

Forum

Why be moral? A reply to Donahue and Tierno*

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Thomas J. Donahue and Joel Tierno¹ seek to provide a formal, normative answer to the question, Why be moral? Their argument proceeds by identifying an inconsistent triad of beliefs typically held by the amoralist: I am entitled to moral consideration from others; I do not differ from others in the possession of some special characteristic entitling the possessor to moral consideration; I have no obligation to extend moral consideration to others.

In the following, I seek to describe a rational amoralist, with a commitment to avoiding contradictions in her beliefs, who is not guilty of the inconsistency identified by Donahue and Tierno. My amoralist holds the second and third beliefs, but not the first. She appears to hold the first through a variety of apparent speech acts deliberately executed for effect, but such is a mistaken ascription.

This amoralist has noticed that some linguistic behavior generally secures desirable linguistic and non-linguistic behavior on the part of others. As these desirable behaviors often serve her interests, she goes to some pains to encourage those behaviors, and so engages in the requisite linguistic behavior that elicits those interest-serving responses. She calls her own linguistic behaviors, "making moral claims." While expressions such as, "I deserve moral consideration," and, "I deserve respect," occur in her linguistic behavior, these have no more cognitive content for her than does clearing her throat or tapping on a glass with a spoon to gain the attention of others. That is, she regards this range of linguistic behavior to be simply behavior which produces an effect; she has no beliefs of the form "that-p" where p is a place marker for instances of any of the set of elements of her linguistic behavior called "making moral claims."

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The amoralist does not believe that she differs from others, except in that others do have beliefs of the form “that-p” where p is a place marker for instances of the set of elements of their linguistic behavior which they call “making moral claims.” The amoralist also notices that others seem to attach far greater emotional significance to their uses of elements from this linguistic set; some of the emotions they describe as “feeling guilty,” “feeling outrage,” and the like are not, so far as she can tell, ones she has; instead, the emotional states which she attaches to her uses of elements from this linguistic set are states like “feeling hope,” “fearing,” and the like.

Finally, the amoralist takes a philosophy course in which an interpretation of this set of linguistic elements is offered, including terms like “really obligated,” as in “Sometimes you are really obligated to sacrifice your own interests for those of others.” The amoralist considers the reasons given for believing this interpretation rather than her own, and she finds that they fail to pass a test known as “Occam’s Razor” – in short, that accepting that interpretation would involve unnecessarily positing a set of entities called “obligations” and “rights.”

She doesn’t surrender all rights to complaint insofar as she is affected by the actions of others, for the concept of “rights” she rejects – except that she uses the language of rights because it has effects on the behavior of others which she finds salutary to her interests. She recognizes that few people fall into this class, just as few people fall into the class of individuals who do not believe in the existence of a supreme being. Indeed, while she counts herself as an atheist, along with being an amoralist, her linguistic behavior employs terms which, in the language of theists, are employed to make theistic claims, invocations, condemnations, and the like; but for her, use of such terms involves expostulatory and like emotional expression, and not theistic claims.

Donahue and Tierno should find that the above interpretation of the amoralist better illuminates those “many persons, both philosophers and non-philosophers, [who] reject the notion of moral obligations which are truly binding, and yet, under other circumstances, ...speak and act in ways which [seem to] quite clearly presuppose that they have been unjustifiably wronged by others.” The remedy for the inconsistency Donahue and Tierno note is not to make such a presupposition, but only to appear to make it.

Note

1. In “Why be moral? Some reflections on the question,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, 26.4 (1992).