In chapter 1 of *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*, Gilbert Harman characterizes moral relativism by means of two principal theses. First, he states that when someone makes a moral remark like “It was wrong of Sally to have shouted at her mother,” that remark must be understood as elliptical for a judgment of the form “Relative to moral framework \(M\), it was wrong of Sally to have shouted at her mother.” Second, he denies that there is a single true morality: rather, “there are many different moral frameworks, none of which is more correct than the others” (5). I will comment on each of these theses, then turn to an examination of the “quasi-absolutism” which Harman offers in ch. 3 as a supplement to his moral relativism.

We should begin by noting what Harman is not saying in his first main thesis. He is not saying that “It was wrong of Sally to have shouted at her mother” means that relative to a particular framework \(M\) it was wrong of Sally to have shouted at her mother (4, 5, 17; see also Thomson, 189–90). Rather, and more modestly, he is saying that such a statement must be relativized to a moral framework \(M\) for purposes of assigning truth conditions to it. Judgments to the effect that something is illegal might be a useful analogy. When assigning truth conditions to such judgments, a parameter specifying a jurisdiction must be added. Such a parameter is required because there is no such thing as being absolutely illegal, or “illegal, period”: there is only being illegal in a particular jurisdiction.

Harman wishes to say that there is only relative moral truth, and hence that moral claims can be assessed for truth or falsity only relative to a moral framework. What we have been told so far, however, is not enough to rule out a form of “truth, period” for moral claims; for this we need Harman’s second major thesis. If moral frameworks could themselves be true or false, correct or incorrect, then particular moral claims would be susceptible of a form of truth or falsity which is not purely relative. For example, a moral claim which was true only in relation to moral frameworks which were themselves false or incorrect would presumably count as false, period. So Har-
man's second thesis, which denies that any moral framework is any more correct than any other, is important to his view.

Harman indicates in ch. 1 that he will argue against moral absolutism, which is defined as the view that there is a single correct moral framework. The arguments which follow do attack moral absolutism, but they do not seem to me to support Harman's stronger thesis that all moral frameworks are equally correct. Call a moral framework $F$ maximally correct iff no other moral framework is more correct than $F$. Moral absolutism, as Harman represents it, holds that there is a single maximally correct moral framework. Harman claims rather that all moral frameworks are maximally correct. There is a middle position which has been omitted: some moral frameworks are maximally correct, while others are not. (Moral absolutism then becomes a special case of this middle position: one in which the class of maximally correct frameworks has a single member.) None of Harman's arguments supports his sweeping claim that all moral frameworks are created equal as against this middle position.

Harman might have been well served to defend a version of this middle position rather than the position he says he is arguing for. It seems most unlikely that there are no respects in which one moral framework can be (objectively) inferior to another. Harman is vague about what moral frameworks are (Thomson also presses this point at 194–96), so it is not clear whether they admit of inconsistency in a strict sense. But whatever they are, surely they admit of at least an analogue of inconsistency. If they are "values," for instance, as Harman often suggests, what would we say about a moral framework which attached both a great deal of value, and a high degree of disvalue, to some single thing? Or one whose value-rankings violated transitivity? If such systems are allowed to count as moral frameworks—and nothing in Harman suggests otherwise—it seems uncontroversial that they are inferior to ones which possess, at a minimum, internal coherence. But then Harman's sweeping claim is false.

The real debate is within the middle position (of which moral absolutism is the limit case): it concerns the extent of maximal correctness. (Compare Harman's proposed recasting of the thesis of Moral Objectivity at 161.) The new debate concerns matters of degree, rather than the sharp differences suggested by Harman's original portrayal of the options. In this new debate, Harman might argue that the only frameworks which fail to achieve maximal correctness are those exhibiting internal incoherence: all internally coherent moral frameworks are created equal. Someone of a less tolerant cast might argue that other features of a moral framework besides incoherence can render it clearly inferior; perhaps the features proposed would allow us to say, as Harman's original view could not, that Hitler's moral framework is incorrect. Then, if there are any moral judgments which are true only on inferior
frameworks, we could reject them as false (false period) in the way I suggested earlier.

I will now return to Harman’s first principal thesis of ch. 1 via a review of chs. 4 and 5.\(^1\) Harman’s main topic in those chapters is what he calls “reason implying judgments” (62). Certain judgments are generally used to attribute compelling reasons to the agent being judged: Harman suggests that judgments of the form “A ought morally to D” and “It would be wrong of C to G” are often used in this way (62). Further, Harman puts forward an account of reasons according to which the reasons S has depend on S’s particular desires, goals, intentions, and values (47–48). Imagine, then, a person A and an act D such that A’s values, intentions, desires, etc., are not such as to give her compelling reasons to do D. Let J be a reason-implying judgment attributing compelling reasons to A to do D. It follows from what has already been said that J is false. Given A’s psychology and Harman’s account of reasons, it is false that A has compelling reasons to do D. But we have stipulated that J implies that A has compelling reasons to do D. Hence, on Harman’s view J must be false, as it implies something false.\(^2\)

This result, however, seems to contradict the first main thesis of ch. 1. We were told there that moral claims are not truth-assessable as they stand; they must be relativized to a moral framework for purposes of assigning truth conditions to them. Here, though, we have not relativized judgment J to a moral framework—or, indeed, to anything at all. It is false as it stands: false period. It is, admittedly, a statement about A; but to say something about A is not to say something which must be relativized to A in order to be assessed for truth or falsity. (“Sally shouted” is about Sally, but does not need to be relativized to her—whatever that would mean—in order to be assessed for truth or falsity.) Reason-implying judgments, then, seem to constitute counterexamples to the relativism of ch. 1.\(^3\) This is a surprising result—especially in light of the examples Harman put forward to illustrate moral relativism in ch. 1. (See, e.g., thesis (2) and fn. 2 on 4; these appear to be reason-implying judgments.)

Thomson doubts whether Harman is really committed to the view she calls “Agent Relativism” (209). The version she puts forward, however, concerns judgments of the form “Morality requires S to D”; the question is

\(^1\) In what follows I simply expand on Thomson’s remark that “Critic Relativism and Agent Relativism … are at war with each other” (211).

\(^2\) Cp. 61, where Harman notes that given a certain picture of Hitler’s psychology, “any moral judgment that implied that Hitler did have a compelling reason to refrain [from ordering the Holocaust] could not be true. (If P is not true and Q implies P, then Q is not true.)” I don’t know why Harman says “not true” instead of “false.”

whether Harman must say that such judgments are false when S’s desires, etc., are not such as to give her compelling reasons to D. Whether Harman must say this depends, of course, on whether he takes “Morality requires S to D” to be a reason-implying judgment. Thomson is correct that he never says explicitly that he does—although I think his comments at 45 suggest that he does. Indeed, he is careful in ch. 5 not to say of any form of words that it is invariably used to make a reason-implying judgment. But he clearly thinks people make such judgments, and he is committed to something like Thomson’s Agent Relativism about any genuine instance of that practice.

I turn now to the “quasi-absolutism” which Harman introduces in ch. 3 in order to repair a defect he sees with his original formulation of moral relativism. I want to begin by asking what exactly that defect is supposed to be. Harman suggests at the beginning of ch. 3 that the relativism of ch. 1 creates a difficulty for the expression of basic moral disagreement. (He is committed to the existence of such “basic differences in moral outlook” (11): they are the basis of his main argument for relativism.) Suppose Joe and Jane disagree fundamentally concerning vegetarianism. Joe says, “Raising animals for food is wrong,” and Jane replies that it is not wrong. Despite appearances—after all, one has said something which is syntactically the negation of what the other has said—Harman thinks they have not succeeded in expressing their disagreement. Rather, the relativism of ch. 1 would suggest that they are in total agreement: both agree that raising animals for food is wrong relative to Joe’s framework and not wrong relative to Jane’s (32).

It is not easy to see, though, why the moral relativism of ch. 1 has this consequence. Harman did not say there that when Joe says, “Raising animals for food is wrong,” that means, “Relative to moral framework M, raising animals for food is wrong.” Harman’s claim was not that Joe is expressing that proposition when he says, “Raising animals for food is wrong.” If that had been Harman’s view, then it would have been easier to see why Joe and Jane can’t succeed in expressing their disagreement: equivocation on “wrong” would mean that there is no proposition which Joe is asserting and Jane is denying. But if we take seriously Harman’s claim that “moral relativism is not ... a claim about meaning” (17), then moral relativism would seem to pose no threat to univocality. Thus, Harman’s evident concern about the

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4 If that were Harman’s view, the problem about being unable to express basic disagreement would be just a special case of a more general problem: that of being unable to make (certain) moral judgments at all. When we tried to express a moral opinion, all we would be able to say—the only propositions we would succeed in asserting—would be judgments to the effect that a certain moral opinion is a “theorem” of a certain moral framework. That would constitute a real loss of expressive power: to say that p is a theorem of T is not to say that p. Indeed, we might lose the ability to make genuine moral judgments at all. Thomson, at 188–89, expresses the opinion that the expanded, relativized judgments for which moral judgments must be seen as elliptical are not in fact moral judgments at all.

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expression of disagreement on a relativistic account should make us wonder whether his relativism isn’t a claim about meaning after all.

Harman also suggests, however, that when people accept different moral frameworks they disagree in their affective attitudes (32); it may be disagreements of that kind which he fears cannot be expressed on a relativistic construal of moral judgments. “Emotivism, unlike pure moral relativism, allows people with different moral frameworks to express moral disagreements,” he says (33; emphasis added). Why, though, are Joe and Jane supposed to be unable to express their conflicting attitudes toward raising animals for food? If Joe sincerely says, “I am against (standards which permit) raising animals for food,” and Jane sincerely replies, “I am not,” then Joe and Jane have succeeded in expressing their clashing attitudes toward the practice of raising animals for food (or, alternatively, toward standards which permit that practice).5

In short, I am not clear on the motivation for introducing quasi-absolutism. Nonetheless, let us now try to see what that use of language consists in. Harman characterizes the function or nature of the quasi-absolutist use of moral language in two rather different ways. On the one hand, he stresses the expressive nature of this use of language. Quasi-absolutist judgments “are used to express the speaker’s attitude toward certain standards” (35). (That is presumably why he later says that quasi-absolutism is a form of emotivism (171).) Harman also says, however, that quasi-absolutist judgments involve “project[ing] [one’s] moral framework onto the world” (34) and speaking as if it were the single true morality, knowing all the while that there is no such thing. We might therefore say that the quasi-absolutist use involves pretending that one’s own moral framework is the single true morality.6

Harman insists that in contrast to simple forms of emotivism, quasi-absolutism allows us to embed moral claims in complex contexts and to make inferences involving moral claims (33, 37, 38). This is because quasi-absolutist judgments, unlike “boo-hooray” utterances, possess truth conditions and are susceptible of being true or false. I found it unclear, however, how exactly this is supposed to work. Harman claims that the truth conditions for quasi-absolutist judgments are not “objective” (41–43). He indicates that he cannot strictly define “objective,” but tries to sketch what he has in mind in

5 Harman is of course right that there is a difference between talking about an attitude and expressing that attitude (35). But you can express an attitude by way of talking about it, e.g., by sincerely asserting that you have it.

6 One might wonder why we are necessarily expressing affective attitudes when we engage in this charade, as we must be if the two characterizations of quasi-absolutism pick out the same phenomenon. It would have been helpful had Harman explained why these two characterizations of the quasi-absolutist use are equivalent. (On 177–79, Harman seems to argue that the quasi-absolutist use of language necessarily involves the attitude of approval; but this argument does not mention the “projective” aspect of that use.)
this way. The moral relativist cannot suppose that any quasi-absolutist, non-relative moral judgment is objectively true—that would be to suppose that some moral framework was objectively privileged after all. That seems right, but it does not help us to understand what subjective truth conditions might be. It seems to follow rather that on a relativist view nonrelative judgments simply can’t really be true.

I also don’t see how the quasi-absolutist use of moral language is supposed to facilitate the expression of basic disagreement. I suggested earlier that quasi-absolutist moral judgments involve pretending that one’s own moral framework is objectively correct. Before making a quasi-absolutist judgment, then, one steps into a make-believe or “pretend” world in which one’s own moral framework is assumed to hold. When Joe and Jane make apparently conflicting quasi-absolutist judgments about raising animals for food, they are thus occupying and speaking from inside different make-believe or pretend worlds. It is hard to see how this could generate disagreement in any robust sense. Each knows, after all, that if he stepped into the other’s pretend world he would say what the other person is now saying; any apparent difference between them is due simply to their having chosen to enter different make-believe worlds. We seem to be no farther along.

I note in closing that I have not commented at all on Harman’s arguments for moral relativism; I have merely attempted to bring out some difficulties which attend even the formulation of such a view.