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Transcript of Girard Lecture II | Mimetic Desi and Original Sin

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0. Introduction

David Perell: In many parts of culture, children are led along a path of prestige, wh they're told to ace their tests no matter how tedious so they can attend an elite university no matter how incompatible, in order to work a prestigious job no matte how trivial.

Prestige sometimes provides the necessary motivational force to achieve our goals, even when doing so, often pulls us towards the wrong goals – dating the "right" per who is wrong for us, living in a fancy neighborhood that's beyond our means, befriending influential people who we don't actually like – and it's no coincidence, think, that the Latin word for prestige translates to "illusion" or "mirage".

What I found most fascinating about this lecture is that it provides a comprehensiv theory to help us distinguish between authentic desire and social validation in orde wean off the drug of prestige.

Girard helps us see the extraordinary extent to which society is motivated by presti It's like the arrow in the FedEx logo that you might have learned about as a kid. On second, you don't see it. The next, it's with you for eternity, and you wonder how yo went blind for so long.

So I hope you find this lecture as illuminating as I do.

Johnathan Bi: After our first introductory lecture, we're now ready to dive into Girard's theory proper. We're gonna spend two lectures, this one and the next one, i understanding Girard's psychology, after which we're gonna spend four lectures understanding how these psychological forces drive human history and manifest qu differently in different historical circumstances.

In this lecture, we are focusing on understanding the dominant psychological force within one individual. It's going to proceed with the gradually zeroing in on the mo powerful and explanatory forces in human psychology. Within the realm of all hum behavior, we're going to focus on mimetic behavior. Within the realm of mimetic behavior, we're going to focus on mimetic desire. And within mimetic desire, we're focusing on metaphysical desire.

This tripartite narrowing down is not an arbitrary bias, it's not a blinded ignorance about the other parts of human psychology like reason and appetite, but it's a surgi focus on the most unique, explanatory, and powerful elements within human psychology. Mimesis, mimetic desire, metaphysical desire is what differentiates humans from animals – what makes us social creatures – and importantly the key motor responsible for driving human events in history, and that is why Girard focus on them.

These components within human psychology, however, are also what render us evil and fallen. There's something necessarily perverse within these key motors of huma motivation that allowed Girard to begin painting an anthropology of the Cross – hi project to explain and describe Christian phenomenon through cultural, psychological, and social language. After I describe these three psychological components then — mimesis, mimetic desire, metaphysical desire — I will describe Girard's argument for why metaphysical desire is none other than our original sin.

And how we can interpret original sin in purely psychological language. Let us first then begin with understanding mimesis.

1. Mimesis

Johnathan Bi: Mimesis can be best understood under the light of David Hume. In h A Treatise on Human Nature, Hume develops a concept that becomes foundational Scottish moral philosophy: sympathy. Sympathy is the human capacity to understar others by co-experiencing their emotions in one's own mind. In order to emphasize just how foundational and inevitable Hume took this capacity to be, Hume employs the very famous metaphor of two violin strings setting each other in motion. When you put two violin strings together, as you flick one, a similar frequency of vibratior will translate into the other.

This is how Hume describes it. I quote:

> As in strings equally wound up, the motion of one communicates itself to the res so all the affections readily pass from one person to another and beget correspondent movements in every human creature.

What is relevant in this analogy for Girard, is the observation that there's a species human behavior – and for the lack of a better term, I apologize, I use "behavior" her to connote the broadest possible sense of behavior: whether it's experiences, judgments, actions, intentions, values – there's a species of human behavior that proceed from copying an external instance of said behavior. Indeed, this logic that Hume identifies in sympathy – the carrying out of an external behavior – is none ot than the logic of mimesis. What is different is that unlike sympathy, which only traffics in emotions, mimesis spans the entire gamut of human behavior.

I like this metaphor because, first, it describes humans as naturally social creatures prone to a form of co-vibration. Just as strings on a violin aren't independent, neith are we. Mimesis is the fundamental capacity to gain access to the subjectivity of otl

as well as to reproduce objective cultural forms – so in other words, mimesis constitutes us as social beings.

Second, I like this analogy because it clearly paints mimesis as a tendency. Just as strings next to each other are inclined to co-vibrate, so are we in ingesting our cultu environment.

The third reason that I like this analogy, then, is because mimesis here is also clearl painted as a capacity, not a deterministic faculty that we are obliged to always follo This metaphor leaves room for agency because the violinist can always, when pluck the first string, pluck the second string differently, or hold the second string steady that it does not co-vibrate. In the same manner, mimesis itself does not rob us of ou agency, and we have some degree of freedom to choose who and what to imitate, whom to extend sympathy to.

David Perell: What evidence is there for mimesis?

Johnathan Bi: That's a really good question. And I think like most answers to the question, what evidence is there in this part of Girard's argument, the first respons always an interpretive one. Girard always presents to us an interpretive or hermeneutical proof. That's to say, he's saying something like, "Just grant me this o hypothesis, just humor me for now, just go on this path that I'm taking you down a let me show you the broad kaleidoscope of phenomenon that this concept alone car make sense of." The convincingness of mimesis is not grounded on some empirical fact, but a broad range of phenomenon that it alone illuminates.

That's not to say there is no empirical evidence whatsoever to back up Girard's clai Think to the American psychologist, I believe his name is Andrew Meltzoff, who observed that infants as young as 40 minutes would naturally mimic the experimenter's facial expressions with surprising accuracy. Of course, it was the fir time that one of these babies saw someone make a silly face or stick their tongue ou but the inclination to imitate was intuitive and innate. Perhaps another set of

empirical evidence, if you have a taste for things like that, that you can look at, are mirror neurons. These are neurons that fire both when you observe an action, as we as when you perform that similar action. So this lends to the idea that there's some real biological basis to the idea that doing and observing the same behavior are somehow intimately connected.

2. Mimesis and Normativity

Johnathan Bi: After touching upon the plausibility, which is your question, of mimesis, let's go to its significance. Why is this a significant thing to focus on? I th the significance of mimesis is that it is an authority that provides normative certain I'm trying to use the perennial distinction here between descriptive and normative phenomena. Space and time, length of this chair, color of your a-bit-too-dark navy s proof of a theorem, I can gain certainty of all of these things through my own investigations. But when it comes to normative phenomena, what is the good? Wha the beautiful? How should I treat people? A primary, but not exclusive, way to be certain that we are right is mimesis. This is a conclusion that Girard doesn't have to add on but naturally follows from our definitions on mimesis. After all, if mimesis i capacity and tendency to naturally extend into the subjectivity of others, internalizi their values – then surely having the same value internalized bolsters our confidenc Let me give you a few examples.

And let's start with the most local one, recognition. There's a Chinese phrase that goes, "千里寻知己":

> Man would travel a thousand miles to meet he who understands him.

I think this is a statement and sentiment that we can all relate to, especially if we ha very peculiar and odd interests that only a few friends share, I think it's so liberatin and affirming to just find one other person who likes the same weird stuff that you

because you feel so much more assured in your own interest, and that's what this Chinese saying is trying to get at.

David Perell: I've seen a lot of this in writing online because I was somebody who g really obsessed and passionate about things growing up, and I always felt like I was lunatic for having these interests. I was interested in airplanes and golf and all thes sorts of things so intensely. But I felt like I was crazy, like I was the only person wh was interested in these things. And the way that I found affirmation with writing o the internet was I would share my ideas. I'd put out my intellectual frequencies in t world and all of a sudden, I'd attract people who were interested in these same idea and now I went from feeling like an outcast to feeling affirmed in my passion for things.

Johnathan Bi: Yeah, that's precisely right and the exact type of example that we sh be thinking about. Girard's explanation of the phenomenon that you described here why it's so important to find people who affirm our values is that we can't help but through mimesis to internalize the positions of those around us. And when those internalized values are aligned with our own, then we feel legitimized, the example writing online that you gave. But when those values disagree, then I think we feel a conflict within ourselves, a deep alienation. Just think about the inverse case, right? About the story that we probably know too well, whether it's the artist with parents who disapprove of art, or perhaps a queer kid with conservative parents, it is a normative catastrophe, because what they know to be true through their own experience is in some sense invalidated by the voice of others, whom they can't help but internalize through mimesis.

Let's move on to the next set of examples, let's turn up the mimesis a notch. Instead mimesis among pairs, recognition, there is mimesis that can happen through group and that is prestige. Prestige is an inflated sense of normative certainty based on th opinions of others, right? When a majority of a social group that you're in believes t this is good or this is beautiful, through mimesis we slowly start to take on those

positions as well, and I do think that our everyday notions of prestige already have a understanding here of mimesis. When we say something is prestigious – we're perh also saying that on its own grounds, it does not deserve the values we attribute to it that there is some kind of surplus value there. And Girard would say that that surpl value comes not from the object, but our peers valuing it and us digesting that thro mimesis.

But we can even dial this one up a notch. Going from recognition to prestige and pushing it even higher, all the way to the sacred. Think about a sacred person, a sac place, or a sacred object – like the relics of a saint that have infinite normative valu Girard believes that this is nothing but turning up the dial of mimesis. If the prestigious object has a disproportionately large amount of value relative to its intrinsic value, then the sacred object has an infinite amount of value compared to intrinsic value. Think about it like this: How much value does the relics of a saint h to a disbeliever? Nothing. Zero, right? It's nothing more than a pile of bones. But fo someone living in a society where everyone else treats the relics as holy, then they would appear indeed to take on that infinite degree of value. Girard's point is that t infinite value really comes from others and not the objects themselves.

So, even the sacred, even the fundamental building blocks of gods are created by unanimity, bolstered through mimesis. What gives gods their infinite value and pov for Girard is none other than unanimous belief in their infinite value and power. I think this is easy to see with religions that no one believes anymore – everyone toda would agree that for the Egyptian gods, not only was their normative status bolster but their very existence is propped up by unanimity.

All of these different mimetic phenomena: recognition, prestige, sacredity, tell the same story – the normative values we hold for us to be truly confident in them, mus bolstered by the normative value of others, internalized, digested through mimesis. need to lean on others in order to gain certainty. Human values then for Girard, if y allow me the analogy to currencies, are less like traded cattle that has intrinsic valu

and more like fiat currencies – holding value mostly because others believe that the hold value as well.

Let's just pause then at the cataclysmic consequences which flow out of this one ide Giving mimesis such a central place in Girard's psychology pulls the rug underneat modernity and its cherished philosophical assumptions. How can we believe reason thus, if at the end of the day, we need confirmation from others for normative certainty? How can we follow our own authentic desires and passions if every part o our psyche is so helplessly external in its origin? How are we individuals if what defines us is that we're co-vibrating social animals? We will have to spend the rest o Girard's social, historical, and political theory unraveling the Copernican consequences of mimesis being the key normative authority.

Of course, mimesis is not the only authority to grant normative value. The opinions others isn't the only way we decide for ourselves what is good, what is beautiful, wh is just, and how we treat others, right? We can invalidate positions through experience, and certainly we can use reason to some capacity as well. Girard's claim that mimesis is the strongest, and in some sense, necessary authority. After all, I fin quite humorous that those who wield reason best, who claim to be the most independent — philosophers — seem to travel in packs. 2000 years of Christian theologians affirming similar values, 2500 years of Buddhist philosophers agreeing a rough cosmology, the current academy and its heavily progressive leaning, or mos humorous of all, that pack of enlightenment philosophers who believed in reason so Well, it seems like that the belief in reason itself needs to be grounded on unanimit

Even for those best trained in reason, reason still proves somewhat impotent, more acting as a spokesperson, a defensive lawyer for intuitions that are actually grounde on mimesis. And even if we were to find that rare individual who is able to pull awa from the mimetic orbit and bring forth new positions not shared by anyone, well, I would wager that we will soon find that his lack of certainty, his terrible alienation

without any mimetic support will soon drive him crazy, as is common with the grea artists and intellectuals like Van Gogh or Nietzsche.

This then, is why Girard within the entire realm of human behavior, chooses to focu on mimetic behavior, behavior which imitates an external instance, which sets up a vibration between us and others. Mimesis is both the strongest and necessary authority for us to hold normative values. It, more than any other faculty, decides w we think of as beautiful, as good, what laws we think about are just, and what sexua relations we think of as a legitimate or depraved, and even what we should strive to like.

3. Mimetic Desire

Johnathan Bi: Within the realm of mimetic behavior, Girard's focus is heavily parti as well. He primarily concerns himself with mimetic desire, types of mimetic behav that are acquisitive, instances where I, upon observing a model desire an object, ha that desire ignited in me as well. There's a whole other sphere of mimetic behavior that has nothing to do with desire, the taking on of accents, cultural mannerisms – which, while mimetic, is gonna be of little interest to Girard because he's interested explaining the psychological motor behind history. And these instances of mimesis not have a strong enough motivational force to be relevant.

Girard focuses on mimetic desire, and he delineates two species of desires within mimetic desire: The desire to be, which he terms metaphysical desire, and the desir 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. Let me give you a few examples. I can pursue sex for the experience, and what I would be after there, will be pleasure or intimacy. I can also pursue sex for being, what having sex with a certain person says about me. This is a real psychology, right? This is the psychology of the Don Juan or the Coquette. For these people, sex is no longer about sex, but trying to prove something core to their

identity. It's about being and not experience. Here's another example, the one I gave already in our introductory lecture: I can buy a car for the experience and that would be its gas mileage or the trouble it saves me from not walking anywhere. Or I can buy a car because I want to be known as a certain type of person.

A reductive, but hopefully illuminating way to put it, is that physical desire aims at utility, whereas metaphysical desire aims at identity. Of course, Girard suggests that any specific instance of mimetic desire always contains both aims – the experiences we hope to enjoy and the being we aim to enhance – each varying in strength depending on the specific desire we're trying to investigate. That is to say, we probably buy cars both concerned with what it says about us, as well as its gas mileage and trunk size. We probably choose sexual partners for immediate pleasure, but also for our being. The degree to which being and experience motivates us is different from person to person, and even time to time. In fact, they're in some sense competing for real estate.

Certainly the boundary between "experience" and "being" is not so clear. Who we conceive ourselves to be colors our experiences, as much as our experiences, if ever subtly, shape our self-conception. If I conceive of myself as a trained assassin versus I conceive myself as a holy man, then my experience of murder will be radically different. On the converse, if every day I kill, which is an experience, that's going to shape a very specific type of self-conception. But just think about how drastically different these experiences are, pursuing a profession because the work is engaging versus doing a job because it is the cool job. Dating a person because you like spending time with them versus because you like being seen with them. Or going to travel to a place because you actually enjoy the place and the culture and are interested versus just going to the next hot new locale where you wanna be seen. Clearly, the distinction that Girard has drawn between experience and being, while muddy, is nonetheless meaningful, especially at the extremes.

Girard here has a systematic preference for the desire to experience and a systematic suspicion for the desire to be, to the extent that I'm doing an activity not for its own

sake, but for what it says about me, our motivations for Girard are perverse. Hopefu through the examples I've just given, of traveling, to be seen at the right place, or dating a person you want to be seen with or taking a job because it's the right job, v can understand Girard's intuition here. Metaphysical desire, the desire to be, shows itself to be a prideful snobbism.

David Perell: You were talking about the Don Juan figure earlier, and what you've b saying reminds me of romance, where there's two different kinds of romance. And a lot of times… you see this in the trophy wife phenomenon… people love the other person, not for them, but because of what it says about them. Where what happens that person becomes an object. They become an object that makes the person look good, that makes the person feel wealthy or powerful. And I contrast that in relatio to, say, true love. And true love is much more authentic. And what true love is, is loving the other person not for what they say about you, but loving the other persor because of just who they are.

Johnathan Bi: Yeah, I think that's a great example. And again, you should always cc back to romance when you're reading Girard. That's primarily the domain where a l of these mimetic desires play out. And I think your specific point was also very accurate that there is a sharp distinction between metaphysical desire, which is a perverse egotistical concern for the self and physical desire, which primarily is a concern for experience in and of itself.

And on that note, I think a strength of Girard's account of desire is to have a more reasonable picture of what authentic desire means. The romantic (capital-R Roman not the small R romantic that you just mentioned) view of desire is that the strengtl desire is correlated with its authenticity, right? Think of Romeo and Juliet. The authenticity of their love is thought to be indicated by the strength of the love and l much they're willing to sacrifice for each other. Girard says, nay. If the strength of t desire comes from a desire to be, that's not authenticity, that's vanity. After all, we c strongly desire luxury goods, we do strongly desire the right job. We have a passion

all-consuming obsession to date the right person – but so often, as soon as we obtai these things, we find them unsatisfying. The teenage passions which Romeo and Ju embody so often fizzle out after the initial excitement.

For Girard, then, to have authentic desire, you need strong physical desire for the object in and of itself, and that only comes with sufficient experience. Authenticity not only about the strength of the desire, but about desiring things, activities, peop for their own sake.

To be authentic then, we need to find ways to calm our metaphysical desires, so we aren't so concerned with what objects have to say about us and gain enough experience to nurture and ground a strong physical desire.

Or let me try and frame this another way. I've often found that snobbism, vanity, prestige, anyone who cares too much about status is often a dead giveaway of their amateurity in a specific field, of not having enough experience in a specific domain Let me give you a concrete example. I have many friends who when they were youn aspired to be entrepreneurs, because it's all the rage these days, right? Every kid or many kids wanna be entrepreneurs, and of course, it starts out as almost entirely a metaphysical desire, all vanity and snobbism. And how could it not? Because they didn't have any physical desire for the act of entrepreneurship, because they never really experienced it. What pulls them isn't the act of entrepreneurship, but the aur surrounding the entrepreneur, of what it means to be an entrepreneur. And if you've met young aspiring entrepreneurs, you know exactly what I'm talking about, they're the most snobbish, prideful people because they're motivated by a desire to be, and don't feel bad about saying this because I was one of them. As some of my friends g more experience in the space of building companies, a portion of them genuinely developed a desire for the act of entrepreneurship itself – strategic planning, hiring raising money, executing – and waned off their metaphysical desire. The arch then towards authenticity is building up enough experience of the object so you can desi

it for its own sake and be less concerned with what it says about you – metaphysica desire giving way to a physical desire.

David Perell: Interesting. I always thought that mimetic desire means that you exclusively desire something for how it impacts your being and not for the object at all. But you're saying that there's also physical desire that is directed at the object. I I thought that Girard's point is that the only objects we desire for themselves are water, shelter, sex, and food, and that's it.

Johnathan Bi: I know exactly where you're coming from and the passages in Girard that you're pointing or gesturing at, but no, I think that's a reductive, but all too common interpretation of Girard. I think far from thinking that all desire is just a desire to be, and objects don't matter to us at all, which is a completely implausible view, right? I think Girard fully recognizes, as he must, contributions of the object forming our desire. It's just implausible to say that when we're buying a car, the experience, the object itself does not matter at all. If Girard spills more of his ink o the desire to be, it's because he's trying to course correct from this exaggerated romantic notion of desire as spontaneous and sprouting solely for the object itself. Girard himself fully admits that within mimetic desire, there's a strand of desire, physical desire, that does aim at the object itself.

David Perell: But if physical desire aims at the object itself, how is it a species of mimetic desire?

Johnathan Bi: Yeah, this is a very good question, which has quite a technical answe Physical desire is indeed directed at experience, which is primarily determined by t object itself, but it's not independent from the normative values we hold, which of course, is still affected by mimesis. Let me give you a clear example. Take the objec premarital sex. If I happen to hold the normative position that premarital sex is bad because God said so, then my experience of sex would be quite different than if I he a normative position that the goal of life is leisure. Because our normative positions are governed through mimesis, so too are our experiences and even physical desires

David Perell: So then, if even physical desires are mimetic in the way that you've described, are there non-mimetic desires?

Johnathan Bi: Girard would probably say that as humans we are interpenetrated by mediators even when we do not realize it. So, perhaps the first gulp of breath that a baby takes is truly non-mimetic at all, but I think apart from that, we will find trace mimesis contained in all of our actions. Even the action as animal and basic/necessa as replenishing ourselves, drinking water, I think we can call in mind and sometime do, if unconsciously, how our favorite athlete drinks Gatorade, right? That's what th purpose of those commercials are for, to implant that model of drinking inside your head. So the answer directly to your question is that there exists a spectrum of desi with increasing degrees of mimesis. Under this interpretation, mimesis is not everything, but everything is mimetic. That is to say, mimesis is not the core mechanism behind every psychological phenomenon, but it permeates all of our psychological faculties.

4. What is Meant by "Being"

Johnathan Bi: Just as Girard chooses to focus on mimetic behavior in all of human behavior and mimetic desire within the set of all mimetic behavior, so too will he sp his ink disproportionately on metaphysical desire between the two strands of mime desire. Metaphysical desire will drive Girardian psychology in history, and it is this drive that we must understand if we are to understand the dominant aims of man. I only now, after this tripartite zeroing in – mimesis, mimetic desire, metaphysical desire – do we have the core Girardian drive properly in view.

Metaphysical desire, the desire to be, is going to do all the heavy lifting in Girard's theory because, he reasons, as humans, our strongest drive is to obtain a type of bei One way to understand what Girard is getting at with the term "being" is the idea o self-conception. It's about our identity, our ego, the core of our character and who w conceive ourselves to be. For example, the disproportionate allure of fine dining is

perhaps better explained not by the quality of the food, but by the type of social standing we conceive ourselves to have when we are served in such a delicate way. What's important, maybe less so the experience, but the self-conception that is generated from this experience about how it flatters our ego and bolsters our identi

Another way, other than self-conception, to approximate this idea of being, is "spir when we say someone is very spirited. Think about a classical hero like Achilles. W we say that Achilles' spirit is wounded, we don't mean that their physical body has been harmed, what we aim to capture with the idea of spirit here is that his status, prestige, his honor, his pride has been hurt. This is also what Plato tried to capture with his use of spirit – the part of our soul that craves honor – in contrast to the reasoning and appetitive parts of the soul that aims at truth and human appetites respectively. From now on then, I will use these terms – being, spirit, self-conceptic interchangeably, whichever is the best fit, to capture this set of phenomenon that w trying to describe.

So then the question is: what type of being, what type of spirit, what type of self-conception do we all yearn for? Can we say something more about what humans ar really after? I think we can if we read Girard closely, and I think it breaks down int three related ends.

4.1 The First End of Being: Reality

Johnathan Bi: First, Girard thinks that a fundamental, although hidden goal, of eve human subject is to become real, to exist. The existence and reality that Girard thin you and I want is very different from the reality of tables and chairs, of cameras and tripods and boom mics. What we want is a social existence, a social reality. Have yo heard the phrase like, "Pics or it didn't happen?"

David Perell: Yeah, of course, of course.

Johnathan Bi: Yeah, or "If it's not on Instagram, did it really happen?" There's a tre I think, an unfortunate one, where people consider their social media presence as more important, more real than their real lives. For example, taking an entire vacati just for the production of a few pictures. What a person who is uttering such a phra "Pics or it didn't happen," "Instagram or it didn't happen," they're not saying that if they didn't post a picture of them going to Hawaii, then they really didn't go to Hav What they are saying is that what really matters, what has real significance is not th physical act of going to Hawaii, but the social act of being recognized as having gor to Hawaii. Clearly then, there's a social reality that each person is seeking that is ve different from the spatial temporal reality of just tables and chairs, and the desire fo that reality is at once and the same, the desire for attention, for prestige, to stand ou

David Perell: This reminds me of the Matrix, which follows the theme of humans being unknowingly trapped in simulated realities, and that movie is inspired by a b by Jean Baudrillard called Simulacra and Simulation. And in the book, Baudrillard shows how we're increasingly replacing the real thing with simulations. And so, wh he's saying there is that the simulations, they become more real than our real lives, spectacle and images, they transcend, they take over reality. And my favorite examp of this, in terms of how it plays out in real life is video games where you have peopl who, they don't care about their bodies, they're overweight, but they care so much about their video game characters. They must have perfect clothes, they must be ripped and jacked, and it's the Matrix in real life, these simulated realities that are taking hold in society.

Johnathan Bi: Yeah, those are great examples, Matrix, Baudrillard and these video games. And I think what is the consistent thread between the examples you gave ar my original example of Instagram, is that there's a set of rules and customs about w really constitutes reality and legitimacy that is distinct from mere physical existenc And this social reality that we've described is precisely what Girard thinks we're aft to be real, that is the first end of being.

4.2 The Second End of Being: Persistence

Johnathan Bi: This Instagram example that I just gave is also revealing, because wh is attractive about Instagram and I think perhaps photography at large, is that it eternalizes an instant, that you are able to take one moment of your life and capture advertise it, derive value from it through time, and thereby increasing its importanc and its reality. The second and closely related end that Girard takes us in wanting then, is to have persistence. We want our identities to last through time. And again, think we can see this desire to persist, manifest in many, many ways, whether it's through progeny, whether it's through books, companies, nations, a park bench wit your name on it, Chinese emperors and their perennial fascination with immortalit everywhere we look in human society, I think we can identify this as a key drive of humans to be permanent, to be immortal.

4.3 The Third End of Being: Self-sufficiency

Johnathan Bi: The third and last fundamental end of all humans is self-sufficiency. Girard's idea of self-sufficiency will look nothing like what we are used to. When w think of self-sufficiency, we tend to think of, like the homesteader, right? He's self-sufficient because his physical needs are satisfied; he has his plow and his animals, and his cows and his ducks and his chickens, and he can live the way he wants thro his own means. Girard's understanding of self-sufficiency expands the set of needs that need to be addressed, from the physical to the social.

He gives an example of a coquette – of a seductive woman – who plays her suitors o leash to satisfy her desires and egoistic impulses. The ideal of self-sufficiency is to have so much power, for Girard, over the physical and social world that all our need not just hunger and thirst but also – social admiration, acceptance, belonging – can be addressed with a snap of our fingers. Whereas it may be difficult for the homesteader to satisfy his desire for recognition, the coquette can bathe in surplus admiration by simply texting one of her many enamored suitors.

Perhaps a good way to understand this drive towards self-sufficiency then is Nietzsche's will to power, a desire to exert influence in the world according to one's own self-conception, to mold and shape the lived world around us, to be hospitable our ends and desires. Under this light, the self-sufficiency that the Girardian subjec seeks often manifests as a form of domination, as ultimate forcefulness, as being th sole locus that determines one's lived world. This is perhaps the same sentiment behind Louis XIV's utterance *"L'état, c'est moi."* "I am the state," that his ends and desires solely determine and are satisfied by the nation.

Indeed, the canonical examples that Girard gives of yearning for this type of self-sufficiency are generals like Clausewitz, Carl von Clausewitz of the 19th century, ar intellectuals like Holderlin, who in their own way are out there to conquer the worl Girard thinks that we all, to some extent, are after this exaggerated form of self-sufficiency. But to be clear, Girard doesn't think we all want to be kings or rule the entire world, but that in our social world, like the coquette – we need to be the ones control. Not unlike Nietzsche's will to power, this drive towards self-sufficiency car motivate a plethora of activities that seemingly aren't about power at all.

Let's say I'm in early retirement with nothing to do, sitting on my kid's school boar I might be debating nomenclature, arguing over what's allowed in senior prom, enforcing mask policies because that is the channel for me to exert my will. And on other hand, if I'm an aesthetic, if my self-conception is one of otherworldliness and renunciation, then fasting, what appears to be giving up my power can be a way for to exert my will nonetheless because I'm shaping the world according to my own se conception.

To summarize then, packed tightly, perhaps a bit too tightly if I'm honest, within metaphysical desire are really three desires aimed at making ourselves real, persiste and self-sufficient. I must again emphasize that all three ideals are highly abstract, gain social attention, to have one's identity last in the cultural zeitgeist and finally t exert one's power. Their abstraction makes them incredibly malleable and capable c

powering a wide array of cultural phenomena. I can gain social attention by discovering a particle or going on a murdering spree. I could have my name last by having children or by writing a famous play. I can exert my power by conquering all Europe or by fasting – of course insofar as the type of power I wanna exert is a form aestheticism. What all humans are really after are specific relations with the social world. How we achieve those relations can take upon a whole kaleidoscope of concr forms, from the world historic to the mundane.

But make no mistake, even when motivating quite mundane activities, these ideals take on an exaggerated form. Rather than reality, persistence and self-sufficiency, perhaps it's a bit more accurate to think of us as wanting glory, immortality, and power. Therefore, I invite you to understand this being we all want to obtain as summarized in one single phrase: we want to exist in great measure.

Girard believes that this ideal, quite intuitively, is unachievable and compared to th glory, immortality, and power we all unconsciously strive towards, our day-to-day existent really pales in comparison. We yearn and strive to be real, to be persistent a self-sufficient, but deep down we develop a suspicion through lived experience that are not so. We develop this rationally by recognizing our mortality. We develop this intuitively through the rapidity of which we adopt and dispose off identities. We develop this emotionally in times of despair when we are vulnerable and dependent We develop this physically, if we ever lose control of our environments, such as in a crash. And so, the distance between this glorious ideal and our lived experiences as meat sacks plagues us always with a deep existential shame, a lack in the very core o our being. Girard's psychology then, with metaphysical desire at its center, is deeply deeply, deeply pessimistic. We are motivated by an ideal we can never achieve. Wha really drives us day to day, is an unpleasant force, we are almost like children who'v disappointed our overly ambitious parents chasing an impossibly burdensome expectation.

5. Metaphysical Desire

Johnathan Bi: This lack, this drive to render ourselves whole, to exist in great measure, to enhance our being, to bolster our identity, to fulfill our self-conception I'm trying to get at what Girard is saying from as many angles as I can – these are tl driving forces of metaphysical desire and the key motivational faculty of all humans

But how do we achieve this being? After all, it's so darn abstract, metaphysical desi takes on forms as a pursuit of objects in the broadest sense of the term: wanting to climb Everest, building a unicorn company, studying in an Ivy League, wanting a particular car, dating Sally instead of Susan, enjoying a fancy restaurant. This shoul not be a foreign concept to our this-worldly, achievement-focused consumer society we want to acquire objects to bolster our identity. And the way we go about choosir objects is imitating individuals whom we consider to already possess this fullness o being, celebrities, parental figures, entrepreneurs, an outstanding co-worker. We ta on their desires as our own, the objects they value as the objects we too strive for. T faulty logic here being that it must be the acquisition of these objects that grant the the fullness in being.

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 acqui that object to be like a model. What we are really after isn't the object, but the being the model. Put differently, we want objects because what they say about our identit vis-a-vis models. If there's one thing that you should take away from Girard's observations on metaphysical desire is this: Whereas we think of desire as unidirectional from subject to objects, it is actually triangular, proceeding from subject through model and then to object. The strength of our desires often have lit to do with the objects themselves, but with our relationship with the model – our o sense of lack and their fullness in being.

Because what is at stake in metaphysical desire is our identity, it is the strongest dr in the human motivational repertoire. It's quite obvious when we are motivated by such a drive because we become obsessed and compulsive and we think that

achievement, that getting the object which metaphysical desire yearns for, will fully transform us. In different stages of our lives, metaphysical desire usually directs us towards a limited and discrete set of objects. For me in my own life, first it was a specific toy and then it was a weapon in World of Warcraft, and then it was dating a person, then it was getting into an Ivy League, et cetera, et cetera. Girard's point is that in every period of life, we are always oriented towards something, that there are these objects in each period of life that take on a disproportionate weight, such that you define progress as inching towards the object, and whenever it slips away from you, your heart just thuds and you feel existential despair, you are totally enamored and caught up with the object.

David Perell: This reminds me of the world of celebrity advertisements. I remember seeing Kanye West's clothes for the first time, and what happened was I walked in and I saw them on the rack, and I thought they were ugly; I didn't think that they looked comfortable. It didn't look like they would even fit well. They honestly looked like they belonged in the $5 section sales rack at the local Marshalls. But then I started seeing ads for the Yeezus brand and the same clothes that I once shunned now seemed so inviting to me, so appealing. And what I realized in that moment is that clothes are just about functionality, which is what I'd always thought clothes were, but also about the person that they make you become.

Johnathan Bi: I think that's exactly the right types of examples to think about when we're talking about metaphysical desire and mediation. Celebrity advertisement is exactly I want you to have in mind. But I just wanna be clear here, this also happens with a much closer circle as well, it doesn't have to be someone as glorious as a celebrity, but the values of a parent, the desires of the coolest kid in school, the taste of the most popular co-worker, these too have the same type of gravitational pull. But on the topic of celebrity advertisement, the one line that gives it all away for me is the slogan of Michael Jordan's sneakers, when he sells his sneakers, he says, "Be like Mike." What he's promising you isn't just a product, it's not a utility, but the being and prestige of Michael Jordan so that you too can have a small piece of that as well. It's

not jump like Mike, it's not score like Mike, the advertisement doesn't promise you most important thing about basketball shoes, whether it's the lightness or the fit or the bounce or the grip, it's promising you something you want so much more: being "Be like Mike."

As this example shows, it's not just any object from the model that gains this allure has to be close, it has to be proximate, it has to be unique to the model – in short, w have to think that the object is core to the model's being.

This is what Girard has to say. Let me give you a quote:

> The object is to the mediator what the relic is to a saint. The rosary used by a sai or his vestments are more sought after than a medal which has simply been touc or blessed by him. The value of a relic depends on the closeness to the saint. It is the same with the object in metaphysical desire.

Girard's point here is that metaphysical desire only directs itself to the objects we think are core in some sense to the model's fullness of being. After all, when we wa to, "Be like Mike," we don't run out and shave our heads bald, we go out and buy basketball shoes, even if being bald is just as a quality of Michael Jordan as wearing his shoes.

Of course, I've been using objects in the widest sense possible here, going far, far beyond mere possession and consumption. Take something as intimate as romantic sexual interest. After all, what could be more private and valuable in and of itself th love or sex? Yet even in this domain, we aren't freed from mediators, our desires are our own. Girard here would point to Dostoevsky's famous book, The Eternal Husba The Eternal Husband tells the story where a protagonist admires his Don Juan frien and is clearly mediated by him. The protagonist clearly considers this Don Juan as having a fullness of being, so much so that the protagonist brings his new wife to th casanova Don Juan figure in hopes that he would seduce her, in hopes that he woul show his desire for her, and by doing so, validate the protagonist's own decision of

marrying his new wife. Granted, this may be an exaggerated case of mediation, but Girard would say that we all experience a tempered, yet nonetheless similar version this in our own romantic lives. After all, it's all too common for us to find a previou unappealing partner attractive when we've learned that there's plentiful new competition. Dostoevsky's Eternal Husband then is but a mere exaggerated form of what many of us do really experience in our day-to-day romantic lives.

If even in the extremely personal and intimate domain of love and sex our desires a heavily informed by those of others, then the externality of desire is even more true less personal domains: career choice, political orientation, aesthetic taste, or something as innocuous as writing style, the way that intellectuals write. Girard, in some of his essays, tells us that clarity is not fashionable these days. I think what he saying here is that there's been a succession of incomprehensible writers in the pas few hundred years – perhaps Hegel and Adorno chief amongst them – who've adde great prestige to writing obscurely. And, as a result, many contemporary intellectua also eject clarity to be more similar to their models.

Clearly, the domain of mediation expand beyond consumption and span the whole scope of the human condition. The implications of this phenomenon – that our des are triangular, more due to the people associated with the objects than the objects themselves – ripple across Girard's theory. I will highlight four qualities of metaphysical desire that warrant it being the dominant object of analysis in Girard theory.

5.1 The Malleability of Metaphysical Desire

Johnathan Bi: First, metaphysical desire is extremely malleable and it explains the varied presentations of human culture. Its malleability lies in the abstract nature of ideals: reality, persistence, self-sufficiency. Based on who our mediators are, these ideals can take form in a kaleidoscope of ways. If I grew up with a Don Juan as a father, perhaps my desire takes the form as a desire for sexual conquest. If I spent m childhood with philosophers, perhaps my desire manifests as a desire to write

treatises. If I was educated in Imperial Japan, perhaps my desire takes on the shape a desire to die for the emperor. Metaphysical desire is the desire that can be, throug mediation, morphed into almost any concrete desire.

Even stronger then, metaphysical desire explains the most puzzling parts of other cultures – the parts where people seem to go against their own interests: their own appetites and their own experience. Take this as an example. We look quite puzzlin at early Christian aesthetics, with self-imposed celibacy, castration, and mutilation We are also confused by aristocrats who refuse certain tactics in war that would gra them certain victory because these tactics are ignoble. Those in the future perhaps puzzle at our modern elite who seem to work harder the richer they get instead of using it to enjoy leisure. These phenomenon are hard for an external observer to decipher because they seemingly go against the individual's immediate sensual interests. However, they become readily understandable under the light of metaphysical desire – a malleable and more powerful force in our motivational repertoire that is fundamentally not concerned with experience, appetite and intere narrowly construed, but our being.

5.2 The Power of Metaphysical Desire

Johnathan Bi: The second quality of metaphysical desire is that it is powerful. Inso as we are motivated by it, we start to lose our agency. The idea is quite simple: the force of metaphysical desire is so strong because so much is on the line. We aren't after just a momentary experience, but what an object says about us that will echo through time, our spirit, our being, our self-conception is at stake. And thus I think becomes quite easy to identify when we are primarily motivated by metaphysical instead of physical desire. The former almost always manifests in a compulsive forn I'm thinking about the fervorous religious rituals of pagan societies, the rush to buy buds in the heights of the tulip mania or the rush to buy internet companies in the dotcom bubble. Metaphysical desire underlies most activities that we feel like we n to do – to date someone, live in a neighborhood, hold a specific job, go to a specific

school – without which we can never feel whole. If we have that sense of need, that'
good symptom, a good indication that we've been taken over by metaphysical desire

5.3 The Deceitfulness of Metaphysical Desire

Johnathan Bi: However, even if we are able to obtain the objects metaphysical desi
so desperately wants us to have – we will still not feel whole. Third then, metaphysi
desire is deceitful, it results in an unending series of failures, this fullness of being
always elude us. The reason that metaphysical desire is deceitful is simple. What
metaphysical desire aims at (an object) and what it really wants (being) aren't even t
same type of thing, we are oblivious that this intense desire we feel for the object is
because of the model. Instead, we consider the object to be extremely desirable
because of its intrinsic qualities. After all, when I watch Jordan's commercials, I gai
direct desire for Jordan's shoes – I don't go consciously thinking that I only like the
because they're associated with Michael Jordan – this triangular root is hidden fron
us.

Think back to the example of romance, when we find a previously uninteresting
prospect suddenly become attractive, as soon as we find that a formidable rival desi
them, well, nothing about the prospect has changed, yet our desires have increased
many fold. Clearly then, such an increase in desire cannot be pointing at anything
intrinsically real from the object since the object has not changed at all. Indeed, the
strength of metaphysical desire is not correlated to any qualities of the object, it tak
upon a reality of its own based on the desirability of the model. And I think Kanye's
$100 white t-shirt that you just gave is a great example of this, and I think that it
wouldn't have mattered if he had sold white t-shirts or blue boxers or red socks, it'd
equally alluring because the objects don't matter. And if the objects don't matter, th
clearly the objects will not be able to satisfy our deepest desires.

And I think this is quite plausible. When you speak with people who've had
metaphysical desires, believing that after they do X, they will be fulfilled – getting a
job, dating a person, buying an object – it almost always ends in disappointment. T

is why we so often lose interest in objects after acquisition, they do nothing to chan our being, and we start seeing them for what they truly are, just objects.

Yet, because of how malleable metaphysical desire is, when we are inevitably disappointed, we don't see through the lies of desire, we simply conclude that the object we just had was not the right one, and go on the chase for other new objects. How many times in your life have you heard something like this? "Getting into an I League is fine and all, but you know what will really make me happy? Ten million dollars." Or: "Getting a car. That car I was just so excited about three days ago, that nothing. You know what would really make me happy? That house that I don't yet have." Or maybe a total 180: "making money, having a house, having nice cars, that' necessary, but what will really give me lasting satisfaction is being a world-renown actor." Because of how malleable metaphysical desire is, people don't renounce desi itself and it's simply re-directed towards the next set of objects that have maintaine their allure, and so they go on one wild goose hunt after the other.

David Perell: To your point about cars and houses, one of the weirdest things about the human condition is the way that we think that buying something, one thing, is j gonna satiate us forever. In high school, I was a big, passionate golfer, and I wanted new putters, the same one that Phil Mickelson had, and it was gonna make me feel Phil Mickelson It was The Odyssey #9 Putter. And I remember being so excited for this thing to arrive, as if it was just gonna take care of my golf game forever. And I g it, I was super excited. Three days later, it didn't mean much to me anymore. I want new driver, I need a Tiger Woods driver. And so I get that thing. And it was this cyclical repetition of wanting something, being so excited, getting it, and feeling th emptiness. And even though I can laugh about this story, I still feel it all the time, I that same disappointment, I still desire things all the time.

Johnathan Bi: Perhaps what you're saying is that even if you rationally know that getting this new set of drivers, or whatever set of objects you're desiring now, will n

fundamentally transform your being, you still can't but help desiring that next set o objects that you have not obtained yet.

David Perell: Drives me crazy.

Johnathan Bi: I think Girard has a really great metaphor to describe this phenomer Metaphysical desire is compared to a mirage with a seductive promise: the place yo were just at, well, that's not it, that's not it. Don't worry. But just a few more steps, a I will give you that which will replenish your entire being and quench your thirst or and for all.

Metaphysical desire is a mirage that leads us on one wild goose hunt after the other

5.4 The Ungovernability of Metaphysical Desire

Johnathan Bi: What makes all of this so much worse then, is the last quality of metaphysical desire: it is ungovernable. That is to say, that metaphysical desire doe not fall under the jurisdiction of reason. This ungovernability stems from its deceitfulness. If I desire something physically, there's something concrete that I ca point to. Reason can examine it, it can weigh its trade-offs, and potentially tame or redirect it. But the goal of metaphysical desire, however, is abstract and elusive. Furthermore, this pursuit of the being of the model is always hidden from the subje disguised as a passion for the object. Reason does not even know where to begin, much less be able to quantify and "weigh" it.

But even if we had rational understanding of our predicament as your club example and your buying sprees shows, the ungovernability also stems from the strength. Metaphysical desire tends to have such strength as to override the dictates of reaso The platonic ideal of the reasoning part of the soul, holding the reins of the spirited part of the soul, Girard thinks is an illusion. The spirited part of the soul, when it is inflamed, is the strongest part and commands reason. Think about instances of ang Reason does not direct us, but merely becomes a spokesperson for the spirited part

us while pretending to be its steward. If Nietzsche says, "He who has a why can bea with almost any how," then we must add to him, "he who needs a how can make up almost any why." Insofar as through mediation, you need to obtain some objects – t how – the reasoning part of your soul becomes this lawyer who comes up with reas — the why.

Metaphysical desire then is the key focus of Girardian psychology because it represents a motivational force that is infinitely malleable, exceptionally strong, continuously deceitful, and often ungovernable – it is a flexible, powerful, dynamic compulsive force that is responsible for humanity's greatest achievements, most terrifying disasters, and just about everything notable in between.

6. Original Sin

Johnathan Bi: Let's pause and reflect on the territory we've already traversed today. Girard's psychological project is to identify the key psychological motors of man. Within the realm of human behavior, he focuses on mimetic behavior because it is t key normative authority. Within that, he focuses on mimetic desire because it carri with it an acquisitive force, and within that, mimetic desire is shown to have twin components, a desire to experience — physical desire — and a desire to be — metaphysical desire. Metaphysical desire sees us chasing for objects, not for their o sake, but for what they say about us, for the self-conception they confer, and the fullness of being we expect to receive upon their acquisition. It is this drive which Girard sees as the dominant force within our motivational repertoire, if you will.

Metaphysical desire – malleable, powerful, deceitful and ungovernable – renders us compulsive, chasing one shiny object after the other, all while being led on by the fa promise that salvation is just around the corner. We will always be disappointed if a when we obtain the object, caught in a perennial, repeating trap of tragedy and farc

David Perell: These negative consequences are only for when we're motivated by metaphysical desire, only though, right?

Johnathan Bi: Yes. That is right. And thanks for drawing the clarification here. Everything we've said so far today only relates to people primarily or solely motivat by metaphysical desire. Of course, we can choose basketball shoes based off of thei price and utility instead of their prestige. Of course, we can choose romantic partne based on our taste and not the opinions of others. And of course we can form our o philosophical beliefs independently of intellectual fashions. This is the distinction tried to draw between physical and metaphysical desire. Only when we are primaril motivated by the latter, to gain a fullness of being, are we subject to this terrible fat we are primarily motivated by physical desire, then we are indeed quite sober and a after the object for the object's sake.

Of course, the next important question that we need to answer is, what determines proportion of metaphysical desire versus physical desire? How do we not give ourselves over fully to models? There's gonna be way too many answers here: how much experience do you have to ground your physical desires, whether you are proximate to any specifically alluring models, whether you've received the right typ upbringing, whether you have been disrespected and humiliated. But I will highligh the root cause of metaphysical desire. The degree to which we experience metaphysical desire is one-to-one correlated with our pridefulness. And I think the idea is quite straightforward. Metaphysical desire is the desire to be glorious, to be immortal, to be dominant and powerful. We've discussed how these are exaggerated ideals that can't really be achieved, whose exemplars are the Napoleons and Achille the world. And so, to even think that this type of being is obtainable by us requires unreasonable arrogance or pridefulness. Because we all experience metaphysical de then, Girard sees all humans as prideful creatures.

With this intuition in place, we're ready to begin constructing Girard's anthropolog of the Cross, his project of explaining all of Christian phenomena in cultural,

psychological, and social language, and it all starts with this one claim: metaphysic desire is the root of all sin.

A canonical Christian position held by thinkers like Saint Augustine, say that pride the root of all sin because it closes us off from God – humility exalts and pride deba As I've just argued, metaphysical desire reveals, above all, one's pridefulness. It sho a fundamental hubris of thinking that we can possess such a heightened degree of being. With this simple translation, then, we can say – leaning on Augustine as Gir himself often does – that metaphysical desire is the root of all sin.

Let's take off our Augustinian training wheels and let me try to give this argument more direct fashion. If we are to re-examine this notion of being that we are after, v will find that it is nothing but the core metaphysical qualities of the Christian God. We desire to be the most real. Well, what could be more real than God? A popular move in Christian theology conceives of the universe as a gradation of being with G as the most real entity, the fundamental substratum that grounds all. We desire to persist through time to be eternal. Well, that's even easier. God is the alpha and the omega. He spans all time. We desire to be self-sufficient, to have power over oursel and all existence. Well, what is that if not describing God's omnipotence?

The desire to be turns out to be the desire to be the most real, the all-lasting, the all powerful. What we are really after are really core metaphysical concepts: ontology, reality; temporality, persistence; and causality, power. Metaphysical desire, upon examination under Christian spectacles reveals itself to be a desire to be the capital God. Of course, there is another entity in Christian cosmology who's defined by the desire to be God, and that is the fallen angel, Satan, who dared to rebel against God Metaphysical desire then, is literally the satanic drive to rival God in his metaphysi splendor – and what could be more sinful than that?

But metaphysical desire isn't just the root of all sin, it is also our original sin. Let m read to you Genesis 3:4–5:

> And the serpent, said unto the woman, "Ye shall not surely die, for God doth kn
> that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened. And ye shall be as
> gods, knowing good and evil."

Satan here is the model, Adam and Eve the subject, and God the object. Before this moment, humanity was content being a servant of God. Yet through our imitation o Satan, we too acquired the satanic drive to be like God. Metaphysical desire then, w can say was formed at this very instance. At this point, we too yearned for a fullness being that was only reserved for God. At this point, we became prideful.

And simultaneously, the acquisition of this ideal, the birth of this pride brought us our lowest depth, a deep shame. Genesis 3:7:

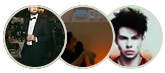
> And the eyes of them both were opened and they knew that they were naked.

Before our original sin, without the desire to be, we were content in Eden, even in o nakedness. We only feel shame when we compare our petty human existence to the glory of God which we now all yearn for.

By establishing this relationship between metaphysical desire and original sin, hopefully our listeners can now appreciate the full psychological, philosophical, theological significance of metaphysical desire. And why we have done this triparti zeroing in from mimesis to mimetic desire to metaphysical desire. This relationshi should also give us a hint at how pervasive Girard takes metaphysical desire to be. W may be able to tame it such that it's manageable or even unnoticeable, but we shoul eject any delusions that any of us can fully escape from it all together. Just as no Christian ask "do" I sin but only "how" do I sin, Girard thinks we are always, if only subtly, plagued by this rebellious, tormenting impulse.

Metaphysical desire then, is the most pervasive, unique and consequential force tha drives us as humans, and that is why Girard focuses on it.

What could be more damning? What could be more emblematic of the fallenness ar depravity of man, that our core motivational nexus is a satanic heritage inherited fr the original sin. That is a terrifying thought … but we've only just begun to scratch t surface of Girard's terror.



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