

Moral Stories: How Much Can We Learn from Them and Is It Enough?

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Our responses to papers are shaped, in part, by our own biographical experiences. Betty Sichel's paper reminded me that almost thirty years ago, as a twenty-one year old Amherst college senior, I submitted an undergraduate thesis entitled "The Moral World of Joseph Conrad." I was proud of my two-semester thesis work, although it had been agonizing to write only fifty pages interpreting five works by Conrad. What I was totally unprepared for was the oral defense of that thesis. It began with English professors asking me why I said "this" or "that" on particular pages of the thesis. I tried to answer as best I could. Then one of Amherst's most formidable English professors, Benjamin Demott, asked me the following question: "What will they be saying about Conrad forty or fifty years from now?" I did not have any idea of what Professor Demott meant by his question, but I did not have either the composure or the courage to ask. I froze. I could not think of anything to say. The rest of the defense was nightmarish. I could barely remember my name by the end. I received 8 credits of "80" (B-) for the two semester thesis work, my lowest grades in four years at Amherst, and resolved to spend no additional time studying English, analyzing poetry or literature. An English scholar I would not become. Nevertheless, in recent years I have yearned for the opportunity to bring my background in literature and my background in philosophy into greater harmony. Betty Sichel's paper encourages me in that direction. I am, thus, especially honored to respond to her provocative paper.

In my response, I would like to do three things: 1) briefly explicate what I think are the critical questions underlying Professor Sichel's project in the paper and identify some of her central insights; 2) suggest two or three ways in which I think some clarification or elaboration of key concepts might improve the paper; and 3) suggest some additional ideas of my own for further reflection and inquiry on this subject. My aim is to help her advance her ambitious project with constructive criticism.

Betty Sichel's paper is organized into three parts, each of them an "act" and each of them dealing with a different kind of "moral story." The final story asks us to consider how we may need to move beyond moral stories in considering the moral practice of child advocate volunteers; it asks us to consider the relationship between stories, moral principles and values, moral understanding, and "contrastive moral languages." Throughout the paper, Professor Sichel asks us to consider a range of very broad and important questions; some of the questions I could identify were the following: a) What makes something a "moral story?" b) What are the functions, purposes, and possibilities of reading and listening to moral stories? c) What role might moral stories play in moral discourse, in moral development, and in moral education? How can we usefully compare the value of moral stories with reasoned, abstract moral arguments? *Do* they convey their moral meanings differently? d)

How do moral stories convey their moral messages? Do some stories do this in different ways than others? Does the quality of the story influence the moral meanings derived from it? Do the reader's moral qualities and sensitivities affect higher understanding? If so, how? e) How are moral stories related to the conception of moral ideals and to the task of living morally? f) Must moral agents do more than interpret moral situations well but somehow act appropriately in response to moral difficulties? If so, do they need perspectives and understandings not readily supplied by moral stories? Now, these questions are questions that I read into the paper. Most of them are not asked explicitly and others could be raised as well. But by raising them here I give you some sense for how far ranging a conversation Professor Sichel asks us to engage in here. Most of her answers to these questions are meant to be largely suggestive rather than carefully argued claims. I read the paper to be rather more like an exploratory journey through a fascinating terrain than a precise investigation of a narrow problem with a neatly defined thesis and supporting arguments.

Professor Sichel, however, does make the following very useful points. First, "talk stories" can educate us morally by enabling us to acquire and recognize the moral values and "moral idioms" of our family, our community, and our society; these stories can serve as "a reminder of the moral idioms" children have been learning and give them added "breadth and depth." They can have permanent meaning in the consciousness of the listeners of the moral story. Second, novels such as James's *Portrait of a Lady* can show us how individuals construct their inner worlds and their moral selves; they can reveal how characters' perspectives on themselves and others can be altered by decisions they make, misperceptions they experience, and their own capacity for self-deception. Drawing on Robert Coles's insight, Professor Sichel suggests that novels may heighten our awareness of moral struggles, even our own moral struggles, and transport us imaginatively into other worlds. They may even "prod readers to transform their lives and view ethical dilemmas differently."

Professor Sichel makes several strong claims for what stories do, but I think these claims should be interpreted as claims for what *good* stories *might* do rather than as claims for what all stories necessarily accomplish. She writes "stories raise awareness and sensitivity. They direct attention to complex dimensions of moral situations and dilemmas in ways that were not previously appreciated." She continues: "Through stories, readers travel to other worlds, to other places; and in these other worlds, feel and see, sympathize with and abhor actions and lives. These different worlds also allow readers to picture and feel their own personal world with a new vision and vitality. By reading stories, one's personal world is invigorated; the flattened becomes multidimensional; the barely visible becomes clearer; and through an imaginary voyage we gain greater understanding and sympathy for the complexity of moral life."

PART TWO: SOME IDEAS THAT COULD BE MADE CLEARER FOR ME

As I read her paper, I sensed that the larger theoretical project that links stories to a whole range of moral phenomena (e.g. moral meanings, standards, principles,

discourse, moral ideals and values, moral living, character, moral decision making) needs to be informed by something that was addressed in a necessarily superficial way in such a short paper: How do stories communicate their understandings? Do different kinds of stories do so differently? One needs something like a theory of literature or of interpretation to give fuller significance to the “how” of stories. For example, virtually nothing was said here about the rather important fact that good literature dramatizes or shows us life rather than merely telling us about it. It communicates indirectly through figurative language; it involves us imaginatively. It seeks in some ways not to be translated back into ordinary discourse, or at least suggests that something fundamental might be lost in such translation.

A second point, related to the first, is that the paper seems to suggest something “essential” to all stories without actually stating that. And although it has three acts and talks of different kinds of stories, “talk stories” (oral, biographical stories?), novels, and real-life historical situations, the paper never makes very much about the differences between stories. I may be misreading the paper here, but I did not get the clear sense that there were some rather important differences between different kinds of stories, that their structure and form could be different in important ways, that their purposes could be different as well. McGuffey’s readers, for example, had lots of very simplistic didactic stories in them. One of my favorites, “The Chimney Sweep,” about a sweep who does not steal a watch in the house of a rich lady for whom he is a servant, ends as follows:

Now as the little sweep did not steal the lady’s watch, nor tell any stories about it, the lady let him stay and live in her house. For many years she sent him to school and when he grew up, he became a good man, and never forgot the commandment which says, “Thou shalt not steal.” Had he taken the lady’s watch, he would have stolen. Then he would have been sent to jail. Let no little boy or girl ever take things without leave for it is stealing, and they who steal are thieves. You cannot steal the smallest pin, without its being a sin, nor without being seen by the eye which never sleeps.¹

At one point Professor Sichel writes “stories rarely provide ready-made answers to be applied to moral dilemmas, but instead raise awareness and sensitivity.” Not McGuffey’s stories. They were simplistically didactic and, according to David Tyack, his readers sold 122 million copies between 1836 and 1920. Recalling his school readers in the 1930s Clarence Darrow writes: “How these books were crammed with noble thoughts! In them every virtue was extolled and every vice condemned. I wonder how the book publishers could have printed such tales, or how they reconciled themselves to the hypocrisy they must have felt when they sold the books.”² My point here is simple; not all stories function in the same way; the differences between them need exploration; and some background theory of literature and interpretation seems necessary here to avoid the risk of making unwarranted and overly global claims about the functions and values of stories.³ The rather conceptually loose way of talking about “stories” is manifested in the final section. We are told about Marion’s abusive family situation, but this situation is referred to as a “story.” However, it is an odd kind of story, one which “was not heard in the public or private domain.” We are told that Marion’s “screaming her story did not suffice.” But Marion is simply screaming. She is not screaming a story. How does one scream a story? We are told that “the neighbor hearing her story was unable

to go beyond the screams of her story.” But it does not seem evident that the neighbor “heard the story at all.” She might have grasped the situation, but is that the same as “hearing the story?” Or perhaps, the point should be made that she did not grasp the full significance of the story. Are all situations akin to stories? As Wittgenstein might caution us, let us return to the rough ground. Let us put on the glasses of differences.

Just as I felt that the paper needed a more variegated theoretical view of stories and interpretation, so I also felt the paper needed to pay some attention to how the notion of “moral” was used. It seemed as if almost everything was “moral,” but the adjective was not helpful to me in most places. Granted there is ambiguity about the term, in that it refers descriptively to that which pertains to what is viewed as “morally good or bad,” as well as to that which is approved of from a moral point of view. But the word “moral” seems to do very little useful work in the paper. At one point, Isabel Archer’s view and Madame Merle’s perspectives are contrasted, and we are told that “their words indicated the differences between two ways of looking at moral life,” but the word moral adds little for me here. They have different views of life, different views of what is important, what is to be valued. Perhaps this is a quibbling analytic concern but just as the paper does not differentiate genre differences in stories, neither does it shed much light on the many varied senses of the moral categories used — moral standards, moral ideals, moral principles, etc. It seemed to me as if the entire universe was a moral universe. Thus, at one point the following question is raised about Isabel Archer: “But what is the whole universe of the moral self?” Is everything one experiences laden with moral meanings? If the answer is yes, then I fear we may have made the word moral lose some of its ordinary linguistic force.

PART THREE: FINAL THOUGHTS

In her opening remarks, Betty Sichel states that she wants to “go beyond stories to question the relationship between stories and moral principles.” But she does not give us much to sink our teeth into here. She suggests that stories are not sufficient to provide the full basis of moral education. Through the discussion of Marion, she gives us hints why she thinks this might be so, but I do not think the hints will suffice. Can stories move us to act? Can stories put the flesh on moral standards, values, principles? Professor Sichel writes of stories that “in addition to raising moral awareness, stories may also suggest moral standards, ideals to be attained, vices to be avoided, ways of living moral lives, and moral shortcomings to avoid.” The key word here is “suggest” and the idea left out is that these suggestions are communicated to us not merely intellectually but emotionally and through our entire being, through our moral sensibility as persons seeking to treat others well and live morally in the world.

But not much is said about “principles” and how they function. To say more might get us into the kind of moral theory that Professor Sichel may not be fully comfortable with: namely, duty theory. As Ronald Dworkin has stated elsewhere, principles, unlike rules, have a dimension of weight; they can guide moral decisions but cannot prescribe the decision to be made. In the case of the child advocate, moral

principles of different sorts may conflict: one principle is to diminish or eliminate the unnecessary harm the abused child is experiencing; another principle is to foster the child's interests. The public sphere, including the sphere of the law courts, requires us to weigh competing principles in light of specific facts, to reach public decisions that are in a child's best interests. How are we to decide what is in a child's best interests in a messy, conflicted case of child abuse? Clearly, on one theory, we must decide how much weight to give conflicting principles in light of the specific facts, for our theory may not do that for us. But if we seek a state of what Rawls called "reflective equilibrium," we may find ourselves balancing conflicting principles in light of specific facts to reach the best decision we can. This is an appropriately rational and public business, but it may involve our private feelings and visions of the good. It speaks to our ideals as well as our moral sensibility. It often requires us to act as moral agents and not commit the crime of indifference, the crime of not doing anything in the face of evil.

Stories, especially the rich, detailed, three dimensional stories of a James or a Conrad novel, deliberately cloak their central characters in a veil of opacity. They thrust us into the mystery of experience; they remind us of the thoroughly indeterminate nature of human decision making. They alert us to the possibility that we may do violence to the complexity of both situation and character when we seek to discuss discursively "what the character should do" or "why they did what they did." Readers of novels, unlike courtroom jurors, will not have to be locked up to deliberate on the intentions of a character; they will not have to disentangle the basis of a decision and arrive at a simple verdict. Competing explanations of what is going on are both expected and reasonable. In other words, reasonable people can arrive at reasonably different interpretations. We expect that. These differences in interpretation, moreover, do not ever have to be resolved in one direction or another.

However, child advocates must make justifiable recommendations; the word "justifiable" is my word not Professor Sichel's. She talks merely of "making various recommendations." But, it is this act of making a recommendation to the court that takes us beyond the moral story, beyond the heightened awareness. One cannot make a useful recommendation if one does not have the moral sensitivity to interpret the situation clearly, to get one's story right. But getting the story right may admit of varied interpretations, just as a novel does, albeit not any old interpretation. However, getting the story right does not yield a recommendation. It is merely a part of understanding the linkage between the principle of "acting in the child's best interest" and the facts of the situation. The additional part — the willingness to justify or support one's recommendations with reasoning — is critical to advocacy. More needs to be said here, but perhaps it will require another paper by Professor Sichel to do so.

Professor Sichel's wide-ranging paper invites us to consider the many ways that stories — talk-stories, novels, and actual situations — are related to moral experience, moral understanding, and moral living. Her paper dramatizes how her own moral life has been transformed by her own stories and the moral reflection she has given them, and she encourages all of us to consider how we can use stories more

powerfully to enrich our own moral experience. However, she reminds us that the complexity of moral living and moral education require that we have additional perspectives and additional modes of reasoning for us to live fully as moral agents and as members of moral communities. For those of us who have read some of her work, we know we will have to return there for a deeper understanding of these additional perspectives. Or read her forthcoming essays and books. Or simply have some wonderful conversation about these matters with her in person. Or do all three. Of one thing we can rest assured: Professor Sichel will always provoke us with the range of her reading, the breadth of her experience, and the depth of her wisdom into all things moral.

1. William McGuffey, "The Little Chimney Sweep," in David Tyack, ed. *Turning Points in American History* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1967), 196.

2. Clarence Darrow, "Clarence Darrow Recalls His School Readers," in Tyack, *Turning Points in American History*, 225.

3. For a fuller discussion of the ways in which literature provides a different orientation to moral reasoning, see Michael S. Katz, "Literature and the Moral Condition: Some Complexities" (unpublished draft, Oct. 23, 1993).