CULTURAL MEMBERSHIP, MORAL RESPONSIBILITY, AND INQUIRY

by

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(Under the Direction of Victoria Davion)

ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I develop a set of conditions that show when average moral agents are morally responsible for failing to investigate whether conventional practices and beliefs are immoral. Specifically, I argue that people are culpable when (1) cultural inconsistencies or other indications of tension or conflict are present; (2) there is a logical connection or conceptual link between the accepted practice (or belief) and what is commonly believed to be immoral or controversial; and (3) we can reasonably show that people have a vested interest in not questioning conventional moral norms and/or suspicions of wrongdoing.

In Chapter One, I explain that the question of whether one is culpable for not examining cultural norms is philosophically interesting because it is not clear if this involves an inability or a choice. My conditions, however, suggest that the failure to debate is probably due to a choice and thus blameworthy. I arrive at these conditions after critically examining three theories. In Chapter Two, I consider Michael Slote’s cultural defense view. I argue that his view underestimates the possibility of average moral agents forging a critical response to conventional norms in the course of socialization. In Chapter Three, I examine Cheshire Calhoun’s argument that it is
unreasonable to assign blame when relevant moral knowledge is isolated among a group of experts. I show that her view cannot determine whether individuals are culpable because key concepts are problematic and ambiguous. In Chapter Four, I examine Michele Moody-Adams' view and the concept of affected ignorance. Although I expand on the notion of affected ignorance and supplement her view with a virtue-based conception of doxastic responsibility, I argue that Moody-Adams' approach best deals with the issue of people failing to debate established norms. Finally, in Chapter Five, I illustrate the effectiveness of my conditions with a contemporary case: the socially accepted practice of factory farming. I argue that affected ignorance not only perpetuates the current hegemonic attitude toward certain animals, but it also explains the lack of extensive public debate about factory farming practices.

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2006
This dissertation, especially Chapter Five, is dedicated to

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply indebted to my major professor Victoria Davion for her sound advice and generous support throughout this project. I would also like to thank the professors who served on my dissertation committee, Drs. Elizabeth Brient and Robert Burton.

I am also grateful to my brother, Clint Williams, who supplied me with “homemade” computers, and my mother, Francoise Williams, for her steadfast encouragement.

I give special thanks to Renee Eady for her enthusiastic support. This project would not have been as much fun had she not been by my side.
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It is widely recognized that our moral beliefs and behaviors are influenced by our social and moral environments. We are never fully immune to the effects of cultural membership. What is not clear is whether these influences excuse average moral agents who fail to scrutinize conventional norms. In terms of moral responsibility, what is the impact of socialization or enculturation on individual moral reflection? More precisely, on what grounds can we reasonably assign blame to average moral agents who fail to investigate whether conventional practices, values, or beliefs are immoral?

This question is important and indeed urgent because the continuance of some discriminatory practices and beliefs has been linked to an unreflective populace. In this way, the average moral agent could be at moral risk. An average moral agent is a normal adult human being who can be held morally accountable for the acts she performs or fails to perform. Because she has a variety of sophisticated abilities, including the rational ability to deliberate about which moral principles she should act on, she can rightly be blamed or praised, criticized or condemned. For example, consider a Nazi “deportation” officer, who by virtue of his thoughtlessness, contributed to an institutional policy of mass murder. By simply “following orders” and not confronting the moral ramifications
of his actions (and his anti-Semitic beliefs), the Nazi officer actively engaged in practices that contributed to one of humanity’s greatest crimes.

When whites fail to acknowledge the unearned social privileges and advantages they systematically enjoy in a racist society, they too perpetuate conventional injustices. Failing to develop a critically reflective consciousness, whether it be a Nazi officer in 1930s Germany or a white person in a white supremacy culture, contributes, maintains and supports institutional systems, practices, and discourses that are cruel and corrupt. Thinking critically about established customs and codes of conduct leads to recognizing and eventually eradicating oppressive norms and therefore, the debate which follows concerns not only individual moral agency and responsibility but concrete matters of social (in)justice as well.

Ascribing responsibility in these kinds of cases is possible because individuals meet the requirements for moral agency—they possess the general rational capacity to evaluate the moral dimensions of conventional practices and beliefs. People who are unable to critically reflect on cultural norms across the board as a result of age, physical or mental disability, are not to be held responsible. The issue in these cases is settled because they do not meet the requirements for moral agency. The subjects of this inquiry are average moral agents—individuals who possess the rational ability to determine what morally ought to be done and, upon having made such a determination, to freely choose or fail to choose to act as morality requires.
The question of whether one is culpable for not examining cultural norms is philosophically interesting because it is not clear if this involves an inability or a choice. In the case of an inability, assigning blame would be unreasonable because the agent is unable to act otherwise. In this situation, the internalization of customary norms renders the individual unable to discern the reasons for moral inquiry. Simply put, cultural forces make the person morally blind. In the case of a choice, however, since it involves an agent choosing not to investigate, assigning moral responsibility is appropriate. In these sorts of cases, the agent ignores the reasons for debate. So, in the hopes of offering some clarity here, I will develop a set of conditions that show when it is reasonable to assign moral responsibility to agents who fail to examine whether conventional practices and beliefs are immoral. In cases where average moral agents are involved, these conditions will suggest that the failure to debate is due to a choice rather than an inability.

I will argue that average moral agents are responsible for failing to debate conventional norms when: (1) cultural inconsistencies or other indications of tension or conflict are present; (2) there is a logical connection or conceptual link between the accepted practice (or belief) and what is commonly believed to be immoral or controversial; and (3) we can reasonably show that people have a vested interest in not questioning generally accepted moral norms and/or suspicions of wrongdoing. Although condition (1) is necessary for assigning blame, it is not sufficient. As I will show, there are, at some level, particular strains or tensions in every culture. Throughout four chapters, I argue that the
first two conditions are necessary for assigning moral responsibility because they provide individuals with viable alternatives and compelling reasons to investigate conventional norms. Since it is unreasonable to assign blame when individuals have no motive to examine conventional norms, condition (3) is also required. It points to the motive(s) not to examine, despite the presence of (1) and (2). When all three conditions are present, it is reasonable to assign moral responsibility to individuals who fail to investigate. I arrive at these conditions after identifying the strengths and weaknesses of various philosophical theories which designate specific criteria for determining when an agent is either responsible or excused for her failure to examine conventional norms.

However, before I proceed with a summary of these theories and my critical analysis of them, it is important to be clear about the scope of this project. My argument is primarily concerned with the question of the relationship between cultural membership and individual moral reflection. We need therefore to make explicit an important distinction in order to set other questions aside. The theories I examine address two questions: (1) Are average moral agents culpable if they fail to know that a conventional practice and/or belief is wrong?; (2) Are average moral agents culpable if they fail to investigate whether a conventional practice and/or belief is wrong?

The first inquiry considers whether the agent is morally responsible for failing to know the objective moral status of conventional practices. In this case, one is responsible in the sense that one's moral belief or actions are in fact wrong, based on an objective true moral standard. The basic idea is that one
cannot be held morally responsible for an action unless that action is objectively wrong in the first place. This line of inquiry, therefore, requires the assumption that moral facts exist. The second question, however, asks if the agent should investigate whether a conventional practice is immoral. It focuses on the human capacity and moral responsibility to examine and reinterpret cultural norms.

Questions concerning whether the practice is immoral or if the person is blameworthy for his failure to know the (objective) moral status of that practice are set aside. In this case, there is an important sense in which the agent is not morally responsible even if she fails to know the objective moral status of the practice (assuming, of course, that such a metaphysical property exists).

Ascription of blame is unreasonable in this case because our agent has done her best to ground her actions and beliefs on proper moral reflection.

Suppose a Cartesian “evil demon,” unknown to us, has made our world such that truth is best attained by, what we would qualify as intellectual laziness, close-mindedness, and careless reasoning. If we were to find out that such was the case, we would have to alter our opinion about these epistemic qualities and encourage their development. Even so, we would not blame those agents who, in the past, justified their beliefs on intellectual rigor, open-mindedness, and proper reasoning. We would not blame someone like Einstein, for instance, for his “false” beliefs. Instead we would exempt him for his failure to know the truth on the grounds that he did his best to form “truth-conducive” beliefs. Given our epistemic limitations, we can do no better than what appears to be how the world is. The question of responsible moral reflection does not necessarily depend on
whether the agent possesses moral facts. Rather, it depends on whether the agent did his best to justify his beliefs and actions given what he can know about his (social) reality.

In this project, I concentrate my efforts on the second question. Specifically, I seek the precise conditions for assigning moral responsibility to those individuals who fail to investigate whether conventional practices, values, or beliefs are immoral. My project focuses on the human capacity to reinterpret moral norms and not whether those interpretations correspond to some independent moral realm. I am concerned with the agent's ability to form a deep understanding about the moral complexities involved in the particulars of concrete cultural and historical experience. The issue of whether isolable moral facts or properties exist independently of human experience is bracketed so that we can focus on the problem of people choosing not to investigate conventional norms. The overall issue here is about agents exercising their ability to scrutinize, interpret, and reevaluate. Agents are culpable in the sense that they fail to do their best to justify culturally supported beliefs and practices. As I will show, they are culpable when the reasons for debate are clearly accessible vis-à-vis one's immediate culture.

In chapter two, I examine Michael Slote's cultural defense view that average moral agents are not culpable for their failure to examine whether conventional practices and beliefs are immoral when there is no public debate about these customs. Historical evidence suggests that in ancient Greece slavery was widely considered a natural and economically necessary practice and that
the Greeks accepted this justification, largely without question. According to Slote, since there was no public debate about slavery in ancient Greece, slave owners did not have access to social alternatives (i.e., a society without slaves) or to compelling reasons that could have activated their capacity to scrutinize the practice. In light of these cultural conditions, Slote concludes that ancient Greek slave owners (and their supporters) are not blameworthy for their failure to debate whether enslaving certain persons is immoral.

Although Slote’s approach to the problem of uncritical acceptance is ultimately rejected, I note some of its intriguing features. First, his view is appropriately grounded on well-established conditions for moral exemption. It is reasonable to maintain that average moral agents are not responsible for failing to investigate when they have no exposure to compelling reasons and/or alternatives. Any model of moral responsibility ought to consider these important excusing conditions and I respect Slote’s view here. I also point out that Slote’s explanation fits nicely with common views about the possibility of essentially good people unwittingly supporting immoral social practices. It seems that for the most part people want to do the right thing but in some cases the internalization of widely accepted beliefs (and practices) can render otherwise morally conscientious people blind to social injustices. Slote’s argument has the advantage of explaining this possibility. Finally, Slote is correct to point out that the range of individual moral reflection is influenced by one’s social (moral) context. On the reasonable assumption that moral agents are situated knowers who can never fully escape the effects of socialization, I will argue that it is
imperative for a model of moral responsibility to take into account the ways in which moral reflection, including the reasons for debate, is social in nature. Influenced by recent works from some feminist epistemologists (e.g., Elizabeth Potter, Lynn Hankinson Nelson, and Lorraine Code), I argue that we must recognize our epistemological communities and the way average moral agents are inherently connected to them when investigating conventional moral beliefs and practices. When inquiry is understood as a social process, I believe an account of responsible moral reflection (and behavior) must consider less individualistic factors. Slote’s view rightly captures this important social, epistemological, and moral point. Ironically, it is the agent’s social (moral) context that will serve as the basis of my main objection to Slote’s conclusion.

I go on to show, among other things, that a lack of public debate does not prove Slote’s conclusion. It is possible that slave owners and their supporters chose not to examine slavery and this could explain the lack of public debate in ancient Greece. In other words, Slote’s cultural condition (i.e., the lack of public debate) does not necessarily justify moral exemption. I will also take issue with Slote’s general failure to fully appreciate how the human capacity to critique social norms can be activated in the course of socialization. On his view, the agent’s relationship to his cultural environment explains his nonculpable failure to engage in debate. Although I appreciate Slote’s insistence that one can never fully escape the influences of one’s culture, I object to his suggestion that cultural membership hinders an agent’s ability to critically examine social norms. I will argue instead that cultural membership (one’s situatedness) can be the source
from which the average moral agent (i.e., the knower) forges a critical response to conventional norms. To support my view, I introduce recent feminist scholarship about the possibility of individuals adopting a critical stance toward social norms despite their cultural membership. Based on certain feminist concepts and metaphors (e.g., the liminal phase and intersectional identities), I show that participation in cultural practices can create fractures in one’s belief system and this doxastic incoherence could indicate to individuals that an investigation is warranted.

Contrary to Slote’s suggestion, I will argue that slave owners may have had accessible reasons to investigate slavery when prisoners of war were forced into servitude and when complaints about slavery were frequent. Given these cultural conditions, I believe that Slote’s claim that the social context in which slavery took place left no conceptual “space” for moral considerations or inquiry is undermined. On my view, the tension between “natural” and conventional slavery and the expressed dissatisfaction from slaves provided the Greeks with a social and moral context teeming with opportunities for critical moral reflection. If so, then it is possible that slave owners (and their supporters) chose not to debate the practice, perhaps for self-serving reasons including the continuance of a privileged way of life. It is possible that the beneficiaries of slavery did not want to question the practice for fear that a widespread public inquiry would render the practice and their social status immoral.

An apparent implication of Slote’s view is that the presence of debate would readily justify attributing blame to those individuals who remain
unreflective. Cheshire Calhoun considers this kind of scenario. On her view, when debates about conventional norms take place only within a subgroup of moral experts it is unreasonable to attribute blame to average moral agents for failing to participate in those critical discussions. I examine her argument in chapter three.

According to Calhoun, before we can better understand the appropriateness of assigning responsibility we must first determine whether the practice or belief occurs in a normal or abnormal moral context. In a normal context, people should be familiar with society’s moral framework. They are expected to know which practices and beliefs are considered moral, immoral, or controversial. They are also expected to know when examination is warranted. For instance, accusations of discriminatory hiring, sexual harassment, and marital rape should be investigated. In short, Calhoun claims that one’s failure to investigate practices that occur in a normal moral context is culpable. However, failing to investigate a practice (or belief) that occurs in an abnormal context is excusable. According to Calhoun, in this moral context average moral agents are at a disadvantage in recognizing the reasons for debate. They are at a disadvantage because relevant moral knowledge is isolated among a subgroup of moral experts. On Calhoun’s model, these experts (e.g., bioethicists, business ethicists, and feminist ethicists) possess advanced reasoning skills which better enable them to find the reasons to debate conventional practices and beliefs. Calhoun cites, among other examples, the common use of “he” as a neutral pronoun, and heterosexual marriage as topics that feminist experts critique but
they would not be considered controversial in popular consciousness. For Calhoun, there is no reason outside the subgroup of moral experts for an individual to form a critical perspective of such practices. Only when expert criticism or knowledge have institutionalized channels of communication can we assign blame to those who remain unreflective.

Like Slote, Calhoun rightly acknowledges the intricate relationship between one’s ability to recognize the reasons for debate and one’s social environment. As I will show, her concept of abnormal moral context accommodates those cases where the channels of communication are controlled and manipulated to disseminate false or partial information. In these situations, proper moral reflection about conventional norms can be difficult. I cite the current debates about privatizing Social Security and legalizing same-sex marriages to illustrate this fact. I also recognize the importance of moral experts sharing specialized knowledge with average moral agents and how that valuable exchange could encourage in-depth moral reflection about traditional mores.

In the second half of the chapter, I will show why these conceptual merits cannot rescue Calhoun’s model from its essential ineffectiveness. The concept of moral experts and the theoretical distinction between normal and abnormal moral contexts are too problematic and ambiguous respectively. For instance, I point out that Calhoun’s assumption that moral experts are a coherent group goes against the fact that bioethicists and feminist ethicists routinely disagree about the most fundamental of moral issues. When disagreement arises, it is not clear how average moral agents are supposed to know which expert to believe.
Although not central to the larger issue of whether average moral agents should be debating conventional norms, my criticism does highlight a problematic aspect of Calhoun’s rather simplistic conception of moral experts.

I then go on to argue that average moral agents may have an epistemic and motivational advantage over experts to recognize and confront the reasons for scrutinizing customary codes of conduct and belief. After rehearsing some of the main tenets of feminist standpoint theory, I will show that average moral agents could be in a better social position than, say, bioethicists to disclose unexamined assumptions embedded in dominant practices and justifications. Since the person who is engaged in critical moral reflection may not be the “expert” Calhoun has in mind, the conceptual distinction between “expert” and “average moral agent” begins to dissolve. I also question Calhoun’s insistence that moral experts necessarily possess superior reasoning skills. I refer to Charles W. Mills’ book, *The Racial Contract*, to show that social contact theorists, such as Thomas Hobbes and Immanuel Kant, willingly gave philosophical support to their culture’s racial prejudices. If Hobbes and Kant represent Calhounian moral experts, then either they were unable to build ethical arguments by virtue of their cultural membership or, as Mills suggests, they willingly gave philosophical support to racist norms. Either way, I argue that it is no longer clear if “moral experts” demonstrate superior moral reflection as Calhoun contends. In order to address these problems adequately, Calhoun’s model must provide some sort of mechanism or a set of epistemic criteria that will enable average moral agents to sort out the hypocrite from the genuine moral
expert. Of course, if ordinary persons were in possession of such criteria (or knowledge) I would see no need for moral experts in the first place.

Calhoun’s model, I argue further, is unable to determine whether average moral agents are culpable because the theoretical distinction between normal and abnormal moral contexts is too permeable for practical purposes. As I will show, when practices and/or beliefs in one context have conceptual links or moral associations with practices and/or beliefs that occur in another context, there is confusion as to whether the practice takes place in a normal or abnormal moral context. Without an obvious demarcation between contexts, Calhoun’s model can be used to support contradictory conclusions about moral responsibility. Since one can apply Calhoun’s model and arrive at contradictory conclusions about culpability, I shall propose that we abandon her theory.

In chapter four, I critically examine Michele Moody-Adam’s view and the concept of affected ignorance. According to Moody-Adams, the collective failure to examine slavery in ancient Greece was likely due to affected ignorance: choosing not to be informed of what one can and should know. Because it involves making a choice, affected ignorance is culpable. Although I find it necessary to expand on the notion of affected ignorance, I argue that Moody-Adams’ explanation best deals with the issue of people failing to debate established practices and beliefs.

I consider and critically evaluate four instances of affected ignorance. First, affected ignorance occurs when people deny any connection between their actions and the consequent suffering of their victims. Remember the Nazi
“deportation” officer who deceives himself about the reality of his anti-Semitic actions. By devising a self-deceptive strategy, the officer is able to mask the moral relevance of his actions. Second, affected ignorance occurs when a military officer who commands his soldiers to retrieve certain information from captured prisoners by “any means possible,” but all along insists that he does not want to know how they intend to precisely carry out those orders. The third kind of affected ignorance is manifested when a police chief chooses not to investigate evidence that racial profiling may be taking place in his department. He ignores the information before him and thus remains ignorant of any potential wrongdoing. Finally, the freeman who learns to inure himself to the numerous complaints and suffering of slaves also represents a form of affected ignorance. By adopting a certain point of view regarding the rational and racial inferiority of slaves, the slave owner can teach himself not to recognize these complaints as indeed rational (and morally relevant) complaints.

Although a complex phenomenon because of its multiple (sometimes subtle) manifestations, affected ignorance is morally culpable because it involves a choice not to investigate conventional moral beliefs. Specifically, I will show that affected ignorance involves a choice not to confront particular moral beliefs or suspicions that arise from cultural inconsistencies and other indications of societal tension. Thus, the moral agency in affected ignorance is the refusal to confront what one already believes or suspects to be morally important.

I will explain that affected ignorance is usually motivated by various kinds of self-interest. For example, the police chief’s refusal to confront the evidence
that his officers may be involved in racial profiling practices could be motivated by the fear that, if those practices are occurring, he could lose his job or have little chance to receive a significant pay raise. Perhaps he does not want to acknowledge the possibility that he misjudged their moral characters. Of course, it is also possible that the chief is racist and this explains why he overlooks the evidence (and his suspicion of possible wrongdoing).

By ignoring important moral information, the affected agent renders himself morally blind to the reasons for debate. But it is a structured blindness that is supported by his society. He chooses to remain “in the dark” about possible wrongdoing with the assurance that his ignorance will be publicly validated. As I will argue, this culturally supported moral ignorance can obscure the reasons (e.g., cultural inconsistencies, frustrations, complaints by oppressed persons, suspicions, and particular moral beliefs) for social criticism. It is a kind of moral ignorance that is culpable because it involves average moral agents turning away (for self-interested reasons) from important moral beliefs. It involves an active refusal to be better informed about the moral complexities associated with certain conventional practices and beliefs.

For the most part, I defend Moody-Adams’ explanation that affected ignorance could explain one’s failure to debate social norms. It supports my argument that suspicions of possible wrongdoing can influence people not to ask questions about established customs. Her view also underscores my belief that, in some cases, average moral agents have a motive not to scrutinize status quo values and practices. However, I will point out that Moody-Adams’ approach
lacks specific criteria for \textit{responsible} moral reflection. I will show that self-reflection is not a sufficient condition for assigning moral exemption since the process can be negatively used to form improper beliefs and perpetuate unjust practices. I argue that we need a normative standard that will not only encourage people to examine certain cultural conditions and their suspicions but to do so in a responsible way. Therefore, to make better sense of responsible moral reflection, I shall propose a virtue-based conception of doxastic responsibility. On my view, average moral agents should reflect on customary practices and beliefs within the context of James Montmarquet’s sets of intellectual virtues; impartiality, sobriety, and courage. These intellectual virtues, I will argue, represent a moral model from which individuals can examine whether customary values and practices deserve public scrutiny. They extend a positive account of what it means to act as a responsible moral agent in the face of cultural influences. Essentially, I want to encourage individuals to confront cultural inconsistencies and other societal tensions, their suspicions of possible wrongdoing, and particular moral beliefs in an intellectually impartial, sober, and courageous manner. I conclude the chapter with my conditions for when it is reasonable to assign blame to average moral agents who fail to question conventional norms.

In chapter five, I illustrate the effectiveness of my model with a contemporary case: the socially accepted practice of factory farming. I argue that affected ignorance not only perpetuates the current hegemonic attitude toward certain animals, but it also explains the lack of extensive public debate about
factory farming practices. Instead of a culturally induced inability to recognize the reasons for debate, I believe that people are choosing to remain unreflective about the moral complexities involved in our general acceptance of factory farming. I am able to arrive at this conclusion because all three conditions for when people are culpable for failing to debate conventional practices and beliefs are present.

Specifically, I argue that the acceptance of factory farming methods is inconsistent with prevailing social attitudes about the wrongness of animal cruelty. Animal cruelty cases usually strike a responsive moral chord with the public but, as I will show, that same outraged public goes on to support factory farming practices. If factory farms represent the institutionalization of animal cruelty practices, then we should be asking more questions as to why practices that are not morally permissible when they involve certain animals (i.e., pets) are permissible when they involve other relevantly similar animals like cows, hogs, and chickens. Generally speaking, when it comes to our pets a collective moral shift occurs. It is an alternative moral point of view that should compel people to debate the legitimacy of treating farm animals as mere commodities or “production units.”

Other indications of societal tension include the already limited debate about factory farming and vegetarian alternatives. Although the current debate is far from the level of other debates such as the morality of abortion services or death penalty laws, it can make relevant information readily available for people who want to know more about factory farming. Vegetarianism is an alternative
dietary practice that also challenges the reasonableness of factory farming and meat-eating. As I will show, these conditions point to additional cultural opportunities for people to engage in a wider debate.

I next present Peter Singer’s and Tom Regan’s arguments that factory farming practices are immoral. I repeat their views because they reveal the logical connection between speciesism (the view that legitimizes factory farming practices) and what is widely believed to be immoral—arbitrary discrimination. Singer argues that the hegemonic attitude toward animals, especially farm animals, shares the same kind of logic as the wrongness of racism and sexism. Singer explains that, like racism and sexism, speciesism relies on an arbitrary characteristic to protect the interests of one group (human beings) against those of another group (nonhuman animals). If speciesism has conceptual links to arbitrary discrimination (e.g., racism and sexism) and since the wrongness of discrimination is part of our moral and social context, I then argue that average moral agents have an accessible reason to debate the general acceptance of speciesist practices such as factory farming.

Regan’s argument that factory farming is immoral is largely based on the same kind of logic that justifies the attribution of rights to human moral patients. According to Regan, if (human) moral patients have rights because they are experiencing subjects of life and since it is reasonable to think that the category of experiencing subjects of life include (some) animals, then reason follows that the moral patient category ought to include (some) animals. For Regan, it is arbitrary moral discrimination to exclude these animals from the moral patient
category because species affiliation does not logically preclude the possibility of experiencing subjects of life. I appeal to Regan’s argument because, like Singer’s, it presents and is grounded on a basic moral principle we all accept—it is wrong to differentiate moral treatment on the basis of arbitrary (morally irrelevant) characteristics. In this way, they demonstrate the logical connection between factory farming and what is commonly believed to be immoral.

Given these cultural conditions and the lack of widespread debate, I suspect that people do not want to investigate the issue of factory farming. I argue that knowledge about it (including slaughterhouses) is knowledge most people do not want. We choose to remain ignorant by not asking questions. It is a kind of ignorance, however, that arises from the deep-down suspicion that animals may have been mistreated somewhere in the process. Given our social and moral context, the lack of widespread debate about factory farming is probably due to affected ignorance.

I then discuss possible motives for why an agent would choose to remain ignorant in this case. Satisfying culinary tastes, making a profit, and gaining the social rewards for conforming to long-held culinary traditions such as cooking the Thanksgiving turkey or the Easter ham are possible motives. The resonant fear that one might be participating in an immoral practice could also explain one’s unwillingness to investigate these cultural inconsistencies, the moral association between speciesism and wrongful discrimination, and/or one’s suspicions. Rather than confront the possibility that the truth about factory farming methods will lie
heavily on one’s moral consciousness, people are choosing not to examine the issue. Because it involves a choice, this makes the agent culpable.

When socially approved practices and beliefs are linked to cultural inconsistencies and troubling moral associations, we, as responsible moral agents, should be asking more questions. On my view, however, simply debating the practice does not guarantee moral exemption. Ultimately, I urge that average moral agents, if we are to take our moral responsibility seriously, must investigate this important issue within certain normative standards. Specifically, I am encouraging a large-scale discussion characterized by James Montmarquet’s sets of intellectual virtues. I envision a debate framed around a genuine willingness to take seriously the various arguments put forth by vegetarians and animal activists. It would call for an honest appraisal about the possibility that one’s conventional beliefs might be immoral. I imagine a public debate infused with genuine inquisitiveness, fair-mindedness, intellectual carefulness, and thoroughness—a debate where average moral agents take seriously their moral obligation to do their best to form well-justified beliefs concerning the legitimacy of factory farming.

As these chapters will show, it is important to develop a better understanding about the complexities of affected ignorance because failing to engage in proper moral reflection about cultural norms can lead to systematic self-deception and the corruption of fundamental moral principles. We need to take seriously our moral and epistemic duty to remain critical of popular beliefs and accepted practices, especially those that are considered “natural,”
“economically necessary,” or “normal.” When we fail to exercise our rational capacities to reflect on our social world, we run the risk of exploiting those who are most vulnerable to (accepted) political and social injustice. It is my hope that this effort encourages proper moral reflection for the sake of justice.
According to Michael Slote, average moral agents should not be held morally accountable for failing to investigate whether conventional practices are immoral when there is no public debate about those practices. In these cases, Slote contends that individuals are unable to recognize the reasons for debate. For instance, Slote believes that ancient Greek slave owners are not morally responsible for their failure to engage in debate about slavery because they could not have suspected that the widely accepted practice was immoral.

In this chapter, I argue that a lack of public debate does not prove Slote’s inability thesis since people choosing not to ask questions could explain the lack of debate. The focus of this chapter, however, will take issue with Slote’s general failure to fully appreciate how socialization itself can activate one’s rational capacity to examine conventional practices and beliefs. I use recent insights derived from the works of feminist epistemologists and ethicists to show that ancient Greek society could have provided slave owners (and their supporters) with opportunities (or reasons) to investigate the popular practice of slavery. Therefore, in light of certain cultural conditions, I conclude that the ancients are morally responsible for their failure to debate slavery.
We have limited knowledge of ancient Greek culture; most historical information pertaining to ancient Greek practices, including slavery, derives from fragmented sources that frequently leave us with more questions than answers. Nevertheless, scholarly consensus suggests that there was nothing remotely resembling an abolitionist movement in ancient Greece. Historical evidence reveals that, for the most part, the institution of chattel slavery was simply taken for granted in Greece. The Greeks grew up with it and accepted it, largely without question. We know, for instance, that a complex legal structure regulated the institution.¹ There were legal distinctions between slaves and freepersons with regard to voting and in the matter of protection against certain kinds of physical harm. The legal regulation of slavery was also intricately bound up with popular theatrical conventions which tended to demonstrate certain features of the practice. It was not uncommon for Greek comedies to rely on the flogging, bullying, and humiliation of slaves for humorous scenes.²

The acceptance of slavery largely depended on the belief that enslaving certain persons was perfectly natural and economically necessary. Certain persons were considered slaves by birth—their minds and bodies naturally suited for extensive manual labor and other menial tasks. Because some Greek slaves were considered more like tame animals and children than autonomous agents, it was not unusual for slave owners to think of them as mere “tools” who needed

² Ibid.
and benefited from a natural master to direct them.\footnote{Aristotle claimed that a despotic form of rule is justified in the case of natural slaves who lack a deliberative faculty and thus needed a master to direct them. Slavery is defended at length in his \textit{Politics} I.4-8. See \textit{Politics} I-II, trans. Trevor J. Saunders (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).} Within this conceptual framework, slaves were fortunate to have “good” masters. Slavery was also deemed a vital part of the economic system in which Greek men could achieve the best form of civilization and individually attain the good life. For Greek society to prosper and to remain a cohesive city-state, slavery was widely accepted as an economically necessary institution.

According to Slote, these popular justifications rendered average moral agents unable to act or imagine otherwise: “no other system was known or, perhaps, even thought possible.”\footnote{Michael Slote, “Is Virtue Possible?” \textit{Analysis} 42 (1982): 72.} That is to say, it was impossible for average moral agents to imagine social alternatives to slavery on the basis that it was widely believed to be an “axiomatic” feature of any thriving society. On his view, “if the ancients were unable to see what virtue required in regard to slavery, that was not due to personal limitations (alone) but requires some explanation by social and historical forces, by cultural limitations, if you will.”\footnote{Ibid., 72-73.} The continuance of slavery in ancient Greece was simply a case of “social forces” preventing one’s ability to critically reflect on conventional practices. Ordinary Greek citizens failed to grasp that there was a moral issue at stake but their moral ignorance is excused on Slote’s view. Their moral ignorance is excusable because it was caused by social and historical forces and not personal limitations such as egotism, willful neglect, and moral (or intellectual) apathy. Thus, with no
conceptual “space” to question the justice of slavery, Slote concludes that ordinary Greek citizens had no reason to debate the practice.

It is important to be clear about Slote’s argument. His theory does not defend the more controversial claim that the internalization of cultural norms (i.e., acceptance of slavery) diminished the rational capacity and moral sensibility of the slave owner across the board. For Slote, the ancients failed to debate slavery because their culture did not provide them with opportunities to do so. Given his social context, the slave owner did not have access to discernable reasons or social alternatives that would have otherwise enabled him to engage his capacity to scrutinize the practice.

As I see it, Slote’s cultural defense view has three intriguing features. First, it properly takes into account the traditional conditions for moral responsibility.6 A theory of moral responsibility ought to consider at least two standard excusing conditions: a moral agent must have a reason to investigate and/or have access to viable alternatives in order to be morally responsible for her actions (or inaction). An agent is not responsible for failing to investigate when she has no reason to suspect that her participation in a socially approved practice could be immoral. Without a compelling reason, we cannot expect the agent to act otherwise. According to Slote, a lack of public debate is equivalent to having no reason to question the moral status of conventional practices and beliefs. On his view, average moral agents are at a disadvantage to discern the reasons for debate when widespread acceptance is present. Given the apparent

social context in ancient Greece, what possible reason, Slote may ask, would prompt an ordinary Greek citizen to investigate slavery?

The second condition is having access to viable alternatives. Before we can reasonably assign blame to agents we must first show that the agent could have acted differently. It is unreasonable to ascribe moral responsibility when the agent’s actions are a result of some external form of coercion. Examples may include brainwashing, hypnosis, or direct manipulation of the brain when an agent is unable to act otherwise. The agent is not acting on her own free will when this level of external coercion is present. When an agent has no viable alternative to choose from, her agency is undermined and moral responsibility is eliminated or at least minimized. On most traditional accounts of moral responsibility and agency, one must be able to act otherwise, to act freely, in order to be a responsible moral agent.

In the case of ancient Greek slavery, Slote argues that the widespread acceptance of slavery rendered average moral agents unable to imagine social alternatives. His thesis suggests a kind of social determinism or coercion where popular ideas, acting as a kind of brainwashing mechanism, force agents into thinking and acting in certain ways. Since the ancients lived in a culture where slavery was not debated, Slote insists that opportunities to imagine alternative social arrangements were absent. So, in light of more traditional accounts of moral responsibility and agency, one must be able to act otherwise, to act freely, in order to be a responsible moral agent.

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7 See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), 1110a3, where he offers examples in which a person is carried somewhere by the wind against his will or taken by kidnappers. Also 1109b30-1111b5, where Aristotle distinguishes between “voluntary” (culpable) and “involuntary” (nonculpable) actions.

8 For a discussion on how moral responsibility does not require alternative possibilities, see Harry Frankfurt’s “Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility,” in *Perspectives on Moral Responsibility*. 
moral responsibility, such as the requirement that in order for agents to be morally responsible it must be shown that they have reasons and/or opportunities to pursue alternatives, Slote's explanation for why slave owners are not responsible for their failure to examine slavery seems satisfactory.

Slote's cultural defense view also fits nicely with common views about the possibility of nonculpable wrongdoing. All things being equal, it seems that most people want to do the right thing but in some cases cultural influences can derail them from a more virtuous path. Slote's view accommodates our basic intuitions that the continuance of immoral conventional practices and beliefs does not always depend on immoral persons or characters. I agree with Slote that few people "would suggest that the Greeks or the ancient Hebrews and early Christians were less able to instill moral values into their children than we are today."\(^9\) Although they participated in and maintained the institution of slavery, the ancients were nonetheless capable of other moral traditions. In other words, his view has the advantage of being able to explain that in some cases essentially good people unwittingly support immoral social practices.

Finally, and most importantly, I agree with Slote that any model of moral responsibility for these sorts of cases ought to take into account the social dimension of individual moral reflection. Before we assign moral responsibility to agents who fail to be morally reflective about conventional norms, it is imperative that we reasonably determine what the agent knows or should know given her social (moral) context. We have to consider the knower's physical and psychological relations to her cultural environment and how these affect the

\(^9\) Slote, 72.
range of moral reflection. The social location of the moral agent is crucial because we are situated knowers.

“Situated knowers” is a concept developed in feminist epistemology. It refers to people (i.e., knowers) as situated in a particular social context, that is, it considers how the social location of the knower affects what and how she knows. The concept is used to identify the multiple ways in which people understand the same object or experience in different ways depending on their specific relation to it. Relations could include embodiment, attitudes, interests, distinct cognitive styles, relationships with other inquirers, and social status. More importantly, these social relations shape the nature of critical moral reflection in significant ways. First, it affects one’s attitudes about customary beliefs and/or practices. In some cases, individuals may continue their dogmatic ways and, in others, they may feel compelled to submit their customary beliefs (including their general approval of socially accepted practices) to possible revision. Epistemic standards of justification are also influenced by one’s situatedness. Specifically, one’s social location affects the relative weight to give to different sources and the kinds of evidence one requires before accepting a claim. Finally, situatedness shapes the knowers’ assessment of which claims are judged significant and which should be discarded. Thus feminist epistemology can be seen as a branch of social epistemology, in which inquiry is treated as a fundamentally social process, and
the basic subject of knowledge may even be communities or networks of individuals.\(^{10}\)

Situatedness also explains the ways we understand our multifaceted social identities and how these complex identities can spur a critical response to cultural norms. An individual's social location consists of her ascribed social identity (gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, kinship status, etc.) and social roles and relationships (occupation, political party membership, etc.).\(^{11}\) By virtue of these various identities, individuals can occupy different social roles that give them different powers, duties, and role-given goals and interests. Because each identity is subject to different virtues, customs, emotions, and skills that are considered appropriate for these identities, people by virtue of their social roles acquire a specific form of self-knowledge which informs their diverse and subjective ways they understand that identity.\(^{12}\) For instance, one may simply agree to have certain ascribed identities by actively affirming the norms and roles associated with them. Or one may regard one's social identity as oppressive or unwanted (if, say, one's identity is cast by society as humiliating or degrading), yet see this social identification as an opportunity to overcome that oppression with other members of that group. The point is recognizing our multifaceted social identities can be a source of critical moral reflection and ultimately cultural resistance.


\(^{12}\) Ibid.
Social epistemology is an intellectual response to the traditional philosophical notion of epistemological individualism (the hallmark of early modern philosophy, whether rationalist or empiricist), which states that the individual is the source of rational inquiry and the principle agent in the production of knowledge. ¹³ What is necessary for this view is that the knower is impartial, that is, the observer must articulate a socially-independent description of external reality. It creates a radical and in principle an isolated individual as the ideal epistemic agent. On this view, the solipsistic knower (not the situated knower) is the basis of knowledge acquisition or belief justification.

Epistemological individualism is rejected by some feminist philosophers. They argue that one must recognize our epistemological communities and how we, as members, are inherently connected to them when developing our beliefs and justifications. In many important respects, rational inquiry is constructed and shaped within a community of which we all find ourselves. According to Elizabeth Potter, epistemological individualism is weakened by the impossibility of a private language. ¹⁴ In essence, her argument is that individuals learn to use language from their respective communities. Language cannot be private because there is no way for an individual to come up with the rules governing behavior that constitute speaking a language, nor is there any way to apply the rules. For example, there is no way for the isolated knower to make the distinction between

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statements that are true and those that seem to be true.\textsuperscript{15} “The isolated individual cannot produce language—language must be public because two or more people are required for concepts like ‘truth’ and ‘reference’ to work.”\textsuperscript{16} Therefore, since the individual is not linguistically prior to the community, “then the individual cannot be epistemologically prior either.”\textsuperscript{17}

Lynn Hankinson Nelson explores the idea that observation is theory-laden or language-laden, that is, that we learn to experience the world as meaningful according to the categories of the language(s) we speak, languages of which a single individual could not be the author. Nelson argues that sensory experiences are themselves shaped and “mediated by a larger system of historically and culturally specific theory and practice…”\textsuperscript{18} These considerations leave Nelson to argue the implausibility of the solipsistic knower. Individuals may receive sensory input, but “it is communalities that construct and acquire knowledge.”\textsuperscript{19} For Nelson, evidence or doxastic justification is communal, and thus, the proper agents of knowledge are communities.\textsuperscript{20} In “Taking Subjectivity into Account,” Lorraine Code also argues that epistemologists should take into account the subjective factors of knowledge and investigation.\textsuperscript{21} Code suggests that there is no reason to accept the traditional empiricist paradigm of a remote and solipsistic knower. Instead, she argues that knowledge is interactive and dependent on subjective factors including our situatedness. According to Code, the idea that

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 163.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 164.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 165.
\textsuperscript{18} Lynn Hankinson Nelson, “Epistemological Communities,” in Feminist Epistemologies, 138.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 123.
\textsuperscript{21} Lorraine Code, “Taking Subjectivity into Account,” in Feminist Epistemologies.
individual inquiry is somehow detached and the objects of knowledge are separate from our historical context is false. Potter, Nelson, and Code insist that individual reflection must be understood in its social context.

When inquiry is understood as a social process and the basic subjects of knowledge may be communities or other individuals, an account of responsible moral behavior must consider less individualistic factors. Slote's cultural defense view rightly captures this important moral, social, and epistemological point. Indeed, Slote believes that the agent's relationship to her cultural environment explains her nonculpable failure to engage in debate. On his view, socialization hinders one's ability to scrutinize customary codes of conduct and/or particular moral beliefs. Greek society failed to provide individuals with compelling reasons to debate slavery and in this way the slave owner's situatedness explains his nonculpable failure to take on a critical perspective.

Despite these important contributions, Slote's cultural defense view is burdened with significant weaknesses. In terms of its structure, Slote's argument is circular. On his view, the ancients did not debate slavery because they had no reason to do so. However, he also suggests that the ancients had no reason to debate slavery because there was no public debate. To accept his conclusion about the ancients' inability to examine slavery, it seems to me that Slote's theory needs additional evidence or independent criteria. We need evidence that explains the failure to debate that is independent of the failure itself. Furthermore, to infer what the Greeks could not do based on what they did not do is logically unsound. For one could just as well conclude that the lack of public
debate was a result of the ancients choosing not to ask questions rather than some inability to do so. It is plausible that slave owners and their supporters did not want to debate slavery for self-interested reasons and that is why public debate did not take place. Thus, the lack of public debate does not convincingly show that the agents in question are morally exempt.

I am also not convinced that the Greeks were entirely unable to imagine social alternatives to slavery as Slote contends. By virtue of learning a language—in particular, learning to form the negation of any statement—the ancients could have conceptualized the statement “a society without slaves is possible,” and, thereby, had some kind of awareness about social alternatives. To be sure, some imaginations are richer than others. But to claim, as Slote does, that “no other system was known or, perhaps, even thought possible” is to overlook the agent’s capacity to form simple linguistic (and conceptual) negations. If the ancients had the (linguistic) ability to imagine social alternatives, then it seems to me that public debate about slavery could and should have occurred in ancient Greece.

A defender of the cultural defense view might object that mere ability to imagine social alternatives is not a sufficient condition for moral responsibility in this case. According to Neil Levy, the capacity to imagine a world without slaves is one thing, having a compelling reason to seriously consider that proposition is quite another: “No doubt it is true that Greeks could form sentences like ‘A world without slaves is possible.’ But bare ability to imagine a possibility, in this sense,
is very far from constituting a reason to take the proposal seriously.”\textsuperscript{22} For instance, I can imagine that there are green leprechauns living in my closet but this ability alone does not constitute a bona fide reason to take my imaginings seriously. I consider the fantasy and move on with my normal life. For Levy (and I suspect Slote would agree), assigning moral responsibility to agents who fail to investigate solely on the grounds that they have the capacity to imagine alternatives is misguided:

Though it may sometimes be true that the members of a culture are able (possess the physical and mental capacities necessary) to investigate…, very often they lack a reason (accessible to them) to investigate and when this is the case, they are not culpable for their failure to investigate.\textsuperscript{23}

The challenge before us is to identify possible reasons that could have motivated the ancients to examine the proposal, “a world without slavery,” in particular and slavery in general. As I will show, there may have been two accessible reasons to ask questions.

Although we can be certain there was nothing resembling an abolitionist movement in ancient Greece, Bernard Williams suggests that a dissenting voice was present.\textsuperscript{24} According to Williams, it was not uncommon for slaves to complain about their physical hardships and constant humiliation. He explains that “being captured into slavery was a paradigm of disaster, of which any rational person would complain; and…they [Greeks] recognized the complaints

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 156-57. 
\textsuperscript{24} Bernard Williams, \textit{Shame and Necessity} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
as indeed complaints, objections made by rational people.” It appears, therefore, the ancients had rational reasons to debate slavery.

Williams rejects such a suggestion and claims instead that these complaints were not compelling reasons for the ancients to debate the moral status of slavery. Most Greeks recognized the hardships involved in slavery, but, according to Williams, they saw them as a paradigm of bad luck. No one denied that it was unfortunate to be a slave, just as it is unfortunate to be sick or physically deformed. But to suggest that these complaints should have motivated the ancients to question the moral status of slavery is to overlook the social context in which the practice took place. According to Williams, the ancients could not help but understand these complaints as the unpleasant consequences of Nature’s lottery or, since it was commonly believed that slavery was economically necessary, as a socio-economic issue and not some immoral social pretense. Any questions concerning its administration were considered matters of civil law to be settled by reference to royal edict without any recourse to higher moral principles. For Williams, the social context in which these complaints took place left “no space, effectively, for the question of its justice to be raised.”

When one group has rational reasons to complain about their inferior status while others benefit, it seems to me that people should be asking questions about social alternatives. It is not unreasonable to posit that the ancients had the presence of mind to examine the conceptual and social divide between the privileged and the underprivileged, especially when we take into

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25 Ibid., 116-117.
26 Ibid., 124.
account another cultural condition. It was not uncommon for the practice to take on a conventional justification when prisoners of war were made into slaves. Enslaving soldiers ran against prevailing arguments about the "naturalness" of slavery since some of the soldiers would not have been considered inferior like "natural" slaves. Even if the ancients took the view that victory in war suggests the excellence of the victors, it would not follow that Nature intended for these men to be slaves. Indeed, according to historical accounts, many believed that the "wrong" people were being enslaved in these cases.

Consider the statements made by various characters in the surviving plays of Euripides. The plays provide evidence that theoretical and provocative statements criticizing some fundamental Greek attitudes and ideologies were made on the Athenian stage in the late fifth century. According to Nicholas Fisher, two central points are made more than once. First, after scenes in which individual slaves demonstrated qualities of loyalty, intelligence, or bravery equal, or superior to those shown by free people, characters in the plays often concluded that the institution of slavery operates unjustly, enslaving and degrading those who do not deserve it. For example, in the *Ion* a loyal slave, prepared to risk his life for his mistress, claims that:

"One thing alone brings shame to slaves, the name; apart from all that, a slave is no worse than free men in anything, if he is good."

In Euripides’ *Alexandros*, the main character (Paris), who has been brought up as a slave, succeeds in his request to be permitted to compete with

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29 Ibid.
30 Euripides, *Ion* 855-7. Quoted by Fisher, 94.
free men in the heroic games at Troy. According to Fisher, interpretation of the fragments is not easy, but it seems as if the following views are expressed: “all men originally had the same appearance; noble birth, free birth and race do not guarantee good moral qualities; and while some slaves are enslaved only in name, for others it is an appropriate fate.”31

Second, in plays focusing on the consequences of war for the defeated victims, great pity is aroused by the enslavement of women and children. This sympathy may have caused the Greeks some anxiety about the justice of enslaving those defeated in war. Further, since there is considerable emphasis on the injustice and callous cruelty of the victorious Greeks, and considerable sympathy for the terrible sufferings and humiliations of the Trojan women who are represented as “barbarians” by the Greeks, Fisher claims that “serious questioning of the Greek-barbarian contrast and the orthodox view of the moral superiority of the Greeks was a significant part of the effects of these plays.”32

Thus, it is possible that the social context in which slavery took place was not quite as Williams (or Slote) suggested. That is, slavery could have occurred in a social context fraught with justificatory tension, suspicions, and inner doubts about the general acceptance of slavery as a “natural” practice devoid of any moral considerations. Forcing prisoners of war into chattel slavery could have aroused some suspicions and inner doubts about the standard belief that slavery was a result of Natural law and, since many believed that the “wrong” persons were being enslaved in this situation, it is plausible that some people recognized

31 Fisher, 95.
32 Ibid.
the reasons for public debate. Therefore, if slavery took place in a social context characterized by these tensions, it is possible that the ancients had opportunities to reinterpret common justifications and to investigate possible social alternatives.\textsuperscript{33}

In sum, the inconsistency between natural \textit{(physis)} and conventional \textit{(nomos)} slavery could have raised inner doubts in some individuals about the standard argument that slavery was natural. If so, then it is no longer obvious that the belief about the naturalness of slavery was the single dominant cultural influence Slote wants it to be. In addition, the idea that “wrong” people were sometimes being enslaved could have alerted the ancients to possible moral considerations. Given these cultural tensions, Slote’s suggestion that the social context in which slavery occurred left no conceptual space for moral considerations or debate is questionable.

My analysis is based on the general idea that socialization itself can activate one’s rational capacity to critically examine socially accepted practices. As I see it, the cultural defense view in general and Slote’s version in particular fail to fully appreciate the human capacity for critiquing social norms in the course of socialization. Contrary to Slote’s insistence about cultural membership hindering the activation of one’s ability to form a critical perspective of conventional practices, I would like to propose that socialization is actually compatible with moral (and epistemic) agency. Most people have an innate ability to learn a language but they must be exposed to a language first. The same

\textsuperscript{33} I am not suggesting that these tensions constituted a large-scale debate. My point is that pockets of social resistance or questioning could have been possible in such a social context.
holds true with the capacity to examine social norms—our innate abilities to form a critical opinion about conventional practices and beliefs can be stimulated by particular cultural conditions. When Slote suggests that “social and historical forces” explain why the ancients failed to examine slavery, he may have exaggerated the effects of socialization while downplaying the possibility of people critiquing cultural practices by virtue of their cultural membership. In what follows, I will show that cultural membership can provide average moral agents with the necessary moral resources and compelling reasons to examine socially accepted practices and beliefs.

There have been and always will be social critics and cultural outsiders who scrutinize the moral standing of social conventions. Consider those who question prescribed norms and rebel against, say, certain gender expectations, such as Isabel Archer, Henry James’ protagonist in The Portrait of a Lady.\footnote{Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady (New York: Modern Library, 1951).} Here is a young woman with no income and no social position. Despite her low status and the social pressures for women to marry and procreate, she refused to marry either Lord Warburton, a respected and wealthy peer, or a reputable American, Caspar Goodwood. Archer claimed that her reason for the rejections was her love of liberty, her desire to know life, and her determination to form her own views. Consider also Gertrude Stein who studied psychology with William James at Harvard and then went to medical school at John Hopkins. Although nearly finished with her medical degree, Stein quit medical school, moved to Paris, and became one of the most influential writers and art collectors of the
twentieth century. These forms of rebellion exemplify how people can forge a critical understanding and response to prescribed (gender) norms.

According to Ruth Benedict, an individual’s capacity to critique social norms is often activated after she adopts certain conventional practices and beliefs and, thereafter, experiences inner conflict or doubt. Although her main contention is that most people conform to their cultures’ norms about right and wrong, Benedict also admits that in every society there exist “social deviants” who resist the “molding forces” of culture. According to Benedict, a “social deviant” is “an individual upon whom that culture has put more than the usual strain. His inability to adopt himself to society is a reflection of the fact that that adaptation involves a conflict in him that it does not in the so-called normal.”

Benedict’s point is clear. Internalizing certain cultural norms can produce inner tensions for some individuals and these tensions could motivate them to resist the pressures to conform and instead encourage them to forge their own response to socialization. Benedict never implies that social deviants are exceptional moral agents who mysteriously escape the effects of socialization. No one is completely removed from the influences of one’s social environment, and this is exactly Slote’s point. Nevertheless, his view appears to overlook the ways in which socialization can provide average moral agents with opportunities to scrutinize conventional norms. On his view, the norms of conduct and inquiry are determined by dominant social discourses. But Slote’s deterministic position is unconvincing. As I will show, participation in cultural practices can create

36 Ibid., my emphasis.
fractures in one’s belief system and this doxastic incoherence could indicate to individuals that an investigation into social norms is warranted. Hence, on my view, culture itself (one’s situatedness) provides the impetus for social critique.

My account takes its inspiration from María Lugones’ work on individuals acquiring a libratory sense of self despite the fact that their subjectivity remains fully immersed in an oppressive culture. According to Lugones, every culture presents certain conditions for individuals to experience a “place” in between social norms or realities, “an interstice from where one can most clearly stand critically toward different structures.” 37 This cultural “place” allows the agent to slip through normative structures where she is able to forge a more critical understanding of “axiomatic” conventions.

Logones borrows this concept from Victor Turner, an anthropologist who also claimed that every society creates conditions in which people are able to “slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space.” 38 Turner used the notions of “liminality” or “liminal phase” to describe this social and individual phenomenon. 39 The liminal phase challenges any belief or any aspect of a worldview that requires unification, either psychologically, morally, politically, or metaphysically. Like Lugones, Turner characterizes the liminal condition as a “gap between ordered worlds” or a place

39 Turner adopted the term “liminality” from Arnold van Gennep who used it to describe the rites of passage found in tribal processes. See Gennep’s The Rites of Passage [1908], trans. Monika Vizedon and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).
“between” clearly defined cultural positions. Turner goes on to explain that liminality is a state of liberation, usually temporary, from the varied normative demands of society. On his view, there are “liminoid” happenings in all societies simply by virtue of social differentiation and its effects. Liminoid phenomena create opportunities for everyone to stand (if only for a moment) “outside” their conventional understandings and social positions (e.g., family, lineage, etc.).

Consider how economic changes can place various stresses on existing cultural norms. These periods of change can encourage people to modify or rethink cultural expectations. For example, families suffering from financial hardships could experience profound tensions within the family structure about the conventional belief that a woman’s “place” is in the home. As a result of socio-economic changes, the patriarchal prohibition against women working outside the home begins to erode and opportunities to debate traditional gender norms emerge.

It should be clear that the concept of liminality goes against Slote’s suggestion that there was no “cultural space” for debating slavery in ancient Greece. For Slote, the widespread acceptance of slavery reflected a coherent culture where opportunities for social criticism were absent. If Lugones and Turner are correct about the universality of “liminoid” phenomena, Slote’s conception of culture is implausible. Indeed, a society that conforms to Slote’s conception of a single dominant cultural influence shaping individual notions about culturally approved behavior and beliefs would probably be in a state of

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41 Ibid., 231-260.
perpetual decline. Liminal phases, that cultural “place” where individuals can confront and access their inner conflicts regarding cultural norms, is necessary for cultural change and moral development. I follow Lugones and Turner in maintaining that no society can survive if its culture is insufficiently labile. Because moral development and change require liminoid phenomena, Lugones and Turner provide a more plausible account of the connection between culture and individual moral reflection than Slote.

My point is the tension between “natural” and conventional slavery, the complaints made by slaves, and the provocative criticisms in Euripides’ plays could have provided ordinary Greek citizens with liminoid happenings—“places” in between social norms where agents stand “outside” the familiar and generate critical responses to the acceptance of slavery. I have been arguing that these cultural conditions strongly suggest that slavery took place in a social context strained by doxastic tensions and inner doubts—a context teeming with liminal opportunities. Contrary to Slote’s insistence that socialization rendered the ancients unable to discern the reasons for debate, I believe that the possibility of critical inquiry was derived from and shaped by the very community in which slave owners (and their supporters) found themselves.

The liminal phase involves not only the possibility of social inquiry but also the critical awareness of our multiple selves. Questions arise about how to make sense of one’s conflicting social roles and how to coordinate and solidify differing conceptions of oneself. In other words, the liberating experience of the liminal phase is based on the idea that individuals are not atomistic agents with
completely unified or monotonously consistent experiences. Individuals are comprised of many desires, personalities, and behavior traits and, depending on their particular social roles, they can experience different feelings, thoughts, and emotions. In the liminal phase, people can understand themselves as *intersectional* subjects; namely, as an individual comprised of diverse and, sometimes, conflicting “realities” or “cultures.”

Intersectionality and multiplicity are current feminist metaphors for describing the complex experiences that make up one’s identity. Intersectional subjects analyze their social position within the context of social hierarchies. They also interpret the psychic impact of their social experience and constantly reconfigure their identities as members of diverse social expectations. According to Diana Meyers,

> The idea of intersectional identity is premised on the general philosophical thesis that how one is depends on one’s social experience. However, the intersectional conception is specific to societies that exhibit certain kinds of social stratification, for it derives from a social-psychological view about how individuals internalize gender, sexual orientation, race, class and ethnicity in sexist, homophobic, racist, classiest, and xenophobic societies.

These social divisions symbolize the ways in which people can draw from different sources of self-identities. To define ourselves intersectionally, we must know “who we are.” It involves addressing questions along the following lines: What social group do I belong to? How did I acquire this affiliation? What do I

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gain (or lose) by being affiliated with this social group, ranking, or status? What is worth preserving by upholding such conventional rankings? It requires becoming acquainted with the sometimes conflicting ways in which we understand our being in the world. It is a continual process of coming to terms with ourselves in a cultural context fraught with tension. As Meyers explains, defining oneself intersectionally requires that one is…

introspectively vigilant, attuned to signs of frustration and dissatisfaction, attentive to baffling subjective anomalies, and willing to puzzle out gaps in one’s self-understanding. One must be equipped to tap into oppositional intellectual currents…one must command critical thinking skills.\textsuperscript{44}

In other words, to understand ourselves intersectionally is to acknowledge the multifaceted expressions of our culture—its frustrations, anomalies, gaps, and oppositional intellectual currents. Culture is no longer a single integrated and consistent whole when our lives are defined by lived contradictions and conceptual gaps. Coming to have an intersectional understanding is to experience seeing things about oneself and one’s society that were heretofore concealed. In other words, embracing our multifaceted identities—understanding ourselves as intersectional subjects—can uncover liminal opportunities for critical moral reflection about conventional norms and beliefs. In this way, intersectional subjectivity promises a deeper appreciation of one’s culture and how it affects our behavior and formation of beliefs. It also carves out possibilities for liberating collective action and for unprecedented personal growth, possibilities that were once hidden by conventionality. Indeed, a curious thing happens upon the recognition that identities are intersectional: socialization ceases to be as

\textsuperscript{44}Ibid., 167.
“coercive.” Once our intersectional identities have been brought to one’s consciousness, cultural membership is no longer the “force” Slote claims it is.

A powerful example is the way patriarchal expectations assigned black women slaves in the United States virtually total responsibility for managing domestic needs. The widespread belief that slaves needed to be “taken care of” because they were incompetent, lazy, and childlike was inconsistent with the actual realities of slaves as skilled farmers, diligent laborers, and expert caretakers. Institutional conflicts made it possible for female slaves to understand themselves as intersectional subjects. They lived by conflicting social expectations or realities: in one reality, they were defined as weak and childlike, in the other, they were strong and capable. Occupying conflicting social normative roles or “realities” can reveal to the agent her part in perpetuating or resisting conventional practices and beliefs.

Speaking out against slavery and advocating women’s rights, Sojourner Truth, a former slave, would publicly expose the practical and theoretical contradictions in racism and sexism. According to historical records, a man confronted Truth during one of her speeches and audaciously declared that women were frail and in need of a man’s strong arm to help them into carriages and over mud puddles. Truth responded with an impassioned testimony about how men never helped her plough the rigid land, plant seeds from dawn to dust, or carry heavy loads of crops into barns. Truth made it clear that she was not frail.

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and in need of a man’s strong arm. Her powerful speeches awoke audiences around the nation to the accepted contradictions and illogicalities involved in slavery and patriarchy. Her words aroused public consciousness to the urgent need for racial and sexual justice. The point is that, in the context of American colonial slavery, cultural inconsistencies provided a meaningful context of accountability, self-worth, and power from which slave women could resist and (publicly) criticize institutional slavery.

The recognition that we are intersectional subjects, constituted of multiple cultures and experiences, should be considered an indispensable feature of the moral self since the capacity to scrutinize conventional practices and beliefs demands (in part) that one be honest about “who they are.” Ignorance of one’s intersectional identity, that is, ignorance of who one is, is a major threat to social critique. To ignore one’s social privileges, such as the advantage of being heterosexual in a homophobic society or of being a white person in a racist society, is to become complacent about and morally blind to possible injustices in conventional hierarchal systems. According to Peggy McIntosh, whites are carefully taught not to acknowledge the socio-political advantages they have in our culture. 47 Indeed, most whites have been influenced not to see “whiteness” as a racial identity. For McIntosh, unacknowledged white privilege “secures the myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all” but it is a myth, a form of ignorance, that is prevalent in our culture. 48

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48 Ibid., 267.
significant extent, being white in our culture is to live in a created delusional
world, where misrepresentation, evasion, and systematic self-deception on
matters of race are the norm.

Lay arguments against affirmative action policies, for instance, sometimes
point to the “unfair privileges” members of underrepresented or political minority
groups receive; yet, these criticisms usually ignore the unarticulated but
prevailing racial bias and practice of bestowing socio-political and economic
advantages to whites. As a white person in a society dominated by the
supremacy of whiteness one has increased chances of getting a well paying job,
a bank loan with reasonable interest rates, and access to a wide range of real
estate opportunities. Failing to recognize the privileges of one’s race perpetuates
conventional systems of dominance since the myth of meritocracy implies that
the “failure” of non-whites is due to their own personal limitations and not
(unacknowledged) racism. Self-ignorance of what it means to be a member of a
privileged social group precludes self-transparency and a genuine understanding
of complex social realities. Thus, a deficient understanding of the implications of
social hierarchies can have damaging repercussions. Arbitrary discrimination and
conventional cruelty become the norm when we fail to be honest about “who we
are.”

In this way, deluded, self-deceptive views about one’s group or cultural
membership—not owning up to one’s intersectional identity—buries the reasons
(i.e., the signs of cultural frustration, dissatisfaction or complaints from others,
and the conceptual gaps in popular justifications) for public debate.
Unfortunately, like whites in a racist society, Greek slave owners (and those who were too poor to own slaves) also had the luxury to ignore their social privileges. Given certain cultural conditions (e.g., conventional slavery and complaints), the widespread acceptance of slavery in ancient Greece was probably due, in part, to self-ignorance—a form of ignorance maintained by a created delusional world of “natural” hierarchies, where inconsistencies and complaints were systematically overlooked.

I focus on the concepts of liminality and intersectionality because I believe they explain how average moral agents can critically examine socially accepted practices and beliefs, even though they never escape the influences of those practices and beliefs. What I am suggesting is that the liminal phase and the acknowledgment of our intersectional identities are springboards for critical reflection. Locating oneself within the liminoid or an intersectional context can reveal the reasons for debate. It is a kind of self-understanding that should motivate individuals to resist the common tendency to accept dominant practices and ideologies without question.

Suppose a soldier was forced into slavery after his army was defeated by the Greeks. We can imagine that in this situation he developed an intersectional understanding and shared that self-knowledge with others, presenting liminal opportunities for critical moral reflection as a result. Prior to his capture, he (we shall presume) enjoyed the privileges of a freeman. As a slave, stripped of his socio-political agency, he experiences new desires, feelings, thoughts, and behavior. We may also suppose that he understands his forced enslavement as
wrong and inconsistent since his former status as a soldier is in direct opposition to the Greek belief that slaves are born. Like Sojourner Truth, he expresses his frustrations and informs slave owners about the reasons to debate Greek slavery. He informs them that his forced servitude is immoral because he is not inferior like “natural” slaves. In this situation, slave owners find themselves in a social context laden with inconsistency and apparent moral tensions. It is a social context teeming with liminal opportunities for critical moral reflection.

There are some remaining objections that should be addressed. Critics may question the effectiveness of acknowledging our intersectional selves. They could raise concerns that I overlooked or gave cursory attention to the difficulties of intersectional self-definition. On their view, intersectional identity will cause confusion rather than improved moral clarity since it is not clear how fragmented psyches can compile their varied beliefs in one coherent system, accurately assess cultural norms, or that such individuals would be motivated to do so. Intersectional self-definition involves embracing other ways of living and opposing points of view and this could result in synthesizing new information in novel but unfamiliar ways. These intersectional identities may suffer from ambivalence, uncertainty, alienation, despair, and even moral madness. My critics might claim that intersectional self-definition is unhelpful for it could leave people struggling with their own reactions and emotions as well as with conflicting social and political loyalties. Rather than positive assessment for

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49 For an interesting discussion about how patriarchy traps women in unavoidable moral paradoxes and induces feelings of “moral madness” among them see Kathryn Pauly Morgan, “Women and Moral Madness,” in Feminist Perspectives, eds. Lorraine Code et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988).
radical change, people could become confused and unable to come to terms with such inner and cultural conflict. In other words, defining oneself intersectionally could frustrate the ability to scrutinize social practices rather than incite it.

To be sure, acknowledging our intersectional identities is not easy for there are many formidable obstacles to overcome. It is a complicated and ongoing process involving a repertory of intellectual skills and courage to confront what most people find familiar and comforting. Meyers admits that understanding ourselves in this way can be difficult in a society that provides “no convenient terminology—no shorthand, as it were—for articulating intersectional identities.” This way of knowing can appear overcomplicated and it risks errors of fact and fallacies in reasoning since there is no universal template procedure for intersectional self-definition. But, Meyers counters her caution with possibility. The challenges involved do not make intersectional self-definition impossible or invaluable. On her view, the loose ends of the intersectional subject, the gaps and lags in self-knowledge as well as the approximate or incomplete self-deﬁnitions need not be self-deceiving. As one gains experience and practice, one gains proficiency at self-understanding. Intersectional identity should be thought of as an open-ended process of inner reflection, reconsideration, revision, and conceptual reﬁnement. It is a process that can be interesting and gratifying, and reassuring for, as I mentioned earlier, recognizing the inﬂuences society has on our beliefs and behavior can be a liberating

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51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., 174.
53 Ibid., 168.
experience. Although it can be difficult to articulate our intersectional identities, I believe that average moral agents can and should always be mindful of how their social group membership perpetuates conventional practices and beliefs. Social justice demands it.

The considered objection assumes that the need for resolution must be complete doxastic coherence. Given human limitations and fallibility, I believe this assumption or requirement is quite dubious. The need for coherence or resolution should be understood as contextual, arising from specific problems in specific contexts. Grand unified moral belief systems are not required for individuals to form a critical perspective about slavery or any other conventional practice. The scientific community, for example, is rarely in total consensus. Disagreements about theoretical conclusions, experimental applications, and scientific paradigms persist, but this state of affairs does not necessarily result in paralyzing confusion. Contradiction, negation, opposition, and tension can play a positive role in the development of scientific knowledge and our intersectional identities.

Feelings of inner doubt may be counterbalanced by a new identification, a new understanding of one’s cultural membership. Making sense of conflicting worldviews or “realities” could bring feelings of relief, repose, confidence, security, and might even spark excitement and elation. It can be an enjoyable and satisfying experience to discover hidden virtues and injustices. Rather than despair and self-doubt, defining oneself intersectionally and becoming more
sensitive to possible wrongdoing vis-à-vis moral reflection can be a rewarding and perhaps an empowering experience.

Another criticism can be anticipated. A critic might object that my view could only apply to exceptional moral agents or moral experts. On this view, average moral agents are at a disadvantage to recognize liminal opportunities or to acknowledge their intersectional identities. Given their limited access to sophisticated moral resources, one may argue that average moral agents are unable to critique conventional practices without extensive moral re-education. Only moral experts can recognize and come to terms with their intersectional identities or the libratory possibilities of the liminal phase. Simply put, critics could object that my view imposes an unrealistic moral (and epistemic) expectation onto average moral agents. There may be a small handful of people who subject their most basic moral beliefs to scrutiny and manage to ground them in some sort of compelling argument, but for my critics this is manifestly supererogatory.

As I see it, there is no reason to be pessimistic about the reflective capabilities of average moral agents. It is not obvious that moral critiques of socially accepted practices and beliefs must be limited to exceptional moral agents. The cultural conditions I point out as “reasons” for moral debate are discernible manifestations of perceivable tensions. One only has to be a cultural member to obtain a glimpse of these culturally based motives for moral reflection. Moreover, the concept of moral experts is extremely problematic for it is not always clear who the experts are or if they necessarily demonstrate superior moral reasoning. To return to my earlier reference to female slaves and how their
experiences enabled them to recognize and speak out against the injustices of conventional slavery, are we to understand Sojourner Truth as a “moral expert” or Thomas Jefferson, himself a slave owner? To adequately address this question and the topic of moral experts in general requires more explanation—one that goes beyond the limited scope of this chapter. So, I examine this important issue in greater depth in chapter three.

To review, I have argued that given certain cultural conditions the ancients should have debated slavery. My conclusion goes against Michael Slote’s view that ancient Greek culture deprived average moral agents of the necessary moral resources to activate their capacity to engage in critical reflection. On his view, a lack of public debate left no cultural “space” and no reason for average moral agents to suspect that an investigation was warranted. Given the widespread acceptance of slavery, Slote insists that the ancients were rendered morally blind and thus should not be held morally responsible for their failure to debate slavery.

I showed that Slote’s analysis has some noteworthy features. First, before assigning blame to agents who fail to ask questions, his model of responsibility properly requires that we ascertain whether the agents had access to reasons and/or alternatives. I agree with Slote here. Any model of moral responsibility for these sorts of cases ought to consider whether people have compelling reasons or access to viable alternatives (either practices or points of view). I also explained that his theory fits nicely with the view that social wrongdoing can be perpetuated by otherwise morally conscientious people. His argument has the
advantage of being able to explain how essentially good people (like the Greeks) could give their support to immoral (but socially accepted) practices and/or beliefs. Finally, Slote is correct to emphasize the affects of socialization when it comes to individual reflection. On the reasonable assumption that moral agents are situated knowers who can never fully escape the effects of socialization, it is imperative that a model of moral responsibility take into account the ways in which moral reflection, including the reasons for debate, is social in nature. Informed by recent works from some feminist epistemologists (e.g., Elizabeth Potter, Lynn Hankinson Nelson, and Lorraine Code), I argued that one must recognize our epistemological communities and how we, as situated knowers, are inherently connected to them when developing our moral beliefs and ascertaining proper moral conduct. When inquiry is understood as a social process, an account of responsible moral reflection (and behavior) must consider less individualistic factors. Slote’s cultural defense argument rightly captures this important moral, social, and epistemological point.

Despite these important contributions, I showed that Slote’s argument is undermined by a flawed logical structure and an impoverished understanding of the relationship between cultural membership and individual moral reflection. Slote claims that the ancients did not debate slavery because they had no reason to do so. Yet, he also suggests that the ancients had no reason to debate slavery because there was no public debate. Before we accept his conclusion about nonculpable moral ignorance, Slote needs to offer evidence that is independent of the Greek’s failure to debate slavery. In a related vein, Slote’s conclusion that
the ancients could not debate slavery simply does not necessarily follow from the fact that they did not debate slavery. As I have suggested, one could just as well conclude that the lack of public debate was a result of the ancients choosing not to ask questions rather than some inability to do so. In short, a lack of public debate does not prove Slote’s thesis.

For Slote, because inquiry is intimately linked to our social situatedness (e.g., social roles, identities, standards of justification, etc.), average moral agents are at a disadvantage to discern whether conventional practices warrant public scrutiny. On his view, socialization (i.e., widespread acceptance) overwhelms the agent and renders her morally blind to the reasons for debate. Slote appears to believe that the complex relationship between individual inquiry and cultural membership hinders one’s ability to forge a critical response to conventional norms.

But as I see it, socialization (the social location of the knower) can activate one’s rational capacity to examine socially accepted practices and beliefs. Inspired by certain feminist concepts and metaphors about the possibility of average moral agents forming a liberating subjectivity under dominant norms, I argued that Greek citizens could have had (culturally-based) reasons to examine slavery. More specifically, if slavery took on a conventional tone and if slaves complained about their humiliating treatment, it is possible that Greek society provided slave owners (and their supporters) with liminal opportunities to debate slavery. Thus, I argue that the lack of public debate about slavery was probably due to people choosing not to examine “natural” hierarchies or apparent social
tensions. It was a choice motivated by the desire to maintain a privileged way of life.

I also pointed out that Slote’s argument depends on the assumption that the widespread acceptance of slavery in ancient Greece reflected a coherent, unified culture where opportunities for social criticism were absent. This generalization, however, fails to consider the complexity of the social world. To depict ancient Greek culture as being so universal in its morality that dissention and alternative points of view were impossible or nonexistent is to ignore the evidence that shows how complex and inconsistent some of the beliefs may have been. There are, at some level, liminal opportunities in every culture. Indeed, a society which conforms to Slote’s conception of a single, dominant influence would probably not survive. Without liminal opportunities, it would be difficult to explain cultural change and moral development.

An implication of Slote’s view is that the presence of debate about some custom would readily justify attributing blame to those individuals who remain unreflective. In chapter three, I consider Cheshire Calhoun’s argument that the presence of debate does not automatically justify assigning moral responsibility to those individuals who continue to uncritically accept status quo values and practices. On her model, when the debate is isolated among a subgroup of moral experts it is unreasonable to attribute blame to average moral agents. In these cases, average moral agents are at a disadvantage to discern the reasons for debate and therefore their failure is excusable.
CHAPTER 3
NORMAL AND ABNORMAL MORAL CONTEXTS

This chapter examines Cheshire Calhoun’s view that when advanced moral knowledge from a subgroup of moral experts has not been properly disseminated to and assimilated by average moral agents, it is unreasonable to assign blame. Like Slote, Calhoun’s view stipulates that ordinary people are at a disadvantage to recognize when an investigation is warranted. They are at a disadvantage because relevant moral knowledge remains isolated among certain individuals. In these situations, average moral agents are unable to discern the reasons for social criticism and, since it involves an inability, this failure to engage in debate is excused. Calhoun’s view would also allow for the idea of nonculpability due to an absence of public debate, and since I examined such a case in chapter two I will now focus on those cases where some level of public debate is taking place. In what follows, I argue that Calhoun’s key concepts, such as moral experts and the distinction between normal and abnormal moral contexts are ambiguous and practically speaking unhelpful. They cannot inform us if average moral agents are blameworthy for their failure to debate conventional practices and norms.

According to Calhoun, before we can better understand the appropriateness of assigning responsibility to those who fail to be morally
reflective we must first consider the moral context in which the practice takes place. She explains that in a normal moral context, “the rightness or wrongness of different courses of action is ‘transparent’ to individuals, where ‘transparent’ does not mean self-evident, but simply that participants in normal contexts share a common moral language, agree for the most part on moral rules, and use similar methods of moral reasoning.” In a normal moral context, people are generally expected to be familiar with society’s moral framework and which actions are considered right, wrong, or controversial. For example, according to Calhoun, there is “public consensus on the wrongness of discriminatory hiring, sexual harassment, and marital rape.” People are expected to know that these practices are immoral and any claims of ignorance should be viewed with suspicion. Calhoun’s statement that there is “public consensus” on these matters, however, may be questioned. Serious disagreements abound as to what exactly constitutes discriminatory hiring, sexual harassment, and marital rape. These are notoriously controversial issues. Indeed, because they are difficult to prove in a court of law, conviction rates for these sorts of cases are relatively low. Although it is not clear from Calhoun’s discussion, I suspect that “consensus” just means that average moral agents ought to know that accusations of, say, discriminatory hiring should be investigated. Failure to investigate such claims, in other words, would be viewed with suspicion. Thus, one is morally responsible for failing to investigate practices that occur in a normal context.

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55 Ibid., 396.
One’s failure to debate a practice that occurs in an abnormal moral context, however, is excusable. According to Calhoun, abnormal moral contexts, arise at the frontiers of moral knowledge when a subgroup of society (for instance, bioethicists or business ethicists) makes advances in moral knowledge faster than they can be disseminated to and assimilated by the general public and subgroups at special moral risk (e.g. physicians and corporate executives). In these cases, average moral agents fail to investigate popular practices because relevant moral knowledge or criticisms remain isolated among moral experts. Since expert moral knowledge has failed to reach them, the general public has no motive or sees no reason to question whether a conventional practice (or related belief) is immoral. Calhoun cites male bias in psychological and other theories, the design of female fashions, the use of “he” as a neutral pronoun, and heterosexual marriage as practices that moral experts critique but would not be considered controversial in popular consciousness. Because these critiques are isolated from the general population (i.e., limited to academic journals, professional conferences, etc.), Calhoun believes that it is unreasonable to expect ordinary people to dissect what is publicly considered normal or morally permissible. Only when expert moral knowledge has institutionalized channels of communication does it become part of a common moral language and a normal moral context. That is, only after organizations establish relevant committees (e.g., hospital and business ethics committees) and make substantive changes in school curriculums and social laws does expert moral knowledge become part of a normal moral context. Until then, average moral agents should not be expected

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56 Ibid.
to question popular practices and beliefs. In these cases, one’s failure to examine is excusable.

In abnormal moral contexts, Calhoun maintains that we should have diminished expectations when people act on their unreflective but culturally supported beliefs. There is no reason, outside the subgroup of moral experts, for average moral agents to form a critical perspective of, say, the use of “girl” as a routine reference to women. Consider Calhoun’s example of the “ordinary” man who always refers to women as “girls” or “ladies.” He is “ordinary” in the sense that his reference is (to some degree) socially accepted and in some cases encouraged. But some feminist ethicists protest because they believe it patronizes and infantilizes women. On their view, “girl” is a part of a wider system of oppressive acts toward women. From the ordinary man’s perspective, however, there is nothing controversial or ethically disturbing about his commonplace reference to women. Everyone he knows, including his father and mother, call women “girls.” For as long as he can remember, this reference was perfectly acceptable. In light of his socialization, the ordinary man believes that this term is actually flattering to women because it suggests youth and beauty. Although his behavior is uncoerced and he is in complete possession of normal adult reasoning faculties, Calhoun argues that the ordinary man is not morally responsible for failing to reflect on this practice. According to Calhoun, even though he possesses the capacity for critical moral reflection, the ordinary man is at a disadvantage to know better:

57 Of course, women use these references as well.
While the ordinary man...[is] equipped with many of the tools necessary for moral reasoning, there are limits to the powers of moral self-critique...[W]here self-criticism depends on having acquired new tools for moral reasoning, it hardly seems reasonable to blame those who have not acquired these things for failing to be sufficiently reflective.\textsuperscript{59}

For Calhoun, the ordinary man should not be expected to question his actions since he has 'not acquired any new tools for moral reasoning.' Only after expert moral knowledge has been properly assimilated should we expect him to be able to recognize the reasons to reflect on whether calling women "girls" is offensive to women in certain situations. Until then, his actions occur in an abnormal context, where relevant moral knowledge remains outside the moral purview of our ordinary citizen.

According to Calhoun, debates about the ordinary man's actions can only take place within the feminist community. Unlike average moral agents, feminist ethicists have advanced moral knowledge and thus are better equipped to discern the reasons for debating the general use of sexist language. Average moral agents, like our ordinary man, according to Calhoun, are not privy to such criticisms because unlike other professional ethicists, "feminists lack the sort of institutionalized channels of communication between insiders and outsiders that bioethicists and business ethicists have. Women's studies programs and feminist publications and professional organizations institutionalize communication within the feminist community."\textsuperscript{60} As a case in point, Calhoun characterizes Carol Gilligan's ethics of care as highly contextualized reasoning. On Calhoun's view,

\textsuperscript{59} Calhoun, 399.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 397. Italics in the original.
and I agree with her, ordinary persons should not be expected to know Gilligan’s theory of moral development.

In her influential book, *In A Different Voice*, Gilligan claims that on the average, and for a variety of cultural reasons, women tend to espouse an ethics of care that stresses relationships and responsibility to others, whereas men tend to espouse an ethics of justice that stresses rules and universal rights.61 Gilligan’s conclusions are a direct response to her former mentor and educational psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, who claimed that women were less morally developed than men. 62 According to Kohlberg, moral development is a six-stage process. Stage One is the punishment and reward orientation where the child does what she or he is told in order to avoid punishment or receive a reward. Stage Two is the reciprocity orientation. The child satisfies her or his needs and occasionally the needs of others. Stage Three involves the adolescent conforming to prevailing gender mores in order to be accepted by others. In Stage Four, the adolescent begins to develop a sense of duty and social justice by demonstrating respect for authority. Stage Five is the social contract orientation where the adult adopts an essentially utilitarian moral point of view according to which individuals do what they please permitted that their actions do not harm others. Stage Six is the universal moral perspective. The adult is no longer ruled by self-interest, but by self-legislation and universal principles such as those of justice, reciprocity, and respect for the dignity and value of all human

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61 Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).
beings. Kohlberg’s studies showed that women rarely climbed past Stage Three, whereas men routinely ascended to Stage Five.

Gilligan questioned Kohlberg’s stages, claiming that they only provided an account of male moral development rather than of human moral development. As a result of several empirical studies, including interviews with twenty-nine relatively diverse women who were deciding whether to have an abortion, Gilligan concluded that women’s ontologies and epistemologies as well as ethics typically diverged from men’s. Because women tend to think of people as interdependent and moral decision-making as a matter of responsibilities for others, Gilligan claims that women do not do as “well” on Kohlberg’s scale as men, who tend to think of people as independent and moral decision-making as a matter of assessing individual rights.

Gilligan points out that the cultural importance of separation and autonomy for men often leads them to center discussions of morality around issues of justice, fairness, rules, and rights, whereas the cultural expectation that women center their moral decisions around family and friends leads them to focus on people’s wants, needs, interest, and aspirations. Thus, for Gilligan, the process of moral development for women includes moving in and out of three stages: (1)

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63 Gilligan, 173.
64 Gilligan admits that her conclusions are not entirely unique. She relies on the theories of psychologist Nancy Chodorow, who grounds men’s and women’s different conception of self in what she maintains are the different “object-relational” experiences they have as infants with their mothers and fathers. Because of their different psychosexual development, boys and girls grow up with different tendencies and relational capacities. Men are drawn to work in the public sphere (because of their ability to separate from others), which values single-minded efficiency and competitiveness. However, girls are more prone to focus on intimate relationships in their adult lives (because of their difficulty to separate psychologically from their mother). This relational capacity, of course, is facilitated in her role as dutiful wife and caring mother in the private sphere. See Nancy Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).
an overemphasis on self; (2) an overemphasis on others; and (3) a proper emphasis on self in relation to others.

If we compare Gilligan’s account of women’s moral development with Kohlberg’s account of human development, we can begin to understand why she thinks his account merely describes men’s moral development. A “formal logic of fairness” informs Kohlberg’s mode of reasoning and style of discourse; his scale structures moral phenomena in terms of a set of rights and rules. In contrast, a “psychological logic of relationships” informs Gilligan’s mode of reasoning and style of discourse; her scale structures moral decision making in terms of a set of responsibilities and connections. Therefore, Gilligan insists that students of moral development should not expect men and women to achieve moral development in the same way. Instead, researchers should consider the different ways in which men and women make their moral decisions, viewing them as alternative ways to achieve the goals of a morality that ultimately requires a combination of rights and responsibilities.

For Calhoun, understanding Gilligan’s claims about female moral development “requires moral re-education and not just supplementary coursework.” Average moral agents should not be expected to debate the different ways in which men and women develop morally or how ethics of care can conflict or merge with rules and universal rights. I think Calhoun is quite right here. This level of critique is far removed from common moral understanding.

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65 Gilligan, 73.
66 Ibid., 174.
67 Calhoun, 398.
So, it would be unreasonable to hold ordinary persons accountable for failing to debate the ethics of care.

Calhoun also makes mention of recent feminist neologisms, such as “the Other,” “marginalized,” and “marriage as prostitution,” as additional examples of the ways in which feminist moral theory remains outside popular consciousness. For Calhoun, “understanding the meaning, extension, and legitimacy of this kind of moral language requires a much deeper familiarity with feminist criticism than [notions such as ‘date rape’ and ‘glass ceiling’]. Thus, the language of feminist moral criticism may obstruct its dissemination and assimilation.”

Discussions about the complex ways in which men and women make moral decisions and the controversial idea that marriage is ultimately a form of institutionalized prostitution, put forth unfamiliar and radical moral conceptions that are obtuse in the minds of average moral citizens. In this way, Calhoun believes feminists lack the necessary channels of communication that would otherwise inform popular consciousness about their moral conclusions, including the various but socially condoned instances of sexist language (e.g., the ordinary man’s references to women).

Finally, Calhoun considers the objection that various kinds of self-interest could motivate individuals to not think about the moral ramifications of socially approved actions: “Business executives, for example, may suppress moral reflection about their business practices because they tacitly recognize that

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68 Ibid., 397.
69 It is not clear to me, however, that the controversial idea of marriage as a form of institutionalized prostitution is as unfamiliar (or obtuse) as Carol Gilligan’s ethics of care. In terms of what ordinary people are expected to know or debate, the former is more problematic than the latter.
ethics and profit maximization rarely coincide. And people can certainly take advantage of abnormal contexts, pretending or cultivating ignorance when prudent to do so. The possibility of cultivating ignorance changes the moral assignment here since it is no longer the case that the agent was unable to investigate but, rather, she simply chose not to. In this case, the individual is blameworthy because her failure involved a choice not to examine whether a familiar practice is immoral. Calhoun, however, goes on to stress that having no motive to examine social practices is quite different from having a motive not to examine one’s actions. So, in the case of the ordinary man, Calhoun insists that his socialization explains why he has no motive to question his actions. There is no reason, outside the knowledge-acquiring subgroup of feminist ethicists, for him to suspect that the socially accepted practice of calling women “girls” is somehow degrading to women in certain situations.

Like Slote, Calhoun is not claiming that cultural membership destroys one’s ability to scrutinize conventional practices across the board. Rather, the nonculpable failure to investigate just means that a person’s ability to examine social practices was not activated, their rational capacity to do so withstanding. I suspect that Calhoun retains the agent’s ability to forge a critical response to social norms because without this potential it would be difficult to explain moral development or change. That is to say, for moral knowledge to move from an abnormal context to a normal context (where expert moral knowledge has been properly assimilated by and disseminated to the general populace) average moral agents must possess fully developed critical thinking skills in the first place.

70 Ibid., 399.
Calhoun’s theory has several appealing features. Like Slote, her explanation rightly considers the social dimension of individual critical moral reflection. Recall in chapter two where I argued that a model of moral responsibility ought to take into account that people are situated knowers. Because the norms of inquiry are shaped (but by no means determined) by our social location and identities, Calhoun is correct to emphasize the communal aspect of one’s ability to discern the reasons for debate. Specifically, her view accommodates those instances where public discourses can promote collective or mass ignorance. For instance, Calhoun’s concept of abnormal moral context could include those cases where governments (or those who control the institutional channels of communication) intentionally limit the range for critical analysis in order to gain uncritical public acceptance of questionable social policies or controversial legislation. Governments, corporations, politicians, and lobbyists often rely on focus group studies to determine the kind of language they should use when “educating” the public about environmental or social welfare policies. To persuade public opinion, euphemisms, vague clichés, and an appeal to popular (but empty) sentiments are often used. When information is regulated in such a way, it may give the illusory impression of in-depth coverage, but in truth the options for critical examination have been narrowed.

The current debate about privatizing Social Security is a case in point. Despite the widespread dialogue concerning this sweeping reform policy, a recent survey showed that only forty-nine percent of all adults know that Social Security guarantees payment for life and only twenty-three percent know that
Social Security guarantees protection against inflation.\textsuperscript{71} In light of the fact that mainstream criticism of the issue has been weak, it is no surprise to also learn that only seventeen percent know that Social Security has lower administrative costs than private sector pensions and other retirement plans. Consider also the most recent public debates about legalizing same-sex marriage. Public arguments, including those from politicians, against same-sex marriage generally rely on extremely vague “premises” about the need to protect the “sanctity of marriage” and to preserve “family values.” When public debate involves a narrow range of criticism, linguistic distractions, and an overall superficial treatment of the issue, assigning blame to those who fail to ask certain questions about conventional practices and beliefs is complex. In certain situations, the channels of communication are controlled and manipulated to disseminate false or partial information, making proper moral reflection difficult. In this respect, I fully appreciate Calhoun’s emphasis on the ways in which public debate can prevent people from thinking critically about certain social issues. Deciphering the nature of public debates is important because we must first be able to reasonably determine what the agent is expected to know before we assign responsibility.

I also recognize the importance of moral experts sharing specialized knowledge with others and how that valuable exchange may encourage greater moral insight and development among the general populace. To be sure, experts fill an important role in this regard and in some cases Calhoun’s characterization

seems to work. Teachers or college professors can encourage students to rethink conventional ideas and practices. They may incite some students to reexamine the ways in which society condones unjust actions that they would not have otherwise questioned. Some students in my Women’s Studies or Feminist Philosophy courses, for instance, undergo a kind of moral awakening when they learn about the multiple but covert ways in which our culture continues to perpetuate sexist norms, despite relative advances in gender equality. They are surprised to discover how homophobia, heterosexism, and misogyny are interconnected. Toward the end of the semester, students share with others what they have learned in class and begin the process of forming a critical perspective about conventional norms and beliefs.

Other compelling examples of how experts might encourage critical reflection about conventional practices and beliefs are John Stoltenberg and Susan Griffin’s arguments that, contrary to popular belief, rape is tacitly accepted in our culture. According to Stoltenberg, rape coincides with culturally accepted ideas about what it means to act as a man: “men rape because it is congruent with the tacit ethics of male sexual identity.” The ethics of male sexuality, according to Stoltenberg, include the prescribed behavior for men to have...

an unfailing belief in one’s own goodness and the moral rightness of one’s purposes, regardless of how others may value what one does; a rigorous adherence to the set of behaviors, characteristics, and idiosyncrasies that are appropriately male (and therefore inappropriate for a female); an unquestioning belief in one’s own consistency, notwithstanding any evidence to the contrary—a consistency rooted, for all practical purposes, in the relentlessness

of one’s will and in the fact that, being superior by social definition, one can want whatever one wants and one can expect to get it.\(^74\)

For Stoltenberg, the ethics of male sexuality are essentially rapist. Once we consider the details of what it means to act as a man in our culture, Stoltenberg argues that rape is simply a logical extension of the male ethic. If it is “right” to be male and “wrong” to be female then it is no wonder that rape victims are often blamed for the crime. For Stoltenberg, the double-victimization of female rape victims and the misogynous nonsense associated with certain rape myths, such as the notion that some women deserve to be raped, supports a tacit acceptance of rape in our culture.

Susan Griffin makes a similar argument: “The fact that rape is against the law should not be considered proof that rape is not in fact encouraged as part of our culture.”\(^75\) Like Stoltenberg, Griffin examines conventional understandings about men and women’s sexual identities that ultimately excuse men who rape: “[a] canon in the apologetics of rape is that, if it were not for learned social controls, all men would rape. Rape is held to be natural behavior, and not to rape must be learned.”\(^76\) For Griffin, to think of rape as natural is to suggest that the rapist is unwittingly overcome by sexual urges that society cannot satisfy. Essentially, this message provides men with an excuse for their wrongdoing. The scenario is further complicated by some of the rules of heterosexual erotic play, such as the expectation that “no” really means “yes.” Rape myths, including the

\(^74\) Ibid.
\(^76\) Ibid., 321.
idea that all women secretly want to be raped, also serve to protect male interests. For Griffin, these widespread views about male and female sexual behavior circulate throughout society and render the so-called distinction between consensual sexual intercourse and rape virtually obsolete: “the basic elements of rape are involved in all heterosexual relationships…For in our culture heterosexual love finds an erotic expression through male dominance and female submission.”  

It is no wonder then that convictions rates for rape remain comparatively low to other crimes.

If Stoltenberg and Griffin are moral experts and the general public has access to their arguments, then it is reasonable to think that average moral agents could be motivated to examine conventional notions about male and female sexual identities and whether our culture endorses a tacit acceptance of rape. In this respect, Calhoun’s account about experts inciting critical thought among average moral agents is morally important. She is correct to highlight this valuable exchange.

I agree with Calhoun about the importance of deciphering the agent’s social conditions (or her social and moral context) before assigning moral responsibility. Since one’s cultural membership influences the formation of moral beliefs and behavior, a model of moral responsibility ought to give careful consideration to one’s social location. I also acknowledge the value of moral experts encouraging average moral agents to rethink conventional norms. Unfortunately, Calhoun’s concepts of moral experts and normal and abnormal moral contexts cannot help us determine when average moral agents are

77 Ibid.
culpable for failing to reflect on conventional practices and beliefs. As I will show, these key conditions for the assignment of blame or moral exemption are, practically speaking, unhelpful.

In terms of moral experts, Calhoun fails to consider that average moral agents will have to decide for themselves which expert to believe when they disagree. Bioethicists, business ethicists, and feminists disagree among themselves about the most fundamental of issues. The debate about how to best deal with women’s global oppression can produce serious disagreement among feminists. For instance, Martha Nussbaum claims that we should assess the quality of women’s lives in terms of universal norms and assimilation, but Jane Flax supports an emphasis on microanalyzing power and locating incommensurable differences among women’s lives.

According to Nussbaum, the legitimate concerns for diversity, pluralism, and personal freedom are not incompatible with the recognition of universal norms.78 On her view, universal norms are actually required if we are to protect diversity, pluralism, and freedom. Nussbaum argues that the best way to hold all these concerns together is to formulate universal norms as a set of capacities for fully human functioning, emphasizing the fact that these capabilities protect, and do not close off, spheres of human freedom. She proposes a list that can assess the quality of women’s lives around the globe—a list that can be endorsed for political purposes by people who have very different views of what a complete life for a human being would be. The list is supposed to provide a focus for the

quality of life assessment and for political planning with regards to the eradication of sexual subordination in both the private and public spheres. Nussbaum insists that the list aims to select capacities that are of central importance in any human life. On her view, we can assess the quality of women’s lives around the world in terms of ten central human functional capabilities:

(1) Life—being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; (2) bodily health—being able to have good health, including reproductive health; (3) bodily injury—being able to be secure against violent assault, including sexual harassment and domestic violence; (4) senses, imagination, and thought—being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason—and to do these things in a truly human way, a way cultivated by an adequate education; (5) emotions—being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves, not having one’s emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety; (6) practical reason—being able to form a rational conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life; (7) affiliation—being able to live with others and having the social bases of self-respect and nonhumiliation; (8) other species—being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature; (9) play—being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities; (10) control over one’s political and material environment—being able to participate in political processes and to hold property.79

For Nussbaum, these human capabilities can serve as a reliable and universal guide to end gender oppression.

Jane Flax, however, raises some concerns about Nussbaum’s proposal.80

She claims that these universal human capabilities will not enable oppressed women to isolate the precise sources of their oppression or to identify the mechanisms from which they are reproduced. Flax argues that such mechanisms may resemble each other at the macro level, but their strongest force is likely to

79 Ibid., 14-15.
be found in their local particulars. For instance, Flax shows that important kinds of human practices are missing from Nussbaum’s list of “universal” human capabilities. Consider Nussbaum’s concept of practical reason. According to Flax, this category seems to “require the exclusion of many modes of human being; for example, those structured through tradition or faith. Facing a problem, one might ask the rabbi, consult a sacred text or oracle, or talk with a wise man. A religious person may decide to leave such questions to God’s hands.”

Practical reason, therefore, is not the only manner in which people make sense of their lives. Flax also criticizes Nussbaum’s apparent overvaluation of people’s desire for affiliation. On Flax’s view, Nussbaum excludes an alternative to affiliation—solitude—which many humans crave equally if not more in some cases. Human practices such as imagination and creativity sometimes demand solitude. For these and additional reasons, Flax concludes that this list of human capabilities cannot do the work that Nussbaum wishes.

Moral experts also disagree whether rape is a symptom of a patriarchal and misogynous culture. Recall John Stoltenberg’s argument about rape and how it is tacitly accepted in our culture. On his view, rape is a logical extension of popular patriarchal ideas about male sexual dominance and female submissiveness. However, Christina Hoff Sommers disagrees and insists that rape is not a symptom of a misogynist or patriarchal society, but rather a manifestation of a violent society in general: “To view rape as a crime of gender bias (encouraged by a patriarchy that looks with tolerance on the victimization of women) is perversely to miss its true nature. Rape is perpetrated by criminals, 

81 Ibid., 34.
which is to say, it is perpetuated by people who are wont to gratify themselves in
criminal ways and who care very little about the suffering they inflict on others.”

On her view: “Gender feminists…have made no case for the claim that violence
against women is symptomatic of a deeply misogynist culture.”

Assuming that Nussbaum, Flax, Stoltenberg, and Sommers are moral
experts, it is not clear, on Calhoun’s account, how average moral agents are
supposed to know which expert to believe. Although disagreements among moral
experts can reveal that a conventional practice or belief is controversial, it
appears that average moral agents must decipher for themselves the proper
epistemic criteria to adjudicate conflicting arguments. To be sure, this criticism is
not central to the broader issue about whether average moral agents should be
debating conventional norms; however, it reinforces the present argument that
Calhoun’s conception of moral experts is problematic.

Furthermore, Calhoun’s suggestion that moral experts are in a better
situation than average moral agents to examine conventional practices is
challenged by recent observations from some feminist standpoint theorists. As I
will show, Calhoun’s view appears to overlook the possibility that average moral
agents may have an epistemic and motivational advantage over experts to
debate dominant cultural practices. Recall that Calhoun identifies bioethicists and
business ethicists as moral experts. Apparently, moral experts are professional
persons who occupy privileged positions in society. Because ordinary citizens or
average moral agents stand “outside” this group, Calhoun believes that they are

82 Christina Hoff Sommers, Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women (New
83 Ibid., 226.
at a disadvantage to critique common practices and accepted beliefs. Feminist standpoint theorists, however, disagree and claim instead that members of oppressed groups (i.e., average moral agents) could have a privileged vantage point from which to scrutinize socially accepted norms. On their view, moral (and epistemological) theories like Calhoun’s should consider the possibility of marginalized groups (i.e., the experience of subjects who are not typically cast in the role of moral experts) exposing conventional injustices when their privileged counterparts remain complacent. Contrary to Calhoun, standpoint theorists claim that by virtue of their “outside” social status, the underprivileged are in a better position (and perhaps more motivated) than so-called moral experts to recognize the reasons for investigation.

Where the privileged class tends to represent social inequalities as natural and necessary (e.g., slavery), the standpoint of the underprivileged correctly represents them as socially contingent and changeable. For example, Nancy Hartsock, referring to the Marxist origins of standpoint theory, suggests that the privileged vantage point for investigating the truth about power relations can be obtained by women’s unique experiences:

Whereas Marx relocated power on to the empirical ground of production, I argue that women’s lives provide a related but more adequate empirical terrain for understanding power. Women’s different understanding of power provides suggestive evidence that women’s experience of power relations, and thus their understanding, may be importantly and structurally different from

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the lives and therefore the theories of men. I suggest that, like the lives of the proletarians vis-à-vis capital, women’s lives make available a particular and privileged vantage point not only of the power relations between men and women but on power relations more generally.\textsuperscript{85}

In other words, marginalized persons could disclose previously unexamined assumptions embedded in popular justifications for conventional practices. Because women are considered primary caretakers who are expected to properly socialize children while taking care of bodies, they could be in a superior epistemic and moral position than men to critically assess how patriarchy fails to meet certain people’s needs. Men, on the other hand, have the social privilege of ignoring how patriarchal norms neglect the interests of political minorities, including primary care takers.

Susan Sherwin argues that professional groups like health care providers, health researchers, and bioethicists, could expand their capacity to identify particular moral dimensions of the acts and omissions that they undertake or fail to undertake when they include the perspectives of members from underprivileged groups.\textsuperscript{86} Specifically, she looks into those cases where the majority of practitioners are unaware that they are actively engaged in (accepted) practices or ideological assumptions that contribute to the continuing oppression of vulnerable social groups (women, blacks, poor, etc.). Consider the following excerpts from two recent bioethics publications. First, from \textit{An Ambulance of the Wrong Colour}, a book that discusses the lessons to be learned from the Health

\textsuperscript{85} Nancy Hartsock, \textit{Money, Sex, and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism} (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1985), 151.

Sector Hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa regarding the behavior of health care practitioners under apartheid:

In its report, the TRC found that the ‘health sector, through apathy, acceptance of the status quo and acts of omission, allowed the creation of an environment in which the health of millions of South Africans was neglected, even at times compromised, and in which violations of moral and ethical codes of practice were frequent, facilitating violations of human rights.’[^87]

Yet, when confronted with charges of wrongdoing, the health sector defended their behavior “on traditional ethical grounds, including the adoption of all major international codes of ethics.”[^88] The second excerpt is from Susan Wolf’s article, “Erasing Difference: Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in Bioethics,” which discusses the general failure of most bioethicists to confront the ways in which racism, sexism, and ethnic privilege structure the very cases they discuss. According to Wolf, bioethicists are complicit in their perpetuation of these patterns of injustice.

Bioethics was born of outrage at scandals in which difference figured large. Experimentation on Jews and others in Nazi concentration camps and on African Americans in the Tuskegee syphilis trials were pivotal events. The field has come of age decrying the wrongs of physicians and scientists enacting the prejudices of their day…[Yet] bioethics has too often recast these and other events as problems between generic subjects or patients and generic doctors. Issues of difference have frequently been avoided.^[89]

These excerpts describe behavior from two different professional groups: health care providers in South Africa and bioethicists in the United States. What is particularly interesting among these examples is the similarity. Each case

[^88]: Ibid., 11.
describes a situation where apparently well-meaning professionals were actively involved in perpetuating prejudicial practices and unexamined assumptions.

Sherwin argues that these professionals might be able to reduce the likelihood of repeating such morally problematic patterns of behavior if they incorporate the input of marginalized persons. According to Sherwin, health care practitioners and bioethicists could benefit from the input of marginalized persons because “members of oppressed classes will be most likely to question and critically access background assumptions that degrade, defame, or otherwise harm their members.”

In contrast, members of dominant cultural groups or practices tend to take for granted many assumptions that maintain their positions of privilege and power. Members of less powerful social groups, however, are more likely to perceive difficulties with such background assumptions. Sherwin insists that they will be “better perceivers of such flawed assumptions and thereby they will be better able to recognize the need for correction.”

Like Hartsock, Sherwin argues that the critical insights of those who remain “outside” the dominant culture can help to illuminate problems with assumptions that appear “natural” and unproblematic to those who share the prevailing cultural perspective. Therefore, to ensure that bioethicists are being sensitive to all the morally relevant dimensions of dominant beliefs, approaches, and practices, Sherwin maintains that they should incorporate the perspectives of those who are very differently situated from themselves:

Members of oppressed groups tend to be particularly sensitive to the existence of background assumptions that involve prejudicial

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90 Sherwin, 184.
91 Ibid.
stereotypes or unquestioned acceptance of a discriminatory status quo. Members of oppressed social groups have a motivating interest in identifying and dismantling the problematic beliefs that support their continuing oppression whereas members of dominant social groups have clear interests in avoiding such knowledge. Hence, oppressive practices are generally much harder to sustain when the targets of the prejudicial misperception become part of the moral conversation.

For Sherwin, this (feminist) approach to increasing one’s moral perception can help to identify inconsistencies in the shared understandings of the dominant cultural group or, more specifically, it can assist bioethicists in their efforts to recognize biased or immoral practices. For example, when drafting policies that will protect patent rights of large multinational seed producers like Monsanto and Rice Tec, we need to hear from people in the developing world about the likely impact of these policy options on their food needs, cultural traditions, ecological sustainability, and employment.

The point is standpoint theory complicates Calhoun’s apparent seamless distinction between average moral agents and experts. If by virtue of their “outside” status average moral agents have an epistemic advantage to recognize

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92 Ibid., 185
93 Implementing the injunction to include the point of view of the oppressed can be difficult, however. Membership in a socially oppressed group does not guarantee awareness of oppressive background assumptions. Members of oppressed groups can internalize the very ideologies of their oppressors and perpetuate them onto others, even members of their own group. They are not always immune to oppressive prejudices and stereotypes. Critics also raise questions about the application of standpoint theory. Bat-Ami Bar, for instance, argues that the existence of multiple oppressed groups makes it difficult to privilege any one group: “is any one of these groups more epistemically privileged than the other, and if that is not so—if they are equally epistemically privileged—does epistemic privilege matter?” If every marginalized social status can produce epistemic privilege, the claim to prioritize any one of them loses its bite. Bat-Ami Bar-On, “Marginality and Epistemic Privilege,” in Feminist Epistemologies, eds. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993), 89. For additional criticisms of standpoint theory see Uma Narayan, “The Project of Feminist Epistemology: Perspectives from a Nonwestern Feminist,” in Gender/Body/Knowledge, eds. Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo (Rutgers University Press, 1989), 256-269; and, Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman, “Have We Got a Theory for You? Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism, and the Demand for ‘The Woman’s Voice’?” in Women’s Studies International Forum, 6, 573-581.
the reasons for debate or, at minimum, possess greater motivation to investigate conventional practices than moral experts, then Calhoun’s conceptual distinction is, practically speaking, unhelpful. The person who is engaged in critical moral reflection may not be the “expert” Calhoun has in mind.

Assuming that moral experts are professional persons (akin to bioethicists and business ethicists), it is far from obvious that their moral views must be based on superior moral reflection. Charles W. Mills, in his compelling book *The Racial Contract*, exposes the prejudicial implications in some of the arguments developed by prominent contract theorists such as Thomas Hobbes and Immanuel Kant.\(^{94}\) Mills first examines Thomas Hobbes’ notorious description of the State of Nature where one has a nasty, brutish, and short existence. To put it briefly, Hobbes argued that without a sovereign leader, societies would exist in the State of Nature where people fend for themselves in a land of lawlessness and immorality. In the State of Nature, which according to Hobbes is purely hypothetical, people are naturally self-interested, they are more or less equal to one another (even the strongest man can be killed in his sleep), and there is a limited supply of resources (competition is fierce). It is the state of perpetual and unavoidable war. So, given these conditions, Hobbes argues that people need a sovereign who has absolute authority to ensure that people by way of a social contract can live in a cooperative and moral society. Society becomes possible because there is an artificially and conventionally superior and more powerful person who can force people to cooperate.

Mills points out that a cursory reading of Hobbes might conclude that the State of Nature applies to everyone—to all human beings. A more in-depth reading, however, reveals otherwise. Hobbes’ only example of persons living in this perpetual state of war is, “the savage people in many places of America.”\textsuperscript{95} Mills explains that the implication in Hobbes’ thinking is that only nonwhite people live by lawlessness and immorality. Of course, Hobbes’ remark about savage people in America appears to be inconsistent with his claim that the state of nature is purely hypothetical. It was supposed to show what could happen in the absence of a sovereign or a social contract. So, if the state of nature is hypothetical, then why cite a literal example of a people living in it? For Mills, what appears to be an accidental oversight or slight inconsistency is really outright racial prejudice:

There is a tacit racial logic in the text: the literal state of nature is reserved for nonwhites; for whites the state of nature is hypothetical. The conflict between whites is the conflict between those with sovereigns, that is, those who are already (and have always been) in society. From this conflict, one can extrapolate…to what might happen in the absence of a ruling sovereign. But really we know that whites are too rational to allow this to happen to them. So the most notorious state of nature in the contractarian literature—the bestial war of all against all—is really a nonwhite figure, a racial object lesson for the more rational whites, whose superior grasp of natural law will enable them to take the necessary steps to avoid it and not to behave as ‘savages.’\textsuperscript{96}

Mills goes on to examine some of Immanuel Kant’s moral arguments to show that they too support common racist attitudes of his time. In Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime, Kant writes: “So fundamental is the


\textsuperscript{96} Mills, 66. Italics in the original.
difference between [the black and white] races of man…it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color” so that “a clear proof that what [a Negro] said was stupid” was that “this fellow was quite black from head to toe.”

For Mills, this remark does not occur in isolation:

“rather, it comes out of a developed theory of race and corresponding intellectual ability and limitation. It only seems casual, unembedded in a larger theory, because white academic philosophy as an institution has had no interest in researching, pursuing the implications of, and making known to the world this dimension of Kant’s work.” If Kant and Hobbes are moral experts, then either they were unable to build ethical arguments by virtue of their cultural membership or, as Mills suggests, they willingly gave philosophical support to society’s racist norms. Either way, it is no longer obvious that moral experts necessarily possess proper moral knowledge or that they demonstrate superior moral reflection.

As a result of these problems, Calhoun’s reliance on moral experts to lead the way toward moral progress is cause for great concern. Suppose our moral “expert” is actually a religious zealot who persuades people to join him on a righteous crusade to rid the world of evil. Jim Jones, Charles Manson, and David Keresh were self-proclaimed “experts” who exemplify my worry here. How are agents to know if their expert possesses proper moral reflection? It seems to me that Calhoun’s framework needs some kind of mechanism or a set of criteria that will enable people to sort out the madman from the moral expert. Of course, if average moral agents were in possession of such epistemic and moral criteria

98 Mills, 71.
then I fail to see the need for the category “moral experts.” Similar to my previous criticism about people having to decide for themselves which expert to believe in the event that they disagree among themselves, it seems to me that in order for average moral agents to judge which expert is truly “moral” they would have to be, on some level, experts themselves.

Finally, although it is an important condition for assigning moral responsibility, the conceptual distinction between normal and abnormal moral contexts is too ambiguous for practical purposes. As I will show, this ambiguity is particularly troublesome for Calhoun’s view because without a defined threshold between contexts one is able to arrive at contradictory conclusions about the culpability of agents who fail to investigate. According to Calhoun, societies do not divide into normal and abnormal moral contexts full stop; whether a society’s moral context is normal or abnormal depends on the particular practice at hand. We may be in a normal moral context with regards to one practice and an abnormal moral context with regards to another. For Calhoun, a practice converts from an abnormal to a normal context only after changes in social laws that govern that practice have been institutionalized.

This cultural condition, however, may be too lenient. Regardless of whether certain laws have been properly established (i.e., abnormal moral context), it seems to me that in certain situations average moral agents could and should investigate conventional practices and beliefs. For example, Calhoun situates the wrongness of marital rape in a normal moral context and feminist criticisms about the institution of marriage in an abnormal context. People are
expected to know that marital rape is wrong; however, they are not expected to
question whether certain marital practices or laws are immoral. The implication is
that the wrongness of marital rape has been properly disseminated to and
assimilated by the general public whereas feminist criticisms about marriage
have not.

I suspect that Calhoun’s placement of feminist criticisms about marriage in
an abnormal moral context coincides with her more general characterization of
feminist moral theory. Recall that Calhoun describes most feminist debates as
advanced and isolated from ordinary people. She designated Gilligan’s argument
that Kohlberg’s studies provided an account of male moral development rather
than of human moral development as an example. According to Calhoun, we
should not expect average moral agents to debate such issues. I suppose, in
some cases, Calhoun’s characterization of feminist theory is justifiable. For
example, Robert Baker, a critic of the general use of sexist language, argues that
if we want to change our deleterious sexual practices, we must revise our
conception of heterosexuality and the words we use to articulate it. This
revision, however, will require people (men and women) to eliminate gender from
their conceptual linguistic schema. Baker’s call for gender-free language may
seem radical for most ordinary persons. That being said, Calhoun’s social,
epistemological, and moral division between abnormal and moral contexts
becomes problematic when we consider that the wrongness of marital rape has

conceptual links to certain aspects of feminist criticisms about the institution of marriage.

Claudia Card argues that the institution of marriage is evil because its normal or correct operations can lead to or facilitate intolerably harmful practices. Specifically, she argues that state-sanctioned marital rules “provide cover for evils by making wrongdoing difficult or impossible to detect or prove, by placing obstacles in the way of accountability for harm, [and by] giving persons in certain positions unchecked license to treat certain others as they see fit.”

According to Card, certain marital regulations can make it extremely difficult for victims of abuse to defend themselves in a court of law: “Legal rights of access that married partners have to each other’s persons, property, and histories make it all but impossible for a spouse to defend herself (or himself), or be protected against rape, battery, stalking, mayhem, or murder by the other spouse.” For Card, requiring spouses to cohabitate facilitates domestic abuse and gives violent partners substantial legal protection from criminal prosecution. When states assume spouses have only the best intentions for one another, domestic violence, like marital rape, is very difficult to prove. In these kinds of cases, the institution of marriage protects abusers while leaving their victims with little legal recourse. Moreover, because divorce can be expensive, many partners choose to stay in an abusive relationship rather than risk poverty or material impoverishment for themselves and/or their children. Marriage then becomes a trap for the abused victim. Economic dependence, child care responsibilities, and

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101 Ibid., 149.
the lack of “evidence” that one is being abused culminate in a dangerous, potentially fatal situation. Unfortunately, situations like these are far too common. In this way, marriage is an institution that ultimately facilitates “terrorism in the home,” including marital rape. To be clear, Card is not arguing that marriages are violent per se; rather, her focus is on the potential traps and dangers of marital regulations. According to Card, people are simply better off without marriage. She proposes customized but renewable contracts for individuals who want a contractual relationship. These contracts would (ideally) cater to a couple’s unique needs and they would be easier to terminate in the event that one partner wants out.\(^\text{102}\)

If the general public is expected to know the wrongness of marital rape, as Calhoun suggests, then why also suppose that they are morally blind to the reasons for critiquing the institution of marriage? It seems to me that the wrongness of marital rape is related to Card’s critical assessment of marriage; that is, to know why marital rape is immoral is to already acknowledge (in some way) that marriage is not a license for spousal abuse. Reflecting on the wrongness of marital rape, it seems to me, includes the awareness that marital laws should not protect men from raping their wives. I am not suggesting that ordinary people should be familiar with \textit{all} elements of Card’s argument. To be sure, the depth and sophistication of these kinds of philosophical arguments are a result of professional training and extensive research. But, in this case, average moral agents could know \textit{some} aspects of Card’s moral argument by

virtue of what they already know (or should know) about the wrongness of marital rape. If the wrongness of marital rape occurs in a normal context then it is not clear to me why feminist criticisms about marital regulations must occur in an abnormal moral context. In this case, important conceptual links bridge the so-called divide between normal and abnormal moral contexts.

My analysis about overlapping contexts is based on the supposition that people arrive at certain beliefs on the basis of what they already know or believe. I endorse Otto Neurath’s popular metaphor of knowledge acquisition, which involves replacing parts of a figurative raft piece by piece while staying afloat in imperfect cultural norms.\(^{103}\) For Neurath, we are like sailors trying to rebuild our ship without ever being able to dismantle it in dry dock. This simile exemplifies the ways in which we must modify, expand, or replace our beliefs in light of other, sometimes conflicting, beliefs. The claim that one comes to know “new” moral knowledge is not plausible on this account. Given our epistemic limitations, it is more reasonable to think of knowledge acquisition, including the recognition that a debate is warranted, as an extension and reinterpretation of what one already believes (or is expected to know) to be true or moral. As responsible epistemic agents, we should utilize proper moral judgment, rational technique, and public negotiation in order to arrive at a better, more in-depth understanding of the moral complexities involved in conventional norms. This kind of reinterpretation could result from the inclusion of other points of view. When women became more involved in science as scientists, philosophers of science, and subjects of

clinical studies, significant androcentric bias and other harmful but socially
accepted prejudices about women and their lives were finally exposed. When
people compare moral beliefs and/or include other points of view, it is possible
that they will recognize the reasons for debating conventional understandings
about right and wrong.

Certainly, the ordinary man already knows (or he is expected to know) that
calling men “boys” is patronizing in certain situations. This knowledge, one could
argue, is part of society’s moral framework about proper references. We can
easily imagine the ordinary man thinking about how it would make him feel if
people routinely called him “boy.” By considering women into his (and society’s)
moral framework about proper references, the ordinary man could be compelled
to examine the possibility that calling women “girls” is analogous to calling men
“boys.” This moral inquiry does not require “advanced” moral reasoning,
membership in some professional committee or the establishment of sexist
language laws. Rather, it requires a reinterpretation or a logical extension of what
one already believes to be true about proper and improper references. If
Calhoun’s ordinary man is expected to know that calling men “boys” is
patronizing in certain situations then it is possible that his culture provides him
with a reason as well as a motive to seriously consider whether calling women
“girls” is analogous to calling some men “boys.” If this analogy holds, then the
ordinary man’s actions occur in a normal moral context and thus he is culpable
for not being morally reflective about the matter. This conclusion, however, goes

104 See Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press,
1986); and, eds. Evelyn Fox Keller and Helen Longino, *Feminism and Science* (New York: Oxford
against Calhoun’s own assessment that the ordinary man’s behavior occurs in an abnormal moral context. Unfortunately, arriving at contradictory conclusions about moral contexts is possible because the theoretical distinction between them is too permeable for practical purposes. When conceptual links are involved, it is far from clear whether the practice in question takes place in a normal or abnormal moral context.

To review, I have been arguing that Calhoun’s model is practically speaking unhelpful. Nevertheless, her approach has some interesting features. First, I pointed out that it recognizes the importance of deciphering the social nature of moral inquiry. Because we are situated knowers, a model of responsibility needs to consider how one’s social environment affects the range of critical reflection. Like Slote’s cultural defense view, Calhoun’s model captures this important feature of individual moral inquiry. For instance, her concept of abnormal moral contexts can accommodate those cases where the channels of communication are controlled and manipulated to disseminate false or partial information, making proper moral reflection about conventional practices and attitudes difficult. I cited the current debate about privatizing Social Security and legalizing same-sex marriages to illustrate my point.

I also recognize the plausibility and the importance of moral experts sharing specialized knowledge with average moral agents and how that valuable exchange could encourage greater moral reflection among the general populace. I explained that if John Stoltenberg and Susan Griffin are moral experts and the general public has access to their arguments then it is reasonable to think that
average moral agents could be compelled to investigate whether our culture supports a tacit acceptance of rape. Such an exchange, therefore, is morally important since it could result in the populace forming a deeper understanding about the moral complexities involved in traditional notions about female and male sexual identities.

Despite these appealing features, Calhoun’s key concepts—moral experts and the distinction between normal and abnormal moral contexts—rendered her model impractical. For Calhoun, bioethicists and feminist ethicists represent a subgroup of moral experts. On her view, these professionals are better equipped to critique conventional practices and beliefs than average moral agents. Her concept of a moral expert, however, was shown to be extremely problematic. For instance, I argued that it is not clear if they are in a better position to debate conventional practices and beliefs than average moral agents. When we consider the possibility that politically marginalized persons (those individuals who would not be considered experts on Calhoun’s assessment) have an epistemic advantage and perhaps more motivation to recognize and confront the reasons for scrutinizing dominant traditions, Calhoun’s elevated position of moral experts is suspect. Indeed, I pointed to recent feminist discussions about how professional groups like health care providers and bioethicists could improve their capacity for identifying particular moral dimensions when they included various points of view from members who belong to vulnerable social groups (e.g., women, blacks, poor, etc.). In other words, the person who is engaged in crucial moral reflection may not be the “expert” Calhoun has in mind.
I also have some doubts about Calhoun’s assumption that moral experts (assuming we know who they are) necessarily possess advanced moral reasoning. I referred to Charles W. Mills’ work on exposing the prejudicial implications in some of the arguments developed by prominent theorists including Immanuel Kant and Thomas Hobbes. If Kant and Hobbes are moral experts, then either they were unable to form proper ethical arguments by virtue of their cultural membership or, as Mills suggested, they willingly gave philosophical support to society’s racist prejudices. Either way, it is not clear to me if moral experts necessarily exhibit superior moral reflection or if average moral agents should follow their lead. I argued that Calhoun’s model needs some kind of mechanism or a set of criteria that will enable people to sort out the hypocrite from the genuine moral expert. Of course, if average moral agents were in possession of such epistemic and moral criteria, I fail to see any need for the category “moral expert.” As I see it, for ordinary individuals to judge which expert is truly moral they would have to be, on some level, experts themselves.

My final point of contention centered on Calhoun’s theoretical distinction between normal and abnormal moral contexts. I argued that the distinction becomes exceedingly permeable when practices and/or beliefs that occur in one context have conceptual links to practices and/or beliefs that (supposedly) occur in another. Specifically, I showed that practices that occur in an abnormal context (e.g., the ordinary man’s references to women and feminist critiques of the institution of marriage) can have logical links or moral associations to practices and beliefs that occur in a normal context (e.g., improper references to men and
the wrongness of marital rape respectively). When conceptual links are present, when the demarcation between contexts dissolves, it is not clear if the practice in question takes place in a normal or abnormal moral context. This confusion ultimately renders Calhoun’s model unhelpful for our purpose because it permits one to arrive at contradictory conclusions about the agent’s culpability.

My analysis of Calhoun’s distinction between abnormal and normal moral contexts revealed the importance of deciphering if the practice/belief in question links to other practices/beliefs that are widely considered immoral or controversial. It is important because if we can establish that this is indeed the case—that a conceptual link exists—then we have a reasonable condition for assigning moral responsibility. That is, my criticism about Calhoun’s contextual distinction has shown that when there is a logical connection or conceptual link between the accepted practice or belief and what is commonly believed to be immoral or controversial, it is reasonable to assign blame to those who fail to engage in debate.

To illustrate the ineffectiveness of Calhoun’s model of responsibility in one final case, I consider the general acceptance of slavery in the South prior to the Civil War. As I will show, Calhoun’s conditions for moral responsibility cannot inform us as to whether Southern slave owners are culpable for their collective failure to debate the moral status of slavery (and racism). While Southern states continued the practice, the northern half of the United States and Great Britain had officially abolished slavery by the early 1830s. The American Anti-Slavery Society (founded in 1833) flooded slave and Free states with abolitionist
literature urging everyone to reconsider this socially sanctioned practice. Former
slaves, such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, wrote popular narratives
describing their insurmountable suffering and the blatant hypocrisy of “America’s
peculiar institution.”

Although public debate was present, one could use Calhoun’s conditions
to argue that slavery continued to receive widespread acceptance in the South
because relevant moral beliefs had not been properly disseminated to or
assimilated by slave owners. In other words, the level of public debate was not
extensive enough to constitute a Calhounian normal moral context. Without
adequate exposure to expert criticisms about slavery, one could claim that
Southern slave owners and their supporters did not have access to relevant
moral information that would have compelled them to question the moral status
of slavery. The placement of slavery in an abnormal context is further justified on
Calhoun’s view since Southern states did not have established anti-slavery laws
prior to 1865.

Consider the unreflective slave supporter who has been taught by
everyone she loves and respects, including her parents, church officials,
teachers, and the authorities in her society, that slavery is permissible. Her
culture encourages the belief that slaves are members of an intellectually inferior,
subhuman race who do not deserve the same moral considerations as those who
are “fully human” (i.e., whites). On the assumption that slaves complained about
slavery and that she had access to such information, one might argue that our

1987).
slave supporter was unable to recognize any reason to question if those complaints were of moral consequence. If belief acquisition and moral reflection are coherentist activities (where certain beliefs warrant the critical examination of other, related beliefs), one could claim that, by virtue of her socialization, our slave supporter was rendered morally blind. The widespread belief that slaves are subhuman left her with no motive to seriously consider slaves within the moral scope of human rights. For her, there was no logical connection. Thus, she was unable to properly assimilate the abolitionists’ arguments or to appreciate the moral relevance of popular democratic principles. Only the abolitionists possess advanced moral reasoning in this case. Therefore, on Calhoun’s model, Southern slave owners and their supporters are not responsible for failing to reflect on the moral status of slavery because the practice took place in an abnormal context.

Calhoun’s theory, however, could also be used to support the contradictory claim that Southern slavery occurred in a normal context. On this approach, the social resources for moral self-criticism were present to our unreflective supporter. One could suggest that the level of public debate was extensive enough and properly disseminated in the South for her to have suspected that slavery violated existing moral principles about human rights, even though there was no Southern law banning slavery. Given her wider culture and how it supported American liberation from British colonialism, an independence announced by the declaration that “all men are created equal,” one could reasonably claim that she was exposed to relevant and important
moral beliefs. She had access to the moral association between chattel slavery and the accepted belief that denying human beings their inalienable rights is immoral. In light of her social moral context, therefore, one could use Calhoun’s view to conclude that Southern slavery took place in a normal moral context and that our slave supporter is culpable for her unreflective acceptance.

It is obvious that Calhoun’s key conditions are ambiguous and ultimately unhelpful for deciding if our unreflective slave supporter is culpable. One is able to draw contrasting conclusions on Calhoun’s view because it is not clear how much debate constitutes a normal context. There is no exact measure to determine whether an abnormal moral context has converted to a normal one. As this case illustrates, it is not clear on Calhoun’s view whether the agent was adequately exposed to relevant moral information. Calhoun’s condition that institutional laws must be in place before we can assign moral responsibility to those who remain unreflective leaves the possibility that agents are choosing to ignore relevant moral information. The fact that there was no Southern law banning slavery in 1850 does not exclude the possibility that certain social conditions could and should have indicated to slave owners that a moral inquiry was warranted.

Critics might rejoin that I misapplied Calhoun’s theory when I assigned abolitionists the role of moral experts. My gesture seems to go against Calhoun’s understanding. After all, former slaves are not necessarily professional ethicists akin to bioethicists and feminist moral philosophers. Perhaps philosophers like John Locke would be more of what Calhoun has in mind in terms of moral
experts possessing “advanced moral knowledge” about slavery. But Locke’s support for slavery raises serious questions about his view concerning the humanity of blacks. Thomas Jefferson might also qualify as a “moral expert” on Calhoun’s view, given his eloquent writings on human equality and the inalienable right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Yet, Jefferson was also a slave owner. It seems that Jefferson and other framers of the United States Constitution applied the principle of (human) equality to members of their own racial group.

My positioning of abolitionists, instead of Locke or Jefferson, as moral experts points to my earlier comments about Calhoun’s obscure distinction between average moral agents and moral experts. It illustrates the possibility of socially disadvantaged persons (e.g., former slaves) laying claim to an epistemic and moral vantage point from which to investigate the truth about (racial) power relations. While the socially privileged (e.g., slave owners) represented slavery as morally permissible, natural, and necessary, abolitionists correctly represented the practice as immoral, socially contingent, and changeable. So, in the case of Southern slavery, abolitionists are the “moral experts.”

Like Slote, Calhoun’s conditions for moral exemption leaves the possibility that slave owners chose not to debate slavery. Perhaps slave owners (and their supporters) had certain motives not to confront the reasons for debate. It is possible that many suspected that chattel slavery went against well-accepted moral beliefs about universal human rights; however, they chose to ignore their

106 Locke had assisted in writing the slave constitution of Carolina and had some investments in the slave-trading Royal Africa Company. See Mills, The Racial Contract, 68.
suspicions in order to preserve a privileged way of life. Perhaps slave owners
maintained the prejudicial belief about the inferiority of blacks so that they were
not forced to acknowledge the moral connections between slavery and (popular)
democratic ideals about universal human rights. To adopt a point of view about
blacks that defied Southern convention could invoke a heavy moral
consciousness about the possibility that one participated in an immoral practice
and supported an immoral belief about certain persons. Rather than confront her
moral and cultural fallibility or give up a certain way of life, our hypothetical slave
supporter chose not to debate the issue. She wanted to remain ignorant of the
cultural inconsistencies and disturbing logical connections involved in slavery
because of various kinds of self-interest. In short, it is plausible that some chose
a self-serving interpretation of the basic moral principles implicit in the
Declaration of Independence, despite more judicious interpretations available to
them.

In the next chapter, I explore this possibility in greater detail. Specifically, I
consider Michele Moody-Adams’ argument that ancient Greek and Southern
slave owners are culpable for their failure to debate slavery. They are culpable
because their uncritical acceptance involved a choice not to examine morally
important information. On her view, it is a choice motivated by various kinds of
self-interest. Although I expand on her approach and elucidate certain key points,
I argue that Moody-Adams’ argument best deals with the issue of people failing
to investigate conventional practices and beliefs. I will also introduce my model
for when it is reasonable to assign blame to individuals who remain unreflective about customary practices and common beliefs.
Thus far, I have been arguing that the failure to examine whether conventional practices are immoral could be explained by people choosing not to ask questions about relevant (moral) information. I suggested that slave owners and their supporters ignored cultural inconsistencies or relevant moral principles to explain why public debate about slavery was lacking in ancient Greece and also why Southern slave owners were culpable for not debating slavery. Rather than an inability to exercise one's rational capacity to scrutinize, it is possible that average moral agents are refusing to investigate. In this chapter, I explore this possibility in greater detail. Specifically, I examine Michele Moody-Adams' view that one's failure to debate conventional practices could be explained by affected ignorance—the widespread but complex phenomenon of people choosing not to be informed of what they can and should know. Because it involves making a choice, affected ignorance is culpable.

I will show that Moody-Adams' explanation for why agents are culpable supports my belief that suspicions of wrongdoing can influence people not to ask questions. Her view also underscores my view that, in some cases, average

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moral agents have a real interest in not questioning status quo values. Although I favor Moody-Adams’ explanation (over Slote’s and Calhoun’s), it is necessary to expand on her view in two ways. First, my account provides a more detailed explanation as to what agents are choosing to ignore. For Moody-Adams, affected ignorance “involves a choice not to know *something* that is morally important.”¹⁰⁸ Yet, it is not always clear what Moody-Adams means by “something.” I will show that affected ignorance involves a choice not to confront particular moral beliefs, suspicions, cultural inconsistencies, and other indications of societal tension.

Second, I augment Moody-Adams’ view with James Montmarquet’s sets of intellectual virtues. As it stands, Moody-Adams’ approach does not provide agents with a precise ethical standard from which to conduct responsible reflection. If we want to encourage people to confront their suspicion(s) or other forms of moral information in a responsible way, Montmarquet’s virtue-based conception of doxastic responsibility is required. As I will show, this inclusion complements Moody-Adams’ view. I conclude the chapter with my philosophical model for when agents are responsible for failing to investigate conventional practices and beliefs.

Affected ignorance has a variety of forms, although it generally involves the refusal to consider if a practice in which one participates is immoral. There are four manifestations that seem particularly relevant here. First, affected ignorance occurs when people deny any moral connection between their actions and the consequent suffering of their victims. Many times it involves people

ignoring or denying the humanity of their victims. This kind of denial is maintained by carefully calculated language. Torturers often use deceptively benign phrases or euphemisms to describe their methods. For instance, some torture techniques are described as “the telephone” or the “parrots’ swing.” 109 Nazi propaganda was infamous for its regulated use of euphemisms, especially when it concerned the extermination of the Jews. “The Final Solution,” “forced evacuation,” “resettlement,” or “deportation to the east,” were just some of the phrases used by the Nazis to signify and mask their programs of genocide. Rather than acknowledge their role in the massacre of thousands of human beings, Nazis could deceive themselves into believing that they were simply carrying out their duties as “deportation” officers. 110 This kind of ignorance is culpable because it involves a choice not to know the reality of one's actions. The agents in question made themselves morally blind and in this way they are culpable.

Affected ignorance also occurs when someone assigns a morally questionable action to others but insists that he does not want to know how they intend to carry it out. Imagine the military commander who orders his soldiers to retrieve information from captured prisoners of war by “any means possible.” He is well aware (or he should be aware) that in times of war and high stress soldiers can sometimes “go too far” when interrogating their enemies. Yet, he later claims that he “knows nothing” about the torture that took place. By ignoring the culture in which the soldiers carried out their orders and by creating an environment where prisoner abuse would be overlooked, the commander is in

some sense culpable when his soldiers violate certain human rights conventions. He is culpable because he had a compelling reason and (we assume) the means to carefully monitor and investigate the soldiers’ actions but failed to do so.

A third variety of affected ignorance is typically manifested in the readiness of some people to simply not ask questions. For example, a police chief notices an unusual increase in the number of arrests in his department involving Hispanic Americans. Given his department’s (unarticulated) acceptance of racist attitudes, he suspects that some officers may have violated certain legal and/or ethical codes. Yet, rather than call for an internal investigation, the police chief ignores his suspicion and thus remains ignorant of any potential wrongdoing (i.e., racial profiling). His failure to investigate is culpable, on Moody-Adams’ view, because the police chief chooses not to be informed of what he suspects to be morally relevant information.

Finally, affected ignorance can be manifested when the freeman learns to inure himself to the numerous complaints made by slaves. By adopting a certain point of view regarding the rational and racial inferiority of slaves, the Southern slave owner can teach himself not to recognize the slave’s complaints as indeed rational (and morally relevant) complaints. Sarah Lucia Hoagland, in her article “Femininity, Resistance, and Sabotage,” makes a compelling case about the ways in which socially approved prejudices or stereotypes enable members of dominant groups to understand instances of (cultural) resistance from oppressed persons as “confirmation” or “evidence” of their inferior nature and status rather
than as reasons to question those prevailing stereotypes. She cites, for instance, how women’s resistance to oppressive feminine stereotypes (e.g., passiveness, emotional, childlike, irrational, and mentally fragile) is usually understood as “insanity” or “madness” in a patriarchal culture. Women who rebel, say, against the socially prescribed notion that one should not fight back against battering husbands are usually perceived as “crazy.” This prejudice is manifested when women who kill their long-term battering husbands are, for the most part, forced to use the insanity plea rather than that of self-defense. Simply put, stereotypes allow us to see what we want to see (or what we do not want to see).

Likewise, institutionally characterizing blacks as rationally inferior and subhuman lays the groundwork for denying the reasons to question the moral status of slavery. According to Hoagland, within the confines of slave stereotypes, no behavior, no set of actions, and no complaints counts as acts of resistance. Any behavior that cannot fit into one’s prejudicial framework will be discounted as an aberration or simply ignored. Hoagland explains:

Consider the fact that white history depicts Black slaves (though not white indentured servants) as lazy, docile, and clumsy on such grounds as that slaves frequently broke tools. Yet a rational woman under slavery, comprehending that her situation is less than human, that she functions as an extension of the will of her master, will not run to pick up tools. She acts instead to differentiate herself from the will of her master, she breaks tools, carries on subversive activities—sabotage. Her master, in turn, perceiving her as

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113 Hoagland, 92.
subhuman and subrational, names her clumsy, childlike, foolish, perhaps, but not a saboteur.\textsuperscript{114}

When slaves are officially considered subhuman and irrational any form of resistance is dismissed as nonsensical or foolish. Indeed, some believed that slaves were content with their lot in life and that slave owners were only acting in their best interest. This characterization, of course, not only creates a significant picture of the slave owner’s fantasy but it also maintains existing lines of power. For slave owners to maintain the conceptual framework in which they can see themselves as legitimate and morally exempt, they must establish and maintain a cultural atmosphere in which slaves are “fortunate” to have “good” masters.\textsuperscript{115} In other words, racial stereotypes are used so that one group of people is defined in relation to another in such a way that domination and submission are portrayed as legitimate, natural, and ultimately morally uncontroversial. In short, to maintain the slave stereotype (including the belief that slavery is in the slave’s best interest), slave complaints are rendered institutionally invisible.

I am not suggesting that slave owners are overwhelmed by these prevailing prejudices to such an extent that they are unable to critically examine them. The point is the freeman learns to inure himself to the numerous complaints made by slaves when he chooses to maintain conventional stereotypes. Because he refuses to consider slaves as anything other than chattel or non-rational beings who benefit from "good" masters, the freeman fails to see any reason to question whether their grievances signify immoral suffering.

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 93.

\textsuperscript{115} Recall footnote 4 in chapter two and Aristotle’s claim that despotic rule is justified in the case of slaves because they needed a master to direct them, given their lack of rational capacities and autonomy.
Although it is possible that affected ignorance can be more or less insidious than the ones discussed here, in all its manifestations it is morally culpable. Affected ignorance is morally culpable because it involves a choice to remain ignorant rather than an inability to activate one’s capacity to critically reflect. It points to those cases where people willingly turn away from important moral questions. That is to say, affected ignorance is usually motivated by various kinds of self-interest such as the continuance of a privileged (or pleasurable) way of life, profit, power, the (sometimes intangible) rewards for conforming to and maintaining long-held traditions, and fear. Recall the police chief who refuses to investigate whether his officers are involved in racial profiling practices. We can imagine his motivation for not investigating arises from his fear that, if his officers did violate legal and ethical codes of conduct, he could lose his job or have his chances of receiving a significant pay raise reduced. Perhaps the police chief does not want to acknowledge the possibility that he misjudged his officers’ moral characters. Of course, it is also possible that the police chief is racist and this explains why he overlooks his suspicion.

The Nazi officer, who deceives himself about the reality of his actions, could be influenced by the social and political rewards of conforming to status quo values. During the day he thinks of himself as a “deportation” officer who “assists” thousands of Jews with their “travel itineraries” so that later in the evening he can enjoy the material and social advantages of being a Nazi in 1930s Germany. He is able to enjoy the spoils of elite Nazi society when his self-deceptive strategy eliminates any inner doubts or moral conflicts.
Self-interest could also include the avoidance of unwanted feelings and responsibility. Suppose a mother suspects that her husband is sexually exploiting one of their daughters. She becomes suspicious after noticing sudden changes in her daughter’s behavior, including unusual shyness, withdrawal, loss of appetite, nightmares and failing in school. Even more compelling, were the recent changes in her daughter’s behavior toward her husband. She would often appear fearful or unusually quiet in his presence. Yet, despite these behavioral signs, the mother refuses to investigate the matter or even seriously entertain the idea that her husband might be sexually abusing their daughter.

Acknowledging the sexual abuse would require the mother to recognize her husband’s moral failings and perhaps face her own feelings of guilt and shame. The idea that she married a man who could do this is upsetting: “Surely,” she may say, “my respectful, thoughtful, and well-mannered husband would not be capable of committing such an immoral act.” She respects and admires him and to acknowledge his moral fallibility is at the same time to acknowledge her own fallibility in judging moral characters. She might even blame herself. So, rather than subject herself to these painful feelings, the mother chooses not to investigate her suspicions. She represses the evidence she does have and remains “in the dark” about the abuse occurring in her home.

Suppose, further, her husband’s employment provides the family with a luxurious way of life. His income allows her (and the family) to travel in exotic countries, to live in beautiful mansions, and to dine at the finest restaurants. If she were to follow up on her suspicions and discover that he is indeed guilty then
she has a moral and legal responsibility to turn him over to the authorities. But his arrest could cause a major scandal within their social circle. She would risk tarnishing the family’s name and the loss of her social and economic status. Rather than facing these possible consequences she chooses not to ask questions about her husband’s behavior. Because she remains ignorant of any wrongdoing, her advantageous way of life is preserved.

Affected ignorance is particularly troublesome because it seems to me to be a widespread phenomenon, an ordinary fact of everyday life. It can affect us all at some point in various ways. Because the tendency for people to choose ignorance over investigation is common, Moody-Adams believes that a better understanding of affected ignorance “may be one of the most valuable contributions for any theory—normative or otherwise—to make to moral life.” With this in mind, I examine in more detail exactly what affected agents are choosing to ignore. I argue that affected ignorance usually involves people choosing to ignore particular moral beliefs, their suspicions, or cultural inconsistencies and other indications of social tension. It seems to me that these beliefs and cultural conditions should motivate people to activate their capacity to examine conventional norms. However, in affected ignorance cases, they actually compel people to turn away.

Consider the first case of affected ignorance: the Nazi who deceives himself about the reality of his actions. Recall how his reliance on euphemisms

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116 I’ve discovered that many people choose not to be informed of mainstream current events. On their view, such information is irrelevant or potentially inaccurate, although they rarely make a deliberate effort to confirm such beliefs.

makes it easier for him to ignore the moral relevancy of Nazi policies and his actions as a “deportation” officer. This kind of affected ignorance involves the agent ignoring a previous moral belief. Suppose in the past our hypothetical Nazi officer believed that the prevailing attitude and subsequent treatment of Jews was unwarranted, cruel, and wrong. That moral belief, however, conflicts with the anti-Semitism of Nazism. It produces an inner moral strife, a kind of doxastic strain. So, to help alleviate this inner moral tension (and to secure the many advantages of conforming to the status quo), the Nazi officer chooses to ignore what he once believed to be morally important.

This might sound incoherent because it seems that the Nazi officer (or anyone else for that matter) cannot ignore something he already accepts as true. But it may be possible for him to devise a deliberate and self-deceptive strategy that would render him no longer believing what he once thought to be immoral.¹¹⁸ For example, he could meticulously choose to surround himself with others who vehemently preach about the inferiority and the Otherness of Jews. He might immerse himself in the Nazi rhetoric of his day by reading particularly virulent anti-Semitic books. He inhales the fascist air around him and fills his mind with empty nationalistic slogans, prejudicial beliefs, and a myopic worldview. After some time and conscientious effort, the Nazi officer comes to understand his victims as only objects or degenerate things. On his (revised) view, Jews are no longer fully human and therefore not worthy of proper moral consideration. He has taught himself to be morally complacent about the numerous complaints made by Jews. In other words, his previous moral belief about the maltreatment

¹¹⁸ Neil Levy presents a similar example in “Cultural Membership and Moral Responsibility.”
of Jews has lost moral force for him and, as a result, he no longer believes his actions or his anti-Semitic beliefs are wrong. The moral connection between his actions and the consequent suffering of his victims is dissolved. Since he has deceived himself about his actions as a deportation officer and the humanity of his victims, we can understand why the Nazi no longer recognizes any reason to investigate the matter further. But understanding why he fails to question Nazi practices does not imply that he should be excused for his failure.

To be sure, this strategy is not guaranteed, but if one is dedicated enough it might be successful. If so, then we have a case where one chooses not to believe what was once accepted as true. It is a case of moral ignorance because the agent does not recognize the moral relevancy of his actions and his (newly acquired) belief about the inferiority of Jews. Still, the Nazi officer is culpable for his ignorance because it was self-induced. He taught himself to become ignorant of a previous moral belief and, as a consequence, the reality of his actions. He has learned to see the world wrongly, but with the assurance that his mistaken belief will be validated by Nazi authority. We can think of his ignorance therefore as a kind of “structured blindness,” a prescribed sequence of events that establish and maintain Nazi polity. In many respects, the Nazi’s self-deceptive strategy is similar to the other kinds of affected ignorance we discussed earlier. However, the military commander, the police chief and the freeman who has inured himself to slaves’ complaints ignore their suspicions of possible wrongdoing rather than articulate moral beliefs.

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Recall the military commander who refuses to be informed about the exact details of how his soldiers will carry out his orders. Perhaps he wants to remain ignorant just in case allegations of improper treatment arise. After all, he already knows that some soldiers could mistreat prisoners of war during intense interrogations. Given the stressful climate in which his soldiers carry out orders, the military commander is well aware that something could go wrong. He has good reasons to be suspicious of possible ethics violations. Yet, he chooses to disregard his suspicion, despite its moral relevance. Consider the prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib in Iraq. In April 2004, photographs surfaced showing American soldiers abusing and humiliating Iraqis who were being held at the prison near Baghdad. There were pictures of the prisoners stacked in a human pyramid, one of which had an English slur written on his body. In others, male prisoners were positioned in such a way as to simulate sex with each other. And in most of the pictures, Americans are laughing, posing, pointing, or giving the camera a thumbs-up gesture. Seventeen soldiers in Iraq, including a brigadier general, were removed from duty after charges of mistreating Iraqi prisoners were made public.

One of the soldiers, Army Reserve Staff Sergeant Chip Frederick was charged with maltreatment for allegedly participating in and setting up a photo, posing in a photograph by sitting on top of a detainee, and observing an indecent scene. He was also charged with assault for allegedly striking a detainee and ordering detainees to strike each other. Frederick pleaded not guilty, claiming that the Army was responsible for the way it ran the prison, which led to the
abuse of prisoners: “We had no support, no training whatsoever. And I kept asking my chain of command for certain things…like rules and regulations. And it just wasn’t happening.” He argued that his commanders should be held responsible since they failed to provide proper training and standards for interrogating prisoners of war.

According to the Army’s own investigation, interrogators asked reservists working in the prison, like Frederick, to prepare the Iraqi detainees, physically and mentally, for questioning. Yet, Frederick insists that he did not see a copy of the Geneva Convention rules for handling prisoners of war until after he was charged. The Army confirmed Frederick’s claim and found many more soldiers (mostly reservists) at Abu Ghraib were uninformed about the Geneva Convention rules on integrations. Brigadier General Mar Kimmitt, deputy director of coalition operations in Iraq, stated, “…at the end of the day, this is probably more about leadership, supervision, setting standards…I hope the investigation is including not only the people who committed the crimes, but some of the people that might have encouraged these crimes as well, because they certainly share some level of responsibility as well.” Whether military authorities were culpable for ‘encouraging these crimes’ is unclear. But, it is reasonable to suggest, at minimum, that they should have been more involved in the details of prisoner interrogations given the context (i.e., reservists integrating enemy combatants in a foreign country).

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121 Ibid.
The police chief also has good reasons to suspect that the unusual increase in arrests involving Hispanic Americans may be due to racial profiling. His department has a history of condoning racist attitudes and practices. He has heard numerous complaints by members of the Hispanic community regarding the actions of his officers causing him to suspect possible wrongdoing. However, despite the evidence before him (and his suspicion), the police chief fails to investigate the matter. He fails to confront what he suspects to be morally important. Whether it involves the Nazi officer, the military commander, or the police chief, in every case the agent is culpable for failing to investigate. They are culpable because they could and should have critically examined particular moral beliefs (i.e., the Nazi’s previous belief about the immorality of anti-Semitism and the chief’s suspicion of possible wrongdoing).

However, it is interesting to note that for Moody-Adams the similarity only goes so far. On her view, the Nazi officer exemplifies a form of affected ignorance that is “particularly malevolent” because it involves “a more active refusal.” It is not entirely clear what Moody-Adams means here. I suspect her distinction centers on the idea that ignoring what one believes to be morally true is different from merely ignoring a suspicion of possible wrongdoing. Perhaps the Nazi officer was “more active” in his refusal in the sense that he “actively” changed his mind, whereas the military commander and the police chief simply turned away from their suspicions. Apparently, Moody-Adams believes that

122 Moody-Adams, *Fieldwork in Familiar Places*, 102 and “Culture, Responsibility, and Ignorance,” 301, respectively.
choosing to ignore what one knows to be morally important is different from choosing to ignore what one suspects to be morally important.

But I am not convinced that there is a relevant moral difference here. In every case, the agent moved away from relevant and important moral information—either a particular moral belief or a suspicion of possible wrongdoing. Whether people disregard a moral belief or a suspicion, they are refusing to acknowledge (potentially) important moral implications. In this way, the Nazi officer’s refusal is no more “active” than the military commander’s or the police chief’s.

That being said, I appreciate Moody-Adams’ model for its emphasis on the moral and epistemic duty to examine one’s beliefs about oneself, one’s place in their community and in the social world. A responsible agent must strive to maintain some level of epistemic and moral coherence in terms of her belief system and the community in which she lives. When suspicions arise, it is an opportunity for people to investigate convention and perhaps instigate social change. I also support Moody-Adams’ approach because it rightly invokes the ancient Greek injunction “know thyself” as an integral part of responsible moral agency. Similar to my discussion in chapter two where I stressed the liberating opportunities embedded in one’s acknowledgement of one’s intersectional identity, Moody-Adams also believes that an adequate model for our present inquiry should include the moral relevance of self-scrutiny and interpretation:

The model of philosophical moral inquiry most likely to succeed in [understanding and adjudicating moral conflicts in the culturally heterogeneous moral world] is the Socratic model, which puts the connection between self-scrutiny and moral reflection at the center.
of the discipline. This model embodies a commitment to interpretation: it encourages the articulation and evaluation of unstated, and usually unreflective, moral convictions.\textsuperscript{123}

Questioning and evaluating what is commonly accepted in society is morally important because failing to do so could result in social complacency and the uncritical acceptance of conventional but harmful practices. Not to question practices simply because they are given support is to grant culture or tradition undue authority and to abandon the critical perspectives characteristic of responsible inquiry and agency.

Since I am interested in deciphering when individuals ought to be held accountable for failing to activate their capacity to critically reflect on familiar practices and beliefs, it is important to develop a clear understanding about the notion of affected ignorance. In the hopes of achieving that goal, I have argued that affected ignorance involves average moral agents choosing to ignore cultural inconsistencies, relevant moral associations, and suspicions of possible wrongdoing. It is a kind of moral ignorance motivated by self-interest. On my view, affected ignorance explains why slave owners in ancient Greece and the American Colonial South failed to critically examine slavery. Although they were presented with important and relevant moral information, it was information that they did not want to acknowledge.

However, some proponents of the cultural defense view argue against the case for affected ignorance and claim, to the contrary, that Southern slave owners were not responsible for their failure to debate the practice. According to Susan Wolf, Southern slave owners were not responsible for failing to investigate

\textsuperscript{123} Moody-Adams, \textit{Fieldwork in Familiar Places}, 223.
slavery because they were rendered “morally insane” by their misguided or immoral society. On her view, people are morally insane when they lack the cognitive faculties to access basic reasons or morally relevant considerations. These individuals are unable to examine their socially approved practices and beliefs and thus they are not culpable for failing to question whether those practices and beliefs are immoral. For instance, Wolf believes that the “Nazis of the 1930s and many male chauvinists of our father's generation” were members of a society that failed to provide them with access to reasons that would have alerted them to question their practices and beliefs. On her view, fascism and patriarchal ideology rendered these individuals unable to cultivate proper moral sensitivities toward anti-Semitism and sexism, respectively. Wolf even goes on to claim that slave owners, Nazis, and sexist men should be thought of as “victims” rather than perpetrators of immoral practices because they could not help but live in societies that “actively encourage” mistaken moral values.

Wolf's insanity defense is unconvincing and troublesome. Even if we were to suppose that under certain circumstances the Southern slave owner would have conformed to the prevailing bad morality of his misguided society, this does not prove that he was unable to scrutinize the practice or that he was somehow rendered “morally insane.” As I see it, her argument begs the question as to whether agents are not culpable for their failure to investigate. It begs the question because agents are already defined as “morally insane” before we reach the conclusion about moral exemption. Since she does not offer any

125 Ibid., 57.
independent support for her claim that the failure to reflect on cultural norms is a result of moral insanity, her argument is unconvincing.

Her argument is also undermined by the mistaken assumption that cultures are entirely unified in their beliefs, values, and practices. It portrays cultures as fully integrated, coherent entities. But, like Slote's, Wolf's generalization is problematic. It fails to consider the complexity of the social world, particularly the reality that the continuance of slavery in the South was fraught with inconsistencies and national tensions. On the one hand, slave owners insisted that blacks were an inferior race and not possessed of the intelligence to function equally with whites. On the other hand, they also declared that it was “dangerous” to teach blacks how to read and write. In the words of one Virginia legislator, “We have, as far as possible, closed every avenue by which light might enter their minds. If you could extinguish the capacity to see the light, our work would be completed; they would then be on a level with the beasts of the field, and we should be safe!” 126 Southern slave owners lived in a crisis precisely over the issue of practicing slavery in a nation espousing universal human rights and equality for all. Of course, some may have chosen a self-serving interpretation of the principles implicit in the Declaration, but this does not mean that an alternative (and more judicious) interpretation was unavailable to them.

There are, at some level, particular strains or tensions in every culture. Just because public policy supported slavery, this does not mean that all

members of that society supported the practice. Some whites defied public sentiment by providing travel money or hiding places for fugitive slaves. Germany may have been a Nazi militant state, but that does not necessarily imply that all Germans supported Nazi policies. After all, there were pockets of resistance in Nazi Germany as well. Some Germans went against Nazi policy and assisted Jews in any way they could. To depict the South before the Civil War or Nazi Germany as being so univocal in their morality that dissention and alternative points of view were impossible or nonexistent is to ignore empirical evidence that shows how complex, and occasionally inconsistent, the beliefs of any culture may be.

Finally, Wolf’s view is troublesome because it encourages a dismissive attitude toward those who have suffered from cultural injustices. If slave owners and male chauvinists of the 1950s are “victims” then it is no longer clear what we should call slaves and women in racist and sexist societies. When we consider a Nazi a “victim” of anti-Semitism, it seems to belittle the experiences of concentration-camp inmates. It seems to me that defining “victim” so broadly renders the debate about moral responsibility and one’s failure to examine conventional practices meaningless. It removes any moral discrimination between the victim and her perpetrator. It is no longer clear how we can ever justify holding people accountable on Wolf’s view. Responsible agents are let off the proverbial moral hook when virtually all of us are in some sense “victims” of socialization.
To sum up, Wolf’s definition of “moral insanity” is too broad to be helpful in terms of isolating the conditions for moral exemption or responsibility. Her view is also incapable of generating a plausible picture of the social world because it relies on the mistaken assumption that cultures are fully integrated in their beliefs, values, and practices. It precludes any real understanding of the complex relation between morality and culture. Finally, I argued that Wolf’s explanation fails to offer convincing evidence that these individuals are indeed “morally insane.” As I see it, her account is merely an ad hoc explanation as to why people are not responsible.

Interestingly, the issue about who is a victim in immoral societies raises another related question concerning moral responsibility. I have been suggesting that slave owners had the cultural resources to critically examine slavery. It seems to me their failure to examine was probably due to affected ignorance. However, this line of reasoning appears to have troubling implications with regards to victims of oppressive practices. That is, if we blame slave owners for not asking questions about slavery, then consistency requires that slaves, who endorse an unreflective acceptance of slavery, should also be held morally accountable; the slave would be culpable for his affected ignorance. In terms of motivating factors for this kind of affected ignorance it is possible the slave does not want to ask questions about his social status because that inquiry would intensify his awareness about the desperate circumstances in which he cannot
Perhaps he does not want to acknowledge the reality of his suffering. And so, he uncritically accepts slavery and his plight in life as natural and economically necessary. Assuming this is the case, it appears that, like the slave owner, the slave is in some sense morally responsible for failing to activate his ability to scrutinize slavery, given certain cultural conditions. However, assigning moral responsibility to a slave seems unreasonable and counterintuitive.

Moody-Adams responds to this worry with a Kantian perspective about responsibility and autonomy. According to Immanuel Kant, a distinct feature of our humanity is rational autonomy. Kant argued that rational persons are free and therefore responsible when they ground their moral decisions on their ability to reason. So, to excuse the slave, on the grounds that he is unable to question the popular justifications of slavery is, in some way, to deny him his humanity or rational autonomy. That is, exempting the slave is to suggest that he has less than fully developed rational skills. According to Moody-Adams, it is a point of view that reinforces all too common ideas about the rational inferiority of certain persons (or races). Attributing blame to the slave in this case does not mean he is responsible for perpetuating slavery. Slave owners certainly carry this moral burden. If the slave was exposed to abolitionists’ debates and familiar with democratic principles about human freedom and equality, then he is culpable for his uncritical acceptance of slavery provided that he had proper nutrition to be able to critically reflect on such matters. It seems to me that one’s status as a

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victim does not necessarily preclude agency and moral responsibility. I want to encourage the view that in certain situations those who have suffered from oppressive practices are still able to exercise their rational capacity to scrutinize.

When determining the conditions for when average moral agents are culpable for their failure to debate social norms, the possibility of affected ignorance should be taken seriously. We need a thorough understanding of this common phenomenon and it is my hope that this chapter moves us closer to that goal. I explained that affected ignorance involves average moral agents who choose not to examine particular moral beliefs, suspicions, and certain cultural conditions such as ideological inconsistencies and other social tensions. Although these conditions ought to motivate average moral agents to investigate I argued that they can actually compel people to remain morally ignorant by not asking questions. In these cases, average moral agents may have a real interest in not debating conventional practices and beliefs.

Throughout the chapter, I have supported Moody-Adams' contention that we should always be mindful or critical of social conventions. Her insistence that we reflect on practices and beliefs, especially those that receive widespread acceptance and are considered “normal,” “natural,” or “necessary,” reminds us about the dangers of moral and social compliancy. Reflection is an important component of moral agency and social justice. However, merely establishing the rationality of a person in terms of her ability to reflect does not guarantee that she will reflect well. Assuming that it is possible, our agent could form consistently bad principles, each one building on the others in some coherent fashion. This
was certainly the case with our hypothetical Nazi officer who deceived himself about the reality of his actions. His affected ignorance was a result of self-reflection. His new belief about the permissibility of Nazi policies and the treatment toward Jews was a result of using consistently bad moral principles to modify and expand other bad principles. One cannot fault the Nazi for failing to reflect on his (Fascist supported) actions and beliefs. But certainly we do not want to excuse him either. As I see it, the Nazi is culpable for failing to investigate his beliefs in an ethical or responsible way. Reflectiveness is good if and only if it is carried out with decent ethical standards since the process of criticism or reflection can be negatively used to perpetuate bad social principles and practices.\textsuperscript{129} So, to make better sense of \textit{responsible} reflection an appeal to a virtue-based conception of doxastic responsibility is required.

James Montmarquet has developed a concept of epistemology that gives certain character traits an important and fundamental role.\textsuperscript{130} For Montmarquet, mere examination and consistency are not sufficient conditions for responsible knowing. Proper moral reflection should be structured by certain intellectual virtues. Rather than thinking of intellectual virtues as cognitive faculties such as vision, memory, and introspection,\textsuperscript{131} Montmarquet conceives of them as personality traits that a person who desires the truth would want to have.

\textsuperscript{130} James A. Montmarquet, \textit{Epistemic Virtue and Doxastic Responsibility} (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 1993).
\textsuperscript{131} See Ernest Sosa, \textit{Knowledge in Perspective} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and “The Raft and the Pyramid: Coherence versus Foundations in the Theory of Knowledge,” in \textit{Midwest Studies in Philosophy} V: 3-25. Sosa, who introduced the notion of intellectual virtue into contemporary epistemology, argues that responsible belief formation involves the use of these reliable cognitive faculties.
According to Montmarquet, the central intellectual virtue is epistemic conscientiousness. An epistemically conscientious person is someone “who tries her best to arrive at truth and to avoid error.” But this desire for truth is insufficient. One’s desire must be appropriately regulated to protect against the possibility of enthusiastic agents forming dogmatic or fanatical beliefs. Consider William Clifford’s description of the religious fanatic who, because of his enthusiasm for truth, ends up falling in love with his own ideas: “He who begins by loving Christianity better than Truth, will proceed by loving his own sect or Church better than Christianity, and end in loving himself better than all.” In addition to the agent’s desire to know the truth and avoid error and in order to constitute proper moral reflection, the agent must also situate her examination within certain regulative virtues.

Montmarquet classifies these under three main categories. First, the virtues of intellectual impartiality, which include “an openness to the ideas of others, the willingness to exchange ideas with and learn from them, the lack of jealously and a personal bias directed at their ideas, and the level sense of one’s own fallibility.” The second set of virtues includes those of intellectual sobriety. “These are the virtues of the sober-minded inquirer, as opposed to the ‘enthusiast’ who is disposed, out of sheer love of truth, discovery, and the excitement of new and unfamiliar ideas, to embrace what is not really warranted,

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132 Montmarquet, 21.
134 Montmarquet, 21.
even relative to the limits of his own evidence."  

Finally, there are virtues of intellectual courage, which include “the willingness to conceive and examine alternatives to popularly held beliefs, perseverance in the face of opposition from others (until one is convinced that one is mistaken), and the determination required to see such a project through to completion.”

These virtues better explain what it means to be a responsible knower since they show why mere reflection is an insufficient condition for moral exemption. Unfortunately, Moody-Adams’ model does not provide this kind of ethical standard. Encouraging people to reflect on their socially approved moral beliefs is not enough. We must promote responsible moral reflection. Indeed, it is not clear on Moody-Adams’ view why the reflective Nazi should be held accountable for his belief transformation. After all, he arrived at his new (anti-Semitic) belief by way of meticulous self-reflection. Montmarquet’s epistemic virtues, however, can explain why the Nazi officer should be held accountable, despite his self-reflection. He is culpable on the grounds that his examination failed to meet the conditions for responsible reflection. He violated the virtues of impartiality when he exhibited a personal bias to certain ideas (i.e., anti-Semitism). He failed to persevere in the face of (Fascist) opposition when he chose to immerse himself in Nazi propaganda about the inferiority of Jews. The point is, when agents ground their beliefs on Montmarquet’s set of intellectual virtues, the possibility of forming insufficient or improper moral judgments about conventional practices could be reduced.

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135 Ibid.
136 Ibid.
The immoral act of making oneself insensitive to particular moral beliefs and/or suspicions of wrongdoing is also challenged by Montmarquet’s call for responsible belief formation. These epistemic virtues could provide agents with the moral motivation to confront their suspicions or relevant moral beliefs. If slaves complained about slavery then the intellectual virtue of remaining open to the ideas of others could encourage the slave owner to seriously consider whether those complaints point to an immoral practice. The intellectual virtue of exchanging ideas with and to learn from abolitionists certainly applies to the Southern slave owner. The willingness to imagine and examine alternatives to popularly held beliefs could mitigate the slave owner’s desire to choose ignorance over investigation. These epistemic virtues might even broaden the moral purview of both the Nazi and the slave owner and afford them with an enlightened moral sensibility.

It is important to be clear in terms of how Montmarquet’s set of intellectual virtues fits in this discussion. His model focuses on the subject and whether she exhibits certain epistemic virtues. It does not claim that reflecting in accordance to these virtues will necessarily lead one closer to “truth.” In other words, Montmarquet’s epistemic virtues complement Moody-Adams’ view as well as my approach to this issue because they focus on the person’s epistemic character and not on the measure or property of truth-conducive beliefs. Whether she holds false beliefs concerns a debate that goes beyond the scope of this project. Again, we are not holding people responsible for their failure to know whether conventional beliefs are objectively immoral. Instead, we are primarily interested
in deciphering the precise conditions upon which it is reasonable to assign blame to those who fail to investigate whether conventional beliefs are immoral. An agent is culpable in these kinds of cases because she fails to examine her beliefs or certain cultural conditions in accordance with these intellectual virtues. Since our focus is on reasonable justifications and not metaphysical properties, Montmarquet’s set of intellectual virtues are appropriate.

We are now in a position to present my model of moral responsibility for these kinds of cases. In light of my critical analysis of Slote’s, Calhoun’s, and Moody-Adams’ views, people are culpable for failing to investigate conventional practices and beliefs when (1) cultural inconsistencies or other indications of tension or conflict are present; (2) there is a logical connection or conceptual link between the accepted practice (or belief) and what is commonly believed to be immoral or controversial; and (3) we can reasonably show that people have a vested interest in not questioning generally accepted moral norms and/or suspicions of wrongdoing. I have argued that the first two conditions provide individuals with viable alternatives and compelling reasons to debate established customs and codes of conduct. The third condition explains why average moral agents choose to refrain from moral reflection. Although conditions (1) and (2) should raise suspicions and compel people to question generally accepted moral norms, affected agents choose to ignore those suspicions for self-interested reasons and, thereby, fail to investigate. Simply debating the issue, however, does not guarantee moral exemption. We have a moral obligation not only to engage in rational debate when prudent to do so but also to ground that debate
on ethical standards. Because the process of examination can be used to form prejudicial beliefs and perpetuate unjust practices, a virtue-based conception of doxastic responsibility is required. That is, as average moral agents we have a moral obligation to justify our beliefs and actions as best as we can, despite their cultural status. So, a responsible moral agent grounds her beliefs and actions on intellectual impartiality, sobriety, and courage. She remains open to the ideas of others and is genuinely willing to exchange ideas and alternatives with them. It seems to me that without this level of expectation, we set our epistemic and moral bar of acceptability substantially low.

Satisfying these three conditions constitutes a strong case for affected ignorance. This certainly seems to be the case with regards to the current general acceptance of factory farming practices. In chapter five, I argue that affected ignorance not only perpetuates the current hegemonic attitude toward certain animals it also explains the lack of extensive public debate about the general acceptance of factory farming practices.
CHAPTER 5
FACTORY FARMING AND AFFECTED IGNORANCE

Many people want to believe that farm animals live a life full of the natural pleasures of animal existence without the hardships and constant struggle of living in the wild. Although most will meet their fate in slaughter houses, these animals, some may say, could not have had a better life. Cows are left to graze on lush green fields while pigs live on quaint family farms that are far removed from the profit-driven industrial environment of the city. These comforting images are far from reality. Today, the vast majority of farm animals in the United States are raised on factory farms—corporate-owned facilities that rely on animal confinement and assembly-line methods of production to maximize profit. In this industry, animals are viewed and treated as renewable resources or “production units,” having value only relative to human interests. As a result of such attitudes and practices, billions of farm animals routinely suffer from abuse, neglect, and deprivation. Yet, there is no vast public outcry about factory farming methods. Most people find nothing ethically disturbing or controversial about the industry or the common practice that supports it: meat-eating. Generally speaking, people do not consider their T-bone steaks or chicken sandwiches as subjects of moral contention. Indeed, food is rarely publicly discussed as an ethical issue.\textsuperscript{137}

\textsuperscript{137} A possible exception to this claim is the increasing frequency of public discussions concerning the commercialization and globalization of genetically modified foods. See Gregory E. Pence,
Factory farming practices are simply the accepted norm when it comes to meat, dairy, or egg production. But if the production of animal food products involves moral questions about animal cruelty and arbitrary discrimination, then what can explain the lack of widespread public debate? In this chapter, I will argue that affected ignorance not only perpetuates the current hegemonic attitude toward certain animals, but it also explains the lack of extensive public debate about the moral dimensions of factory farming practices. I ground this claim on my conditions for when average moral agents are culpable for failing to investigate whether conventional practices or beliefs are immoral. Recall, on my model, agents are morally responsible for not engaging debate about conventional norms when (1) cultural inconsistencies or other indications of tension or conflict are present; (2) there is a logical connection or conceptual link between the accepted practice (or belief) and what is commonly believed to be immoral or controversial; and (3) we can reasonably show that people have a vested interest in not questioning generally accepted moral norms and/or suspicions of possible wrongdoing.

I will show that the widespread acceptance of factory farming practices is inconsistent with prevailing social attitudes toward animal cruelty. Other indications of societal tension are also present, including vegetarianism, a low-level debate about animal welfare, and the collective moral shift some of us experience with regards to pets. As I will argue, pet ownership is a point of view

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that regularly challenges the common belief that it is legitimate to view and treat animals as mere marketable commodities. At a minimum, it seems to me that these cultural conditions should compel people to seek a reasonable degree of moral consistency via extensive public dialogue.

To explain how the second condition is met, I outline Peter Singer’s and Tom Regan’s arguments about the immorality of factory farming and meat-eating. I rehearse their views because they reveal the logical connection between speciesism (the anthropocentric view that legitimates factory farming practices) and what is widely believed to be immoral—arbitrary discrimination. If, as Singer contends, speciesism is logically similar to other forms of arbitrary discrimination (such as racism and sexism) and since the wrongness of discrimination is part of our moral and social context, then average moral agents have a valid reason to debate the general acceptance of speciesist practices such as factory farming. I then discuss Regan’s argument that factory farming practices violate animal rights. His argument is largely based on the same kind of logic that justifies the attribution of rights to human moral patients. Like Singer’s, Regan’s view is presented and grounded on a basic moral principle we all accept—it is wrong to differentiate moral treatment on the basis of arbitrary (morally irrelevant) characteristics. As members of a moral community, average moral agents are expected to know and act according to the principle that moral consideration should not be based on arbitrary (self-serving) distinctions or categories. On the basis that arbitrary moral discrimination is widely considered immoral, and if it is reasonable to suppose that speciesism (the belief that sustains the social
legitimacy of factory farming) is a form of arbitrary discrimination, I believe individuals have a compelling reason (an important moral association) to investigate whether our hegemonic attitude toward nonhuman animals is prejudicial or immoral.

Of course, there is no extensive public debate about the cultural inconsistencies or the moral link between speciesism and wrongful discrimination. This state of affairs is particularly disturbing because I suspect that the lack of widespread debate is due to affected ignorance—people choosing not to be informed of what they should and can know. Instead of a culturally induced inability to recognize these societal and moral tensions as compelling reasons to investigate, people are choosing to remain unreflective about them. As I will show, this choice is probably motivated by various kinds of self-interest, including (but not limited to) the social rewards of conforming to (culinary) traditions and the resonant fear that the reality of factory farming practices may lie heavily on one’s moral consciousness.

This chapter does not claim that factory farming methods are immoral in some objective sense; nor do I propose that people are morally responsible if they fail to know such moral facts. These are important philosophical matters; however, they are outside the scope of this inquiry. The issue at hand concerns the question of whether people should be debating the social acceptance of factory farming practices in light of our social and moral context. As in the previous chapters, my analysis here centers on the moral implications of not exercising one’s rational capacity to scrutinize dominant cultural norms. Whether
those norms correspond to metaphysical moral properties is, once again, bracketed so that we can focus on responsible moral reflection.

In the United States alone an estimated eight billion animals are born, confined, biologically manipulated, transported, and ultimately slaughtered each year so that humans can consume them.\textsuperscript{138} Today, raising animals for mass food consumption is a competitive business, managed primarily by large corporations such as agribusiness giants Greyhound Corporation and John Hancock Mutual life.\textsuperscript{139} They devise cost cutting procedures that inevitably determine how factory farms are operated and how the animals will spend their relatively short and intolerable lives. In order to produce the massive amount of meat people consume regularly in this country and abroad at relatively low prices, most animals live in oppressive and deplorable conditions. For instance, most egg-laying hens are placed into “battery cages,” wire cages that severely restricts a bird’s movements, making it extremely difficult to spread its wings. Geese raised for the delicacy known as \textit{paté de foie gras} are force-fed multiple times each day in order to induce a disease that enlarges their livers up to ten times the normal size. Dairy cows are often confined to restrictive indoor stalls or to outdoor, grassless lots without clean places to rest or adequate protection from inclement weather.\textsuperscript{140} To maximize the use of space and minimize the need for maintenance, hog farms are notorious for encasing 400 to 500 pound animals in

iron crates that are seven feet long and twenty-two inches wide. Oftentimes, these hogs lie covered in their own urine and excrement, with broken legs from trying to escape or just to turn around. They are covered with festering sores, tumors, ulcers, lesions, or what hog farmers commonly refer to as “pus pockets.” These practices result in some of the lowest prices in the world for meat, eggs, and dairy products but at a huge cost to the animals. As long as animals are raised for food on a large scale, it is not practical in terms of profit or unit cost to avoid the pain and the suffering that these sentient beings must experience.

For the most part, farmers and consumers alike accept these practices as necessary and natural. Echoing similar justifications to that of ancient Greek slave owners, proponents of factory farming defend these practices as economically necessary. In order to produce animal products at relatively inexpensive prices for the consumer, intensive animal-production systems must be in place. So, confining egg-laying chickens in battery cages and thousands of cattle in cramped feed lots are considered permissible in a free-enterprise economy. Like many ancient Greeks who uncritically accepted the notion that slavery was “natural,” many people today also assume (without question) that human consumption of meat is simply Nature’s way.

These popular justifications are fraught with cultural inconsistency. For example, the prevailing social prescription to be kind to animals is directly at odds with the general tolerance for factory farming practices. Few people will take exception to the moral worth of the injunction, “Be kind to animals.” In terms

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of its currency in public discussions about the treatment of animals, the legal prohibition against animal cruelty is also well-received. When animal cruelty cases appear on the front page of a local newspaper, it usually causes public moral outrage. Animal cruelty cases strike a responsive moral chord with most people. However, it is interesting to note that the same outraged public continues to give their financial support to an industry that arguably has institutionalized animal cruelty. Every time we purchase meat products we support the construction and maintenance of hog farms, battery cages, sow stalls, and veal crates. Our financial support perpetuates practices that result in extreme animal confinement and routine psychological and in some cases biological deprivation. To support these practices but at the same time condemn acts of animal cruelty is to embrace an erratic understanding about what constitutes legitimate treatment towards animals. Consider the 2002 case of Stanley and Judy Johnson. Judge Alan Glenn of Tennessee’s Court of Criminal Appeals found the married couple guilty of 350 counts of animal cruelty. In their puppy-mill kennel were 350 dogs lying sick, starving, or dead. Several of the dogs had preventable physical problems such as mange, intestinal worms, eye and dental decay. It was readily apparent that they suffered from emotional and socialization problems as well. The Johnson’s treatment of these dogs as mere commodities and “production units” disturbed the public. Many chastised the Johnson’s actions as heartless, cruel, and inhumane. Indeed, people outwardly expressed

joy when the guilty verdict was made public. On their view, justice was well served in this case.

However, the Johnson’s dog kennel was not substantially different from a typical hog farm, only instead of 350 tortured animals, millions of animals are made to suffer. Like the Johnson’s dogs, most factory farm animals are forced to live in oppressive and deplorable conditions. They too have little access to fresh air and are forced to sleep and eat in their own excrement. Despite the similarities, most of the people who expressed disgust and moral condemnation about the ways in which the Johnson’s treated their animals failed to question whether factory farming methods are heartless, cruel, and inhumane. Even in this small Tennessee community, where discussions about animal cruelty took center stage, no one raised the issue about how intensive farming methods render (other) powerless animals into mere commodities and “production units.”

This flagrant inconsistency is most likely explained by our prejudicial leanings toward certain animals; namely, our pets. When it comes to dogs and cats a collective moral (and, on some level, legal) shift occurs. Compared to farm animals, pets are granted greater moral consideration and legal protection against harm. The Johnson’s puppy-mill is a case in point. Although similar environments on factory farms are legal and morally permissible, the Johnson’s kennel was unacceptable because the subjects happened to be animals we like. It is a completely arbitrary distinction. There are no relevant differences between dogs and hogs in terms of their capacity to experience pain and suffering. I would risk imprisonment and certainly moral condemnation from the general public if it
were discovered that I adopted cats from a local animal shelter in order to hang them upside down and slash their throats. My friends might think of me and my actions as heartless, cruel, and inhumane. Yet, similar actions are completely permissible in slaughter houses where people are paid to slash chicken’s throats. It seems to me that this cultural inconsistency should raise more questions as to why practices that are not morally permissible when they involve our pets (e.g., cats) are permissible when they involve other relevantly similar animals like cows, hogs, and chickens.

On a social level, it is not uncommon for pet owners to think of their animals as “family” members or faithful and loving companions. Every year billions of dollars are spent on name-brand dog beds, wool sweaters for Chihuahuas, and water fountain cat bowls. Some owners will go into massive financial debt in order to pay for their pet’s medical treatments. It is also not uncommon for some pet owners to mourn the lost of their animals just like they would mourn the lost of their human relatives. In some important respects, pet ownership represents the cultural “space” where the relationship between humans and animals is in direct contrast to our relationship with farm animals.143 In this “space” it is inappropriate to treat animals as if they were only objects or products to be consumed (e.g., the Johnson’s puppy-mill). We do not condone the eating of dogs, cats, and horses in this country.144 The point is the proper

143 I realize that some people do not treat their pets any different from farm animals. However, those persons have access to alternative points of view regarding the “proper” treatment of one’s pet. My point is our cultural understanding about animal welfare and the “legitimate” ways in which people should treat animals is not entirely uniformed or coherent.
144 However, we do export horses to be slaughtered and consumed in foreign countries.
treatment of our pets is a moral point of view that challenges the reasonableness of factory farming practices.

My discussion about pet ownership points to a conceptual and cultural divide. It suggests the possibility for average moral agents to experience the liminal phase. Recall in chapter two where I explained that the liminal phase occurs within the “gap” between ordered worlds or between clearly defined cultural positions. It is a “place” where the agent can slip through normative structures and develop a critically reflective consciousness about those norms. It is a cultural and individual phenomenon that provides the agent with opportunities to examine the so-called “axiomatic” but conflicting normative structures. This conceptual bifurcation or social tear should cause people to experience inner doubts or suspicions about factory farming. Furthermore, if the agent acknowledges her intersectional identity in this case—a responsible potbelly pig owner on the one hand and a habitual bacon-eater on the other—she has good reasons to examine her role in perpetuating or resisting such cultural contradictions. It seems to me that average moral agents, especially devoted pet owners, should recognize the reasons why a rational moral debate about our dominant relationship with animals is warranted.

The limited debate about animal welfare under agribusiness practices and the availability of vegetarian alternatives signify additional cultural strains. I think it is reasonable to presume that most people have a vague idea that some kind of debate concerning the treatment of factory farm animals is taking place. Celebrities bring public awareness to these kinds of issues when they participate
in well-publicized protests or events. It seems to me that the current debate is like a whisper, a low-pitched public discussion that makes relevant information readily available for people who want to know more about the controversies surrounding industrial farming practices.

Vegetarianism is an alternative dietary practice and point of view about animals that also challenges the reasonableness of factory farming and meat-eating. It is a social practice that can compel people to ask more questions. Although vegetarians constitute a minority in our dietary structure, they nevertheless can incite dinnertime debates. When they conspicuously leave meat off their plates, vegetarians inevitably call attention to themselves. On most occasions, they will be drawn into discussions regarding their dietary and/or ethical choice. People usually want to know why one would make such a “radical” and “depriving” conversion. For the vegetarian, this is an opportunity to share her views about health and ethical concerns associated with meat-eating. In short, vegetarianism is yet another cultural, albeit local, “place” where rational inquiry can take place.

In light of these cultural tensions, we have an obligation to attempt some kind of ethical resolve by way of public debate. The case for normative reflection becomes even more urgent when we take into account how speciesism shares the same kind of logic as other beliefs which are widely believed to be immoral. I now turn to the second condition for when people are morally responsible for not investigating conventional norms; namely, the logical connection or conceptual link between the accepted practice (or belief) and what is commonly believed to
be immoral or controversial. In what follows, I present Peter Singer’s and Tom Regan’s arguments that factory farming practices and speciesism are immoral. I rehearse their views because they reveal the logical connection between factory farming (and speciesism) and what is widely believed to be immoral—arbitrary discrimination.

As I mentioned previously, certain people are debating the issue. Some critics claim that factory farming methods should be discontinued or seriously modified because they present certain health risks to humans while causing extensive and long-term environmental damage.¹⁴⁵ Because the confinement of large numbers of animals requires extensive use of antibiotics, farm animals are now becoming resistant to various bacteria. This state of affairs puts all of us at risk of succumbing to fairly common illnesses. In addition, critics point out that factory farmed meat products can cause many food borne illnesses and food safety risks.¹⁴⁶ Because raising cattle for meat consumption uses more natural resources than, say, growing soybeans, other critics argue that the beef industry is ultimately wasteful and grossly inefficient. Some environmentalists advocate legislative changes to factory farming practices because concentrated animal waste contaminates groundwater, lakes, and rivers. They strongly urge people and countries to do what they can to deter these wasteful and polluting practices.

Peter Singer, however, presents a utilitarian argument for why we should radically modify factory farming practices.¹⁴⁷ Utilitarianism is a moral theory that, generally speaking, aims to promote pleasure (or happiness) and reduce

suffering.\textsuperscript{148} Since pain and suffering are assumed to be intrinsically bad, what we morally ought to do is act so as to bring about the most happiness (and the least amount of suffering) for everyone affected by the outcome. We arrive at the best possible consequences after the interests of every being capable of suffering and affected by the action are taken into equal consideration. For the utilitarian, it is axiomatic that everyone’s interests count equally, no more and no less than others. If a being suffers there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into equal consideration.\textsuperscript{149} Animals have interests since they have the capacity to suffer.\textsuperscript{150} So, the interests of animals should be taken into equal consideration with human interests when deciding if certain practices that affect them are morally permissible. It is on this basic moral principle that Singer’s argument for why current factory farming practices are immoral ultimately rests.

According to Singer, the widespread acceptance of factory farming practices largely depends on the belief that human interests (should) count more than nonhuman interests. For Singer, this pervasive, anthropocentric attitude is immoral since all sentient creatures, whether humans or nonhuman animals, are


\textsuperscript{149} It is important to note that “equal consideration” does not necessarily imply equal treatment. Equal consideration for different beings may lead to different treatment and the appropriation of different rights. According to Singer, when we assign women the right to have an abortion, for instance, equal consideration does not mean we should also assign men abortion rights: “Since a man cannot have an abortion, it is meaningless to talk of his right to have one. Since dogs can’t vote, it is meaningless to talk of their right to vote.” Singer, p. 2.

\textsuperscript{150} The seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes argued that animals were incapable of experiencing pain because they lacked consciousness or a living soul. On his view, animals were “thoughtless brutes,” \textit{automata}, machines. See René Descartes, \textit{Discourse on Method} (portions reprinted in \textit{Animal Rights and Human Obligations}, eds. Tom Regan and Peter Singer (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976)).
members of the moral community who deserve to have their interests (i.e., their capacity to suffer) taken into equal consideration. Again, for the utilitarian the only defensible boundary for moral consideration is whether the being is capable of suffering and not whether that being belongs to a certain species category. To mark this moral boundary by species affiliation would be to mark it in an arbitrary manner, similar to the kind of moral arbitrariness that Singer believes racists and sexists rely on.

Racism and sexism are officially considered immoral beliefs. As members of a moral community who share a common language about right and wrong, we are expected to know that proper moral treatment should not be based on arbitrary characteristics such as race or sex. For the white racist, only the interests of white people matter. The interests of blacks either count less or not at all. This attitude, however, is widely believed to be immoral. That is, it is permissible to condemn people who use race as a self-serving criterion to promote and protect the interests of their racial group over and above the interests of the members of another racial group. The belief that all races have the capacity to suffer and thus have morally considerable interests is part of our common moral understanding. Like racists, sexists also use an arbitrary characteristic (i.e., sex) to promote and protect the interests of their sexual group over and above the interests of the members of another sexual group. They too ignore the utilitarian (moral) principle that all those who are capable of suffering
should have their interests taken into account equally when deciding whether certain practices that affect them are morally permissible.\textsuperscript{151}

According to Singer, speciesism, “a prejudice or bias in favor of the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species,”\textsuperscript{152} is akin to racism and sexism because species affiliation is no more morally relevant than using race or sex to determine membership in the moral community:

Racists violate the principle of equality by giving greater weight to the interests of members of their own race when there is a clash between their interests and the interests of those of another race. Sexists violate the principle of equality by favoring the interests of their own sex. Similarly, the speciesist allows the interests of their own species to override the greater interests of member of other species. The pattern is identical in each case.\textsuperscript{153}

For Singer, speciesism is a perspective about animals that depends on the same line of reasoning as racism and sexism.\textsuperscript{154} Like racists and sexists, speciesists ignore the moral (utilitarian) principle that if a being suffers there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into equal consideration.

Speciesists arbitrarily distinguish themselves as subjects of moral consideration while excluding the interests of other beings in order to maintain and protect their interests.

\textsuperscript{151} It is important to note that the account given here accords with Singer’s utilitarian justification for why racism and sexism are wrong. According to the rights view, racism and sexism are immoral beliefs because they fail to recognize the inherent moral worth and moral rights of all human beings.

\textsuperscript{152} Singer, 6.

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 9.

\textsuperscript{154} Speciesism is also a kind of essentialism, which runs into serious difficulties both conceptually and in its application to morality. Why should moral consideration be deserved solely on the basis of a certain sequence of genes? We must also ask, assuming that genetic content is relevant, why the relevant boundary is at the species level, rather than at the gene, individual, subspecies, order, phylum, or kingdom levels.
According to Singer, the demonstrable arbitrariness of speciesism should encourage people to change the way they think about factory farming practices. On his view, we should publicly demand significant changes in the beef, egg, and dairy industries. When more people critique factory farming, Singer believes that battery cages, veal crates, sow stalls, and all other devices that prevent animals from moving about freely will be made larger or eliminated. In addition, if intensive farming methods were abandoned and we all became vegetarians, Singer believes that the aggregated consequences for everyone affected by factory farming would be better: "by ceasing to rear and kill animals for food, we can make so much extra food available for humans that, properly distributed, it would eliminate starvation and malnutrition from this planet [and] million of animals will be spared considerable pain."155

However, there are others who believe that Singer’s utilitarian argument fails to capture the fundamental problem with factory farming practices. According to Tom Regan, making battery cages and sow stalls larger or devising methods to make factory farming painless for the animal will not solve the problem.156 On his view, the only way to right factory farming practices is to eliminate them all together. That is, the essential problem with factory farming practices is not that they cause animals to suffer per se but rather these practices are immoral because they violate the basic rights of animals.

All things being equal, we believe people have a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, to mention just a few. It is generally accepted that

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155 Singer, xxv.
human beings have moral rights by virtue of God’s assignment or by some other secular explanation regarding our inherent moral worth. Others argue that human beings have moral rights because of their capacity to reason. On this view, the ability to reason becomes the defining characteristic that makes a being worthy of moral rights. However, as Regan explains, if rationality is the defining characteristic that makes the attribution of rights plausible, then some animals would certainly fall under that category since they exhibit the ability to reason. Nonhuman primates, whales, dolphins, and other normal mammals appear to exercise certain kinds of reasoning skills. To be sure, there is no clear line to draw in this case. Whether other mammals or nonmammalian animals like reptiles possess reason (or consciousness) is a notoriously contentious issue and well beyond the scope of the present inquiry. But when some nonhuman animals are like humans in being rational and if rationality explains the attribution of rights to humans, then the same moral judgment should be made when it comes to animals. So, according to Regan, they too should have moral rights, including the right not to be harmed, killed or treated as mere means for human ends (or interests).

159 Regan limits this category to mammals one year of age or older.
But there is a larger problem here. Some humans are unable to reason yet they retain certain moral rights. For instance, moral patients—human infants, young children, and those who suffer from mental diseases such as dementia, schizophrenia, and senility—have moral rights even though they do not possess full rational skills. In fact, some animals have more rational abilities than these human moral patients. When it comes to moral patients, the rational criterion dissolves and the proverbial door opens to welcome animals into the rights view.

As opposed to average moral agents who are individuals with full rational capacities and who are therefore responsible for what they do, moral patients are unable to formulate, let alone follow moral principles. They lack the cognitive prerequisites that would enable them to control their own behavior in ways that would make them morally responsible for what they do. As Regan puts it, “moral patients cannot do what is right, nor can they do what is wrong.”\textsuperscript{161} Their rational or cognitive inabilities (and their lack of moral responsibility), however, do not preclude the attribution of moral rights. According to Regan, these individuals remain part of our moral community because they are “experiencing subjects of life” who have individual welfares logically independent of their being the object of anyone else’s interests.\textsuperscript{162} Since moral patients, like moral agents, are experiencing subjects of life who deserve moral rights, we have a moral (and in some cases a legal) duty to respect those rights.

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 152.
\textsuperscript{162} An “experiencing subject-of-a-life” is an individual whose life is characterized by: “beliefs and desires; perception, memory, desires, and a sense of the future, including their own future; an emotional life together with feelings of pleasure and pain; preference and welfare-interests; the ability to initiate action in pursuit of their desires and goals; a psychophysical identity over time; and an individual welfare in the sense that their experiential life fares will or ill for them, logically independently of their utility for others and logically independently of their being the object of anyone else’s interests.” Regan, 243.
Because people share with certain animals the ability to be experiencing subjects of life, Regan believes that it is arbitrary to exclude animals from the moral patient category. Certainly, there are important differences between nonhuman animals and humans but for Regan the ability to be an experiencing subject of life is the relevant similarity and a sufficient (but not necessary) condition for having inherent worth and rights. Simply put, Regan argues that if the attribution of moral rights ultimately depends on the ability to be an experiencing subject of life (and not on reason) and since animals qualify as experiencing subjects of life, animals have (moral patient) rights. If nonhuman animals are moral patients and since food-animal production is an industry that routinely treats animals as renewable resources for human interests (no matter how trivial), Regan concludes that the industry violates the basic rights of animals and is therefore immoral.

In the case of human moral patients, it seems clear that, as members of a moral community, we accept the belief that the ability to reason is irrelevant when deciding who has certain moral rights. In other words, Regan’s reasoning appeals to an established belief about the broad scope of (human) moral rights; namely, one does not have to be a moral agent to receive moral rights. Despite their lack of full rational capacities, it is widely accepted that it is discriminatory to deny young children, infants, and those inflicted with mental diseases certain moral rights. Therefore, given the current moral context, people have a compelling reason to investigate whether the exclusion of (certain) animals from the moral patient category is a form of arbitrary discrimination.
Some might question my reference to Singer and Regan and how their arguments support my overall conclusion that the lack of widespread public debate about factory farming is due to affected ignorance. Perhaps, one might claim, the weaknesses of Singer and Regan’s views will undermine my project. For instance, it is not clear whether we would be better off if intense factory farming methods were abandoned as Singer suggests. Ending current factory farming practices could result in massive unemployment, bankrupmed industries, and substantial increases in meat, dairy, and egg prices. Because changes in factory farming practices could result in more aggregated unhappiness than happiness, one could effectively argue that Singer’s proposal to induce radical changes in agribusiness practices is immoral (on utilitarian grounds).

Another common complaint against Singer’s approach is the inability of utilitarianism to show why speciesism is wrong. If everyone’s (i.e., human and nonhuman) interests were equally considered, it is still possible that the final utilitarian calculus would result in human interests outweighing animal interests. Theoretically, therefore, utilitarianism could provide a basis on which to defend recognizable speciesist practices. Despite his powerful denunciations against speciesism, Singer’s utilitarian position could sanction it.

Not only is utilitarianism unable to show that speciesism is wrong, it is also unable to convincingly demonstrate that vegetarianism is morally obligatory. It is not clear if the short- or long-term global economic implications of a sudden or gradual transition to vegetarianism would result in greater utility (more happiness

163 See Regan, chapter 6.
164 This criticism is also directed toward the utilitarian explanation for why racism and sexism are immoral.
than unhappiness) as Singer suggested. Moreover, if more people are happy eating meat, then, on utilitarian grounds, meat-eating would be moral. His argument that vegetarianism is morally obligatory is seriously undermined by utilitarianism itself and this, for many critics, ultimately renders his approach self-defeating.

Regan also has his critics. One obvious difficulty with Regan’s rights view is his theoretical assumption (or postulate) that humans have equal inherent moral worth. Recall for Regan all human life, moral patients included, have equal moral worth and inherent value. According to R.G. Frey, however, this assumption is far from evident, “there are good reasons not to judge deficient human life either of equal value to normal, adult human life or, in extreme cases, even of much value at all.” Another critic of Regan’s proposal, Alan White, argues that animals cannot have rights since they are not “logically possible subjects of rights.” On his view, since animals cannot insist on, waive, or surrender rights it is logically impossible for them to possess rights in the first place. Critics also raise concerns about Regan’s insistence that only experiencing subjects of life have inherent value and not all subjects of life.

These are noteworthy objections but they do not necessarily weigh against the present inquiry. The question that concerns us is not whether Singer and Regan present adequate moral theories about the treatment of farm animals

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but, rather, whether there are cultural conditions that should compel average moral agents to investigate factory farming practices. I consider Singer’s and Regan’s arguments because they show the conceptual link between factory farming and the wrongness of arbitrary discrimination.

Specifically, Singer’s argument demonstrated the conceptual link between speciesism and the wrongness of racism and sexism. Like sexists, speciesists justify differential (and mostly inferior) treatment on the basis of a morally irrelevant characteristic—species affiliation. Like racists, speciesists use an arbitrary characteristic to protect the interests of members of their group against those of another group. I appeal to Singer’s argument because it presents (and is grounded on) a basic moral principle which we all accept—it is wrong to differentiate moral treatment on the basis of arbitrary (morally irrelevant) characteristics. If speciesism has conceptual links to arbitrary discrimination (e.g., racism and sexism) and since the wrongness of discrimination is part of our moral and social context, then average moral agents have (culturally derived) reasons to examine the widespread acceptance of speciesist practices. It is a cultural condition that ought to incite more debate. In this way, Singer’s argument is relevant to my project.

Regan’s proposal that animals have moral rights is largely based on the same kind of logic that justifies the attribution of rights to human moral patients. Since this attribution is part of our moral and social context—most people accept the belief that one does not have to be a rational moral agent in order to have certain moral rights—we should be compelled to investigate whether speciesism
arbitrary discriminates against (other) moral patients. I appeal to Regan’s argument because it presents (and is grounded on) a basic moral principle which we all accept—it is wrong to differentiate moral treatment on the basis of arbitrary (morally irrelevant) characteristics. The conventional belief about the wrongness of arbitrary discrimination is central to Singer and Regan’s arguments; and, in this way, their efforts are relevant to my project. In other words, they demonstrate the moral association between the general acceptance of factory farming (and/or speciesism) and the widely-held belief about the wrongness of arbitrary discrimination. Their arguments also give support to my belief that cultural membership can provide people with compelling reasons to investigate the moral complexities associated with conventional practices and beliefs.

Up to this point I have been examining the social and moral context in which factory farming takes place. We are part of a moral community that officially condemns animal cruelty practices; however, the intensive methods used on most factory farms continue to receive little public scrutiny, even though those practices are akin to animal cruelty. The limited debate about animal welfare, the contrasting point of view that many pet owners have toward their animals, and the dietary alternative of vegetarianism all place additional strain on our general acceptance of factory farming.

Furthermore, if factory farming depends on speciesism and if speciesism is a form of arbitrary discrimination (an act that is widely believed to be immoral), then it seems to me that extensive public debate about our dominant relationship to animals should be taking place. As I see it, these apparent social tensions and
compelling moral associations should cause more people to engage in critical moral reflection. It is clear that cultural factors influence our dietary habits and general attitude toward farm animals; behind a desire to eat meat lies a long history of dietary practices and human dominance over animals. But as ingrained as speciesism and meat-eating is in our way of life, I think that these cultural tensions should produce inner frustrations, doxastic gaps, and suspicions.

A critic might object that my view presupposes that average moral agents are already aware that farm animals suffer. Before individuals are able to recognize these cultural inconsistencies as inconsistencies, they must first know or have a suspicion that farm animals may suffer under factory farming practices. After all, there is nothing inconsistent about morally condemning the Johnson’s puppy-mill while condoning factory farms if one believes that farm animals do not suffer. For my critic, this kind of ignorance is possible since, on my own admission, there is no mass debate educating the public on this topic.

This objection has a point, up to a point. Yes, corporations will spend every last dollar to ensure that what has to happen in order to produce large amounts of animal flesh for human consumption remains hidden from public scrutiny. Developments in farming techniques that deprive millions of animals of freedom of movement go largely unreported. The average viewer of American television is exposed only to glimpses of factory farming practices during infrequent “specials” on agriculture or food production. Geographically, most factory farms are cloistered, tucked away from plain view. Most of us have never visited a pig farm or could distinguish a storage barn from a broiler shed.
Language is another effective tool for masking the connection between meat-eating and animal suffering. Euphemisms like “poultry,” “beef,” and “pork” shield us from the reality of what it is we are in fact consuming—a former living, sentient being. Animals are rendered being-less by innocuous phrases such as “food-producing unit,” “protein harvester,” “converting machines,” “crops,” and “biomachines.” When animals are made into objects, “things” to be bought and sold, the moral connection between my eating them and their suffering dissolves.

If the public is ignorant about the ways in which billions of animals suffer under factory farming, I believe their ignorance can be overcome by the desire and determination to learn more. Though some people may believe that our government actually establishes and enforces laws that protect animal interests, there is little if any attempt to confirm that comforting belief. I think most people do not want to know how their meat is produced. When confronted with this issue people generally reply, “Don’t tell me, you’ll ruin my appetite.” Knowledge about factory farming (including slaughterhouses) is knowledge most people do not want to have. We do not want to see or hear about what transpires on most hog or chicken farms. So, we choose to remain ignorant by not asking questions. It is a kind of ignorance, however, that arises from the deep-down suspicion that animals may have been mistreated somewhere along the way. The collective ignorance about factory farming methods and the ways in which animals are made to suffer centers on the suspicion that these practices are not conducted with the interests of animals in mind. Driving behind a tractor trailer that is hauling
hundreds of chickens in cramped wire-mesh cages ought to make people suspicious that food animals are not treated like many of our beloved pets.

Moreover, the idea that people do not have suspicions about animal suffering overlooks the likely probability that most people are aware of the controversy surrounding veal production. Compared to other factory farming practices, the production of veal has received the most public attention. At least, it is fair to say that the average moral agent knows at some level that some animals (e.g., calves) suffer as a result of factory farming practices and that some organizations (e.g., People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, The Humane Society of the United States, etc.) are debating the issue.

Again, given our social context, it is likely that most people have suspicions that animals suffer so that we can eat them. These suspicions should motivate individuals to question our almost universal acceptance of factory farming. Of course, there is no massive debate. I believe that the lack of widespread public debate about factory farming is explained by people choosing to ignore cultural indications of moral conflict and/or troubling moral implications. On my view, the lack of widespread debate about factory farming is probably due to affected ignorance—people choosing not to investigate cultural inconsistencies, disturbing moral associations, and their (subsequent) suspicions. These cultural conditions compel (affected) agents to choose ignorance over inquiry. This brings us to the third condition for moral responsibility: we can reasonably show that people have an interest in not questioning the inconsistency between the acceptance of factory farming and the
general disdain for animal cruelty practices, the moral link between speciesism and wrongful discrimination, and/or their suspicions that animals suffer so that people can eat them.

In this case, satisfying culinary tastes, making a profit, and gaining the (sometimes intangible) social rewards for conforming to long-held culinary traditions, such as cooking the Thanksgiving turkey or the Easter ham, are some possible motivating factors. The resonant fear that one might be participating in an immoral practice could also explain the unwillingness to investigate one's suspicions. Rather than confront the possibility that the truth about factory farming practices will lie heavy on one's moral conscience, people choose to ignore cultural opportunities (including their suspicions) to critically reflect. As I see it, the present ignorance of factory farming practices is similar to the ignorance of Nazi concentration camps in WWII. After the camps were liberated, some German civilians claimed that they were not aware of the atrocious activities occurring in their vicinity. Although most concentration camps, like slaughterhouses, chicken sheds, and cattle lots, were hidden away from most eyes, I suspect that in both cases it is not the inability to find out what is going on as much as a desire not to know just in case the facts “burden” their moral conscience. Of course, it is possible that this kind of moral ignorance, again in both cases, is due to the comforting belief that the victims of whatever it is that goes on in those places are not members of one’s own group.  

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168 See Singer, 217. There may be aspects of the two phenomena that are not analogous. Some argue, for instance, that while certain parallels make the comparison appealing, only the holocaust can be described as ‘evil.’ See J.M. Coetzee, The Lives of Animals (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999). Timothy Costelloe, however, argues that the two events share
The hegemonic elements in affected ignorance are particularly relevant here. In some situations, one’s motivation for choosing affected ignorance lies in the desire to maintain a privileged social status. Recall in chapters two and three how I argued that slave owners have a vested interest in maintaining their elevated social status. To grant blacks, for example, full personhood is to also bestow upon them civil and legal privileges, including the right to vote and own property. As long as the institution of slavery remains intact (without public dispute), however, such possibilities are eliminated and the slave owner’s social and political power is fortified. In the present case of maintaining factory farming and meat-eating practices, privilege status may also play a role.

According to Carol Adams, “The way gender politics is structured into our world is related to how we view animals, especially animals who are consumed.” On her view, meat-eating practices are cultural expressions of male power and privilege. Adams explains that the symbol of masculinity is associated with the general acceptance of factory farming practices and meat-eating in the sense that part of what it means to be a man includes domination over animals and the consumption of meat. One aspect of manliness is to demonstrate power over animals. Young boys learn from their fathers, for instance, that shooting and trapping an animal is a proper expression of masculinity, strength and power. The masculine association with meat-eating corresponds to the prevailing beliefs that “real” men eat meat while

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vegetarianism is a “girl” thing. Popular conceptions of vegetarianism are usually associated with weakness and passivity, or more precisely, femininity. Vegetables represent the “side” dish while meat is the “main,” more valuable part of the meal. According to Adams, “Men who become vegetarians challenge an essential part of the masculine role. They are opting for women’s food. How dare they? Refusing meat means a man is effeminate, a 'sissy', a ‘fruit.’”

For Adams, when men choose not to eat meat they repudiate certain masculine privileges, including the perception that they are strong, active, and powerful. If meat is part of the cultural mythology of male power then to scrutinize meat-eating (and factory farming practices) is at the same time to threaten a long-standing conception about patriarchal symbols of dominance. Whether it is the fear that one might be participating in an immoral practice or the desire to maintain certain gender schemas, the general failure to recognize the cultural conditions for public debate may be due to people protecting their interests.

Now, the three conditions for moral responsibility I set out (or established) have been met. First, there is the inconsistency between factory farming and the general social disdain for animal cruelty practices. Second, there is the logical connection between speciesism and arbitrary discrimination, and finally, there are reasonable explanations as to why people may want to ignore the reasons for debate. I argued that the first two conditions should motivate people to investigate whether factory farming practices are immoral. To be sure, absolute doxastic coherence may not be humanly possible. But when cultural inconsistencies and troubling moral associations tug at our culturally-supported

\[170\] Adams, 48.
beliefs and practices, we, as responsible moral agents, should be asking more questions.

The kind of debate I envision is inspired primarily by James Montmarquet's normative approach to epistemology. As I noted earlier, his model provides the basis for responsible moral reflection. Recall for Montmarquet, a responsible moral agent examines her beliefs in accordance with three sets of regulative virtues: the virtues of intellectual impartiality, sobriety, and courage. A responsible epistemic agent—one who does her best to form justified beliefs—exhibits impartiality when she remains open to the ideas of others and is willing to exchange ideas with them. This epistemic and virtuous approach permits the agent to confront her own fallibility as well as the fallibility of conventional norms. It is almost inevitable that vegetarians will eat with meat eaters and it is very likely that their dietary choice will spur dinner-time discussion. In this situation, the vegetarian sees the opportunity as one of education and thoughtful debate; but in most cases it is not. Instead, it is a teasing game of manipulation, defensiveness, trivialization, and dismissiveness. At times, ludicrous questions are raised (i.e., “What about the broccoli’s feelings? Don’t they count?”). These questions imply that the entire discussion is ludicrous. What to a vegetarian is of political, personal, existential, and ethical importance becomes for others mere dinnertime entertainment. Our moral commitment to intellectual impartiality, however, promises a more reasonable, thoughtful discussion about vegetarianism and meat-eating. It also calls for an honest appraisal about the possibility that one’s conventional beliefs might be immoral. Indeed, history
reminds us that convention is not immune to wide scale injustice (e.g., racism and sexism). When we keep aware historical prejudices, we are better equipped, I believe, to resist the all too common tendency to blindly conform to status quo values and practices.

The lay argument that animals do not deserve moral patient rights simply because they are not human beings is seriously challenged by the virtues of intellectual sobriety, which include the commitment not to embrace what is poorly justified. This run-of-the-mill argument has no real force within this moral and epistemic context because species category does not, by itself, rationally warrant such a moral distinction. Finally, the virtues of intellectual courage—the willingness to conceive and examine alternatives to popular beliefs and to persevere in the face of opposition from others—is relevant to the person who, deep-down, feels compelled to engage in a more reasonable discussion about the moral dimensions of factory farming or vegetarianism but is fearful of how others may react to her inquiry. She does not want to be the object of ridicule or to be perceived as silly or childish, so she retracts. A responsible knower, however, would confront her own fears and welcome the opportunity for critical reflection as her moral duty. She would recognize that the failure to embrace these epistemic virtues could put her at moral risk of perpetuating unjust but socially accepted practices. When average moral agents ground their beliefs (and subsequently their actions) on intellectual virtues, the tendency to uncritically accept conventional beliefs and practices is reduced.
We can think of these virtues as good intellectual character traits—qualities that a responsible knower should have. One does her best to form reasonable beliefs. The person who engages in debate about vegetarianism but does so in a dismissive manner is not off the moral hook so to speak. The quality of the debate is important here since, as I have explained, mere discussion is insufficient for moral exemption. An agent is worthy of praise only when she confronts the reasons for debate with genuine inquisitiveness, fair-mindedness, open-mindedness, intellectual carefulness, and thoroughness.

I am not claiming that Montmarquet’s intellectual virtues will lead one to the moral truth of factory farming or meat-eating, assuming that there is such a metaphysical property. Rather, I make reference to them because they can serve as a conceptual model from which a responsible public debate should take place. These virtues extend a positive account of what it means to act as a responsible moral agent in the face of cultural influences. I also do not deny that this sort of debate is already taking place in limited circles. Peter Singer, Tom Regan, and grass-roots organizations are actively involved in debating factory farming. My point is, given the cultural conditions aforementioned, the public at large has the rational capacity, compelling reasons, and thus a moral obligation to actively join in the debate.

Our understanding about animals, that reference point from which we conceive “reality,” relies mostly on unacknowledged inconsistencies and conventional prejudices. This perspective, however, is so pervasive in our culture that one might assume no further justification or extensive debate is needed. I
argue that this is not the case. An extensive, responsible moral debate is warranted since the general acceptance about the ways in which we understand and treat animals involves important and relevant moral beliefs.

In this chapter, I suggested that affected ignorance not only perpetuates the current hegemonic attitude and treatment toward certain animals, but it also explains the lack of extensive public debate about intensive factory farming practices. I ground my conclusion on three conditions. Specifically, I showed that the widespread acceptance of factory farming practices is inconsistent with prevailing social attitudes about animal cruelty. Other cultural conditions including the low-level public discussion and the increasing popularity of vegetarianism also point to societal tensions with factory farming and meat-eating. On my view, these cultural inconsistencies should create suspicion and provoke more public debate. Speciesism was also shown to link with other moral beliefs (i.e., the wrongness of sexism, racism, and denying moral patients their rights) that are considered immoral in our culture. Since the wrongness of moral arbitrariness is widely accepted and it was shown to have conceptual links with speciesism, I argued that we have another compelling reason to engage in a broader debate about our dominant relationship with animals. Given the lack of extensive public debate, however, it seems to me that people are choosing not to investigate. It is a choice motivated by self-interest, including the rewards of cultural conformity, satisfying culinary tastes, maintaining industrial profit, protecting a privileged social status, and the suspicion that one might be participating in an immoral practice. As moral agents we have a responsibility to do what we can to resist the
far too common temptation to blindly accept conventional practices and beliefs. To not take this moral obligation seriously is to put ourselves at moral risk.

In this project, I hope to have developed an effective model for examining when people ought to be held morally responsible for failing to debate conventional practices and beliefs. I argued that the concept of affected ignorance and Montmarquet’s set of intellectual virtues best deal with the issue of people not questioning social norms (i.e., slavery and factory farming). I showed that Michael Slote’s cultural defense view fails to fully appreciate how certain social conditions can be the source from which individuals forge a critical response to conventional norms. I also demonstrated that Cheshire Calhoun’s model cannot help us determine whether agents are responsible for their failure to debate. In the end, I hope that my efforts in this dissertation enhance our understanding of affected ignorance and the moral implications of blind social acceptance.
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