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### Comments on Eamonn Callan

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

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Callan's essay is an exploration of whether an individual's choice to assimilate into another culture is always morally wrong. His project is to examine: (1) the argument that assimilation is wrong in the sense of causing harm to others because it involves defaulting on a gratitude-based debt of loyalty akin to adult filial duty; and (2) the argument that assimilation is wrong because it causes harm to oneself in the form of loss of self-respect. His aim is to demonstrate that these arguments are not tenable and therefore that assimilation is not necessarily morally wrong.

I have two concerns. First, he bases his argumentation on a distinction he draws between "assimilation" and "assimilationism" that is not as clear as he supposes. Second,

in analogizing cultural assimilation and racial disidentification, conceptualizing them as distinct but similar processes, he disregards the important ways in which race and ethnicity impact assimilation.

According to Callan, "Assimilation is not to be confused with assimilationism, which occurs whenever a dominant group appeals to the superiority of its culture as the license for its domination and seeks to entrench its power through the selective assimilation of outsiders" (472). Assimilationism is always wrong, according to Callan, because it involves pressuring people to assimilate into a dominant culture. He argues that assimilation, on the other hand, may be morally acceptable if it is voluntary and not the result of oppression.

My concern is that the absence of intentionally coercive practices is necessary but not sufficient to make assimilation voluntary, and Callan is not specific about what further conditions must be satisfied. First, he is not adequately distinguishing between different versions of assimilation. There are important differences between assimilating from a dominant or high-status culture into an oppressed or low-status culture and vice versa. The former is the less frequent version of assimilation and may often be voluntary. It is worth noting, however, that even this version of assimilation is not necessarily voluntary when the absence of intentionally coercive practices exists. For example, a person from a dominant culture who becomes intimately involved with someone from an oppressed culture may find that her partner is not welcomed into the dominant culture and that life within the dominant culture thus becomes unbearable. In this case, is her assimilation into the oppressed culture voluntary, or is it the result of, in effect, forcible ejection from the dominant culture? This is not a case of assimilationism, by Callan's definition, but it is not strictly voluntary. We could expand the definition of assimilationism to include forcible ejection (policing), but even in the case where someone is not

literally forced out, her going may not be her first choice or what she would pick if she were entirely free to choose.

The most common form of assimilation, however, is from an oppressed or low-status culture into a dominant one. This seems to be the form of assimilation to which Callan refers throughout his article. All the examples of assimilation he gives fit this pattern. Furthermore, he suggests that it is the case of someone leaving an oppressed culture for a dominant one that generates concern: "If a pampered young surfer from California goes native on Bali, it seems odd to me at least to accuse him of ingratitude to his culture. It is when destitute Balinese peasants are seduced to give up their traditional ways out of sheer economic desperation that we fret about assimilation" (480). Thus, it seems that leaving an oppressed or low-status culture for a dominant one is the version of assimilation about which he is writing.

But this leads to a problem with his distinction between assimilation and assimilationism. Even in the absence of the intentionally coercive practices that Callan terms assimilationism, there are factors that make it difficult to draw the line between completely voluntary and not completely voluntary assimilation. A dominant culture, by virtue of being dominant, is able to supply its members with benefits unavailable to oppressed or low-status cultures. The pressure of being an outsider, even if that pressure is not exacerbated by intentionally coercive practices, may be enough to convince someone to assimilate into the dominant culture. What is a "free choice" in such an environment? To dismiss this question with appeals to an artificially heightened distinction between assimilation and assimilationism is a poor basis upon which to build an argument about the ethics of "voluntary" assimilation.

A further problem with Callan's assumption that there is such a thing as clearly voluntary assimilation from an oppressed or

low-status culture into a dominant one is that he writes as if assimilation were uni-directional: an individual assimilates into a culture. But people who are already members of a culture also make choices about whether or not to assimilate (absorb) outsiders. Just because I want to assimilate into your culture does not mean that you will let me assimilate into your culture.

One of the principal reasons why members of a culture reject some people from assimilating is because the people aspiring to assimilate do not match the race or ethnicity of the members of the culture. This leads to the second flaw in how Callan sets up his argument, which is his introduction of an analogy between assimilation and "racial disidentification." He suggests that racial identification with a group that is experiencing racial oppression is analogous to cultural identity with an oppressed culture (476). He then proceeds to use the case of Tiger Woods, an example of repudiation of racial identification rather than cultural assimilation, as his test case to show that gratitude-based arguments hold up in neither case.

In drawing the analogy between racial disidentification and cultural assimilation, which suggests that these are distinct yet similar phenomena, Callan disregards the important ways in which race and ethnicity are factors in the process of assimilation. Race and ethnicity are the caveat of the "melting pot" ideology in the United States, for example. Only people whose appearance matches that of white, Anglo-Saxon protestants and who do not resist abandoning cultural practices that distinguish them from white, Anglo-Saxon protestants are actually absorbed (melt) into white, Anglo-Saxon protestant (so-called "American") culture. They are the only ones to be assimilated. The rest are not and, if they aspire to be, will only be frustrated in being perpetually identified as the outsiders who do not quite fit in, no matter how assiduously they adopt the cultural practices of the

dominant culture. Indeed, the pressure on people who will not be assimilated into the dominant culture due to racial and ethnic mismatch is to play along nonetheless, adopt the practices of the dominant culture so that they do not disrupt the routine of and can be useful to members of the dominant culture, all while accepting that they will never have the full benefits of assimilation.

That Callan ignores this aspect of assimilation is evident in his discussion of Earl Mills, the Mashpee Wapanoag chief. The “happy ending” of Mills’ story is that Mills realized that he was harming himself by repudiating Mashpee culture and decided to embrace it instead. Callan suggests that an “alternative happy ending” is one in which Mills finds himself “fulfilled and at peace in the American cultural mainstream” (496). Callan’s point is that if we are evaluating the moral acceptability of assimilation on the basis of harm to self caused by lack of self-respect, then if a person who has assimilated has self-respect, the assimilation was not immoral. I do not know if Mills looks white. If he does not, he would not be assimilated into “the American cultural mainstream”: the alternative happy ending would be impossible. If he does look white, he would have to hide forever his Mashpee ethnicity if he wanted to be assimilated. And a situation in which one has to hide information about himself in order to achieve his goal (of being assimilated) is a situation in which one cannot be “at peace”: there is always the possibility of discovery and always the knowledge that one does not quite fit the bill.

All this being said, it is not a moot question what an individual’s responsibility is in the face of pressure to assimilate (or pressure to “play along” without the benefits of assimilation). Just because pressure exists does not mean that a person has no responsibility for how she responds. Should she seek to be assimilated, acquiesce to assimilation even if she did not seek it, or resist? In addressing these questions,

however, we must acknowledge what assimilation actually is and actually involves, rather than basing claims on a sanitized version that disregards the dirty details.