

Philosophy 232: Eamonn Callan, "The Ethics of Assimilation"  
471-488:

"assimilation" = (a) to give up an identification with a primary cultural community and (b) to adopt a cultural identification with another group (often the dominant group in one's society) [This is different from "additive acculturation" where you hold on to your primary identification but add onto it an ability to navigate and be part of another culture.]

EC is interested in whether it is wrong for an individual person to voluntarily assimilate. (This question is almost never discussed in a systematic way.)

Clearing up some preliminary confusions:

1. "assimilation" is not the same as "assimilationism," which is a policy (formal or informal) of *forced* or *coerced* assimilation. If someone assimilates in response to that kind of pressure or policy (a policy the U.S. had in place for Southern and Eastern European immigrants from c. 1890-1920), it is not voluntary.
2. 474: assimilation seems to conflict with the ideal of diversity, by which EC seems to mean the idea that more cultural diversity is better than less. He answers this worry by saying that assimilators can also be cultural innovators, so (he implies) assimilation can actually lead to as much diversity overall as non-assimilation or cultural preservation.

476ff: **Argument from gratitude:** Just as you should love and care for your parents, especially when they are older, simply because they loved and took care of you (even though you did not choose them), you should be loyal to your cultural community that nurtured you. It would be a betrayal and a denial of your obligation of gratitude to desert that community for another. (To do this, you need to have certain emotions, of care and solidarity for the group, not only certain behavior.)

480: one objection to this argument: A more stressed community is less able to nurture you very well, so it seems you have less of an obligation of gratitude to it; and yet subordinated communities are the ones the issues of loyalty and betrayal arise about.  
Partial answer: It is not the amount of good the community does for you, but the degree of sacrifice it makes to nurture you.

481: EC seems to accept that we might owe something to our culture of origin based on this sort of argument; but it is not, he says, a strong enough obligation to make us stay in the culture if we want to leave it. He analogizes this to the filial obligation case: We might, as adults, have gratitude to our parents; but this does not mean we have to do everything they want us to do.

[NOTE: This argument seems fishy to me. Deserting a cultural group is not simply like not doing something your parents want you to do.]

III. 482: Tiger Woods example

TW says he is not African American; he says he's just an American, and ancestrally he is a "Cablinasian." For EC, this is a test case: Does TW have an obligation to identify as an African American?

To address this question, distinguish 3 possible meanings of African American, or black, identity [that is, he is understanding “black” to mean “African American” in this context]

1. being classified as “black” or “African American” according to standard and familiar practices in the U.S. On this meaning, TW is black, and he is not denying this.
2. 483: Solidarity among victims of anti-black racism is necessary to end racism. This is black identity as a “strategic necessity”. It is consistent with not thinking that race is important in itself, and with hoping that if racism disappeared, race would disappear too. But until that day, racial solidarity is needed to bring that about. On this view, disidentifying with being black might suggest that you (TW) thought that racism no longer existed, so there was no need to struggle against it together with other blacks.
3. 484f: Citing a statement from DuBois from 1947, racial oppression has created African Americans as a distinctive *cultural community*, not only a community that has experienced racism, but a culture arising from that experience. (This is consistent with what DuBois says in the chapters we read from Souls...). This community and its culture is valuable in its own right, not only as a strategic necessity for eliminating racism.

486: It is reasonable to interpret TW’s refusal to identify as African American as rejecting solidarity of types 2 and 3. But, EC says, someone who does this could still contribute to the struggle against racism in some other way (e.g. {my examples, not EC’s} by contributing money to the NAACP or joining an interracial anti-racist group); but he is not saying that TW actually does this.

EC notes that TW’s disidentification is not necessarily the same as assimilation [NOTE: but TW’s statement that he is “just an American” could be understood that way]; he is not saying he is joining some other cultural or racial group.

487: Argument, based on earlier discussion of gratitude, that it is wrong of TW to disidentify with being African American: His success in the golf world was made possible by previous generations of African Americans who made personal sacrifices to struggle against racism. This argument works better for the “anti-racism/strategic necessity” view of black solidarity (#2) than the “cultural community” view (#3).

EC ends this section with various qualifications of what the argument shows: whites also benefit from the anti-racist struggle, since it is better to live in a more just society; some whites and other non-blacks have contributed to the anti-racist struggle, not only blacks;

493-96: This section concerns whether assimilating involves a self-inflicted harm on the person who assimilates [I am not providing an outline for this section; I think you can understand it, given the background in the rest of the article].