high school, had two purposes: to help Emma Willard teachers and administrators better understand girls' ways of knowing and learning and making choices, including ethical choices; and, to begin mapping the largely neglected domain of adolescent girls' development (Gilligan, Lyons & Hanmer, 1990; see also, Adelson, 1980; Adelson & Doehrman, 1980; Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Gilligan, 1990). Under particular scrutiny was how girls might make use of two moral orientations in their ethical decision making: an orientation towards concerns of justice, rights and fairness, the traditionally identified ethic of justice, (Kohlberg, 1969); or an orientation to concerns of responsiveness to others' needs and one's own (an ethic of care [Gilligan, 1977; 1982; Lyons, 1982; 1983]). Results of this work, which confirmed girls' interest in and use of **both** ethics, were presented in the book Making

Connections: The Relational Worlds of Adolescent Girls at Emma Willard School
(Gilligan, Lyons and Hanmer, 1990).

But in a subsequent re-examination of these data a new dimension emerged: Girls' descriptions of their ethical deliberations revealed their awakening responses to life's realities and showed how sometimes seemingly simple chance events entered into their thinking, their moral decision making and their relationships to others.

The potential connection of chance to ethical decision-making or development has not been seriously examined in adolescent theory building. Indeed, the concept of chance with its insistence on the particular and concrete, the real rather than the ideal, counters traditional notions of adolescence: These posit adolescence as a time of a preoccupation with idealism and ideology (Erikson, 1968), with the achievement of abstract thinking (Piaget, 1965; Piaget & Inhelder, 1958) and with the emergence of transcendent ethical values (Kohlberg, 1969; 1984; Marcia, 1980). In its suggestion that one important but little-explored strand of adolescent

development may be coming to see, acknowledge and deal with life's inescapable realities, this work with its perspective, rooted in part in the responses of adolescent girls, challenges standard adolescent psychology.

Here I find it useful to turn to Nussbaum's work. In tracing the interconnection of the ideas of luck--chance--and ethics in classical Greek thought and literature, Nussbaum illuminates an element missing not just in contemporary moral philosophy but in moral psychology as well (Nussbaum, 1986; 1990; see also Williams, 1981; 1985).

This work in philosophy suggests, too, why this topic may not have been addressed either in adolescent psychology or in moral psychology. For this line of thinking about chance has been almost eliminated from Greek thought and our own. Through certain powerful ethical traditions beginning with Plato and including Kant, Nussbaum argues, "the goodness of a good human life has been made safe from luck" by placing it under the power of reason. "Putting that life...under the control of the agent, an element of reliance upon the external and

undependable was removed" (Nussbaum, 1986, p. 4). Kantians, for example, believe that the domain of moral value is immune from the assaults of luck. This is so, Kant would claim, because a genuine moral obligation, by its very nature, can never conflict with another genuine obligation. By construing conflicting claims into a hierarchical, ranked order, one can always determine which is the first and only duty or obligation, or right choice.

But, Nussbaum finds, Greek dramatists offered no such comfort and playwrights like Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, through such characters as Agamemnon or Antigone, tended to consider unalterable human predicaments as part of human experience and of a valued human life. While Nussbaum sees stark examples in these Greek plays--such as Agamemnon confronting the sacrifice of his daughter--she also finds similar ones in the more mundane, though none-the-less significant moments of our daily lives. She gives the example of a young professional woman who, already scheduled to present an important paper at a scholarly conference, discovers that her daughter has just been chosen for a leading part in a school play

to be performed on the same day as the conference (Nussbaum, 1989). Nussbaum articulates the ethical dimensions of these chance events: that is, that in the most vulnerable of our human activities, in our relations to others, when we care deeply and simultaneously for more than one thing, we face the possibility of a human conflict in which there may be no way to avoid harm. Yet these inescapable and unalterable experiences may be significantly and deeply at work in our moral development, in the conflicts we encounter, and in our deliberative thinking about them and about how to live a good human life.

But the rational, ranking model of Kantian ethical decision-making is reflected as well in moral psychology. Indeed the dominant model in the field, Kohlberg's justice model, is itself hierarchically organized. It offers a way to consider, reason, and rank situations and values in determining how to make moral choices. Similarly, in using an ethic of care, one can assume that it is possible to decide who one is to care for first.

This work in philosophy, however, alerts us to

ask how people, like high school students, might come to know and act on the unalterable situations they find in their relations to others, considering the chance events of their lives--what they can and cannot control, what they care deeply about--and how they come to realize and act on these perceptions.

**People's Experiences of Chance:
Acting When You Care Deeply About More
Than One Thing**

Let me turn to one of the Emma Willard student interviews that first captured my attention to see how ethical conflicts students report can reveal certain characteristics of these chance situations. I begin with an Emma Willard student, Anne. Each year over three years of her high school, Anne described situations of conflict that stood out for her, ones that she characterized as moral conflicts. In contrasting two of these conflicts, it is possible to see how and where chance events entered into them--and how and where they did not--and to speculate on their affect on Anne and her developing sense of self.

As a sophomore, Anne described a seemingly

everyday adolescent conflict that occurred when a "really good friend," wanted her to go to her house after school, but Anne couldn't reach her mother: "I think she wanted me to stay overnight or something because she had problems and, I couldn't get a hold of my mother, so I didn't know whether to go or not."

In that situation, Anne's major concerns were: "My feeling of what I should do. And what my mother would want me to do. I didn't want to get in trouble." She goes on:

.... it hurts, I guess, I mean it always hurts if you get in trouble.....I hate to have my mother upset with me for something... It hurts both of us I think, you know, I don't think she likes to get mad at me either.

To Anne, trouble was not just an effect, some punishment, but involved hurt, both to her mother and herself. When trying to think about what to do, Anne introduces a second concern:

Well,...it was something like I want to go for my own selfish reasons because I like to visit with my friend and I think she needs me there for her, too. I don't think it is just my own selfish reasons, but I think it would be good for my friend to

have me there when she needs somebody to talk to or something; and, then the other side is I just don't want to do something without mom's permission, I don't want to get in trouble...and that my friend wanted me to come, that also helped affect me and my decision. But the other side was very strong, I mean my mother's feelings on the subject was very strong, if she didn't like it, then I wouldn't do it, of course...

In the end, Anne says, "I decided to go to my friend's, which was fine, because my mother wasn't mad anyway. She didn't mind at all." To Anne that was the right thing to do. "Because she would have let me do it and I wanted to do it and it was important to my friend that I do it. So three ways in one direction is fine."

In the situation presented here, Anne grapples with the inherent conflict of "trying to be generous" to all the people around her, not wanting to hurt her mother, being there for her friend and also doing what she wants for her own "selfish reasons." She struggles to make her own decision, to be independent and to consider, too, what she would like to do.

But this situation, although presenting Anne with a conflict, was clearly one within her control. As she said, she did in fact decide to go to her friend's house. Giving priority to one thing, she acted on that. In contrast, a second conflict Anne reported a year later reveals different characteristics and different dynamics precipitated by a chance event.

The second ethical conflict Anne discussed occurred unexpectedly when her divorced father announced that he was to be remarried. In that situation, one over which she had no control, Anne had to decide whether to tell her mother: "It was really a hard decision on my part as to whether and when to tell my mother that, because on the one hand, I knew that it was really going to kill her to find that out, and on the other hand, I thought I had an obligation to tell her." Anne's conflict centered on the fact that, while her mother and father were divorced, she knew, "my mother still loved my father a great deal" and "there was always hope there."

When asked by the interviewer to say why she termed this situation a moral problem, Anne indicated her own realization of life's

contingencies, their interconnection with her values and the difficulty of choosing between things equally valued. Moral problems, Anne said, usually occur for her when:

I am struggling against myself to come to a solution to the problem because of values. I can't decide and they are **both equally as important.**

Anne describes the values that were conflicting in the situation of her father's marriage:

"The fact that I had always been brought up to care a tremendous amount about my parents' feelings and the way they feel. On the one hand that conflicted with itself because my mother's feelings were going to be really upset and my father's feelings were good, so that conflicted with itself. And um, my (long pause) trying to figure out, I guess you would have to weigh the love that I have for my mother which is in effect my morals, against if I love my mother enough to tell her something that she won't hear from other places and get upset. But then again, that's against mainly the feeling that I've been brought up with that I hate to see any member of my family hurt

and that would conflict against that, so the two."

Thus Anne found herself caught in a dilemma of telling her mother what she knew and risking her hurt, or not telling her and risking the pain her mother would inevitably feel when she did learn of the remarriage. In the end, Anne decided to reveal what she knew. In this calculation, she also considered consequences to herself: If she told, her mother would really be upset with her and some of it would "fall back on me because I live with her" and "terrible things like that really bother her but they hit me hard." When she did talk with her mother, she also knew that she and her sister, who joined in the telling, could give the mother "our personal support so she could handle it."

In this dilemma, Anne confronts one of life's small but terrible chance contingencies. Having no control over her father's decision and facing the impossibility of preventing hurt to her mother, yet desiring good for her father and understanding that she cares deeply for both of her parents, Anne saw, acknowledged and dealt with that situation. What is at work here is a chance happening over which an individual has no control, which involves things she cares

deeply about, and over which she cannot choose without some harm coming to someone.

One Effect of Chance: Moral Deliberation

In other interviews, adults reveal similar chance elements in their ethical encounters. Like Anne, they also elaborate another feature that seems connected to people's experience of chance, that is, their engagement in a kind of moral deliberation. The case of a history teacher offers one example of the way a chance event created a ethical dilemma and fostered moral deliberation (Lyons, 1990B).

The history teacher, an experienced, master teacher, told this story:

When I first started as a teacher, I was quite a showman. I was a performer. I could hold ten balls in the air at once. The kids loved it. The parents loved it. I was considered a great teacher. The kids would look up at me and say, "God, I love this course." But they weren't doing history, they were watching the show. It was only after I had been teaching six or seven years that I began to realize that I

wanted to (change). If memory serves me it was a student ...he shared that ball metaphor with me and he said to me, "You know, you're really wonderful and it's exciting but you have to show people how to do it. When are you going to teach us how to do it?" And that really forced me, it led me to try to do that, (to help kids become historians.) But I had to make a decision. I could say, 'Go away, you bother me. Everybody likes me as I am.' The kids had already dedicated the yearbook to me, teaching the old way. I had gotten all this publicity, fame whatever, from doing it as a showman, I had to make a decision.

Thus the teacher, confronted by an incredibly perceptive student, is challenged to think about his "showman" style of teaching and consider engaging his students in a radically different way of learning. But the history teacher acknowledged something more: that responding to his student created what he termed a "moral dilemma," specifically in determining **if** he should respond. For if the teacher does act to respond, to help his students become historians, he implies other changes as well: changes in his

approach to his discipline, in his teaching practices, and in his very way of interacting with his students. In this reorganization, he comes to a new way to conceive of himself as a teacher. As he says, he did not have to respond, nor did he have to change. Yet he describes himself today as a "person who tries to teach kids how they can do what I can do." As the teacher changes, his students as "historians" will ply a different set of tasks as learners, shifting to a new way of knowing. This situation, which came about because of a chance event, a kid's question and suggestion, triggered a set of ethical deliberations.

I have been particularly taken with this case. I have heard this teacher tell this story several times, repeating it in public over a number of years. I believe this was a powerful experience. And it reverberates with a point Nussbaum makes, that is, that chance encounters, when they involve things we care deeply about foster moral reflection. The history teacher, responding to his student's question, finds himself reflecting on his craft, his reputation as a teacher, the way he has been a "good" teacher to his students and how he might better teach

them. Like, Anne, the Emma Willard student, the history teacher ponders what to do considering things he values deeply. Thus, an uncontrollable chance event, a student's question, precipitates both an ethical dilemma and ethical reflection and deliberation.

While there is no way to generalize from these small examples, it is interesting to speculate whether this kind of reflection fosters ethical considerations of a larger kind: How should one conduct one's life and one's relations with others-- students, family, workers? What is fair or kind? How should one view the work one does or will do in the world? And how should one consider that it is good?

Another teacher, Ramon Parks, who teaches philosophy in a small suburban high school, spoke similarly about how teachers can find ethical dilemmas in chance situations and how they can engage moral reflection (Lyons, 1990B). In Parks' case a dilemma arose for him in a class discussion of a controversial issue when one of his students wanted Parks to reveal his own opinion. The situation forced the teacher to ask: "What is the context in which it

is appropriate for me to express my opinion on sensitive issues--euthanasia, suicide, abortion--the kinds of things we are talking about?" Parks elaborates why this is problematic for him:

They want to know my opinion and yet there is a danger in my mind of giving it too early because often the dialogue stops then. Now we know THE ANSWER, we can go on. Some kids don't do that, but a lot do. So I try to create an environment all year long whereby they are willing to question your opinions as another opinion and hopefully reasoned, but still an opinion. And then the conflict is reduced.

In the specific dilemma he encountered, Parks found himself in a class discussion of a case of euthanasia, where a nurse with a terminally ill patient in a moment of crisis lets the patient die without calling for help. For the teacher: "The question is , 'Is the nurse right or wrong to do that?' And I felt if not right, at least I could understand what the nurse was doing, and I thought it was a rational decision for her to take, ... and I thought that it was morally justifiable... I am sure it is not legally justifiable." In that situation Parks saw that the students were not giving the situation the attention it deserved, nor

were they treating it as "an open question." They saw it as a closed question, and so he ponders, "do I give my opinion and force it open, running the risk that twenty-two kids will change their vote because this is what the teacher thinks, which is not what I want?"

Although he wants his students to formulate positions and arguments, Parks admits the difficulty of that goal: "Kids tend to be very poor debaters. Their notion of debating is to say things louder and louder, rather than searching for some evidence.....I would love to have them develop the whole range of opinions and arguments on their own -- be able to expound the whole range before coming down someplace. Kids usually see things right away as either right or wrong, or (look for) instant answers and tend not to go much farther than that."

Embedded in Parks' considerations is also the students' own assumptions about the nature of knowledge. Here the teacher takes that into account as he struggles to determine just how he can voice his own views in class discussion, encourage the thinking of his students, and move them to a new understandings. Here a situation

that occurs by chance even though it is one that might reoccur causes the teacher to consider his views, those of his students as well as what is "good" for them as learners.

These cases do not fall easily into the traditional decision rules of Moral Psychology or Moral Philosophy. The experiences of the people presented here illustrate how chance contributes to ethical conflict and enters into ethical decision making. Situations may involve things one cares deeply about, and they may not always be susceptible to ranking--like the love for one's mother and one's father or the respect one has for one's students or oneself as a teacher. Indeed, recognizing that the value of these incommensurable goods, goods that cannot be ranked, creates conflict and deliberations--some that one may never forget.

Implications

Martha Nussbaum (1986, 1990) asks one question we need to explore:

To what extent can we distinguish between what is up to the world and what is up to us, when assessing a human life?

How much can reason--our ability to deliberate and choose, to make a plan in which ends are ranked, to decide actively what is to have value and how much--control the happenings of our lives? (pp. 3-7).

Nussbaum examines these questions in light of Greek thought before the idea that luck could be checked by reason took precedence in ethical theory. Kantian ethics, for example, suggest that practical reason is the best guide to moral life, that two obligations can never conflict with one another, and that there is always a way to rank and choose among one's deeply held values. But earlier Greek philosophers such as Aristotle argued differently.

Nussbaum sees this idea of conflicting goods joined with a fundamental question, one Aristotle asks, that is: How should a human being live? Nussbaum sees that in the stark experiences of Antigone or Agamemnon or Hecuba, the Greeks sought to portray the terrors of confronting what chance or luck had decreed. These experiences confront us with the inevitability of ethical deliberation and engage us in a dialectic that may contribute to our own answers to how to live a good human life.

As philosophers today recover this line of thinking about contingency and the conflicts of incommensurable values, moral psychologists need to do the same. That people should reveal the role of chance in their ethical dilemmas is really not surprising--luck is a clearly recognizable human phenomenon. What is surprising is how little this factor has been examined or explored in moral psychology. Recognizing this phenomenon suggests an important shift in the locus of what Moral Psychology should consider as including the moral dimensions of our lives. Past moral theorizing, primarily the work of Kohlberg but including Piaget as well, focussed on moral judgments of discrete conflicts. Clearly this is an appropriate realm, but, I would like to suggest, an incomplete one for an adequate theory of Moral Psychology. **Judgments of moral conflicts** are only one dimension of our moral lives. Taken alone they can obscure the multiple dimensions and experiences of moral development in all the exigencies and chance events embedded in living a life. Indeed, life histories may more adequately reveal the full range of ethical dimensions of peoples' lives. They at least ought to be added to what moral

psychologists take as the domain of their work.

These studies suggest, too, that future research should consider systematically how the realities and chance contingencies of life figure in peoples' ways of knowing and in their ethical and epistemological development. A framework for the development of students' ways of knowing articulated by Perry (1970) has been elaborated on in the work of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) who suggest that students move from a belief that knowledge is fixed to the idea that knowledge is constructed. How contingencies fit into this type of epistemological development needs to be identified as well. Clearly, dealing with conflicts in which one must act in the face of two or more unrankable values could hasten the awareness that one acts on what oneself alone can know. It may be that confronting a conflict of incommensurable values precipitates this developmental shift towards an understanding of oneself as a constructivist.

In this paper, peoples' encounters with chance have been used to examine a dialectic of ethical development and to discern the intricate

relationship between self, one's relations to others and the chance happenings in human experience. A new research agenda is suggested by this work. It must consider that:

1. Chance events, those unalterable life happenings, are intertwined in peoples' lives and can be experienced as ethical dilemmas they see and try to resolve;

2. Confronting these chance occurrences over which one does not have control has the effect of setting up a kind of dialectic, an ethical deliberation. This is likely because the situation usually reveals deeply held values for people or things, values which cannot be ranked.

3. The result of these deliberations is a new awareness, a way of seeing one's self, one's own values and others in their concrete particularity, with their hopes, fears, values and ideals--a kind of an expansion of one's moral imagination;

4. This experience and recognition of life's unalterable events and the resultant

deliberations they set in motion may be a significant part of ethical and intellectual development.

Awareness and understanding of the realities of chance in life contexts is not just a moral starting place, but one that may be an important part of healthy development. Researchers and practitioners, moral philosophers and psychologists need to understand this phenomenon more fully in all its rich particularity and look not just to moral judgments but to all aspects of peoples' lives and the stories of it that they tell.

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BIOGRAPHY

Nona Lyons received her Ed.D. from Harvard University and was awarded a Spencer Fellowship. She has publicly presented her research on numerous occasions and her works, notably those written with Carol Gilligan, have been extensively published. Nona Lyons is currently serving as Director of Teacher Education at the University of Southern Maine.

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- March 17 **J. Baird Callicott, Ph. D.**
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- March 18 **Paul Denefeld, J.D.**
Legal Director
American Civil Liberties Union
Thomas Schlindler
Director of Ethics
Mercy Health Services
Assisted Suicide and Constitutional Rights
- March 25 **Dorothy Vawter**
Associate Professor of Philosophy
Michigan State University
Donating, Procuring, and Transplanting Human Fetal Tissue: Ethical and Policy Concerns

- March 30 **Sylvia Culp, Ph.D.**
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*Genetic Testing for Predisposition
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- April 4 **Laurence Mordekhai Thomas**
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*Telling Narratives: Blacks and
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- and
- April 5 *The Grips of Immorality: Child
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- TBA **Elinor Wittrup**
Assistant Professor of Philosophy
University of Massachusetts
*Breast Implants: Implications for
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