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### Review Of "Morals And Stories" By T. Siebers

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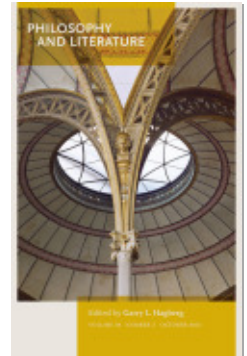
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## Morals and Stories (review)

Richard Eldridge

Philosophy and Literature, Volume 17, Number 2, October 1993, pp. 377-378 (Review)

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The range of Ohly's scholarship and his analytical discrimination have produced a monograph of significant interest, even though much of its material may appear to have lost its relevance for our time. It should be acknowledged with no less a sense of pleasure that its English version has been prepared with meticulous care, a number of misprints in the Notes notwithstanding, and that the translator (and her editor) have rendered the sometimes tortuous style of the original and its many quotations from various stages of German, Latin, and French in a lucidly idiomatic English that sounds graceful and natural as if no blessed soul had ever toiled on the rock.

RICE UNIVERSITY

MICHAEL WINKLER

*Morals and Stories*, by Tobin Siebers; x & 235 pp. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, \$29.50.

Siebers offers a picture of human life, of a human need for morality, and of how stories may help us to know our moral interests. His main thesis is that "to be human is to tell stories about ourselves and about other human beings" (p. 7). "We understand character," including which characters are worth having, "only by telling and retelling stories" (p. 15). Siebers hints that the character most worth having, at least in our modern world, is that of a Kantian moral person, who acts out of respect for the categorical imperative. Kant is the subject of the two most connected chapters of the book, in which the following sorts of claims are made: "Kant's story is way ahead of us, which means that Kant is here more modern than his modern critics" (p. 116); Kant's "unbreakable principle," though "distasteful to modern sense," "is also nauseating to that modern form of evil represented most clearly by German history" (p. 133). So presumably Siebers holds that Kant's moral theory somehow stacks up well against its competitors. Apart from this work on Kant, there are other chapters on Jane Austen, on Hillis Miller's theory of criticism as a form of positivism (a charge carried over from Siebers's 1988 *Ethics and Criticism*), on Homer, on Plato, on Achebe and proverbs, and on Tolstoy.

It is not a bad idea to try to combine a commitment to Kantian morality with a narrativist conception of persons. But *Morals and Stories* is a misbegotten mishmash of a book, conceptually, stylistically, and in scholarship:

1. What does Siebers really think about Kant? How are we to reconcile these two passages? (a) "The project [of a Kantian ethics of pure reason] is sublime, ridiculous and inconceivable" (p. 102). (b) "The categorical imperative puts one into communication with 'the humanity in one's own person' . . ." (p. 109).

Which is it? Is humanity in our person there commanding obedience to the categorical imperative in each of us, or not?

2. How does the apparent, albeit guarded, support of Kant comport with a generally instrumentalist conception of morality as serving the Hobbesian need for security? Siebers writes, "at the heart of ethics resides the overriding human desire to live in community with other people" (p. 13). But if that is so, then it is hard to make sense of Kant's emphasis on the duties of an isolated, finite rational will.

3. How much philosophy does Siebers know? There are no references to the major expositors and critics of Kant. Only Paton appears in the bibliography (not the index), and such figures as O'Neill, Hill, Nagel, Scanlon, Herman, Korsgaard, and Rawls appear nowhere. Perhaps this would not be a problem, if one could trust the formulations of Kant's views that Siebers has putatively gleaned directly from Kant's texts. But this is not the case, since one finds outrageous claims like this: Kant "speaks as if there really were a concept of duty deriving from outside the sphere of willing" (p. 115).

4. There are significant stylistic problems in *Morals and Stories*. Abstruse and near unintelligible pronouncement is frequently substituted for argument. Here are some all too typical sentences. "The modern age marks the end of philosophy, if only because our moral choices are now well rehearsed. The place of modern philosophy is one that we have seen before, with the difference that we have never before stood in a place where all the views are so familiar" (p. 135). "The ethic of otherness is often so anti-Kantian in principle that it ends by being Kantian in practice. Similarly, its Aristotelianism is so severe that it is not always recognizably Aristotelian" (p. 144). "If a choice could be made, there would be no need for a decision, a *decidere*, a cutting. Decision involves the impossible and necessary task of cutting one thing that we want into one thing that we can want and another thing we cannot want" (p. 202). And so on.

It is hard to see how Siebers's thinking and prose would satisfy anyone who takes a serious interest in the problems that the book seeks to engage.

SWARTHMORE COLLEGE

RICHARD ELDRIDGE

*Somewhere I Have Never Travelled*, by Thomas Van Nortwick; xiii & 204 pp. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, \$29.95.

Thomas Van Nortwick's title raises the possibility of an approach reflective of a reworking of Heraclitus' metaphor which has intrigued such writers as