

An appeal for the consideration of the Mimetic Theory of René Girard

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate program in Philosophy
in conformity with the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

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Kingston, Ontario, Canada

June, 2013

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Abstract

The Mimetic Theory (MT) of René Girard promises a new landscape for the humanities. In this paper I will outline MT, giving a brief overview of the terrain and how the theory works, defend MT against criticisms made against it, and argue that MT ought to be evaluated by a wider academic audience.

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Glossary:

Mimesis – is the word that Girard has used to designate the phenomena of a particular mode by which human beings learn, act, and receive their desires. Girard has avoided the use of the term imitation since it is not merely reducible to the phenomena of copying gestures or mannerisms, accents, ways of speaking - though there is all of that – it is also emulation and the taking on of various styles, ideas, worldviews, attitudes, reactions, from at least one model, but (most) often times the synthetic result of two or more.

Scapegoat – is understood in the common, contemporary, ordinary sense of the term. The scapegoat is a victim, often unjustly persecuted, used to generate group solidarity and reconciliation. Its fullest expression is in physical violence and sacrifice of the other as a surrogate to reconcile parties in conflict. The scapegoat can also simply be the person that we deride in our group to keep group solidarity – through gossip, joking, insults, slander, etcetera.

Desire – Desire, for Girard, takes on the form of a particular kind of logic that seems instinctive to humanity. Desire is not reducible to need or appetite, but is rather constituted out of the symbolic ordering of human ideas and relations. This distinctively human phenomena has, for Girard, emerged from the effects of the scapegoat mechanism.

Model/Obstacle - The model (or obstacle/rival) is the thing that, in many/most cases, gives us our desire. Both objects and models are our cues to what it is that we want. The ‘folk’ conception of desire is one that runs in a straight line, from subject to object, missing out on the role of the model or mediator. Whether or not the model is loved, hated, feared, or admired, or rapidly alternating between all of those things, usually depends on the proximity of one subject to another.

Naïve realism – Girard assumes that the external world exists, and that it is in some sense knowable to us. While he says that rationalism is sine qua non for accepting his theory, I think one merely needs to believe that theory can provide an accurate way of understanding and predicting phenomena in the world.

Metaphysical Desire – The later stages of mimetic rivalry are characterized by metaphysical desire. The key insight to keep in mind is that the object in dispute is typically an invention of human culture: prestige, honour, territory, etcetera. Metaphysical desire is always the desire to appropriate the very being of the other (though this is, realistically speaking, fairly impossible), and becomes symptomatic when the object has disappeared from view

EC = *Evolution and Conversion*

TH = *Things Hidden from the Foundation of the World*

VS = *Violence and the Sacred*

The work of philosopher, anthropologist, and literary theorist, René Girard has been, to a large degree, passed over in silence for the closing two decades of the twentieth century. Up until the late seventies he was receiving more and more attention to his work on desire in literature and the role of the scapegoat in explaining religious phenomena. Yet he retains a notable circle of disciples who firmly believe that the implications of his theory constitute a revolution for the whole enterprise of the humanities, and perhaps all knowledge altogether. In 2004, Girard was nominated to the *Académie Française*, the highest intellectual honour in France, and as of very recently, it seems his work is being taken up again with renewed interest. Currently a group of scholars forms *the Colloquium on Religion and Violence* (COV&R), which meets annually and works to unpack the work of René Girard into its different potential spheres of application. Some of the leading scholars working on Girard include, but are not limited to: Jean-Pierre Dupuy (Stanford), Paul Dumouchel (UQAM), Andrew McKenna (Loyola), Pierpaolo Antonello (Cambridge), Eric Gans (UCLA), and Michael Kirwan (Heythrop London). These scholars come from diverse fields, reflecting the fact that mimetic theory is cross disciplinary reaching into philosophy, anthropology, sociology, religious studies, literary theory, psychology, history, theology, and biology. *The Colloquium on Religion and Violence* also publishes a journal, *Contagion*, which works to apply mimetic theory across these fields. Girard has mostly drawn on his background in literature and anthropology to provide evidence for his theory, but other researchers have drawn in a considerable amount of evidence from biology, cognitive science, and anthropology that further provide support for his work. Recently (2007) venture capitalist (famously the first major funder of Facebook) and co-founder of PayPal, Peter Thiel, a former student at Stanford who later came to appreciate Girard's mimetic theory, has started *Imitatio*, a

not-for-profit dedicated to getting mimetic theory out to a wider academic and culture-making audience.

In spite of all of this the larger academic community has not yet heard of mimetic theory. Mimetic theory is notably absent from philosophical consideration in the English speaking world. Girard himself admits that he might be to blame for the failure of philosophers and analytical theoreticians to notice his work. He acknowledges that a clear, logical, systematic presentation of his theory has yet to be articulated in the sphere of analytic philosophy, and laments that he has not been able to present his theory in a way that the truth of it is made immediately obvious. (EC 165-169) Indeed, he has said that because the truth of his theory seemed so obvious to him, that he expected it to be obvious to everybody.

This is, I would assume, a cultivated ignorance. The very nature of the theory makes it difficult to accept. It undercuts our self-ascribed value to our motives and insights, and steals away our individual agency by caging it into the structural dynamics of interdividual desire. The idea that we are shaped by our environment and situatedness is not necessarily a novel or controversial proposition, especially in continental philosophy and sociology, but mimetic theory articulates our understanding of the dynamics of desire with a whole new focus and orientation.

Girard, in developing his theory, said he thought he was being very in touch with the deconstructive spirit of the age when he released his theory into the world of literary criticism. Everything in philosophy on the continent and in literary theory was about the death of the author, the impossibility of objective knowledge or libertarian freedom, historicism, perspectivism, the decentering of texts, etcetera; he simply saw himself going one step further by taking even the originality of the desire of the subject from him or her. While other thinkers in

the (post)structuralist tradition had long been suspect of essentialism about individuality, Girard went a step further by pulling out from under us the very foundations of what we think is our own desire.

Difficulties are compounded due to the fact that those who might be sympathetic to the application of mimetic theory to the sciences are not used to the Continental style of presentation with which Girard outlines his work. For the Continent, he is far too naive, with his beliefs in the knowability of the external world, and the possibility of a genuine and universal anthropology. For the analytically inclined, he is too Continental, taking for granted certain postmodern epistemological assumptions and presenting his work in a mode that incorporates and responds to thinkers like Pascal, Freud, Levi-Strauss, Lacan, Derrida, Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, and Heidegger.

A further explanation for the lack of attention paid to his theory can I think be focused on the way he treats the Judeo-Christian narrative. His own logic is fairly straightforward, but perhaps unsettling to our contemporary intuitions. If Girard is fundamentally right about the place of the scapegoat in the origins and founding of human culture, if he is right that the sacred is characterized as the ambivalent force emerging from the collective killing of an innocent victim, and if he is right that the Judeo-Christian narrative is the only narrative that explicitly exposes this practice and points out the innocence of the victim, then it would seem to entail something like the unique (anthropological – not necessarily religious) truth of Christianity among other religious and philosophical traditions. This is an unfashionable position to take in contemporary academia. This position uniquely privileges the Christian position over-and-above any other form of mythological, allegorical, religious, or literary form of understanding the human inter-relational condition. Girard, nevertheless, attempts to show how his position is

justified, and remains open to evidence to the contrary. In putting Christianity in a privileged position he has been decried in his treatment of other religious texts that also appear to draw attention to the victims in sacrifice. He acknowledges that we do find some progress towards the renunciation of “mythical sacrifice” among various traditions; Buddhism, for instance, seems to circle very close to the core elements of mimetic theory and reacts strongly against traditional ritual sacrificial systems. Girard, however, claims that no other tradition comes close to the blatant, historical and dramatic, undermining of the scapegoat mechanism that we find in Christianity.¹

After publishing *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, and thereafter *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard was catapulted to the heights of fame and notoriety, especially within Continental philosophy and literary theory. Around this time (1963) he was, for instance, partly responsible for putting together the conference that introduced Derrida and Lacan to scholars in the United States.² Girard’s influence and success was growing, but it suffered a significant setback when he began to comment on the relationship of the mimetic theory to the Judeo-Christian narrative. While Girard thought the truth of his theory was obvious, he had difficulty presenting it to others, since they seemed to believe that embracing his theory involved somehow being hoodwinked into accepting various premises about the unique status of Christianity. (TH 43-44) However we can bracket questions about the nature of the Judeo-Christian narrative within the scope of his theory, and an analysis of his insights doesn’t seem to have any *necessary* connection to Christianity. In other words, one can accept the premises of mimetic desire and the scapegoat mechanism of mimetic theory without accepting anything about the specifically

¹ I will explain later what the notion of “mythical sacrifice” entails.

² Co-organizer (with Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato) of the international symposium “*The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*,” in which leading thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Lucien Goldman, Jean Hyppolite, Jacques Lacan, and Georges Poulet took part.

Christian revelation found in the Gospels. Further, one can accept the anthropological truth of Christianity without accepting any supernatural or religious belief.

In this paper I will outline the basics of mimetic theory, defend it against some criticisms, argue that it ought to be taken up for wider consideration and attempt to gesture at some interesting implications that I think emerge for philosophy. Some scholars have remarked that Girard's theory does nothing less than create a new Archimedean point for all knowledge in the humanities and the social sciences, if not all knowledge altogether.³ Others have said that they believe when the intellectual history of the 20th century is written a hundred years from now it will be Girard's name that takes center stage.⁴ These are grand claims, but they are fitting given the nature of the material that Girard is attempting to examine. Assessing whether or not the evidence fits with the theory is a massive task that has really only begun to be undertaken. Many new potential insights are ready at hand for theoretical investigation using the mimetic theory.

Chapter 2 – Mimetic Desire

Cutting right to the heart of philosophy is a question about the nature of desire. It is the question of what we want and why we want it. It is the question of the will and its relation to action, agency, personality, and character. Aristotle, for instance, would tell us that our desire is aimed constantly towards the good of happiness, and therein lays the explanation for all of our activity. For the Stoics, desire was a hindrance to the cultivation of the wisdom of the sage, something to be diffused and set to war against. For Augustine desire was the infinite yearning

³ Eric Gans: "It seems to us that Girard's research provides an 'Archimedean point', outside the terrain of classical thought, from which we might profitably deconstruct this thought, not in the service of a nihilism, which is only the negative image of its failure, but as a positive reflection which is capable both of integrating the assets of traditional philosophy and of providing a true anthropological foundation to the 'social sciences.'" *Pour une esthétique triangulaire*

⁴ Peter Thiel mentions this in an interview of his thoughts on the work of René Girard. See bibliography.

for the peace of God. For Bentham, and other utilitarian's, desire was broadly the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. For Kant, desire is totally disembodied, and is a product of the representation of the object. For Schopenhauer, desire is the senseless willing, the will to life, pervasive everywhere throughout the universe. For Freud, it is the playing out of the Oedipus complex, among other mysterious drives. For Nietzsche, desire is the source of our obstacles, the possibility of our growth. These are oversimplifications, and much of mimetic theory finds predecessors in the history of philosophy, but despite a few theorists getting very close to the nature of desire (Augustine, Rousseau, Spinoza, Hegel, and Nietzsche, among others), nobody has been able to articulate a philosophy of the will that is able to intelligibly account for all human phenomena. The problem of the human condition has never been solved in theoretical form. A significant stream of the whole history of philosophy testifies to a desire to understand desire, and the whole of modern psychology is basically oriented around understanding what it is that makes our desire "tick". The tradition continues on in many forms, among them, modern action theory is our analytic theorizing about the nature of desire and how it might relate to ethics.

The failure to understand desire is for Girard a problem arising out of our own lack of humility. We fail to locate and understand the mechanisms of desire because we fail to acknowledge the role that imitation plays in the source of our identity and understanding. We find imitation to be an appropriate explanation for the desires of *other* people, but it is uncomfortable to admit that we ourselves are constituted out of the imitation of the desires, or apparent desires, of others.

One reason Girard believes that these previous theorists have been incorrect or misguided is because they follow, consciously or not, within the Western tradition of Plato. Plato was

perhaps the first to recognize the importance of imitation and its relation to desire (nearly half of *The Republic*, for example, deals with the right models for imitation). However, in following Plato, they miss the opportunity to nail down a central theoretical feature of the nature of desire:

Already in Plato the problematic of imitation is severely curtailed. When Plato speaks of imitation, he does so in a manner that anticipates the whole of Western thought. The examples he selects for us are consistently limited to *representation* – to types of behaviour, manners, [habits], words, phrases, and ways of speaking... What is missing in Plato's account of imitation is any reference to kinds of behaviour involved in *appropriation*. Now it is obvious that appropriation figures formidably in the behaviour of human beings, as it does in that of all living beings, and that such behaviour can be copied. There is no reason to exclude appropriation from imitation; Plato nonetheless does just this, and the omission passes unnoticed because of all of his successors, beginning with Aristotle, have followed his lead. It was Plato who determined once and for all the cultural meaning of imitation, but this meaning is truncated, torn from the essential dimension of acquisitive behaviour, which is also the dimension of conflict. If the behaviour of certain higher mammals, particularly the apes, seems to foreshadow human behaviour, it does so almost exclusively perhaps, because the role of acquisitive mimesis is so important in their behaviour. (TH 8)

In addition, if we follow Plato, the ability to properly understand imitation and desire *scientifically* becomes impossible, since it completely cuts off the animal world and focuses on a realm that is, more or less, distinctively human. Any successful theory of desire for Girard will have to come out of an evolutionary context, and in full concert with a scientific understanding of hominization. If we are to understand the role of desire in humans, and how it could have arisen from the non-human animal world, Girard thinks a better starting place would be to look first at the whole of the phenomena of imitation and mimicry in the animal kingdom:

In the science of man and culture today there is a unilateral swerve away from anything that could be called mimicry, imitation, or mimesis. And yet there is nothing, or next to nothing, in human behaviour that is not learned, *and all learning is based on imitation*. If human beings suddenly ceased imitating, all forms of culture

would vanish. Neurologists remind us frequently that the human brain is an enormous imitating machine.⁵ (TH 7) [Emphasis added]

When we look at how imitation functions in the animal world, we can see the origins of the structural beginnings of mimetic desire (finding its origin in the object, but the dynamics of ‘culture’ in the interpersonal relations):

If one ape observes another reach for an object, it is immediately tempted to imitate the gesture. It also happens that the animal visibly resists the temptation, and if the imitative gesture amuses us by reminding us of human beings, the failure to complete it, that is to say the repression of what already can nearly be defined as a desire, amuses us even more. It makes the animal a sort of brother to us by showing it subject to the same fundamental rule as humanity – that of preventing conflict, which the convergence of two or several avid hands toward one and the same object cannot help but provoke. (TH 9)

Anyone who has had a sibling or close childhood friend can recall the origins of many of our play-time desires. If our friend or sibling is playing with a ball, it is that ball that we are suddenly, seemingly inexplicably, interested in. Girard notes studies that verify the same experimentally when “[placed] a certain number of identical toys in a room with the same number of children... [and showed] the toys will not be distributed without quarrels”. (TH 9)

This is our starting point for Girard, and he notes that there is nothing really new or exciting here “the discovery of conflictual (acquisitive) mimesis and its repression, in itself is hardly very surprising”. Once we recognize that imitation has an acquisitive dimension, and that this dimension is found and extended in the animal kingdom, we can make some progress towards understanding the mechanisms of human desire.

Mimesis appears to be present in all forms of life, but in the so-called higher mammals and particularly in man’s nearest relatives, the anthropoid apes, it manifests itself in some quite spectacular forms. In certain species the propensity to

⁵ Girard was writing this in 1978, since then there has been an avid interest in mimetic activity (within domains like Neuroscience/Psychology) as it relates to human behaviour and activity. The discovery of mirror neurons has provided one instance of large scale empirical support for his theory.

imitate and what we would call a quarrelsome, bickering mood are one and the same thing; it is a question of acquisitive mimesis (TH 90)

Alongside the foundational elements of his theory we might also look for a plausible psychological reason that we fail to locate imitation as the source of our desires, if it is indeed as central as Girard thinks it is then there ought to be an explanation for why it has remained hidden for so long? There are at least two major reasons that Girard cites. The first is that we Western philosophers have been, to an impressive degree, under the sway of the Romantic conception of desire. This is not to say that it is only those belonging to, or coming after, the Romantic movement that are capable of missing the origins of our desire, but merely that the spirit of idealized individualism, which perhaps arose from Descartes and Hobbes onwards, is incapable of admitting that its cogito is always something external to itself. When we ask ourselves “what is desire?” we are preloaded to believe that desire “is arch-individualistic. It [modernity] wants desire to be strictly individual, unique.” (EC 12) So we wish to believe that desire is, somehow, something that is uniquely our own. If we were to find out that the nature of desire is that it is borrowed from others, it might come as a very severe and unpleasant shock to our ego. We would prefer to believe that our desires arise spontaneously within us, or that we are somehow responsible for being authentic to our “true” desires. Of course the reality of the phenomenon contradicts this conception. If we trace the history of any of our desires backwards we can only arrive at a source external to ourselves – there has never been a true, inwardly generated, spontaneous desire. Second, in order for the dynamics of mimetic desire to function “effectively” – there needs to be a certain degree of misrecognition. For instance, using a group/individual/idea as a scapegoat is only effective insofar as people do not recognize that it is a scapegoat. The same is true for our desire; we only believe it to be “authentic”, when we cannot, or fail to, trace it back to someone or something else. Circling back on the previous

point, we do not wish to acknowledge that our tastes, interests, decisions, attitudes, and responses to other human beings (or animals) are driven by forces outside of ourselves (other subjects), and so we tend to misrecognize the origin of our desires. While we might be happy to admit that *some* of our behavior and attitudes are given to us by role-models and people we admire, we would be loath to admit that all of it is the synthesis and product of others, or even worse, that our desire and self is given to us by our enemies!

We might concede that our desires do not arise spontaneously within us, but are rather presented to us from objects of the external world, either by other subjects, or by other things in general. This would be the standard theoretical model of desire that we intuit. Subject *a* sees object *b*, that is attractive for one reason or another, a desire is generated and subject *a*, if possible, makes a move to acquire the object *b*. The reality though, even upon mere reflection, is something completely different.

This, for Girard, is how our appetites function.⁶ And we might be excused for confusing the process of appetite with the process of desire in general, but for Girard, they are distinct (if often related). “First of all, we should distinguish between desire and appetites. Appetites for things like food or sex – which aren’t necessarily connected with desire – are biologically grounded. However, all appetites can be contaminated with mimetic desire as soon as there is a model, and the presence of the model is the decisive element in my theory.” (EC 56) The

⁶ We don’t need to be too strict with our definitions here. Girard isn’t proposing any kind of black or white distinction by which we are able to separate some behaviours as driven by complete appetite and others by another force altogether, something we call Desire. That would be a return to the Platonizing of various drives that we find in Freud, which is a kind of obscurantism, since it makes the real mechanics of desire something slippery and impossible to grasp. Appetites are things we all need, they are mostly given to us by objects in the world rather than by other subjects, though it is entirely possible, indeed probable, that both appetites and desires feed off of each other and respond in various ways relative to their relations. Desires are given to us by our model(s). We don’t simply copy the actions of one particular model at all times, we synthesize and combine our models into novel expressions – hence the diversity of forms of culture that we find. How that relationship between subject and model plays out is going to be largely governed, it turns out, by proximity.

distinction Girard proposes is not necessarily a black and white one. If we have a motivation for chocolate cake, we might be under the sway of both appetite and desire – appetite for high-sugar high-fat foods as a result of growing up in our evolutionary context, coupled with the desire-specific chocolate cake given to us by an advertisement or other model. Desire and appetite interplay with each other, but we do not get to mimetic desire, properly speaking, until there is the presence of a model. Humans are the animals who do not know what to desire, and so we take our cues from others around us.

Chapter 3 - The Model and Mediator of Desire

In contrast to the Romantic picture of spontaneous desire is the Girardian picture of *mimetic desire*. We desire what we desire because the people that we desire to be, or even find ourselves sharing presence with, indicate for us what to desire. Our desiring is acquisitive from top to bottom, as it is in the realm of the higher mammals, so it is in the highest realms of symbolic abstraction that human beings are capable of playing in. The fundamental point is that our desires are not normally generated by things that we spontaneously want, or find along the roadside, they are, instead, *given to us by our models*.

Our models can be anyone in the world, but most typically they are persons who are related to us in close proximity: our neighbours. People we admire, revile, or share close space with are responsible for giving us our desires, which can be a productive and helpful process, but also creates a very real tension at the heart of all of our relations:

If individuals are naturally inclined to desire what their neighbours possess, or to desire what their neighbours even simply desire, this means that rivalry exists at the very heart of human social relations. This rivalry, if not thwarted, would permanently endanger harmony and even the survival of all human communities. Rivalistic desires are all the more overwhelming since they reinforce one another. The principle of reciprocal escalation and one-upmanship governs this type of conflict. This

phenomenon is so common, so well-known to us, and so contrary to our concept of ourselves, thus so humiliating, that we prefer to remove it from our consciousness and act as if it did not exist. (ISS 7)

The reality of these facts sets off what might be considered a theoretical chain reaction of discovery about the nature of interpersonal relationships and power structures; because if we understand that our desires are given to us by other people in this way, then it necessarily follows that we can understand the movements of conflict interpersonally:

Either the subject is in the same relational domain as his model or he is in a different one. If he is in a different domain, then of course he cannot possess his model's object and he can only have what I call a relationship of *external mediation* with his model. For instance, if he and his favourite movie star, who might act as his role-model, live in different worlds, then a direct conflict between subject and model is out of the question, and the external mediation ends up being a positive one – or at least not a conflictual one. However if he belongs to the same contextual domain, to the same world⁷ as his model, if his model is also his peer, then his model's objects are accessible. Therefore, rivalry will eventually erupt. I call this type of mimetic relationship *internal mediation*, and it is intrinsically self-reinforcing. Due to the physical and psychological proximity of the subject and model, the internal mediation tends to become more and more symmetrical: the subject will tend to imitate his model as much as his model imitates him... A mimetic crisis is always a crisis of undifferentiation that erupts when the roles of subject and model are reduced to that of rivals. It's the disappearance of the object which makes it possible. This crisis not only escalated between the contenders, but it becomes contagious with bystanders. (EC 60)

Girard unpacks the place of mimesis in its relation to giving us our desires via the presence of the mediator, and shows simply the different ways that mimesis spurs on conflict and rivalry. Not all mimesis leads to conflict, but if it is undifferentiated, uncontrolled and not channelled by things

⁷ When Girard is speaking of different worlds, he means the horizons of our own physical and psychological presence. These boundaries are often rough, but also easy enough to sketch. My colleagues in the classroom inhabit the same world-space as I do, so do the people I pass-by on the sidewalk (to a lesser degree), but people in Shanghai who I have never interacted with only share the same world as I do in a much more limited sense. Sharing the same world is primarily about proximity of physical and mental space. Mental and narrative space is primarily characterized by various symbolic orderings, we might share things like rank, title, job description, personal relationship, duties, clan affiliation, etcetera.

like judicial systems, taboos and prohibitions, or other kinds of distinction, rule, or regulation, it will, eventually, lead to violent conflict. This is an important point. Steering a middle course between the inherent violent and depraved nature of humanity postulated by Hobbes, and the inherent peaceful nature of humanity postulated by Rousseau, Girard holds that mimetic desire tends towards violence, but it is not necessary for human beings to be led on by their desire to acquire (one-up/dominate) the other. Desire has an inherent tendency towards violence when it is caught up in a struggle for an object or in social relations, but humanity is not inherently violent.⁸

Finding the presence of the mediator in giving us our desires is often a difficult project, because we do so much to cover up the fact that our desires are given to us by anyone besides ourselves. Girard accidentally discovered this practice when he went on a hunch and assumed that there might be something in common between the novels and stories that we consider to be great literature. Though this went against the spirit of the age when he was working in literary theory, he believes that he found his hunch to be more than resoundingly correct. The works that we consider “great” are by those authors who have undergone a conversion of sorts, who realize that our desires are given to us by others, and that most human striving and drama is the playing out of this reality. These same authors seem to understand that when we accuse others, we are necessarily implicated in the same crimes (at different times and in different ways), and that therefore all of our blaming of others is, in a sense, hypocritical. Doubles, as Girard calls them, are everywhere. His principle authors of examination are Cervantes, Stendhal, Proust,

⁸ My understanding here is greatly indebted to Wolfgang Iser's text on Girard's mimetic theory (#13 bibliography) – while Girard does hold that the dynamics of desire are mechanical by nature, humanity has an alternative possibility alongside its natural tendency – the logic of grace, which can build on and perfect the flawed nature of human desire.

Dostoyevsky, and Shakespeare, though he acknowledges many others, and he has spent a great deal of time and ink to explore and show evidence for his theory in their work.⁹

When we understand that our desires are given to us by our models we are left with the puzzling phenomenon of figuring out where the feeling of our freedom and spontaneity of our desire comes from. We might even object that mimetic desire can't be true, because human beings are free. While this would be an instance of question begging, since there are already good philosophical reasons to be sceptical of libertarian freedom, we should still attempt to locate what kind of freedom we possess within the scheme of understanding that are desires are given to us by others. It might seem counter-intuitive, but keeping spontaneous desire does not do anything to preserve anything like an authentic notion of freedom. Mimetic theory turns the objection upside down and inside out by asserting the opposite against its critics:

In order to have mobility of desire – in relation to both appetites and instincts from one side and the social milieu on the other – the relevant difference is *imitation*, that is, the presence of the *model* or models, since everybody has one or more. Only mimetic desire can be *free*, can be *genuine* desire, human desire, because it *must* choose a model more than the object itself. Mimetic desire is what makes us human, what makes possible for us the breakout from routinely animalistic appetites, and constructs our own, albeit inevitably unstable, identities. It is this very mobility of desire, its mimetic nature, and this very instability of our identities, that makes us capable of *adaptation*, that gives the possibility to learn and to *evolve*. (EC 39)

While this does not do much to preserve the absolute freedom of an autonomous individual, it does explain how it is that novelty and innovation emerges in society. Desire is mobile in the sense that it combines and synthesizes borrowed desires from multiple models/sources in order to create new forms and phenomena. Given that desire is spurred on through rivalry and

⁹ For a great example of Girard applying mimetic theory to literature I would strongly recommend his: *A Theatre of Envy: William Shakespeare*, Oxford University Press, 1991.

competition with the other, we can see obviously why there is very good incentive, psychologically speaking, to create new ways to one-up our models.

In this sense rivalry driven by desire can be very productive. Innovation and invention in the means of production might be one example, but the process walks on the knife's edge. It is just as easy, absent the constraints of distinctions and rule-based systems of power, for the dynamic to devolve into bloody violence. Military innovation is one telling example where desire driven competition is both exceedingly productive and violently destructive.

The core problem of unrestrained mimetic desire is that, in the end, desire wishes to appropriate the being of the other to itself. This apex point, or fever pitch, of desire is characterized by Girard as *metaphysical desire*. At this extreme point the object that may have initially spurred on the rivalry falls from view, *and the elimination of the other becomes even more important* than actually acquiring any object. As an example, if we are in a heated competition with a rival of ours, it may become more important that our rival does not win the competition rather than winning the competition for ourselves. In a case like this we can say the "object" (winning the competition) has fallen from view in favour of diminishing or consuming the being of our rival. We wish to appropriate the very being of the other to our own ends, and in doing so, they must be destroyed. While this is a fantastic illusion, it does seem to govern our psychology, and examples of it are legion: from cannibalism to international disputes over insignificant territories, intense metaphysical desire is often the source of so many puzzling violent phenomena.

Half of Girard's oeuvre deals with the interpersonal dynamics of mimetic desire. They are most explicitly and systematically examined in part three of *Things Hidden*. Once we

understand how it is that human's desire - according to others - and in the scope of rivalry with attempting to appropriate the very being of the other, human social dynamics can be understood in rather mechanistic terms. Of course, the more intense the desire, the more predictable it becomes, so it is really in the fever pitches of desire that the outcomes become rudimentarily predictable. With this, if Girard is correct, we can understand and systematically examine the origins of all human civilization, religion, culture, down to our present historical situation. The mechanism that is revealed has been baptized by Girard as the *scapegoat mechanism*. It is through this mechanism that we can reveal the hidden motives behind the first human cultural institutions, and also understand how our own interindividual communities are stitched and held together in the present.

Chapter 4 – The Scapegoat Mechanism and the Foundation of the World

The nature of desire gives us sufficient theoretical grounding to begin to look at what kinds of behaviours and practices we could expect to find taking place in the time before the symbolic world of humans had been opened.¹⁰ In particular we are looking for the origin of the phenomenon of sacrifice, especially human sacrifice, as it is a near ubiquitous, universal, and seemingly inexplicable phenomenon in human history.

Once Girard had finished his work in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, on the nature of desire as he had uncovered through his investigation to the role of desire in literature and the author, he began to turn his interest to anthropology. He writes that an explanation for sacrifice and for a universal explanation for the origins of religion consisted of the Holy Grail of anthropological

¹⁰ This is a little misleading. It's not the use of symbols that makes humanity for Girard (as it does for Gans), but rather the ability to *desire*, properly speaking. Girard does not posit a breaking point, or line of demarcation from proto-man to human beings, instead it is a gradual process that emerges accidentally at first, and is later solidified through ritual.

research. (TH 126) Many attempts had been made, perhaps most famously in Fraser's *Golden Bough*, and similar work in the fields of anthropology and comparative religions that followed. But today Girard notes that concerns arising from post-structuralism and deconstruction have become skeptical of any kind of theory that would unify and explain the origin and function of the myriad different religious practices and myth that we find throughout history. In addition, we are so afraid of committing the sacrilege of ethnocentrism that we end up scapegoating our own Western tradition and its insights. Girard accepts that all of the previous attempts fall short of their aim; but that this does not mean that any attempt should be made at all:

Such pessimistic suppositions, based on past failures, purport to be ultrascientific but are in fact questions of philosophy and temperament. Past failures prove nothing outside their own context. It is fool-hardy to condemn the search for a real origin simply because the search has not been successful so far. Antimetaphysical speculation is, after all, another form of metaphysics. At any moment a new theory may arise that will provide a satisfactory – that is, scientific – answer to the question of the origins, nature, and function not only of sacrifice but also of religion in general. (VS 96)

All previous attempts to explain the origins of the diversity of species that we find had failed prior to Darwin, but that did not mean that his search for a unifying theory was in vain.

Anthropology (and philosophical anthropology) ought to be open to unified theoretical solutions to its phenomena if it is to be taken seriously as a science of man.¹¹

Working outwards from the starting point of desire, and looking at other creature's great and small; we can see that early humans and proto-humans would have developed strategies and techniques to stop the contagion of mimetic rivalry from spiraling out of control (or else we would not exist to question it). Again, violence has a tendency to occur wherever mimetic desire is present due to its appropriative nature. It starts in rivalry for an object (usually), but later

¹¹ Alongside a science like biology for instance, which of course depends on chemistry and physics, but nevertheless has its own proper domain. Outliers do not constitute a refutation of the phenomena of family resemblance. The point is that we should not axiomatically write off the possibility of an objective science of man.

becomes strictly “metaphysical” in character. Once the object has dropped from view, the subjects become focused solely on their rivalry with each other, and it is at this point that the distinctly human type of violence is prone to occur.¹²

Understanding this allows us to make sense of the myriad forms of law, custom, and taboo that held primitive societies together by creating differentiated spaces that keep mimetic rivalry from spreading and getting out of hand. Taboos surrounding food and sex, for instance, keep order by making sure that not all hands are grasping at the same time for the same objects, and thereby give birth to mimetic rivalry. We might regard antique taboos as primitive and unnecessary today, but when we understand that they were the only structural means available to stop communities from destroying themselves from within, they begin to make concrete sense.

Aside from the supportive evidence found in ritual and taboo/prohibition that indicates that past societies took very seriously the phenomenon of mimetic rivalry, Girard draws up concrete and explicit proof for his theory in his reading of sacrificial mythology. Again, Girard is well aware that unified theories that propose to explain mythology are certainly not in fashion at the moment, but they do not preclude the possibility of simple, central, principles that explain whole landscapes of phenomena.

It might be easy for us to misunderstand him here. He is not saying that *all* mythology must conform, in some way or another, to the scapegoat mechanism, or that the scapegoating mechanism can give an explanation for all the different elements that we find in mythology, his

¹² In the animal kingdom we often witness aggression and violent behaviour in the form of hunting or in mating competitions, but we do not find the pathological forms of violence that we find in humans. In mating competitions for instance sometimes one of the participants will be wounded to the point of death, but the intentional killing of the other is not the aim of the competition. In the great apes we witness the phenomena of war and scapegoat killing, providing greater support for the mimetic theory as we see that an increased capacity for mimesis is coupled with an increased capacity for violence.

investigation is much simpler. Girard is focusing in on the meaning, role, and place of sacrifice (literally – to make sacred) that mythology presents to us. Sacrifice is ubiquitous throughout ancient ritual and mythology, and typically follows a very predictable pattern. At its most basic element, a victim is sacrificed in order to create the world. The world in this sense could be the city, the region, the kingdom, or the Cosmos. Often times the elements of mimetic rivalry are brought to the fore, often articulated as violent twins, as we find in the stories of the rivalries between Osiris and Seth, Romulus and Remus, Amphion and Zethus, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, etcetera. In these myths one of the twins, or enemies of the twins, must be killed in order for the world to be founded. The creation of civilization is founded on the blood of the enemy other, and mythology *always tries to minimize, hide, or justify, the violent aspects of the “necessary” sacrifice.*¹³ In this sense, we might approach mythology as a kind of crime scene, where we have a victim, and we might try to piece together what happened. (EC 145) Naturally the people telling the story want to hide their culpability as much as possible, or minimize the grotesque elements, and so we cannot fully take the story at face value.

Some may wish to write off religion and sacrifice altogether as oddities or pathologies that do not play any real role in the building or sustaining of culture at all, but this would require a great suspension of curiosity: “but does this technique... have no real object and serve no real function in the social process? How can an institution that is ultimately judged fantastical and imaginary manifest such remarkable similarities from culture to culture?” (VS 96)

If we accept that religion and sacrifice do play a foundational role in cultural institutions, there are very few unified theories or principles available for us to choose from. We must

¹³ The hiding of the victim – through divinization, accusations and blame, or necessity of fate, is the central marker of what makes a myth a myth for Girard. Myth is, on the one hand, acknowledging that the victim is necessary, but on the other hand always attempting to cover up the fact that the victim is a victim.

sidestep Durkheim, since by Girard's own admission he believes that Durkheim is essentially correct about the role of religion in the foundation of society:

Durkheim asserts that society is of a piece, and that the primary unifying factor is religion. His statement is not a truism, nor does it dissolve religion in social institutions... Durkheim never fully articulated his insight, for he never realized what a formidable obstacle violence presents and what a positive resource it becomes when it is transfigured and reconverted through the mediation of scapegoat effects... Human society does not begin with the fear of the "slave" for the "master," as Hegel claims, but – as Durkheim maintains – with religion. To carry Durkheim's insight to its conclusion, **I will add that religion is simply another term for the surrogate victim, who reconciles mimetic oppositions and assigns a sacrificial goal to the mimetic impulse.** (VS 322) (Emphasis added)

Girard here, as in other places, is a bit too loose with his language given the rest of his theory. Clearly he does not believe that Christianity or Buddhism would fall into the category of religion that he has outlined, and so his reformulation and definition of "religion" here is misleading.

The leading competitor to Girard's scapegoating mechanism hypothesis would be that of the Cambridge Ritualists, coming out of contact with Frazer's hypothesis in the *Golden Bough*. In this hypothesis religion and sacrifice are built out of ancient man's awareness of the cycles of death and rebirth in nature. Girard does not dispute the central place of the divinization of the natural within the context of antique religion and mythology but, again, inverts its place in relation to the more immediate concerns of mimetic crisis and social breakdown.¹⁴ "Nature enters the picture later, when the ritualistic mind succeeds in detecting certain similarities between nature's rhythms and the community's alternating pattern of order and disorder. The

¹⁴ In this sense we can understand Cosmogonies and other religious texts and systems as a kind of scaffolding of justification and explanation built on top of the practical means of ritual. This explains the great deal of diversity in architecture, with the same underlying mechanisms at the heart. Man finds his mirror of 'necessary' cruelty in the use of the victimage mechanism in nature - which can also be necessarily cruel.

modus operandi of violence – sometimes reciprocal and pernicious, sometimes unanimous and beneficial – is then taken as the model for the entire universe.” (VS 101)

What we see is that in order for civilization to exist, to be founded and to be sustained, there are, in the light of myth anyways, *necessary victims*. Tracing the re-enactments of the mode of the spread of mimetic contagion played out in ritual, we can examine the kinds of things that were said to have happened in the past. In the breaking of incest taboos, food and sexual prohibitions, revolts against authority, all re-enacted in ritual, we are given witness to the activities that set off the mimetic contagion in the first place. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, the recipients mirror and escalate each-others responses and attacks. If allowed to go on forever, it will mean the complete destruction of everyone. But somewhere along the line - in the swirling pool of violence - a victim is marked off. Someone who stands out from the rest for one reason or another, and all of the accusations of the community are heaped upon him or her, spiraling and snowballing in mimetic contagion. The community then unanimously participates together in the sacrifice of the victim. After the death of the victim reconciliation is accomplished and the community is unified together again, the mimetic contagion having been displaced onto the victim. The phenomenal character of this process, from the crisis of violence and complete social breakdown, to one of total peace and reconciliation, we can plausibly postulate, was understood as something divine and sacred. It should come as no surprise then that we find in the myths of sacrifice a unique individual, at first heaped with all kinds of scorn and accusation, and then all of a sudden deified into a god. Of course for Girard the myth and ritual is presenting something that actually took place in the past, a real awareness of the real presence of mimetic rivalry among social animals, albeit one that attempts to, as much as possible, minimize the supposedly

necessary violence.¹⁵ Once the phenomenological elements of the crisis are perceived by certain persons within the community, ritual emerges to reconstitute and organize the process.

We can assume that this is necessarily the case both from the textual and ritual evidence that we have available to us today, but also from a practical logical necessity if we follow the logic of mimetic desire. If conflict breaks out, if left unhindered, the two parties of the conflict have only a few ways of coming to a resolution. Either party *a* destroys party *b* completely, or vice versa, or at some point a third party is created and faces the deflection of the violence between the two parties onto itself.

The cardinal error that Girard believes to have exposed in our previous investigations of ancient mythology and ritual is to take language and culture as having been established before ritual practice:

The question, then, is how does culture develop? The answer is through ritual. As I said, in an effort to prevent frequent and unpredictable episodes of mimetic violence, acts of planned, controlled, mediated, periodical, ritualized surrogate violence were put in place. Ritual in this way becomes like a school because it repeats the same scapegoat mechanism over and over again on substitute victims. And since ritual is resolution of a crisis, it always intervenes at points of crisis... therefore, ritual will turn into the institution that regulates any sort of crisis, like the crisis of adolescence and the rites of passage, like the crisis of death, which generates funeral rituals... Whether the crisis is real or imaginary makes very little difference, because an imaginary crisis may cause a real catastrophe. (EC 72)

And further:

There are two possible views of ritual. On the one hand, the Enlightenment view for which religion is superstition and if ritual is everywhere it's because cunning and avid priests impose their abracadabra's on the good people. On the other hand, if we simply consider that the clergy cannot really precede the invention of culture, then

¹⁵ It should also be noted that not all mythology is so ashamed of the violence against the victim. Some cults are more, if we like, Dionysian; and fully relish in the swirling orgiastic pool of desire. We might think of the Mayan culture based around human sacrifice, for example.

religion must come first and far from being a derisory farce, it appears as the origin of the whole culture. (EC 72)

The *initial* process of the mechanism then looks something like:

- i. Crisis emerges from mimetic rivalry. This can happen in any number of means through the channels outlined by Girard in his exposition of the possible ways through which desire can be mediated interpersonally.
- ii. Purposefully or accidentally a victim is marked off who is accused (guilty or not in actuality) of the infractions that caused the swirling pool of violence.
- iii. The unanimous community (with the exception of the victim) gathers and sacrifices the victim.
- iv. The community is reconciled together again. The power of both the chaotic violence and the reconciliatory effects are merged together and understood psychologically as *Sacred*. The victim is seen both as perpetrator of the crisis and after being killed as a divine gift giver.
- v. The process is institutionalized and refined until, after much repetition, evolution, devolution, and modification, or outside crisis (plague, earthquake, etc) it becomes exhausted and a new crisis emerges.

This process is general enough, and simple enough, to explain the various forms of ritual and religion that we find across the whole panoply of human culture.¹⁶ When applied to mythological texts and rituals that we have available to us today, it allows us to decode and understand them with unprecedented predictability and clarity. The great diversity is, in reality, built on a very simple (and yet profoundly powerful and terrifying) effect of the community coming together against a single victim.

¹⁶ We ought to distinguish between ritual practice and sacrificial cults from things like prayer and meditation that we find in traditions that are anti-sacrificial. There may be, and often are, prayers and invocations as a part of sacrificial ritual, but these are distinct in function from the personal ascetic practices that we find in “non-violent” religions. This is especially clear in Buddhism, where the emphasis is placed on detachment of desire from material things and other agents beyond our control, and in the Christian tradition of monasticism which is based around on a similar form of detachment and communion with God. It would seem that most, if not all, forms of asceticism that we find are intimately tied to some kind of rechanneling of desire that moves away from the negative tendencies of rivalry, acquisition, and violence driven by desire. This is not to say, however, that all forms of asceticism are healthy. Asceticism done for masochistic reasons is revealed by the logic of mimetic desire as an attempt to appropriate divinity in an acquisitive manner. If the scapegoat mechanism is correct as the originary mechanism of human culture, then we would need to re-examine how we would ordinarily categorize and define different religious traditions and practices.

The process I have outlined is the process that would have taken place in antiquity, or wherever cults of sacrifice remain today. The same structure of the mechanism is at work today, but it may not follow the explicit formulation that has just been laid out. For instance, a group of gossipy academics may make a “scapegoat” out of someone within the group to build social solidarity, but an actual immolation need not take place.

Girard has much to say about the process of victim selection, we see the same process in play today. Victims are usually those who are in some sense different from the collective: the deformed, the abnormally beautiful, the abnormally ugly, the very old, the very young, those who can easily be marked off as somehow different from all the rest. In fact, the more marked off and different the victim, the more unifying and reconciliatory power is at the hands of the community. Everyone within the community begins to model the behavior of everyone else, polarizing their solidarity around the victim. Each person who joins the crowd makes the attraction of the mimetic pull stronger and stronger.

While this process is abhorrent to us today, we can also see its productive power. To moralize the mechanism with our own knowledge of the inhumanity of scapegoating is to miss the point. In the past, centered around sacrificial cults, it was the only means of preventing further violence from spiraling out of control and destroying whole communities. Indeed, without the “discovery” of the scapegoat mechanism and the institutionalization of it into sacrificial cults, if Girard is correct, we would not have any civilization at all. While the mechanism is ugly to us now, it should be recalled that its fundamental function is to *minimize* violence within a community. Today we have institutionalized the process to such a refined and rational degree in the form of judicial systems that we unfairly criticize (or unfairly become enamoured with) the primitive processes that are their immediate successors. (VS 23) In the

modern judicial form of the scapegoat mechanism the victim is (ideally) actually guilty of a crime that threatens the community. The judicial system is so powerful and unified that nobody (or hardly anybody) in the community doubts its legitimacy. If there are serious doubts about the legitimacy of a judicial institution, then we can see further proof for the dynamics of mimetic theory as we see a sacrificial crises emerge.

While the power of the scapegoat has been severely undone and diminished in our contemporary age (and arguably for Girard, since the last two millennia), we nevertheless still see attempts to make it work to build culture in our immediate past.¹⁷ From the wholesale slaughter of the bourgeoisie in the Soviet revolutions of the early twentieth century, to the Holocaust of the Jews by the Third Reich, and even in our own games of gossip and slander in our immediate interpersonal relationships, we still mark off victims with the (often unconscious) aim of group solidarity.

Girard admits that he is not a moral philosopher. His work on the scapegoat mechanism, for him, is essentially to offer a descriptive explanation of the mechanism and show how it works in the foundation of all human cultural activity – starting with sacrifice and religion. There is, however, one significant outlier in his examination of religion. The Judeo-Christian texts appear to know about the same sacrificial mechanism, but instead of encouraging its use, or justifying/hiding the role of the victim, they systematically, *over time*, gradually and fully unmask it. If we find scapegoating inherently abhorring today, and not, by and large, in the past, then there must be a reason for it. To better understand our current attitudes towards the

¹⁷ The proof for the diminished power of the scapegoat is that it only works insofar as there is a misrecognition of what is taking place. The fact that we even have a word like “scapegoat” that everyone understands is one indication that the power of collective violence against others to achieve unity has been severely curtailed. The mechanism only functions insofar as people do not realize that the victim is not actually guilty of anything. In the case of the Nazi’s, for example, the persecution of the Jews only worked insofar as people actually believed that the Jews were some kind of threat to society. As soon as people realize how ridiculous and arbitrary the accusations are, the power to victimize them is completely undone.

scapegoating mechanism Girard does a very interesting examination of the Judeo-Christian narrative.

Chapter 5 – The Judeo-Christian Texts

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of Girard's work is the part of his research that deals with the relationship of mimetic violence and the scapegoat mechanism to the Judeo-Christian narrative. If we take the scapegoat mechanism seriously, as the origin of religion and culture, then there are interesting consequences of mapping it onto the various religious traditions that we have available to us today. In examining traditions like Jainism and Buddhism, we find clear backlashes against the sacrificial sentiment that is ubiquitous among the oldest religious systems. Other traditions may, in a roundabout way, expose and criticize the use of victims in the foundation and sustenance of human culture, no other religion points out, instantiates, and makes explicit the scapegoat mechanism in the blatant way that Christianity does. Part of this tendency of the biblical narrative to point out the realities of the scapegoating mechanism, Girard notes, had already been explored by Freud in an indirect way:

I think that *Moses and Monotheism* is Freud's greatest book [on the subject of religion]. It is full of insights, based on a Jewish 'legend' of Moses being killed by his people, without being aware that similar 'rumours' circulated about Romulus, Zoroaster and most foundational religious figures. Zoroaster is supposed to have been killed by groups of sacrificers (sacrificial associations) which were part of the old religion, and they decided to kill Zoroaster precisely because he was hostile to sacrifice. All these stories resemble the story of Moses, as interpreted by Freud, but he never related them, and that is why he was not able to discover the scapegoat mechanism. (EC 204)

In the same spirit the Bible continually, progressively, identifies itself as being on the side of the victim, to the point where God himself supposedly assumes the role of the victim, forgiving his persecutors, and once and for all making a total and complete renunciation, revelation, and for

the theologically inclined, undoing, of the scapegoating mechanism. We find in the text a gradual unmasking of the reality of the scapegoat mechanism, and a set of tools to gradually release the Hebrew people from its use in the foundation of their own culture. To take one example: if we compare the story of Romulus and Remus to that of Cain and Abel, we notice that most of the story is very similar. Romulus kills Remus and founds Rome, whereas in Genesis Cain kills Abel and founds the first city and the first tools of civilization. The relevant difference, according to Girard, is that in the Judeo-Christian versions of the same stories told by their pagan neighbours; God comes in on the side of the victim.¹⁸

In a nutshell: myth is *against* the victim, whereas the Bible is *for* the victim... I am just repeating here what Nietzsche said, although I am doing it *in reverse*, Nietzsche took sides with the persecutors. He thinks he is against the crowd, but he doesn't realize that the Dionysian unanimity *is* the voice of the crowd... What Nietzsche doesn't see is the mimetic nature of unanimity. He doesn't seize the meaning of the Christian reflection of the mob phenomenon. He does not see that the Dionysian is the spirit of the crowd, of the mob, and the Christian is the heroic exception. (EC 196-7)

Girard vacillates between a condemnation of mythology and an appreciation of it. He acknowledges that he does this to a point, although it might not be immediately clear from reading only one of his texts. We must keep in mind that the operative function of the scapegoat mechanism is the reduction of violence and the building up of unity and order within a community. When the necessity of the victim is unchallenged, it is extremely effective, but as the reality of the victim is brought into focus, it loses its ability to offer any tangible effect.

¹⁸ We might point to the Deluge or the many other instances of Divine Wrath that we find in the Old Testament, most poignantly, we might recall the use of animal sacrifices in the Temple, as evidence against Girard's reading of the non-violent God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Girard, I think, would respond in two ways. From a purely naturalistic point of view, if the reality of the scapegoating practice as the core central institution of human culture was an insight relatively unique to the Hebrew people, then we would expect that this core intuition would be refined over millennia and gradually purged as differences were revealed. The classic theological response to the differences we find in the Old and New Testaments is that God is working to save mankind from itself, and he does this by gradually raising up a people "after his own heart."

The founding murder is the phenomenon that cannot appear, because if it succeeds, then everybody is united against the victim who appears to be genuinely guilty; if it fails, if there is no unanimity, there is simply no phenomenon to watch! (EC 197)

One question that stands out is why, if it is so obvious, this core truth has been largely passed over unnoticed (if not deliberately sidelined and ignored) at many points by Christians and Jews throughout the centuries? Why have Christians and Jews, if they possess the unique insight into the scapegoating phenomena, been responsible for so much persecution in their own histories? There are a few ways to approach an answer, but keeping in mind the force of mimetic rivalry over persons engaged in it, we should expect even those with a limited knowledge of its elements to frequently forget the central truth of the religion they themselves claim to hold. Further, while it is made explicit in the texts, the amount of courage necessary to practice the kinds of renunciation of violence instructed in the Gospel texts is challenging.

Alongside a revelation of the founding murder as the origins and maintenance of civilization, Girard has also shown how the Christian revelation acts as a deconstruction of society and civilization itself. Gianni Vattimo credits Girard with his “nihilistic rediscovery of Christianity” as he came to see the Christian revelation acting as a deconstructive force through history by exposing the innocent victim and the victimary mechanism at the heart of all politics and civilization. (Vattimo 34) This deconstructive element of the Judeo-Christian narrative ultimately leads us towards an understanding of the apocalyptic as the central movement of post-Christian history.

Chapter 6 – The teleology of History

The final stage of the Girardian hypothesis amounts to a circumscribed teleology of history. Unlike the dialectical rational unfolding of Hegel, or the eternal recurrence of Nietzsche,

in fact abandoning any metaphysical postulates about the arrow or nature of history, Girard locates history in the apocalyptic.

Theology in the past two centuries has been anxious to cover up and exclude the apocalyptic texts of the Gospels - for good reason. After two millennia of Christianity, the apocalyptic predictions seem to have been, at best, miscalculated. Girard is able to take a fresh perspective on the impulse to anticipate the end of the world.

If we follow Girard in understanding mythology and sacrificial religion as the means by which cultural order and differentiation is kept, then the break of Christianity, and other religions in the spirit of Christianity, situates us in a place where the end of the world is always at hand. There is no longer a sacrificial outlet for culture to feed upon. There are no more 'legitimate' victims that we may use as sacrifices to keep order. We can fully understand, while preaching peace and forgiveness, the injunction of Jesus of Nazareth that he comes not bring peace, but a sword, pitting husband against wife, son against father, etcetera. We can no longer appeal to the victimization of the other as a means for our own psychological stability. This is a dangerous situation – even institutional Christianity finds itself running out of scapegoats (though it still tries – with ever-decreasing effectiveness): there are no more witches to burn, homosexuals to vilify, or women to keep silent in the Congregation. When institutional Christianity does take a scapegoating stand, it is widely rejected and condemned by the secular culture at large that has been born itself out of Christianity.

Sacrificial crisis emerges from the erosion of differences, and Christianity was the ultimate erosion of all differences. In this sense, we are always living in the danger of the end times. While we would like to have recourse to the classical means of expulsion to keep order

and differentiation in place, there is no more sacred to have recourse to, though we still try, with less and less success as we collectively come to understand the arbitrary character of violence.

There is, then, a dialectical tension between the Logos of Heraclitus and the Logos of St. John, for Girard, unfolding in our midst. “Heidegger was the first thinker to draw rigorous consequences from the substitution of the Greek Logos for the Johannine Logos throughout Christian and post-Christian thought... Heidegger is absolutely right to state that there has never been any thought in the West but Greek thought, even when the labels were Christian.” (TH 273)

Rather than any necessary end-point to history, then, humanity stands at the crossroads of a choice. Will it choose love and forgiveness or violence? Will it continue to sacrifice its very home planet for the continuation of its own brand of ideologically driven economic organization?¹⁹ Will it continue to create necessary victims? Will it build more and more rockets with names like Triton, Neptune, and Saturn (who devoured his own children)? Will we continue to sacrifice the other to appropriate her being to ourselves, or will we move to an ethics of generosity and recognition of the other as other? Girard notes that Christianity is the only religion that has predicted its own failure, and that the apocalyptic dimension is the plausible endpoint in history as violent mimesis becomes ever more undifferentiated and widespread across the globe. Gradually differences will continue to be eroded and finally, as predicted, the Anti-Christ can appear: “the Anti-Christ is nothing but that: it is the ideology that attempts to outchristianize Christianity, that imitates Christianity in a spirit of rivalry... You can foresee the shape of what the Anti-Christ is going to be in the future: a super victimary machine that will keep sacrificing in the name of the victim.” (EC 236) We might make a comparison with certain

¹⁹ The upcoming COV&R conference (2013) is aimed at focusing on issues and relationships of place, landscape, and environment to violence and sacrifice.

strains of evangelical Christianity that wish to speed up environmental degradation in order to bring about the end of the world, or with the Bolsheviks who believed that we are only one more “grand purge” away from creating Utopia.

Coming to the end of conclusions like this Girard may have lost those who are inclined towards a secular mindset, nevertheless, I believe those of a secular mindset can appropriate and make use of the apocalyptic dimension that Girard puts forward as an explanation for history.

Chapter 7 – Evaluation

From the tone of this essay it should be obvious that I think the mimetic theory of Girard is correct, and believe that it presents us with the tools to generate a whole new understanding of our collective anthropology. The flaws that I find within the work are not directed at the theory itself, but with its presentation. In many areas Girard is too loose with his language and terms, making understanding his theory more difficult than it needs to be. Terms like religion, sacrifice, structuralism, deconstruction, are all loaded with different meanings depending on the context in which his dialogue is moving. We might find religion and sacrifice used in universally negative terms, as in *Things Hidden* or *Violence and the Sacred*, and then redoubled as positive things in the context of Christianity or other non-violent religions.

Rebecca Adams has also pointed out that because of Girard’s tendency to focus on the violent aspects of the tendencies of mimesis and rivalry, he neglects the possibility of positive aspects of mimesis like love, creativity, and apprenticeship. (Adams 278) Girard has responded that he does acknowledge the creative aspects of mimesis, but for the purposes of presentation and anthropological explanation, has been forced to investigate the violent tendencies of appropriation as it normally plays itself out. We can accept the innovative aspects of rivalry, as

in say, the marketplace, without ignoring the violent tendencies towards, say, environmental destruction that is a ‘necessary’ by-product of this creativity.

In addition, due to Girard’s absolute affirmation of the Gospels as the key to undoing the violent mechanisms at the heart of sacrificial religion, he has perhaps neglected the same strains that are present in other religious traditions. Important work is being done now to bring out the same peacemaking message in religions like Buddhism, Jainism, and Daoism. While I would agree with Girard that Christianity is the “full” anthropology of revelation, this should not serve as yet another excuse to scapegoat other traditions.

Michel Serres, in his work *Atlas*, and in *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time*, with Bruno Latour, has brought about a synthetic analysis of Girard with Derrida that shows that all critical analysis is, in effect, an intellectualized version of the same old sacrificial cult. Instead of immolating our victims on the altar, we immolate them in deconstructive texts to generate the intellectual community. (EC 151) If this is the case, then we ought to also be careful in reading Girard where he is willing to make scapegoats of whole intellectual traditions (Romanticism – for instance), in order to prove the point of his theory. While the theory, I believe, is sound, the movements are made far too quickly, and it might easily leave the reader dizzied as to how we got from the imitative and appropriative nature of human social interaction to the Virgin Birth of Christ.

The generative potential of the theory, I believe, is enormous. Serres again: “[mimetic theory is] a Darwinian theory of culture because it proposes a dynamic, shows an evolution and gives a universal explanation of culture.” (EC 96) For this reason I would argue that, even just to examine the theory is a task that ought to be taken up by the wider academy. Slowly this is

happening, and this paper is one small attempt to call attention to the mimetic theory for wider evaluation.

In doing this many scholars will be totally uninterested in the theological dimensions of his work, which is fine. If we may divide his work up into four movements:

- i. Mimetic Desire
- ii. The Scapegoat Mechanism and Hominization
- iii. Christianity
- iv. History

We can bracket three and four and close in on an examination of one and two. Indeed Eric Gans has formulated his own Generative Anthropology in spirit with, and in contrast to, the mimetic theory of Girard that brackets the questions of religion and moves in a way that is explicitly secular (while also offering an explanation for the emergence and function of religion).²⁰ Before moving onto what I take to be the concrete sources for philosophical evaluation and consideration I will do a cursory overview of some of the objections to mimetic theory, and respond in defence against the accusations.

Objections to mimetic theory have appeared since the beginning. Volume 8 issue 1 of *Diacritics* was a special issue on the work of Girard where Haydon White levelled his criticism of Girard's most recent work as had been outlined in *Violence and the Sacred*.

White places Girard in the tradition of the anti-Enlightenment squarely in the vein of De Maistre "Modernism, for Girard, is very close to what De Maistre excoriated as "impiety" and

²⁰ Gans has released a number of texts about his Generative Anthropology (GA); current research is catalogued in the journal *Anthropoetics*.

identified as a “grand conspiracy” against both Christianity and civilization; it is a congeries of falsehoods and error: individualism, democracy, rationalism, naturalism, humanism, progress, enlightenment, and so on, most of which derive from the 18th century.” (White 2) While, superficially, this is a way of perceiving Girard’s work, it doesn’t actually square up with the theory itself. Individualism, in terms of an emphasis and preference of rights for the individual, does not come under attack, rather it is the idea that we can constitute ourselves individually. Democracy, likewise, is not attacked: indeed “To be really for democracy means seeing the dangers of democracy. Tocqueville is quite sophisticated on this score ... If one covers up those dangers, society becomes like the Soviet Union, whose favourite system was a single house, a totally powerful mob of representatives that would be completely swayed by mimetic imbalance. To be democratic is to look for a division of powers, bicameralism, checks and balances, etc. It is important to see the dangers of mass societies and to try to counter them as effectively as possible. Mimetic theory is a real contribution to this understanding.” (EC 251) To say that Girard is anti-Rational must mean for White that he is against the form of Enlightenment Rationalism that wishes to get away from any kinds of superstition or dogmatism. This would be definitely wrong. “I don’t subscribe to religious atheism, but I do think that the approach to facts in the social sciences should be devoid of both religious and anti-religious assumptions. To call this atheism is surely wrong. The religious minds are wrong in asking for a religious postulate. If you postulate the a priori truth of religion from the start, your reasoning would have a far weaker apologetic value. The mimetic theory has an apologetic value in terms of Christianity only if you assume all restrictions of knowledge of the scientific attitude.” (EC 150) As for humanism and progress, they are only condemned by Girard insofar as they are naïve. Progress is not inevitable, and human beings show over and over again their tendencies towards violence.

Both De Maistre and Girard are French, Catholic, and profoundly interested in the role of sacrifice in shaping and founding society, but I would argue that the similarities stop there. De Maistre believes that sacrifice can be delineated into good and bad categories, for Girard, this is impossible. The kinds of self-giving sacrifice that emerge from the application of mimetic theory onto Christianity are of a whole different kind than the social-cult sacrifices of myriad forms under examination in work like *Violence and the Sacred*.

White contends that to do this makes him all the guiltier of being one of “the great apologists of Reaction who preceded him and in whose shadow he writes, Girard defends religion on “scientific” grounds.” (White 3) Which is where I am unsure whether or not White has really understood Girard’s work (though the failure of ambiguity would rest squarely on Girard) – religion in the sense outlined in *Violence and the Sacred* – is seen for what it is, something that does indeed build and sustain society, *but only on the blood of innocent victims* – “What rational and skeptical thinkers such as Voltaire took to be the flaw in religion and what Rousseau took to be the sin of society, Girard turns into virtues and identifies as the keys by which to unlock society’s mystery and to unravel the secret of history.” (White 3) Far from praising or endorsing religion in this sense, Girard is categorically against it, while at the same time admitting the fact that this kind of religion is indeed responsible for society and culture as we know it today. The turn is, perhaps, more subtle than White realizes.

White reconstructs the mechanism of the victimary hypothesis faithfully, but he fails to make any mention of the central claim about the nature of desire that Girard puts forward to get there: namely, that desire is mimetic rather than spontaneous. White is responding before the discovery of mirror neurons, and so attacking Girard’s speculation as mere hypothesis without any impressive and direct empirical support has sounder foundations. Nevertheless his failure to

even mention the mimetic nature of desire should make us wary of his presentation of the scapegoat mechanism.

White's failure to make the distinction between the victimary hypothesis and mimetic desire makes him mistaken when he puts his most substantial objection forward: "What is lacking, in his work as in theirs [Levi-Strauss and Freud], are any criteria of falsifiability, any specification of the kind of data one would have to produce in order to disprove the contentions about the nature of religion, society, sacrifice, myths, and so forth. There is nothing about culture and society that Girard's theories cannot predict. In this respect, they are exactly like any religious system or any metaphysical one. This does not make them useless, but it is fatal to the claim of scientificity." (White 7) It is not that White is wrong in saying that the victimary hypothesis is a universalizing theory in the same vein of Levi-Strauss and Freud, it is, but that he is overloading the burden of the victimary hypothesis as an explanation. At bottom the dynamics of the victimary hypothesis are ruled and explained by *mimetic desire*.

The difficulty is in deciding in how we can discern whether or not desire does function according to the dynamics shown in the mimetic hypothesis. While there has been impressive empirical support for the mimetic hypothesis, there is no way we can put consciousness under a microscope – at least for the moment – whereby we can empirically verify whether or not our desires are being given to us by others and the world around us. It is at least hypothetically possible that they are the result of angels, or a unique personal self, the mimetic hypothesis merely suggests that the best explanation is that they are, for the most part, given to us by our models.

At any rate Girard has approached this objection and responded to it in *Evolution and Conversion*:

The question of Popperian ‘falsifiability’ is a red herring since we aren’t talking about a natural phenomenon that can be tested and debunked in laboratories. In the same way, Darwin’s evolutionary theory can’t be dismissed by the standard procedure of falsification. There are plenty of undoubtedly true things which are not verifiable or falsifiable in Popperian sense. The illusory nature of witchcraft, for example. The ineffectiveness of witchcraft is a fundamental truth for our conception of human rights and democracy. It is not an ideological conviction; therefore it can only be a scientific one. Science actually denies the possibility that some people have a hidden power that transcends scientific knowledge. The scepticism about witchcraft must be defined as scientific rather than religious or ideological. (EC 164)

There is no positive test we can do in order to discover that witchcraft has any causal efficacy, but we can rule it out on the basis of our scientific assumptions. Our scientific assumptions are, at bottom, strictly speaking, – unjustified, but we nevertheless make them because they are extremely successful in predicting and understanding natural phenomena in the world around us. The only way we would be justified in throwing out our scientific assumptions (say in materialism), would be if we ever came across a material effect that could not be explained by its material causes, or something of that nature. In the same way we are not able to throw away the mimetic hypothesis until we seriously examine the evidence in the light of the theory and see whether or not it has a clear, elegant, and insightful explanation in the light of mimetic theory.

Instead of looking for evidence to the contrary to the mimetic hypothesis, it needs to be *tested against the data*. If a competing theory can offer a simpler, more elegant, and complete explanation, then mimetic theory ought to be discarded in favour of the competing hypothesis. The only other theoretical alternative, it would seem, would be to deny the possibility of even creating a theory that explains the myriad forms of religion and tradition and can, at the same time, provide a working scientific (roughly: naturalistic) hypothesis for the origins and genesis of human culture.

Like any general theory - it needs to be tested against the evidence, if it is elegant, clear, and insightful, then it warrants further investigation. White believes, on the other hand, that the surrogate victim hypothesis is too broad, too fantastic, to be tested against:

So too with Girard's theories of culture. "All religious rituals spring from the surrogate victim," he writes; "and all the great institutions of mankind, both secular and religious, spring from ritual. Such is the case, as we have seen, with political power, legal institutions, medicine, the theatre, philosophy and anthropology itself" (VS 306). But suppose we turn this assertion upside down or reverse it? Would anything be lost by the assertion that the surrogate victim springs from ritual, or that political power requires it, or that Girard's own critical method requires such a victim and that this victim is nothing other than the theories he is attacking? The answer must be that we would lose nothing at all. The "data" would still be there, in all their concreteness and determinateness. (White 8)

This is a sound objection. But, again, it is pointless in dealing with the bottom of theoretical foundations. The only possible alternative is that no theory is possible at all, which is itself an unverifiable (in the empirical/Popperian sense) theoretical postulate. It could very well be the case, hypothetically, that it is political power or the imperative of ritual that there be sacrifice, but when put up against mimetic theory, it does not compare in explanatory power, simplicity, or elegance. At the very least, if this is the only objection one has against mimetic theory, I would think it should be put aside until a further and wider application and examination has been carried out. We can't falsify all (or any) of the different types of superstring theory, but we can test these theories against theory and phenomena to see which offers the simplest, most elegant, solution.

It would seem to me that the real debate moves forward over the question of what constitutes the applicable data-set to look for evidence from? Is it, for example, legitimate to look to mythology and ritual as sources for confirmation of the theory? If it's a universal theory, then shouldn't all culture confirm, or be explained, by the mimetic hypothesis? The answer, it

would seem, is yes. This is the level at which we might ask what the right kinds of evidence that would count in favour of discarding the theory. The test might be something extraordinarily broad, given the wide ranging scope that the theory offers to account for. We might look to any and all artifacts of human cultural activity and ask if they conform to the dynamics present in mimetic rivalry, if they do, and they fit in correspondence with similar evidence to create a whole that is predictable and fruitful for the categorization of all various patterns of human behavior, then we should take the theory very seriously as a leading explanation for human social and cultural dynamics. If mimetic theory can clearly and elegantly explain all human phenomena, without postulating anything beyond the realm of our ordinary scientific understanding, then mimetic theory ought to be taken seriously as a universal anthropology.

In terms of the specific nature of the kinds of evidence that we will need to support mimetic theory Girard looks to prior and alternative approaches towards the nature of anthropological evidence: “Hocart is probably very important to this discussion, since he has an original view of anthropological evidence. According to him, anthropological evidence is always indirect, circumstantial, like a clue in a detective story. If we isolate these clues, we cannot reach any final verdict, but they are so numerous, ubiquitous and consistent that any doubt disappears” (EC 165) and further that: “I agree with Hocart and I regard his account [between direct and circumstantial forms of evidence] as fundamental for the social sciences. But for reasons that in part escape him, direct testimony is secondary and suspect as well. He is right to say that actors in all cultural dramas, which are always the same essential drama, ‘do not know what they are doing’. But it is possible to make sense of it. That is what the theory of the founding murder is able to do – so thoroughly that it is impossible to consider it a pure fantasy.” (EC 166) Hocart states that the kind of falsifiable criteria can be, in many instances, more misleading than the

secondary types of evidence that we rely on to construct theory: “There is a popular, but natural, delusion that direct evidence is necessarily better than circumstantial, in fact that it is the only satisfactory kind of evidence ... Direct evidence not only fails to explain; it may even suggest the wrong explanation; because it tells us only a fraction of the facts, while seeming to tell all.” (EC 166) Ultimately, the recourse to saying that no possible common denominator exists for the explanation of the numerous founding mythologies, or for any global theory of the origins and foundation of human culture, is giving into a “type of false direct evidence.” (EC 168) One way of attempting to look at the way Girard sees the difficulties with approaching his theory is that those who are investigating the evidence of what his theory speaks to do not believe in a conclusion that is possibly unifying in explaining the artifacts.

This objection seems to me to be the standard and most fundamental objection to Girard’s work, and he is willing to entertain it, but when in examining, as one instance, Livy’s *History of the Roman Empire*, when we find separate reference 43 ordinary lynchings we need to attempt to find an explanation for the phenomena. (EC 182) This is, among all the other examples of ordinary violence, found implicitly in both mythology and ritual – not to mention our own every-day experience (of scapegoating and being scapegoated by others), what the scapegoat mechanism is meant to enable us to understand.

Toril Moi has also argued against mimetic theory. According to her reading of Girard in *Things Hidden* he cannot account for feminine desire, and therefore, the universal application of his theory fails. “My main contention is that Girard’s theory of mimetic desire cannot account for feminine desire. Any claims to universal validity for his theory must therefore be abandoned.” (Moi 21) This is a difficult claim to assess if one is starting from the assumptions of mimetic theory. There is not really any room for a specifically feminine form of desire within the scope of

mimetic theory – desire is assumed to be a phenomenon that is shared equally by men and women. Perhaps one of the fundamental insights of mimetic theory is that there is far less difference between the sexes than a fixture on certain biological differences might magnify. Evolutionary psychology, in its more extreme moments, might be a classic example of attempting to magnify biological differences between the sexes in terms of desire and behavior. Indeed, from a mimetic theory perspective, men and women are orders of magnitude in greater behavioral similarity than they are different when it comes to how they process cultural data and, especially, how they strategize their moves and aims interpersonally.

There is no unconscious drive or separate form of desire intrinsic to the sexes – everything that mimetic theory puts forward is plain and in the open: “What I’m against is the idea that there is an unconscious, as a separate mental entity. There isn’t anything wrong with the idea of something being unconscious, but the idea of the unconscious, as a kind of ‘black box’, has been proved misleading”. (EC 86) If Moi means that there is a separate kind of desire that women have in addition to, or distinct from, men or that their psychology of desire is structured differently from men, then her argument will need to move along separate lines. To prove her argument she needs to show that there is a distinctly feminine form of desire that cannot be integrated into the dynamics of the mimetic theory. This is not found anywhere in her paper.

The first half of her paper intends to show that Girard neglects female subjects in his literary work. This may be the case, but nowhere does he ever remark that women and men somehow desire differently, or according to any structure unique to either of the sexes. It is very easy to misunderstand the application of mimetic theory, and while Moi creates a very charitable and faithful reproduction of the scapegoat mechanism and mimetic desire at the outset of her paper, she fails to accurately apply the theory in her criticism of Girard’s reading of Freud where

he neglects the role of the mother in the pre-Oedipal stage of development. At the outset she states that her main objection is towards the failure to treat a specifically feminine form of desire, and she spends several pages gesturing at a lack of treatment of female desire in his work on literary theory but does not produce any textual evidence that would show that Girard believes that mimetic desire is structured differently in men and women. Mimetic desire is born in rivalry.

The second half of her paper presents an argument that is meant to force Girard to concede that his theory, when applied, has unacceptable outcomes. Her argument takes the form of a *reductio* that says: if mimeticism functions automatically and if the mother is the predominant caregiver (model) for the child, then it should follow that the desire for all male children with a predominantly female caregiver will automatically be structured homosexually. (Moi 28)

I believe Moi simply makes a failure to distinguish the two key modes of mediation at the outset of her argument against the mimetic hypothesis. “If we are to suppose that the infant assumes its place as a rival to the mother’s already existing desire for the father, it follows that the baby girl will imitate her desire – and so will the baby boy... one is obliged to posit the woman’s desire as original, the mother’s desire becomes paradigmatic of all desire.” (Moi 27-28) Moi is obviously correct to assume that in ordinary circumstances the mother is going to be seen as a primary model for her children, but she is wrong to assume that the desire of the mother for her spouse is going to automatically structure the sexual drive of the infant for the father.

According to the mimetic hypothesis the mother would, in ordinary circumstances one might assume, be the most significant model for the child to pattern his or her desires according to. However mimetic desire is not merely about copying the desires of other people (although

this often happens), instead we need to understand that the model, because she is a model, can instruct the behavior and patterns of desire that are given to the child. If the child did have a desire for the parent that was sexual, the child could be instructed that this pattern of desire is forbidden, and alternatively show that sexual desire ought to be directed elsewhere. “Mimeticism is the motive force, and the specifically sexual appetite is taken in tow.” (TH 335)

Freud and Moi both believe that the sexual appetite has desire in tow, and it is this confusion that leads to all of the scandalous conclusions of the Oedipus complex. Mimetic theory in no way denies or minimizes that there is a sexual appetite, but it does deny that the sexual appetite takes priority before mimeticism. The sexual appetite is a biological drive in the background, but it floats without anchor until it is directed by a model. Here we can see where Moi’s confusion sets in – the male child should, then, automatically fix his sexual appetite on the desire of his mother. The mimetic hypothesis assumes that the model for the growing child will be the one that gives the child ideas in terms of how to channel his/her sexual appetite, but this is not going to be a carbon copy of the desire of the person who is doing the modelling. Desire will not, then, be necessarily structured homosexually as Moi believes would happen when the mimetic hypothesis is applied. In order for the child to enter into sexual rivalry with his or her parents, the child’s desire would need to be mediated *internally*. This could happen through scandalous events like molestation or other forms of sexual abuse, but it would not be the ordinary form in which desire is mediated between child and parent. In terms of mimetic theory, most of what we would classify as good parenting is parenting that is done where the desire of the parents is mediated *externally* to the child. This inherently maternal structuring of the sexual appetite is what Moi seems to mean by feminine desire, and if this is the case, then it is a simple confusion as to the modes in which desire operates.

Ultimately the main contention of her paper fails to justify a rejection of the mimetic hypothesis. Moi wants to read Girard as misogynistic; her shock seems to have been set off by reading:

Freud does not understand that the mediator's desire is the essential factor in the desirability of the woman. The subject needs the desire of his rival to sustain and to legitimize his own desire. In Oedipal terms, this would mean that the son wants the father's desire to sustain and legitimate his desire for the mother. If there is one thing the Oedipus complex will not allow, it is certainly that. It would mean that the mother is not desired "for herself," that she has no independent value of her own, that she is desired primarily as an object for the father. In addition, it would mean that the father is not the incarnation of the law against incest. The two pillars of the Oedipus edifice crash to the ground. ["Nietzsche, Wagner and Dostoevsky," *Double Business*, p. 67] (Moi – 27)

To which she responds:

Girard here actually seems to be proud of having shown that the mother (the woman) cannot possibly be desired for "herself." Her whole value resides in her status as an object for the father. This, of course, is the logical implication of Girard's triangular theory. (Moi – 27)

If Girard is proud of anything here it is showing that the rival is a much better place to look for the inspiration of one's sexually motivated desires than one's parents. It is jealousy and rivalry with our internal mediators that, often enough, spurs on who we select to pursue as sexual partners. The point certainly is not that women are incapable of being valued as subjects for themselves, as it seems Moi reads it. Girard is simply illustrating the fact that our selection for who it is that we want to pursue is mediated by our models/rivals, rather than being tied to the structural framework of the Oedipus complex. In the above passage he is highlighting where the Oedipus complex fails to explain romantic pursuits spurred on by rivalry.

I believe that there is much room for improvement within mimetic theory, and it will greatly benefit from consideration from the world of English speaking philosophy, but as it has

yet to appear on the radar of the Anglo-Saxon philosophical world, few philosophical objections have been raised against it.

Chapter 8 – Conclusion

Robert Hamerton-Kelly a Stanford based academic and current chair of *Imitatio* has claimed that the emergence of mimetic theory basically amounts to the end of traditional philosophy – as it explains, demystifies, answers, or changes all of the major traditional philosophical questions. I think he has exaggerated the situation, and that rumours of the demise of philosophy have been greatly exaggerated (at least since Nietzsche). In contrast I would offer that mimetic theory opens up new possibilities for answers, not only to the greatest classic philosophical problems (the nature of ethics, the freedom of the will, the nature of politics, personal identity and the self, the nature of beauty, truth, and the good, and how all these things relate), but also formulates whole new questions of application alongside mimetic theory. What is clear, if mimetic theory is true, is that a whole hurricane of dust has been kicked up, and it is yet very unclear as to how it will all settle. There are a whole host of open questions for those working within mimetic theory, and all of the dialogue and attempts to answer them (that don't have to do with obviously empirical matters) will be philosophical in nature. Examples of some of these questions basically fall into all of the classical philosophical problems I just outlined, and so it would seem radically premature to greet the death of philosophy. She has proved, up to this point, very resilient.

Mimetic theory gives a whole new unifying framework for understanding the human sciences. It is novel, simple, elegant, and fruitful in explanatory power. While mimetic theory does, for Girard at least, lead to some unexpected and strange places, the burden is on those

examining it in detail to show where the reasoning has failed. With strong new empirical support for the foundations of mimetic theory, and with a pressing urgency for all of humanity in figuring out the dynamics of human behaviour, I argue that his work ought to be taken up in all of the disciplines that are addressed by mimetic theory. I think that philosophers are in a uniquely privileged position for examining mimetic theory as it requires a broad, interdisciplinary, and systematic analysis that is impossible to carry out in a context of overspecialization. If it is wrong, then it is at least a very interesting and novel theory that speaks to very captivating phenomena like human sacrifice, mental illness and the nature of mating and dating, and the origins of human culture, and we lose nothing by giving it a solid critique. If it is correct, then it entails a complete revolution in how we conceive of the human sciences.

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