Gilbert Harman has proposed a version of moral relativism which is clearer than any earlier statement of that position.¹ According to Harman, moral relativism is best construed as a 'soberly logical thesis' about the logical form of moral judgments about actions. Such judgments, he argues, standardly ascribe a relation, which I shall call the Ought-relation, to ordered quadruples consisting of an agent (A), a type of act (D), certain considerations (C), and certain of the agent’s motivating attitudes (M). Schematically, the form of these judgments is Ought (A, D, C, M). The relevant motivating attitudes, M, consist of intentions to act in certain ways if others act in these ways also, and constitute what Harman views as implicit acceptance of social agreements. Because entering into such an agreement is at least recognizably similar to accepting a moral rule, Harman’s account in effect replaces the absolutist’s references to independent moral rules with parallel references to cognate psychological facts; and it is this which makes it a version of relativism.

On Harman’s account, moral relativism involves neither an inconsistent prescription of universal tolerance nor a confused semantics of ‘relative truth’. Moreover, Harman believes there is a strong positive case for the theory as well. He summarizes this case at the end of ‘Moral Relativism Defended’:

Such a theory helps to explain otherwise puzzling aspects of our moral views, in particular why we think it is more important to avoid harm to others than to help others. The theory is also partially confirmed by what is, as far as I can tell, a previously unnoticed distinction between inner and non-inner moral judgments. Furthermore, traditional objections to implicit agreement theories can be met (MRD, p. 22).

I shall not contest the consistency and clarity of Harman’s relativism, but I do want to question, each of the more positive considerations just mentioned.

Let us first consider Harman’s explanation of the common feeling that we have a stronger duty to refrain from harming than we do to furnish aid. According to Harman, this asymmetry is best explained by an appeal to the circumstances in which people agree to the relevant

principles. Everyone, rich and strong as well as weak and poor, can benefit from a common practice of not doing harm (since the poor can harm the rich as well as vice versa); but only the weak and poor are likely to benefit from a practice of furnishing aid. Hence, the rich and strong will want everyone to accept only the former practice, while the weak and poor want everyone to accept the latter as well. Given this partial conflict in goals, a process of 'moral bargaining' will ensue:

In order to further our interests, we form certain conditional intentions, hoping that others will do the same. The others, who have different interests, will form somewhat different conditional intentions. After implicit bargaining, some sort of compromise is reached (MRD, p. 13).

In the present instance, the compromise is precisely that negative duties are stronger than positive ones.

Since a weak principle of aid incorporates some of what the rich and strong want and some of what the weak and poor want, there is some initial plausibility to Harman's claim that it is a compromise between the two groups. However, doubts arise when we look more closely; for Harman's bargaining situation is so radically underdescribed that his compromise is only one of many which might emerge from it. Other compromises, not involving a weak principle of aid, are also possible. Moreover, of the alternatives, Harman's compromise is not even the most promising; for since it allows the weak and poor to benefit from both the absence of harm and the availability of aid while the rich and strong benefit only from the absence of harm, it seems to favour the weak and poor over the rich and strong. A more even compromise would involve a symmetrical agreement to the universally desired harm-avoidance plus some further concession from the weak and poor in return for the rich and strong's further agreement to aid the needy. Of course, the mere fact that a bargain is inequitable does not show that it would not be reached; inequitable bargains are struck for many reasons. However, barring any special reason for imbalance, the presumption must be for equity. Thus, to be convincing, Harman must show either that his compromise is really not one-sided, or else that its one-sidedness is itself dictated by some element of the bargaining situation.

These considerations suggest that there are serious questions about Harman's version of the bargaining situation. But even if these questions can be resolved, a more subtle difficulty will remain. The aspect of the duty to render aid which Harman wants to explain is precisely its weakness relative to the duty not to do harm. But what can it mean, in Harman's scheme, to say that one duty is weaker than another? It cannot mean that the conditional intention involved in the stronger duty dominates that involved in the weaker whenever they conflict, nor yet that the former conditional intention dominates more further conditional intentions than the latter; for neither interpretation explains why violating a strong duty is worse than violating a weak one even when neither duty conflicts with any other. To make sense of this, Harman must construe the strength of obligations as depending not on dominance patterns
among conditional intentions, but rather on certain features of the Ought-relation itself—on either the degree or the type of Ought-relation which holds among the relevant ordered quadruples. However, the first suggestion introduces the notion of degree where it seems not to belong, while the second proliferates types of Ought-relation beyond plausibility. Moreover, and decisively, both suggestions would prevent agreements about the strength of duties from arising as compromises among bargaining parties. On Harman’s account, what is chosen in the bargaining situation is not the degree or type of Ought-relation that will apply to an ordered quadruple, but rather the conditional intentions to which, \textit{inter alia}, the Ought-relation will subsequently apply. Because the implicit bargaining must thus be completed \textit{before} any questions about the Ought-relation can arise, the applicable degree or type of Ought-relation cannot itself be a product of the bargaining situation.

So far, I have criticized only Harman’s explanation of our feelings about the strength of negative and positive duties. But equally serious difficulties beset his explanation of the further feeling ‘that each person has an inalienable right to self-defense and self-preservation’ (\textit{MRD}, p. 14). According to Harman, this feeling arises from our recognition that we cannot intend \textit{not} to preserve our own lives, and so \textit{a fortiori} cannot stand in the Ought-relation to any such conditional intention. But given Harman’s psychological assumption that people cannot but try to preserve their own lives, the right to self-defence is just as easily explained without assuming relativism. If that assumption is correct, the right to preserve one’s own life, in at least one fundamental sense of ‘right’, will follow immediately from the contrapositive of ‘ought implies can’.

Since the right to self-preservation and the harm/aid distinction are the only normative elements of our moral system which Harman addresses, and since he does not explain either convincingly, he has not shown that relativism ‘helps to explain otherwise puzzling aspects of our own moral views’. But what, now, of his second claim, that moral relativism is partially confirmed by ‘a previously unnoticed distinction between inner and non-inner moral judgments’? This distinction separates our ordinary judgments from judgments of the acts of persons who are in some sense ‘beyond the pale’—moral monsters like Hitler, members of Murder Incorporated, malevolent invaders from other planets, etc. When a person of this sort is in question, it sounds decidedly odd to say that he should not have done what he did. At best, it seems appropriate to say only that the world would have been a better place if he had acted differently. According to Harman, these linguistic intuitions show that such judgments differ from ordinary (inner) ones in two important respects:

First, [inner judgments] imply that the agent has reasons to do something. Second, the speaker in some sense endorses those reasons and supposes, that the audience also endorses them. Other moral judgments about an agent, on the other hand, do not have any such implications; they do not imply that the agent has reasons for acting that are endorsed by the speaker (\textit{MRD}, p. 8).
Moreover, although Harman does not explicitly say so, he implies further that these differences are best explained by supposing that non-inner judgments, unlike inner ones, do not ascribe the relevant conditional intentions or Ought-relations. Unless this explanatory claim is included, Harman's distinction between inner and non-inner judgments will not confirm his analysis of the former's logical form.

Although questions can be raised about both stages of Harman's argument, I shall criticize only its implicit second stage. If Harman cannot explain the different implications of inner and non-inner judgments by citing the logical form of these judgments, then his success or failure in extracting those implications from our linguistic intuitions will be irrelevant. Doubts arise about the appeal to logical form, moreover, when we realize that this appeal at best explains one of the two (actually three) implications in question. The appeal may indeed explain the implication that the agent has a reason to act as he does; for given Harman's view of their logical form, all inner judgments will ascribe the Ought-relation to ordered quadruples including both the agent and his conditional intention to act in the specified way. But no similar account will explain the implications that the speaker endorses the agent's reason and that the speaker supposes the audience to endorse that reason as well; for neither the speaker's conditional intentions nor his beliefs about the audience's conditional intentions are included in the relevant ordered quadruples. Moreover, even if Harman could explain all the implications of inner judgments, his would still not be the only way of doing so. An alternative, suggested by David Lyons, is that the implications stem from such pragmatic considerations as 'the pointlessness of advising a person when we think we cannot influence him'. Although Lyons' suggestion explains only the implication that the agent himself has a reason to act, it can be extended to cover the others as well. To explain the implication that the speaker endorses the agent's reason, we may add that unless he does share this reason, the speaker will not want to influence the agent (or anyone else) by drawing attention to it; and to explain the further implication that the audience also accepts the agent's reason, we may invoke the discouraging likelihood of disagreement among people who lack shared values. By thus locating the implications in the context of utterance rather than in the truth-conditions of moral judgments, we can account for the otherwise puzzling fact that the failure of the implications does not falsify the relevant judgments—that, odd as it sounds to say that Hitler should not have established his death camps, this claim's denial sounds odder yet.

Finally, let us consider the last advantage Harman claims for his relativism, its alleged ability to resist traditional objections to implicit agreement theories (and, we may add, to relativism in general). Although a full discussion of this claim is obviously impossible, one aspect of it deserves special mention. An important traditional reply to relativism is that if right and wrong were relative to a society's basic attitudes, no one could say that his own society's basic attitudes were themselves wrong.

Thus, relativism is often held to imply the impossibility of internal criticism even of practices like slavery. But according to Harman this objection fails; for slavery may be open to internal criticism in two ways. It may be condemned by citing either ‘aspects of the basic moral agreement’ (MRD, p. 17) or more general considerations of ‘coherence of attitude’ which tell against it (MRD, p. 21). To conclude, I shall argue that neither mode of internal criticism is free from conceptual difficulty.

Consider first the claim that slavery might be inconsistent with the conditional intentions constituting a society’s basic agreement. Spelled out, this says that even members of a slave society might conditionally intend to respect the freedom of all human beings, and so might be implicitly committed to respecting the freedom of members of the enslaved group, who are also human. It is easy to see how, if correct, this would tell against a society’s practice of slavery. What is harder to see is why we should ever believe it to be correct. It is a commonplace that people’s intentions are generally reflected in their behaviour; and so the most straightforward way of understanding a society which respects the liberty of all groups but one is precisely as intending to make an exception of the excluded group. One might object that charity in interpretation demands that we ascribe to this society the intention to respect the liberty of all groups; but that would be to base the appeal to the initial agreement on the further claim that wider intentions are superior to narrow ones. Since the latter is precisely Harman’s principle of coherence, we might as well abandon the appeal to the initial agreement and confront the issue of coherence directly.

According to Harman, the requirement that intentions display maximal coherence is grounded in the nature of practical reasoning itself. Just as theoretical reasoning presses towards maximal explanatory scope in belief, so too does practical reasoning press ‘to widen the consensus and eliminate arbitrary distinctions’ in our intentions (MRD, p. 21). Of course, the pressure for coherence in intentions is not the only one to which practical reason is subject; there are also pressures to preserve intentions already formed and to satisfy basic needs and desires. Still, ceteris paribus, a more comprehensive intention is more rational than a less comprehensive one. Thus, the intention to respect the liberty of some persons but not others remains deficient in generality.

Initially, Harman’s views about generality in intentions appear firmly grounded in a general analogy between theoretical and practical reasoning. Since it is plainly arbitrary to adopt a restricted explanatory principle when a more general one is available, it seems only reasonable to say something similar about restricted intentions as well. However, as appealing as it is, this analogy is flawed; for since an ever-widening system of intentions will commit us to an ever more inclusive, and so ultimately impossible, sequence of actions, our intentions must be limited as our beliefs need not. Perhaps for this reason, it does not seem arbitrary to intend to see some movies but not others, to intend to eat some foods but not others; to intend to associate with some people but not others, etc.

Although Harman says nothing more about coherence in intentions in
his discussions of moral relativism, his views on the subject are developed further elsewhere. In a related paper, he distinguishes three ways in which practical reasoning may increase coherence. One of these exploits an internal connection between theoretical and practical reasoning: since practical reasoning aims to form intentions, and since intending $x$ entails believing that $x$ will occur, one can increase the explanatory coherence of one's beliefs by adopting secondary intentions which explain how one's primary intention will be satisfied. A second way of increasing coherence is (roughly) to adopt intentions likely to increase the satisfaction of one's 'intrinsic' or basic desires. A third is to form intentions which make retroactive sense of one's previous actions, as when one adopts the intention of pursuing a career that will utilize his previous training. If the conditional intentions which sanction slavery are to be ruled arbitrary at all, it seems reasonable to expect it to be in one of these ways. But which? We cannot locate the intentions' arbitrariness in their failure to increase explanatory ability; for only instrumental intentions can increase explanatory ability, and the intentions in question are surely not instrumental. We cannot cite the intentions' failure to satisfy intrinsic desires; for if an intention arises through implicit bargaining, then we must presume that it does satisfy such desires as well as any alternative. Nor, finally, can we cite the intentions' failure to make retroactive sense of actions already taken; for if a society has a history of slavery, then the collective intention to continue mistreating the slave population will indeed bring a unifying continuity to its past practices. In view of these considerations, Harman's claim that it is arbitrary to intend to respect the liberty of some persons but not others appears ad hoc. Of course, the claim would not be ad hoc if it were grounded in the contention that certain ways of distinguishing among people are wrong; but this contention is itself a moral principle, and so any appeal to it would merely reraise all of our difficulties at another level.

I have tried to expose a number of weaknesses in Harman's defence of moral relativism. However, these weaknesses do not show that such relativism is false. Indeed, given the convincing case against the explanatory efficacy of moral facts sketched at the outset of The Nature of Morality, we may ultimately have to settle for an account along Harmanian lines. But it is one thing to lay the groundwork for such a theory and another to argue the case for it. If moral relativism is to be made plausible, it must be defended by better arguments than those examined here.

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1 'Practical Reasoning', The Review of Metaphysics, xxix (March 1976).
2 I have benefited from the helpful suggestions of Patricia Kitcher, Philip Kitcher and Alan Wertheimer. A version of this paper was read to the A.P.A., Western Division, in April 1979.