

Shared Ignorance

In the *Gorgias* (475d), Socrates tells Polus to “submit [himself] nobly/bravely to the logos as to a doctor“. At the root of Socratic praxis is the *therapeia* of the soul. Once a vital truth has been uncovered, one must affirm it and live into it. Not to do so is a sign that one still has some growing up to do.

So these are the four steps:

1. Ask a vital question.
2. Give voice to what you believe.
3. Give voice to second thoughts.
4. Submit yourself to what you learn along the way.

A powerful methodology indeed.

<http://woodybelangia.com/2014/06/05/the-method-behind-thinking/#more-4638>

The Mimetic Theory of Rene Girard, Part I

The Mimetic Theory of Rene Girard is a chief source of insight for me both personally and academically. Since my book project will make constant use of Girardian ideas in interpreting Plato, I think its necessary to unpack this subject a little for the uninitiated so that what I write later can make sense. For those who are already initiated in Girardian thought, I lift up my interpretation to your critical review in gratitude and humility so that you can help me distinguish between Girard’s theory and my interpretation of the same. This will take a few posts to get through, but here is a first attempt:

MIMETIC DESIRE

One of the marks of genius is to notice something vitally important and seemingly obvious but which never before had been recognized as important. Rene Girard’s great discovery of genius, a potential Rosetta Stone for the human sciences, is that human beings naturally imitate the desires of other human beings. (Have you noticed that? Obvious, yes?) Human desire is, by and large, mediated desire. Someone signals a desire for a particular thing, and now you discover that you want that thing. Most advertising works through this mechanism with demonstrated success. You and I are mimetic creatures.

TRIANGULAR DESIRE

Desire as analyzed thus has three participants: a *desirer*, an *object of desire* and a *model/mediator* — *not* just two, a desirer and object. So why does it usually seem as if desire is just between you and the object? Because mimetic desire operates on a pre-rational

level. Neurological studies have shown that this reflexive imitation is present even in newborns. The phenomenon is “preconscious,” grasped only after a later act of reflection if at all. We are otherwise blind to the influence of our models in supplying us with desires and thus blind to the “second-hand” character of our desires. Girard calls this blindness to the role of mediators in the origin of desire (i.e. the belief that “I” am the originator of “my” desire) the “romantic” delusion. Mimetic desire seems obvious when self-consciously reflected upon, but such reflection is not at all common and is certainly not automatic.

ACQUISITIVE MIMESIS

Among the species of desire is *acquisitive desire*, which is similarly mimetic: an acquisitive gesture in one person begets a corresponding acquisitive desire in another for the same object. (Defensive gestures similarly give rise to acquisitive desires in others, the well-known “forbidden fruit” phenomenon.) Acquisitive desires, subject to mimetic mirroring, will inevitably attach themselves to a single object within the same field of play and generate hostility and violence. In such cases, the model/mediator of desire first appears to his/her imitator as an obstacle/rival. (If the mimetic model doesn’t occupy the same “playing field” then there is no common object and thus no conflictual rivalry. Girard calls a model “distant” enough to avoid rivalry an *external mediator*, as opposed to the potentially rivalrous *internal mediator*.) The important thing to notice is that my mediator will first appear to the desirer as a rival, an obstacle, an opponent. Again, the mimetic phenomenon is preconscious, whereas the rival as rival stands all too noticeably in our way. Reaction against the rival’s potential (or actual) attempt to grab what I want *always* precedes the reflection that could uncover the truth source of my desire: that I only want it because she wants it. Put two kids together with a surplus of toys and their desire(s) will inevitably latch onto the same toy, beginning a tug-of-war and mutual cries that “I wanted it (or had it) first!”

SCANDAL

Pursuit and defense of an acquisitive desire mimetically reinforces the desire of the rival/model/obstacle and vice-versa, leading to an escalation of conflict unless something external to the conflict (like a taboo or a legal authority) intercedes or unless one of the rivals submits or dies. Girard calls this mimetic escalation scandal, after the Greek word *skandalon*, suggesting a “trap” or “snare.” A chief characteristic of scandal is that attempts to escape a problem only makes the problem worse (analogous to pulling against a snare). An example is the behavior of a nation-state perceived to be threatened by another nation-state. (A familiar situation?) Its defensive preparations look to its rival like aggressive provocations, which only increase the perceived threat. The rival then arms itself defensively, which is interpreted as aggression by the other side, and so on and so on. Therefore, the actions that were undertaken to secure each nation from threat have actually increased the threat and have fed a dynamic that is dangerously self-reinforcing (e.g. Europe, circa 1914.) Here is a [link](#) to a story nicely illustrative of the phenomenon of scandal.

METAPHYSICAL DESIRE

Since mutual interest in the object of desire is generated by human interaction, objects of rivalry can be manufactured out of thin air by mimetic conflict. Examples might include prestige, fame or success. (T.S. Eliot calls such things “shadow fruit”. They may also be called “vanities.”) I like to call these objects, born of mimetic entanglement, “metaphysical objects,” objects whose objectivity is located solely in the resistance provided by rivals. *Metaphysical desire*, Girard’s term, is the desire to possess the quality of “being” attributed to the possessor of the object in dispute. We attribute to the glamorous, e.g. the successful or famous, a quality of being that we lack, unaware that they also feel inadequately lacking in comparison to their models and so on.

INHERENT SCARCITY

The scandal of metaphysical objects is that desire for such objects leads to an *a priori* frustration. In eliminating my obstacle, I also eliminate the originator and sustainer of my desire and therefore the substance of the object in question. This leads to the paradox of success aptly expressed in Groucho Marx's quip, "I wouldn't belong to any club that would have me as a member." Metaphysical objects are essentially scarce and diminished when shared. Such scarcity extends even to material objects. Contrary to the assumptions of classical economics, which posits that competitive struggles emerge from the scarcity of goods, perhaps it is competitive struggle that creates the scarcity. And predictably when the rival falls away, the cherished thing no longer has its luster. A lyric by Terry Talbot in a song called "Stuff" is apt: "*It's treasure 'till it's mine then it ain't worth a dime.*"

The Mimetic Theory of Rene Girard, Part II

(This is a continuation of a summary description of Mimetic Theory that I began in [Part I](#). Make sure you read that first.)

THE SACRIFICIAL CRISIS

It is clear that mimetic rivalry is an incubator and accelerator of human violence. Mimetic forces left unchecked by external societal checks would result in contagious spasms of violence. Remember that the strong mimetic tendency in humanity is biological and preconscious rather than a product of human deliberation. Therefore the origin of any general disorder caused by the propagation of mimetic rivalry would be generally mysterious, while its effects are obvious and dangerous. The societal checks that we take for granted (police forces, manners, etc.) have a history and every history must have a prehistory. Given the tendency of mimetic rivalry to generate, sustain and even amplify violence, the question arises as to how human culture during this prehistory was able to survive the Hobbesian "war of all against all" that springs from natural mimetic escalation in the first place.

THE SCAPEGOAT

Just as the crisis begins with mimetic contagion, so too must it end mimetically. The new contagion is catalyzed not by an *acquisitive* gesture, but by an *accusatory* one. Someone is blamed arbitrarily for the violence — *the scapegoat*. Questions of who or why matter less than that the accusation is imitated. As an accusation is transmitted by mimetic contagion across the social field, there is a natural tendency for it to converge on a single victim. (This can be demonstrated in computer models with a collection of mimetic agents biased to imitate the most duplicated meme.) The violence of "all against all" is replaced by the more economical violence of "all against one" (or in Virgil's formulation, *unum pro multis*, "one on behalf of many"). The social vectors all become aligned, commonly focused on a single victim, who is eliminated. Unanimous violence "cures" the crisis not because of the violence as such, but on account of the unanimity born of accusatory violence.

POST HOC RATIONALIZATION

The peace that results from scapegoating violence will occur at blinding speed since, unlike the antagonistic tugs on the mimetic object, the accusation encounters no resistance (other than the increasingly outnumbered and feeble objections of the single victim). The social solidarity survives the death of the victim, and the experience of mass antagonism giving way so suddenly to an apparent peace has a powerful effect on everyone involved. The accusation

has been pragmatically justified by its predicted effect — the pollution having been purged, the society is now restored to health. *Post hoc, ergo propter hoc*.

THE ARBITRARY VICTIM

The victim is chosen by arbitrary markers. The victim must have been peculiar in order to be singled out and must lack defenders in order for the mob verdict to be unanimous. The scapegoat, being the first to stand out from the crowd, is the first “individual” both psychologically and socially. The scapegoat is also the only one in the culture who grasps the lie at the heart of the founding accusation — the only one who knows the “truth” of the culture — making him/her doubly threatening. Andrew McKenna has coined the term “the epistemological privilege of the victim” to name this phenomenon.

THE DIVINIZATION OF THE VICTIM

According to Girard, the seeds of primitive religion are here, in the seemingly miraculous effects that attend the death of the victim of unanimous violence. Far from being the projected fantasies of savage minds, the peace achieved is very real indeed, as was the danger of unchecked mass violence that preceded it. Because the danger was so precarious and because the deliverance so sudden, the corpse left behind becomes an object of intense fascination to those simultaneously threatened and saved by it. (This accounts for the two conditions of the holy in Rudolph Otto’s famous formulation of sacred ambivalence: *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*) Since the mimetic forces are invisible, diffuse and so far-reaching in generating social madness, and since the sudden curative effect of the scapegoating murder provides a *post hoc* justification (in the minds of the accusers) for the accusation, the murdered victim is credited with occult powers. The *post mortem* divinization of the victim by the society is the natural culmination of the story. .

THE SACRED ORDER

Girard theorizes that scapegoating effects are at the origin of all human cultural forms by marking the emergence of the category of *The Sacred*. The unity that follows the collective murder obviously is of life or death importance to the community founded by it. Maintenance of this unity and the prevention of the mimetic forces that continually threaten to undermine it *is* culture, at least in its archaic form. There are three signature components of sacred cultural order: *ritual, prohibition* and *myth*.

RITUAL

Since scapegoating murder cured the original disease, ritual repetition of this generative event will be used either to reactively cure further outbreaks of mimetic violence or prophylactically prevent them. This gives rise to sacrificial ritual. (Girard is the first to adequately explain the widespread existence of sacrificial rites in human cultures.) Girard also believes that the institution of sacred kingship arises out of the deferral of these rites: the king is a sacrificial victim with a suspended sentence — kept alive and treated as divine as long as order prevails.

PROHIBITION

Since mimetic desire gives rise to violence, *prohibitions, taboos* and *enforced distinctions* arise (through a kind of natural selection perhaps) that act as firewalls against the spread of mimetic rivalry. For instance, the incest taboo prevents destructive rivalries over the closest available sexual partners from developing within families. Girard points out that it is similarity, rather than difference, that encourages one human to imitate another. (This accounts for the primitive fear of twins in many early cultures.) Sacred distinctions such as caste systems help prevent mimetic amplification of the use of royal power for instance. Loss or weakening of such taboos/distinctions (what Girard calls the *crisis of distinctions*) can lead

to new spasms of mimetic violence. One such distinction is king/subject. The singularity of the victim and the singularity of the monarch may not be a coincidence — Girard theorizes that the origin of the king is as “a victim with a suspended sentence.” The hypothesis is that the scapegoat is able, prior to his murder, to leverage his sacred status before dying, to agree to use his “powers” for the community in exchange for his life and confirmation of his sacred role.

MYTH

Myths are narratives that makes sense of the founding event and the subsequent rituals that recreate the founding scene. Myths serve to overcome the arbitrary nature of the choice of victim, replacing it with a veneer of necessity and justification. Girard believes that traces of the original violence can be discerned at the heart of mythic narratives. Girard also believes that mythic stories, when viewed through the light of mimetic theory, reveal, across cultures, the originary act of scapegoating violence. The success of the sacrificial system rests on a general belief in the validity of the original accusation and justifying myth.

[The Mimetic Theory of Rene Girard,](#) [Part III](#)

(This is a continuation of a series of posts comprised of [Part I](#) and [Part II](#). Reading those posts first is a necessary backdrop to Part III given here.)

INTERDIVIDUALITY

Girard’s anthropology implies that human subjectivity is essentially de-centered. The Mimetic Theory replaces the notion of the individual as the first principle of social analysis with the radical notion of *interdividuality*, which transcends the self/society dichotomy. Desires have their locus between mimetic partners; they are not placed precisely within one or the other.

OCCULT EFFECTS

Since desire is mutable and contagious rather than fixed or self-determined, there can appear within human society agencies that transcend particular agents, often appearing as occult phenomena (e.g. demonic possession, mesmerism) or psychological maladies (e.g. hysteria). (See Jean-Michel Oughourlian’s work, *The Puppet of Desire*, for a good study of such phenomena.) The contagious germ passed between mimetic subjects can also be called a “meme.”

PRINCIPALITIES AND POWERS

Since institutions and social forms are largely the outgrowth of an order that has its foundation in mimetic dynamics, they represent the objectification of the interdividual situation, expressions of something like a *mimetic field* with gradations of attraction and repulsion. These “Powers” are not directed or controlled by any particular human agent, but are themselves quasi-agencies. Humans act out of their desires, but these desires are created, shaped and molded by the Powers that contain and confront them. Recognized human authority such as a ruler results from the Power and not the Power from the ruler.

THE SATAN

The central Power, that which founds the existing social arrangements, is that of accusation itself. “Satan” means the accuser, the prosecutor. The foundation of order has throughout most of history been through scapegoating violence and the mimetically attractive power of accusation. One could say of accusation what Heraclitus said of war — that it is “the father and king of all, and has made some as gods and others as men, and has made some slaves and others free.” Jesus calls Satan “the ruler of this world” in John 12:31. Satan, although very much a reality, is not a person in the strict sense but what Robert Hammerton-Kelly called the “Generative Mimetic Scapegoating Mechanism,” a feature of all human societies.

UNMASKING THE POWERS

The success of the sacrificial system rests on a general belief in the validity of the original accusation and justifying myth. Since the guilt of the original victim is a lie at heart, any narrative that unmasks the lie will weaken/destroy the Power and unmake the culture founded on it. Again, Girard distinguishes between (1) a narrative that masks and propagates the founding lie and (2) one that unmasks and deconstructs it. The former he calls *myth* and the latter *gospel*. Whereas myths are written from the perspective of the persecutors, gospel accounts privilege the innocent victim’s witness. A gospel gets its light from the “epistemological privilege of the victim” described earlier.

STRUCTURAL INNOCENCE

One of the species of innocence is *structural innocence* — the idea that even a forensically guilty person can be an “innocent” victim of scapegoating violence — especially if the purpose of the violence has more to do with maintaining social distinctions than with punishing crime. In this sense, a black man lynched in the Old South for horse thievery should be viewed in the light of “structural innocence,” independent of whether he stole the horse. Likewise, the victim of judgment is structurally innocent if the point of the accusation is to preserve an appearance of relative righteousness in the accuser at the expense of the accused. (Camus: “To justify himself, each relies on the other’s crimes.”)

WEAKENING OF THE SACRIFICIAL MECHANISMS

The concern for the victim *qua* victim that has arisen in human culture makes sacrificial solutions to social disorder less and less efficacious, since vindication of the victim destroys the myth that justifies the violence. Each discovery that unveils a victimage mechanism utterly destroys/transforms the society founded on it — modernity exposes the victimization implicit in the hegemony of ecclesial power; postmodernity discloses the sacrificial nature of modernity’s foundational meta-narratives, etc.

THE APOCALYPTIC SITUATION

The concern for victims of scapegoating violence has the perverse effect of increasing the threat and magnitude of further outbreaks of violence, since the sacrificial mechanisms that would otherwise keep them contained can’t survive being made transparent. The Greek word *apocalypse* (etymologically: “unveiling”) gestures both to this revealing and to the terminal violence that is produced by such revelation. Given our legitimate moral qualms over scapegoating mechanisms, and given the specter of apocalyptic violence made possible by the weakening or loss of those mechanisms, it seems more necessary than ever for our survival as a species to discover and model non-rivalrous, non-sacrificial ways of living. Auden: “We must love one another or die.”

THE SOLUTION FOR MIMESIS WILL BE MIMESIS

Girard holds that human beings cannot escape their mimetic nature and that (romantic)

attempts to outflank mimetic influences (e.g. Rousseau, Heidegger) are ultimately scandalous — we just end up playing the same mimetic games at a higher level. The cure for mimetically produced violence will be a mimetically transmitted desire for peace. The model/cure will have to be someone who has transcended the lure of scapegoating violence, but who?

<http://woodybelangia.com/2014/01/14/the-mimetic-theory-of-rene-girard-part-i>