
Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy

Volume 2, number 2. May 2006

<http://web.mit.edu/sgrp>

A Rejoinder to Stubblefield

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Anna Stubblefield thinks that my argument in “The Ethics of Assimilation” is marred by a disregard of “dirty details” about the true character of assimilation in the U.S.A. If I had adequately considered the relevant details, my account of the ethics of assimilation would have been very different. The “dirty details” revolve around two points. First of all, I make the distinction between assimilation and assimilationism seem clearer than it really is, and second, I overlook the distinctive ways in which ethnicity and race affect assimilation in America.

I am not sure what to make of the first point. I have no doubt that the influence of assimilationism on choice is very often subtle, easily missed, even by perceptive observers, and subject to reasonable disagreement by such observers. To that extent, I do not believe that assimilation and assimilationism can always be clearly distinguished, and nothing I said in “The Ethics of Assimilation” suggested otherwise. Stubblefield offers what purports to be a counterexample to my analysis when she describes a woman who decides that she must assimilate from a socially dominant into an oppressed culture when her partner, who comes from the oppressed culture, is rejected by the dominant culture. “This is not a case of assimilationism, by Callan’s definition, but it is not strictly voluntary.” I agree entirely if by “strictly voluntary” is meant “fully voluntary”. But then again I never said that the choice to assimilate must be fully voluntary once assimilationism is absent. That would be a very foolish thing to say. The voluntariness of a choice to assimilate can be reduced in myriad ways that do not entail assimilationism. When social constraints impose severe costs on the agent who assimilates, the agent’s choice is certainly less voluntary than it would otherwise be, and such constraints cannot always be explained by assimilationism. But if the choice is still voluntary to some degree, it is properly subject to ethical evaluation. And that is all I assume about the relationship between the voluntariness of decisions to assimilate and their ethical status.

Stubblefield also notes that dominant cultures may attract assimilation just because someone does not want to be an outsider. “What is “free choice” in such an

environment? To dismiss the 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." I have no idea why Stubblefield thinks I would want to dismiss the question. Nevertheless, if choice in the environment she describes is at least minimally voluntary, it will be appropriate to ask questions about how the choice is to be ethically assessed. There may well be *other* moral questions to ask about norms within the dominant culture that stigmatize others as outsiders, and these will likely be much more important than questions about any particular individual's decision to assimilate, but that is irrelevant to my argument.

Stubblefield also chides me for being obtuse about racism and ethnic prejudice as obstacles to assimilation. "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." I think the truth about race and the American "melting-pot" might be a bit more complicated than that, but the point I want to dwell on is conceptual rather than sociological.

In the second sentence of "The Ethics of Assimilation" I noted that assimilation can be partial or comprehensive. I take it that racism and ethnic prejudice are an insuperable obstacle to comprehensive assimilation and a surmountable obstacle to partial assimilation. The severity of the surmountable obstacles depends on how

intense and widespread are racism and ethnic prejudice. I think that almost all talk about assimilation is in fact elliptical talk about partial assimilation. After all, assimilation that is literally comprehensive will entail the sheer dissolution of one collective identity into another, and even white Europeans who have been in the U.S.A for several generations have not all reached that point (Waters 1990).

Now consider the following claim about German Jews during the Weimar Republic: "What we witnessed in the Weimar period was a return of those fallen Jews, who came from rather assimilated houses, where the removal from Jewish tradition had started three or four generations earlier" (Brenner 1999). Of course, the Jews of Weimar were about to become victims of genocide, and thus the intelligibility of this claim about their and their immediate ancestors' "assimilated" status in German society depends on (partial) assimilation being compatible with widespread and murderous racism against Jews. By parity of reasoning, my assumption that assimilation has been possible, beginning in the recent past, for blacks and Native Americans does not betray any naive optimism about the breadth and depth of racism in the U.S.A. Stubblefield finds it inconceivable that a Native American could find a happy and fulfilled life assimilated to the American mainstream in the post-WW II U.S.A. I find it almost inconceivable that she finds it inconceivable. That does not mean I would want to say anything particularly nice about the scale of racism in America. There were happy and fulfilled Jews in Weimar Germany.

No doubt many dirty details to the truth about race, culture, and assimilation in this bewildering country were ignored in "The Ethics of Assimilation". But I fail to see how more attention to the dirt would have improved my argument.

References

Brenner, Michael (1999). "Jewish Culture in Contemporary America and Weimar Germany: Parallels and Differences." *Jewish Studies Yearbook* at <http://www.ceu.hu/jewishstudies/yearbook02.htm>

Waters, Mary (1990). *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.