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Comments on Eamonn Callan

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

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Callan argues that it is not necessarily wrong of people to leave a cultural group in which they have been raised and join another one. That is, it is not wrong to assimilate, though it is wrong to pressure someone else to do so. One part of Callan's argument concerns Tiger Woods's oft-quoted remark from 1997 about his racial identification. Callan says that Woods said (on *Oprah*) that he was not African American. As Callan notes in his discussion of Woods, his remark is not a sign of assimilating (486); Woods did not say that he took on the cultural characteristics of a group other than African Americans. (He seemed to regard 'Cablinasian' as a purely racial, rather than cultural, construction.) The issue Woods's remarks raises, and the one Callan discusses, is whether it

was wrong of Woods to disidentify with African Americans. (Callan understands Woods not as denying that he would be classified as "African American" according to American racial classification practices but as denying a personal affiliation with an ethnoracial group. I wondered, however, whether Woods was doing a third thing, denying that "African American" is or has to be his central or most salient identity.)

Thus Callan's article is really examining from an ethical perspective two distinct processes—disidentification with a primary cultural group, and the taking on of the identity of a different cultural group. Each can take place without the other, although to the extent that Callan discusses the latter, it is always preceded by the former. However, as he himself notes briefly at the beginning of the article (471), someone can add a new cultural identity without abandoning a previous one, a phenomenon sometimes called "additive acculturation." Callan implies that additive acculturation presents no ethical concerns. But it does. Someone from a subordinate group, who "adds" an identification with the dominant group—perhaps based on having a parent from each group—might be charged with a kind of betrayal, despite continuing to identify with the subordinate group. I am not saying that this is a valid ethical charge; but it is the sort of charge that Callan takes seriously at other points in his article in connection with those who assimilate. In that respect, there do seem to be two distinct processes in play here, both of which are susceptible to ethical scrutiny—the disidentification that Woods's remarks imply, and identification with a group other than one's birth ethnic group (where this is also one's birth cultural group).

Callan's article is full of insight and rich argument, and I can focus on only a small piece of the argument related to Woods, specifically concerning whether it is wrong to disidentify with one's primary cultural community. A centerpiece of this argument in favor of the claim relies on the idea that we owe

a debt of gratitude to our primary cultural community, that includes our affirming our continued identity as a member of that community (the debt in question is called an “identity confirming debt”)—a debt analogous to that which we owe our parents. Callan disputes the analogy in Woods’s case, and by implication, in the typical case.

The argument supporting the debt of gratitude is that Woods (like other currently successful African Americans) is the beneficiary of “the extraordinary efforts that generations of blacks endured in their struggle against oppression.” (486). The struggle encompassed a broader group than those engaged consciously to withstand and mitigate racial oppression and secure racial justice. It included also ordinary African Americans attempting simply to live “decent and productive lives” in the face of their oppression.

What is the entity to which, this argument proposes, Woods owes a debt of gratitude? Callan provides two alternatives. One is African Americans as a distinct ethnocultural community whose existence is valued for its own sake. The other is a community of African Americans committed to Black solidarity for the purpose of ending racism; here the Black community is valued only strategically—as the best means to end racism—not intrinsically. (I am following Callan in using “African American” and “Black” interchangeably in the U.S. context, but it should be noted that there have always been and are now an increasing number of non-African-American Blacks, of African, Caribbean, or Latin American origin.)

Callan then goes on to argue that Woods does not owe an identity-confirming debt of gratitude to *either* of these versions of the African American community. Regarding the cultural version, the main argument is that the products of African American culture have by now permeated the broader American society (and the world, for that matter),

benefiting many who have no membership ties to the African American community. “So whatever debt of gratitude is appropriate should be widely dispersed as well” (487). If so, the debt of gratitude cannot be of the identity conferring kind, since the benefit to which the debt responds does not depend on being a member of that African American community.

Against the debt to the second, strategic and antiracist version of community, Callan argues as follows: First, the struggle against racism has historically been carried on not only by the African American community acting as a solidaristic community, but by interracial alliances as well. Moreover, Callan rightly points out, many Blacks carried on the struggle against racism as part of *both* intraracial *and* interracial groups and alliances. If so, then an African American can not be required to identify himself with one of the racial groups that engaged in this anti-racist struggle, since all were necessary (489).

Callan uses the fact that the contributions of interracial and intraracial groups to the struggle against racism cannot be disentangled as part of his argument. But that point is equally compatible with the view that Woods should be grateful to both groups, and that a way it is appropriate for him to express this gratitude is, at least, to acknowledge his membership in the interracial group. (Presumably, this would not be sufficient; an acknowledgment and appreciation of the anti-racist struggle waged by these two groups would be necessary as well.) This seems to me an entirely appropriate way to look at the situation.

But Callan offers a second argument: Whatever was true in the past about the struggle against racism, it is now possible for someone to reasonably reject intraracial community in favor of interracial alliance as the best means to achieve the goal of racial justice. If so, then even an appropriate recognition of the antiracist struggle does not require an

African American such as Woods to identify as an African American, since that community may well not be the one best placed to carry out the struggle against racism. Leaving aside the empirical dimension of this argument, it seems to operate with a strange view of the proper object of gratitude. Gratitude does not require that I judge the object of my gratitude to have done the best it could possibly have done to further the aim (whatever it may be) for which I have gratitude. If I am grateful to my college for providing me with an education—let us assume this is my only legitimate basis for gratitude toward my college—I am not also required to think that it the best education possible. It need only have provided me with a good, not the best possible version of that good. (Perhaps some intent condition is also required). So *even if* the past intraracial community was not optimally placed to end racism, this does not show that Woods has no debt to that community. For Woods to be appropriately grateful to the African American community for its struggle against racism that has made his current success possible, it need not have waged that struggle in the strategically optimal way.

Even more problematic is Callan's argument that even if intraracial community were *once* necessary to the antiracist struggle, *now* interracial alliance is, so gratitude of an identity conferring sort should be directed to the latter; that is, Woods should now identify with the interracial antiracist struggle group. Gratitude, however, does not require an assessment of the *current* strategic situation, but only a recognition that the object of gratitude has contributed to the goal in question in the past.

In a footnote, Callan indirectly acknowledges a more serious problem for the "strategic antiracist community" view, with respect to the gratitude-to-parents analogy (490). It is that if the appropriate ground of gratitude is the struggle against racism, it seems that the appropriate targets of gratitude are

only those who actually engaged in that struggle, not members of the same race-defined group who did not, hence not the group as a whole. One can accept this argument without thinking of the other members as freeloaders, selfishly reaping the benefits of the risky or self-sacrificing efforts of others to secure equal opportunities for all Blacks. It is not necessarily dishonorable simply to struggle to feed oneself and one's family. However, if the source of gratitude is defined by the struggle against racism, then, strictly speaking, only those who engaged in that struggle are the appropriate objects of the gratitude. Callan says, in this footnote, "No one could sensibly deny that Woods owes a debt of gratitude to those who in the past have fought antiblack racism in the United States" (490).

This acknowledgment seems to me to point to the genuine importance of gratitude in our understanding of how individuals of a certain social group properly relate to that group, that is not captured by the idea of the group either as a culturally-defined group, or as a strategic anti-racist community. African Americans as the group to which Tiger Woods should feel appropriate gratitude seems to me to be an historically defined group, subjected to certain treatment on the grounds of its imputed "race," sharing certain historical experience because of this, and struggling in the face of that racism to carry on and make their lives and the lives of their progeny better. (Callan recognizes the importance of struggle and sacrifice in grounding gratitude, but does not bring that insight into the discussion of Woods.) This conception incorporates the "antiracist struggle" aspect of gratitude but places it in a broader context. African Americans who were the actual troops of the various community and national efforts against racism were part of a larger community that both lent important moral and material support to that struggle, but also contributed to the conditions that allowed Tiger Woods to be so successful just by keeping going in the face of racial oppression, by passing

down through the generations the affirmation of Black humanity, equality, and capability. This does not mean that Woods's appropriate gratitude goes to every single historical Black individual. Some may have done absolutely nothing of value, and some may have "sold out" their community in various ways. But it does give us grounds for saying that Woods should feel gratitude toward the African American community as a whole, where this community is an intergenerational, ethnic one, not simply a cultural community nor a strategic anti-racist one. Although understood politically, the African American community as such an ethnic group is still valued for its own sake, not merely instrumentally to the cause of racial justice, as it is in the anti-racist community conception.

Elements of Callan's argument throughout his article recognize this point—that the appropriate target of gratitude is African American as an ethnic community, not merely a cultural community or an anti-racist one. But the discussion of Woods does not do so. Part of the reason for this concerns a slippage in the notion of "culture" throughout Callan's argument. In the argument that African Americans are not distinct from non-African Americans in having a reason to be grateful for African American culture, "culture" seems to refer to products that can be shared with those outside the group, such as art, music, scholarship, political leadership, and so on. But elsewhere in the article, Callan has a much more expansive view of culture—something closer to the values and behavioral norms of a group. (For example, he speaks of leaving one culture for another (471); this cannot mean merely art, scholarship, and politics.) This expansive conception of culture would then include the values and behaviors (such as a steadfast commitment to keeping on in the face of racism, or DuBois's notion in *Souls of Black Folk* that African Americans are the foremost "exponents of pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence" [7]) that are part of and indeed help to constitute the way of life that I

argued immediately above is the proper object of gratitude. When Callan is discussing the proper objects of gratitude, his narrower use of "culture" in the discussion of cultural achievements leads him to overlook the conception of African American community yielded by the more expansive view he takes elsewhere. (I hope readers will agree that similar confusions about the meaning of "culture" are rife in philosophical and other literature on these subjects.)

But I am not saying that the more expansive view of culture is generally to be preferred to the narrower one in any general way. Indeed I think the reverse. If "culture" slides too close to being "the way of life of an ethnic or ethnoracial group," it discourages distinguishing between the experiences that bind a group together, and the norms and values a group develops (often arising from those experiences, to be sure). These experiences (for example, of racial discrimination, stigmatization, and oppression) are analytically distinct both from "cultural products" and from "norms and values." What I called the expansive view of culture masks these important distinctions.