Comments on Torbjorn Tannsjo’s “Moral Relativism”

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Professor Tannsjo proposes an ontological version of relativism he believes to be superior to others. I think that his version has certain advantages, ones that mine has too, and that his does not differ so much from mine, at least in the way Tannsjo proposes. There are some differences between his version and mine, but the most important of these differences make his relativism more extreme than mine. Not surprisingly, I think I have an advantage on this matter. But let me explain what I take to be the similarities and differences, and let you keep the final score.

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 attributes this form of semantic relativism both to myself and to Gilbert Harman. 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. We furthermore agree on the reason for this possibility, at least on one description. The two speakers have different truth conditions for their moral judgments. That is why they can both be right. Furthermore, I hold, as Tannsjo does, that despite the different truth conditions, the judgments can 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. Their judgments conflict on the practical level because one cannot conform to both judgments at the same time.2

Harman’s position, at least as he articulates it in “Moral Relativism Defended,”3 is somewhat different with respect to “A morally ought to do X” judgments, when such judgments are taken to imply that A has a reason to do X. Such judgments on his analysis reveal what the balance of reasons supports, given an implicit agreement to which both the speaker and the subject of the judgment, A, are presupposed to subscribe. On Harman’s analysis, so-called “inner” moral ought judgments reveal the commitments to action that follow from implicit agreements made within moral communities. Such judgments are not properly made across moral communities. As Harman famously, or

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perhaps notoriously claims, most of us cannot say that Hitler ought not to have killed all those people because he was obviously not a party to any implicit agreement to which we subscribe. Therefore on Harman’s analysis of these kinds of moral judgments (though not necessarily on his analysis of other kinds of moral judgments, it must be noted), we cannot even appropriately make the kind of “A ought to do X” judgments that would come into practical conflict with judgments that Hitler would have made about what he himself morally ought to have done.

I disagree with Harman’s analysis of such ought judgments and in fact agree with Tannsjo’s observation that many of us do not limit such ought judgments to people we assume to share our moral commitments. On my view, we make such judgments based on our conceptions of what an adequate moral system is, and there is nothing in the logic or meaning of such judgments per se that implies that the people we judge share those conceptions. That can bring us into practical conflict with these others when we say their actions are wrong or that they are doing what they ought not to do, even if the reference of their concept of adequate moral systems differs from ours in such a way that they can say truthfully that they are doing what they ought to do.⁴

On a deeper level, I disagree with Harman’s conception of morality as constituted by implicit agreements that properly govern only those who are parties to the agreements. Moralities play a crucial role in socializing and in shaping the characters and motivations

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of people who are not already members of any implicit agreement. Part of the point of such shaping is to “induct” or “recruit” new members into existing communities of shared norms. The prescriptive level of moral meaning makes such shaping possible. In his contribution to *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*, Harman recognizes this kind of difference between his analysis and mine, and not surprisingly perhaps chooses to call his view “a pure version” of relativism, because his implies that real moral disagreements can exist only between those who share the same implicit agreements (or “frameworks” in the language of *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*). I think he allows me to hold an “impure” version of moral relativism since I still hold that there is no single true morality, given that people can hold different meanings for the term ‘adequate moral system’ and therefore draw out conflicting prescriptions for action that can all be true.

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. I would think that Tannsjo would have to incorporate within his analysis a prescriptive or expressive element of moral meaning also. However, there might be another kind of difference between Tannsjo and me on a related matter. Tannsjo says that the attitude of “live and let live” is relatively rare when it comes to moral difference. While I might agree with that as a sociological statement, I would want to go on to point to the possibility of change towards a less antagonistic attitude. If a person

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comes to the conclusion that there is no single true morality, let’s say on the kinds of
grounds I advocated yesterday, that indeed may have an effect on her willingness to
continue condemning others for living differently than she does, at least in cases where
she thinks they are reasonably adhering to an alternative meaning for ‘adequate moral
system’. As I have said, there is nothing in the logic of moral judgment that necessitates
such a change in attitude. One can simply go on condemning others for failing to live up
to what is an adequate morality according to one’s own lights. But one might come to
appreciate the richness and variety of what human beings can value. One can come to
appreciate the worth of other ways of life even if one continues to uphold the worth of
one’s own, as I said yesterday, especially if the difference between one’s morality and
theirs is a matter of the priorities set between values that one shares with these others.
And that may move one in the direction of “live and let live,” if not always and not on
every matter of importance.

I am unsure as to whether Tannjo’s ontological relativism might allow a similar
possibility of change in attitude. If people became aware that there were differently
constructed moral facts, different moral universes, might they become less eager to
condemn others who lived in different moral universes? That is at least a possibility, it
appears to me, but it is unclear to me exactly how one would regard a moral universe
different from one’s own, because the notion of a moral universe remains somewhat hazy
to me.
This thought leads me to consider what appears to be the major difference between semantic and ontological relativism. Tannsjo construes moral judgments to concern moral universes of socially constructed 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. In a book manuscript that I have just finished writing, *Natural Moralities*, I have changed to construing such judgments as indicating what in a given set of circumstances is required by the balance of moral reasons. I believe that this alternative construal has certain advantages over my old formulation, but it would take too long to set out the analysis, what I mean by moral reasons, and my rationale for switching to this analysis. The difference between my old and new analyses is immaterial to my agreement or disagreement with Professor Tannsjo, as far as I can tell. So, let me continue to talk about my construal of moral judgments as specifying what is required by an adequate moral system.

Besides the different language of moral universes versus adequate moral systems, or in Harman’s case, the language of implicit agreements of moral frameworks, what are the actual crucial differences between Tannsjo’s relativism and semantic relativism,
either of Harman’s pure kind or my impure kind? Is this a distinction with a difference? Tannsjo attributes to semantic relativism the following implication: ”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.” 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.

Harman does not adopt my language of adequate moral systems or the accompanying emphasis on reference to a moral ideal that existing moralities must satisfy. Harman’s move of making the truth conditions for “A ought to do X” statements refer to implicit agreements is perhaps closer to making them refer to the “operative
rules” in the speaker’s society. But even here, Harman embraces the possibility that people make mistakes about what follows from their implicit agreements, and that such mistakes can become embodied in long-accepted norms in their societies.

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. Therefore, while people need not be making any reference to what counts as an adequate system 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’.

For his part, Harman is careful to say that his analysis of moral truth as being relative to implicit agreements or (in his later language) “frameworks” is not an analysis of what people mean when they make moral judgments. He is not saying that moral language users mean to be saying that they are invoking one moral framework as opposed to others. Harman does not much elaborate on this thought, but if I were to elaborate for him, I would say that people are not necessarily aware that there are different moral frameworks. They may suppose that other people differ from them...
because of bad faith, moral self-deception about what the norms of true morality require, or that real disagreement cannot exist on the level of fundamental values, which all share, but only on the level of how to apply these values. 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, but Harman’s point is that a particular framework comes into play when it comes time to evaluate the truth of moral statements in their moral dialects. They make judgments that are “absolute” in import, just as Professor Tannsjo says they do.

On this score of allowing for the apparently objective import of the way many people make moral judgments, I do not see much of a difference between semantic relativism of either the pure or impure variety and ontological relativism. Consider the question of what people would do if they realized there were differently constructed moral universes. Would they necessarily continue to make moral judgments that were absolute in import? I think not necessarily.
At one point Tannsjo argues, if I understand him correctly, that his theory has better explanatory value than “semantic” relativism:

If ‘This is wrong’ means that, according to a certain (adequate) system of norms $S$, this is not permitted, then there seems to be no way of explaining what it is that makes the action in question wrong. However, on the version of relativism here defended, we may easily find an explanation why the action in question is wrong. We may say, for example, that it is wrong since it means that an innocent person is harmed, certain rights violated, of something of the kind. But these facts cannot explain why, according to $S$, it is not permitted. The fact that it is not permitted by $S$, if this is a fact, seems to be quite unexplainable.

I must confess to not understanding the argument here. My conception of an adequate moral system is of a system that does prohibit harming innocent persons, for instance, because my conception contains norms or reasons weighing against such harming. Perhaps Professor Tannsjo wants to say that it is somehow a more satisfying explanation to refer to facts in a socially-constructed moral universe about the wrongness of harming innocent people than it is to refer to the norms of an adequate moral system that prohibit the harming of innocent people, but neither explanation it seems to me cuts that deep. If you ask me for a deeper story of why an adequate moral system would contain norms against killing innocent people, I would tell the kind of story I told yesterday—about the function that moralities play in human life and in structuring social cooperation. I might even tell you what general features any adequate moral system
would have to have, what features would have to be included in any of the eligible meanings for ‘adequate moral system’. It seems to me that I can offer quite a lot of explanation. It is not clear to me how a reference to moral universes can offer as much explanation, but in any case, I’m pretty sure that it can’t offer more.

Another criticism Tannsjo makes of semantic relativism is that it cannot offer satisfying explanations of

*why* we should avoid practical inconsistencies in our moral framework. If the norms making up the framework are neither true nor false, the purpose to be filled by the framework must certainly be practical. We have it for a purpose. Suppose it fulfils its purpose, in spite of containing some practical inconsistencies. Why change it? And if one wants to change it, *how* should one change it?

I suppose Harman’s answer to the latter question, as to how the system should be changed, when we construct our system we need to refer to, when we give truth-condition to moral judgements, would be to make minimal changes in the actual, inconsistent framework, in order to get rid of the practical inconsistencies. However, there may more than one way of doing this. Or, there may exist no way of doing this while having the framework fulfilling its point.

A response consistent with the spirit of Harman’s relativism is the following, and it is a response to which I would subscribe. Tannsjo is right to say that practical inconsistencies are bad to the extent that they undermine the purpose of morality. If
moralities are meant to guide action and provide workable terms of social cooperation, practical inconsistencies are bad to the extent that they provide unclear or contradictory directions. It is true that there may be more than one way of removing such inconsistencies, which means that the adherents to the relevant moral framework have more work to do, but this is consistent with Harman’s notion that morality is in the end a form of politics—and that may involve continuous negotiation and renegotiation on the terms of social cooperation. It is a common phenomenon to find that a law leaves certain crucial questions unaddressed or that contradiction exists between two or more laws. The response is to try to deal with it in the most reasonable way possible, which may involve extending the law, removing some parts of it, and making new law. Perhaps, as Tannsjo says, there may be no way of fixing the contradiction without losing the point of the whole system. That would be too bad for the system, but I do not see that this is a criticism of semantic relativism. On the contrary, I think it a very plausible picture to those of inclined to take a naturalistic perspective on morality.

Professor Tannsjo says that there are moral inconsistencies that do now show up in practice. There is a way to satisfy both the norm that one should not work on a Sunday and the norm that one may either work on a Sunday or not. Both norms are satisfied if, as a matter of fact, we do not work on Sundays. However, we feel that these norms are inconsistent. But there is no way for Harman to account of their inconsistency, says Tannsjo. Well, the kind of inconsistency in question here turns up if we ask whether there is a course of action directly permitted by at least one norm that conflicts with the
course of action directly permitted by the other norm (the language of direct permission is meant to capture the idea that the idea does not merely arise from contingencies of how actions are related to one another in the real world). If part of the point of morality is to provide practical guidance and provide workable terms for social cooperation, for possible situations as well as the situations that have turned up so far, there is something to fix (though the felt urgency of fixing it may depend on how realistic the possibility is), and then the adherents of the moral framework in question would have to discuss the various options for fixing it.

Professor Tannsjo might still claim that his ontological relativism provides a cleaner and more direct response to the problem of inconsistencies. He says, “When we think of moral facts as constitutive of a moral ‘universe’, it becomes imperative that all moral truth can be combined into one single and true (consistent) conjunction describing this universe.” Speaking now only for myself (I don’t know that Harman would agree with what I’m about to say), I call into question the idea that our experience of the moral life implies such a straightforwardly realist view in analogy to facts about, say, the physical structure of the world. My experience includes the very real possibility of tragic conflict between urgent values, including the value of beneficence, construed as a duty to help those in urgent need, and the values of tending to one’s personal relations (which involve their own special duties) and some degree of personal fulfilment. I am not at all sure that many of our existing moralities contain a satisfactory resolution of such conflicts, given the way the world is now and for the foreseeable future. On my morality,
and given the way the world is now, many people, both in the developing worlds and our
own, comfortable “first” world, have legitimate moral claims on our aid that can
overwhelm our personal relationships and quests for personal fulfilment. Perhaps the
world (and what we have done or failed to do in the past) can leave us in moral blind
alleys (to use a phrase from Thomas Nagel[^6]), where there can be no right course of
action. And I am not very clear on how to fix this so that there will be no contradictions.
There may be better and worse ways of acting in the face of the contradictions, but it may
be better to leave the contradictions in place rather than to absolve ourselves. Thinking
about such possibilities, at any rate, makes me question the plausibility of strongly
realistic views of moral facts.

Finally, I want to point out a respect in which Tannsjo’s relativism 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,
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. 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. One of the counterarguments given is that critics of the practice assume a controversial conception of the human body as complete and given at birth. Others point out that Western critics conveniently forget this when the time comes for plastic surgery or other forms of bodily enhancement.

I cite these arguments as one who 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 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

7 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).
their minds, but it is possible that they may change ours. I think relativism must allow for this possibility, at least some times.

To conclude, 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.