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Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance*

Michele M. Moody-Adams

Few theorists concerned to understand human behavior would deny that the capacity to be influenced by the specific culture of a given social group is an important part of what it is to be human. As Clyde Kluckhohn argued in his “layman’s introduction” to anthropology, *Mirror for Man*, “to be human is to be cultured. There is culture in general and then there are the specific cultures such as Russian, American, British, Hottentot, Inca. The general abstract notion serves to remind us that we cannot explain acts solely in terms of the biological properties of the people concerned, their individual past experience, and the immediate situation.”¹ Moreover, as Kluckhohn suggests in this passage, if being human involves being cultured, there must then be a crucial connection between culture and agency. An important consequence of this connection is that much of our behavior can be intelligible only by reference to generally approved cultural practices. For example, only by reference to participation in a marriage ceremony can we coherently account for what happens when two people appear together to pronounce certain expressions of their language and exchange circular pieces of a yellow metal. Further, every culture develops intricate patterns of normative expectations about emotion, thought, and action that help to structure each person’s formative experiences. The motivation of people who marry, for instance, will be partly influenced by such patterns of cultural approval. Recognizing the link between culture and agency clearly reveals that cultures powerfully shape even the most fundamental desires and purposes that influence human action.

But what might the link between culture and agency mean for the practice of holding people responsible for action, and for moral

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1. Clyde Kluckhohn, *Mirror for Man* (New York: Fawcett, 1944), p. 24.

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and legal conventions of praise and blame? A currently influential answer to this question—to be found in much recent philosophical psychology, as well as in the social sciences and in history—is that cultural influences can, and often do, constitute serious impediments to responsible agency, and our attitudes toward praise and—especially—blame should acknowledge the existence of such impediments. Some of these views attempt to establish that, at least sometimes, widespread moral ignorance can be due principally to the cultural limitations of an entire era, rather than to individual moral defects. Michael Slote has argued, for example, that ancient Greek slave owners were simply “unable to see what virtue required in regard to slavery,” and that this inability “was not due to personal limitations (alone) but requires some explanation by social and historical forces, by cultural limitations.”² A second group of theories has developed out of somewhat different concerns: attempts within one culture to understand the behavior of an agent shaped by a different culture or by a subculture that seems to differ from the dominant culture in a complex society. Relying on notions like “social incapacitation,” and even “cultural insanity,” these theories attempt to establish that some behavior is evidence that one’s cultural background may radically impair one’s capacity for responsible action.³

Against both kinds of views, I contend that the link between culture and agency does not undermine the standard attributions of responsibility for action and hence cannot exempt human beings from responsibility. In Section I, I challenge the empirical credentials of those views which attempt to exempt historical agents from responsibility on the grounds that they suffer from some presumed culturally generated inability to avoid wrongdoing. Further, I show in Section II that these views rest on some dangerous misconceptions about the human potential for wrongdoing. Section III discusses the shortcomings of more radical claims—like the claim of cultural insanity—about cultural impediments to responsibility. Such views embody serious misunderstandings about the connection between culture and agency. We are powerfully influenced by our initiation into the cultural practices that, to adopt a phrase of Kluckhohn’s, constitute the “social legacy” that we acquire from the group.⁴ But a defensible account of the connection between culture and agency must be able to show that, ultimately, cultures persist only because individual persons capable of

2. Michael Slote, “Is Virtue Possible?” *Analysis*, vol. 42 (1982), reprinted in *The Virtues*, ed. R. Kruschwitz and R. Roberts (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1987), pp. 100–105, p. 102.

3. Lawrence Rosen, “The Anthropologist as Expert Witness,” *American Anthropologist* 79 (1977): 555–78, esp. pp. 568–69.

4. Kluckhohn, p. 24.

responsible action persist. The social legacy that comprises the culture of any group endures only when human beings choose, whether critically or uncritically, to protect and perpetuate that legacy.

I. MORAL IGNORANCE AND CULTURAL LIMITATIONS

One of the most influential philosophical views about cultural impediments to responsibility involves the claim that sometimes one's upbringing in a culture simply renders one unable to know that certain actions are wrong. I call this the inability thesis about cultural impediments. Slote's discussion of slavery in ancient Greece, cited above, provides one instance of this view. Alan Donagan defends another version of the view when he contends that "a graduate of Sandhurst or West Point who does not understand his duty to noncombatants as human beings is certainly culpable for his ignorance; an officer bred up from childhood in the Hitler *Jugend* might not be."⁵ Susan Wolf defends a still stronger version of the thesis. In her view, the "social circumstances" of, for instance, "slaveowners of the 1850's, Nazis of the 1930's, and many male chauvinists of our fathers' generation" may have made it inevitable that these people would hold the values and beliefs embodied in the actions that we now condemn.⁶

The simple inability thesis, in all of its guises, is bound up with a claim about diminished responsibility. But on some views the thesis provides only a mitigating excuse. According to Slote, for example, the ignorance at stake in the case of ancient Greek slavery was due in part to cultural impediments but also in part to "personal limitations." For Donagan and Wolf, in contrast, the inability thesis provides an exculpatory excuse. Wolf, in particular, believes that the applicability of the thesis actually requires us to withhold blame.⁷ But all the views under consideration accept the standard bifurcation of excuses into coercion and nonculpable ignorance, and they then argue that cultural influences can excuse wrongdoing in virtue of their tendency to produce nonculpable ignorance. The inability thesis thus represents a powerful challenge to the notion—defended at least since Aristotle—that an adult agent's ignorance of what she ought to do is, in general, no excuse for wrongdoing. What this notion presupposes is that ignorance of what one ought to do can generally be traced to some personal failure, whether a culpable omission or commission. Against this view, the theories under consideration posit, as a regular

5. Alan Donagan, *The Theory of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 135.

6. Susan Wolf, "Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility," in *Responsibility, Character and the Emotions*, ed. F. Schoeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 46–62; see pp. 56–57.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

occurrence, a phenomenon in which a culturally induced “blindness” to alternative cultural practices renders agents unable to question the morality of their culture’s practices.

A striking shortcoming of these theories, in view of their forceful assertions about the operation of culturally induced moral blindness, is the questionable status of the inability thesis as an empirical claim. Moreover, a particular weakness of the theories under consideration is their tendency to base hypotheses about what some agent(s) *could not* do solely on evidence of what the agent(s) *did not* do. To be fair, Wolf recognizes this weakness in her own discussion, noting at one point that “it may be open to question” whether any of the people she describes were in fact unable to hold different beliefs and values. Yet she goes on to argue that it is ultimately an “empirical question, the answer to which is extraordinarily hard to determine.”⁸ Donagan also believes that the question is ultimately empirical. He recommends an inquiry into how easy or difficult it would have been for someone raised in the society in question to detect, and then correct, the errors in that society’s moral principles.⁹

But deciding whether any agent’s behavior manifests a culturally induced blindness—rather than, say, an unwillingness to consider that some practice might be wrong—is hardly a simple empirical matter. Or, more precisely, it is an empirical matter in the way that debates about the truth of psychological egoism, or about the existence of unconscious motives, are empirical matters. Such debates are notoriously plagued by the radical underdetermination of psychological hypotheses by the data of behavior, and debates about the simple inability thesis are no different in this regard. Although empirical considerations are surely relevant to the resolution of such debates, a rationally compelling answer to the issues they raise will ultimately require reliance on a variety of nonempirical resources. One such resource is, of course, the familiar notion that successful empirical theories typically embody a complex set of theoretical “virtues”—reflection on which then generates a set of nonempirical constraints. Yet before turning to a discussion of precisely which nonempirical constraints might be relevant to psychological theory, the question of appropriate empirical constraints merits closer scrutiny.

We might begin this inquiry into the empirical credentials of the inability thesis by asking whether any instance of socially widespread ignorance can be correctly attributed to cultural limitations. But before we can fully consider the possibility of cultural limitations on moral knowledge and action, we must ask what a culture is. A culture may

8. *Ibid.*, p. 57n.

9. Donagan, p. 135.

be thought of as the way of life of a given social group, that will be shaped by more or less intricate patterns of normative expectations about emotion, thought, and action. These patterned expectations will typically take the form of social rules that give a distinctive shape to the group's practices. Of course, some kinds of social rules will be articulated more formally than others. Legal rules, for instance, which regulate and protect important aspects of the public life of the group, will typically be more formal in this way. Moreover, a group's legal rules, in particular, will be supplemented by an elaborate structure of nonlegal sources of support—including religious, economic, and even artistic cultural conventions. Indeed, the persistence of legal rules over time actually depends upon the emergence of such sources of support. But the possibility of such support is rooted in the tendency, among those concerned to protect the life of the group, to develop what H. L. A. Hart has called a complex “internal” perspective on important social rules.¹⁰

The internal perspective on social rules is central to the life of the group. For it is from this internal perspective that those subject to the rules will take demands for conformity, as well as criticism of breaches of the rules, to be justified. From time to time, taking up the internal perspective will even allow those subject to the rules to undertake self-criticism of their own lapses in conformity to the rules. It is also from the internal perspective that children, and other cultural newcomers, are initiated into the group's practices. But I contend that to the extent that we can identify the elements of such an internal perspective among the relevant members of a given social group, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to make a rationally compelling case for the inability thesis. I contend, further, that a thorough account of each case offered as an instance of the inability thesis would reveal the existence of such a perspective.

A brief discussion of one such case—Slote's example of ancient Greek slavery—will help illustrate this point. To begin, we have evidence that a complex legal structure regulated and preserved the institution of slavery. We know, for instance, of the vast legal distinctions between slaves and nonslaves with regard to voting and in the matter of protection against certain kinds of physical harm.¹¹ Further, the legal regulation of slavery was intricately bound up with religion and with popular moral conceptions. Even certain theatrical conventions tended to perpetuate features of the institution: consider the extent to which Greek comedy relied for humor upon the flogging, bullying,

10. H. L. A. Hart, *The Concept of Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), esp. pp. 97–120.

11. K. J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), see pp. 283–288.

and humiliation of slaves.¹² Still further, though Slote insists that the Greeks mounted no real moral criticism of slavery, even in the *Politics* Aristotle takes on some unnamed opponents of slavery who denied that slavery is natural. To be sure, there is no obvious evidence of who these opponents were, and it is difficult to find much antislavery material in the surviving literature of the period. But, as Finley reminds us, the literature that does survive is principally the product of those who had reason to support the institution.¹³ Finally, Dover suggests of Athens in particular that even the poorest Athenian citizen—who could vote, and who could expect certain legal protection from harm—might have seen himself as a member of an elite group. All these considerations suggest that the support of ancient Greeks for the institution of slavery could well have embodied their choice to perpetuate an institution that benefited nonslaves in various ways. The belief that slavery was justified was insufficiently examined by those who held it. But there is no convincing evidence that the blame for this should be traced to anything other than the affected ignorance, in Aquinas's phrase, of those who wanted to perpetuate the culture of slavery.¹⁴ Affected ignorance—choosing not to know what one can and should know—is a complex phenomenon, but sometimes it simply involves refusing to consider whether some practice in which one participates might be wrong.¹⁵ Sometimes—perhaps much of the time—cultures are perpetuated by human beings who are uncritically committed to the internal perspective on the way of life they hope to preserve.¹⁶

Of course, as I have argued, no empirical considerations alone can decisively resolve the debate over the inability thesis. But the standard

12. *Ibid.*

13. M. I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (New York: Viking, 1980), pp. 119–20.

14. Jonathan Barnes, in his "Review of Bernard Williams' *Shame and Necessity*," *Times Literary Supplement* (April 23, 1993), pp. 3–4, offers an interesting version of the inability thesis about the Greeks. According to Barnes, "Aristotle apart, the Greeks did not think that slavery was a morally just institution; but because they could not imagine a world in which there were no slaves, they did not treat the institution as a possible topic of moral debate" (p. 4). Yet there is simply no evidence to suggest that the Greeks "could not" (or even "did not") imagine a world in which there were no slaves. Though I cannot argue this case here, I contend that merely in virtue of learning a language, every human being has the capacity to imagine (to conceive) that her social world might be organized on quite different principles. This is why the view I defend in this article requires no detailed moral epistemology: one has the capacity to question existing social practices merely by virtue of learning to form the negation of any statement.

15. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1–2.6, 8. Donagan makes somewhat different use of these passages from Aquinas in *The Theory of Morality*, esp. chap. 4.

16. The would-be critic of such a culture will initially experience inner conflicts. Thus Mark Twain wisely shows us how Huckleberry Finn's gradual acknowledgment of Jim's humanity initially conflicts with his culture's affected ignorance about slavery.

accounts of the relevant nonempirical considerations—relying on familiar theoretical virtues like simplicity, elegance, generality of explanation, and conservation of current beliefs—turn out to be incomplete. For certain characteristics of psychological theories render the familiar catalog of theoretical virtues inadequate to the task of determining the merits of these theories. The distinctiveness of psychological theories is a function of two phenomena: (1) the character of the empirical reality that such theories aim to interpret and (2) the peculiar relation between these theories and the reality they concern. It is seldom acknowledged that our self-conceptions are always a central element of the empirical reality to be accounted for by a psychological theory. Yet a self-conception is a complex set of beliefs not just about oneself but also about one's place in the natural (and possibly a supernatural) world and about one's relation to other persons.¹⁷ Further, there is a complex reciprocal relation between one's desires, ends, and actions, on the one hand, and one's self-conception, on the other. Thus, even a theorist who claims to be concerned about behavior alone will be assessing phenomena in which self-conceptions are already implicated. Moreover, any psychological theory implies a certain content and ordering for some portion of the beliefs that comprise a self-conception. As Berger and Luckmann have argued, psychological theories have a powerful tendency to shape the reality they claim only to interpret—especially when they achieve dominance in a culture.¹⁸ Any psychological theory should thus be capable of conformity with self-conceptions capable of withstanding rational scrutiny, for the ascendancy of a new theory will powerfully influence our self-conceptions and our actions in the world. Still further, theory construction in psychology should be equally attentive to the tendency of some psychological theories to produce self-conceptions that influence desires, ends, and action in a dangerously self-deceptive way. The inability thesis, as I show below, is commonly associated with explanations of behavior that have just such a dangerously self-deceptive influence. The special relation between psychological theory and its data thus suggests two distinctive, but essential, virtues that any such theory should embody: (1) conformity with a self-conception that can withstand rational scrutiny and (2) incompatibility with self-conceptions that are potentially dangerously self-deceptive. In Section II I suggest ways in which the inability thesis fails to embody both of these important additional virtues.

17. M. M. Moody-Adams, "On the Alleged Methodological Infirmity of Ethics," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 27 (1990): 225–35.

18. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Doubleday, 1966).

Critics of my view may suggest that I have overlooked an important way in which the inability thesis itself attempts to constrain the explanation and evaluation of action. Such critics may contend that the “commonsense” view embodied in the thesis should be construed as a way of reining in a tendency to moral smugness or self-righteousness in evaluating the behavior of historical agents. Yet, in my view, this construal reveals just how methodologically problematic the inability thesis really is. To be sure, it is a commonplace of everyday moral reflection that it is “only fair” to judge people by “the standards of their own day.” After all, the commonsense view runs, we can imagine some future society condemning a practice that is widely approved in our own day. Given that possibility, the argument continues, we ought to judge participants in past cultures as we would want to be judged by future generations—with a presumption of nonculpable ignorance of the wrongness of any practice at issue. But I contend that this commonsense view simply presumes without argument that our own moral ignorance is best attributed to “cultural limitations” rather than to our failings as human beings who perpetuate cultures. This presumption, as I show in Section II, dangerously ignores the common, and culpable, tendency simply to affect ignorance of the possibility that some cultural practice might be morally flawed. Moreover, the inability thesis generates self-conceptions that, like the thesis itself, rest on assumptions that cannot withstand rational scrutiny.

II. AFFECTED IGNORANCE AND THE BANALITY OF WRONGDOING¹⁹

In the epilogue to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt insisted that “the trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal.”²⁰ Arendt wanted to convince us that ordinary citizens can do evil—even extraordinary evil; moreover, they can come to view such evil, and their participation in it, as “routine.” Some of Arendt’s early critics were deeply troubled by her now-famous assertion of the “banality of evil” because they thought that it threatened to trivialize the horrors of nazism. But in their distress they overlooked a central point of that assertion. Arendt wanted to reject, as a barrier to understanding, the all-too-common assumption that only “sick” or “monstrously insane” people could commit the terrifying evils of Nazi concentration camps. Evil can become routine; people who kill during the day may go home to protect

19. The phrase “banality of wrongdoing” is my own. Hannah Arendt’s insights about the banality of evil, in my view, can illuminate some features of human wrongdoing in general.

20. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Viking, 1963), p. 253.

their families at night. Moreover, studies of recent regimes where the internal use of torture is widespread make Arendt's message seem as urgent as ever. These studies suggest that some who become involved in the torture do not begin as crazed sadists, seeking out positions from which they can inflict harm, but that they may begin as ordinary citizens who gradually become able to inflict almost unspeakable horrors on fellow citizens.²¹ Still further, trenchant criticisms of such regimes remind us of how easily ordinary citizens can become complicit in the existence of torture—often by simply refusing to admit that it takes place.²² Unfortunately, a powerful resistance to Arendt's message is firmly embedded in the everyday moral consciousness. It also underwrites the inability thesis, as a tendency to deny what I call the 'banality of wrongdoing'. But this tendency hinders understanding of how wrongdoing begins, and engenders a self-deceptive complacency about the potential each individual human being has to support and engage in morally culpable conduct.

Even the most skilled interpreters of human behavior, confronted with troubling indications of the banality of wrongdoing, are sometimes unwilling to draw the appropriate conclusions. An example of this unwillingness can be found in some standard accounts of experiments carried out in the 1960s by the social psychologist Stanley Milgram.²³ Milgram's subjects were tested to determine the amount of electric shock they would be willing to administer to another human being—but in a controlled setting in which the "victim" was only pretending to suffer physical pain. The act of "administering" the electric shock was set in the context of a "learning experiment" which (subjects were told) was designed to study the effect of learning on memory.²⁴ Milgram was surprised and dismayed by the fact that a large number of subjects were willing to administer "the most extreme shocks available," even while remarking on the further fact that those whom they believed to be their "victims" vigorously objected to the treatment.²⁵ In commenting on the results, Milgram assures his readers that his subjects were "good people," not sadists—they were "men who in everyday life are responsible and decent."²⁶ But where one

21. *Amnesty International: Report on Torture* (London: Duckworth, 1973); and *Amnesty International Report on Torture in the Eighties* (Oxford: Martin Robertson; London: Amnesty International, 1984). See also Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), for a chilling account of how several members of one group of "ordinary men" became brutal killers.

22. See, e.g., the 1985 Argentinian film *The Official Story*.

23. Stanley Milgram, "Some Conditions of Obedience and Disobedience to Authority," *Human Relations* 18 (1965): 57–76.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

might have expected Milgram at least to consider the possibility that even generally good people can sometimes behave badly, he offers a very different sort of observation. In particular, he attempts to explain extraordinary displays of aggression toward the experiments' "victims" by reference to an inability to resist the experimenter's demands. He claims, for instance, that his subjects "were seen to knuckle under the demands of authority" and that the experimental situation exerted "an important press on the individual."²⁷ Yet a close scrutiny of the results casts doubts on the merits of such claims—indeed, it calls into question Milgram's contention that the experiment was simply a study of "some conditions of obedience and disobedience to authority."²⁸

When we examine some of the verbal, as well as nonverbal, behavior that accompanied the administering of shocks, some surprising details emerge. Several subjects "frequently averted their eyes from the person they were shocking." One such subject explained his behavior with the following words: "I didn't want to see the consequences of what I had done." Still others offered similar explanations for averting their eyes from the people they believed they were harming.²⁹ In a later passage, Milgram cites a particularly striking comment from one of the subjects who administered the strongest shocks: "He can't stand it! I'm not going to kill that man in there! You hear him hollering? He's hollering. He can't stand it. What if something happens to him? . . . I'm not going to get that man sick in there. . . . I mean I refuse to take responsibility. He's getting hurt in there. . . . Who is going to take responsibility if anything happens to that gentleman?"³⁰ Now in Milgram's view, these comments are evidence that the subject "was unable to invent a response that would free him from [the experimenter's] authority."³¹ But surely a better interpretation of this behav-

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 74, 72.

28. Milgram was at least aware that talk of 'obedience' rather than 'cooperation' is problematic (p. 58n.). Yet he goes on to deny that his subjects satisfied criteria of cooperation, rather than obedience to authority. But perhaps he ignores the facts: his subjects were not pressed into service; they were paid to take part in an experiment (however contrived); and no subject who refused to administer electric shock was threatened with harm for so refusing. Arendt was remarkably prescient about the inadequacy of the word 'obedience' in such contexts, and about the irrelevance of the phenomenon of 'moral luck'. (On moral luck, see Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck," in *Mortal Questions* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979].) Arendt assumes for the sake of argument that "misfortune" might have made Eichmann "a willing instrument in the organization of mass murder" (p. 255). But Eichmann was nonetheless responsible, she continues, because he "carried out, and therefore actively supported, a policy of mass murder. For politics is not like the nursery; in politics, obedience and support are the same" (p. 255).

29. Milgram, p. 61.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

31. *Ibid.*

ior, as of the behavior of each subject who averted his glance, is that it manifests the subject's profound unwillingness to acknowledge his responsibility for continuing to cooperate with the experiment, despite the screams of the "learner." We might even say that this behavior manifests a classic case of affected ignorance: in this instance, a denial of the connection between one's actions and harm to the "victims." We can reject this interpretation, I think, only if we have decided in advance to deny that generally decent people can sometimes behave badly, and that affected ignorance is a common accompaniment of wrongdoing.

A discussion of the varied settings in which affected ignorance is linked to wrongdoing will help to support my interpretation. Affected ignorance is essentially a matter of choosing not to be informed of what we can and should know. But in practice, affected ignorance takes several forms; I discuss only four important varieties. The elaborate linguistic deceptions by which torturers are known to mask the reality of their activities illustrate a particularly malevolent variety of affected ignorance. Reports from around the world reveal a striking similarity in the way in which those engaged in torture describe their violent methods by means of deceptively benign phrases such as "the telephone" and the "parrots' swing."³² Such descriptions ultimately allow the torturer to deny the connection between his wrongdoing and the suffering of his victim. To understand the second variety of affected ignorance, we can imagine the head of an investment banking firm who demands that her employees increase the firm's profits but insists on knowing nothing about the means used to accomplish this. This executive's wish to "know nothing" of the potential wrongdoing of her employees is surely—in some degree—culpable.³³ A third variety of affected ignorance is typically manifested in the readiness of some people to "ask no questions" about some state of affairs, in spite of evidence that an inquiry may be needed in order to stop or prevent wrongdoing. Thus a mother who repeatedly accepts expensive gifts from a teenage son with a modest income is surely complicit in her son's wrongdoing—at least morally—if the gifts have been purchased with money from the sale of drugs.

Finally, perhaps the most common form of affected ignorance is the tendency to avoid acknowledging our human fallibility: as finite and fallible beings, even our most deeply held convictions may be wrong. But it is also common for human beings to avoid or deny this possibility. Mill relies on the prevalence of this variety of affected

32. *Amnesty International: Report on Torture*; cf. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), chap. 1.

33. Mike W. Martin, in his *Self-Deception and Morality* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), offers a similar example (pp. 6–7).

ignorance and on its common connection with the desire to suppress the convictions of others, in order to argue for freedom of thought and expression. Of course, Mill may be incorrect in his claim that all silencing of discussion is “an assumption of infallibility.”³⁴ But he is clearly right to assume that there is a common human tendency to avoid, or even to refuse, acknowledgment of our own fallibility. Equally important, this tendency is often manifested in some of the most vicious wrongdoing possible. An extremely bigoted person who would violently silence protest of his bigotry is almost always guilty of this variety of affected ignorance. But it is at work even in less actively malevolent cases. A university administrator who refuses to investigate charges of wrongdoing because his colleague “couldn’t possibly” be guilty of sexual harassment also manifests this kind of affected ignorance. Indeed, I contend that much of the moral ignorance at issue in the examples discussed by Wolf, Donagan, and Slote can be understood in terms of this variety of affected ignorance.

There is thus much evidence of the banality of wrongdoing. There is, further, much evidence of the regularity with which varieties of affected ignorance are bound up with such wrongdoing—to varying degrees, and of course with varying degrees of culpability. Why, then, should everyday moral reflection—and the theories that presuppose it—seem so oblivious to such evidence? Why should it be so difficult to accept that ancient Greeks, or male chauvinists in Victorian England, for instance, might be to blame, in some degree, for perpetuating cultural practices either by “asking no questions” or by avoiding the possibility that the assumptions underlying the practices might be wrong? I submit that this resistance has two principal sources. First, it is partly a function of what Hume would call the capacity for “sympathetic identification” with historical agents. This capacity operates most completely in the evaluation of societies whose cultural assumptions are viewed as important antecedents, or important outgrowths of the antecedents, of the evaluator’s own culture. The continued attractiveness of the inability thesis—particularly in history—reveals how difficult it can be to accept that one’s cultural predecessors could have perpetuated a practice embodying culpable moral ignorance.³⁵

But there is a second, more fundamental, source of resistance to the banality of wrongdoing and the regular occurrence of affected ignorance. For it is assumed both in philosophy and in everyday moral thinking that there are only two possible responses to behavior that we may want to condemn: (1) a rigorously moralistic model which

34. J. S. Mill, *On Liberty* (1859; reprint, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), chap. 2.

35. For a classic statement of the alleged need to “make appropriate allowances for historical conditions” in evaluating Jefferson’s stance on slavery and integration, see Douglas Knox, “Thomas Jefferson and the Character Issue,” *Atlantic Monthly* (November 1992), pp. 57–65.

seeks to emphasize blame, without the forgiveness that recognizes how hard it is to be moral, and (2) a therapeutic model of behavior which allows forgiveness by doing away with blame, putting various syndromes in its place—as what was once adultery, for example, is now “sex addiction.” But I contend that there is a third possibility: there is a model of human behavior that can acknowledge the banality of wrongdoing and its connection with affected ignorance, and yet also acknowledge the serious effort required to adopt an appropriately critical stance toward potentially problematic cultural assumptions. This “forgiving moralist’s” model of behavior is both consistent with respect for the worth of persons as agents and compatible with facts about how hard it is to merit moral esteem.³⁶ Equally important, the most estimable of human qualities will sometimes be revealed in the effort to forgive the wrongdoing of our cultural predecessors, rather than simply to ignore the ways in which their practice amounted to wrongdoing.

III. INSANITY, INCAPACITATION, AND RESPECT FOR CULTURE

As Hume once argued, the capacity for sympathetic identification with others has limits. Moreover, theorizing about culture—as some of Hume’s own essays demonstrate—tends to reveal these limits in striking ways.³⁷ For the simple inability thesis is typically reserved for an account of the behavior of those who seem to have shared most of the evaluator’s basic cultural assumptions. Presumed cultural distance tends to produce very different, and potentially quite troubling, conceptions of the relation between culture and responsibility. In one tragic and dramatic example, the culture of a foreign graduate student in an American university was claimed to be relevant to the question of the student’s capacity to form the intent to murder. The student had killed a woman who rejected his romantic overtures, and defense attorneys attempted to construct an unusual defense. They tried, unsuccessfully, to establish that “cultural stresses” bound up with the defendant’s cultural assumptions about women somehow produced a “mental infirmity” that diminished his capacity to form the intent to murder.³⁸ In a very different context, the subcultures that seem to

36. Kant distinguishes respect and esteem in *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (1785; New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

37. See, e.g., Hume’s infamous display of a-host of racial and ethnic prejudices in “Of National Characters,” in his *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose (1882; reprint, Darmstadt: Scientia Verlag Allen, 1964), pp. 244–58.

38. *People v. Poddar*, App., 103 Cal. Rptr. 84 (1972). Poddar’s defense attorneys unwisely attempted to have an anthropologist, rather than a mental health professional, testify to “cultural stresses” that allegedly “gave evidence of diminished capacity.” According to the presiding Appeals Court judge, such testimony was rightly disallowed:

exist within complex, highly stratified societies have been claimed to produce a variety of impairments. Thus, something once described as the “ingrained psychology” of the inner-city ghettos of America has been characterized as being “like insanity”—in virtue of a supposed tendency of ghetto subculture to impair radically the ability of ghetto residents to avoid criminal wrongdoing.³⁹ In a different case, appealing to the influence of an unidentified subculture, a group of antiwar protesters convicted of destroying draft records unsuccessfully appealed their conviction on the grounds that they were “culturally insane.”⁴⁰ All of these claims posit severe incapacitation or impairment as the result of a particular cultural or “subcultural” upbringing. I intend to show that these efforts dangerously distort the connection between culture and agency and hinder any careful understanding of what a culture really is.

Kluckhohn tried to warn us that any claim about a culture independent of individuals who create and perpetuate that culture can be problematic. After all, we never see any entity properly called “culture as such”; what we see instead are “regularities in the behavior or artifacts of a group that has adhered to a common tradition.”⁴¹ Of course, as I have argued, the link between culture and agency makes the concept of culture indispensable to the project of making human behavior intelligible. Moreover, based on informal evidence of the so-called feral or wild child phenomenon, and on a growing consensus in anthropological circles, it seems reasonable to conclude that being “encultured” is a condition of the possibility of responsible agency.⁴² But the fact remains that any talk about culture is talk about a useful theoretical abstraction that outlives its usefulness when we attempt to think of cultures as “forces” or “causes” that make things happen. A culture— independent of agents who perpetuate culture—cannot be an “agent” of anything. Moreover, there is no brute fact about persons that can plausibly be held to constitute “having a culture.” Culture is created, and even transmitted, by people. But it is not transmitted in the way, for instance, in which one transmits a virus; having a culture simply is not a physical reality like having a disease. These considerations together indicate that the language of impairment and incapacitation, in the context of a discussion about the influence of culture, cannot withstand rational scrutiny.

“Diminished capacity is a form of mental infirmity. To the extent that it is to be evaluated by experts, the experts should be those qualified in the mental sciences.”

39. Owen S. Walker, “Why Should Irresponsible Offenders Be Excused?” *Journal of Philosophy* 66 (1969): 279–90. Walker is not careful to indicate that he is talking only about inner city ghettos of America and not, e.g., about the ghettos of Eastern Europe.

40. *Chase v. United States*, 468 F.2d 141 (1972).

41. Kluckhohn, p. 28.

42. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic, 1973), chap. 3.

These are general reflections on—in Mackie’s phrase—the “ontologically queer” commitments of cultural impairment theories, but they can be supplemented by more particular observations. Consider, first, that it is not possible to explain every aspect of human behavior by reference to cultural practices. Many of the most important details of our decisions, even about how to conform to important cultural conventions, are simply not determined by culture. Let’s take the institution of marriage as an example: some people get married in conventional houses of worship, while others get married at the end of a pair of bungee cords. Further, every society contains people whose inclinations and desires do not allow them to conform very easily to dominant patterns of normative expectations about emotion, thought, and action. Thus the man or woman who eschews marriage (whatever the sexual preference informing the decision) is viewed with immense suspicion in many cultures. Still further, those agents whose desires and inclinations are comfortably in line with culturally approved patterns may nonetheless act on those desires in ways that would not be sanctioned by the culture. Thus the acquisitiveness and competitiveness that are championed as cultural ideals in some societies can also motivate behavior that is disapproved of as immoral, and often criminal, in the same societies. Similarly, even in a society where there are intense cultural pressures against certain displays of independence and assertiveness in women, killing a woman who spurns one’s affections may be viewed as extreme, even grossly aberrant, behavior. It is unhelpful in such cases to blame the culture, or “cultural stresses,” or even a clash of cultures, when the individual who chooses how to perpetuate the culture is to blame.

Claims about an impairment that allegedly results from life in “severe ghetto conditions” in American inner cities present an interesting variation on the unreflective appeal to culture. In one such discussion, Owen Walker argues that the “ingrained psychology” produced by “severe ghetto conditions” is “like insanity” in the way in which it seems to impair the capacity for rational action.⁴³ But then Walker goes on to describe the alleged impairment in a most surprising fashion. The person at one point said to be suffering from near-insanity is later described as someone who “may feel, and with good reason, that he has no stake in a lawful society,” and who, instead, believes that “his only opportunity to get ahead is in crime.”⁴⁴ But this later claim describes someone who is clearly not beyond the reach of rational argument—as one whose impairment is “like insanity” surely would be. The person Walker describes may be angry, his belief may be

43. Walker, p. 289.

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 288–89.

incomplete or even incorrect, and his action—even on true beliefs—can be either indefensible or defensible. But he does not suffer from an impairment; his condition is not even remotely “like insanity.” It is beyond the scope of this article to assess those features of Walker’s view implicitly suggesting reasons sometimes to mitigate our response to crime. But to deny that an unimpaired person has engaged in wrongdoing—even if there are compelling reasons to mitigate our response to the behavior—is to deny the humanity of the person in question.⁴⁵ Of course, the theorist of cultural impairments may deny that this is his aim. But the dangers of the tendency to see culture everywhere at work in the behavior of individuals are most acute when historical prejudice in a culture—in this case, primarily racial prejudice against African Americans—has marked out a confined conceptual space for some group of people. In those circumstances, an unreflective insistence on seeing that group of people as radically “other”—in virtue of a debatable presumption about their culture—simply reproduces old prejudices in new terminology.⁴⁶

More generally, what is wrong with blaming culture is that such blame ignores the ways in which cultural conventions are modified, reshaped, and sometimes radically revised in individual action. No culture is perpetuated without some modification of cultural patterns in the lives of individual agents. Because a culture is a way of life shaped by normative expectations embodied in social rules, a culture simply could not be perpetuated in any other fashion. Hart notes that rules used to communicate general standards of behavior will, “where their application is in question,” prove indeterminate.⁴⁷ The social rules that embody a group’s normative expectations are no different. Even periods of economic and social stability will present us with new experiences that differ from past experience in crucially unexpected ways. Moreover, in periods of social and environmental change, or economic instability, applying social rules to new instances will require the development in individuals of fairly sophisticated faculties of judgment. Under such circumstances, the survival of a culture will demand extraordinary inventiveness and spontaneity. New generations in a culture under the stress of change are, in effect, called upon to generate new theories about how to apply the rules. Of course, as in judicial contexts, a new theory about how to apply a rule is sometimes barely

45. See M. M. Moody-Adams, “On the Old Saw That Character Is Destiny,” in *Identity, Character and Morality*, ed. O. Flanagan and A. O. Rorty (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 111–31.

46. Many such claims—like other ostensibly ‘liberal’ and nondiscriminatory attitudes concerning African Americans—simply perpetuate the very distortions used to justify discrimination in the first place.

47. Hart, p. 124.

distinguishable from a new rule. There is thus a fuzzy boundary between cultural adaptation and cultural change. But both cultural adaptation and cultural change depend for their success upon the preservation of the individual's capacities for the exercise of judgment and discretion. Any culture that worked to impair these capacities would be creating the conditions for its own demise. Though I cannot defend this view here, it may be that any humanly designed institution or system of rules that, as a matter of course, does impair these capacities cannot be called a culture at all.⁴⁸

We must also recognize that the "effects" of culture are not immediate but are always mediated through a variety of persons and institutions. In nearly every human society, a family, or some kind of social unit charged with the principal caretaking responsibilities, is one such institution. Further, even in relatively simple societies, each person occupies several social roles and may be a member of various social groups. In virtue of this fact, even in simple societies the existence of a variety of mediating influences will complicate the notion that some dominant "cultural influence" shapes the individual personality. The variety of mediating influences will be even more pronounced in complex, highly stratified societies. This is, no doubt, a principal reason that claims about the "social incapacitation" of ghetto residents—in virtue of so-called ghetto culture—are ultimately so unconvincing. For the conception of "getting ahead" that underlies the behavior of many such residents is clearly shaped by a host of profoundly American cultural assumptions about the connection between self-worth and material possessions.⁴⁹ Interestingly, some anthropologists have suggested that the complex effect of overlapping cultural influences in any society makes it reasonable to think that ultimately each individual has her own subculture, or even her own culture.⁵⁰ I submit that it is more plausible to claim that each individual possesses her own version of a given culture. But in view of the way in which culture is transmitted—in virtue of the way each individual modifies culture for her own purposes—the cultural impairment views simply seem implausible.

48. How else could being brought up in a culture differ from being brainwashed, or acting under posthypnotic suggestion, or being the victim of torture, or being a concentration camp survivor?

49. See M. M. Moody-Adams, "Race, Class and the Social Construction of Self-Respect," *Philosophical Forum* 24 (1992–93): 251–66.

50. See Edward Sapir, "Cultural Anthropology and Psychiatry," in *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture and Personality*, ed. David G. Mandelbaum (1932; reprint, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). See also A. F. C. Wallace, "Cultural Distribution of Personality Traits," in *Readings in Anthropology*, ed. M. H. Fried, 2d ed. (1961; reprint, New York: Crowell, 1968), 2:809–31.

Of course, it will still be asked whether I intend to deny that psychological stresses sometimes result when someone brought up in one culture attempts to take part in the cultural practices of another. I must answer, of course, that I do not. Moreover, an agent who (for the first time) confronts a radically different cultural practice against her will, or before she is fully capable of choice, will have a mitigating—sometimes even an exculpatory—excuse for failing to conform to such a practice. But the agent who chooses some period of continued contact with another culture thereby also chooses to be confronted with practices that may test her ability to accept that culture. Reflection on some variant of the Rawlsian notion of the “strains of commitment” is thus a rational requirement for anyone contemplating an extended period of travel or residence in a foreign country.⁵¹ Some critics of my claim will insist that I presuppose an agent capable of deliberation—and rather sophisticated deliberation at that. It may be said that the “cultural insanity” claim might sometimes be intended to characterize the behavior in question as the result of some kind of angry fit. Yet, like Aristotle, I contend that any such anger would not be very different from the sort of intoxication that results in wrongdoing. If either anger or intoxication is the result of a negligent failure to avoid those practices that one knows to produce either state, then the anger or the intoxication is culpable—and whatever flows from either state is in some degree culpable as well.

Finally, I must acknowledge that sometimes in criticizing an individual we may be unable to avoid criticizing his cultural assumptions as well. I cannot dodge this possibility, especially in virtue of my insistence that individual agents often choose to perpetuate morally problematic practices. Yet there is no reason to resist this possibility; only a misguided cultural relativism could support the view that moral criticism of another culture is never justified. The misguided relativist assumes that a readiness to engage in moral criticism of other cultures reveals disrespect for those cultures, or even masks a malevolent readiness to dominate and destroy the cultures that we criticize. On this view, when the practices of different cultures clash, we are allowed only to gaze in amazement—or possibly in horror—at the result. Other cultures become little more than occasions for marveling at difference, and those who accept those cultures are reduced to exotic specimens of that difference, embodiments of sheer “otherness.” But what respect for culture, or for the people who accept a culture, can possibly reside in this museum-curio conception of cultural difference? To view those who accept another culture as fundamentally “other,”

51. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 145, 176 ff.

as this misguided relativism typically does, is ultimately to view them as less than fully human.

If we reject this misguided relativism we can resist its impoverished understanding of cultural difference and its empty notion of respect for such difference. A readiness to engage in moral criticism and debate with the individuals who will perpetuate a culture manifests the highest respect for culture—principally, of course, in virtue of manifesting respect for the individual agents who must decide their culture's future. This readiness also prepares us to contend with those difficult circumstances in which we must decide whether and how to aid those (inside or outside of a culture) who may become unwilling victims of morally indefensible practices. Finally, a willingness to engage in cross-cultural moral debate makes us better able to lead the examined life that makes possible a reflective and critical commitment to our own culture.