I’d like to thank Professor Tannsjo for the opportunity to comment on a daring and provocative paper. I believe a point of fundamental agreement between us is that relativism can be combined with a kind of realism, given a certain conception of the moral facts. I am certainly glad to welcome an excellent philosopher to the very small community of self-professed relativists. I would like to explore whether his ontological relativism is really as different from the semantic relativism he attributes to Gilbert Harman and me.

Professor Tannsjo defines “semantic” relativism as providing the following sort of analysis for “This action is right:” “According to some (adequate) moral system S, to which I adhere, for example the one prevailing in my culture, this action is right. He contrasts semantic relativism with his own “ontological” version of moral relativism. On this version, “when two persons pass conflicting moral verdicts on a certain action, they may both be right.” That is, each may be speaking the truth because each inhabits a different socially-constructed moral universe.

1 In formulating a response to Tannsjo’s paper, I have benefited from discussion with Kevin Delapp.
Tannsjo and I agree that two people can pass conflicting moral verdicts on the same action and may both be right. They may both be right because they have different truth conditions for their moral judgments, but their judgments conflict on the level of offering practical guidance. On my view, two speakers may mean something different on the level of truth conditions by “adequate moral system,” and therefore each may be saying something true even when one is prescribing that an action X be done and the other is prescribing that it not be done.  

On this score, then, my version of “semantic” relativism is closer to the implications of Tannsjo’s ontological relativism than it is to Harman’s version of semantic relativism, which construes some “ought to do” statements as “inner” judgments that can only be properly addressed to others who share one’s moral commitments as embodied in “implicit agreements” (“Moral Relativism Defended”) or in shared moral frameworks (Moral Relativism and Objectivity). On my view, moral judgments play a crucial role in socializing and in shaping the characters and motivations of people who are not already members of any implicit agreement or who do not already share a moral framework. Part of the point of such shaping is to “induct” or “recruit” new members into existing communities of shared norms.

The language of Tannsjo’s and my analyses certainly differs on the surface. Tannsjo construes moral judgments to concern moral universes of socially constructed

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facts. I construe moral judgments as second order normative language. In *Moral Relativity*, I construe them as arising from reflection that organizes simple rules in imperatival form into systems of rules covering different circumstances, and that may contain priority rules in case two or more rules conflict in application to the same situation. Judgments about what it is right to do or what one ought to do, on my reading in *Moral Relativity* are judgments about what in a given set of circumstances is required by an adequate moral system. Besides the different language of analysis, what are the actual crucial differences?

One of the alleged differences is that semantic relativism does not account for the “objective import” of moral judgments, while ontological relativism does. Tannsjo’s argument depends on the attribution of the following implication to semantic relativism: ”when a person in one society asserts that a certain action is right, what this person is saying is that, from the perspective of the set of moral rules operative in his or her society, this action is right.” However, this is not something I think follows from my version of relativism. According to the analysis I give in *Moral Relativity*, an “A ought to do X” statement says, “A is required by an adequate moral system of rules,” where the concept of adequacy embodies some ideal of morality that can be used to judge actual moralities both within the speaker’s society and without. This ideal can be used to judge the set of moral rules that are “operative” in the speaker’s own society, in fact. Let me take an example from the talk I gave yesterday: that it is part of anything we could call an adequate morality that any of the justifications it gives for the subordination of one group
to another must not be based on false factual claims, particularly about the capacities or inclinations of the groups in question. Therefore, my conception of the way the term ‘adequate moral system’ operates in the truth conditions of “A ought to do X” statements does not have the implication that someone who makes such a statement is simply identifying what follows from the system of rules that is operative in her society.

More importantly, neither Harman nor I are committed to the view that all that people mean when they make moral judgments is that they are merely invoking whatever standards they happen to have. The whole point of my using the language of adequate moral system is to capture the readiness to be self-critical about the standards one happens to have. But I am a relativist because I think that in stepping back and being critical about their own moralities, people must ultimately rely on substantive moral ideals that not every rational and relevantly informed person needs to agree upon. While people need not be making any reference to what counts as an adequate system for them as opposed to what counts for others, since they may have no awareness of such diversity, the truth of what they say may still be relative to their particular meanings for ‘adequate moral system’.

Similarly, when Harman says that moral truth is relative to a certain moral framework, he is not saying that moral language users mean to be saying that they are invoking one moral framework as opposed to others. People are not necessarily aware that there are different moral frameworks. This kind of mistaken impression is quite intelligible if what I argued yesterday is true: that moral differences are not typically
differences between moralities that have nothing in common with each other but
differences between moralities that significantly overlap with one another in general
features and shared values and norms. If people are thus understandably unaware of the
existence of different moral frameworks, or as I would want to put it, that there can be
different meanings for ‘adequate moral system’, they cannot be relativistic in their
meaning when they make moral judgments. They make judgments that are “absolute” in
import, just as Professor Tannsjo says they do.

Tannsjo claims another advantage for an ontological relativism that construes
moral language to refer to moral facts in a way analogous to the way our common sense
language refers to physical facts about the world. He thinks that provides us with a
straightforward necessity for eliminating practical inconsistencies. I on the other hand,
would argue that practical inconsistencies may impair the action-guiding function of
morality and that may be a reason for modifying our moralities. But practical
inconsistencies may also reflect the fact that our values are plural and may be difficult
and even impossible to fully reconcile. There may be a point in simply recognizing
inconsistencies as corresponding to tragic conflicts of values, such as impersonal duties
of beneficence to strangers in need on the one hand and on the other hand personal values
such as the duties of our personal relationships and the permission to seek a measure of
personal fulfilment. Given the way the world is, including the mess we have made of the
world, the impersonal duties can easily overwhelm the personal, and the conflict may
allow us no right course of action.
Finally, Tannsjo’s relativism in one respect seems more extreme and less objective than mine. He observes that in many societies with their corresponding moral universes, women are treated worse than men. The apparent rationale for this is that “by treating women worse than men, all get what they deserve,” but “such a defence is not possible in another society (with another and different moral universe, where the value of women and men is constituted as equal).” On my version of relativism, we should not pass so quickly to the idea of irresolvable difference. We should ask why women supposedly deserve worse treatment, especially in the light of the adequacy requirement that rationales for the subordination of groups to other groups not depend on false factual claims. Kant’s and Aristotle’s rationales for the subordination of women are simply false because they contain false claims about the capacities of women for rationality and for command, respectively.

Of course, it might get very complicated if “treating women worse than men” is not acknowledged as such by those who are said to engage in subordination, and if their claims do not depend on falsely characterizing the capacities of women. Professor Tannsjo mentions female circumcision as a case in which those who approve and those who condemn the practice “do not, strictly speaking, contradict each other.” He says that this is because their respective judgements differ in meaning. Though Professor Tannsjo is very much more qualified to speak on the implications of ontological relativism, I wonder if the doctrine needs to imply quick acceptance of such a sheer and brute difference in meaning. If we are to speak of moral universes, I would prefer to speak of
ones that considerably overlap with each other, in accordance with the view of moral
difference and similarity across cultures that I sketched yesterday

It must be said that there exist many forms of the practice of female cutting, from
pricks and slight cuts of the female genitalia to radical removal and suturing of the
openings. There exist a variety of justifications offered for them, depending on where it
is practiced and by whom. Some of the justifications offered are not at all alien in
content to those of us here, even if we have trouble accepting how they are applied to the
practice in question. For example, some women who accept or even endorse the practice
say that it is a ritual embodying the values of courage and endurance in the face of pain,
and that it binds together the women of a community that practices it.3 Others dispute a
claim often made in criticism of the practice—that it diminishes sexual pleasure for
women, arguing that the criticism presupposes an excessively mechanical picture of
sexuality, omitting the role of the most important sexual organ—the mind.

I at one time thought that female genital cutting could categorically be called
“female genital mutilation” and that this was one practice that could not be countenanced
by a reasonable form of relativism. I now think the issues are very complex, that any
condemnation that takes place needs to be much more specific, and that it can often be
difficult to identify in any simple or unambiguous way the motivations and justifications

3 See, for example, Fuambi Ahmadu, “Rites and Wrongs,” in Female
“Circumcision” in Africa: Culture, Controversy, and Change, ed. Bettina Shell-Duncan
and Yiva Herlund (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001).
of people who engage in it. My point here, however, is that a complex dialogue needs to
take place, and that it can take place. Perhaps some justifications of the practice may
make us throw up our hands and declare that the others are in another moral universe, but
some of them don’t. Some of them we can continue to discuss with others who disagree
with us, and not only is it possible that we may change their minds, but it is possible that
they may change ours. I think relativism must allow for this possibility.