

Argument Reconstruction Assignment #3
PHIL 140, Fall 2020

Due: on Blackboard before your discussion section Oct. 12 – 16

You must also bring a copy to discussion section.

Grading: ARAs are graded according to the ARA rubric posted on the course website.

Prompt: In “Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance,” Michele Moody-Adams presents (but does not endorse) an argument to the effect that “it is ‘only fair’ to judge people by ‘the standards of their own day’.”

Find the argument for this claim in the paragraph attached below. Reconstruct that argument and present it in numbered premise-conclusion form. Your reconstruction should provide a plausible interpretation of the argument. Each of its steps should be a clear, straightforward claim. The reconstructed argument also should be *valid*—i.e., such that the conclusion cannot be false if the premises are true.

Note that the argument is in the passage, but only part of the passage! The beginning parts of the paragraph are not parts of the argument. Here’s the passage:

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