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Transcript of Girard Lecture III | Mimetic Rivalry and Girard's Theodicy

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0. Introduction

David Perell: Among the many benefits of studying Girard's work is exposing how modern, theoretical understanding of human nature is flawed. But what's the probl with that? Aren't these just theories?

The problem is that when we misunderstand human nature, we build political structures for the kinds of people we wish existed and not the kinds of people who actually do. It's like flying an airplane with a manual for driving trucks.

The dominant, modern framework, which we think of man is homo-economicus – a rational, utility-maximizing agents. But Girard shows us that this understanding is terribly limited. Reason is quite weak and most of us aren't driven by utility – we desire glory, prestige, social belonging, and fame. We're motivated by pride, envy, a rivalry.

Girard tampers our hopes, and teaches us what to expect from a world filled not by rational, utility-maximizing agents – but by spirited social animals.

In this lecture, you're about to enter a social world that will be both barely recognizable to the modern eye but also, I bet, undeniably familiar to your personal experience.

Johnathan Bi: In the previous lecture, we've covered four important topics that are foundational to Girard's psychology. First, mimesis, it's the core capacity and tende for us to imitate others. It's what makes us social creatures. Second, it's mimetic de – desire that is borrowed from others. Mimetic desire always has two components. There's a desire to experience, physical desire, and a desire to be, what Girard calle metaphysical desire. Third, then, this metaphysical desire is striving for a fullness o being – to be real, to be persistent, and to be self-sufficient. It tries to accomplish th goal by searching for models that seem to possess this fullness in being and desirin the objects that they too desire. This is called mediation. Last, but certainly not leas metaphysical desire is malleable, powerful, deceitful, and ungovernable by reason. I leads us on one wild goose chase after another and is nothing other than the root of sin.

In this lecture then, we are going to continue building off of this foundation, to rou out the psychological picture that Girard is trying to paint.

First, we're going to flesh out our understanding of mediation. Not only can mediat happen unidirectionally, but bidirectionally amongst equals. This is what we are go to discuss on our section on mimetic rivalry, which will reveal itself to be the motor violence throughout human history.

The second thing we're going to discuss today is that not only can mediation draw u closer to those whom we admire, it can also push us further apart from those whom resent. This negative force, if you will, is also a subset of mimetic behavior and sho the extent to which we are social creatures. Even our radical pursuits for independence, going away from a group, a carving of one's own path, render us, in some sense, more socially dependent.

Last but not least, with this full picture of mediation in view, we will continue to further develop this idea of original sin. Far from rescuing or baptizing the human condition from the uncharitable picture from last lecture, these new ways of mediat

inject even more forms of necessary pathologies into the human experience. These depravities are going to be so pervasive, likely, and yes, in many cases unavoidable, that what Girard is doing is more exhaustive, it's more systematic, and with a stron modal status than moral psychology. He's presenting us with nothing less than a theodicy – an exhaustive explanation on the origins of evil.

So let us begin with our first move of expanding our understanding of mediation by interrogating the concept and consequences of mimetic rivalry.

1. Internal and External Mediation

Johnathan Bi: Most of the forms of mediation that we've talked about in the last lecture are what Girard coins external mediation. Take the example of celebrity advertisement, something you brought up and that of Michael Jordan's shoes that w talked about, that we want to "be like Mike" when we buy those shoes. Mediation h refers to the fact that Jordan mediates my desires for the basketball shoes which he sells, that my desire for those shoes is really the desire for me to be Michael Jordan. acquire the object in hopes that I too will exist in great measure through my act of possession. In this example, I hope it's evident and obvious, mediation is unidirectional. Jordan imbues me with a desire, but I do not do so to him.

However, there's also another species of mediation that is bidirectional where each person is both model and subject, competing over the same object. Let's extend the analogy: two kids in school mediating each other's desires to buy new Jordans – eac inspiring jealousy as he acquires the newest release and competes for the prestige o having the best collection. This form of bidirectional mediation Girard calls interna mediation, a relationship where both parties, one, fight for the same objects and, tw mediate each other's desires and increases them.

What determines whether a mediation is internal (between two parties, bidirectiona or external (between two parties, unidirectionally) depends on the distance between

model and subject. In internal mediation, the pair is close enough that they end up desiring, competing, and converging on a similar set of objects. In external mediati the pair is distant enough that even though one mediates the desires of the other, th never really converge onto the similar object because of how far apart they are.

When we talk about distance, there are two types of distances that matter here. The first type of distance is spatial temporal distance. And it's quite trivial and easy to understand because it prevents the pair from competing by making sure the pair is exposed. If I'm being mediated by Michael Jordan, that is because I am exposed to h through advertisements and commercials. Yet Jordan is not exposed to me in any w We are far enough apart that he mediates me but I do not mediate him. The arc of history has reduced this type of distance. Before, it was hard to be physically expose to more than those in your city – but now, both advances in transportation as well a communication have rendered the entire world smaller, much more proximate. And therefore, the slogan of social media companies like Facebook "of connecting the world" is not a celebratory declaration for Girard, but a terrifying damnation for Girard because it renders us all the more capable of mediating and competing with each other.

David Perell: This reminds me of a time when I was driving in Upstate New York in town called Poughkeepsie. And when you go just north of the city, on the left side, y see this big estate of the former American president, FDR. And you see the signs, b the estate's pretty far back. There's big walls and it's hidden behind trees. And I thi that represents the way that wealth used to be, that it would be far away, it'd be hidden. The Gatsby parties weren't visible to the common person. But now you can just sit on your couch, open up Instagram and see Dan Bilzerian and his yachts and private jets, the women, all the fun stuff. And I think this speaks to what you're sayi about communication technologies reducing the cognitive distance between people that used to exist.

Johnathan Bi: Precisely. And Girard would say, not only do communication technologies like social media reduce this distance but literal physical distance is reduced by means such as air travel. There's a second type of distance that's a bit m subtle and more interesting, and that's social distance. Social distance prevents the pair, even if they're exposed, from identifying with each other and believing that th same objects which satisfy one will also be fitting for the other. This social distance this differentiation, if you will, prevents metaphysical desire from contagiously spreading from subject to subject. Class, for example, acts as such a mode of differentiation. In my own life, I find it quite curious and somewhat humorous that probably much more jealous of the other 23-year-old entrepreneurs than I am of th multi-billionaires in my life. And prima facie, from an external perspective, that's a ridiculous person to be jealous of because the billionaire has so much more than m whereas the 23-year-old and I may be indistinguishable. But Girard's point is that jealousy and envy are emotions that operate between similars. The objects the billionaire deserves aren't the objects that I think I deserve because we are so differ as to be in completely different classes. But the other 23-year-old, well, we are mucl more socially close and I much more easily and readily take on his desires as my ow

But not just class – caste, gender roles, guild lineages – all serve as distance here. Whatever makes us consider ourselves as different in stock or in essence is enough prevent mediation. Of course, history has closed down on this form of distance as w with the introduction of the ideal of equality. We no longer consider that there are these fundamentally different groups of people. We tell our children "you can be anything you want to be" and we demand the same opportunities for all because we think everyone is equally deserving. While Girard ultimately affirms this trend and finds it praiseworthy, laudable, and in essence, Christian, he is worried because it means that desire will have fewer barriers of spreading and be much, much more contagious.

Rest assured, desire can still be kept in check by differences which do still exist in modernity. The example of class that I just highlighted is one of them. An even mo

trivial example is I've noticed that while sophomores in college may be more threatened if another sophomore gets a great internship, they aren't so much when junior gets an equally promising one. Because they reason, "Well, they got another year on me so they should be getting something better." Even such minute differenc is enough to create social distance.

2. Mimetic Rivalry

Johnathan Bi: When the subject and model are both socially and physically proxim then the relationship becomes one of internal mediation or mimetic rivalry.

David Perell: Are those two words synonymous, internal mediation and mimetic rivalry?

Johnathan Bi: That's a good question and I think there are technical distinctions between the two but I won't bore our listeners in this introduction to Girard. So, ye you can essentially understand them as one and the same, describing a relationship where subject and model are competing over the same objects and mediating each other's desires.

Girard, as we discussed in the last lecture, sees human desire as being made up of t competing strands: the desire to be, which he calls metaphysical desire, and the des to experience, which he terms physical desire. Metaphysical desire, the one that is shown to be original sin, is directed at what objects say about me. Physical desire is directed at the experience conferred by the qualities of the object. If I pursue a romantic partner for the experience of sexual gratification or intimacy, then that is physical desire. If I pursue someone because of what dating such a person says abou me, then that is metaphysical desire. For reasons that are hopefully obvious, Girard defines sanity as being primarily motivated by physical desire – the utility and experience of things, and not what objects say about us, but what objects can do for

The primary problem with mimetic rivalry, this is why it's so much worse, is that it tends to inflame metaphysical desire, the bad desire that we don't want, and crowd this healthy and sober physical desire, such that we primarily become concerned ab what things say about us instead of what they can do for us. We become obsessed w identity and give up utility.

The first and most obvious way that mimetic rivalry tends to inflame metaphysical desire and make us disregard the object is that you and your rival reciprocally incre each other's metaphysical desire. Think about it like this, in external mediation, the one unidirectional mediation, and that's it – Jordan makes me desire his shoes. But internal mediation, in mimetic rivalry, the two rivals mediate each other. I have a sr desire for Jordan's shoes, you latch onto that desire, and suddenly I copy your copy my desire, increasing it in strength, and this goes on ad infinitum. Have you noticed how really tight friend groups have really peculiar and from an outside perspective, indecipherable status symbols, a particular brand, a particular way of speaking, a specific store that they go to at a specific time? This reciprocal nature of mediation and rivalry is how these status symbols are created.

If mediation in external mediation is like an injury – I push you off the cliff and you break your leg, and that's that. Then mediation in internal mediation (in mimetic rivalry) is like a contagious disease. It's kind of like COVID. I have an original strain the desire, I pass it on to you. It develops within you, it mutates, it increases in strength, which is then passed back to me.

The second way that mimetic rivalry inflames metaphysical desire is that competiti leads to winners and losers. Losing leads to shame. And shame creates an even grea distance to this ideal of being, to exist in great measure that we are striving for. And therefore, we desire to exist in great measure all the more when we are deprived of That is how metaphysical desire leads to competition, leads to losing, leads to sham leads to even greater metaphysical desire.

David Perell: Yeah, and this point of losing and shame, I always think back to Mich Jordan's Hall of Fame speech. Have you ever seen it?

Johnathan Bi: I haven't.

David Perell: It's ridiculous. He gets up there, greatest NBA player of all time, six N championships, multiple MVP awards and even after all that, he's accepting this gr honor. And he talks about how the guy who took his spot, the coveted spot on the varsity basketball team his freshman year, how he held that anger, that resentment throughout his entire career. And I think it speaks to this way that when you lose, when you are in a competition, you're not getting what you want, you get this spite, this vengeance that can drive you so much more than reason or logic ever could.

Johnathan Bi: That's a great example. And I think social humiliation, in this case, Jordan not making his varsity basketball team, is in some way the exact opposite of this fullness in being which we all strive for, which is why our desire for it and humiliation is all the stronger in the same way that the thirsty man desires water m more. What Girard is getting at here is the phenomenon of us desiring an object ev more upon not winning it – romantic interest, job, a gift – that I think we can all rel to.

David Perell: And often we're attracted to things more after they reject us as well. I think it was Groucho Marx who said: "I never want to be a member of a club that would have me as a member."

Johnathan Bi: I think that's another great example. And I think Girard would perha explain that phenomenon like this: when you get rejected, you experience a diminishing of being. And the model who wins the object (in this case, whoever doe get to go in the club) has a slight elevation in your eyes. They get a little surplus of being. And, therefore, you desire the object, in this case, the club, that they have all more because you both feel more deficient in being and the model also seems a bit

more spectacular. Metaphysical desire then becomes inflamed in rivalry because of this difference between the loser and the victor.

But apart from merely exacerbating the problems of metaphysical desire, this type o competition introduces a new problematic logic. In mimetic rivalries – think about intense competitions or maybe even feuds that you've been in – you tend to blame y rivals disproportionately for your problems and often attribute to them a malicious intent that they didn't really have.

David Perell: I know what that's like. I don't know if you've ever been so mad at somebody. Maybe you feel like they spited you, they betrayed you. But what happen at first it's kind of obvious. You're just angry at them. You're pissed off. But then something really weird happens where everything in your life that goes wrong, you' at the grocery store, they're out of your kombucha. You go and you're at the bar wit some friends, they don't have your favorite beer. And now you start blaming it on th friend who you're mad at. And your life begins to spiral into this descent of negativ where you're just blaming everything on that person on that single event. And furthermore, when you're mad at them, you assume a malicious intent in their actio that might not even be there.

Johnathan Bi: That's precisely right. And I think through this undeserved blame, a you hit upon two ways that it's undeserved. One is that you attribute to them a malicious intent that they might not have. And the other is the scope of the blame y level at them. The rival in mimetic rivalries is given a dual character: as good (becau they possess the coveted object) and as evil (because they're responsible for your sh in competition). Usually, the subject, you, feels nothing but respect and admiration towards the model. But in the case of mimetic rivalries, the subject believes, again (often wrongly) that the model is actively hurting the subject's being for the sake of causing pain. This is the malicious intent – malicious intent, and not just undesirab consequence, is often what we attribute to our rivals, whether it's true or not.

This is a new force in Girardian psychology that is absolutely central: resentment. Resentment, Girard observes, is reserved for those who are both, I quote:

> The instigator of desire and a relentless guardian forbidding its fulfillment.

Without being an instigator, we simply feel annoyance for people. And without bei the forbidding guardian, we feel respect. That's how external mediation works. Resentful sentiments are ambivalent, containing within them a degree of admiratio alongside hatred.

The logic of metaphysical desire changes considerably with the injection of resentment. It is no longer about acquiring the object to have the same being as the model, but to steal the object from the model, robbing him of his elevated status in retributive vengeance. We don't only want to have ourselves exist in great measure, we also want to diminish the existence of the other.

And one cannot overemphasize the degree to which this new logic of resentment transforms relationships of mediation. If the examples of external mediation – such fanboying over Michael Jordan's shoes – already represents a perverse fascination w the other, disguised as a desire for the object, then resentment makes it all the mor so. In external mediation, I'm fascinated, I'm fanboying over this one person, but at least I do not have it as an end of mine to change his being, to sabotage him. But in mimetic rivalry, on top of this perverse fascination, this enthrallment, I do have it a direct end, to hurt his being, to get even for the malicious intent that I perceive him having. In mimetic rivalries, not only is one fixated on and enthralled by the being o the model, as one already is in external mediation, but one also wants to change or more accurately, sabotage it.

With resentment then, Girard provides us a psychological motivation to hurt others for the sake of hurting others. Resentment directs us to cause our rivals pain for the sake of causing them pain, even if it means harming ourselves. And we think it

justified because of their malicious intent. We treat their suffering as an end in itse This is the psychological force behind vengeance.

Let me give you a historical example of mimetic rivalries that I think encapsulates a of the facets we've talked about so far.

This example is one provided by the American anthropologist David Graeber, and i tells the story of the transition of Greece from a heroic society around, let's say, 100 BC, the time of Homer, to a market society at the time of Socrates, around 500 BC. This transition is one where the rigid, differentiated class structure of aristocrats a citizenry became much more muddied as social mobility is increased and even the average man gained a larger degree of economic power. This mobility came from re two things. First, there's a greater inflow of slaves, and second, the introduction of coinage in the markets lifted the boats of all, so to speak – enabling even citizens of quite modest means to take part in the political and cultural life of the city.

Graeber's description of how the aristocrats reacted to the greater share of power t the citizenry now gained, I think is emblematic of all the qualities of a mimetic riva that we've just talked about. First, the aristocrats who used to unidirectionally medi the citizenry's desires became mediated by the citizenry's desires. It was the closing the social distance (due to the increased money of the citizens) that turned mediatic from unidirectional to bidirectional. Specifically, the aristocrats began engaging in lower trades of merchant activity and commerce as was practiced by the lower class by the citizenry. It was out of a secret admiration, a desire to have something that t nouveau riche had, the wealthy citizenry, that motivated the aristocrats into commerce. At the same time, however, the aristocrats were resentful of this nouvea riche, and this resentment resulted in a revaluation of values. This famous Greek obsession with honor didn't stem from the times of Homer, but this aristocratic rebellion against the values of the marketplace, or at least so Graeber argues. That i say, money in the Homeric times was the measure of one's greatness. But when the nouveau riche started gaining more and more money, the aristocratic classes starte

devaluing money out of resentment and jealousy, and brought up honor instead as t ideal to differentiate themselves, because wealth no longer could. The aristocratic class wanted to be like the nouveau riche and started engaging much more in commerce, but they also deeply resented them, and so made commerce ignoble.

This complicated story of admiration combined with resentment is so often the cas the old elite's attitude towards a new rising class. And the last example here is probably Hong Kong that got a lot richer, a lot faster, and a lot earlier than mainlan China. And as the mainland started to catch up in the past three decades, let's say, I think the people of Hong Kong have an ambivalent attitude towards the mainland, dissimilar from the Greek aristocrats and their reaction towards the rising citizenry you are a Mandarin speaker from the mainland and you go to Hong Kong, I think it common to experience both a bit of resentment and admiration. You get this feelin however subtle, that some people don't want you there, but almost everyone wants your business. This combination of admiration and resentment is what defines mimetic rivalries.

Let's go back to the Greeks. We're not done there yet, because the aristocrats are or half the rivalry. Here is how the Nouveau rich reacted to their newfound status. I'm going to quote Graeber here.

> We see an almost schizophrenic reaction on the part of ordinary citizens themselves, who simultaneously try to limit or even ban aspects of aristocratic culture and to imitate aristocratic sensibilities. Pederasty [the practice of a grow man having sex with boys fundamental to aristocratic initiation] is an excellent c in point here. The democratic polis saw it as politically subversive and made sex relationships between male citizens legal. At the same time, almost everyone beg to practice it.

Here we see the exact same logic play out, but just on the other side. On one hand, have imitation of a practice, in this case, man-boy love pederasty. This was an imitation that previously was not widely practiced because the citizenry felt so dist

from the elite that they couldn't possibly deserve what the elite had. On the other hand, there is a natural resentment from the citizenry for the aristocrats that also didn't exist before for performing these rituals that they themselves want to practic And this resentment manifested explicitly in a desire to sabotage the elite, to ban aristocratic practices and privileges, all while they themselves secretly yearn to practice them.

The two rival classes of Socratic Greece then, are shown to be very, very similar in their form. As the distance between the two classes decreased, they all experienced admiration and urge to imitate the defining practices of the other: commerce and man-boy love, respectively. Sitting extremely uneasily alongside this admiration wa also a deeply felt resentment that saw each other trying to sabotage one another, devaluing commerce and banning aristocratic practices.

In the case of competition over money between the Greek social classes, I think it's easy to see how fighting over a limited object can inflame metaphysical desires, hov there can be clear winners or losers. However, there's a different form of competitic that is prima facie not as zero-sum, but can just as effectively stir up metaphysical desires.

I think an example will be helpful to illustrate the wide scope and irrational nature mimetic rivalries here. Consider two friends mediating each other's goals in recreational weightlifting. David, weightlifting, if you aren't familiar, is the activity that people do to gain a respectable physique.

Let's imagine two friends mediating each other's goals in recreational weightlifting Should one friend reach the goal first, the other could feel slight resentment buildi up as if the successful friend were somehow to blame for their own lack of progress choose weightlifting precisely because how innocuous it is, and how the goal to lift certain amount of weights – unlike say, two classes competing for material resource in the case of the Greeks – is not exclusionary, but nonetheless can create feelings c resentment.

You might think me petty for even being able to relate to this example, but I can thi of many more arenas that aren't zero-sum, or perhaps even positive-sum, that we fe threatened by the mere presence of someone too similar. If you can't relate to weightlifting, perhaps you can relate to any of these other arenas. Investing – hearii that a close friend made a killing on a few good trades. Academic publishing – hear that a colleague received a certain type of recognition. Or a company promotion – when a coworker received a job that you didn't want but is very prestigious within t organization.

David Perell: I relate to this too with subscriber counts on the internet, where I'll b growing an audience and my friend will pass me, and I'll get upset about that, or I'l feel some kind of envy or jealousy. But it's ridiculous. It's my friend, and that's exac the kind of person who I would want to have surpass me because they can help me, can help them. And yet still, this mimetic envy takes hold.

Johnathan Bi: Precisely. And I think that's a great example, in addition to the three that I just gave as well because these aren't zero-sum arenas. To your point that you can help them and that they can help you, these are positive-sum arenas. My friend who's good at investing can probably give me better stock tips. My friend who is no recognized in the academy can probably help me in some way. And my friend who i a place of higher influence in the company may help me push my own agenda. And friend who has more followers than me, in your case, can also help me boost my following as well. But nonetheless, I think it's a human likelihood, if not necessity, t have our hearts thud a little bit when we hear of the successes of those close to us, even if it means we benefit materially. What did Aristotle say, that we fear our frien will become gods?

Of course, there are relationships where we can genuinely feel happy for the other. Girard's point is that, contra our intuitions, the more similar someone is to our self- conception, the more threatening they tend to become. But why is this? I think it's because our ideal of being is inherently exclusionary. I've described this desire to b

a desire for social reality, for our names to last, for us to exert power, to exist in grea measure. So if I'm a philosopher of Girard, what I'm really striving for is getting the greatest degree of social recognition as a philosopher of Girard. If another Girard scholar pops out on the scene, then the attention I receive qua Girard scholar diminishes. Even if, through debate, both of us gain a greater understanding of Gira what I'm really after, however, is threatened.

Because the ideal Girard thinks we are striving towards is exclusionary, the mere existence of someone with a similar self-conception threatens our very being. Let m frame our insights this way. The world of material, of utility, of experience, it may b positive sum, but the world of spirit, of being, of self-conception, of gaining social recognition and attention isn't. If what I most wanted was to make good trades, the should be delighted that my friend made a great deal of money. But if what I most wanted was to be an investor, to maintain a certain self-conception, then I should fe threatened by such a friend. In like manner, if what I most wanted was to access tru then I should be delighted of my colleague's academic achievements. But if what I most wanted was to be a philosopher, then I should feel threatened. And I think the fact that we are more often threatened rather than delighted by the advance of thos most similar to us, even when it means we benefit materially – tells us about the tru nature of our desires and our priorities.

This fact – that those with similar self-conceptions to us are a natural threat – expla why conflicts between those who inhabit a close relationship, who have or had shar feelings of admiration are so common and often brutal: master and apprentice, Aja and Odysseus, Orestes and Clytemnestra, Romulus and Remus. Indeed, this motif o the warring twin pulses through Girard's work. Similarity and proximity is what causes conflict. And let me leave you with one last example.

I have a friend who took a class with a scholar of Roman literature, and this scholar was extremely nice and caring, as many professors are. Not only was he nice and caring to his students, but he was extremely tolerant of things very distant, other

cultures, other ideologies, other races, other gender orientations. And my friend enjoyed this course on Roman literature so much that he watched videos from anot scholar of Roman literature and very excited, he brought this other scholar up to hi professor during class. And it was as if thunderclouds descended upon a sunny day. The professor's brows started frowning and he was visibly upset and spoke in harsh and dismissive phrases – the loving, caring, and tolerant scholar was really nowhere be seen, and he just completely let it rip on his colleague, tenfold the anger and frustration when he was discussing even the most cruel aspects of distant cultures. Perhaps many in academia can relate to these phenomena of bitter, petty rivalries between extremely similar people. And I think this extends well beyond the academ ask someone who they have the biggest problem with and it's often people very sim to them: who want the same things, who have the same self-conception.

Girard's point is that even when there is no real competition, as in the case of the Greeks, mimetic rivalries inflame our desires and pit us against each other because social competition. It's easy to love someone distant and much harder to love thy neighbor.

To summarize, mimetic rivalries inflame metaphysical desire, making us lose sight the object and become enthralled with the model in three ways. First, when two pe are so intimately involved as they are in mimetic rivalry, each mediates and strengthens the other's desires for the object. Second, real competition introduces shame in the loser, which makes them desire being even more. Third, even when th is no real competition, there still exists a social competition, where we feel threater by those too similar to us.

2.1 Doubles

Johnathan Bi: This inflammation of metaphysical desire, then, leads to the creatior doubles or warring twins. This is what Girard has to say: all the relationships are symmetrical, the two partners believe themselves separated by a bottomless abyss, there is nothing we can say of one which is not equally true of the other. There is a

sterile opposition of contraries which becomes more and more atrocious and empty the two subjects approach each other and as their desire intensifies.

David Perell: It makes me think of the idea that you should choose your enemies wisely, for you'll become just like them.

Johnathan Bi: Right, that's exactly right, and I have just the example prepared here Think about the Meiji restoration of Japan in the 19th century. After being humilia by the West, Japan wanted to stand up to the West and be able to fight against it to its own nation. But the way it did so was by imitating to a degree the West. It had to adopt a more flexible social structure, it had to adopt a more constitutional politica structure, it had to gain an orientation towards science and technology, and obviou it eventually developed a taste for colonization as well. So even as Japan explicitly rejected the West, Meiji Japan also had to imitate it. Even as it sought to distance it from the West, it had to become more similar. And of course, we all know how this increased proximity ended – it ended in World War II. Everything that we talked ab so far is how proximity causes fighting. But as the Japanese case shows, the convers also true. Fighting creates more proximity because rivals often have to resort to sim tactics. Be careful of who your enemies are because you'll be forced to be like them.

2.2 False Differences

Johnathan Bi: And what makes this doubleness, this likeness between rivals all the more perverse is that rivals themselves do not perceive it as such. They perceive themselves to be the most radically different, even though from an outsider's perspective, the rivals cannot be differentiated. Rivals focus on what Girard calls "f differences". These are tiny, inconsequential distinctions that they base their entire identity around in order to justify their hatred of the rival.

Were you to expose the similarity between the West and Meiji Japan to a Japanese a the time, I imagine they would say something like: "Oh no, but what makes us different is that we served an enlightened emperor, whereas the West is ruled by

virtueless charlatans" or something like that. And I think if you were to grill my friend's Roman literature scholar about why the other colleague was so despicable, imagine he would bring up what must seem from the outside trivial answers: a form argumentation not being up to rigor, or petty departmental politics. We need these differences to justify our resentment. After all, I can't resent someone for qualities I too have. If I'm an industrialist superpower critiquing another industrialist superpower, I can't critique their worldliness or material orientation, for then I wou be critiquing myself. I have to say something about their political structure or their religious intolerance. And if I'm a Roman literature scholar, I can't admit that I disl the other scholar out of petty jealousy or envy. I have to find some objective reasons however trivial, to ground my dislike.

So, Girard reasons, we create and cling on to these trivial "false differences" and tal them to be the core of our identity. Girard's point is that in rivalry, we systematicall repress how we and our enemies are alike, sometimes even identical – in what we want, what we believe in, who we think we are – to justify our resentment.

David Perell: Yeah, you see this with the major television networks. If you walk int gym and you see Fox News and CNN, MSNBC, and you're somebody who's in the media world, you see them as totally different. Different sides of the political spectrum, representing different views, totally different. But then if you just don't watch the news and you see the three of them on TV, they look exactly the same. Th have the same bold headlines, the same shouts on television, the same super drama clips that they cut to. And it's these small differences that are exaggerated for the people in the industry.

2.3 American Psycho

Johnathan Bi: And from their perspectives, they must exaggerate these small differences in order to justify their hatred of people who are, as you mentioned, objectively quite similar to them. And I think one albeit extreme example, also rela to corporate America, perfectly encapsulates all of these qualities of mimetic rivalry

that we have just talked about so far. And that is the boardroom scene in the movie, American Psycho.

American Psycho is about the story of a yuppie New York banker, Bateman, the old money, Ivy League, who is a closeted serial killer. And he kills not from some vigila agenda or some noble cause, but because there's a deep spiritual boredom in his life

And the core aim of the movie is to show the derivative, trivial, and unsatisfying nature of the life of rivalry and prestige. And I think the boardroom scene is particularly brilliant in highlighting this. The scene goes something like this. Bateman, a young and successful banker, sits down in a very upscale Manhattan boardroom surrounded by bankers who look and behave indistinguishably from hir the point where they actually mistake each other frequently. As the meeting ends, Bateman presents his newly printed luxury business cards with glee and he says, "That's bone. And the lettering is something called Silian Rail." And he says that wi a very smug grin. In an act of one-upmanship, another banker presents his card and says, "Eggshell, with Romalian type." And as the camera zooms in, the cards are jus indistinguishable as their owners: they're all bland white rectangles with blue font, with the same company and all with the same title of "Vice President." But Batema clenches his fist in passive anger as the group seems to slightly, slightly favor the newcomer's card. Another banker then also joins in the mix. He says something lik "raised lettering, pale, nimbus white." Bateman is now visibly infuriated and he demands to see the card of his rival, Paul Allen. He picks up Paul's equally derativ card. He swallows and he becomes speechless. The whole sound in the room dies down in the scene as the audience is treated to Bateman's faint heartbeat and inter dialogue. And he says something like: "Look at that subtle off-white coloring, the tasteful thickness of it. Oh my God, it even has a watermark." And he lets the card f as he is unable to tame his own anger, the same anger which would escalate in the movie and leads to Bateman to eventually kill Paul as one of the many victims in his murdering sprees.

This is not to say that every mimetic rivalry ends in a murdering spree. The movie i rightfully titled "Psycho" for a clear reason here but I think, albeit in exaggerated form, this scene highlights all the key points of mimetic rivalries that we've just discussed. First, they enter into rivalry because everyone in the boardroom is so dar similar. Second, their similarity enters them into real competition because they're competing over a similar book of clients. Third, even when they aren't competing o similar clients, there's a social competition over the status markers, the non-exclusi non-zero-sum status markers of the banker – whether it's reservations or romantic conquests or business cards. And fourth, the way in which they try to differentiate themselves only makes them more similar. A slightly better haircut at the same bar a slightly better reservation at the same restaurant, and of course, the damn busines cards, the white rectangles, the blue fonts, the vice president, they are completely indistinguishable. However, fifth, as Girard articulates, they themselves perceive radical difference from each other. Bone with Silian Rail, eggshell with Romalian ty raised lettering, pale nimbus white — markers that are completely indistinguishabl us, are seen as the greatest gaps of taste and character. It is this radical, illusionary distance between Bateman and the rest that legitimizes his killing sprees.

Similarity leads to real and social competition. Competition produces more similar All of this is obstructed by false differences which justify violence. This is both the story of American Psycho and the form of mimetic rivalry at large.

3. The Negative Phase of Mimesis

Johnathan Bi: Let's move on to our second topic of discussion. Everything we've discussed so far has dealt with a positive species of mimesis, where model and subj converge, where rivals become more like each other. However, there's a whole other species of mimesis that pushes us away from others. This is the negative phase of mimesis.

The logic of metaphysical desire is to pursue objects associated with those who hav fullness in being. A natural continuation of this logic then, is to avoid or distance

oneself from objects associated with those we conceive as having a deficiency in be
We both want to be like the cool kids, but also be different as far as possible from tl
social outcasts, the people who we think are unacceptable.

David Perell: You see this in our aversion to certain aesthetics from the 20th centu
think back to the Italian Futurists. They had this beautiful art and architecture. The
architecture is grand and majestic. It represented power. And then their art was ver
optimistic, these blues and reds that represented this technological optimism. And
was wondrous and inspiring. But what happened was after World War II with the
Nazis, we rejected anything that looked like fascism, looked like a government that
was just too strong, too authoritarian. And so what happened is no matter how
beautiful a certain aesthetic is, if it smells like Nazism, if it smells like fascism, we
reject it outright.

Johnathan Bi: So what you're saying here is futurism was not rejected on its own
grounds because it was ugly or because it carried the wrong connotations of
technological progress, but it was rejected on the grounds of who it was associated
with.

David Perell: The association is the key point there. Exactly.

Johnathan Bi: And I think that would be the Girardian interpretation as well, that t
negative drive to distance ourselves away from those we think are lesser, or in this
case, evil, is just as powerful and prevalent as the positive drive to be more like thos
we think greater than us or fundamentally good.

And the personal example I can give here is of a college acquaintance who was an
economic progressive. When he was a freshman and we just met, he was extremely
passionate about the distributive justice. And every time I would meet him, he wou
go on and on and on about the mistreatment of the poor and what we could do bett
However, as I got to know him a bit better, he confessed to me that what was
motivating his progressivism wasn't a universal benevolence, a concern for the poo

but a localized resentment, a hatred of the rich. See, this acquaintance came from a middle-class family but grew up with upper middle-class peers and was always mad to feel poor. His orientation of values against wealth was not for its own sake, not a more than our orientation away from futurism was for its own sake, but to get back his wealthier peers. By painting money-making as immoral, he found himself on th moral high ground. The funny story is, he's now in a career as an investment banke because he never really had a problem with money at all. In fact, the only reason he renounced wealth so heavily and so fervently was because he wanted it so much and was deeply resentful that he couldn't get it. This is the psychology of the negative phase of memetic rivalries, and it's the exact inverse of the positive one: it's to, at th surface, reject the values of the rival, but in secret strongly desire them.

In *American Psycho*, Bateman affirms the values of his other bankers, resenting then secretly, whereas my friend rejects the values of his peers, but admires them secretl This is a fine, thin, and often traversed line indeed – the closest of partners often become the worst of enemies.

If the perversion of the positive phase of mimetic rivalry, and here think to Batema and American Psycho, is pettiness and triviality, bickering about the fonts of your business cards, then the perversion of the negative phase is hypocrisy – rejecting money while you secretly desire wealth.

3.1 Conforming to Contrarianism

Johnathan Bi: This negative species of mimesis adds a completely new dimension o what it means to say that man is a social creature. Even when we break away from a group, that itself can be a deeply socially determined action.

And with this intuition, Girard wants to tear down what he conceives of as the Romantic lie. The lie goes something like this, at the bottom, we are all individuals, whatever that means, with a core of what we can call the "authentic self." And then layered on top of this true individual are layers and layers of social constraints with

origins external. The way to access authenticity under this model is by "following o heart" with a radical breaking free from the group.

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

When I asked my college acquaintance, after he confessed to me that his progressiv stemmed not from a belief of the ideas themselves, but largely due to a social resentment of his peers, I asked, "Well, isn't that a huge problem that you didn't for this opinion independently?" But to my surprise, my acquaintance answered, and ir stark contrast to what he had just told me, he responded, "Why I did form this opin on progressivism independently. After all, all of my peer group are economic conservatives. I am the only progressive. I am different from them. How could I hav been determined by their opinions?" This here then is the lie of romanticism, that difference means authenticity – that all we have to do is to peel away the effects of t group and we will find our authentic cores.

The reality, however, is that we can just as easily be socially determined by rejectin group as we can by conforming to the group. Mimesis operates positively and negatively. Becoming a progressive because you were resentful of the conservatives no less socially determined than becoming a progressive out of peer pressure from progressives.

I think my acquaintance could only have thought otherwise because we fetishize difference in our culture. Our models in modernity are all of radical breaking-aways from the group. The underdog going against the big brother, the rebel fighting outs the system, the daring entrepreneur disrupting an old industry, the starving artist creating something radically new.

Too often, however, I feel like we are conforming to contrarianism, that we're seeki difference for difference's sake. Just as how a Confucian in Chinese antiquity might

have doggedly adhered to tradition just for the sake of tradition, we, I think with nc less rigidity, try to rebel from tradition for no other reason than rebellion.

I think Marlon Brando's character, who plays a motorcycle gang leader in The Wild One – a movie in the '50s – captures this perverse sentiment well. There's a scene ir that movie when Brando's character is asked, "What are you rebelling against?" He this bar, he's this really cool, rebellious leather biker jacket, and he just lets out a weary sigh and responds, "What do you got?" He doesn't stand for anything, his val are not held for their own sake any more so than the conformists are. He simply wa to be different from whatever you present to him. Whatever you give him, he's goin rebel against it. That is the perverse sentiment within modernity.

Man is shown to be a social creature through and through. If you take one thing fro Girard's psychology, it is this: the most powerful and explanatory element within th human psyche is our sociality. Our values, our political orientations, aesthetic taste and even philosophical positions are inevitably dependent on and heavily influence by others in deep and often very unconscious ways. This influence is so pervasive th not only can our movements towards a group be socially determined, but so can ou movements away from the group.

I think we can understand Girard's psychology as elevating this social part of ourselves, what I've been calling spirit, over reason. Spirit is stronger, it's more persistent and more important to us. Reason often pretends to be its steward, but ir reality is its lawyer and spokesperson, engaged more often than not in simple post- rationalization.

In this view, we are not rational, truth-seeking creatures, but animals who willingly believe in lies, in so far as others around us do as well. After all, other animals enga in truth-seeking all the time – echolocation, tapping into the magnetic fields, night vision – but we are the only ones who create gods, who tell stories, who spin up fictions, who convince each other of lies. We are not individuals, but a collection of vibrating violin strings. Our behaviors always have direct consequences for others.

Framed in this way, Girard's psychology mounts a formidable challenge to the very ground of modern social theory. What does it mean to protect individual freedom if we, like co-vibrating violin strings, are never truly even free to begin with? Are wha we consider personal decisions – aesthetic preference, sexual orientation, gender identities, familial roles, music tastes – are these really a question of self-expressior should we examine them primarily due to their mimetic effects on society? How do legitimize democratic political consensus when people don't seem to vote for the common good? They don't even seem to vote for their rational own self-interest bu pick allegiances based off of spirited, tribalistic social forces.

This is the Pandora's box of questions that Girard's psychology opens up. Unfortunately, they will have to remain questions for now, but this much I can reassure you. The social world we are about to step into over the next four lectures one completely alien to our intuitions. It is a world – where groups can only be reconciled through violence, where the foundation of worldly peace is always lies, where truth brings war, not peace, and where the historical expansion of justice, equality, and freedom begets apocalypse.

When you will inevitably be shocked by Girard's social conclusions, more often tha not, it is due to a difference in psychological assumptions. The key in understandin Girard's social theory is to interpret it as built upon a psychology that elevates Spiri over reason.

4. The Psycho-Social Pathologies of Man

Johnathan Bi: But before we enter into Girard's social theory, there's one last topic wish to discuss today. Let's take a look back at the terrain that we've already travers in these two lectures on psychology. In the last lecture, we focused on metaphysical desire, the desire to be, to exist in great measure. It is our original sin, our prideful yearning. It is compulsive, it's ungovernable, it's deceitful, and aimed at such a heightened deal that we could never obtain it, dooming us on one wild goose hunt

after the other. In the beginning of this lecture, the problem is worsened with the introduction of mimetic rivalry. Not only does this inflame metaphysical desire, but also introduces a new logic of resentment which leads to violence. What envelops u all the deeper into this mimetic quagmire then is the second topic of today's lecture this negative phase of mimesis, which shows just how thoroughly we are social creatures – even breaking free from a group can be a symptom of radical dependenc

To say that this is a pessimistic view on human nature would be a gross understatement, and it's about to get a lot more pessimistic.

Girard treats what we commonly think of as abnormalities within human psycholog and society as necessary occurrences. Fetishization, bipolarity, alienation, masochis – pathologies that we think only the few unfortunate among us experience – Girard believes is the common predicament. These psychological pathologies are not a radical break, but on a continuum for Girard with regular psychology. Put provocatively, we are all to some degree masochistic, bipolar, fetishizing, and alienated.

In like manner, social pathologies – oppression and inequity – which we only think plague the most unjust of societies, will receive the same treatment – all of human society are oppressive and inequitable, the only difference being of kind and degree

This then is our next and last conversation of this lecture, to understand the necess evils that Girard's psychology injects into individual life as well as society, to understand the social and psychological pathologies of man.

4.1 Fetishization

Johnathan Bi: Let's begin with the psychological pathologies, and most of these wi be old news.

The first pathology is fetishization, and I would describe fetishization as gaining a morbid attraction to an object, disproportionate to the intrinsic value of that object

think that's quite a standard understanding of fetishization. And once we frame it i this light, we can see that it is none other than metaphysical desire. As the example you gave last lecture of Kanye's $100 white t-shirt goes to show, through metaphysi desire we give objects an undeserved surplus value because of certain models who mediate our desires.

In so far as we experience metaphysical desire – and Girard believes that almost all us do – we are fetishizing creatures.

4.2 Alienation

Johnathan Bi: The second psychological pathology of alienation directly flows from this point.

One popular understanding of alienation championed by thinkers like Feuerbach a of course the later Marx is to describe it as the experience of externalizing and bein alienated from the best or the most important qualities of ourselves. We project wh is most important to us on an external object, and thereby become alienated from these qualities. Feuerbach's famous example is the Christian God – he berates Christianity because it makes us project the best qualities of man – innocence, love truth – onto a distant God, and thereby robbing ourselves of those self-conceptions

Here, metaphysical desire is the channel and culprit of alienation as well. We take t key ideals that we are striving for – reality, persistence, and self-sufficiency – and project and externalize them onto objects that we chase. The very act of desiring fo Girard is, in and of itself, the very act of externalizing our most prized and desired qualities onto an external object.

David Perell: You know that makes me think of a line from Naval Ravikant, and I think he says: "Desire is a contract that you make with yourself to be unhappy until you get what you want." And this happens with clothing all the time, where often w set our eyes on something, and we'll want it so badly that we just won't even feel ha

until we have that thing. And we think that once we get that thing, we'll feel happy worthy or successful – as if it's the salvation that we've been waiting for, looking for along – and then until you get it, you're an incomplete person.

Johnathan Bi: That's precisely right. And Girard's point is that the very thought tha only when I get that object will I feel whole is the cause of you not feeling whole in this very moment. The very act of metaphysical desire causes a deep lack. We say: in the example you've provided, only if I obtain this amazing object can I and will I experience this fullness in being. Of course, that's also saying that the fullness of be does not reside within me now. It resides externally on that object over there. Becau we all experience metaphysical desire, we all, Girard believes, are constantly alienat in this way.

4.3 Bipolarity

Johnathan Bi: And because what is most precious to us is alienated away, residing i an external object, we also necessarily experience the next psychological pathology: bipolarity. Bipolarity is a pathology characterized by oscillating manic and depressi phases. In the manic phase, we feel a surplus of pride, like we are on the top of the world. And in the depressive phase, we feel utter and complete despair.

Mimetic theory also offers a reasonable explanation for this. Because the external object holds so much weight, you experience mania when you are close to it, and yo experience despair when you are far from it. This oscillation between pride and sha between mania and despair, is in fact, for Girard, what defines metaphysical desire.

David Perell: You know, this might be a ridiculous example, but it kind of reminds of the early days of romance. Sometimes you'll be texting somebody who you're into and you're starting off and things are going well, and you're so excited, and you're enthusiastic, and you're skipping around. And then you'll send a text, and she won't respond. And you're freaking out, "What did I say? Did I put the emoji in the wrong place? Why did I use a period? I should have edited a sentence without it." And you

so mad at yourself. You can't sleep at night. Then you wake up in the morning, you look at your phone, and you get out of bed like a double shot of espresso because th person has now texted you back. And it's those waves of emotion that I think you're speaking to here.

Johnathan Bi: No, I don't think that's a ridiculous example at all. If anything, I thin it's a great everyday example to show how we are all at least on the same spectrum a the clinically bipolar, if not the same intensity due to metaphysical desire, due to th fact that we've projected this fullness of being onto this one precious external objec in this case, a romantic partner.

4.4 Masochism

Johnathan Bi: The last psychological pathology that we are always doomed with, if ever so subtly, is masochism. Masochism, commonly understood, is associated with gaining sexual excitement for pain, but I think that there's a larger form of masochi as well that actually extends much broader: and that is to confuse the difficult with good. And I think our mimetic tendencies brings this confusion about in two ways.

First, think back to the deceitful quality of metaphysical desire we described last lecture – how the object can never satisfy us because it's not an object that we seek, but the being of the model. A natural consequence of this fact then is that whatever objects we obtain, we are going to be dissatisfied and reason that all objects like thi aren't suitable objects for metaphysical desire. As a result, the only objects that maintain their allure – that we can still believe have the power to confer this fullnes in being – are necessarily the ones that we haven't yet obtained because of their difficulty.

For example, it is easy for most people to reject the simple idea and silly idea that, s buying candy bars is the key to our ultimate satisfaction. Why? Well, because candy bars are very accessible. Anyone who believes so can simply buy a pair of candy bar and correct their belief through experience. The belief, however, that a million dolla

is the key to our ultimate satisfaction is much more widely held because the object much more difficult to obtain and, thus, harder to invalidate. And I do think this is quite explanatory of how prestige works in society, that there is an intimate connection between prestige and difficulty. Certainly, not all difficult-to-obtain objects are prestigious, but almost all prestigious objects are difficult to obtain. Wh Because the illusion of prestige can only be maintained if most people don't have experience of the object directly, which would make them recognize the object's deficiencies. This makes us start forming a however unconscious connection betwe the difficult and the good because everything easy to obtain shows itself to be deficient.

This connection – between the difficult and the good – is further bolstered second l the very form of mimetic rivalry. We've discussed extensively today how the form of rivalry increases the desire for the object. If throughout my entire life the value of t object is always correlated with the intensity and amount of competition surroundi it, then I could gain an association between the trials and tribulations associated w competition and the value of the object itself – and thereby confusing the difficult a the good.

The idea may be something like this. If a person develops a strong romantic relationship to potential partners every time there is significant competition, then perhaps he will start forming a strong association with the value of a partner and h difficult they are to court. Such a person, if pushed to the extreme, may exclusively desire partners who aren't just competed after but unavailable altogether. These people do exist, and the scary thought is that Girard thinks we are not drastically different from them but on a continuum with them.

4.5 Oppression

Johnathan Bi: The necessary pathologies that stem from Girard's psychology are n just limited to individuals but are also social. One such social pathology is oppressi

and the best way to make sense of it is to understand Girard's commentary on eatin disorders. Let me quote Girard:

> The people with eating disorders are not the people with a religious hang-up, th traditionalists and the fundamentalists, but the most 'liberated'. I remember one the Seinfeld shows on NBC that brilliantly captured the 'normality' of bulimia nervosa, eating and then throwing up afterwards in our world. At the end of a m in a New York restaurant, a young woman goes to the bathroom to vomit the lar plate of spaghetti she has just finished eating. She announces this to her companion, another woman in the same tranquil and matter-of-fact tone as in bygone days she might have said, "I'll put on some lipstick." … Compared to the young woman on NBC, the decadent Romans [who were also bulimics] were innocent sensualists. They, too, were eating and vomiting in turn, but for themselves only and not for anybody else. They were really looking out for numb one. Our modern bulimic is eating for herself, to be sure, but she is vomiting for others, for all these women who are watching each other's waistlines. Her radica freedom is synonymous with her enslavement to the opinions of others.

Girard's point here is not gendered – I think it applies to male bodybuilders who compulsively inject harmful steroids, as it does to this example of bulimics – and it this: oppressive prohibitions, such as coverings for one's body or preventing certain types of people from doing certain activities – can serve a legitimate, albeit paternalistic end: to limit certain objects from inciting competition, to take them o of the mimetic game entirely. Once we liberate people from these oppressive prohibitions, as this example shows, a deeper and more subtle form of oppression c take place. We can be just as compelled to do activities against our own interest, (bu seemingly out of our own volition) due to mimetic rivalries.

This idea may be distasteful to modern intuitions, but let me provide an example I think we can all relate to: why do certain parents prohibit their children's social me usage, maybe especially teenagers? Because, from one perspective, this is a very

oppressive act to limit a species of freedom. But I think, and I think many of us will agree, that it is oppression to prevent a greater form of oppression – the mimetic frenzy that teenagers often get caught up in, which can, even more, take away their agency.

Modern man, for Girard, fully liberated, is subject to oppression precisely where he thinks he has liberty. Through mimesis, the liberating "can" quickly degenerates in an oppressive "ought". Whatever objects we are given liberty to pursue can become object of mimetic rivalry, coercing us through a radically different channel. And so, Girard believes, oppression will always plague society. It either exists explicitly in different forms of prohibition, like gender roles and caste systems, or it exists more subtly through mimetic competition, coercion disguised as liberty.

4.6 Inequity

Johnathan Bi: If the threat to our treasured ideal of freedom was not enough, so too will equality be threatened. Inequity, much like oppression, will be a social patholo that we can't escape from. And the reason is quite simple: in so far as we remove th real forms of inequality – caste systems, gender norms – where we consider groups people as being essentially different, we go from external mediation to internal mediation by bringing people closer. But as I've argued extensively in this lecture, proximity is the precondition for comparison, for jealousy, for mimetic rivalries. Ar so, as the real distance between people shrink, people feel more prone to compare, as a result, the subjective experience of inequity balloons.

This, of course, is none other than the famous Tocqueville Principle that Alexis de Tocqueville observed after coming to America.

I quote Tocqueville here:

> When inequality is the general law of society, the most blatant inequalities escap notice. When everything is virtually on a level, the slightest variations cause

> distress. That is why the desire for equality becomes more insatiable as equality extends to all.

And I think we are living in just such a moment now. At a time when the inequaliti between genders and races have never been so small in American history and conti to decrease, the cries of injustice and the painful experience of inequity seems to or increase.

And so, not unlike oppression, we are forced to choose between real and psycholog manifestations of inequity: either we have real inequality, differences in essence, or continue to close down the differences among peoples only to inflame our compara and competitive drives, and therefore making the subjective experience of inequity much more suffocating.

5. Hegel's Theodicy

Johnathan Bi: With these necessary pathologies of man and society in view, I wish argue that Girard's psychology is not just Girard's psychology. He's doing somethin much more specific, much grander, more ambitious, and ultimately impactful.

Girard is giving us a theodicy. A theodicy, I would posit, has four key movements o components. First and most primarily, a theodicy's aim is to explain the origin of al evil. Where is its source? How does it manifest? What are the possibilities of escap By doing so, second, theodicies also tell us something about the shape of the good - what can be achieved and expected from this world. And as a result, theodicies, thi reconcile us with the world. If not all theodicies can fully legitimize evil – to justify ways of God to man, so to speak – at the very least, they can reconcile us in a limite way by explaining their origin. But beyond mere reconciliation, theodicies, last and most importantly, tell us how to feel and what to do about evil and injustice in the world. The same normative interpretation of phenomena, experienced in the light c

different theodicies, creates very different reactions. Let me explain why theodicies so important with two examples.

First, let's look at Hegel's theodicy. Hegel's theodicy looks something like this. To t primary question on the nature of evil, Hegel would say that in modernity, all huma evil, injustice, inequality, crime, are never a result of systematic perversions of our institutions but deviations from those institutions. If too many people, say, are bein born out of wedlock and have deficient childhoods as a result, it's not because there anything wrong with a two-parent nuclear family, but because we aren't adhering t the values and structure of such a family enough.

This understanding of evil naturally tells us the shape of the good. It is encapsulate his famous double sentence: the actual is rational and the rational is actual. What Hegel means here is that the actual values we already hold, most notably freedom, a the actual institutions we already have, the nuclear family, civil society, and the nat state – are fully rational. They're fully good in some sense. Even if it may not seem s to us, our world is already fully hospitable to humanity's most important ends. According to Hegel then, we are at an end of history where we have already achieve the full good – whatever evils that exist are mere deviations. It's not hard to see how this reconciles us with the world – it does so by enabling us to affirm the world in it essence – that the modern world in its core design is good. And last but not least, th reconciliation is why the classical Hegel is often thought of as a conservative. There no need for any normative or institutional revolutions. All that we need to do is institutional reform, to redesign and rejuvenate our institutions with the values and structures they already have.

6. Rousseau's Theodicy

Johnathan Bi: Let me give you a different taste of theodicy. And for that, let's look t Rousseau's theodicy. There is a terrific book bearing that exact same name, Rousse Theodicy, written by a philosopher that I had the great pleasure of studying with, F

Neuhouser. Professor Neuhouser illuminated the overlooked significance and relevance of theodical thinking for me. And so you must read that book. I will but attempt a very clumsy summary here.

To the primary question on the origins of evil, Rousseau will, not unlike Girard, try explain a whole kaleidoscope of human evil on a singular, intersubjective, psychological drive within human nature that is inflamed and improperly directed l society. Unlike Girard, Rousseau does not see human nature itself as necessarily fal and corrupt, even if it is prone to corruption. The problem for Rousseau is not hum nature in itself, but how this human nature has been channeled by society. That me that even if, contra Hegel, the good for Rousseau is not fully actualized today, it doe not preclude the possibility of a social organization that does fully actualize the goc and meet all of humanity's ends. And thus, Rousseau reconciles us in a way much m limited than Hegel: he gives us simply the reason to hope. Even if we cannot affirm world as it exists today – because it channels human nature in all these perverse wa and poorly designed institutions misguide human nature – we can affirm the world because there's nothing about human nature itself that precludes a fully good and hospitable world from existing, however unlikely. And so we are instilled with hope We are given a reason to pursue change. To the same question of too many babies being born out of wedlock, Rousseau might say something like you're wrong, Hegel that the nuclear family isn't the right structure, but there is some right structure, or least there can be some right structure out there. We need to start experimenting w different forms of familial organization, maybe like polyamory and open marriages, make social progress. There's little wonder then that with this type of theodicy, Rousseau is the father of progressivism.

7. Girard's Theodicy

Johnathan Bi: Let us proceed then to Girard's own theodicy. To the primary questic on the origins of human evil, Girard, of course, attributes it to metaphysical desire - our prideful yearning for being. All of the pathologies that I have just described and

many perversions which I haven't find their root in metaphysical desire. Unlike Rousseau, however, these perversions are not accidental due to some poorly organiz social arrangements, but essential to human nature. The shape of the good then for Girard also becomes clear. You can try all you want, you can try to redesign our soci as much as you please, but you should not entertain the delusion, and it is a delusio that we will ever be rid of these pathologies. There is a natural limit to how good ou world can be. And so, to continue our example, to the question of babies born out o wedlock, someone with Girard's theodicy might say something like, "You know, He you're wrong in thinking that the nuclear family is the perfect structure. But Rousse you're also wrong in your optimism in thinking that there can be a perfect structure right structure." Whatever familial design we try, we will always have these pathologies plaguing us.

David Perell: But why is this a form of reconciliation?

Johnathan Bi: Yeah, that's a great question. Indeed, the type of reconciliation I hav mind for Girard is not Hegelian – to show that the world, in its essence, is already hospitable, which engenders affirmation. Girard's reconciliation is also not Rousseauian – to show that, even if our world is not a hospitable one now, there is nothing in the essence of human nature that precludes such a world from existing – which engenders hope and an impetus for action. Girard, you are exactly right, sho that evil is an unavoidable condition of human organization and will only be more powerful as history progresses – there's very little that we can do. However, to answ your question directly, it is a form of a however limited reconciliation, because if seeing the world as fundamentally good (Hegel) engenders affirmation, and viewing the world as potentially good, (Rousseau) engenders hope, then depicting the world irrevocably evil (Girard) engenders tranquility. We can look at the world and think: "This is just the way the world is." And may even be able to help us appreciate the pathologies we aren't as burdened with. Let me frame this positively. Such a view th Girard gives us frees us from the taxing obligation to always be looking at ways to better the world. This limited sense of freedom legitimizes a tranquil retreat – a

tending to one's own garden – which Girard will turn to as the last only possible solution to the apocalyptic moment we are in today.

This is perhaps, and I'm speculating here, why people who've met Girard describe h as peaceful, as tranquil, as contented, and even saintly.

Let me read you a quote from Girard:

> People think I'm some kind of wild monster because I don't have any Rousseauis illusions about the natural goodness of man, but nothing teaches moderation lik the theory of original sin, which is always the opposite of what its critics say it is Because it always meets, Rousseau's ideas, with disappointment in reality. The belief in man's natural goodness always leads to the hunt for scapegoats. Indeed, this point, the story of Rousseau himself and his descent into paranoia are quite exemplary.

Girard's point is that Rousseau is so pessimistic in actuality because he is too optimistic in possibility. Girard is then the exact inverse here. He's so optimistic, or the very least contented in actuality because he is extremely pessimistic in possibili Because Girard believes in unshakable evil – original sin – he isn't as surprised or angered or bothered by the actual evils of the world. Girard isn't paranoid, looking culprits everywhere because he understands evil as not coming from a few guilty individuals but from the very core of human nature. So this reconciliation, however limited, is nothing to scoff at. Because without it, we tend to become overly anxious upset, and angry – Girard rescues us from Rousseau's descent into paranoia.

8. A Critique of Critique

Johnathan Bi: I hope you are starting to see the important practical consequences of theodicies. Even if people have the same normative interpretation of phenomena the example we've been using so far is that babies born out of wedlock are bad, theodicies greatly change how we relate and react to such phenomena. To put it ver

simply, theodicies are about our expectations of the world. Of course, we're going t react differently to the same normative phenomenon if our expectations of the worl and its goodness are different. And I would wager that in modernity, most of our disagreements on the political spectrum aren't on the normative interpretation of phenomena, whether babies born out of wedlock is good or bad, but on what we ca expect from society. We don't disagree on reality as much as possibility these days.

I think Girard's theodicy tampers the expectations of all forms of Rousseauian progressivisms and specifically inoculates us against a whole host of what we can c critical theories. Now, for the purposes of this discussion, by "critical", I'm referrin theories with two conjoined movements. First, the theory aims to describe an injus or pathology within society, and second, hoping that nothing other than that description engenders action and emancipation. It aims, these critical theories that we're trying to discuss here, to go from critique directly to inspire change. Girard's theodicy defangs these types of naive critical theories, not by arguing against them, disagreeing whether something is pathological or not, it takes the bite out of critic theories by unchaining these two movements. The mere description of a pathology no longer enough to engender change because pathologies are shown by Girard to l inevitable.

Marxism here I think is one such critical theory because Marx himself described th he was not interested in making recipes for the cookshops of the future, for giving these positive visions of what a communist utopia should look like. Marx was conte with mostly dedicating his work to a critique of capitalism, to show how capitalism generated numerous psychological and social pathologies, and hoped and believed that the critique in itself would have the normative force to engender proletariat revolution.

The most impactful, I think, of Marx's critiques centered around the psychological pathologies that capitalism generates – a fetishization of objects of production, an

alienation from the process of production, as well as the social pathologies created what he called capitalistic exploitation: oppression and inequity.

Of course, by now, you should already be able to anticipate Girard's answer here: if fetishization – attributing surplus value onto objects – is part of our psychological constitution, then Marx, while warranted in identifying production relations as tha which channels fetishization, was incorrect in concluding that they were also its ch cause. The Girardian says something like, show me a society where people do not unduly fetishize a set of objects, be it capitalistic, religious, political, or cultural. Sh me a society where there isn't some form of oppressive coercion. Show me a society where inequity, real or psychological, has been eradicated. The reason you can't is because these pathologies are made necessary by our human nature and not by capitalism.

Girard would say: Marx, even if you are right about the pathologies within capitalis you are mistaking the channel of these pathologies for their root causes. And, therefore, you shouldn't expect these pathologies to just go away in so far as you change the economic structure. And I think, unfortunately, this was the story of communism in the Soviet Union where it first took root. Fetishization was simply redirected from objects of production to charismatic Russian leaders. Alienation wa alive and well, perhaps even worse, in the cold Soviet state apparatus. Oppression indeed no longer came from the demands of a factory owner, it now came from the often more unreasonable demands of a central planning committee. Inequity was n longer bolstered by the surplus value capitalists took from their workers, but it reemerged as a form of hoarding by Soviet party members.

Of course, Marxism isn't the only thing, but just a good example that I brought up, the cross-hairs of Girard's Theodicy. You think private property and political liberti is going to help? It might emancipate you from the feudal lord, but they themselves will be your new ball and chain. You think patriarchy and religious traditionalism h kept you oppressed? Well, just look at the horrors committed in the free-love hippi

communes of the ’60s and ’70s. You think the internet will bring about a free, connected, and truthful world? Well, look at how it’s being used for surveillance, division, and the spreading of lies. And you think cryptocurrencies, by the nature o them being decentralized, will grant access for all and finally give us an equitable financial market? Well, go look at that Gini coefficient of Bitcoin.

Any form of critical utopianism is doomed to fail because human nature and not an form of political, social, cultural organization is the real root of evil for Girard. You only rubbing ointment on the skin. Given enough time, the perversions of human nature will infiltrate and corrupt any such structure.

Of course, Girard’s theodicy does not preclude any form of progress or change whatsoever. There are different intensities of these pathologies – it would be ridiculous to say, “Slavery? Well, there’s oppression everywhere. We’ll just have to l with that one.” The very pathologies that Girard brings up can act as a productive basis for constructive conversations – how are they being channeled today, who is being harmed, how do we limit their inflammations, what limitations and side effec are we going to run into if we push too hard for change? These conversations, however, will look very different from the critical projects today that seem content pointing out all the pathologies of society. Against the backdrop of Girard’s theodic these projects carry very little force – you’ve simply shown me that what is necessar does indeed occur. You’ve shown me that 1+3=3+1. You’ve shown me that that bach over there is indeed unmarried and that the triangle over there does indeed have th sides.

Girard’s theodicy then, is an inoculation against critical sentiments all too commor our society today. To throw out the baby as soon as the bath water gets a little bit lukewarm, that wants a revolution at the first glimpse of discomfort and wants to change everything at the first slight. What Girard provides us in his theodicy is a powerful critique of critique. That is to say, putting a limit on the forcefulness of

critical projects, for if we are astute interpreters of the world and human nature, we will see that pathologies will always be with us, no matter what we do.

In many ways then, Girard is a converse Marx. Philosophers have tried too hard to change the world, the point is to interpret it.

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