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Reply to Gines

Eamonn Callan

Faculty of Education
Stanford University
ecallan@stanford.edu

Kathryn Gines's subtle and wide-ranging comments on my paper raise many issues I cannot adequately explore here. I am especially intrigued by the use that she makes of an example from Fanon to provoke some questions about my argument, and my reply will focus narrowly on these.

The efforts of colonial authorities in French-occupied Algeria to eradicate veiling among the Arab population were not some bungling attempt to elevate the status of women in the indigenous society; they were rather part of an attempt to undermine that society. As Fanon noted, discarding the veil took on variable meanings in

these circumstances. During one phase of the occupation, mass unveiling became a diversionary tactic to create a semblance of compliance to imperial power among those who continued to resist the occupation. During another phase, it was adopted as a convenient means of hiding contraband from the authorities. Gines adds another possibility that Fanon did not envisage:

But what can be said about the woman who removed the veil as an act of resistance to her own culture or to her own subordination within that culture? This resistance may be inaccurately described as a form of assimilation or as complicity with assimilationist pressures. For Callan, it seems that a woman might voluntarily assimilate to the occupying culture and still avoid the charge of being complicit with the oppression of assimilationism. But what about the woman who resists pressures within her culture with no desire to assimilate to the dominating culture?

My rather scant analysis of assimilation in the "The Ethics of Assimilation" does not show how we are to distinguish between abandoning one's formative culture to join another and borrowing from another culture in an effort morally to improve one's formative culture. Gines's question exposes the importance of that distinction. The distinction matters not just because any analysis of assimilation that keeps tolerably close to ordinary language will not confuse one kind of case with the other; it also matters because the ethical status of a particular act of assimilation might be very different from the ethical status of a superficially similar act that combines morally progressive borrowing from an alien culture with fidelity to the formative culture.

To make headway here, more needs to be said about the concept or concepts of culture that assimilation presupposes. If assimilation involves leaving one culture and joining another, then what we count as assimilation depends on what we take “culture” to mean in this connection. On one common interpretation, cultures are societies, and therefore, a corresponding concept of assimilation would strictly require moving from one society to another. Will Kymlicka’s influential idea of a “societal culture” captures that concept well: a societal culture is “a set of institutions, which has historically developed over time in a given territory, covering both public and private life, with a common language, which provides people with a wide range of choices about how to lead their lives” (Kymlicka 2000, 53). But culture can also mean something like a way of life more or less self-consciously shared by a particular group, defined by religion, a cherished common ancestry or some such criteria either alone or in combination. The corresponding idea of leaving a culture to join another is not tightly linked to migration because the same way of life can be lived in different societies, and a single society can harbor a teeming diversity of cultures in this second sense. When I came to live in the U.S.A. seven years ago, I found myself living in a neighborhood very like the one I had left, shopping in stores almost identical to the ones I had used in Canada, and having much the same kind of academic conversation in the same language with students and colleagues who were remarkably like their Canadian counterparts. I was now living in an entirely new culture in Kymlicka’s societal sense but in “the way of life” sense there was negligible discontinuity between my experiences in the two societies. Conversely, a

Latina who is admitted to Stanford University from a rural community a hundred miles away and whose ancestors have lived in California for many generations might experience a radical rupture of identity as she abandons one way of life for another while traveling only a small distance within a single, but culturally variegated society.

So perhaps we could usefully distinguish between two concepts of assimilation corresponding to the two concepts of culture I have differentiated. One of these strictly requires moving from one societal culture to another; the other has to do with moving between communities constituted by different ways of life that may thrive alongside each other in a common societal culture or penetrate the boundaries between different societal cultures. My primary interest in “The Ethics of Assimilation” was assimilation in the sense that connects with cultures as ways of life rather than societies. But for members of a colonized society who are resisting imperial assimilationism, their paramount concern is surely with the preservation of their societal culture. The colonizing power seeks to marginalize or even destroy altogether the indigenous societal culture and to replace it with a set of institutions – a new and coercively imposed societal culture -- that can be more easily exploited for imperial purposes.

I think this helps us to see more clearly the difference between the woman under French occupation who unveils to express a new commitment to the colonizer’s societal culture and the one who unveils as an act of protest to patriarchal norms within her own societal culture. The former assimilates in both senses. The latter assimilates in neither sense only if we assume that

the indigenous society is not already to some degree internally diversified, with an established beachhead for those who support each other in opposing patriarchy through acts such as unveiling and who are accepted, perhaps only very grudgingly, by the more traditionalist members of the society. Alternatively, if the societal culture is already diversified to that extent, then the woman who unveils only to protest it patriarchy is presumably a case of intrasocietal assimilation from the dominant, traditionalist way of life to an emerging, more egalitarian alternative. Of course, one who attempts to challenge the patriarchal norms of a given society, whether it is colonized or not, can meet with much less than grudging acceptance: she may be imprisoned, murdered, shunned or exiled. And so there may be no viable alternative to intersocietal assimilation after all. But suppose the necessary beachhead for an anti-patriarchal way of life does exist in the indigenous societal culture. Is there anything useful to be said in general about the ethical difference between choosing to assimilate to the colonial societal culture and choosing instead to cleave to its indigenous counterpart while attempting to protest and overcome its patriarchy?

Other things being equal, I am inclined to think we have strong reason to regard the choice to maintain fidelity to the indigenous society as particularly admirable. By so doing, the individual is likely to be better placed to help maintain a societal culture that is under unjust assault from outside, and to resist the harm and humiliation that befalls its members as a consequence of the assault. At the same time, her protest at its patriarchal norms has the credibility of one who remains a cultural insider, at least in the eyes of those who do not renounce her as a

traitor to their society. And so far as her protest achieves some success, she mitigates the suffering of some of the society's least fortunate members - those who are oppressed because of both colonial occupation and patriarchy. But this is certain to be a desperately hard and it may well be an ultimately unsuccessful moral endeavor. No many people will have the mettle to make that choice without turning back at some point to intersocietal assimilation, where that option is available, or exhausted acquiescence to patriarchal tradition. Those who stay the course properly belong among our saints and heroes. But merely to acknowledge that point is also to see why we should be very slow to condemn those who choose intersocietal assimilation. If one does not or cannot choose what is saintly or heroic, one is not thereby guilty of acting badly; one merely fails at an exalted species of excellence, and almost all us of partake of that failure in one way or another.

References

Kymlicka, Will. *Politics in the Vernacular* (Oxford 2000).