Notes on “Trying Out One’s New Sword” by Mary Midgeley

moral isolationism, what: the view that we can never understand any culture except our own well enough to make judgments about it.
- the world is sharply divided into separate societies, each with its own system of thought.
- we ought to respect and tolerate these systems and are therefore forbidden to criticize them.

Criticisms
1) On Respect: Moral isolationism makes two incompatible claims--that we cannot understand any other culture, and that we must respect other cultures. How can we respect another culture if we cannot understand it? Respect implies a favorable judgment; I cannot pass a favorable judgment on something I cannot comprehend.
2) On Praise and Criticism: If we cannot understand other cultures enough to criticize them, then we cannot praise them either. We praise others when they have not given us any reason to criticize them, which means that we must be capable of understanding what criticism of them would be like.
3) On Crude Opinions: what we should fear are not judgments about one culture by a member of another, but rather crude judgments. We can criticize another culture without being crude; what makes crude judgments crude is not that they come from outsiders--people from other cultures--but that they are ignorant and insensitive.
4) Assessing our Own Culture: we cannot judge our own culture if we could not judge others. To critically assess ourselves, we must be capable of comparing our own culture with others so that we can glimpse what is positive or negative about our culture when compared with them. Other cultures provide a framework of comparison that we need to evaluate our own practices and policies.
5) The Motivation for Moral Isolationism: people are driven towards isolationism because they disapprove of the oppression of other cultures. They think that it is the capacity to judge other cultures that leads to their oppression, hence the isolationists undermine that capacity by claiming that we cannot understand other cultures enough to judge them. But being repulsed by the oppression of one culture by another is itself a moral judgment about the oppressed culture, and such a judgment would not be possible if moral isolationism were true. So the standard motivation to adopt an isolationist perspectives presupposes the ability to judge other cultures, which is precisely what the isolationist denies.
6) The Formation of Our Own Culture: if cultures literally could not understand one another, then our own culture could not have been formed. Our culture is made up of influences from other cultures, and cultures cannot influence one another if they cannot understand one another.