

# Culture and Responsibility: A Reply to Moody-Adams

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In her bold paper, "Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance," and recent book, *Fieldwork in Familiar Places*, Michele Moody-Adams attacks the claim that cultural influences can exempt persons from moral responsibility by rendering them unable to know that certain actions are wrong.<sup>1</sup> Among her many objections to this claim, which she terms "the inability thesis about cultural impediments,"<sup>2</sup> three stand out as central to her position. First, she argues that the inability thesis has not found adequate empirical support. The evidence standardly given to show that a culture has rendered some of its members ignorant of some moral qualities of their actions may instead serve as evidence only that those persons *chose* to be morally ignorant. Moody-Adams argues that, where ignorance is "affected," or voluntarily induced or sustained, it is culpable and cannot excuse the ignorant parties from wrongdoing.

Moody-Adams concedes that empirical considerations alone cannot settle the truth or falsehood of the inability thesis. But she aims to attack the thesis itself, not only the quality of the evidence that has been cited for it. So she also develops two main theoretical objections to the thesis. She argues that adherence to the notion of cultural incapacitation for responsible agency tends to produce "self-conceptions that are potentially dangerously self-deceptive."<sup>3</sup> The inability thesis, she thinks, tends to lead us to misunderstand ordinary persons' potential for doing wrong on a massive scale. Finally, Moody-Adams argues that cultures depend on individual persons' choices and actions in such a way that cultures cannot systematically impair the moral capacities of their members.

I shall consider these objections in turn, showing that none of them provides sufficient reasons for rejecting the inability thesis. My aim in salvaging the thesis, however, is not to suggest that the numerous employments of it have generally been well founded. I quite agree with Moody-Adams that the thesis often has been invoked carelessly, with the result that many responsible agents have been let off the moral hook for grave wrongs. Specifically, I agree that the inability thesis commonly has been coupled with oversimplified and exaggerated views about how cultures might influence moral capacities. Granting that the inability thesis has regularly been misapplied in these ways is, however, compatible with the truth of the thesis, properly interpreted. For the thesis need make nothing more than the modest claim that *some* cultural influences *can* affect the circumstances or moral capacities of *some* persons in ways that exempt them from responsibility for *some* of their actions.

## I. Inability to Know

Moody-Adams correctly notes that charges about certain persons' inability to know the wrongfulness of their acts are often based on little more than the fact that they did not know or believe that their acts were wrong. But this fact is consistent with their culpably having refused to seek moral knowledge that they could acquire. Moody-Adams points out that, where culturally tolerated wrongdoing exists, there are often strong reasons for persons who hold culturally prevalent moral views not to subject their moral attitudes and acts to careful scrutiny.<sup>4</sup> For instance, the benefits that free men and women derived from the practice of slavery in ancient Greece gave them good reasons not to probe carefully the moral grounds for slavery or their personal implication in the practice. Although Moody-Adams acknowledges that the matter of someone's ability to know will not be settled through empirical evidence alone, she implies that the existence of good reasons for agents not to scrutinize their actions lends her affected-ignorance hypothesis greater weight in such situations than the hypothesis that persons' moral abilities have been compromised.

This is unpersuasive in some cases. To continue with the example of ancient Greek slavery,<sup>5</sup> we know that Aristotle, who as a privileged, free man had clear reasons not to examine the ethical justification of slavery, did try to investigate the grounds of slavery and concluded that some kinds of slavery were appropriate because natural. Aristotle did not agree with conventional Greek justifications of slavery; in some sense he found slavery more fully defensible than did most ancient Greeks.<sup>6</sup> Because Aristotle recognized possible ethical objections to slavery,<sup>7</sup> apparently tried to assess the ethical character of slavery despite incentives not to do so, yet failed to reach anything approximating a sound moral judgment about it, the hypothesis that he was unable to grasp the wrongness of slavery, although far from established, seems at least as probable as the hypothesis that he willingly clung to false beliefs about slavery simply to maintain his own privilege.

The inability thesis becomes more probable for Aristotle's case when we consider that the very practice of slavery typically limited severely the evidence about slaves' moral dignity that some in the society, especially aristocrats like Aristotle, could be expected to have access to. This is a well-known feature of social oppression: oppressive practices sustain themselves partly by systematically covering up evidence that the persons they oppress deserve better treatment. Hence, Aristotle need not have willingly refused to examine critically the ethical justification of slavery in order to arrive at his distorted appraisal of it; rather, his aristocratic social circumstances may have occluded his access to good evidence about the rational capabilities of persons subjected to enslavement, thus preventing him from being able to discern those capabilities. Moody-Adams seems to disregard this feature of social oppression in part because she thinks that the initial steps of ethical criticism of established cultural practices will be quite easy once one sets aside one's refusal to engage in ethical investigation. Describing affected ignorance, she writes, "it is morally culpable ignorance because it involves a choice not to know something that is morally important and that *would be*

*easy to know* but for that choice.”<sup>8</sup> Surely this is not an accurate description of the generic Greek’s epistemic access to the wrongness of chattel slavery; it is even less credible as a description of the epistemic position of those, like Aristotle, who would never have worked side by side with slaves and would probably have had very limited personal relations with them.

This point might be unlikely to move Moody-Adams without much closer analysis of Aristotle’s life and the nature of Greek slavery.<sup>9</sup> But this argument about the power of oppressive practices to conceal ethically relevant evidence can also apply to the circumstances of the oppressed themselves. So let us consider, instead of elites such as Aristotle, the situation of a male Greek slave who believed that slavery was ethically justified to some extent and who did not subject this belief to critical scrutiny. The point I aim to make about this slave’s moral ignorance does not require that the slave hold completely conventional classical views about slavery’s legitimacy. For one thing, those views may themselves have incorporated some ambivalence about the justice of Greek slavery.<sup>10</sup> In addition, it is likely that the slave’s personal relationships permitted him to maintain some sense of personal esteem and humanity that would be in sharp conflict with thoroughgoing acceptance of slavery. Nevertheless, this slave might have complied with the norms governing Greek slavery because he accepted their legitimacy to a significant degree, not solely because the practical costs of complaining or resisting would have been too high. That many slaves internalized to some extent the norms of slavery was necessary for the long-term survival of widespread chattel slavery, since some tasks routinely assigned to slaves, such as child care and cooking, could not be performed well without the slaves’ demonstrating genuine cooperation and trustworthiness. Also, the social and personal trust that had to be bestowed upon many slaves in order for the system to function provided those slaves with responsibilities through which they could find some additional measure of self-esteem, which secured further their partial acceptance of slavery.<sup>11</sup> So without ignoring the severe coercion that Greek slaveholding frequently involved, and without holding that slaves ever completely internalized the values of the system that subjugated them, we can suppose that a person born into Greek slavery might have taken it to be a necessary and reasonable practice.<sup>12</sup>

Like Aristotle, such a slave undoubtedly had incentives not to question the morality of slavery. He may have been better off than most women (slave and free alike), for one thing, and there was little for him to gain practically by seeking a reflectively reasoned conclusion about the morality of slavery. But to hold that the slave’s moral ignorance was willingly affected is far less tenable than it would be in Aristotle’s case. It is difficult even to think of the slave’s undertaking an ethical investigation of slavery, much less arriving at the conclusion that slavery is unethical, assuming that he had been brought up to think of himself primarily as another person’s physical equipment, not a reflective moral investigator or social critic, in a cultural world in which such upbringings were almost universally considered to reflect unalterable social necessities (the possibility of eventual manumission notwithstanding). Even if this slave could conceive, in some sense, of

a world without slaves,<sup>13</sup> this would not equip him to seek out and discern reasons for morally scrutinizing slavery as a cultural institution. In order to be able to grasp reasons to investigate the institution of slavery, he would need some way to think about slavery as being a cultural institution, a matter for collective human reflection, discussion, and deliberation, not just a fact of nature or an ineluctable economic condition of social survival. It is difficult to see how a typical Greek slave could have access to such a perspective on slavery. His moral ignorance seems, therefore, more plausibly attributed to inability than to willing and culpable refusal to fulfill some standing responsibility to analyze dominant cultural practices.

In fact, it is not clear that debating the slave's abilities as a moral agent is really the crucial issue here. Moody-Adams often presents the hypothesis of affected ignorance as though it follows directly from rejection of the inability thesis. Plainly, this is not the case. Even if we were to suppose that the slave did have the ability to know that slavery was wrong by critically reflecting on his culture's practices, it would not follow that the slave's failure to pursue such reflection and gain that knowledge was culpable. The main practical issue about the slave's moral ignorance is whether cultural influences could affect his agency in such a manner that it would be unreasonable or unfair for others to hold him to the expectation that he reflectively scrutinize the ethics of slavery. For this is what his responsibility for his moral ignorance would consist in: if he were responsible, it would be appropriate for others to hold him to the moral demand that he form certain judgments about slavery. Whether or not we think that cultural influences have rendered the slave strictly incapable of knowing that slavery is wrong, surely it would be unreasonable to hold him to the expectation that he know this, given his cultural location (unless there is something unusual about his particular social circumstances).

Notice that this view is compatible with taking the slave seriously as a person,<sup>14</sup> since exempting him from responsibility for his moral ignorance about slavery does not require exempting him from responsibility for having other moral knowledge, for scrutinizing other social practices, or for acting ethically in other respects. The influences of culture on moral capacity are normally fragmented and localized. The alternatives are not limited merely to holding the Greek slave—or Aristotle—responsible for all his moral beliefs or exempting him entirely from all accountability as a moral agent. Nor must the slave and Aristotle be regarded in the same way, as their situations within Greek culture are so different.

Moody-Adams would likely respond that the difficulties the slave would face in pursuing moral criticism of Greek assumptions about slavery would make it appropriate to forgive the slave for his affected ignorance about the wrongness of slavery, but not to release him from responsibility for his ignorance.<sup>15</sup> This response confuses forgiveness with the mitigation of blame and responsibility. We forgive another, in the face of her blameworthiness, when it is reasonable to seek reconciliation with her, to reestablish normal personal relations. The difficulty of someone's doing what we nonetheless required her to do is not a reason to forgive her failure. Rather, her apology and repentance would be reasons for us to forswear blame. If we were holding her to

expectations that would in fact be exceptionally difficult to meet, then we might lessen our estimation of her responsibility to meet those expectations and so lessen the blame that her failure to meet our standards justifies. But this is precisely what Moody-Adams resists doing in the case of persons' failures adequately to criticize entrenched cultural practices.

To sum up thus far: Moody-Adams offers insufficient evidence for affected ignorance in cases where persons apparently try in earnest to subject their moral beliefs to critical scrutiny and fail to reach sound conclusions. The affected-ignorance hypothesis is especially difficult to sustain when we consider persons, like the Greek slave, who are being wronged by an oppressive cultural institution but who have been brought up to internalize the central values and prevalent rationalizations of that institution. The main practical issue that dwells behind the inability thesis is not inability *per se* but rather whether we can reasonably hold persons to expectations that they acquire knowledge about the moral quality of certain actions or social practices. For even someone who has the raw competence to gain particular pieces of moral knowledge may be culturally positioned in such a way that attaining that knowledge would be so extremely difficult that we could not fairly hold her to the demand that she do so.<sup>16</sup>

## II. Self-Deceptive Tendencies

Moody-Adams's attack on the inability thesis proceeds by asserting that the thesis runs afoul of two essential constraints on any acceptable psychological theory.<sup>17</sup> One of these constraints requires that the psychological explanation be incompatible with self-conceptions that are potentially self-deceptive.<sup>18</sup> Moody-Adams contends that the inability thesis tends to be associated with serious self-deceptions. For instance, it leads us to deny the "banality of wrongdoing," the capacity of ordinary, otherwise decent people to do morally horrible things.<sup>19</sup> The thesis also tends to make it easier for us to excuse our cultural predecessors from responsibility for grievous wrongdoing, thereby allowing us to maintain a more benign view of our culture and its heritage than is warranted.<sup>20</sup>

Moody-Adams's discussion of these common accompaniments of the inability thesis is insightful: the thesis has often been used to support such self-deceiving views of our moral standing, and these views are indeed dangerous. Nevertheless, these are not good reasons to reject the inability thesis altogether. First, the constraint on psychological explanation to which Moody-Adams appeals here is far too restrictive. Virtually no interesting, plausible explanations of morally complicated behaviors will be *incompatible* with all *potentially* self-deceptive conceptions of ourselves.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, even some of the best explanations of our behavior as moral agents can easily be used in ways that are seriously self-deceiving.

Consider Moody-Adams's own affected-ignorance hypothesis, for example. Although I do not concur with the sweeping application she makes of this hypothesis, I agree that ignorance of the wrongfulness of established cultural practices and of the particular actions that perpetuate them is more often culpable than we usually admit. Yet the thesis that moral

ignorance is sometimes only a blameworthy refusal to know certainly can lend itself to harmful self-deception. It can naturally lead us to think smugly that we are able to know much more about the right and the good than we are actually capable of knowing from our current historical and cultural situations. It can easily lead us to adopt unrealistically high expectations about what others should know, based on false assessments of what reasons they might have to commence moral criticism of their societies.

The conclusion to be drawn is that if an otherwise well supported psychological explanation tends to be applied in dangerously self-deceptive ways, then those tendencies should be exposed and resisted. But this is not a reason to abandon the explanation if, once the application of the explanation has been properly reined in, the explanation can do its job well in the absence of those tendencies. This is the case, I believe, with the inability thesis. The thesis has been applied with far too much enthusiasm, with the result that it has tended to foster the dangerous misunderstandings that Moody-Adams describes. A more restrained employment of the thesis is, however, possible and, I am suggesting, warranted. If we interpret the thesis as a fairly modest one, holding that some cultural influences can affect the circumstances or capacities of some persons so as to exempt them from responsibility for some of the wrongs they commit or permit, then it allows us to acknowledge the banality of wrongdoing and the unsavory practices of our cultural predecessors. In short, we can carefully admit the inability thesis in some cases without seeing "culture everywhere at work in the behavior of individuals."<sup>22</sup>

### III. Culture's Dependence on Individual Agency

The second constraint on psychological theories that Moody-Adams invokes requires that psychological explanations conform with self-conceptions that "can withstand rational scrutiny."<sup>23</sup> Moody-Adams uses this constraint to develop her most direct attack on the inability thesis. Although she grants that human behavior, as a whole, cannot be adequately explained without invoking cultural factors,<sup>24</sup> she argues that the notion of cultural incapacitation utilized in the inability thesis is deeply confused. If Moody-Adams can sustain this conclusion, then, however successful my earlier replies might prove to be, even the modest version of the inability thesis that I have favored will be unfounded.

Moody-Adams's main argument against the possibility of cultural incapacitation is that cultures have causal efficacy only by way of individual agents whose actions perpetuate and apply cultural norms and values. Apart from those actions, "a culture . . . cannot be an 'agent' of anything."<sup>25</sup> This is unobjectionable. The question is, what does this show about the inability thesis? In the modest form that I endorse, that thesis says only that cultural influences may disrupt some of an individual's capacities, or the opportunities for their exercise, in ways that excuse her from some moral responsibility. This does not require that such cultural influences operate in ontological independence of individual persons' actions; nor does it require that the effects of culture be brought about directly, without the mediation



of other individuals or social institutions.<sup>26</sup> The thesis merely entails that it is appropriate for explanatory purposes to cite cultural factors, not just the individual actions and social situations through which those factors are realized on some particular occasion. And Moody-Adams has granted the legitimacy of appealing to culture in order to understand human conduct.

At times, Moody-Adams seems to advance a different argument. She states that cultures are perpetuated, protected, modified, or revised only through actions that individuals choose to perform. She then implies that responsibility for those choices rests with the persons who make them, not the cultural context within which the choices are made.<sup>27</sup> In other words, if I perform certain deeds that, unknown to me, happen to be serious wrongs because I belong to a culture in which such (unrecognized) wrongs are conventionally expected of the culture's members, then it is nevertheless through my own choices, in conjunction with the decisions of my cultural fellows, that those cultural expectations survive in my situation and are interpreted as demanding the particular sorts of wrongs that I unwittingly commit. The fact that my actions are intelligible because of my cultural setting cannot diminish my responsibility for committing these wrongs, since I choose to carry on the culture's legacy in those circumstances through those particular acts. "It is unhelpful in such cases to blame the culture . . .," Moody-Adams asserts, "when the individual who chooses how to perpetuate the culture is to blame."<sup>28</sup>

It is unclear, however, how this could yield a sound argument against the inability thesis. As we saw above, Moody-Adams cannot be arguing that the place of persons' choices in perpetuating culture precludes any explanatory role for cultural factors, for she explicitly denies this. Alternatively, it would not be reasonable for her to hold, for cases of moral ignorance, that the cultural factors that contribute to an explanation of someone's ignorance of wrongdoing are necessarily realized in, or sustained by, *that person's* own choices, among others. For the individual may be morally ignorant because of others' choices, not his own. If others' choices to perpetuate the culture helped to bring about the person's ignorance, that still would not rule out a role for culture in explaining why he is morally ignorant, possibly morally impaired to some extent, and blamelessly so.

Three points stand in the way of constructing a sound argument against the inability thesis based on the idea that cultural norms are sustained through individuals' choices. First, unchosen or less than fully voluntary actions can also help to perpetuate or modify cultures. The particular ways in which a group of people speak, gesture, sit, and walk may support cultural conventions even if those people do not specifically choose to act in those ways. Second, acts can be deliberately chosen under descriptions that have nothing to do with the cultural norms those acts help to perpetuate. For example, even though an agent's reasons for acting may have nothing to do with certain cultural norms, her actions can help to maintain those norms if others perceive the acts as being motivated by cultural reasons. Further, even deliberate choices to protect or modify cultural standards can be made under conditions that excuse the agent from responsibility, such as conditions of extreme deprivation, trauma, or nonculpable empirical ignorance.

The force of these points is illustrated by the case of the Greek slave we considered earlier. The fact that many of the slave's attitudes, choices, and behaviors might have helped to maintain the practice of slaveholding establishes nothing about the slave's ability to understand that slavery is wrong or his culpability for failing to understand this.

Moody-Adams does well to point out that, owing to the indeterminacy of the social rules that embody a culture's values and to the pressures of changing circumstance on a culture's survival, cultures cannot persist if they impair wholesale their members' "capacities for the exercise of judgment and discretion."<sup>29</sup> Other things equal, cultures whose participants are relatively thoughtless and insensitive are not likely to thrive over the long haul. There is reason to doubt, as Moody-Adams suggests,<sup>30</sup> that widespread impairment of agents' capacities would be compatible with proper application of the term "culture." Yet again, this observation raises serious difficulties for the inability thesis only when the thesis is applied overzealously. Cultures may impair or impede the exercise of some moral capacities of some of their members without placing cultural survival or adaptability in jeopardy. Of course, it is open to investigation whether cultures that have such effects might not be worse off (and not just morally worse) than cultures that more fully cultivate all of their members' ethical capabilities. But that issue is not germane to the inability thesis, which concerns only the possibility of some culturally induced impairment, not the long-term benefits or costs of this for a society.

Two mistaken assumptions about the scope of culturally induced moral impairment run throughout Moody-Adams's treatment of culture and responsibility. First, she assumes that, if cultures could morally debilitate anyone, they would have this effect on all or nearly all of their members. It is apparently because Moody-Adams assumes this that she suggests that the truth of the inability thesis would pose a serious obstacle to the possibility of progressive individual and social change. If cultural incapacitation meant that virtually all of the culture's members were incapable of knowing that certain things were wrong, then, where important cultural practices depended on such wrongdoing, it would be quite unlikely that those wrongs would be corrected internally.<sup>31</sup> Second, she assumes that culturally generated impairment, if possible, would extend to all or nearly all of the capacities used in any moral judgment. It is because she assumes this that she fears that acceptance of the inability thesis would mean denying the moral personhood of those who have been impaired by their cultures.<sup>32</sup> The former assumption is false because different members of a culture may be situated very differently within it, and individuals' distinct cultural locations tend to mediate cultural effects on their moral abilities (as illustrated by our earlier discussion of Aristotle's and the slave's moral ignorance). The latter assumption is false because cultural influences on the development or exercise of moral capacities can be highly localized and compartmentalized, operating rather selectively on specific types of perception, emotion, and judgment.<sup>33</sup> The inability thesis, when properly applied, depends on neither of these mistaken assumptions.



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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Michele M. Moody-Adams, "Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance," *Ethics* 104 (1994): 291–309; and *Fieldwork in Familiar Places: Morality, Culture, and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), esp. chap. 2.

<sup>2</sup>Moody-Adams, "Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance," 293.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 297.

<sup>4</sup>It is worth bearing in mind that there are always some reasons not to subject our moral judgments to scrutiny, regardless of our cultural situation. Moral reflection is difficult and often time-consuming. It holds out the prospect that we may have to change, sometimes in dramatic ways, and it may for a time upset the coherence of our aims and means of self-understanding. The incentives against moral reflection that Moody-Adams mentions are ones that operate in addition to the usual reasons to refrain from reflection.

<sup>5</sup>Moody-Adams considers this example because Michael Slote has argued that this is a case in which cultural limitations made the Greeks unable to know that slavery was wrong. See Slote, "Is Virtue Possible?" *Analysis* 42 (1982): 70–76. Moody-Adams addresses the history of slavery more extensively in *Fieldwork in Familiar Places*, devoting particular attention to Bernard Williams's discussion of ancient Greek slavery in *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), chap. 5.

<sup>6</sup>See Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 110–17. According to Williams, most Greeks held that slavery was neither just, since it was arbitrary and coercive, nor unjust, since it was thought to be an unavoidable precondition of social survival. Aristotle argued, however, that a system of slavery could be fully grounded in nature and therefore could, in principle, be justly maintained without arbitrariness or coercive force.

<sup>7</sup>See, for example, Aristotle, *Politics* 1253b20–23, 1255a7–10.

<sup>8</sup>Moody-Adams, *Fieldwork in Familiar Places*, 102 (emphasis added).

<sup>9</sup>An anonymous referee suggested that closer analysis of Aristotle would tend only to support rejection of the inability thesis, since Aristotle's own views about responsibility and ignorance would have made him leery of this thesis. Without a general defense of Aristotle's account of responsibility, however, exploring Aristotle's own views about responsibility does not seem germane to a determination of his actual ability to appreciate the wrongness of slavery and his blameworthiness for failing to have done so.

<sup>10</sup>See note 6 on the Greeks' recognition of the arbitrariness of slavery.

<sup>11</sup>For a more thorough defense of the claim that slavery can require some degree of internalization on slaves' parts in order for the practice to survive, see Laurence M. Thomas's work on American slavery: "American Slavery and the Holocaust," *Public Affairs Quarterly* 5 (April 1991): 191–210; *Vessels of Evil: American Slavery and the Holocaust* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), esp. 125–38; and "Power, Trust, and Evil," in *Overcoming Racism and Sexism*, ed. Linda A. Bell and David Blumenfeld (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995), 153–71. Thomas's discussions are particularly helpful for their attention to the way in which slavery enlisted support from slaves' own moral capacities for trust. For those who insist that prevalent justifications for slavery were never internalized by slaves, see the ex-slaves' comments quoted in *Vessels of Evil*, 133. One of these ex-slaves says that she hopes to get to heaven "wid all my white folks, just to wait on them and serve them, sorta lak I did in slavery time. Dat will be 'nough hebbin for Adeline."

Joshua Cohen also argues that some degree of internalization contributed to slaves' compliance with slavery: "It seems indisputable that slavery was sustained in part by the acceptance on the part of slaves of religious and ethical views that

presented their status as suitable for them, and by the more willing compliance resulting from such acceptance: though vast inequalities of power typically excluded determined resistance, the phenomenology of compliance appears not to have been exhausted by strategic accommodation to those inequalities." See Cohen, "The Arc of the Moral Universe," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 26 (Spring 1997): 91–134, 107. Neither Cohen nor Thomas, however, claims that slaves ever completely internalized conventional justifications for slavery. On this point they concur with Orlando Patterson. See his *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 97.

<sup>12</sup> I am not considering the case of free citizens who were forced into slavery through conquest. Of course, it is one thing for a slave to believe that slavery is a legitimate practice and quite another for the slave to believe that his own enslavement is justifiable. This distinction does not matter, however, for the point I want to make about the slave's moral ignorance.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Moody-Adams's statement that the Greeks, simply in virtue of having learned a language, could imagine a world in which there were no slaves because they could form the negation of the statement "There are slaves" ("Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance," 296, n. 14). In *Fieldwork in Familiar Places*, Moody-Adams reiterates the claim that learning a language suffices for "the capacity to question existing practices, and to imagine that one's social world might be other than it is" (100). Although Moody-Adams does not develop these contentions, she appears to conflate the ability to conceive with the ability to imagine, where the former clearly does not suffice for the latter. Furthermore, imagination plays a significant role in much ethical criticism in part because of its motivational capacity, its ability to engage emotional sensitivities. By contrast, the linguistic skills that Moody-Adams refers to do not necessarily have such motivational power. This distinction between mere conception and ethically potent imagination is illustrated by Aristotle's own description of a world without slaves. Aristotle playfully entertains the possibility of a world in which tools would immediately anticipate human wills, so that no one would be needed to operate tools as slaves and servants do (*Politics*, 1253b33–39). Aristotle's ability to fancifully conceive such a world does not, however, help him come any closer to imagining how a human society could realistically do without slavery and so does nothing to advance his ethical comprehension, as genuine imagination of such a society might.

<sup>14</sup> See Moody-Adams's worry that appeals to cultural impairment can have the effect of denying persons' full humanity and thus reinforce degrading prejudices and practices ("Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance," 306).

<sup>15</sup> See Moody-Adams's description of the "forgiving moralist" (*ibid.*, 302–03, and *Fieldwork in Familiar Places*, 102–03).

<sup>16</sup> In making this point, I am not backing off of my defense of a limited version of the inability thesis. Instead, I am noting that there is a practical matter about which parties to the dispute over the inability thesis should be able to agree, namely, that the extreme difficulty of meeting an expectation can make it unreasonable to hold someone responsible for meeting that expectation.

<sup>17</sup> The theoretical nature of Moody-Adams's proposed constraints confirms that she is indeed attacking the inability thesis itself, not just the evidence that has been offered to support it. Were she merely doing the latter, it would be possible for her to agree with much of what I end up saying about the truth of the inability thesis.

<sup>18</sup> Moody-Adams, "Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance," 297. I discuss the second constraint in section III.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 298–99.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

<sup>21</sup> See Moody-Adams's statement of the constraint (*ibid.*, 297).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

<sup>24</sup> See *ibid.*, 291, 304.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 304. In *Fieldwork in Familiar Places*, Moody-Adams writes, "The concept of culture is a useful theoretical abstraction, but it outlives its usefulness when it is assumed that an abstraction might cause anything to happen" (95).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Moody-Adams, "Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance," 307.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 293, 305. The emphasis upon choice in this reconstructed argument is Moody-Adams's.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 305.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 307.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Moody-Adams does not explicitly advance this point about the inability thesis and progressive change. Her discussion of the place of individuals' choices in the interpretation and modification of cultural norms, however, suggests the point implicitly. Tracy Isaacs's brief, but helpful, response to Moody-Adams's article explains how rejecting the inability thesis could pave the way for constructing an account of moral progress. See Isaacs, "Cultural Context and Moral Responsibility," *Ethics* 107 (July 1997): 670–84, 673.

<sup>32</sup> See Moody-Adams, "Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance," 306.

<sup>33</sup> This is one of the factors that facilitates the banality of wrongdoing, in fact, making it possible for ordinary folks to do abominable things in some areas of their lives but not in others. Although they do not address cultural influences specifically, John Sabini and Maury Silver offer a useful discussion of the roles that various psychological and social mechanisms play in the banality of wrongdoing. See Sabini and Silver, "On Destroying the Innocent with a Clear Conscience," in *Moralities of Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 55–87. Sabini and Silver's account might be extended to include cultural factors.