



## **Torbjörn Tännsjö, From Reasons to Norms: On the Basic Question in Ethics**

«Torbjörn Tännsjö, From Reasons to Norms: On the Basic Question in Ethics»

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*cartoon language* is not to be neglected because of the overall distribution of animated films—their linguistic aspect will undoubtedly become more important in Croatia because it *deeply influences the opinions and language practice of their consumers* and people who are closest to them (35). Žanić stresses the *unconscious aspect* of language by providing the example of non-usage of Slavonian dialect, Istria-Kvarner Čakavian dialect, and the urban vernacular of Rijeka. As in the case of Rijeka and Istria, not using their dialects is not a *conscious discriminatory decision*, but the result of more complex relations that transcend local and regional limitations and *emerge from the general self-perception of Croatia and the inner distribution of symbolic functions in various regions*.

Finally, as in his previous book, *Croatian on probation*, through cartoon analysis Žanić sends us a most important message that language identity is dynamic and relational. If it were not so—it would not exist.

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Contemporary metaethical debate is characteristically underwritten by its insistence on the concept of practical reason. This *turn* in metaethical investigation from values and concepts of right and wrong to the utilization of the concept of practical reason as the basic ethical notion arguably started with Thomas Nagel's *The Possibility of Altruism* (1970) and has definitely become metaethical mainstream with Thomas Scanlon's 1998 book *What We Owe to Each Other*. In recent years this trend has been even more reinforced with Parfit's forthcoming book *On What Matters*. With his latest book *From Reasons to Norms* Torbjörn Tännsjö joins the aforementioned metaethical debate by making an unpredictable twist; his contention is that focusing on the concept of practical reason has brought nothing good to the field of ethics and that the 'Copernican counter-revolution' is in order, towards the revitalization of the notion of norm and the question *what ought to be done* and *why*; hence the title of his book (viii).

According to Tännsjö the main reason why we should insist on the Copernican counter-revolution in metaethics is the fact that reasons-talk is ambiguous between at least two kinds of practical reason, which according to him leads philosophers into confusion concerning the sources of normativity (obligations) and eventually into a kind of practical "relativism" (ix). For example Tännsjö thinks that focusing on reasons naturally leads to distinguishing different kinds of reasons that people might have; such as prudential reasons to be egoistic, moral reasons to be helpful and aesthetic reasons to appreciate a piece of art. From this division of reasons it is almost impossible for one to resist the conclusion that for every kind of rea-

son there is a special normative source and a set of obligations that spring from these different normative sources. This is problematic since then we could have conflicting obligations. For example, it might happen that from the moral point of view we are obligated to help a friend in need, but from a prudential point of view we are obligated not to help the friend, because that would go against our best self-interest.<sup>1</sup>

Even though *From Reasons to Norms* is a relatively short book with only 165 pages, it covers all the traditional metaethical topics. Tännsjö argues for a moral realism of a non-naturalist sort (chapter 4); concerning the semantics of moral judgments he holds a cognitivist position (41–42), according to which moral judgments are truth-apt; and in epistemological issues he advocates a sort of reflective equilibrium as a method of arriving at correct moral principles and particular moral judgments (55–58).

However, the main theme around which Tännsjö structures his book is the question about problems of morality; are there many different moral questions that an ethicist should address or is there only one question that can rightly be characterized as a genuine moral question? (vii) Tännsjö's main thesis is that there is only one genuine moral question, and the question is: *what is it that we ought to do?* (Ibid.) Ethical inquiry is supposed to give us the answer to the moral question and to explain *why* we ought to do what we ought to do. Moreover, the author construes the moral question as equal to the normative question in general; so that, the answer to the moral question is at the same time the answer to the normative question in general, i.e. it answers the question what we ought to do *simpliciter* (ibid., 74, 151–152).

With regard to the moral (normative) question Tännsjö introduces his conception of the practical reason. In disambiguating the concept of practical reason, the author follows the tradition in practical philosophy according to which there are two different kinds of practical reasons.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, there are "Humean" or motivating reasons, which are taken to be concrete mental entities (such as beliefs and desires), that serve as an explanans in the rational explanation of human action<sup>3</sup> (11). Further, the concept of rationality employed in the explanation of action is also taken to be purely descriptive; "[w]e only assume that a certain pattern is exhibited in P's actions or, better put, we assume that there exists a kind of "fit" between P's beliefs, desires and actions." (15) On the other hand, there are genuine normative reasons that justify actions. However, here is where Tännsjö makes his practical Copernican counter-revolution; unlike influential philosophers such as Scanlon (1998) and Parfit (forthcoming), who take the concept of reason to be primitive (and the basis for the definition of other normative concepts), Tännsjö takes practical reason to be derivative and defines it as being the ex-

<sup>1</sup> This view on the sources of normativity and practical reasons lead Sidgwick (1907/1966) to the conclusion that there is an inherent dualism in the concept of practical reason; according to Sidgwick, when prudential and moral reasons conflict there is nothing that can adjudicate between these two demands.

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent statement of this tradition see Introduction in Cullity and Gaut (1997).

<sup>3</sup> Here the author follows Davidson (2001) in the claim that beliefs and desires explain the action by causing it and rationalizing it from the acting agent's point of view.

planation of why one ought to perform a certain action<sup>4</sup> (27). Hence, a moral (normative) reason is an explanation of why certain normative fact obtains, a fact which is expressed by categorical ought-statement.

With the explication of the notion of practical reason in place (chapters 2 and 3), the author sets out, in the rest of the book, to argue that moral realism is true (chapter 4) and that there is only one source of normativity (i.e. denying the practical relativism) which stems from the realm of moral facts. For the latter conclusion the author takes the strategy of arguing (chapters 6–9) according to which any other apparent source of normativity, such as norms that stem from prudentiality, aesthetics or epistemology can either be reduced to the descriptive concept of Humean reason or to the concept of moral (normative) reason (74, 151). Whether the author succeeds in his project, of proving the thesis that there is only one moral question that gets explained with the discovery of normative reasons, it remains to be evaluated in a more thorough metaethical investigation and discussion. Be that as it may, in the remainder of this review I will reflect on couple issues that are of importance for the whole outlook of this book.

First there is the issue of moral explanation. Moral reasons are explanations of ought-facts; if we want to know why we have a certain obligation, according to the Tännsjö we should construct a moral explanation that entails the existence of that normative fact. So, according to the author moral explanations have the same structure as the nomological “covering law” explanations that we can find in scientific practice (27–28, 59–60). For example, this is how a moral explanation would look like on this account:

(P<sub>1</sub>) We ought to keep our promises.

(P<sub>2</sub>) I have promised to do F.

(C) I ought to do F.<sup>5</sup> (60)

In this model of explanation moral principles play a parallel role to the laws of nature as exhibited in traditional ‘Hempelian’ nomological explanations. In order for the normative fact to be explained one has to subsume it under a general moral principle from which, together with a descriptive statement, normative fact can be deduced. Needless to say, the author derives many far reaching metaethical conclusions from this view on moral explanation; together with the premise that moral realism is true Tännsjö concludes that moral particularist, naturalists, expressivists and nihilists, all alike cannot aspire to gain any moral understanding because the model of moral explanation as construed by the author is not available to them.

Whether or not Tännsjö is right on the latter point it seems to me that Tännsjö begs the question against all this other metaethical theories by taking as granted that “covering law” model of explanation is the correct model of explanation in ethics. On the contrary, it seems that not even in philosophy of science the “covering law” model has much support.<sup>6</sup> The point is made especially acute in special sciences where the concept of general,

<sup>4</sup> Tännsjö gives credit to Broome (2004) as being the first author who proposed this definition of the concept of normative reason (27).

<sup>5</sup> Which are the correct moral principles from which we deduce our moral obligations is a job for normative ethics to discover (28).

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of this point see Godfrey-Smith (2003).

unexceptional law does not have much of an application.<sup>7</sup> The latter fact caused different philosophers to devise new models of explanation that do not make use of the concept of general law (Leibowitz forthcoming). With this facts in mind, it is not clear why would Tännsjö just presuppose that this nomologico-deductive model is the correct model for moral explanation. One explanation for Tännsjö's contention can be glimpsed at the pages 29 (chapter 3) and 60 (chapter 5) where he claims that this kind of model enables us to gain and improve moral *understanding*. However, I believe that this line of arguing is a non-starter, it puts the *versthen* cart before the *erklären* horse. Since, intuitively, how we reach and improve our moral understanding depends on our conception of the moral explanation, and not the other way around. So, as far as the theory of explanation is concerned there is no a priori reason to believe that non-deductive explanations in science are defective and by analogy there is no such reason to believe that such explanations are defective in moral domain.

The second issue that I want to address concerns the more general meta-ethical problems with realist interpretation of moral domain. For example, if one believes that normative statements get their truth-value from their correspondence with normative facts, and if normative facts are structured from objects and properties then supposedly statements that describe those normative facts should obey the rules and logic of predicate calculus, like normal descriptive statements supposedly do. Indeed, that is what Tännsjö contends, and adds that “[t]he only addition we need to standard logic are the rules that if an action is right, then it is not wrong, if an action is wrong then it is not right, and the rule that an action is wrong if and only if it is obligatory not to perform it.” (76) Be that as it may, moral realist still has to face *deontic* paradoxes. For example, if it is a fact that I ought to help a friend in need, then, from this statement I can deduce that I ought to help my friend or that I ought to play darts. Now, according to this logic I can satisfy the normative requirement by doing whatever I want, despite the knowledge of moral principles and other normative facts, which seems absurd. Hence it seems that normative facts, whatever they are, cannot be in any simplistic way covered with the logic of descriptive language.

In conclusion I must say that this book brings a refreshing change of paste in the highly sophisticated and often arid domain of practical reason. The written style that the author uses is not very formal so the reading can be in large part executed in an easy going manner; however at moments this feature can be misleading because, after all, the subject matter of the book (practical reason) is, I would say, *intrinsically perplexing*, so one should be careful not to overlook some subtle but important points that can be found in this book. Nevertheless, this book makes an interesting and refreshing contribution to the field of practical philosophy and therefore I would recommend the book to more experienced scholars working in the field, as much as to the people who are just trying to get a first grip on the issues discussed in this field.

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of this point see Leibowitz (forthcoming).

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Richard A. Richards, *The Species problem: A Philosophical analysis (Studies in Philosophy and Biology)*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 248

The main topic of this book is, as the title suggests, the species problem, which is actually a set of interrelated questions concerning the reality of species, species definition and the criteria for species identification. Basically, species problem can be summarized in a general question: what are species? Since this is a very general question, different authors take different approaches in trying to answer it. Some authors primarily concern themselves with ontological questions about the nature and reality of species while other take a more practical approach and tackle the questions about the criteria for grouping organisms into species, recognizing a new species and deciding to which species a particular organism belongs. From the very beginning of this book it is obvious that the author belongs to the second group since he defines the species problem as the question about how to divide biodiversity into species: “There are multiple, inconsistent ways to divide biodiversity into species on the basis of multiple, conflicting species concepts, without any obvious way of resolving the conflict. No single species concept seems adequate.” (5) Throughout the book Richards will also tackle the ontological questions concerning species since these are interrelated with the more practical questions about species concepts and definitions, but is clear that this is not his primary concern.

The introductory part of the book is worth noticing because Richards explains the importance of the species problem and presents readers with both theoretical and practical reasons for solving this problem. Species