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A Rejoinder to McPherson and Blum¹

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In "The Ethics of Assimilation," I considered over many pages the possibility that Tiger Woods violated a duty of gratitude to African-Americans when he refused to identify himself as one of them; the possibility that he did something bad, though consistent with duty, was dismissed in two paragraphs. Lionel McPherson rightly thinks that more should be said about the latter.

McPherson claims that the ethical value of racial self-identification for African-Americans is a consequence of a milieu in which "stigma attaches pervasively and deeply to

blackness." Within that milieu, racial self-identification takes on a special moral significance as a public act that affirms strategic black solidarity, or so McPherson suggests. He does not say that we have enough grounds to condemn Woods outright for failing to make that affirmation; his claim is only that the ubiquitous power of racial stigma in America casts a pall of moral suspicion over black disidentification. "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). Furthermore, McPherson thinks that individuals of multiracial descent who resist being identified as black must be committed to the intellectually if not morally disreputable view that personal identity tracks racial essence. Thus if someone has more than one racial ancestry, he or she must be multiracial, or so a crude essentialism would entail.

To take the measure of McPherson's comments, it will help to say more about racial identity and disidentification. James Fearon has very usefully distinguished between identity as "social category" and as "personal identity." Social categories are constituted by rules of membership and by expectations about the typical or appropriate behavior of those who count as members. "Black" and "African-American" constitute identity in the social categorical sense. Membership in that category is fixed regardless of choice by the one-drop rule and expectations about typical or appropriate behavior are commonly determined by racist stereotypes. Personal identity, on the other hand, "is a set of attributes, desires, or principles of action that a person thinks distinguishes her in socially relevant ways and that (a) the person takes a special pride in; (b) the person takes no special pride in, but which so orient her behavior that she would be at a loss about how to act or what to do without them; or (c) the person feels she could not change even if she wanted to" (Fearon 1999). I assume that identifying with a set of attitudes, desires or

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principles entails some second-order endorsement of them, and for that reason, identification is not strictly relevant to (c) and relevant only in a tenuous sense to (b).² The central case of personal identity that involves identification is (a).

Fearon's analysis suggests one reason why an African-American or black in the social categorical sense could reasonably believe that she must also be African-American or black as a matter of personal identity. Because both labels name an attribute that distinguishes anyone in numerous salient ways in the U.S.A., and the attribute will be ascribed regardless of her choice, it would seem not just that (c) is automatically satisfied, but that anyone who is African-American or black in the social categorical sense and yet repudiates it at the level of personal identity is being very obtuse about the extent to which social interaction is racially coded.

But it would be uncharitable to infer that Tiger Woods denied that racial ascription entered his personal identity in that sense. He is perfectly aware that others will classify him as black, and to my knowledge at least, nothing he has said publicly betrays innocence about the power and pervasiveness of American racism. His racial disidentification is more aptly construed as a claim that he does not satisfy the criteria specified in (a), despite his satisfying (c). On this point Fearon's analysis nicely complements my own distinction between "African-American" and "black" as labels for a quasi-nation and as a strategic association defined both by a common susceptibility

² Suppose a girl identifies with a stereotype of femininity that includes traits such as indecisiveness, irrationality, and weakness. She regards these as contemptible, and thus regards herself with contempt. This is what I mean by a "tenuous" form of identification that Fearon's second variety of personal identity entails. The relevant form of identification involves no second-order endorsement of the object of identification.

to anti-black racism and solidarity against it. For someone who identifies with either the quasi-nation or the strategic association, membership is naturally a source of pride and thus (a) is satisfied.

McPherson's chief point, re-cast in terms of Fearon's analysis, is that the stigma intrinsic to anti-black racism changes the context in which blacks (in the social membership sense) identify or disidentify as black (in the sense that entails racial solidarity, and hence, the possibility of racial pride). The change is such that some ethical presumption holds against disidentification. McPherson is not explicit about just why stigma creates this difference. But he could plausibly argue that a presumption against disidentification is created for either or both these reasons: racial stigma and oppression open room for the operation of base motives among their victims that will in some cases prompt racial disidentification; efforts to undermine racial stigma are hindered by racial disidentification, at least when it is done by a widely esteemed individual, such as a famous athlete, with substantial power to affect public attitudes.

The examples McPherson gives of passing and claimants for some intermediate status in a racial hierarchy help to sharpen the issue of base motivation. Those who try to pass may be seeking to profit from oppression and not merely to escape it, and even when that is not so, passing may reveal the internalization of stigma, and thus a lack of due self-respect. Similarly, those who were proudly "mulatto" took a contemptible pleasure in their supposed superiority to those who were merely black. But I see no reason to ascribe any comparable motive to Woods. He had nothing obvious to gain by racial disidentification. And it would be rash to infer that someone who disavows pride in ascribed membership in some social category is ashamed of membership just because the category is widely stigmatized. No one should be ashamed of being black. But it does not follow that everyone

or even anyone black must be proud of being black. To be sure, if the black solidarity that McPherson and others regard as so ethically important were demonstrably necessary to the defeat of anti-black racism, then Woods's disidentification could be reasonably construed as a failure sufficiently to register the evil of racism. But I think we can be sincerely like-minded about the gravity of American racism qua social evil and still reasonably disagree about the comparative importance of racial and interracial solidarity in opposing it.

The consequences of Woods's racial disidentification on the prevalence of racial stigma are hard to fathom. We might reasonably hope that widespread, proud identification with a stigmatized category by members of that category will in the fullness of time erode the stigma. But that is certainly not a necessary route to its erosion, nor is it obviously the most effective route. A social category is de-stigmatized just insofar as we come to recognize that there is nothing shameful in membership, and that recognition is as available to members who take no pride in membership as it is to those who do. I do not know whether Woods would have contributed more to the erosion of racial stigma if he had proudly proclaimed that he was African-American, and I doubt that anyone else knows either. At any rate, the absence of racial pride would seem to be too flimsy a basis to impute any ethical lapse in opposition to racial stigma.

And by the way, I do not think we can fairly ascribe a covert racial essentialism to those who insist on their multiracial identity in defiance of the one-drop rule. They could simply take pride, for example, in the cultural heritage of multiple ancestral groups with which they identify, and their pride need not be threatened by a thorough appreciation of the folly of essentialism.

Laurence Blum believes that more can be said than I acknowledge for criticizing Woods's racial disidentification on grounds of ingratitude. He claims that gratitude on the part of a contemporary African-American to others who in the past have pursued strategic black solidarity against racism could properly motivate identification with them. Those who share that identification comprise what Blum calls an "intra-racial" (rather than an interracial) anti-racist community:

(E)ven if the past intra-racial 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 intra-racial community were once necessary to the anti-racist struggle, now interracial alliance is, so gratitude of an identity conferring sort should be directed to the latter; Woods should identify with the interracial anti-racist 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.

I never intended to suggest that Woods should not be grateful to blacks who struggled against racism through intra-racial community in the past, whether it was the optimal strategy then or not. My main point is this: the strategy of anti-racism with which blacks (or anyone else) currently identify should be the most effective strategy; and therefore, whatever gratitude Woods owed to anyone could not require him to identify with other African-Americans as a strategy of anti-racism.

I think it is easy to miss the force of the point I have just made because the distinction between racial identification as a matter of loyalty to a cultural or ethnic community on the one hand and commitment to an antiracist strategy on the other is so easily blurred. Therefore, it may be helpful to consider an analogous case of politico-moral strategy where no comparable ambiguity disturbs our intuitions.

Suppose I declare myself to be a socialist because I believe that socialist policies are the most effective means of eliminating poverty, and for the sake of argument, suppose I am right about this. As someone committed to ending poverty, I am also duly grateful not only to socialists who have shared my commitment in the past but to liberals, anarchists, religiously-inspired altruists and even socially conservative philanthropists who have recognized the evil of poverty for what it is and done their best to eradicate it. Whatever other implications my gratitude might have for my moral identity, it surely has no relevance to my current self-identification as a socialist. Precisely because my self-identification is a strategic moral choice, I rationally choose the best means of accomplishing the moral end I favor. Strategic anti-racism must follow a parallel logic. If black solidarity is the preferred strategy, the preference must be justified by comparing its efficacy with two alternatives – interracial solidarity and what might be called “strategic opportunism”, a general willingness to exploit opportunities for antiracist activism wherever they arise, in both intraracial and interracial venues. Gratitude to those who adopted the intraracial strategy in the past is simply irrelevant to the comparative merits of currently available strategies to defeat racism, and therefore, irrelevant to the rational choice of strategy.

Yet the point I make here is limited so far as it pertains only to *strategic* racial self-identification. What Blum’s comments

helped me to see – and I did not see this when I wrote “The Ethics of Assimilation” – was that someone who is black or African-American in the social categorical sense could find in reasons of gratitude grounds to identify with the black or African-American community in a cultural or quasi-national sense. (Blum also helpfully underscores the ingredient of ethnicity in that concept of black or African-American community, an ingredient I did not consistently acknowledge in my original article.) To be sure, the benefits created by the community across generations are not strictly confined to any racial group. Therefore, gratitude for those benefits cannot itself be a distinctive marker of the community, but gratitude might still rationally motivate identification in many cases. After all, gratitude presupposes due appreciation of what one receives from a benefactor, and when the relevant benefactor is a culture, that appreciation might make cultural identification alluring as an apt expression of gratitude. For those who identify as black or African-American in this quasi-national sense, the community with which they identify is cherished for its own sake; and the value of the community that identification helps to sustain is wholly distorted if we think of it merely as an instrument for struggling against a particular social evil. This suggests that Woods has some good reasons – reasons of gratitude -- to identify as black or African-American. But does it follow that he has a duty to do so or that he does something bad, though consistent with duty, in refusing to identify himself as such?

In “The Ethics of Assimilation” my paradigm case of identity-conferring commitment that gratitude requires was adult filial love. I tried to discredit the idea that growing up as a member of a culture or a racially oppressed group could, through reasons of gratitude, create an analogous duty to embrace the culture or group as a matter of personal identity. I want now to pursue that effort further by exploring some ways in which a filial duty of gratitude would seem to be an outlier among debts of gratitude by requiring identity-

conferring commitment. I claim that a comparable identity-conferring duty seems not to apply in Woods's case.

A point that McPherson makes in passing is a helpful starting-point: "Appropriate feelings of gratitude do not in general specify what we should do to discharge an ethical debt to persons who are their object." Imagine that someone saves me from drowning. I should of course be profoundly grateful and try to find some way of expressing gratitude to my benefactor that was pleasing to her. Now suppose my benefactor expects me to express it by befriending her. Maybe my debt of gratitude requires me to make some effort in that direction. (If I were an intensely shy and reclusive person who is averse to making new friends, even "some effort" could be asking too much of me.) But if my effort founders on the fact that she is a pompous boor, or if I merely find that we are too ill-matched for friendship, I am hardly required to think that a debt of gratitude continues to burden me. I should continue to be grateful for her saving my life, but that is another matter. So it would seem that even with unusually great debts of gratitude, such as those created by saving a life, little may ordinarily be required in the way of reciprocal benefaction or commitment to one's benefactor, even if the benefactor wants and expects much more. That should not surprise us. Benevolence would hardly be the great virtue that it is if it were a means of creating debts that constrained the ethical identity of its recipients in onerous ways; it would rather be a means of taking control of other people's lives, and as often an occasion of resentment as gratitude. Furthermore, the sheer abundance of people (and institutions, etc.) to whom we should be grateful in any even moderately fortunate life is immense, and so a stringent view of debts of gratitude would threaten to engulf much of our lives in service to benefactors.

This line of skeptical thought about the scope of debts of gratitude might reasonably provoke doubts about my

paradigm case of adult filial duty. The elderly parents who constantly remind their child of the great sacrifices they once made in their child's behalf, while the child cares for them with a toxic mixture of guilt and resentment is one familiar version of domestic hell. And such cases might tempt one to think of adult filial love as something that is properly as freely given or withheld as the love of friendship, a sentiment which no debt of gratitude can require us to cultivate. But I am inclined to think that a duty to love parents who have loved and reared us well is in fact justified, though for reasons that have no parallels in any duty that Woods might have to African-Americans as a quasi-nation.

The love and care that good parents give their children as they grow up is a great gift that may require much material sacrifice, emotional self-control, and efforts at empathy, tact, and self-criticism that do not always come easily. Children will naturally respond to the love and care they receive with a reciprocal love, though of course, their needy attachment is altogether different than the morally disciplined love their parents give. As children grow older and become independent, their intense emotional need for their parents will abate, though at the same time, their growing understanding of love and of the skills and virtue that their parents have shown them will nourish a deep sense of gratitude. We expect that morally good adult children will not outgrow the needy love of childhood to become indifferent to their parents; their love will rather develop into something akin to the morally disciplined sentiment that their parents showed them when they were children. At least we expect this to happen if the children are not culpably self-engrossed or if tragedy does not disrupt the relationship. No doubt we would not be inclined to speak of a duty of gratitude in connection with adult filial love if the parents of grown human beings, like the parents of other animals, were characteristically more or less indifferent to their grown-up offspring. But they are not. They continue to cherish their

children's love. Being unloved by one's adult children is not the dire affliction than being unloved by one's parents during childhood is, but it is an affliction nonetheless. No adult child who is duly grateful to good parents would want to cause that affliction.

This is all sketchy. But I hope it suffices to show the kind of considerations that make it reasonable to say that grown-up children might have a duty of gratitude to love and care for their parents. These considerations include the critical role of parental love in any satisfactory childhood, and the enduring value of reciprocal love between parents and children throughout the ordinary course of human life. Yet I am at a loss to see any plausible parallel claims that might be made for a duty of identification with a particular ethnocultural group, such as blacks or African-Americans as a quasi-nation. To be sure, someone else in Tiger Woods's circumstances might be captivated by the story of his black ancestors, come to feel a sense of gratitude for all they accomplished, and learn to identify with an inter-generational community that came to thrive despite terrible adversity. Then again, reflection on the experience of his Chinese, Thai, Dutch or Cherokee ancestors might lead to identification with *their* respective cultural communities. But if gratitude in none of these cases prompts identification, then I cannot see any grounds for ethical complaint. Identification here cannot be plausibly viewed as the linchpin of some universal or nearly universal good, such as love between parents and children; it would seem to depend rather on idiosyncrasies of interest and affinity about which we have no reason to moralize. And when we have no reason to moralize about a particular human choice, we have compelling moral reason not to do so. As I said in "The Ethics of Assimilation", Tiger Woods's racial identity is his own business, not ours.

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