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The Racial Refusenik's Issues, and Ours

Commentary on Eamonn Callan's "The Ethics of Assimilation"

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There is much to appreciate in Eamonn Callan's subtle and probing article. I agree with his major conclusions—I will discuss the two in the category of wrong done to others. But I have real misgivings about how he arrives at these conclusions, namely, via the case of African Americans. Callan takes seriously the notion of gratitude-based filial duty, according to which children of good parents have a special responsibility as adults to love and care for their parents. He considers whether such a duty supports, through moral analogy, the notion that persons may owe by virtue of their (ascribed) racial identity an "identity-conferring commitment" to a particular "cultural community" or "morally strategic association." (486) However, he rejects analogous, gratitude-based arguments against assimilation and against repudiating racial solidarity.

The gratitude-based argument against assimilation is weak. Callan observes that a person might never have participated in or identified with the cultural community associated with her ascribed racial identity; so there would be no ties to this cultural community to betray in joining another. Moreover, those who share a racial identity might not share a commitment to sustaining a distinct culture; some in fact might resist the assumption that there is a common culture—e.g., "black" American culture—that does or should bind them together.

The gratitude-based argument against repudiating racial solidarity fares better in comparison. Let's assume that solidarity among members of a racialized group (to borrow Larry Blum's phrase) plays a strategic role in fighting racism directed at them. Let's also assume that some members of the group fought against this racism, and that today's members are beneficiaries. Proper gratitude thus might seem to require that today's members discharge their ethical debt to their forebears by continuing the fight, which will involve accepting strategic racial solidarity. Yet some persons outside the racialized group might have contributed to the fight as well. If they did, Callan observes, proper gratitude would not be limited to persons who fought in racial solidarity but would extend to all persons who fought against this racism. Gratitude could require anti-racist interracial solidarity—not racial solidarity of a kind that would require members of the racialized group to self-identify as members of the group.

These gratitude-based arguments for an identity-conferring commitment to a racialized culture or group can also be rejected, I believe, because the appeal to gratitude-based duty is not very helpful in the first place. In the case of filial duty, gratitude does not seem to do the obligating work: reciprocity does. Appropriate feelings of gratitude do not in general specify what we should do to discharge an ethical debt to persons who are their object. Perhaps we should honor the

persons in our hearts or publicly, or support a project of theirs, especially if it is connected to the source of our gratitude (e.g., fighting racism). But such requirements threaten to be vague and open-ended. What do I, as an African American in his 30s, owe to Martin Luther King Jr., Jackie Robinson, or my forebears who endured slavery? Can they bequeath to me the obligation join in black solidarity, or interracial solidarity; or might I have merely a humanistic obligation to be a good person? What about gratitude to those who developed worthwhile things such as the polio vaccine or refrigeration? Or to the stranger who pulls me to safety from a car wreck? To be clear, I am not skeptical about the ethical significance of gratitude. I am doubtful about how gratitude itself could ground specific obligations.

This is a prelude to my deeper misgivings about Callan's account of assimilation and racial solidarity. My worry is that his account does not do justice to issues of racial identification *for African Americans*, the group at the center of his discussion. I agree that there is no gratitude-based duty to recognize an identity-conferring commitment to a black cultural community or to black solidarity: not only because of my doubts about grounding obligations on gratitude but also because the appeal to duty is too strong. In a politically liberal society at least, individuals are and should be free to self-identify as they see fit. Yet this is compatible with recognizing that how persons choose to self-identify can be ethically significant and hence may warrant scrutiny, absent any violation of moral duty. It might seem that Callan suggests as much when he refers to "ethical criticism," but he defines the phrase more narrowly in terms of "wrong done to others [or] to the self." (475)

The problem is that emphasis on duty and wrongdoing distorts our analysis of refusals by some members of a racialized group to self-identify as members of the group. This distortion can mirror the failure of these refuseniks to

comprehend the broader ethical significance of their "racial disidentification," as Callan perspicuously calls it. His model is the great golfer Tiger Woods, who "invented a word to name his multiracial identity—he was 'Cablinasian'," a word "meant to stand for his mixture of Caucasian, black, (American) Indian, and Asian ancestry." (482) Woods's "more obtuse critics," according to Callan, fail to understand that he is not "in denial" about his widely being perceived as black. (482) But Callan, like Woods, misses the point of a version of this criticism that is not obtuse. Racial self-identification is primarily important as a public act—not as a matter of private conscience that would reflect facts about one's racial essence.

A solid majority (around 75%) of African Americans are of "mixed race": they have traceable black (i.e., sub-Saharan African) and non-black ancestors. This ancestral heterogeneity is not news to most African American families, whose non-black ancestry is often quite apparent, though they might be surprised about the prevalence of mixed ancestry among African Americans on the whole. Nor must self-identifying African Americans be strictly following the so-called "one-drop rule": many realize that the rule now operates mainly to pick out those persons whose "blackness" is visible, not all those who have a traceable black ancestor. I, for example, do not take my self-identification as African American to reflect who I am essentially, given biology or ancestry. My blackness is hardly a salient aspect of my conception of self when I wake up in the morning and, in a post-racial utopia, would remain a minor aspect throughout the day. Rather, my self-identification as African American is contingent on my milieu, despite (or because of) my typically mixed ancestry. And I do not think that this sensibility is exceptional among African Americans, at the level of social practice.

Many of Woods's critics, I imagine, were never particularly interested in how he self-identifies privately, as a reflection of

his attitude concerning his racial essence. They were interested in whether Woods self-identified as African American in response to his public reception in relevantly race-conscious contexts and, more specifically, whether he so identified for purposes of strategic black solidarity. In other words, we care whether he would make common cause with us in representing African Americans and whether we can feel invited to take pride in his accomplishments as a black person. To this extent, contra Callan, Tiger Woods's racial identity *is* also our business, and not only his own. (491)

Woods, I would grant, does not have a standing moral duty to self-identify as African American. The lack of such a duty, however, does not place his choice to racially disidentify beyond ethical scrutiny. That he has a Thai mother and other non-African ancestry is a misleading rationale for his racial disidentification. Self-identification as African American, I have argued, does not rest entirely on ancestral facts that are supposed to yield a racial essence. Further, self-identification as African American does not necessarily exclude one from also identifying as a member of other non-European ancestral groups; e.g., one could identify as African American *and* Jewish. This should not be confused with racial disidentification that is taken to be supported by a distinctive, mixed-race essence or negation of racial essence. As for Tiger Woods, we of course do not have access to his private motivations for refusing to self-identify as African American; nor is there enough public evidence for us to conclude that his refusal is ethically dubious at the core. Ethical scrutiny of his choice might not sustain ethical criticism of it. But we do know that the stigma that attaches to blackness in anti-black contexts has historically motivated racial disidentification through "passing" or the acceptance of alternative, "higher-status" categories (e.g., mulatto, Coloured).

Against this background, proponents of mixed-race or multiracial identity seem implicitly to endorse a neo-

essentialism about race: plausible racial identification would exhaustively reflect the facts of traceable ancestry. This is no less conceptually dubious than the old, one-drop essentialism. On the ethical front, we are left to wonder about the actual merits of and motivations for insisting on formal, public recognition of non-black racialized categories for some visibly black persons. The old, one-drop essentialism, after all, was precisely a racist-motivated response to the well-known reality of interracial reproduction. Proponents of mixed-race identity would seem to preserve this essentialist orientation of racial identity or its negation while giving it a progressive spin.

In sum, I want to make three main points. First, focus on duty and wrongdoing sets up a kind of straw man, diverting us from the more relevant question of the broader ethical significance of assimilation. Second, there is good reason to be less sanguine than Callan is about racial disidentification for visibly black persons in contexts where stigma attaches pervasively and deeply to blackness. Third, Callan's general account seems best suited to persons—such as Irish Americans, perhaps many Jewish Americans, and some Hispanic Americans—whose (apparent) ancestry no longer renders them liable to substantial racial stigmatization in their contexts of prospective assimilation.

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