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Transcript of Girard Lecture I | Introduction to Mimetic Theory



JOHNATHAN BI

MAY 25, 2022 • PAID



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0. Introduction

David Perell: No philosopher has influenced my thinking more than René Girard.

He showed me how I was caught up in meaningless status competitions, and how much I was driven by desires that weren't even my own. And I wasn't the only one. many of my peers were miserable pursuing things not because they actually wanted them, but because society told them too. And sometimes, I look back and wonder how I ever functioned without Girard's ideas. I see how swept up I was in vain pursuits, pointless social games, and status signaling – which Girard exposed and rescued me from. If there were ever a set of ideas that radically changed my life, these would be

The journey of acquiring these ideas, however, was a long and painful struggle. Girard's writing is hard to understand, his theories seem antiquated and abstract, and his books jump from idea to idea without an apparent structure. This is why this series exists. Over the next seven lectures, we are going to cover the entirety of Girard's system in a structured and understandable way, while exploring the relevance of his ideas for the contemporary world.

My name is David Perell, and I'm gonna be moderating these lectures, which are made possible by the generous grant of Tyler Cowen's Emergent Ventures program. As you

host, I'll be listening and learning here with you. And with that, I'd like to introduce our lecturer: Johnathan Bi.

David Perell: Johnathan, I know you are busy, thanks for taking the time.

Johnathan Bi: Thanks for having me. If you are gonna do all the hard work of setting up, and I can just come and ramble on philosophy, you can have me any time of the week.

David Perell: Well, I'm glad you could be here. And before you introduce us to Girard, I would like to introduce you to our audience. And I wanna start with how we met, which was hosting a philosophy discussion group in New York City, and at the time, we were reading Augustine's City of God, and I remember you being on the other side of the room and you started sharing and I was so impressed with the rigor and the intensity of your discussion. I was like "Who is this guy?" And so, we became fast friends. I audited your philosophy class at Columbia. Now, we both live in Austin, Texas, where we must have dinner together two or three nights a week. And in that time, I've been very impressed and what stands out the most is just the discipline and the thoughtfulness that you bring to philosophy.

And what I would like to do now is talk a little bit about how you got here today. So you were born in China where you were raised between Beijing and later moved to Vancouver and you spent most of your formative years training in Olympiad Math. At 15, you won a Canadian gold medal in the Pascal Mathematics Competition. At 17, you were an invitee to the Canadian Mathematical Olympiad. At 18, you were awarded a full-ride scholarship at Columbia where you studied Computer Science as one of the top 20 Egleston Scholars in a class of over 2000 people. At 20, you finished your Computer Science degree, and that's when you were introduced to Girard. And because of Girard, you pursued a second degree in philosophy, where you focused on continental social philosophy and Buddhist theory. At 22, immediately after

graduation, you started building a fintech startup with Joe Lonsdale, which you've been working on for the past year. Now, did I get that right?

Johnathan Bi: Yeah, I think, factually, that is correct. Although I don't know about exact ages. I'm a bit worried that you've hyped me up a bit too much. Perhaps, not unlike our equity markets, you set me up so high that there's only one direction that can go from here and that's down.

Although in terms of the question of whether you missed anything I think you did miss quite a few important things – to no fault of your own, because no one gives introductions this way – that are relevant to my engagement with Girard. And those are all the personal failures and the suffering that I've had along the way that really drew me to Girard. I suspect this is probably a much broader point that when you give an introduction to a Girardian that you should highlight perhaps their failures, just as much if not more than their successes. Because it's often their failures that really drew them to Girard. I don't think Girardian insights are rewarded, shall we say, in the victory of a triumph but you have to go out there and scavenge them from their field of defeat. And it wasn't out of a mindset of achievement or even a leisurely strolling into Girard out of theoretical curiosity that I was acquainted with him, but I crawled to him out of a desperate existential necessity.

1. The Case for Engaging Girard

David Perell: So then, how did you find your way to Girard?

Johnathan Bi: Yeah, well, like I mentioned, mostly personal suffering and strife. But to be a bit more specific, like many other teenagers, certainly ambitious teenagers – I was struggling quite a bit in my first years at Columbia – not academically, not professionally, not socially, but in a deep personal existential sense. As a freshman at an elite college, if you'll excuse a funny metaphor, I think you end up in a zoo with thousands of other, hyper-conscious, status-oriented, prestige-seeking teenagers. And

one word that I think which captures the existential problem of such a community well is hollowness.

And this wasn't true for everyone – but most of us weren't really doing things I think for their own sake but out of what Girard called “mimesis” – our natural capacity or tendency to imitate others. Think about it like this, 2000 of, allegedly, some of America's smartest and most independent kids all end up after college wanting to go into 4 fields: finance, tech, law, and medicine. And during college, we're supporting political causes we didn't care about to fly the “right” colors. We hung out with the “right” people. We wanted to be seen dating the “right” person. And we worked our asses off, hustling for prestigious internships that a lot of us actually secretly loathed. And I think what made this all so much more perverse was that we had to lie to ourselves to sustain these pursuits. That if we just squinted hard enough and intoxicated ourselves in the equally drunken rhetoric of our peers, that we could fool ourselves into thinking that this path of prestige is the right one for us to really be

And what was so existentially depressing, if you will, about such a life was not the presence of wrong – we weren't being tortured, we weren't starving – but it's the absence of right – even the victories felt so hollow and meaningless. Like getting a prestigious internship, that was a one-day or three-day buzz that went away as fast it came. And I think these victories were so meaningless because they weren't out of our own genuine desires but a product of mimesis, what we felt like we had to do out of some kind of social pressure.

And what was the wake-up call for me was in my sophomore year, seeing where this path of mimesis was leading me down towards. I was talking with adults, some of them alumni living in Manhattan and these were the guys who had “made-it”, right. They have the right postal code, they have the right job, they have a hot partner but they were fundamentally plagued with the same type of existential problems. They were making money they didn't need to buy shit that they didn't want to impress people they didn't particularly like. And in them, I saw the same despair and

hollowness but in some sense just even worse because it's developed a bit further on. And how can anyone not be hollow when you're living life in such a way where you're motivated not by a strong core impetus of genuine desire but this external shell of social expectation.

David Perell: Yeah, I see this all over the place. I've seen the influence of mimetic theory in so many aspects of society. You see it with people who take out a loan to buy some fancy car, and they don't have the money to do it. You see it in the way that management consultants, you'll be talking to them, and they'll talk about the direct level title at the company as if that's the salvation that's going to make them happy forever: they get it and then they're no happier once they get that. But the worst kind of mimetic competition that I saw was in high school, and there was this weird thing where the parents would be really competitive and conniving over where their child would go to school. It was like a status competition among them, and they wanted their kids to go to Ivies, these prestigious schools, and the trophy at the end was the bumper stickers on the back of their Mercedes with the university logo. And I saw how, through mimesis, that people had lost their own way and they weren't even aware of the nature of their own desire.

Johnathan Bi: And I think it's this lack of awareness that if you don't have a proper understanding of these forces makes it so easily for us, especially in today's modern society, to get caught up in these forces. And I think throughout college, I started gaining a more and more intimate awareness of the logic behind all of these phenomena that you mentioned. Not because I was above the fold, if anything I was aware of it because I was the most guilty, that I was the most mimetic of them all. And what was so frightening to me was the realization (as a sophomore) that I could live my entire life like this – fundamentally, not for myself. I knew I had to change before it was too late, and I knew that there was a point where it was gonna be too late. When the ship was gonna get too much speed, where if you'll humor another metaphor, the dagger is too deep in the old king's heart.

Fortunately, in the pits of my despair, I was introduced to the work of René Girard. And Girard saved me – and I really do mean that in a very literal sense of the term – in the same way that Virgil saved Dante by exposing to him the manifestations and the mechanisms behind human evil, as well as guiding his purging of more milder forms of perversion. Now, Girard saved me by presenting to me a theory of human nature that explained the true origin of desire and its terrifying consequences if not directed properly. He gave me a more accurate map with which I myself could slowly unravel and untangle myself from the mimetic web. And with this lecture series, my hope is to be able to gift this map to you and our listeners as well.

David Perell: So Johnathan, I gotta ask you, is the power of Girard's ideas that they gonna stop making us be mimetic? Or, do you still feel like you're still as prone to chasing prestige and envy as before?

Johnathan Bi: Yeah, you're definitely right. It's definitely the latter. Girard's ideas do not work on us by magically making us stop being mimetic and social creatures. In the same environment, I would say, I'm just as susceptible to mimetic forces as I was before. But his theory does have practical personal benefits, and let me explain with an analogy. I think there was a military theorist by the name of John Boyd, and he said something, I'm gonna have to paraphrase here, I don't know the exact quote, like – superior fighter pilots use their superior judgment to make sure they never get into situations where they have to use their superior skill. And the idea behind that line is that what's perhaps more important than the ability to deal with bad situations is the foresight and judgment to fundamentally not get into bad situations.

And I think the same is true for what Girard has done for me, when I am, say, already deeply envious or deeply prideful, the battle is already lost – there's nothing that understanding Girard and mimetic theory rationally can do for me. Mimetic theory, however, gives me a framework to avoid situations which inspire debilitating envy, which ignites a sort of unproductive pride. It tells us what type of person to avoid and who to have close. It teaches us how to construct a social environment that is relative

sober and how to identify ones that are prone to mimetic contagion. Mimetic theory does not give us the power to resist damaging instances of mimesis in the moment, but it does give us the foresight to avoid them altogether.

David Perell: So, do you think Girard is worthy of engagement because of how therapeutic he is ... How he can rescue us from suffering?

Johnathan Bi: Yeah, I would say the answer is probably yes and no, but perhaps let's answer that with an anecdote. One of Girard's collaborators was asked that similar question, that why he was a Girardian, and he answered, "because it's cheaper than psychoanalysis." Now, this was supposed to be humorous, and the literal and perhaps uninteresting interpretation is that you don't have to pay anyone to study Girard's ideas, but it can still have a therapeutic effect of solving your problems.

But there's a much more interesting reading, I think, that "cheaper" here means "economic", being able to explain much more phenomena with much less assumption and not just personal therapeutic phenomena, but social historical as well. Take the example of Freud and psychoanalysis, if you're familiar with that, he had this idea of the Oedipus complex, right? Where the son is rivalrous with the father and the son desires the mother? That's a very heavy, heavy assumption – that we all have this inbuilt desire to have sex with mom – and it can only explain one set of phenomena. Girard's mimetic theory takes the same example, but sees humans as naturally imitative and desire as contagious between people, including between father and son, and as a result, mimetic theory can explain not only the Oedipus complex, but a much broader set of psychological, social, historical phenomena where people desire similar things and then enter into rivalry. Hence, mimetic theory is cheaper than psychoanalysis – doing much more with much less.

So I think Girard, to answer your question directly now, is probably only so therapeutic because he hits on fundamental truths of the human condition. Truths which are overlooked, or perhaps even more provocatively, systematically hidden by modernity. And these truths help us not only in understanding ourselves but

understanding the world and even the trajectory of history. I think Girard's ideas help us navigate the world and help us see opportunity where others may see barren land and see danger where most people have already let their guard down.

Let me give you a direct example here that I prepared for later on, but I think it's a very fitting example here, and it'll go to show the unique predictive power of Girard's theory in the social world – beyond just personal therapy, because I don't want us to trivialize mimetic theory.

The example I'm gonna give is quite timely, it has to do with the relationship between China and America, the Sino-American relationship. Against the crowd, Girard in 2007 anticipated the deterioration of the Sino-American relationship, and you have to recall and remember how contrarian and unlikely such a prediction was in 2007. I mean, remember that in the 2000s, and certainly in the '90s, a dominant view was that China's relationship with the west was only gonna get better and better through economic globalization, and I think such a view which obviously seems hopelessly naive these days, was grounded on two flawed premises that were accepted. The first one was that China's rise would sort of lift the boats of the world economy and make most people in the west richer through cheaper goods and therefore much happier. People in the west would be happy with China's rise. And the second point, the second assumption that this optimistic view was grounded on was that the increasing similarity between China and the west would lead to political harmony. The idea was something like, as Chinese people started watching western movies, as they started idolizing American sports, as they wanted to send their kids to Ivy Leagues, that their values would be much closer aligned to that of the Americans and therefore much less conflictual.

Now, Girard's mimetic understanding of human nature enabled him to see through the flaws of both assumptions. On the first point – we are not rational, utility-maximizing creatures, but social creatures prone to relativistic comparison. For Girard, America would be more unsettled even if it were richer, but its gap between China had close

down. The absolute increase in goods matter little to humans compared to a change in relativistic social standing. And on the second point – Girard believes that it is similarity rather than difference that causes individuals and nations to enter into conflict. Desiring a similar set of objects would open up the two nations to a larger surface area of competition and therefore potential conflict and even violence. And at the peak of Sino-American optimism in 2007, and this was right before 2008 when the congeniality between the east and the west had never been greater, Girard stood against the crowd and warned us of such a conflict – a conflict that will come from a very different mechanism that most thought would establish peace, trade.

Let me read you a quote directly from Girard:

A conflict between the United States and China will follow: everything is in place though it will not necessarily occur on the military level at first... Trade can transform very quickly into war... From this point of view, we can reasonably fear a major clash between China and the United States in coming decades... This looming conflict between the United States and China has nothing to do with a “clash of civilizations.” In fact, the dispute is between two forms of capitalism that are becoming more and more similar.

Of course, 15 years later, Girard proves depressingly correct, we are in the midst of a very trade war and relationships have deteriorated beyond what most could’ve possibly imagined in the 2000s.

So I hope this is a satisfying albeit somewhat startling answer to your question of why Girard is worth engaging. Not only does he help us understand and I think manage part of ourselves most important but previously opaque to us. I think his theory also enables us to understand the world and human society in a different and often much more predictive light.

But before we jump too far ahead, if it’s okay with you, I’d like to give an overview of the structure of these lectures series as a whole.

David Perell: Please do, why don't you take the lead, and I'll jump in with questions and comments.

2. The Structure of This Lecture Series

Johnathan Bi: Great. I have two goals over the next seven lectures, one theoretical and one practical.

Theoretically, I aim to give you an encompassing overview of Girard's entire theory from his psychology to his theology... from his theory on human evolution, to predictions for apocalypse... from readings on Greek literature to his critique of modern institutions – I will present to you the entirety of Girard's system.

Practically, I wish to show you how this theoretical system applies to your life and modern society through bountiful historical and contemporary examples. We are going to analyze, through a Girardian lens of course – celebrity advertisement, romantic relationships, ritual sacrifice, the relationship between COVID and social unrest, the invention of coinage, social media, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the genesis of law, modern victimhood culture, the philosophical basis of innovation and much much more. My goal is not to leave you stranded with sterile intellectual concepts, but to give you a map with which you can identify the Girardian forces animating our world and your life in order to navigate its relatively choppy waters.

Now, I have prepared these lectures for a public audience at an intermediate undergraduate difficulty. That is to say, it's not gonna be a walk in the park but no prerequisites are necessary to understand these lectures. Now, we are going to engage quite frequently with the western philosophical canon – the Hegels, and Platos, and Rousseaus of the world. We're also gonna be engaged perhaps even more frequently with the world literary/mythical canon – *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Hindu *Hymn to Purusha*, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, Sophocles, Shakespeare – but rest assured, all of these

along with core Girardian concepts will be properly contextualized and introduced. There's no prerequisites for these series of lectures other than interest.

Specifically, the ordering of these lectures are as such. This lecture, lecture I, will give an overview of Girard's life and work. It is a condensed summary of this entire lecture series for people who are short on time but still want to get a brief taste of Girard, if you will. And moving on, in lecture II and III, we're going to discuss Girard's psychology – Girard focuses on, as you probably can already tell, the mimetic parts of human nature – our capacity and tendency towards imitation. Now with this psychological grounding, in lectures IV to VII, we will dive into Girard's philosophy of history which starts from the very beginning – man's evolution from ape – and goes to the very end – our imminent apocalypse. Girard thinks the world is literally going to end very, very soon.

Now, given that we are going to be talking about such weighty concepts such as apocalypse, the literal end of the world, I wanted to throw out a quick disclaimer here so that I don't receive either undeserved credit or misdirected anger – all the ideas I am about to share with you are not mine, but the most charitable reconstruction of Girard. This is not me but my interpretation of Girard.

Now, I have many theological, methodological, psychological disagreements, strong points of contention with Girard. And I could do a whole lecture series just on my reasons for those disagreements, but this is not interpreting Girard, it's interpreting Bi, it's interpreting Girard. I will present to you the most charitable interpretation of Girard I can muster even if I privately disagree with him, some of him at least, because I've been taught a philosophical pedagogical tradition that sees the lecturer, me, not as a door-to-door salesman of a single product but as a wandering merchant with a whole caravan of goods. I shouldn't be in the business of knocking down your door and shoving my single ideas down your throat regardless of what your needs are. Instead I should open up my little merchant caravan of ideas and try to argue the best I can for each idea in

my inventory for why they are attractive, so that you the listener can have agency to make that decision.

But before I show you my Girardian wares, so to speak, let me give you a brief introduction about the man behind the theory.

3. Girard's Biography

Johnathan Bi: On December 25th, 1923, René Noël Théophile Girard was born as the second of five children to a catholic, learned mother and an anticlerical, archivist father in Avignon, France.

Girard's father had served, he lost a brother, he had been wounded himself in World War I and passed his views on the meaninglessness of conflict onto Girard. And I think this view was further corroborated as Girard spent his formative adolescent years in France under Nazi occupation. Now of course, as anyone growing up in the place and that time period, the cruelty of the Nazis left an imprint on Girard. But so did the cruelty of the French resistance. You see, once they had been liberated by the allies, the French resistance, now in control of France, started scapegoating and persecuting anyone who had tangential affiliations to the Nazis during the time of occupation. Often these victims were innocents. Many innocents, mostly women too vulnerable to defend themselves, were scapegoated by the French mob – blamed for Nazi collaboration. They were humiliated, dragged around on the street, and often killed without trial on groundless accusations.

Let me read you the vivid scenes depicted by Girard's biographer:

Some of them were young mothers with no means of support, motivated by hunger and need rather than by treason or even desire. Some were unmarried school teachers who were forced to meet with German soldiers in their homes. Others were restless teenage girls who just flirted with the foreign soldiers. One was a charwoman who cleaned the German military headquarters. There were no trials

only stylized rituals of retribution, a shameful carnival that often included stripping these women to their underwear and loading them onto trucks to drive around town. They were exhibited to the sound of drum rolls, shouting, and catcalls, as if the trucks were tumbrils and 1789 [the French Revolution] had come alive again.

These scenes of innocents being scapegoated left a lasting imprint on Girard and became a common thread throughout his work – both the meaninglessness, deceitfulness, and arbitrariness of conflict and the perennial need of troubled human societies to find innocent victims to blame and murder for catharsis.

Now, Girard's intellectual trajectory on the other hand could be described as anti-institutional and unorthodox through and through – he was always an outsider. He was an outsider from the very beginning – unable to bear regular school, he had to go to a private tutoring program, reading at his heart's content and not to the dictates of a syllabus. He was trained at Indiana University in history, but his generative curiosity soon overflowed the boundaries of his diploma. He made little contributions to history and was self-taught and an outsider in all the major fields that he did actually contribute to. First, he made his mark in literary theory by articulating the idea of mimesis through close readings of literature. Next, he jumped disciplines into anthropology, where he shed light on the need for scapegoating. And then he jumped disciplines once more to theology, mounting a serious defense for Christianity.

Despite being accepted into the prestigious French Academy and holding professorships at John Hopkins, Buffalo, and Stanford – Girard still remains, to some extent, an outsider in all of these disciplines. The literary theorists have beef with him for not respecting the methods and conventions and fashions of the day. The anthropologists distrust his liberal use of evidence and lack of fieldwork. And even parts of the Christian community have shunned him for his quite unorthodox reading of the crucifixion.

David Perell: The title of this lecture series is called Interpreting Girard, Exegete or Apocalypse? Why do you call him an “exegete”? Why not “philosopher” or maybe

something more provocative like “prophet”?

Johnathan Bi: That’s a good question. We’re not in the business of drama here. So I think I skipped “prophet” but mostly I call him an exegete because that’s what he called himself and I wanted to have respect for his self-conception. You see, he explicitly, in interviews, rejected both terms, philosopher and prophet. And I think would just simply be too narrow to call him a literary theorist, an anthropologist, or theologian. Now, an exegete is someone who performs exegesis – the interpretation of scripture. And I think that is the most accurate way to understand Girard’s system: the vast terrain that he’s forced to traverse. He is less a careful, analytical philosopher but a visionary expanding and articulating a moral insight informed by scripture through all these domains.

I get a feeling that reading Girard, for him these vast domains weren’t these divergent disciplines, these separate buckets that he was dipping his toes into, but simply different manifestations of the same core insight. And I think Girard’s aim wasn’t to revolutionize literary criticism, anthropology, or theology, but to articulate what he conceived to be, the core insight of Christianity.

4. What We Cover in Lecture I

Johnathan Bi: Now that we have some context on Girard the man, let’s move on to the meat and bones, the meat and potatoes of this lecture which is a brief summary of Girard’s system.

I will attempt to give a reduced and simplistic summary of this entire lecture series which covers the entirety of mimetic theory, sharing with you Girard’s key concepts and conclusions but probably not the full reasons and repercussions behind his conclusion. Here, I will trade precision for breadth. Now, for people who don’t have time for the full 10+ hour lecture series, first shame on you, but secondly, this could be a summary that should be sufficient for you to get a taste of Girard. For those who

embarking on the full journey with us, I think this summary can be a map for the expansive, tumultuous, and dizzying terrain ahead. For you to gain your sea legs and get an orientation of the landscape.

The best way for me to give you a taste of Girard's system in one telling is to give a comprehensive history of humanity – beginning from man's evolution from ape all the way to apocalypse. I will start by summarizing Girard's psychology – how he thought humans were psychologically different from animals. Then, I will articulate the problems this unique psychology created for early human societies and their respective solutions. And after that, I will detail how Christianity represents a meaningful rupture for Girard from these early societies. And, lastly, I will articulate how Christianity brought us all the way here to modernity and how it will imminently deliver us to violent apocalypse. So let us begin with psychology.

5. Mimesis

Johnathan Bi: Girard's apocalyptic conclusions begin with a rather innocuous observation: mimesis. What defined, for Girard, our evolutionary breaking away from our great ape cousins is not reason, it's not truth, it's mimesis – our gradually increasing capacity and tendency for imitation. Now, the best metaphor I can think to explain mimesis is that of co-vibrating violin strings. When you put two violin strings together in close proximity – as you flick one, a similar frequency of vibration will translate to the other. And I think, in like manner, Girard identifies a species of human behavior – and here I use “behavior” for a lack of a better word, in the largest sense possible, actions, experiences, judgments, intentions – that proceed also from copying an external instance of that behavior.

Humans are social animals through and through, prone to this type of co-vibration. Just as strings on a violin aren't independent, neither are we. Mimesis is the fundamental capacity and tendency to gain access to the subjectivity of others as we

as to reproduce objective cultural forms – in other words, mimesis is what constitutes us as social beings and makes us different from other animals.

Mimesis, this tendency to ingest the behaviors and values, what have you, of those around us, is why perhaps prestige and recognition matter so much to us humans. When a majority of a social group that you are immersed in believes something is good or beautiful or believes something should be done in this way or that, we tend to slowly take on and ingest those positions as well through mimesis. And I think our everyday notions of prestige already have an understanding of mimesis. When we say something is prestigious we are perhaps also saying that on its own, it does not deserve the value we attribute to it, right? When we call “prestigious” Rolex, Harvard, Bentley, Cornell... ok, maybe not Cornell, but the other actual prestigious things... partially what we are saying is that the value we attribute to it is not fully accounted for by the objects themselves. That there is some surplus-value the object doesn't deserve. Girard would say that that surplus-value does not come from the object but from our peers valuing it and us ingesting their opinions through mimesis.

For Girard, mimesis isn't everything but everything, to some degree, is mimetic. The rush of adrenaline that infects you in a roaring and lively sporting stadium. The tribalism of politics. The madness of cults and how they sustain each other's delusions. The passing on of accents. Even as “animal” as an activity of replenishing ourselves by drinking water, we may still call to mind, however subtly, how our favorite athlete drinks Gatorade, right? That's the purpose of those commercials to get that in your head. This is how broad and all-pervasive mimesis operates. Humanity, for Girard, would be completely unrecognizable without it.

6. Metaphysical Desire

Johnathan Bi: The species of mimetic behavior that most concerns Girard, in both senses of the word, is desire. It's fine and dandy when what mimesis transmits is

accents or cultural codes, but when mimesis converges the desires of people – well that invites them into competition, conflict, and often violence.

Girard separates the entirety of human desires into two species: The desire to be which he terms metaphysical desire and the desire to experience which he terms physical desire. Metaphysical desire is directed at what objects say about me. Physical desire is directed at the experience conferred by the qualities of the object itself. Let me give you a few examples to clarify. I can pursue, for example, sex for the experience out of physical desire and what I would be after there would be pleasure or intimacy, the feelings in the moment. But I can also pursue sex for being – what having sex with a certain type of person really says about me, right? And this is a real psychology that people have. This is the psychology of the Don Juan or the Coquette. For these people sex is no longer about sex but something more core to their identity, they are not out to experience something but to prove something. Or take another more trivial and mundane example. I can buy a car for the experience – the trouble it would save me from walking everywhere. But I can also buy a car because I want to be a certain type of person, because I just wanna have the coolest car on the block and have people admire me.

You, for example, David, I must applaud you, because clearly from your car, I can tell that you are a very saintly man. Clearly, you do not care what the car says about you. You are free from metaphysical desire in this domain, congratulations.

David Perell: I don't wanna hear it. My Toyota is beautiful, Johnathan.

Johnathan Bi: Yeah, yeah, just please don't stop driving me around.

A reductive but hopefully illuminating way to put this is that physical desire aims at utility whereas metaphysical desire aims at identity. Certainly, this boundary between “experience” and “being” between utility and identity is not so clear. Who we conceive ourselves to be colors our experiences as much as our experiences if ever so subtly shapes our self-conception. But just think about how drastically different these

experiences are: think about pursuing a profession because the work is engaging versus doing it because it is the right job to have; or dating a person because you like spending time with them versus dating some person because you like to be seen with them; or traveling to a place because you're interested in the culture or because you just wanted to be seen in the coolest locale. Clearly, the distinction that Girard has drawn here, if a bit muddy, is nonetheless meaningful, especially at the extremes.

This desire to be at the heart of metaphysical desire is aimed at a fullness of being. To want to exist, Girard believes, in great measure. Metaphysical desire takes form as a pursuit of objects, in the broadest sense of the term – wanting to climb Mount Everest, wanting to build a unicorn company, wanting to study at an Ivy League. Or, more mundane: buying a particular car, dating Sally instead of Susan, enjoying a fancy restaurant. But, in all of these experiences, Girard would say, it's never objects we are really after. I don't think this is a foreign concept to our this-worldly, achievement-focused, consumer society: we want to acquire objects to bolster and back up our identity.

And the way we go about choosing which objects to go after, Girard believes, is imitating individuals whom we already consider to possess this fullness of being, celebrities, parental figures, entrepreneurs, an outstanding co-worker. We take on their desires as our own, the objects they value as the objects we also strive for. The faulty logic here being that it must be the acquisition of these objects that grant the models the fullness of their being.

David Perell: Yeah. This reminds me of celebrity advertisements.

Johnathan Bi: It does indeed, right? You see a celebrity and you want what they want. That's the whole logic behind these advertisements. And I think the one line in a celebrity advertisement that gives it all away is the tagline for Michael Jordan's sneakers: "Be Like Mike." What it's promising you isn't just a product or utility, but the being and prestige of Michael Jordan, so that you can have a piece of that as well. It's not jump like Mike, it's not score like Mike, the advertisement of basketball shoes

doesn't talk about anything of the most important physical qualities of the basketball shoes – of the lightness, the grip, the bounce – it's promising you something you want all the more: being! "Be Like Mike."

Girard's central thesis is that what often appears to be a subject pulled towards an object due to the intrinsic value of that object is really the subject wanting to acquire that object to be like some model. What we are really after isn't the object but the being of the model. Whereas we think of desire as unidirectional flowing from subject to object. Girard thinks it is actually triangular proceeding from subject through a model to the object.

Now, because what is at stake in metaphysical desire is our identity, it is the strongest drive in the human motivational repertoire. I think it's quite obvious when we are motivated by such a drive because we can become obsessed and compulsive. We think that achievement, obtaining the objects that metaphysical desire wants will fully transform us. I think, in different stages of our lives, metaphysical desire usually directs us towards a limited set of objects. For me, first it was a specific toy that I really wanted, and then a weapon in World of Warcraft, and then dating a person, a then an Ivy League, et cetera, et cetera. I think we are always oriented at different stages in our lives towards something. And these are these objects pointed to by metaphysical desire. These are objects in each period of our life that take on a disproportionate weight such that you define progress as inching towards the object. And whenever it slips away, however subtly, however minutely, your heart just thuds and you feel a deep existential despair.

David Perell: Romance provides a good example here. Often, you won't be interested in a woman and what will happen is all of a sudden there is another suitor who comes along and they are interested in this woman and all of a sudden you get excited about this person too. And it is in that competition that we are inflamed by the mimetic spirit. But then there's a second point here about this existential dread that we can feel. You ever feel those tremendous highs and lows in the early stages of talking to

woman? And you'll be so excited because the texting is going well, you'd be skipping down the halls. And then all of a sudden, she won't respond. And you're freaking out you're texting your friends, "What's going on here?" You can't sleep that night. And you wake up in the next morning, your alarm clock goes off, and you see a text. And she's responded. Now you jump out of bed, and you wake up faster than a double shot of espresso.

Johnathan Bi: That's precisely the right example to think of. In fact, Girard would commonly go to romance as his canonical examples of metaphysical desire. And the two qualities you mentioned. First, the object, not contributing anything or too much to desire. As well as these bipolar swings, all make romance or at least the iteration you've described as textbook examples of metaphysical desire. And look, Girard's point is, even in as intimate a domain as romance, our desires are, if you'd excuse the pun helplessly penetrated by those of others. Even our desires for our partners tend not be informed fully by our partners but by people around them. Girard's point is if even such a personal desire can be so external in origin, then the same must also be true in other domains as well: career choice, political orientation, aesthetic taste, philosophical opinions. This is a full-scale attack on the modern conception of individuals who can form their own decisions through reason, who have an authentic core of desires to tap into.

7. The Negative Phase of Mimesis

Johnathan Bi: Now, if this attack was not already threatening enough, Girard's next point will make it all the more so and further problematize "authenticity." Just as mimesis and metaphysical desire can make people conform, they can also make people diverge. Put in another way, even a breaking away from the group and a so-called "carving one's own path" can be radically socially determined.

Think about it like this: the logic of metaphysical desire is to pursue the objects associated with those who do have a fullness of being, right? And so a natural

continuation of this logic is to avoid or distance oneself from objects associated with those whom we conceive to be having a deficiency in being. We both want to be like the cool kids but also distant and be different from the social outcasts.

Here's an example. The tech elite with their plain t-shirts are not independent, from Girard's perspective, from the status games of finance's finely dressed elite, even though they appear to be rejecting that game. In reality, it's merely the continuation of the same game in a more accelerated form. Think about it like this, showing up with a \$5 t-shirt to a dinner where everyone is wearing \$500 suits is in some sense much more of a power play than showing up with a \$5000 suit at the same dinner. Because it's saying that I am so much better than you, that we aren't even playing the same game that I take your highest values – what you hold most dear as vulgar, as nothing. This is the logic of the negative phase of mimesis to distance oneself in order to show one's superiority. This breaking away from a group is no more authentic or independent than conformity because your choices are still made for what they say about you and not the object itself.

Now, in my own life decisions, if I may share a bit of a personal story, I think I've been led astray by both the positive and the negative forces of mimesis. I grew up idolizing entrepreneurs, the Steve Jobs of the world. And as soon as I got into college, I felt like I had to drop out and start a company ASAP. And so I did. My freshman spring I dropped out, I raised a small round and the company crashed and burned out of vapor. And it's not that I didn't enjoy building companies, that's not why I was led astray by mimesis, but the degree to which I desired it and the urgency of which I felt like I had to achieve it, not unlike your romance example, was disproportionate to the value of the object itself. In other words, I desired being an entrepreneur and not necessarily the processes of building a company. When I did go back to school as a sophomore, semester later, out of resentment for my peers who had dropped out and did build successful companies, I think I went the other direction, rejecting the worldly altogether. Switching from CS to Philosophy, going to a Buddhist monastery – for 3 years, I didn't do that much at all in industry out of resentment. Rejecting industry

building companies was my moral weapon to secure victory over my more successful peers. To turn my failure into a triumph. But this was equally if not more inauthentic and perverse. The same story goes, it's not that I didn't enjoy Philosophy and Buddhism but the degree to which I pursued it and certainly the degree to which I renounced the world was not genuine – it wasn't reflective of how much I liked philosophical and meditative practice and certainly not how much I disliked the worldly active life of industry. And I think I really did miss out on valuable career opportunities because I was too resentful to engage. This “carving of my own path” was just as socially-determined – it was a form of coping so that I didn't have to feel lesser than my more successful peers.

As a society, I think we all recognize this first move of conforming to this dropout culture as socially-determined, as prestige-seeking, as not authentic, but I think the second move of rejecting the group is just as socially-determined in that it was still primarily the relationships with people that determined my choices, not for the choices themselves. Admiration led me to converge in the first case and resentment led me to diverge in the second. The direction is different but the form is the same. But, of course, in our society, to break away from the group, to “carve one's own path” so to speak is thought to be a sure sign of independence – but that is not so.

Girard here is trying to tear down what he conceives of as the Romantic Lie. The lie goes something like this: at the bottom we are all individuals with a core of what we can call the “authentic self.” And then there are these layers of social constraints, one on top of the other, with the origins external. The way to access authenticity, so this romantic lie goes, is by “following one's heart” with a bold breaking free from the group, a peeling away of these social layers.

Girard says “not so fast.” This breaking free from the group can be just as socially determined as rigid adherence. You are confusing difference for autonomy. You're confusing distance for independence and you're confusing originality for freedom.

The reality is we can just as easily be socially determined by rejecting a group out of resentment as we can by conforming to the group out of admiration or peer pressure. Mimesis operates positively and negatively.

Mimesis and metaphysical desire, then, entrap us in every direction both in conforming as well as in “breaking free”. Man is shown to be a social creature through and through. If you take one thing from Girard’s psychology it is this: the most powerful and explanatory element within the human psyche is our sociality. Our values, our political orientation, aesthetic tastes, and even philosophical positions are heavily – often primarily – determined by others in deep and often unconscious ways and not chosen for their own sake.

We may think our desires are our own, we may think we desire our spouse just because of who they are or at the very least because of their physical attractiveness, but Girard shows that even this turns out not to be the full extent of the story. We may think reason can hold the reins and guide our decisions but this social dimension of ourselves is often much much stronger. Reason pretends to be its steward but in reality is its lawyer and spokesperson engaged in, more often than not, post-hoc rationalization. “Oh, yeah, of course, I want to be an entrepreneur because I want to change the world for the better.” Or, on the other hand, “Of course, I would never be an entrepreneur because industry is vulgar and capitalism is immoral.” The reasons we give for our decisions often come after we’ve already sworn allegiance to those decisions due to ulterior, social motives.

And for Girard, our mimetic natures – the extent to which we are socially determined – is what differentiates us from animals and the main direction of human evolution from ape. This direction of evolution, is not, as commonly thought, the increase of our ability to reason and grasp truth. After all, Girard would say, other animals engage in truth-seeking behaviors as well – there’s echolocation, there’s tapping into magnetic fields, there’s night vision – these are all truth-seeking activities. But we are the only animals who create gods, who tell stories, who spin up fictions, who would go to war

for an abstract conception of honor which we can neither taste, nor smell, nor touch. Who would trade food and shelter for pieces of paper, who would die for myths and gods that clearly never even existed. Animals are the sober ones. We, are the nut job. What makes us unique, for Girard, is not our ability to determine truth but our capacity to believe in lies in so far as others around us do as well.

For the modern mind, this is a deeply alien conception of human nature. And it opens a Pandora's box of questions: what does it mean to protect individual freedom if, we like co-vibrating violin strings, are never truly free to begin with? How can we follow our own authentic desires if every part of our psyche is so helplessly external in its origin? How is the democratic process not as arbitrary as the whims of a single dictator, if we are so easily influenced and swayed by the mob? These will have to remain questions for now – wrestled with over the course of the next seven lectures because mimesis presents us a much more pressing and threatening problem in this evolutionary story that we must now turn to.

Everything we've talked about up until this point, what we've discussed so far are the core psychological faculties that define humanity. Now, let us jump back into Girard's history to see the unique challenges which this psychology brings about. We are officially moving from psychology to history.

8. The Scapegoat Mechanism

Johnathan Bi: As early humans evolved to be more and more mimetic, the simple dominance hierarchies that were able to contain animal groups started breaking down. The idea goes something like this: dominance hierarchies where there is a clear chain of alpha to beta to gamma all the way to omega works fine if there is little mimesis. So far as the beta doesn't desire what the alpha has and the gamma doesn't desire what the beta has, then all is well. But the mimetic tendency of early humans started to become so strong that there started to be frequent cross-pollination of desires across the hierarchy. Metaphysical desire, at least the strength of it, is unique to humans and

this led subjects to enter into rivalry with their models. Converging and competing metaphysical desires would rip social groups apart in wars of all against all, destroy all those societies that were involved. Girard reasons that the only hominoid groups that survived and formed lasting cultures were ones that stumbled upon a unique cultural technology to stop this escalating conflict and that he called the scapegoat mechanism.

Now, in the midst of such a war of all against all – think a civil war, a French Revolution, when society is in utter chaos – societies, Girard observes, often converge upon a single victim or a small set of victims attributing to them all the blame and frustrations of the chaos that they are in.

David Perell: Now, is this like a rational process similar to the way that a jury sentences a victim? Or, what should I have in mind here?

Johnathan Bi: Yeah. It's not a rational process, it's not a committee that, say, picks a victim but a somewhat random process where certain accusations against certain people start gaining steam until the whole group falls under its spell. Think about the randomness of the French Revolution rather than a calculated drone strike, I think that's what you should have in mind here. This victim, if not fully innocent, certainly does not deserve the extent of the blame leveled on him. This group is always deceived and their certainty is only bolstered by unanimity: the fact that everyone believes in the victim's guilt. This victim will be expelled, often murdered very brutally, as the group gains a cathartic release and peace is restored.

There are, unfortunately, too many examples of innocent scapegoats throughout human history. Think about Socrates' trial and death at the hands of the Athenian jury. Think about the Black Death which was blamed on witches and witchcraft. Think about the Nazis scapegoating the Jews for German decline. Think about McCarthy-witch hunts, persecuting innocents under the crimes of communism. It's not enough, Girard reasons, for us to find guilty parties, but we want to find one radical source of evil to blame everything upon.

With the scapegoat mechanism, Girard is highlighting the perennial need of human societies, in times of chaos, to identify a single source to blame and murder. To truly establish a peaceful society in a time of turmoil, this murder must be maximally cathartic and as a result has to be maximally violent and deceitful – often blaming a singular victim for the entirety of the society's problems. And Girard thinks that the murder is wrong, that it is based on a lie, that it is regrettable, that it should not be done – but it worked and it was the only thing that worked which kept early human societies alive.

To make sense of Girard's claim here, this is quite a radical claim, on the violent foundations of society, we must go back and think about Girard's psychology. For every social philosophy I'd wager, that we must ask who the subject is, right? For Marx, the subject is class. For fascism, it is the nation state. For Augustine, it is the Christian soul. For liberalism, it is the rational agent. Girard's subject of his social philosophy is the spirited animal – not one who thinks in terms of utility and numbers but vengeance and pride, honor and being who experiences envy and resentment. Now, for such a social creature, the primary mechanisms that govern him isn't consensus, it's not the mandate of heaven, it's not the common good, it's certainly not rational political discourse. For Girard, we aren't rational agents interested in a systematic analysis and nuanced solution but social, spirited creatures needing a cathartic release against a radical evil. In moments of extreme turbulence, we aren't interested in truth but a grand lie and founding murder that can grant us catharsis.

The lie, however, goes even further. While this no longer happens in modernity for reasons that we will have to explore later on, in early Pagan societies, the peace that descended onto the crowd would be so miraculous, so instantaneous and unbelievable that people would struggle to make sense of what had just happened – how did we go from being at each other's throats to being fully reconciled? And so just as deceitful as the crowd would blame the victim for causing chaos, they now deceitfully praise now-dead victim for ending the chaos, turning the victim paradoxically into a god. Girard's point is that the scapegoat mechanism is such a unanimous process, people

feel so justified in their expulsion, that they don't feel their own agency. And so they don't see themselves as bringing peace. All they have in view is the victim and reason that it must be the victim that has brought us that peace – the victim must be a god. These Pagan gods are all powerful with the power to begin and end destruction. The gods are seen as both good and evil.

The example Girard will point to is the story of Oedipus as told by Sophocles. Now, we are going to spend an entire lecture with Oedipus but let me give you a very very brief outline first. Oedipus is a new king of Thebes that is being ravished by a plague. Oedipus is guilty of having committed both patricide – killing of one's father – as well as incest – having sex with one's mother. Because of this, the entire city blames Oedipus for causing the plague and expels him. The people get their catharsis and the plague goes away. Oedipus wanders the Greek states, and as time progresses something very very strange happens – rather than only being an object of scorn that everyone wants to expel, to distance from, people are now competing to invite Oedipus into their lands. See, a prophecy has gained momentum in Greece that wherever Oedipus' remains will be buried, shall be granted lasting peace.

In this Oedipus myth then, we see both movements of the scapegoat mechanism, right? First, we see the scapegoating – Oedipus might've been morally bankrupt for patricide and incest but it was certainly an exaggerated lie to think that that was the cause of the entire plague, right? His expulsion was a groundless lie. Second, we see the movement of divinization – as Oedipus' expulsion brought about lasting peace through catharsis, he started to gain a dual character, still evil for causing the plague but also radically good with the power to end plagues and bring peace. Oedipus, at the end of the story, has been divinized or at least fetishized.

Girard's claim is that in all Pagan religions we can find traces of a once-victim-turned God at the foundation of the culture. We will investigate, in due course, across this lecture series: the Nordic myth of Baldr's death that resembles a collective expulsion, the Greek myth of the birth of Zeus and its eerie similarities to murder, and the Hindu

Hymn to Purusha where a genesis deity is sacrificed with his remains giving birth to Hindu society and its castes.

It's not just religions, however, that are born from this scapegoat mechanism but Pagan culture and society as well. Take the example of Julius Caesar who is the victim-turned-god of the Roman Imperium. In the story of Caesar, we also find the key movements of the scapegoat mechanism, right? First, Roman society is in a state of utter chaos and civil war. Julius Caesar is famously scapegoated, blamed and collectively murdered on the senate floor. Now, peace does not come immediately to Rome indeed, but it does come at the hand of another Caesar, Caesar Augustus, Julius' nephew. And so with Augustus' victory, Julius Caesar is literally deified, recognized as a literal God by the Roman senate and becomes a fountainhead of Roman legitimacy and prestige. From then on, rulers derive their legitimacy from their relationship to Caesar, often explicitly by bearing his name, calling themselves Caesars. That's why there are so many Caesars in the history of European leaders.

The victim-turned-God, captured through myth, for Girard, is what lies at the heart of Pagan religion and society. But, of course, we need much more than stories to run a society and keep the peace. So, out of these myths and founding murders, two sets of real institutions were derived – prohibitions and rituals.

The logic of prohibitions is to prevent chaos from erupting by creating social difference between people so that metaphysical desire does not spread as easily. Caste systems, gender roles, guild lineages – however oppressive, these served a crucial function in Pagan society: to keep people from competing with each other.

Now, when prohibitions fail, another set of institutions must be used. And these are rituals. Rituals aim to enact the founding murder in a constrained way to generate a similar level of catharsis as the founding murder did. Ritual incest, debauched festivals, human sacrifice – however cruel, these institutions also served a crucial function in Pagan society: to generate catharsis in order to keep the peace. They are a release valve.

To summarize then, the scapegoat mechanism proceeds from a real cataclysmic event – where a troubled society murders an innocent victim, gains cathartic release, and receives a set of new gods. This real event is dramatized and captured in myth and then translated back into real institutions in the form of prohibitions and rituals. The arc going from real event to myth to real institutions is not only how Pagan gods and religions have been made but also how all human societies and cultures are founded.

Of course, these societies and myths are based on lies through and through. Both the scapegoating and the deification are equally deceitful – because the victim neither has the power to cause or end the chaos – it's all psychological projection by the crowd grounded on nothing but unanimity. And importantly, this deceitfulness is always occluded by myth because myth is written from the perspective of the persecutor. The persecutor writes from a position of the crowd, and from that vantage point, all will seem real – the blame, the praise, the deification, are all deserved and not mere projections. But more importantly, none of this could be revealed – because if they were then gods would lose their powers if people realized that it was they themselves who through unanimity projected the power onto them. It's all deceitful and all arbitrary.

9. Christianity

Johnathan Bi: This explanation of Pagan religion by Girard then begs an important question, why is Girard a Christian? *Prima Facie*, Christianity perfectly conforms to this logic that he attributed to false Pagan religions, right? There's civil unrest in Jerusalem where Christ eventually gets crucified. There's obviously Christ's unjust scapegoating and murder on the cross. There's the resurrection and divinization. There's the mythologization through the Bible. And there's the institutionalization through the Catholic Church and many of its prohibitions and rituals. The question is this: How can the Christian story be true for Girard but the Pagan religions be false?

Girard's answer is that the Christian story is indeed going to have the same structure as Pagan religion, because Christ is going to be scapegoated – but there is one crucial difference: Christianity will be the first story told from the perspective of the victim.

Remember, Pagan myth always sides with the murderers, it always believes in the guilt of its victims. Sophocles' telling of Oedipus affirms the judgment of Thebes that Oedipus was indeed responsible for the plague because of his patricide and incest. Take the founding murder of the Roman Republic that of Romulus and Remus, where Romulus kills Remus to establish Rome. The canonical telling here again paints the killing as, however regrettable, justified by Remus' hubris and transgression from ignoring Romulus' city's boundaries.

What the Bible is doing then is to tell the same type of story as Pagan religion but from the other perspective – not the perspective of the persecutor which all Pagan religion has been told from – but the victim. I mean think about it, what does the Bible tell us? It tells us that Christ is not guilty, even his sentencer Pontius Pilate declares his innocence. The mob that convicts Christ is shown to be arbitrary, the true source of evil. The sentencing of Christ is depicted as unjust through and through with the charges against Christ nothing more than psychological projections by the crowd. This is what that story tells us. And, of course, the whole story is written down and told to us by the disciples – the side of the victim and not the persecutor.

Christianity tells the story of scapegoating but from the opposite, truthful side – we are like jurors who have been hearing the criminals' lies for so long in Pagan religion suddenly exposed to the truth of the victim's testimony. The crucifixion exposes the lies of all religions to show that: the mob is deceitful. The victim is innocent. There is no sacred Pagan power, that is merely a projection. This is the fundamental, resounding message that comes out of the crucifixion for Girard.

And it is a message that will expose and begin to tear down the scapegoat mechanism slowly but surely. From this moment on, we will be reading myths in light of the gospels which allows us to see through their lies. Christ's innocence, and unjust

persecution, through the proliferation of Christianity, becomes the dominant lens through which we will view the world from then on. We will always be looking out for unjust persecution, we will always be siding with the victim, we will always be aware of the deceitfulness of the mob. Christ knows that reason alone, that an analytical articulation of the scapegoat mechanism, like the one I just provided you, is not enough to shake societies out of this perennial cultural practice. What we need is an equally compelling story, that shakes us into a radically new mode of seeing the world.

David Perell: To your point, I'm always surprised by how much of our secular world is grounded on Christian concepts. I think of the Protestant work ethic, our concern for victims, human rights, you know.

Johnathan Bi: Yeah. And this is how powerful the Christian story is. We are all, in a sense, living in a Christian paradigm even if we are not explicitly Christians.

Because Christianity grounds the fundamental philosophical intuitions of modernity. Christianity then for Girard is the religion to end all religions, the myth to end all myths, the founding murder to end all founding murders by exposing their violent, unjust, and deceitful origins.

The right metaphor to think about Christianity and Pagan religion then, is the relationship between a vaccine and the original disease. The efficacy of a vaccine to neutralize the original disease lies in its proximity, not its radical difference, right? Structurally, the COVID vaccine is very similar to the original COVID disease, just with a few tweaks, and it's that similarity is what makes it an effective COVID vaccine and not like a polio vaccine, for example.

The Bible then for Girard is a myth vaccine. And so the strategy of many modern Christians – to show that the Bible has nothing to do with the myths of yore, that it is radically different – is misguided. I mean take the Epic of Gilgamesh, one of the first known myths of Mesopotamia. Modern Christians blush at the similarities between this myth and the Bible, right? There's a quest for a fruit of immortality from the tree

of eternal life, things that both exist in the Bible as well as the Myth of Gilgamesh. There's a deceitful snake eating a fruit and robbing us of our immortality. And there are also great floods from which the chosen are protected. Girard would say, look, don't blush and don't try to distance the Bible from these myths, the Bible is effective because and not despite of its proximity to myths. The Bible is a Trojan Horse that frees us from Pagan religion from within. Girard's surprising conclusion is that Christianity is a demystifying force to end religions.

The Christian moral paradigm takes away the core foundational bedrock of all early human societies. Slowly but surely, Christianity allows us to decode and escape from the scapegoat mechanism which cannot function if people know that the victim is innocent. If the victim is shown to be innocent then catharsis cannot be achieved. Without catharsis, there is no peace. Without peace, there is no deification. Without deification, Pagan worldly institutions lose their prestige. And without prestige, they can no longer properly function.

Christianity takes humanity out of cyclical time, demarcated by these relativistic mythological paradigm shifts, and accelerates us towards a linear trajectory. The direction of this linearity is defined by four key forces that Christ lets loose on human history: love, truth, innovation, and surprisingly, Girard thinks, violence.

As with all things Girard, even his analysis on the worldly effects of Christianity are deeply ambivalent. Within this Pandora's box of forces that Christ has just let loose on human history we have the good – love, truth, innovation – but also the apocalyptic violence. They are both growing and have broken free all at the same time. What's more, even within these individual forces, Girard's analysis is deeply ambivalent: love often manifests as hypocrisy, truth becomes dogma, innovation degenerates into fashion. And even in violence, Girard sees a key motivational force that has brought forth the most enviable living conditions of man when channeled productively through capitalism. Let's examine each of these forces in turn.

10. Love and Hypocrisy

Johnathan Bi: The first force that Christianity unleashes on history is love. Love is the force that has made all our institutions like law so much more humane. It's the force that sees developed nations competing for the prestige of helping troubled nations. the force that has freed us from cruel practices of human sacrifice and bloody ritual. It's the force underpinning the modern political ideals of human rights and equality.

Girard believes that Christ is responsible for all of this because that was his key message: renounce violence, turn the other cheek, develop love – love thy neighbor thyself. We are so concerned with the poor and the dispossessed these days, we naturally side with victims in the same way that Pagan societies might've sided with the strong because Christ's story is about the innocence and the moral purity of victims.

Culturally, we are radically different from Pagan society with their worship of power and disregard for the weak, but in some sense, stubborn human nature still refuses to budge. Girard thinks we still need to persecute, but the only acceptable way to persecute is now in the name of victims, in the name of stopping persecution.

In a way then, Girard isn't convinced society has really changed that much at all – that we've really given up persecution. Rather perhaps the better reading is that it's a more superficial switch of who we think it's acceptable to persecute. Because of our victim-concerned culture, anyone who looks like a traditional victim is completely off limits: ethnic minorities, the lower classes, women, the disabled – and Girard thinks that's a great thing. But the problem is that we've flipped it on its head. Now, we feel warranted nay maybe even compelled to persecute all types of privilege: white privilege, ableist privilege, class privilege, male privilege.

Girard has this to say, I'll give you a quote:

Our society's obligatory compassion authorizes new forms of cruelty.

Girard accuses modernity of hypocrisy and he reminds us of the terrible atrocities committed in the name of protecting victims. Let me give you another quote:

Hypocrisy is dangerous then because it leads to what it claims to prevent: the persecution of victims. Anyone familiar with the tragedies of the Soviet Union grounded on protection of the victimized proletariat should look at America's caught up in victimhood ideology with trembling fear. This "other totalitarianism" this inquisition in the name of victims is the form that arbitrary unjustified violence takes place today: the persecution of persecutors.

11. Truth and Dogma

Johnathan Bi: That's love. And this same ambivalent story could be told for the secret force of Christianity – truth.

Girard asks us to look around at the modern world. More so than any almost other civilization we value truth and believe in our ability to obtain it. Far are we from the Garden of Eden's prohibitions against the tree of knowledge. Far are we from the intellectual humilities of Job. Far are we from the lessons from Oedipus that knowing more can lead to disaster. And far are we from witch hunts and superstitions. Perhaps unsurprisingly at this point, Girard takes the crowning achievement of truth, science to be engendered by Christianity.

This might seem ridiculous but let me give you a first pass at his argument. Christianity paved the way for scientific inquiry by expelling myth and clearing the ground as it were. This should already be a familiar idea at this point. Christianity exposes the deceitfulness of worldly foundations and begins to tear down prohibitive rituals, and all Pagan religions. And it is only when we cease to look for truth in myth does reason even have the fertile ground to bear the fruits of truth. After all, if something is already explained by a wildly prestigious myth that is fatal to question

then reason will not even want to begin to investigate it. Girard's interlocutor sums his view quite nicely here. Let me quote again:

It is really Christianity that makes science possible by desacralizing the real, by freeing people from magical causalities. Once we stop seeing storms as being triggered by the machinations of the witch across the street, we start being able to study meteorological phenomenon scientifically.

Now, I need to say a lot more (and I will) to convince you of this point, but before we celebrate too early, the same problem with love occurs with truth. Just as the protection of victims is the banner which persecutors rally under, we love science so much that we have fetishized it into an unquestionable religion. But what's the problem with science gaining an immense prestige? What's wrong with that?

Girard's answer is this: by being deified, science can become unquestionable which can silence opposing voices and justify terrible political agendas. Think about Malthus in the 18th century, he reasoned that living standards would go back to subsistence because population grows geometrically while food increases arithmetically. In the 1970s, there was a whole wave of ridiculous climate science championed by the Times, the New York Review, Columbia, Brown. They were publishing articles about an inevitable ice age that just seems ludicrous from today's perspective. And, of course the terrors of the Nazis were justified on the latest science of the day – eugenics. Far from a pseudo-science, eugenics enjoyed enormous prestige in the early 20th century; it was grounded on Darwin, the latest evolutionary biology of the day, and responsible for the development of statistics. There was a University College London chair of eugenics in the same way there might be a chair for biology today. And eugenics was supported by Nobel laureates like Hermann Muller and political leaders like Theodore Roosevelt.

So I hope the problem of deifying science is clear – Girard thinks the reason that it is dangerous to deify science is the same reason it was dangerous to deify edicts of the Catholic Church. Just as the bloody European conquest of the Americas was, at least

partially, legitimized through the appeal to Catholicism as spreading the gospel. Today, we too legitimize our often questionable political pursuits with just a sprinkle of reason and a little dab of science. And just as whomever used to disagree with the Catholic Church we called heretics, we call those today who disagree with politically charged, questionable science as anti-science – someone whose positions we don't even have to contend with. When deified science becomes a blocker to truth and genuine inquiry because it becomes a conversation stopper – therein lies the hypocrisy.

12. Innovation and Imitation

Johnathan Bi: The third force of Christianity is innovation, and it has been engendered by Christ in a very similar way that science was. By tearing down myths, we are freed from an exaggerated idolation of the past and we are empowered to imagine a different future.

The idea that Girard has in mind here might be better approximated by thinking about the negative case. What is certainly not conducive to innovation is the reactionary ideology that is not uncommon throughout most of history – most famously perhaps among the Confucians and perhaps many Christians – that our best days are behind us? Such a view lends to the practical orientation that the best we can do is to blindly imitate the past and press the brakes on the downward trajectory of history. Under such a worldview, the very word “innovation” had negative connotations in the west up until the 18th century. Its connotations were negative because innovation implied a deviation from a sacred, albeit static and rigid ideal provided to us by the myths of yore. Innovation, before the 18th century, was synonymous with heresy. Now, such exaggerated respect of the past is often grounded on a religious belief in a mythologized past. Christianity frees us from this blind worship because it is a force, according to Girard, of course, that tears down mythologization. It reveals to us what we once thought of as immutable as arbitrary, so we are freed to experiment and innovate.

David Perell: One of the surprising things that I've seen is this weird anti-correlation between mythologizing the past and innovation. And I started to get this hunch when I would spend time around Silicon Valley types and you have dinner with them and they boast about their knowledge of the world. But then you start talking to them about the history of their own industry, and it's not something that they think or talk about a lot. And I compare that to the people I've met in the oil industry or the financial industry, these older and more established industries where the people who I meet there, they know the history of their industry cold, you know what I mean?

Johnathan Bi: Yeah. And that's an interesting observation that there is a negative correlation between how innovative an industry or person is against how much they know about history or at least seem to respect it. And I think Girard would say that difference between the tech industry and oil industry is the same difference between modernity and Pagan society, that we are much less idolatrous and concerned with the past and as a result much more oriented towards the future due to Christianity.

Now, as we are freed from the grips of the past, innovation has brought about drastic technological and social change. Clearly, if you just look around our world, there's the mastery of travel on land, air, and sea. There's the victory over disease and starvation. Political systems, gender norms, money – western civilization at least in the past few hundred years is defined by and prides itself with change.

Now, the problem with innovation is the same problem with love and truth: Hypocrisy. We've now fetishized innovation, we are conforming to contrarianism, we are obediently rallying under the banner of originality.

Girard has this to say. It's so good that I'll quote in full:

The modern world rejects imitation in favor of originality at all costs. You should never say what others are saying, never paint what others are painting, never think what others are thinking, and so on. Since this is absolutely impossible, there soon emerges a negative imitation that sterilizes everything... More and more often

they're obliged to turn their coats inside out and, with great fanfare, announce some new "epistemological rupture" that is supposed to revolutionize the field from top to bottom. This rage for originality has produced a few rare masterpieces and quite a few rather bizarre things... The principle of originality at all costs leads to paralysis. The more we celebrate "creative and enriching" innovations, the fewer of them there are... For two thousand years the arts have been imitative, and it's only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that people started refusing to be mimetic. Why? Because we're more mimetic than ever. Rivalry plays a role such that we strive vainly to exorcise imitation.

The problem that Girard is identifying here with categorically rejecting imitation and idolizing innovation is that imitation and meaningful innovation are often inseparable. You need to imitate and gain mastery first before you can make any real innovation. History is littered with examples where repetition, replication, imitation is a necessary precondition for innovation. Think about Goethe who was a master of reproduction, reproducing the great poetic forms before he pioneered his own. Think about the industrial powers that started off as mere copycats but grew into innovators in their own right.

Let me read Girard again:

It began with Germany, which, in the nineteenth century, was thought to be at first incapable of imitating the English, and this at the precise moment it surpassed them. It continued with the Americans in whom, for a long time, the Europeans saw mediocre gadget-makers who weren't theoretical or cerebral enough to take on a world leadership role. And it happened once more with the Japanese who, after World War II, were still seen as pathetic imitators of Western superiority. It's starting up again, it seems, with Korea, and soon, perhaps, it'll be the Chinese. All of these consecutive mistakes about the creative potential of imitation cannot be due to chance.

Girard's point here is that by fetishizing contrarianism, innovation, originality, and rejecting repetition, replication, imitation we paradoxically doom ourselves to never make any meaningful innovations whatsoever. Because innovation is dependent on imitation.

As you can see, even the three “good forces” of modernity are deeply ambivalent. Culture has fundamentally changed. There has never been a society as loving, truth and innovative as ours. But stubborn human nature refuses to budge – we still need to persecute, to deify, and to conform. And so the perversities of modernity, for Girard, all take on the shape of hypocrisy: persecution under the banner of protecting victims, rigid adherence to scientific dogmas under the guise of free intellectual exploration, the most derivative of imitations packaged as radical innovations.

The metaphor, then, that best captures this radical break as well as stubborn continuity is a just-launched rocket struggling to reach escape velocity. Such a rocket is clearly a radical break from when it was stationary, but it is also in a continuity because it is still governed by the pull of gravity. The same perhaps can be said for this point of history that we are in now. There is a clear radical break between our culture that protects victims and all the ones that have come before which made them into scapegoats. But the stubborn gravitational pull of the human condition remains the same – we still need to persecute and find victims to blame. It is this tension between cultural advancement and the constancy of human nature that plagues modernity for Girard. Our rocket ship of modernity is already in trouble but the fourth and final force of Christianity will send it crashing towards the ground: violence.

13. Violence and Apocalypse

Johnathan Bi: You may be surprised that Girard conceived of violence as one of the forces coming out of Christ defeating the scapegoat mechanism. But, given Girard's understanding of how worldly peace is brought about, this conclusion, in some sense, should flow quite naturally. After all, if worldly order, peaceful society is founded on

deceitful, violent act of catharsis, then the truth and love which Christianity has unleashed must be threatening if not harmful for this foundation, right? The scapegoat mechanism is a deeply morally ambivalent process for Girard, it is deceit it is wrong, but it is also so damn effective. Just a single innocent man has to be murdered for the entire community to be saved. Sacrifice one for the peace of all. Limit the freedom of the parts for the stability of the whole. And so we might say, in highly reductive fashion, that the scapegoat mechanism is a worldly good but ultimately evil. Whereas Christ is ultimately good but brings forth worldly destruction. Girard constantly reminds us that Christ himself says as much.

In Matthew 14, Christ has this to say:

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword.

Christ's sword is aimed at the scapegoat mechanism which lies at the foundation of worldly order. While the consequences of the Christian revelation, for Girard, are violent and destructive, Christ's intentions surely are not. Christ did not cut down the worldly order for the sake of cutting down worldly order, but only so we may be freed from violence and lies such that we can love each other. Christ took off our training wheels so that we may be freed yet we've simply fallen and stumbled.

Without the scapegoat mechanism, we no longer have our old prohibitions to stop metaphysical desires from running rampant nor do we have sacrificial rituals to bring about catharsis. So, to put in other words, we've lost both our tools to prevent and resolve violence.

So why haven't we gone bust yet? After all, the world looks pretty peaceful to me. Girard responds: don't confuse the lack of the actuality of violence with the lack of potential for violence. Violent energies have been building up and increasing but they've been contained and productively channeled, for now, by two new institutions of modernity.

The first institution is Capitalism. Capitalism is the channel that absorbs and productively directs violence. Now, let me be clear that when Girard says that capitalism is a channel for violence, he doesn't have in mind whipping slaves to build the pyramids but the same violent, competitive energies of glory, of pride, of desire for conquest, are the dominant ones driving capitalism today.

Girard reminds us, I quote:

It is not by chance that the European aristocracy went into business once heroes and warriors went out of style.

Girard's point is that when we peek behind the motivational curtains of actors in capitalism, we shouldn't expect to find a desire to help others, we shouldn't even expect to find materialistic greed, instead what people are really after are the same social goods – recognition, honor, prestige, glory. The princes and heroes of yore who would've amassed armies now find themselves competing to make products and services. Girard warns us: don't be fooled by the altruistic aims that capitalistic actors so desperately advertise, it's the same drive that drove Achilles to kill Hector, that drove Germany to invade France, that drove Caesar to capture Vercingetorix that underpins our world economy today.

David Perell: It's funny, you're referencing ancient stories there, but even today, I'll look at my friends who are successful entrepreneurs, and a shocking percentage of them were criminals in high school. And I think that the same energy that drove them to be criminals, what capitalism does is it redirects that energy towards entrepreneurship.

Johnathan Bi: Yeah. And I think this is both a deep critique of capital – that it's fundamentally driven off these spirited irrational forces – but also a deep praise of capitalism – what a miracle it is today that people who seek revenge, who seek glory, who seek domination, who seek an outlet for their criminal energies have to do so, not by killing millions in zero-sum wars as people have done for thousands of years but

they have to compete in making better products and services for others. What a miracle. Girard's analysis on capitalism is deeply ambivalent.

Now, capitalism can only properly function in this way, when it is supported by law. Law is the second important institution of modernity that contains violence. For Girard, law only works in situations where there is an entity with a monopoly over violence that can arbitrate between disputing parties. Law does not bring about peace through catharsis nor are the edicts of law justified on the prestige of some deity. It keeps peace by threatening you with more violence. If you, the injured party, aren't satisfied with the outcome of the trial and seek private vengeance by killing or hurting the criminal who injured you, then the state will come after you and punish you with more violence. Law only functions when there is such a powerful entity with a monopoly over violence that can easily overpower disputing parties. That's where its efficacy stands from.

This is why within a single nation, laws are often inviolable and sacrosanct, yet between nations, think the laws of the UN or the Geneva convention, these laws without an entity with monopoly over violence are so often transgressed with little consequence.

For Girard, capitalism is this bubbling stew of violent, competitive energies that must be contained by law if that violence is not to overflow. That is why Girard thinks the dike will break where capitalism intersects the weakest points of law, in between nations in global trade. Global trade is where national pride and competitive energies are piled up yet there is no monopolistic force of violence to arbitrate law between parties.

Under this light, let me read you Girard's startling predictions 15 years ago, once more. He said this at the height of Sino-American optimism when popular wisdom believed that relationships between China and the US would only get better through trade.

I quote to you again:

A conflict between the United States and China will follow: everything is in place though it will not necessarily occur on the military level at first... Trade can transform very quickly into war... From this point of view, we can reasonably fear a major clash between China and the United States in the coming decades.

Now, if such a war between colossal nation-states were to actually happen, it could very well be the last war. With the invention of nuclear weaponry, Girard thinks we genuinely do live in an apocalyptic moment where the entire world can go up in flames in mere minutes. What is unique about the nuke isn't its singular destructive force – the firebombing of Tokyo, the Mongol mass murderers, I think are comparable to the devastation of a singular nuclear strike. What is unique about the nuke is that it for rivals to utterly destroy each other at the first glimpse of provocation. Unlike firebombing or a Mongol hoard that takes time to maneuver through terrain, there are no frictions to unleashing your entire nuclear arsenal. Before the nuke, nations fought wars like a boxing match, taking time to maneuver, resting in between, with fatal blows rare and often taking a very long time. The nuke allows nation-states to fight wars like a duel – an instant and fatal escalation. In many ways, it's worse than a duel because it allows the dead party to shoot the person who is alive – even if you nuke an entire landmass into oblivion my nuclear submarines can still avenge me postmortem. This is what mutually assured destruction means.

Framed in this light, Girard's worries of apocalypse is less theological speculation than déjà vu. On October 27, 1962, a Soviet submarine armed with a nuclear-tipped torpedo was located and targeted by an American carrier group dropping signaling depth charges, essentially like underwater bombs, intended to destroy the submarine. At the height of the Cuban missile crisis, the crew in that submarine had completely lost contact with Moscow for days and thought that a new world war had broken out. They were debating and considering whether to fire the nuke, believing that they were under direct attack. The submarine required all three senior officers to agree to launch.

the strike – two of them decided to do so – only one officer's stubborn refusal prevented an almost certain nuclear attack and likely Armageddon. This is how close we were, the will of one man was all that stood in the way.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the specter of apocalypse has long faded from the public imagination. But Girard prophesizes that this ghost of yore will soon return to haunt us once more. If the end of the world had a beginning, I think we could do worse than attributing it to the invention of the nuclear bomb.

So, how ought one live in the end times, with apocalypse around the corner, what ought one do? Girard's answer is brief as it is unsatisfying – withdraw. Withdraw from the world, leave it all behind, tend to your own garden. There's nothing you can do to stop apocalypse. You are only going to muddy your own moral character by trying to get involved in such a mess. Withdraw. Stay away from it all so that you can nurture your soul. The Kingdom of God will not be established here on earth, but perhaps we can preserve ourselves to be worthy of it in heaven.

On November 4th, 2015, Girard passed away peacefully in his home in Stanford, California, at the age of 91, leaving us in deafening silence, stranded in an apocalyptic moment with nothing but the advice to withdraw. This is how Girard's story ends a place where our lectures will also come to a screeching halt.

14. The Case Against Engaging Girard

Johnathan Bi: Hopefully, I've given you enough reason already to engage with Girard and continue with these lecture series. I fear that as time progresses Girard will prove to be, if you will entertain another metaphor, a seismograph of history. Able to feel slight tremors that would balloon to tectonic shifts before others even know that we are standing on a fault line.

Girard begins his final work as such:

This is an apocalyptic book... It will become more understandable with time because, unquestionably, we are accelerating swiftly towards the destruction of the world.

Unfortunately, his most unlikely prediction of worsening Sino-American relations has already been made more understandable with time. On the topic of apocalypse, desperately hope Girard is wrong, but I fear that he is right.

If he is right, then Girard is worth engaging because he is one of the only guides to help us navigate the end time – one of the few Virgils left who still take apocalypse literally and seriously. However, I would be a deceitful merchant of ideas if I also didn't share with you why you shouldn't engage with Girard or continue with these lectures.

There's a common metaphor given about philosophy. Philosophy is often compared with medicine that it has the power to cure our souls and societies. And I think that's a quite apt metaphor, but just not taken far enough. Because just as medicine has side effects, so do philosophies. And I wish that philosophers wrote on the side of their books the unwanted side effects of their philosophies as pharmaceutical companies did on their drugs. Warning: disdain for the material world if you take too much of these platonic dialogues in one sitting. Caution: more than one dose of Nietzsche makes patients with pre-existing health conditions descend into uncontrollable rage. Side effect: erectile dysfunction if you take these Buddhist sutras too seriously. Attention: inability to form coherent sentences if you read too much Adorno in one sitting. Just as a drug will course through your veins and infiltrate your entire system, Girard's ideas will latch themselves onto your psyche and colonize your worldview. So we must ask – what are the side effects of engaging Girard? I've presented to you the red pill but as any honest merchant I must also tell you why you should take the blue pill instead. The likely but not necessary side effects of Girard are three-fold.

First, Alienation. Girard will likely show your most intimate, long-held desires – on which your entire identity has been staked on – as external and alien. The career you

always wanted since you were four, the type of person you wanted to marry since childhood, the political cause that you've dedicated your life to – your core desires will likely be thoroughly alienated and shown to be external and perhaps even perverse. Mimetic theory could also alienate you from others. From this point going forward, you will have trouble fully participating in any political or collective activity, always aware of the deceitfulness of mimesis and the madness of crowds.

Second, inaction. Girard is the most ambivalent writer that I have ever come across. What should we do about scapegoating? Well, on one hand, it is a huge lie, you are killing innocents but on the other it is the only way that Pagan societies have brought peace. Should we fight to remove caste systems? Well, if you don't, then you will subject people to arbitrary distinction, meaningless oppression grounded on nothing but lies. But if you do, you open them up to competition of all against all, metaphysical desire will burn through their communities and set it ablaze. Should we participate in capitalism? Capitalism is a competitive cesspool of violent energies... that has brought about the most lovely, prosperous and peaceful society known to date. If you are looking for clear-cut answers or even answers at all, you've come knocking on the wrong door – go to a Marx or a Hegel instead. The extreme ambivalence in all of Girard's ideas in addition to his deep pessimism on the human condition and history tends to incapacitate those who've digested him a bit too thoroughly.

Third, and certainly not least, the side effect of Girard is hopelessness. By now, the point should be familiar: apocalypse is imminent, there is nothing you nor I nor anyone can do about it. If you do wish to remain hopeful after understanding and digesting Girard, just know that that hope is gonna have to come from you and not Girard. You are gonna have to dig yourself and all of us out of this apocalyptic hole. Girard really has nothing left to offer.

Turn back while you still can, I have warned you thus... Now... To those stubborn or perhaps morbidly curious enough to continue I can only heed one last time against continuing on these lectures by echoing what Dante inscribed on the gates of hell:

Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.



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