

## Forum

### Why be Moral? A Retort to a Response to a Reply

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In “Why be moral? A response to a reply,” Joel Thomas Tierno recapitulates an argument given by himself and Thomas J. Donahue in an earlier article, and responds to a criticism I offered.<sup>1</sup> He says:

I am unable to fathom how the case of the amoralist constitutes a counter-example to our original argument. Our contention is that the *genuine belief* that it is possible for the actions of others to fail to demonstrate adequate respect for you, coupled with the belief that you have no special attribute that entitles you to this respect, is inconsistent with the contention that you have no moral obligations to others. In the final analysis, rejecting the notion that you have such obligations undermines the logical foundation for such a belief.<sup>2</sup>

The term “adequate respect” in this passage is ambiguous. It may mean either respect that is adequate to further a person’s own interests, or respect that is morally owed to someone by virtue of some quality that person possesses. An amoralist might well genuinely believe that actions of other people fail to demonstrate respect for her in the first sense, and may engage in linguistic and institutional behavior such as berating, protesting, or bringing legal charges, widely regarded by moralists as behavior indicating acceptance of objective moral norms of obligation. Yet, an amoralist may hold without contradiction that there is no such thing as objective morality and have no beliefs regarding her entitlement to the moral consideration from others that she seeks with such linguistic and institutional behavior.

Tierno does go on to indicate that his remarks are intended to apply to “*only . . . those who genuinely believe that they are entitled to moral consideration from others.*”<sup>3</sup> With respect to the significance of the class of amoralists, he says: “We suggest, however, that few people fall into this class.”<sup>4</sup> While he may be right, particularly about individuals who have not reflected on these matters, my prediction is that anyone who is moved so to reflect by Tierno and

Donahue's argument will typically choose to "surrender the right to *moral consideration*" rather than "extend the same consideration to relevantly similar others."<sup>5</sup>

Donahue and Tierno have so far offered no defense of the claim that amoralists, "if they wish to avoid blatant inconsistency, have a good reason to be moral and, incidentally, to accept the objectivity of moral truth."<sup>6</sup> Faced with an inconsistency, we have at best a good reason to choose so as to avoid the inconsistency. Without additional reasons prompting one choice over another, the choice between two ways out is arbitrary. For someone accustomed to disregarding the interests and rights-claims of others, the amoralist strategy of playing the linguistic morality game to elicit desired respectful behavior from others while privately denying that anyone has any genuine moral claims may well appear to be the less costly route. It may appear less costly in terms of sacrificing self-interests when the amoralist could get away with not doing so, and less costly in metaphysical coinage. For the amoralist, according to Donahue and Tierno's argument, seems to account for all the phenomena, linguistic and psychological, without postulating objective moral properties and relations.

The reply to all this might be that it would be imprudent for someone caught in Donahue and Tierno's contradictory beliefs to abandon belief in objective morality. Tierno and Donahue might hold that, insofar as belief in objective morality underpins beliefs regarding what someone is entitled to by way of moral consideration, a person who abandoned belief in objective morality would lose the belief that she is entitled to moral consideration, and the ability to express genuine moral indignation, which are important and powerful things to have. But it is the hearer's belief that someone's expression of moral indignation is an expression of genuine moral indignation that is powerful; whether the moral indignation is genuine or not does not add to that power. Similarly, the belief that claiming entitlement to moral consideration is an effective way of furthering a person's self-interest provides the motivation for advancing such a claim. The addition of a belief in an objective basis for such claimed entitlement, given an already resident belief in the power of advancing such claims, is motivationally redundant.

An amoralist depends on the beliefs of moralists in an objective moral order for the effect of her expressions of moral indignation and her claims to entitlement to moral consideration. It is interesting to contemplate how two amoralists, each of whom knows the other to be an amoralist, might interact with respect to securing self-interests. Unless the support of other moralists can be thereby enlisted, neither amoralist would engage in the morality game. For such behaviors are ineffectual for individuals who do not believe in moral entitlement. Similarly, for a moralist to engage in the morality game as a way

of effectively pressing a disrespectful amoralist into a more congenial mode of behavior would be silly, unless, again, the support of other moralists can be enlisted.

There is another way of thinking about all of this. Consider the view that moral language and moral institutions are social inventions designed to encourage cooperative behaviors among individuals who otherwise are likely to encounter aggression by other individuals who, to use David Gautier's felicitous phrase, are "straightforward utility-maximizers."<sup>7</sup> Thus, "promise-keeping, truth-telling, fair dealing, are to be defended by showing that adherence to them permits persons to co-operate in ways that may be expected to equalize, at least roughly, the relative benefits afforded by interaction."<sup>8</sup> The advantage of this approach is that it offers the amoralist a good reason to engage in ostensible moral behaviors, to advocate the belief in an objective basis for moral claims, and to support such institutions even at the cost of subjecting herself to them. A powerful amoralist may lack such constraining, co-operative motivations because she is able to be frankly and aggressively utility-maximizing with great success; such is the way of tyrants of a familiar sort. There is little to do about such powerful amoralists of this sort except to seek their downfall or otherwise to constrain them from without.

The theoretical weakness in Donahue and Tierno's position is that they have offered no way to explain the existence of amoralists or to turn an inconsistent moralist into a consistent one. Perhaps the number of amoralists is small, as they claim; I am skeptical of such a comforting notion. Anyway, those that are evident are often dangerous, so the supposed small number must be regarded as serious enough. But absent any independent argument for the objectivity of morals, Donahue and Tierno have little by way of rationally persuasive ammunition to bring to bear on the supposed small number of amoralists. An unintended consequence of the deliberations of philosophers over the question of "Why should I be moral?" may be to increase the number of amoralists by forcing inconsistent moralists to make choices to resolve their inconsistencies. In that respect, their account so far cannot do all that needs to be done.

## Notes

1. See Joel Thomas Tierno, "Why be moral? A response to a reply," *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, 30 (June 1996), pp. 321–323; Thomas J. Donahue and Joel Thomas Tierno, "Why be moral? Some reflections on the question," *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, 26 (April 1992), pp. 287–288; Richard T. Hull, "Why be moral? A reply to Donahue and Tierno," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 27 (January 1993), pp. 109–110.
2. Tierno, op. cit., 1996, p. 322.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 323.

6. Ibid.
7. David Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 167 *et passim*.
8. Ibid., p. 156.