In this paper I recommend narrative cases to ethics teachers by way of an example. I hope to show by illustration that using narrative cases to discuss ethics has some value, especially for students. This is not really an original idea or even a controversial one. But I also endorse a stronger claim that cases lacking a certain degree of what I call “moral coherence” are deficient and may have a disvalue in the classroom. Of course, the plausibility of this latter claim depends on what we use cases for when we teach ethics. So I will devote some part of the discussion to how I use cases to accomplish certain objectives in my ethics course, remaining sensitive to the fact that cases can be and are used in a variety of ways.

Consider a short case, call it Case A: A young woman, Olympia, succumbs to a secret love affair with a married, middle-aged man, Haskall, her father’s friend. The romantic interlude takes place over the course of a summer month when Haskall and his wife and children visit Olympia’s family at their beach residence. Eventually the affair is discovered. The Haskall’s marriage is destroyed. The community is scandalized, and both families withdraw from society altogether. Olympia is immediately and irredeemably estranged from her father.

If we presented this case to our ethics students, what would they say by way of morally evaluating the actions of Olympia and Haskall? I suspect that our students, as well as most of us teachers, believe that there is little to recommend these actions. Most would put it this way: Olympia and Haskall committed adultery and adultery is morally wrong. The reasons why may vary depending on what moral principles or normative theories one brings to bear on this case. For some people, it may be the fact that Haskall and Olympia lied to and deceived their families and friends that is the salient moral feature of the case, perhaps violating a Kantian principle requiring that the maxim of one’s action be consistently universalizable. Other people may find it striking that the conse-
quences of their adultery led to a considerable amount of pain and unhappiness for all involved, at least in the immediate fallout of their discovery. Whatever reasons might be given, most would agree that the immorality of their action is an open and shut case.

This case is from a novel called *Fortune's Rocks* by Anita Shreve. Much is literally lost in the description I offer here of the storyline. But also what is lost when presented as a case study in ethics is the opportunity for students to wrestle with an ethical problem as it is situated in the context of a human life. Insofar as there is an impoverished description of Olympia and Haskell’s action, there is likewise a corresponding impoverishment in our moral deliberations about these people and what they do. Michael Davis writes, “Cases provide a way to help students see connections between the clear abstractions of the classroom and the disorderly bustle of life outside.” In my view, the more abstract a case is the less useful it becomes since it is the “disorderly bustle of life outside” the classroom for which we hope to prepare students.

And what do we hope to teach students about ethics to prepare them for life outside the classroom? I have three rather modest objectives that I present in the next three sections.

**IDENTIFYING A MORAL PROBLEM**

First, I aim to raise my students’ awareness about what counts as a moral problem, and to cultivate in them a sensitivity to the moral dimensions of problems they may encounter in their ordinary lives. Students may be familiar with grand moral issues like abortion and euthanasia, but fail to see, for example, that friendships figure into a morally good life, so that what counts as loyalty between friends may constitute a kind of moral inquiry. The larger questions that Aristotle asks such as, What is a flourishing life? What kind of person should I be?, are questions that cut across all the various activities in which we are engaged, from recreation, academia, professional life, to our personal relations with family and friends. The reason why narratives are well suited to developing a sensitivity to what counts as a moral issue is that narratives reveal a larger slice of a person’s life to consider, as well as the contextual details that make up the living of that particular life. The description of events in Case A focuses our attention on a particular event—a secret sexual indiscretion between two people. But the reader of the entire novel is privy to much more, specifically, how Olympia herself thinks about this romantic interlude in her life.
We, the readers, occupy the point of view of Olympia as she becomes conscious for the first time of her sensuality. We are directly aware of Olympia’s all consuming first passion to the exclusion of everything else. And in the aftermath of discovery, we are a witness to her continued lack of remorse for what only she herself acknowledges are legitimate feelings of love for Haskell that persist throughout her life. Knowing these intimate details about her psychological states allows the reader to ask certain questions about her situation that have more general applicability. For example, what is the role of passion in a person’s life? To what extent does it enrich a life, or compete with intimate relations between family and friends? To what degree does conventional morality impede the genuine desires of individuals? And does a sustained love for a person over a lifetime vindicate youthful indiscretion? These are moral questions, not just about the circumstances of fictional characters and what they do, but also about the possibilities of living a certain kind of life, and the moral appraisals that are appropriate to make about our own lives or the lives of people we know. To position ourselves to raise these kinds of questions in the first place about real or fictional characters requires that we understand the way in which people feel about what they do, and why they are motivated to act in one way rather than another.

The usefulness of a case for students in an ethics course is partly a function of what I call its “moral coherence.” A case’s moral coherence is diminished when it depicts moral dilemmas that are stripped of realism about people. Cases that are morally incoherent interfere with our ability to morally evaluate the action or the person described in the case. This is so because such cases leave out why an agent acts, as well as information about her relations to other people including friends, family, coworkers, and the agent’s loyalties or long-standing resentments. Typically such cases do not specify what matters most to the agent, including her fears, hopes, professional and personal aspirations, and loves, in short, the very emotional constitution of the agent and how these emotions are directed at people or projects. Without at least some of this information the person to whom we attempt to extend our moral appraisals is opaque to us. And the action, if stripped of its meaningful connection to the person who performs that action, becomes literally incomprehensible from a moral point of view.

To illustrate this point I borrow an example from Alasdair MacIntyre. About a particular bit of behavior we might ask, “What is he doing?” An answer to this may range over some of the following: ‘digging,’ ‘gardening,’ ‘taking exercise,’ ‘preparing for winter,’ or ‘pleasing his
What counts as an appropriate answer must make reference not just to the behavior itself, but to the agent's intentions. He may describe his primary action as digging in order to take exercise. Or perhaps he is gardening in order to please his wife. In either case we have individuated the behavior to be explained in quite different ways that would not have been revealed had we confined our attention merely to the act and not to the intentional context that invokes the agent's motives and purposes.

Moreover, MacIntyre insists that these intentional descriptions of the agent's behavior make essential reference to what he calls 'settings.' The first possible description situates his behavior in a setting where an activity is done for the sake of health, perhaps. For our purposes, what is significant about this example is the way it points to certain requirements about how human action is described. The intelligibility of human action depends on a certain kind of description—one that makes reference to the "agent's intentions, motives, passions and purposes." It is this kind of description that MacIntyre calls a "narrative history." It includes short and long-term intentions of the agent, as well as the relation between these and the act performed, but also the beliefs of the agent and the social settings, institutions and practices that surround the agent and what she does. All of this contextual detail itself has a history that may change over time. MacIntyre says, "There is no such thing as 'behavior' to be identified prior to and independently of intentions, beliefs, and settings." Perhaps intelligibility in the relevant sense comes in degrees. But if MacIntyre is correct to point out that human behavior stripped of motives, intentions, beliefs, and settings lacks intelligibility, even by degrees, this will certainly impair our moral appraisals of people and what they do when they are presented in cases incompletely or thinly described.

**Ethical Justification**

A second goal I have for my ethics students is to learn how to resolve a moral problem. I don't mean to imply by this that there is an univocal solution to every moral problem we can identify. But certainly what I want my students to come to understand is that some solutions or "answers" are better than others. So the moral evaluation of an action or a person should come equipped with a defense or justification for why a particular judgment is preferable. The philosophical content of such evaluations are part of the course content. These may include normative theories or principles that we have read about and discussed in the abstract.
These are the “conceptual tools” of moral evaluation. One reason for using cases is to practice a methodology for working through to a defensible moral conclusion. The application of theories and principles to a case is not at all easy to do, especially if one is skeptical about simple decision-making procedures that aim for a formulaic resolution to a moral problem. Rather, working through to a defensible moral conclusion of a case should be a kind of investigation of the issue that is sensitive to the complexity and context dependency of a moral problem. The amount and kinds of details of narrative cases undoubtedly complicate moral appraisal, but they do not preclude it.

Nevertheless, there is considerable unclarity about the nature of moral justification as it applies to narratives. With respect to the use of narratives in Bioethics, John Arras puts the point this way:

The connection between narrative and moral justification remains maddeningly obscure. What, one wants to ask, is the relationship between narrative and the achievement of moral justification, between the telling of a story and the establishment of a warrant for believing in the moral adequacy or excellence of a particular action, policy, or character?9

If we are going to take seriously my recommendation to use narratives as cases in ethics courses, some attempt should be made to answer this question. Arras’ article is a useful start since he offers a “typology” of narratives and how they might relate to ethical justification. Here I will only make a few descriptive remarks about the model of ethical justification that I prefer—what Arras describes as “narrative as supplement to an ethic of principles.”

On this view narratives do not challenge the kind of moral justification that derives from theories and principles, but allow us to apply these with more precision and care to the particularity of a person’s life. For example, when Rita Charon writes about the use of narratives in Bioethics, she notes that ethical issues sometimes emerge only from a patient’s own story, but not from that patient’s medical chart. The medical stories that caregivers, family members, and patients tell about their health and the impact this has on them, is supplemental data to which moral appraisals apply.10

The way in which a story is told, and by whom, determines to a large extent what ethical issues are salient in this description. For example, though Case A is abbreviated, it is presented in such a way as to make the
act of adultery the focus of our attention. It is this act to which we apply our moral evaluation. However, by reading the entire novel we may be inclined to evaluate Olympia’s actions by reference to a wider collection of details about the circumstances under which she and Haskell pursued their romance. To consider these details about why and how they acted is to create a wider lens of moral evaluation. Telling a longer and more complicated story about human behavior will not necessarily excuse it. But the focus of our moral evaluation may shift. We may come to see Olympia’s actions when she is 15 years old as a less significant event in our overall appraisal of the kind of person she is. In fact, Arras explicitly notes that narratives, in particular, allow us the opportunity to make these kinds of moral assessments about character. It is only when we have before us the particular details of a person’s life over a long period of time that we are positioned to assess the character of that person. It is in this way also that we use narratives as supplemental devices to enrich our moral evaluations.

But how does this work exactly? How do moral theories and principles function as ethical justification when applied to narratives? Nothing that Arras says answers the “how” of this question. Tom Tomlinson, in an article titled “Perplexed about Narrative Ethics,” articulates this question as a kind of challenge.11

What remains tantalizing but so far poorly explored is the idea that narrative understanding can provide a link between principles and particulars. . . The unique virtue of narrative is its capacity for organizing particulars. Its contributions to principled ethical argument, then, will be clarified and documented only through detailed and careful analysis of a genuine narrative (not the pale and superficial cases found in the current narrative ethics literature) that pays sustained attention to the interplay between narrative and principled methods. Only an argument by illustration can show how ethical principle is mediated in its application to complex circumstances by special narrative competencies.12

Perhaps what would satisfy Tomlinson is an illustration of how ethical principles, theories, or philosophical concepts, all of which are general, can be applied to an actual narrative so as to justify a moral conclusion about the particular circumstances of the narrative. In the remainder of the paper I undertake just this task by offering an example
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of how the concepts of moral responsibility, praise, and blame can be used to analyze and work through to a moral conclusion about a person and her actions. I will continue to use the story of our fictional character, Olympia, in Fortune’s Rocks.

MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

As I said earlier, I have three modest aims when I teach a course on ethics. First, to help my students identify and describe what counts as a moral problem. Second, to aid them in learning how to resolve a moral problem. And third, to supply my students with a moral vocabulary that includes the language of duty, obligation, responsibility, rights, and so on. More specifically, I want them to learn how to use these concepts with some philosophical precision. For example, an introduction to the concept of moral responsibility quite naturally begins with Bk. III, chapters 1 and 2 of Aristotle’s Nichomachean Ethics. Here Aristotle identifies two kinds of excusing conditions that exempt or mitigate moral blame or praise. If an agent is forced to perform an act, or performs an act out of ignorance of the particular facts surrounding the action, he or she acts involuntarily. And it is only voluntary actions that merit moral praise or blame.

A contemporary rendering of Aristotle’s concept of voluntary action is captured by Mackie’s “straight rule” of responsibility, which says that a person is morally responsible for all and only her intentional actions. I shall be concerned with a more fine-grained moral analysis of a person, her actions, and her motivations for acting than is allowed by appealing only to the straight rule. In particular, I undertake the moral evaluation of Olympia by asking what kinds of moral excuses are available to her, and on what grounds, if any, she is culpable. Additionally, I want to try to say something about the development of character as Aristotle sees it, and to venture an assessment about what kind of person Olympia is.

A good place to begin is with a distinction between kinds of excuses and exempting conditions we offer to give, as well as to accept, in our ordinary interactions with one another. In an article titled “Freedom and Resentment,” Peter Strawson calls gratitude, resentment, forgiveness, love, and hurt feelings “reactive attitudes” that signal our interpretations of and our sensitivity to the moral conduct of others. When we modify or mollify our attitude of resentment we do so because the action is done by accident, as a result of outside force, or by ignorance of the particular facts surrounding the act. These pleas of excuse sometimes take the fol-
lowing forms: “She didn’t mean to,” “She hadn’t realized,” “She didn’t
know,” “It was the only way,” “She couldn’t help it,” “There was no
alternative.” These excuses make the attitude of resentment inappropri-
ate. The injury that results from an action is acknowledged, but the
accompanying resentment towards the agent is modified to allow for
these kind of extenuating circumstances. Nevertheless, the agent is fully
responsible. She is someone to which it is appropriate to have reactive
attitudes like resentment and forgiveness. As Strawson puts it, pleas of
this type are appeals to forgive, to “accept the repudiation and to for-
swear the resentment.”17

Is Olympia’s conduct forgivable for any of these reasons? It is surely
not by accident that Olympia becomes romantically involved with
Haskell, so we can rule out excuses of this kind. A slightly different story
might allow that Olympia was “forced” by the older and more experi-
enced Haskell, depicted as a rogue who takes advantage of Olympia’s
youth and innocence. This interpretation is even suggested by some of
the characters as a way of “rewriting” the actual events to spare Olympia
blame. Her father, in particular, regards Haskell in this way. But on sev-
eral occasions Olympia explicitly repudiates this version of events. In a
letter to Haskell, Olympia writes about their affair.

I will never feel myself seduced. I do not have age, but I
have will and some understanding, and though the event was
new to me, I comprehended it and embraced it and could have
stopped it at any point.18

Olympia’s qualifications about what she understood is important for
our assessment of her culpability. She says that she “understood little of
the magnitude of what [she] was doing,” and that she had will and “some
understanding.” (my emphasis) So perhaps available to Olympia is the
kind of excuse Strawson identifies by the refrain, “She didn’t know what
she was doing,” or “She didn’t realize the consequences of her action.”
For these excuses to mollify our attitude of resentment or indignation
about the injury Olympia brings about, it must be possible to say about
her that it was not simply from neglect, inattention, or oversight that she
failed to realize what she was doing. These reasons will not hold much
purchase as moral excuses if we add that she should or ought to have
known what might happen as a result of her becoming romantically
involved with a married man.
Although Olympia is described as a young woman approaching adulthood, she is remarkable in her intellectual maturity. Her father has taken on the task of educating her at home. She can enter into serious discourse about literature, history and politics along with invited scholars who dine with Olympia’s family. So she does not immediately appear as someone unable to reason through to the possible consequences of her actions. In fact, there is abundant evidence that Olympia is fully cognizant of the moral impropriety of her and Haskell’s actions. She acknowledges, for example, that her “extraordinary” feelings for a man nearly three times her age, one she hardly knows, and one married to a woman Olympia admires, are “inappropriate.” Indeed, they both admit that it is not “all right,” what they have done, nor do they believe they will be forgiven by Catherine (Haskell’s wife) and others should they be discovered. Despite acknowledging this point of view they proceed toward each other with “forethought” and “some understanding of what it is they do.”

Nonetheless, there is the suggestion of surprise about the harm that both she and Haskell cause when they are discovered, as if the enormity of the consequences of their actions had not been anticipated. Their discovery is the result of a treacherous betrayal by Zacharia Cote who trains a telescope on Olympia and Haskell’s intimacy and invites Haskell’s wife Catherine to take a look, pretending innocence about what she will see. In the ensuing chaos of the party as guests disassemble, Olympia looks across the room at Haskell’s ravaged face. “We cannot have done this, she wants to cry out to him. We cannot have done this.”

Years later Olympia herself reflects about what she understood of her actions.

Did she not understand the consequences of allowing herself to fall in love with John Haskell? Can she ever have been that heedless? Or did she imagine herself charmed, untouchable, merely skimming the surface of disastrous and lethal matters . . .

Because this question about what Olympia understood is not unambiguously answered by the text, I suggest that we try to understand the extent of Olympia’s moral blameworthiness by reference to the attitudes adopted by those who interact with her, as well as Olympia’s self-reflective attitude. This strategy is consistent with Strawson’s thesis in “Freedom and Resentment,” that the reactive attitudes of resentment and forgiveness are constitutive of moral responsibility. It is to these practices
that we should look to assess the degree and kind of culpability appropriate to Olympia.

As the story is told Olympia suffers a punishment strictly enforced by her father. She is literally censored and imprisoned in her parent's home where she is not allowed company, books, or any other distractions. Her only opportunity to leave the house is in the evening after dark when she is allowed a stroll around the park in the company of her maid. It might appear as if Olympia's father is enacting a punishment on her that she deserves, and one that reflects the fact that she is at fault. But her father's attitude toward Olympia and what she has done is not quite this straightforward. While it is true that he holds her somewhat accountable, what is salient about his response to these events is that he diminishes her autonomy by not allowing her to have any say in how she will live. Her future is entirely in her father's hands, and if she refuses to comply he will cut her off from all financial support. Her father decides that she will make her way in the world by teaching, so she is sent to a woman's seminary school to continue her education and to learn domestic skills. Her father decides that the baby Olympia is carrying will be taken at birth to an orphanage, despite Olympia's entreaties to keep the child. In effect, Olympia's father adopts toward her what Strawson calls an "objective attitude." When we adopt this attitude toward a person who has done injury we allow them a certain kind of excusing plea that characterizes the kind of person with whom we are dealing. We may say by way of excusing, "She's only a child," or "He's a hopeless schizophrenic," or "That's purely compulsive behavior on his part." In other words, we are invited to view the agent herself as "psychologically abnormal" or "morally undeveloped." As Strawson puts it,

To adopt the objective attitude to another human being is to see him, perhaps, as an object of social policy; as a subject for what, in a wide range of sense, might be called treatment; as something certainly to be taken account, perhaps precautionary account, of; to be manage or handled or cured or trained; perhaps simply to be avoided, . . . The objective attitude may be emotionally toned in many ways, but not in all ways: it may include repulsion or fear, it may include pity or even love, though not all kinds of love. But it cannot include the range of reactive feelings and attitudes which belong to involvement or participation with others in inter-personal human relationships; it cannot include resentment, gratitude, forgiveness, anger, or
the sort of love which two adults can sometimes be said to feel reciprocally, for each other. If your attitude towards someone is wholly objective, then though you may fight him, you cannot quarrel with him, and though you may talk to him, even negotiate with him, you cannot reason with him. You can at most pretend to quarrel, or to reason, with him.21

Olympia’s father may have revised his earlier estimation of Olympia and may have come to view her as merely a child, as someone who must be managed, lacking in those decision-making skills characteristic of mature adults. But it may also be that her father comes to view Olympia in this way not because this attitude is warranted, but simply to remove himself from the “strains of involvement.” Strawson indicates that we can and do use this attitude as a resource to extricate ourselves from genuine moral engagement with another human being. Perhaps Olympia’s father found her behavior too shocking, dangerous, or disheartening to take seriously, and retreated to regarding her as a young child. The fascinating contrast to her father’s regard for Olympia, is her continued lack of remorse for what she has done, as well as a lack of shame about her involvement with Haskall.

Even while Olympia is forced to comply with her father’s punishment, she is unrepentant about her love for Haskall. She finds that “her capacity for remorse is finite,” and she resists the characterization of her romantic relationship as sinful. It is Olympia’s lack of shame that invites the reader to consider the possibility that her continued love and passion for Haskall has a redemptive quality. Does the fact that she feels persistent and deep love excuse her adultery to any degree? Whether intentional or not, the author encourages this interpretation. For when Olympia finally shrugs off her passivity with respect to her father’s attitude that she is a worthless child, small and shameful, we feel like cheering. Of course, we agree with Olympia that her love is not something to be ashamed of. It is only her father’s small mindedness and the “conventional morality” of Victorian high society that has unfairly judged her. Olympia articulates her understanding of the moral import of what she has done by saying, “I do not have shame. . . I have a conscience. . . I am sorry for the harm that I have done another woman and her children. But I am not sorry that I loved or was loved.”22

I would like to suggest that Olympia is not morally redeemed simply because her love for Haskall is constant over a long period of time. Whether or not it is “genuine” or “true” love is not morally relevant.
What does matter to our moral appraisal of Olympia is the development of her moral character, which includes the degree to which her emotions are sufficiently cultivated to respond in the right way at the right time, and the extent to which her emotions are integrated with her capacity to make decisions and to choose the best course of action. So what is really at issue is whether or not Olympia’s father is warranted in believing that she is merely a child. If she indeed falls into the category of a person that is **morally undeveloped**, then as Strawson suggests, we have grounds for mollifying our resentment or indignation about the injuries she has caused.

Aristotle believed that while young children do act voluntarily, their intellects are not sufficiently developed to allow them to “choose” or “deliberate” about actions.\(^{23}\) For this reason the full-blown attributions of moral responsibility fail to apply to children and what they do. On Aristotle’s account of things, acquiring virtue of character is the result of cultivating and educating the nonrational parts of the soul, primarily the emotions and appetites such as desire. Moral character is developed by practice and habituation from childhood onward with guidance from others who have a certain amount of moral expertise. In her article, “The Habituation of Character,” Nancy Sherman argues that the emotions are included in this kind of developmental model of moral education because even though the emotions are contained in the nonrational part of the soul, they are sensitive to reason and are capable of being shaped and controlled by the authority of reason.\(^{24}\) Emotions are not construed as blind passions over which we have no control since cognitions such as beliefs and judgments are themselves constituents of emotional states.\(^{25}\) How, in particular, are emotions and desires cultivated or trained? Sherman describes this process in the following way:

We should begin by asking how the perceptions and appraisals constitutive of emotions, and ultimately of moral responses, become refined. The parent, like the orator, is in the position of persuading. He or she makes prescriptions to the child and the child listens out of a complex set of desires (love of parents, the desire to imitate, fear of punishment, hope of reward, etc.). But the parent aims not simply to affect specific actions or desires; e.g. to thwart greed, to encourage compassion, to temper anger. Rather, part of what the parent tries to do is to bring the child to see the particular circumstances that here and now make certain emotions appropriate. The parent helps the child to compose the scene in the right way. This will
involve persuading the child that the situation at hand is to be construed in this way rather than that, that what the child took to be a deliberate assault and cause for anger was really only an accident, that the laughter and smiles which annoy were intended as signs of delight rather than of teasing, that a particular distribution, though painful to endure, is in fact fair—that if one looked at the situation from the point of view of the others involved, one would come to that conclusion.  

We can see that a “child” or even an adult that has failed to reach deliberative and emotional maturity will be the kind of person who

- pursues pleasures for the sake of entertainment, and those pleasures that are not unqualifiedly good;  
- lacks the ability to reason through to the best conduct appropriate to the situation;  
- has desires or emotional states that are not appropriate, either in the degree to which these are experienced, or by being directed at the wrong objects.

What the child will come to learn, given suitable guidance by parents and teachers is a dispositional capacity to feel the right kinds of emotion in the right amount, relative to the circumstances at a particular time.  

Is Olympia morally undeveloped by these Aristotelian criteria? I would like to argue that she is. Of course, there is no particular age at which a child is transformed to a mature adult with respect to the wide range of intellectual and emotional skills necessary for having a virtuous character. So we cannot say simply that because Olympia is only 15 years old she fails to have the requisite deliberative and emotional maturity. But there is evidence in the text that she falls short in various ways.

I think more than anything else this is a story about desire and what can happen to a person who experiences passions that are unmoderated. The opening lines of the novel indicate that having certain desires and becoming aware of these, as well as being the object of desire, is the beginning of adulthood. But it is not yet to be an adult. This is something Olympia has yet to learn, though I believe she does learn this by the end of the novel.

Olympia thinks often about desire—desire that stops the breath, that causes a preoccupied pause in the midst of uttering a sentence—and how it may upend a life and threaten to dissolve the soul.
It is not as though desire and passion play no commendable role in Aristotelian ethics. But desire uncoupled from reasoned reflection about what objects of desire are appropriate indicates a moral psychology that is immature. The evidence of Olympia’s immaturity in this respect is her willingness to pursue a romance with a married man, despite who will be harmed. It is as though she believes her feeling of love for Haskall is a separate sphere of experience that has its own validation. Because it is so intense, new, and moving, it becomes to her all consuming—an experience pursued for its own sake, but also an experience that she isolates from her reasoned assessment about what counts as right or appropriate conduct.

Interestingly, even after she and Haskall are discovered, Olympia does not immediately understand the deleterious effect of her unreflective desires as they come to dominate her choices about how to act. Three years after her romantic interlude with Haskall she learns that her baby was put up for adoption, and he has been placed with a working class family that has loved and cared for him since he was an infant. Having discovered the child’s whereabouts, she decides to pursue a legal case to regain custody of her son. Vaguely she realizes that such a course of action will be extremely hurtful for others, the adoptive parents as well as her biological son who has no idea that she exists. Nonetheless, she is swept away by the desire to possess him.

But within minutes, she knows that she has neither courage nor sound judgment in this matter and that her desire to discover her son’s last name and his circumstances outweighs all other considerations. With hungry eyes, she rips open the second envelope.\(^3^0\)

The want is instinctive and overwhelming. Later, she will recognize this strange sensation within her as a double want: for the boy as well as for the father before him.\(^3^1\)

When she finally locates the whereabouts of her son, she watches and follows the family in the streets without identifying herself.

She follows the pair at a discreet distance. She is aware of a particular form of madness that is making her behave in ways she would not have believed were possible.\(^3^2\)
If the reader misses these allusions to Olympia’s unreflective, wayward desires, a “form of madness,” we are reminded about Olympia’s immaturity by the prosecutor during the custody trial.

Let us consider the facts... A wanton fifteen-year old girl, a mere child herself, with a child’s faculties and lack of mature judgment, fornicates with a man nearly three times her age, causing this man to commit adultery and to leave his wife and four children. (my emphasis)

The moral turning point for Olympia is the point at which her own desires become sensitive to how others are feeling, and become integrated with a critical reflection of what she ought to do. The judge does award her custody of her son, only because the “tradition” of the boy’s working class adoptive parents is to have him quit school to work long hours in the textile mill. But as the boy clings to his adoptive mother, crying in confusion, Olympia suddenly sees the effects of her own selfish desire and refuses to take custody of him.

And then she dares to look again at Albertine Bolduc, who in this moment will lose the child who has been her son. The anguish is more than any woman should be forced to endure, more than another woman can bear to watch. (my emphasis)

This decision reveals a certain amount of moral maturity by Aristotle’s standards. Olympia finally discerns the larger picture, one that does not merely include her own unreflective desires and passions, but how her actions might affect the lives of other people. It is not simply that her emotions are overriden by a rational judgment about what it is right to do. She continues to feel and experience a depth of emotion about her biological son, and the life he leads now compared to what it might be like to raise him herself. But she allows these feelings to be informed by other facts. She sees the anguish of the adoptive mother and imagines what it will be like for Albertine to love him so much, and then to lose him forever. And as a result of this sensitivity to another person’s emotions Olympia revises what she wants. She comes to desire what is appropriate to this particular situation, not in a distant and purely intellectual way, but by allowing her emotions to be shaped and refined by the cir-
cumstances. To use Sherman’s language, she comes to “compose the scene in the right way.”

I think we can come to some conclusion about the extent of Olympia’s blameworthiness. Though she causes considerable injury to others by her involvement with Haskell, the moral blame assigned to her should be mitigated by virtue of her emotional immaturity that is more characteristic of a child than a mature adult. The conceptual framework that underlies this moral evaluation is an Aristotelian model of the habituation of moral character that proceeds developmentally. We do witness the development of Olympia’s character over time, and can see that she eventually achieves an emotional maturity that is sensitive to particular circumstances, revealed by her discernment about what counts as appropriate choice relative to those circumstances.

CONCLUSION

What advantages are there to reading the whole novel *Fortune’s Rocks* as an ethics case? It is true that by doing so we need to consider a large amount of contextual detail surrounding Olympia and her actions. This information certainly complicates our moral appraisal but it is also crucial to it because, in order to morally evaluate people and their actions, what we need to know are their intentions, motivations, and purposes. Without this intentional context we will be ill prepared to answer questions about the moral character of a person, as well as questions about moral responsibility, and whether or not excusing conditions for moral blame or praise apply to that person. It is not simply that when we consider the whole story of Olympia we relinquish our prejudices against adultery, if we have any. Rather, we come to see that this event is not an isolated incident but one situated within the broader context of a person’s life. These additional details do not automatically or always function as excusing conditions. Once we have clarified what kinds of pleas count as excusing conditions by reference to a philosophical framework that has some independent credibility, we can turn to the details of our case to see if these have any purchase. In this particular story I believe there is warrant and justification for mitigating moral blame for the injuries Olympia causes. But notice that this conclusion is arrived at only by demanding precision about the concept of moral responsibility, together with attention to the details of Olympia’s life, her motivations, desires, choices, and multiple actions.
I think we do our ethics students a disservice by oversimplifying cases. To present students with abbreviated cases that leave out the intentional context surrounding an action, as well as how this action figures into the living of a human life, is to invite oversimplifying and distorting our moral appraisals of people and what they do.

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NOTES

1 My thanks to those who commented on an earlier version of this paper at the Society for Ethics Across the Curriculum Conference in Gainesville, FL, February 2002.


4 Davis, “Developing and Using Cases to Teach Practical Ethics,” p. 382.

5 MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre characterizes a human life as a narrative. He writes: “Narrative is not the work of poets, dramatists and novelists reflecting upon events which had no narrative order before one was imposed by the singer or the writer; narrative form is neither disguise nor decoration . . . It is because we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out that the form of the narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others. Stories are lived before they are told—except in the case of fiction.” (212) One of MacIntyre’s philosophical projects in this book is to make coherent an account of Aristotelian virtues as they apply to the entirety of a human life. To make sense of the unity of virtues in a person’s life requires a conception of a unitary life—a life which MacIntyre says “. . . links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end.” (205) What I wish to appropriate from MacIntyre is a rather narrow slice of this larger project, and that is his critical remarks about a certain conception of human action—one that strips it of its intelligibility.
17 Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment,” p. 49.


33 Shreve, *Fortune’s Rocks*, p. 357-58. Interestingly, the prosecutor does not use this depiction of Olympia as a mere child to argue that she ought to be excused in virtue of her moral immaturity. Rather, he argues that she should be viewed as “depraved, vulgar, and vile.” It is not clear that he is entirely consistent to characterize her in both of these ways.
