Introduction to “Moral (and Other) Laboratories”

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Abstract “Moral (and other) laboratories” is a special issue that draws on Cheryl Mattingly’s notion of the “moral laboratory” to explore the uncanny interface between laboratory ethnography and moral anthropology, and to examine the relationship between experience and experiment. We ask whether laboratory work may provoke new insights about experimental practices in other social spaces such as homes, clinics, and neighborhoods, and conversely, whether the study of morality may provoke new insights about laboratory practices as they unfold in the day-to-day interactions between test tubes, animals, apparatuses, scientists, and technicians. The papers in this collection examine issues unique to authors’ individual projects, but as a whole, they share a common theme: moral experimentation—the work of finding different ways of relating—occurs in relation to the suffering of something or someone, or in response to some kind of moral predicament that tests cultural and historically shaped “human values.” The collection as a whole intends to push for the theoretical status of not merely experience itself, but also of possibility, in exploring uncertain border zones of various kinds—between the human and the animal, between codified ethical rules and ordinary ethics, and between “real” and metaphorical laboratories.

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Introduction

It is hard not to notice that an ethical turn in cultural anthropology is well underway. In the last 15 years or so, morality and ethics have emerged as a distinct theoretical problem. In essays that have quickly become canonical, various scholars have tried to explain why a discipline specializing in social relationships took so long to theorize ethics, identifying Durkheim's conflation of morality with "the social" as historically consequential (Laidlaw 2002; Robbins 2012a; Zigon 2008). Although one could argue anthropologists have been studying morality and ethics all along, by pointing out that economic exchange, political indoctrination, gender socialization and virtually everything else that involves the regulation of human conduct in the interest of a larger collective constitutes morality, anthropologists *of* morality would still insist on the absence of theorization itself. Amongst scholars contributing to the ethical turn, there is further disagreement on issues such as whether morality and ethics are the same thing, how to look for or recognize morality and ethics, and what is more primary in moral life – habit or reflection (Cassaniti and Hickman 2014; Das 2012, 2015; Lambek 2010, 2015; Laidlaw 2014; Zigon 2008). Whatever the case may be, Joel Robbins is right to say this is a field where a "thousand flowers are blooming" (2012a).

What is the relevance of the ethical turn for medical anthropology? Well for one, medical anthropology has been a major forerunner. Jarrett Zigon points out that the moral frequently stands out as a theme in ethnographic work on topics as diverse as biomedical authority, the interpretation of brain death, sexuality and HIV, clinical encounters, and the social life of bioethics (2008: 107–126). In terms of theoretical development, Arthur Kleinman stands out as having exerted the strongest influence on the way medical anthropologists have adopted the "moral" as an analytic keyword. Kleinman's use of the phrase "local moral worlds" offered an alternative to "culture" while retaining an emphasis on difference, with "local" "worlds" suggesting unique worlds of meaning, and "moral" the deeply felt flow of social experiences (which includes illness and healing) (Kleinman and Kleinman 1991). Much more than another case study on the moral dimension of a social phenomenon or practice, Kleinman's contribution consisted of orienting interpretation to the question of "what is at stake" for actual people. One may even go further in acknowledging Kleinman for shaping a certain sensibility that is more philosophical than anthropological, having argued for the "moral lesson" illness and suffering teaches about the human condition itself (1988, 2006).

Although anthropologists studying religion are noticeably at the forefront of the ethical turn, advancing theoretical development in relation to ethnographic work on Jain ascetic practices (Laidlaw 2002), perfecting piety in Egypt (Mahmood 2005), and Christianity in Papua New Guinea (Robbins 2004, Robbins 2012b) to name just a few examples, medical anthropologists have been and continue to be in a unique position to theorize morality. The two sub-fields have a lot in common to be sure, having overlapping areas of inquiry. But it is also worth identifying what is unique to medical anthropology in terms of avenues for theoretical development. Why would the study of suffering, healing, and learning to live with illness and with others be generative of insights about ethical life? How might the morality

framework help medical anthropologists re-conceptualize processes they have been “studying all along”? How might the intersection of medical anthropology and moral anthropology advance anthropological theory more generally?

This special issue aims to answer some of these questions by exploring the notion of the “moral laboratory,” a concept from Cheryl Mattingly’s recent book *Moral Laboratories*, an ethnography of African-American families in Los Angeles raising sick children (2014). Mattingly uses “moral laboratories” as a metaphorical trope to capture how people conduct experiments on their own lives in rising to the challenges illness and disability bring, even if “a laboratory does not seem a very auspicious metaphor” (15) for handling the at-stakeness of the moral projects she describes, let alone the “first person virtue ethics” she develops. (More on this later.) This improbable mingling of a post-humanist image with humanist concerns led to conversations between Mattingly and Mette Nordahl Svendsen on “real” laboratories and “moral” laboratories, which then led to a double panel at the American Anthropological Association annual meeting in 2015, also titled “Moral (and other) laboratories.”

Our double panel set out to explore the uncanny interface between laboratory studies and moral anthropology, and to examine the relationship between experience and experiment (Mattingly 2014:15). We further set out to see whether laboratory work may provoke new insights about experimental practices in other social spaces such as homes, clinics, and neighborhoods, and conversely, whether the study of morality may provoke new insights about laboratory practices as they unfold in the day-to-day interactions between test tubes, animals, apparatuses, scientists, and technicians. All the presenters examined issues unique to their own projects, but as a whole, the papers shared a common theme: moral experimentation—the work of finding different ways of relating—occurs in relation to the suffering of something or someone, or in response to some kind of moral predicament that tests cultural and historically shaped “human values.” The papers described ways of relating that were “quirky” (see also Sharp 2017), unorthodox, or culturally and personally unexpected. As a collection, they pointed to a new possibility for further elevating the theoretical status of experience itself, by attending to relational practices that constitute “moral projects.” Many medical and psychological anthropologists have contributed to the study of experience well before the ethical turn began, as demonstrated not only in Arthur Kleinman’s work, but also in the push for an “experience-near anthropology” (Wikan 1990, 1991), “person-centered ethnography” (Hollan 2001), “existential-phenomenological anthropology” (Jackson 1989, 1996, 1998), “hermeneutic phenomenology” (Good 1994), “cultural phenomenology” (Csordas 1990, 1994; Throop 2010), and “critical phenomenology” (Biehl et al. 2007; Desjarlais 1997), to give some key examples. But we contend something new is being stirred with the flurry of thinking centered on moral life, and this something may be a new possibility for elevating the theoretical status of possibility itself.

Why “Morality”? Why “Laboratory”?

If medical anthropologists have at their disposal a rich set of tools for taking experience seriously, why bother with the “new” anthropology of morality and all the moral philosophy that comes with it? What could the “moral laboratory” trope

add to our theoretical repertoire for understanding the human experience? In this section, we discuss how and why Mattingly developed the notion of moral laboratory, with attention to the theoretical challenge at hand and what her ethnographic material called for.

We shall start by clearing away any basic misunderstandings about what morality even refers to in the first place. In focusing on the ethical and moral domain, anthropologists are not interested in making assertions about what is right and wrong. As Michael Lambek puts it in introducing the volume *Ordinary Ethics*, “Our ethics is neither prescriptive nor universalist, in the sense of advocating uniform global rights or straining for a version of the common good” (2010:6). Scholars in this field are less interested in evaluating—by following rational procedures for determining right reason—than on the social fact that people are evaluative (Laidlaw 2014:3). In Mattingly’s work, the moral is located in the exercise of practical reason as required by the conduct of everyday life, and in the question of “What is the good I want to pursue” (Mattingly 1998a, b, 2010, 2012a, b, 2014).¹ What counts as “the good” depends on changing life situations, contexts, and histories, and what complicates any one good is the fact that multiple goods are often in competition with one another.

In need of an approach that would be appropriate for studying local moral worlds, purged of the universalizing, normative impulses of moral philosophy (Mattingly 2012a, b: 162–163), a number of contributors to the ethical turn have found conceptual guidance in Michel Foucault’s late career work on ethics in the Greco-Roman world (e.g. Mahmood 2005; Robbins 2004; Throop 2010; Zigon 2011). *The History of Sexuality, Volume II* is especially noteworthy for providing a four-part framework for teasing out different elements of a moral system (ethical substance, mode of subjection, technologies of the self, and telos), and a vocabulary for differentiating between systems (“ethics-oriented” and “code-oriented” moralities). Such a framework allows for comparative analysis, as seen for example in Robbins’s further development of a framework contrasting the “morality of reproduction” versus the “morality of freedom” in explaining what troubles Urapmin Christians (2012b). Perhaps what is even more significant about Foucault’s late career work is that the thinker who gave anthropology a theory of subject-formation—there is no “beautiful totality of the individual” prior to force relations—in the image of a prisoner bringing the dynamics of power to bear upon himself went on to develop a more nuanced framework that went so far as to accommodate the possibility of human freedom (Foucault 1977: 217). Foucault found it in the “arts of existence” of early antiquity. At this stage his enemy is no longer modern, secular authority but Christianity, which—in his account—redefined the purpose of sexual restraint as a matter of fighting against evil rather than stylizing one’s life.

Given the contemporary interest in theorizing the human subject at a time when the “free subject”—free to aspire, to make choices, to take individual responsibility—has emerged as the main protagonist in neoliberal social projects the world over, Foucault’s late career work has been especially useful for anthropologists,

¹ This summary is adapted from Kuan (2015: 15–16).

because one could avoid simplifying freedom as illusory and still address history and power. As this introduction is not the place for going into too much detail on what the arguments are, suffice it to say that what was for Foucault a specific project with specific research questions has become a “tradition,” constituted by assumptions about subject-formation that continue to invoke the subject found in Foucault’s earlier work.

It is against a “discursive Foucault” that the moral laboratories trope was developed. Mattingly identifies two prominent ways of imagining how the moral self is made, two “inaugural scenes” (Mattingly 2012b, 2014). Foucault’s study of premodern ethics has inspired the inaugural scene of the artisan’s workshop, where selves are forged through moral apprenticeship, involving activities such as monitoring one’s thoughts and disciplining the body according to certain aesthetic values. The other inaugural scene Mattingly identifies is perhaps less Foucauldian than Nietzschean. Here, in the inaugural scene of the trial, the moral self is born in response to an accusation. An “I” takes form in the process of reconstructing one’s deeds in the face of possible punishment.² While the inaugural scene of the artisan’s workshop is less dark than the scene of the trial, in both imaginaries, power is the main protagonist. In the artisan’s workshop, it is less the force of fear than the force of authority that gives form to the subject. The pledging of oneself to a particular regime of self-improvement may be voluntary, but the important point is that there are norms and guides to follow in the practice of virtue.

Mattingly offers an alternative third scene—the moral laboratory—in response to the limits of the above.³ For even if the image of craftsmanship provides a subtler picture of self cultivation, it fails to capture “the vagaries of everyday life and the difficulties of discerning what might constitute the morally appropriate action in the singular circumstances life presents” (2012b: 4). Although the laboratory metaphor may be “impertinent,” impertinence is precisely what is needed to shed light on a dimension of human life otherwise difficult to perceive, let alone theorize,⁴ particularly in a discipline where theories of social reproduction dominate. Mattingly’s ethnographic material called for something different, as the families in her team’s research study responded to the challenge of caring for sick children not merely by, say, learning to become compliant patients who can follow medical orders, but more significantly, “stepping up to the plate” and undertaking “unexpected and unwanted” projects of moral becoming in the name of caring for intimate others.

To illustrate, we turn to a description Mattingly gives of a physical therapy session involving a boy with a congenital hip problem. Leroy, his mother and maternal grandmother are in the room, with the grandmother participating actively—reporting to the therapist on how they have carried out exercises at home, taking instructions for corrections.

² Citing Judith Butler’s *Giving an Account of Oneself* to exemplify, Mattingly observes that the “insidious work of power” remains the main protagonist. This is a power that is “no mere imposition upon someone but—more horrifyingly—produces that someone in the first place” (Mattingly 2012b:3).

³ The “moral laboratory” is an alternative both to the trial and workshop scenarios, and also an alternative to the scene conceptualized by Zigon as an alternative, that of moral “breakdown” (2009).

⁴ Mattingly’s discussant comments, AAA 2015.

Mattingly entertains how this clinical encounter may be interpreted in light of the image of the artisan as well as accused defendant. After all, there is a dance of disapproval and defense in the interaction between the therapist and Delores the grandmother, and, Leroy's mother Marcy is especially an object of the judging gaze. Her supposed disengagement from the session has irked other clinicians, inviting accusations such as "What an uninvolved parent!" "She's not even watching!"

But this is not where Mattingly ends, of course. What appears to be an illustration of institutional power and the making of a good caretaking subject was—for this family—just one moment of many, in a life intimately shared and kept together with hard moral work. Mattingly informs us that, "What the therapists who were so critical of Marcy completely missed was that this was no ordinary physical therapy—it was a trial run. The clinic served as a moral laboratory where Delores and her daughter Marcy were experimenting with motherhood itself" (2014:72). Marcy, a former crack cocaine addict of 18 years, was experimenting with the mother she could be in the context of mundane but concrete household routines that included going along to her son's physical therapy sessions. Together, they worked to "build a whole repertoire of experiences that give evidence to support their improbable hope" (79), in the face of what the statistics on long-term addiction and even skeptics in their own community predicted.

Their story illustrates a point Mattingly intends to make in the *Moral Laboratories* book, which is that actual people do not live their lives as if their destinies are foregone. Moral laboratories the trope intends to locate the spaces in which people become researchers and experimenters of their own lives—gathering evidence, trying out the otherwise. Often conducted against the odds, they possess the quality of what Hannah Arendt has called "natality," i.e. a new beginning, a miracle, a rebirth. This aspect of moral experimentation points to the possibility of hope, even if this hope is intimately linked to uncertainty. As such, moral experimentation necessarily has a tragic side, not because the laws of necessity will rear its ugly head, but rather because outcomes cannot be predicted let alone controlled. In another case involving a mother's endless pursuit of medical care for her sickle-cell disease having daughter, multiple experimental moments mark her history (and reputation amongst clinicians) as a "Superstrong Black Mother" who will fight to no end. But this mother's success in cultivating the expertise and the virtues required in this circumstance had moral costs she could not have anticipated: she became separated from the very child she set out to protect. She grew "more and more blinded to her daughter's plight as just another little girl" (2014:110).

The portraits Mattingly painstakingly render of moral life in trying circumstances goes hand-in-hand with her argument for what she calls "first person virtue ethics." Well aware of anthropology's uneasy relationship with the notion of a singular, biographical self, Mattingly nevertheless insists on the importance of an approach that considers the role of motive, the development of character and virtue over time, and the situatedness of moral action within intimate relationships and contingent life situations. The first person virtue ethics Mattingly elaborates absolutely does not involve a return to the heroic, self-sufficient individual imagined in Enlightenment humanism, but rather, a way to attend to "the problem of action itself" (2014: 55). The humanism she has in mind can be found in the stage dramas of Western

antiquity, where the question of how best to live a good life when there is so little under human control was posed (80). Finely elaborated by moral and political philosophers writing in the neo-Aristotelian tradition, the moral actor here is not a cool, impartial deliberator, standing apart from ongoing human intercourse. The moral subject in first person virtue ethics is instead both an actor and a sufferer (Arendt 1998). If human action is subject to the unknowable and uncontrollable, and if circumstances are so often composed of competing, incommensurable goods, then rational deliberation alone could hardly secure a good life. Other virtues are required, and what those virtues may be, resist universalization. Moreover, the “first person” in first person virtue ethics is not restricted to a singular individual. The first person plural—family and community—upholding a common life is implied.

Against the potential critique that a first person virtue ethics is weak in critical insight, Mattingly proposes developing an interest in indigenous hermeneutics of critique. *Moral Laboratories* documents the way people themselves critique the forces that shape their circumstances, cultural archetypes (e.g. the Superstrong Black Mother) (78), lack of research funding for a “black disease” (120–121), and even intimate others and oneself, as when one teenager named Ralph agonizingly pleads at a park vigil following his younger brother’s murder, “We must stop killing us” (187–191).

Mattingly asks what it is that makes critique the privilege of academia, situating academic critique within what Paul Ricoeur termed the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” i.e. a general impulse to move beyond what people themselves hold to be true, in order to unmask the human capacity to be misled. In her words “we contemporary social theorists have collectively become masters of suspicion” (203). By recourse to an indigenous hermeneutics of critique (and of hope), the book argues, we might learn something new, and be able to understand how personal tragedy (for example the death of a child) can lead to social engagement and activism. Not in any straightforward way, however. After all, the families Mattingly writes about face tremendous odds—institutional, structural, historical. But at least this approach allows us to bring “small histories” to light, “efforts that would otherwise be unnoticeable” (206). It is also an approach that invites us to locate wisdom in unexpected places—wisdom that is hard won, yet so crucial when navigating difficult circumstances for which few guidelines exist.

This discussion leads us to some preliminary answers to the questions posed above, concerning the relationship between medical anthropology, moral anthropology, and anthropological theory. Medical anthropologists tend to work with people who are all too familiar with human vulnerability and the cultivation of virtue. The dance between reversal and response—between distress, pain, loss and despair on the one hand, and endurance, irony, experimentation and care-giving on the other—place medical anthropologists in a unique position for not only theorizing moral subjectivity but also processes that link the deeply intimate with larger interpersonal and social projects. Moving toward a more systematic understanding of the moral dimension of suffering and care, through engagement with moral anthropology and perhaps even moral philosophy, could further strengthen the impact of medical anthropology in sociocultural anthropology more generally. After all, at the heart of both sub-fields is a deep commitment to

understanding the human experience ethnographically, in all of its wondrous and tragic complexity.

The Papers

The papers in this collection demonstrate the significance of the moral laboratories trope for identifying and conceptualizing moral experimentation in diverse spaces and situations. As mentioned above the trope intends to locate social spaces in which people become researchers and experimenters on their own (and others') lives, where experimental practices arise in response to the suffering of something or someone, or in response to some kind of moral predicament that tests culturally and historically shaped "human values."

Svendsen, Gjødsbøl, Dam and Navne's paper together with Sharp's paper start our tour through moral laboratories by taking us to "real" laboratories and other quintessential sites of modernity: animal labs, a dementia nursing home and a NICU—all institutional sites harboring the limits of what constitute human lives. Starting out with claims made about the human in Western thought in general (Svendsen et al. 2017), and Charles Darwin in particular (Sharp 2017), where morality is identified as that which separates the human from the animal, these papers explore the borderlands or grey zones in between, and in Svendsen et al.'s paper, between life and not-life at the beginning and end of human life. Both papers describe situations fraught with moral dilemmas or paradoxes consisting of striking the right balance between a "greater good" and the daily work of caring for a precarious other, namely laboratory piglets and monkeys who serve as proxies for the human in laboratory experiments intended to contribute to human welfare (Svendsen et al. 2017), or to advancing scientific research—i.e. neuroscience (Sharp 2017). Both papers demonstrate how ethical guidelines are present, but not sufficient, for dealing with the moral complexity of the mundane care practices that coexist alongside use of animals as research tools. In all the three institutional sites observed by Svendsen et al., professionals come to doubt the very work they are meant to carry out, in making sense of the suffering of the "precarious lives" under their care—piglets, premature infants, and nursing home residents. Meanwhile, the caretakers in the university research labs Sharp observed are "left to their own devices"—to "tinker" (Mol et al. 2010) with different television programs—in trying to provide research macaques "a good [laboratory] life," because the official codes offer no details on tracking effectiveness.

In Svendsen et al.'s paper "Humanity at the Edge: The Moral Laboratory of Feeding Precarious Lives," the best good is not easily judged in situations involving a contradiction between completing an experiment versus relieving suffering, ensuring the survival of a premature infant even while knowing severe disabilities are likely, and maintaining the life of someone who may not want to live anymore. In all three institutional sites, "quirky" practices (Sharp 2017) enacting the human value of the "almost human," "not yet human," and "still human" spontaneously arise in the course of daily routines, "creating new ways of doing the human." Svendsen et al. combine the perspective of distributed agency inspired by laboratory

ethnography and science and technology studies with Mattingly's first person approach to argue that enactments of humanness across their three institutional sites matter to the researchers and caregivers as individuals and professionals. They demonstrate how morality is "done" rather than "said," in relation to protocols and routines involving all sorts of material things such as diapers, feeding machines, incubators, tubes, spoons and syringes, thereby pointing to the uncanny interface between laboratory studies and moral anthropology.

A hermeneutics of critique may be found in the daily care work Svendsen, Gjødsbøl, Dam and Navne have observed. In negotiating and redrawing the moral border between human and animal, between "ethical exertion and profound passivity," professionals in the animal lab, the NICU, and the nursing home conduct moral experiments with the parameters of what counts as human, contesting the very concept found "at the heart of anthropology and open[ing] up an epistemic space for interrogating this concept."

In her paper "The Moral Lives of Laboratory Monkeys: Television and the Ethics of Care," Sharp explores the curious presence of television in the two inseparable domains of a lab monkey's life: as a research tool during "work time" in laboratories and as an "enrichment" tool during "down time" in primate housing units. As in Svendsen et al.'s paper, we are—through this use of television during work time/down time—brought into an uncanny space of human-macaque proximity, with monkeys not only serving as an ideal proxy based on evolutionary closeness but also as a mirror of human action and life worlds. Contextualized in a history of television use in monkey research labs, changing ideas about primate theory of mind, human and non-human primate similarities and differences, and appropriate welfare practices, Sharp's argument focuses not on codified rules of ethical conduct but rather the informal, quotidian care efforts that serendipitously emerge in the interspecies encounter. Sharp's purpose is not so much to evaluate the success of lab personnel's endeavors—though she could not help but wonder, "why show a film of African wildlife to relatively disinterested monkeys of Asian origin who were bred, born, and raised for research and have no notion, experience, or memory of life beyond a laboratory's walls, much less the African savanna?" More significantly, the moral experimentation of caretakers especially, whose work "require them to face head-on the life-and-death realities" of the lab monkey's existence, speaks more to a holding in proximity an other who has become, in working relationships that sometimes last for several years, an intimate other. Sharp, like Svendsen et al., takes up Mattingly's first person approach to locate moral projects that negotiate the "troublesome boundary of species difference" as something that matters to lab personnel. In this mattering, laboratory television emerges as "doubly moral: it evidences the 'humanness' of monkeys alongside the 'humane' qualities of caretakers."

With the next set of papers we move to spaces of family and home. In Kuan's paper "At the Edge of Safety: Moral Experimentation in the Case of Family Therapy," we are brought into an experimental space for the transformation of family dynamics—i.e. the therapy room, while in Grøn's paper "The Tipping of the Big Stone - and Life itself. Obesity, Moral Work and Responsive Selves over

Time,” we are brought into everyday contexts consisting of DIY projects, kitchen tables, gardens and weight loss projects.

What is shared between these two papers is not only the family sites, but an identification of moral laboratories wherein immense efforts in “pitting the possible against the predictable” (Mattingly 2014) may be found. In Kuan’s paper the possible is pitted against the stasis of family systems through deliberate violations of relational patterns—understood by therapists as maintaining an identified patient’s psychiatric condition, while in Grøn’s “life itself” is what might tip the big stone, the weight of the family. Kuan bases her paper on an analysis of personal stories of supervision contained in a key textbook for learning structural family therapy, focusing especially on how Wai-Yung Lee, the “godmother” of family therapy in Asia, learned to become a fearless therapist under the provocative supervision of Salvador Minuchin. Moral experimentation is found both in therapeutic interventions, and also in Minuchin’s provocative style of supervision. Kuan—like Sharp—examines the use of visual technologies, namely taping therapy sessions for playback during supervision. What do the technologies accomplish? How do they work in experiments in relating to intimate others, if they do not exhibit the kind of “tinkering” (Mol et al. 2010) described in Sharp’s paper? There is instead a specific method of observing through video recordings interpersonal dynamics—“phenomena otherwise too small or too fleeting to be seen or noticed.” Therapeutic mastery consists of the ability to see a system’s distinctive pattern, to know how and when to destabilize, and moral experimentation of cultivating the courage to be “ethically unfair but therapeutically correct.”

Kuan aims to reassess the moral orientation of structural family therapy by linking this experimental practice to Mattingly’s notion of moral laboratories and the call for identifying a hermeneutics of hope. She finds in the profession of family therapy an obstinate and audacious hope that something different is always possible, even in the face of human inertia and psychiatric individualization. It is especially worth noting that the basic premise of family systems therapy—the conviction that “there is no such thing as an individual, only interpersonal relationships where the ‘personality’ and the behavior of one person is the resulting complement of another”—along with Svendsen et al.’s and Sharp’s explorations of care for the “not fully human” other, open up broader questions of what constitutes a human self.

The question of the self is fully taken up in Grøn’s paper. Based on Mattingly’s argument that some notion of a biographical self is indispensable to understanding moral cultivation over time, Grøn introduces us to Rita, her long term interlocutor and fieldwork friend, and to Rita’s experiences and reflections on trying to lose weight in the face of overwhelming evidence—both from personal experience and scientific findings—that points to the improbability of success. Rita, like the therapists and families in Kuan’s paper, pits the possible against the predictable, in life long, transgenerational experimentation with weight loss. Danish practices of “hygge”—socializing through (often excessive) eating and drinking—and the meaning of big have become highly ambiguous in the context of the health wave that has swept over virtually all corners of Danish society. What used to be big and cozy (“hyggelig”) has become obese and alien (Grøn 2017a).

Juxtaposing Rita's formulas for weight loss from two separate fieldwork periods, which shifted from a posture of "willing with the head and heart" to allowing small things endowed with the potential to "tip the big stone" to do their work, Grøn observes differing notions of self at play. The more than ten years that separates Grøn's contact with Rita demonstrates how moral reorientation against the odds evolves over time, as new experiments arise in response to the changing circumstances of life. Inspired by the German philosopher Bernhard Waldenfels's phenomenology of responsivity, Grøn argues for a theory of the responsive self, in conceptualizing how Rita's later approach to weight loss holds the alien that is obesity in proximity, as something that calls from beyond one's grasp and control. Here we find a logic of action that differs considerably from the logic of intentional acts. The responsive logic enacted in Rita's new formula involves complex patterns that not only defy the orderly but simplistic logic behind the energy expenditure model commonly invoked to explain the obesity "epidemic." Even more significantly, Rita's understanding of her own role among the many things that can and cannot be moved makes room for miracles that arise from beyond intentional control, and from the rupture between demand and response—what Waldenfels has likened to "two glances that meet." In other words, Rita's reorientation involves shifting from a logic of intentional acts to a logic of responsivity: understanding one's agency in the grander scheme of things goes hand in hand with being "awake exactly when potentialities emerge." Ultimately, the paper offers a concept of the self that has broader theoretical implications, in stressing equally the "suffering and the agential dimensions of action—an active passivity and passive activity."

The final paper by Janelle Taylor, "Engaging with Dementia: Moral Experiments in Art and Friendship," elaborates on the issue of selves and others, by exploring not only projects of care of intimate others, but also more distant ones. Taylor takes us to spaces where we may discover experimental practices of holding people with dementia in personhood, through art or friendship—or a combination of both. Noting a powerful tendency in American culture to locate hope in medical research that might one day lead to the cure of dementia, Taylor argues for honoring the creative experiments ordinary people conduct in the face of dementia, which presents "a serious moral challenge to selves and relationships." Indeed, as Mattingly has pointed out with respect to how devastating events give rise to projects of moral becoming, the bad luck of being confronted with dementia gives rise to the cultivation of virtues not needed before. The exemplary friends Taylor presents "step up to the plate" and form collectives of care, or in Taylor's poetic prose, "cocoons," around someone they might only have known superficially before the onset of dementia. Doing so is highly experimental in the sense that the moral challenge is easy enough to avoid, particularly because it would be quite blameless for friends, neighbors, and coworkers to turn away. In other words, friendships in the face of dementia succeed against the odds. As in Grøn's paper, Taylor's highlights "the kinds of moral experimentation that are in fact possible, and quietly being practiced, by ordinary people every day." There is no fanfare, no Nobel Prize for the exemplary friends who hold the person with dementia "within a social

embrace,” meeting a tremendous challenge with “love and joy.” The stories Taylor holds up to view reveal “moral work of the highest order.”⁵

Following the collection of papers is Michael Lambek’s commentary, which perceptively identifies what the authors reveal about the ordinary in lab experiments and conversely, the experimental in ordinary life. The commentary accentuates the complexity of practical ethics, and invites further reflection in raising provocative questions about uncertainty, risk and accountability—as they arise in-between the edges of care and experiment. Cheryl Mattingly rounds out the collection with an afterword.

Uncertainty and Possibility

This special issue is by no means the first time medical anthropology has productively intersected with moral anthropology. As discussed earlier, medical anthropology has been a major forerunner, in taking experience and what is at stake for people seriously. Joel Robbins’s call for “an anthropology of the good” in his programmatic essay “Beyond the suffering subject” provides a recent example of working toward an explicit synthesis (2013). The essay characterizes the major paradigm shift that followed anthropology’s crisis of representation in the 1980s as a shift from the “savage to the suffering slot” (448). In place of the figure of the primitive the suffering subject now stood—the “subject living in pain, in poverty, or under conditions of violence” (448), reconfiguring anthropology’s “relation to those it studied from one of analytic distance and critical comparison focused on difference to one of empathetic connection and moral witnessing based on human unity” (453). Robbins recognizes the importance of the anthropology of suffering, but he goes on to argue that something has been lost in the shift, namely the lessons difference could teach about other possible ways of being human, “ways we could not imagine on our own” (456).

The loss, however, has not been complete, nor is it irreversible. Robbins observes scattered evidence for scholarship that considers the “cultural point,” which is not necessarily at odds with suffering and the critique of global problems (456). The contributions he has in mind may be “poised to come together in a new focus on how people living in different societies strive to create the good in their lives” (457). Echoing Mattingly’s critique of the hermeneutics of suspicion, Robbins’s argues against the widespread tendency to dismiss and write off striving and aspiration as, in the worst extreme, “bad-faith alibis” for the worlds people unknowingly reproduce (457).

Although all of the essays in this special issue deal with ethnographic material collected in “the West,” they undoubtedly reveal just how diverse moral orientations, formulas and practices can be. Differences stem from the unique particulars of a given world of practice—e.g. kill pigs to save infants (Svendsen et al. 2017), “ethically unfair but therapeutically correct” (Kuan 2017). Sometimes they are developed in the context of experimenting with relationships and with life

⁵ Mattingly’s discussant comments, AAA 2015.

itself—e.g. making “cocoon” (Taylor 2017), and learning to work with “each little thing that comes” (Grøn 2017a, b).

The various cases not only present people striving to realize all sorts of goods and ideals, they also reveal how perilous, risky, and sometimes tragic moral striving can be. Grøn’s main informant Rita has spent years engaging in the hard work of moral reorientation demanded by weight loss, successfully exercising agency in grooming her children and a beautiful garden. Yet still, the obesity is there, thwarting expectations. Care-workers in a nursing home outside of Copenhagen work hard to create “magical moments” when feeding residents they are not always able to read, striving to sustain their value as human persons. Yet when interviewed, they cast doubt on the very work they imbue so much meaning in in daily practice. Clinicians in a Danish NICU make every effort to include severely premature infants in the “human family,” even while knowing that some will end up excluded from society in the future. Caretakers in neuroscience laboratories hope to “enrich” the lives of lab monkeys by installing televisions for their entertainment, even though guidelines and evidence for effectiveness is thin, save for the rebellious fact that the monkeys are barely even paying attention. Perhaps most ironic of all is the case Taylor describes with respect to a group of coworkers who have created arrangements for managing a fellow coworker’s life, Jacqueline, who has dementia but no family. The friend who volunteered to help pay bills was reported to the Adult Protection Services, vividly illustrating the close relationship between hope (i.e. the unexpected is possible) and tragic uncertainty.

The contributions in this special issue document the many different ways people strive to create the good in their work and in their lives, even in the face of uncertain outcomes and moral paradox. As a whole, they answer to Robbins’s call for an anthropology that can hold onto the “cultural point” in expanding our imagination of what is possible, while retaining something of the spirit he identifies in the anthropology of suffering, i.e. “empathetic connection and moral witnessing.” Although there is suffering in these essays to be sure, physical and emotional, we would add that suffering must also include the suffering of the human condition of plurality, living and acting amongst others, immersed in webs that render any notion of individual sovereignty and mastership unrealistic (Arendt 1998). To reiterate a point made earlier in this introduction, moral experimentation necessarily has a tragic side, not because the laws of necessity will rear its ugly head, but rather because action is problematic in and of itself (Mattingly 2014: 55). This is true of human action everywhere, regardless of the socio-historical context.⁶

And conversely, where there is uncertainty, there is also possibility.

It is very much our hope that this special issue could help to expand our theoretical imagination, and deepen how we understand the formation of moral

⁶ Although this example does not illustrate the problem of action from a first person perspective, Abu-Lughod’s point about the certainty of uncertainty in Bedouin weddings is instructive (1991). Bedouin weddings follow a precise outline, each and every time, following underlying rules of social organization that serve to reproduce community. Yet still, a number of questions hang over each individual event, questions that include whether the couple will get along and whether there will be blood at the defloration. A game changing essay, Abu-Lughod’s critique of the “culture” concept led to experiments in writing rather than re-theorization.

subjectivity. In juxtaposing quotidian yet quirky moral practices in “real” laboratories against experimental practices in therapy rooms, homes, and communities, the collection points toward an anthropology that could better accommodate uncertainty and possibility as central theoretical concerns. Against a “discursive” Foucauldian tradition, against the well-accepted explanation that social actors commonly reproduce their social worlds in daily practice without knowing they have done so, the collection as a whole aims to demonstrate how people do not live their lives as if their destinies are foregone, nor are working professionals mere embodiments of institutional power/knowledge. The contributions locate uncertainty and possibility in the surprising originality of the ordinary, “unmasking the *profoundness* that lies beneath the surface” (Mattingly 2014: 206). For the trial and error of negotiating thorny moral and life circumstances, the work of figuring out how to respond to a demand that comes without clear guidelines, gives rise to small miracles that may not necessarily change the course of history in any direct way, yet still, possess the quality of what Arendt has called “natality.”

Svendsen, Gjødsbøl, Dam and Navne together with Sharp discover lab personnel counteracting the reduction of lab animals to “data points,” “circumscribing” the work environment as a moral laboratory in quirky practices that include humans trying to entertain monkeys and naming piglets after Nobel Prize winning scientists. In other institutional contexts, Svendsen et al. further discover quirky practices such as the renaming of dosing cups and syringes as “knives and forks,” and half-jokes about which day of the week care-workers in the nursing home do their killing. In the profession of family therapy, Kuan finds an approach that may not have revolutionized mental health services in the United States, but still offers the possibility of reinterpreting severe symptoms by relating them to mundane domestic conflicts. The right hug, first performed in the therapy room, might change everything. Grøn’s main informant has also achieved a reinterpretation, of the relationship between her moral effort and her unmovable weight. Rita sees “each little thing that comes” as vibrating with potentiality, including the small event of a researcher coming back into her life. In Taylor’s piece, small miracles are everywhere, revealed in every story where a family member, tennis buddy, or former co-worker “steps up to the plate,” against as just as likely if not stronger inclination to simply turn one’s back on a person falling into dementia. In this context, showing up for a visit, watching a five-minute movie, balancing a checkbook, is exquisitely original.

We have assembled ethnographic materials that provide a unique laboratory for experimenting with thought, much of it composed of “matter out of place” (Douglas 1994), presenting a dramatic collision of unlike things. From blue fetus-like almost-humans to human feces in places where feces does not belong on the one hand (other possible examples from the papers are too many), and perfectly mundane things on the other, we have on our hands living, situational metaphors that are highly productive of thought. They elude suspicious social theories because how things get combined and what new beginnings emerge cannot be predicted let alone contained by the hermeneutics of suspicion. In exploring border zones of various kinds—between the human and the animal, between “individual” versus social personhood, between the ordinary and the intimate alien, between safety and injury, between life and not-life at the beginning and end of human life, between

codified ethical rules and everyday ethics, between ethically unfair and therapeutically right, and between “real” and metaphorical laboratories—the contributions in this special issue find potentiality buzzing at the far edges of certainty. Sometimes the possible is a matter of moral effort “exerted” by human actors—“pitting the possible against the predictable,” sometimes it emerges spontaneously of itself—as miracles that arise from beyond intentional control, from the “gigantic puzzle of multiple small things and events” (to borrow from Rita, Grøn’s interlocutor). It is the uncanny interface between laboratory ethnography and moral anthropology that allows us to locate moral as well as life potentiality around and beyond the human, thereby suggesting further directions for the “moral laboratories” trope.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest Teresa Kuan and Lone Grøn declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by the authors.

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