

## TRANSCRIPTS

# Transcript of Girard Lecture VI | The Triumph of Modernity



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## 0. Introduction

**David Perell:** So far, we've only discussed René Girard's understanding of history. But in this lecture, we're going to leap forward and examine the present. For me, this was the crescendo that we've been building towards for the past five lectures.

We're going to see how all of the Girardian concepts that we've come to understand together, such as mimesis, metaphysical desire, resentment, scapegoating, how all of those things manifest in our world as it is today. The same forces that drove conflict in old stories like Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and historical events like the Trojan War, they still animate the world today.

Girard's theory puts words to what the biologist E.O. Wilson once said, and I quote

The real problem of humanity is the following: we have Paleolithic emotions; medieval institutions; and god-like technology.

And we've made great strides in our technological capacities, our institutional design, and even our rational understanding of the world. But still, the stubbornness of human nature refuses to budge.

And with that tension in mind, let's dive into Girard's understanding of modernity.

**Johnathan Bi:** Two lectures ago, we began detailing our past – pagan religion and society. Last lecture, we discussed the rupture – Christianity. In this lecture, we're going to discuss the present – modernity. And in the next, we're going to discuss the near future – imminent apocalypse.

It should be evident, hopefully, from our last lecture that the values of Christianity – love and truth – are not just different, but diametrically opposed to the foundations of pagan and indeed all of human society, which are violence and deceit. Rupture, then, is really not an exaggeration to describe Christianity. How will human society digest such an incompatible and threatening substance? What trajectory has history been on with this foreign injection? These are the questions that I hope to answer in the last two lectures.

Christianity unleashes four powerful forces within human history, three magnificent and one less so, in fact, one is apocalyptic: love, truth, innovation and violence.

In this lecture on modernity then, we will be analyzing the cause and consequences of the three good forces. And in the final lecture on apocalypse, we will examine the fourth and final force of violence. The split between these two lectures is temporal: one is about the present and the other is about the near future. But I also encourage you to understand the split between these two lectures as both examining modernity but from radically different lenses. This lecture will examine current society as if it already were the kingdom of God. The next lecture will examine current society as if it were still a pagan society.

In the next lecture, by examining our current society as if it were still a pagan society needing scapegoats and myths and lies and deceit – we're going to understand how the Christian message has fundamentally altered mechanisms of violence. And in this lecture, by examining our current society as if it were already the kingdom of God, by actualizing love and truth, we can understand where we have made genuine progress and where our fallen human nature refuses to budge.

But before we delve into these three forces, let me give you an idea of the trajectory history that the Christian rupture has set us on.

# 1. Modernity as Rupture

**Johnathan Bi:** For millennia, human society operated on a cyclical time, whose cycles were demarcated by founding murders. Societies would first descend into chaos — was the mimetic contagion. A scapegoat would be arbitrarily chosen to inherit all the blame and be expelled, often meaning killed. And this founding murder would bring back a peace so miraculous that people attributed the saving force to the victim, the now dead victim, deifying it paradoxically. Of course, both the scapegoating and the deification are equally deceitful. The victim neither had the power to cause or end the chaos — it's all a psychological projection by the crowd, grounded on nothing but unanimity. Myths then, would be created out of this real foundational event and out of these myths spawned core institutions of pagan societies: prohibitions prevented violence, and rituals acted as a release valve for violence. But as any ideology or worldly order, these myths alongside their institutions would start to lose their prestige over time. The moral paradigm would lose its force and a society descend again into chaos, this whole process had to begin anew: chaos, founding murder, deification, myth-making, *ad infinitum*.

This four-fold process is called “The Scapegoat Mechanism” and for Girard was deeply, deeply ambivalent. It's a combination of both ultimate evil and worldly good. Sacrifice one for all, limit freedom of the parts for the stability of the whole and use violence and lies to establish worldly order. But the good thing about it is, you only need to kill one innocent man to save the entire community.

What is required for the functioning of the scapegoat mechanism was that its mechanisms had to remain hidden. Because sacredity and pagan power, as we discussed, are predicated and based on a deceitful unanimity, the victim's innocence must remain hidden, lest the whole arbitrariness be exposed and the entire edifice

come crumbling down. For pagan religions to work, the crowd must not know that source of power of their god actually comes from the psychological projections of the crowd.

This is where Christ comes in. Christ, through the crucifixion, showed precisely the innocence of the victim, the guilt and the projection of the crowd and gave us a model paradigm through which we can expose, decode and free ourselves from religion altogether. The Christian revelation for Girard becomes the rupture point of human history. Slowly but surely, humanity loses its ability to create myth out of these deified scapegoats. And with it, the legitimacy of prohibitions—now considered oppressive and the efficacy of sacrifice—now considered cruel—also began to deteriorate.

But remember, this is not an unqualified good thing. If violence and lies properly directed are the foundations of worldly order, then love and truth can only bring about worldly chaos. And so we might say, in a very reductive fashion, that the scapegoat mechanism is a worldly good but an ultimate evil, whereas Christ and Christ's revelation is ultimately good but brings forth worldly chaos. Girard reminds us that Christ himself tells us as much. I quote to you Matthew 10:34:

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

Christ pulls the cultural rug underneath our feet and takes humanity from cyclical time to a linear time.

## 2. Modernity as Continuity

**Johnathan Bi:** But history since Christ cannot only be interpreted as a rupture but also as a strong continuity with pagan society. It is continuity in the first and weak sense in that the Christian revelation takes time to work in the world. The demythologization takes time because mythology has been with us for so darn long. Even Christianity itself, according to Girard, became mythologized, succumbing to

this inertia. The past 2,000 years has been a gradually waning off of religion for the human race. But it is a continuity in a deeper and much more interesting sense because the building blocks of human nature have not changed. Everything that we discussed on the lectures on psychology, mimesis, mimetic desire, metaphysical desire, mimetic rivalry, our need for catharsis, all of that remains constant.

To put it succinctly then, what has ruptured is our social historical conditions. Culture is fundamentally different – we protect victims now whereas they used to be persecuted. We value truth now whereas we used to believe dogmatically. But what continuous then are the people within those cultures, their yearnings and capacities, their psychology and needs. And the key interplay between the break in culture and the continuity in psychology will be the hidden motor driving these two final lectures.

If you consider that the cultural conditions we have been freed from are in some sense natural to the human condition – in the sense that we naturally create religion, we naturally scapegoat – and thus the conditions we are in now as unnatural, it is readily intelligible why so many problems of modernity take on the form of hypocrisy: persecution under the banner of protecting victims, rigid adherence to scientific dogmas under the guise of free intellectual exploration, or the most derivative of inventions packaged as the most radical innovations.

The core problems of modernity that we will explore in this lecture take on the shape of hypocrisy because we live in a fundamentally Christian culture that identifies and tries to correct the flaws of our natural psychological tendencies and as a result has gone against those natural tendencies. It is this incompatibility then between our cultural ideals and our natural tendencies that leads to hypocrisy. We are no longer living in a cultural environment which we have evolved and adapted to.

**David Perell:** Yeah, I've always liked the line from the biologist E.O. Wilson who said

The real problem of humanity is the following: we have Paleolithic emotions; medieval institutions; and godlike technology.

**Johnathan Bi:** I think that quote is apt and getting to the point if we consider culture to be a type of technology that we're really forcing ourselves to live up to these cultural ideals which are some form of technology that we really can't achieve.

## 2.1 Metaphor of the Rocket

**Johnathan Bi:** The metaphor then that I think best captures this radical break as well as stubborn continuity is the period when a rocket has launched but has not reached escape velocity. I think this analogy is apt first because such a rocket is clearly a radical break from when it was stationary but it is also a continuity because it is still governed by the logic of gravity and still within the gravitational pull. The same I think can be said for the point of history we are in now. There's a clear radical break between our culture that protects victims and all the ones that have come before who made them into scapegoats. But the stubborn gravitational pull of the human condition remains the same. We still need to persecute and find victims to blame. The analogy of the rocket I think is apt second because such a rocket can either reach orbit and be freed once and for all or just be blown to smithereens. And for Girard, our future is just as binary, kingdom of God or violent apocalypse with nothing in between.

Christianity sets us free or perhaps just as aptly, exiles us from the comfort of circular time and sets us on a linear, accelerating path. The aim of these last two lectures then is to describe the forces within and the direction of this linearity. By thwarting the scapegoat mechanism, Christianity unleashes four forces within history that slowly but surely take us to the modernity which we find ourselves today. As with all things Girard, these forces are deeply ambivalent. Within the Pandora's box, we have the good – love, truth, innovation – and the bad – violence that are growing and have broken free all at the same time. What's more, even within these forces Girard's analysis is ambivalent. Love often manifests as hypocrisy, truth becomes dogma, innovation degenerates into fashion and even within violence Girard sees a key motivational force that has brought forth the most enviable living conditions of man.

when channeled through capitalism. Let us use the rest of this lecture then to examine and reflect on the three good forces of modernity, beginning with love.

### 3. The Force of Love

**Johnathan Bi:** The most laudable force that comes out of the Christian revelation after the destruction of pagan culture is love. This love stands in stark contrast to the Greek notion of Eros. Eros is marked by two qualities: First, a fundamental concern for oneself rather than the object that is loved. And second, Eros is limited often to a select group of individuals or objects.

**David Perell:** You know what's coming to mind here is that I wonder if romantic love is an example of both of these qualities. So let me explain what I mean. First, that romantic love is, as you're saying, clearly limited to one person. Just think about how much in our world we prize monogamy in the modern West but there's a second point here that modern dating is often less about the other person as an end in themselves and more about using the other person actually as a means to look cool or to make yourself stand out and be proud and confident. But the problem with that is that you're not loving them for who they are, but you're loving them for what they do for you. And when that's the case, it kind of reminds me of buying clothes or something where it's less about love. It's a transaction.

**Johnathan Bi:** I think that is a good modern example of Eros. And I think your intuition is spot on there that there's something perverse about Eros because it's a concern for the other that really isn't a concern for the other. It's a concern for the self disguised as the concern for the other. The love that the Christian revelation has unleashed on the world – Christian love, agape – is not like this at all. It's different on both points. It's fundamentally, one, a concern for the other for the sake of the other. And two, importantly, it's indiscriminating. It is a love that stems from identification with the other and expands to all humanity.

The reason that Girard thinks Christianity is responsible for this agape love are obvious. Christ's defining quality, the one he asks us to imitate, is his unconditional unwavering love. Furthermore, the destruction of rituals, which legitimized catharsis and the violence and anger and hate that followed catharsis, also led to the growth of love.

But most importantly, it was the collapse of prohibition, of social difference – the breaking down of arbitrary distinctions among men that led to this love taking root in the world. In societies that have been touched by Christianity, we are no longer primarily Brahmin or Shudra, man or woman, German or Italian. We are first and foremost human. We are equals, and Christianity is this equalizing force. Framed negatively, the love predicated upon difference – say the concern a lord has for his subjects and serfs, or the serf's loyalty to the lord – it is incomplete because first, the scale of it is rather limited – our social roles only have us have responsibilities toward so many people. But second, the love that stems from one's own social roles stems from a fundamental concern for oneself and is in a deep way prideful. My concern for you, my serf, is rooted in me wanting to maintain my own self-conception as a good lord. The love predicated upon difference, then, is Eros, whereas the love predicated upon Christian equality is agape.

And so much of our society nowadays is underpinned by this Christian love and the unique Christian concern for the victim, what appear to be secular concepts, secular intuitions, secular institutions. Once we look under the hood, so to speak, we will find Christianity underneath.

**David Perell:** To what you're saying here, we live in a Christian society and we don't even know it. Take the idea of human rights. It's self-evident, right? And that's why it appears in the Declaration of Independence. That's the wrong way to think about it. The idea of human rights, it's downstream of the idea of Imago Dei, which is the biblical idea that every person, no matter what they look like, is made in the image of God and therefore has inherent worth. So it's Christianity, it's Christianity that



inspires the famous line from the Declaration of Independence, which says, and you heard this before: we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal. But the craziest thing is that the same secular people who dismiss Christian values, those are the same people who are the most passionate defenders of human rights. And what's funny about it is they're in some sense the most religious of all a they don't even realize it.

**Johnathan Bi:** I think that's right, that most people don't realize the true source of where their ideas really stem from. But I don't think it's just concepts like equality and human rights that you've identified that's downstream Christianity. Take this phenomenon that I find quite curious, adding "big" to anything in our society automatically makes it bad: big tech, big pharma, big philanthropy. And I think this is another Christian concept. This goes to show how the Christian moral paradigm of protecting the victim, protecting the little guy is so steeped into our culture. It's real everywhere.

And Girard identifies so many different institutions as well as modern intuitions that are really Christian in essence. For example, he sees Christian love and the concern for the victim as operating in domestic institutions.

Let me give you a quote:

Since the High Middle Ages all the great human institutions have evolved in the same direction: more humane private and public law, penal legislation, judicial practice, the rights of individuals ... When viewed in terms of the large picture, the social and cultural evolution goes always in the same direction, toward the mitigation of punishment, greater protection for potential victims.

But that's not it. Girard also sees this love as operating in foreign affairs. I quote again

When a catastrophe occurs at some spot on the globe, the nations that are well off feel obligated to send aid or to participate in rescue operations. You may say the

gestures are more symbolic than real and reflect a concern for prestige. No doubt but in what era before ours and under what skies has international mutual aid constituted a source of prestige for nations? There is just one rubric that gathers together everything I am summarizing in no particular order and without concern for completeness, it's this: the concern for victims.

Even our refusal to declare our achievements, Girard believes, is an achievement of Christian concern for the victim. This is how pervasive it is. Let me quote one more time:

We can compare ancient societies to one another, but the global society now in the making is truly unique. Its superiority in every area is so overwhelming, so evident that it is forbidden, paradoxically, to acknowledge the fact, especially in Europe. This prohibition stems from the fear of a return to tyrannical pride. It is also the fear of humiliating nations that don't belong to the privileged group. In other words, it is once again the concern for victims that dominates what it is permissible and impermissible to say.

Hidden uneasily alongside Girard's anticipation of apocalypse then, is a restrained nonetheless fundamental affirmation of modernity that can easily be missed between Girard's dense lines on violence. As these passages show, Girard praises modernity wholeheartedly. He answers a resounding "Yes!" to the question, "are we the best society that has ever been?"

## 3.1 Theatre

**Johnathan Bi:** Girard is not being naive here. As his sober analysis of international care suggests, he does not think that all that appears to be compassion and love actually takes on this noble Christian form of agape, this genuine indiscriminating concern for the other. More often than not, it's more that our society has rendered compassion prestigious and people are pursuing it out of vanity – we might call this theater because it's putting on a display for others.

And this is what Girard has to say. I quote again:

Even the renunciation of violent mimetic desire cannot spread without being transformed into a social mechanism, into blind imitation... Rather than an authentic exit from mimetic desire then there is mimetic submission to a culture that advocates that exit.

Girard's point here is that just as we have conformed to stoning victims before, we are now conforming to helping victims. The action may be different in content, but the form of that action is still the same: conformity of mimesis.

The acts of theatrical love that Girard has in mind are people who just play along with the cultural currents — “Yeah, sure, I’ll volunteer my time.” “Sure, I’ll donate to this cause.” “Sure, I’ll post a social media post to spread awareness” — not because they have a grounded belief, but simply because it’s the fashion of the times and they want to be seen on the right side of history. What appears to be agape here then is really Eros. They are doing it for their own vanity and they only help the victims that are fashionable to help.

There’s a deep critique here of contemporary culture, that humans have not fundamentally changed – we haven’t let go of our pride in favor of love as individual choices. Or even more strongly, if you drop the same people who are sheepishly protecting victims in another cultural environment, they would readily join the stoners. But this is also a deep praise of our current society. After all, we shouldn’t expect people to behave otherwise. That’s what being mimetic creatures means. In social community, the amount of authentic individuality is relatively small compared to mimesis and its forces. So we should be glad that people are conforming to as no ideal as love.

Girard’s comments here on this theatrical display would be his most urgent warning on the topic, if not for the fact that there is an even more pernicious mutation of love that threatens to delegitimize love altogether: That is hypocrisy.

## 3.2 Hypocrisy

**Johnathan Bi:** Hypocrisy goes a step beyond mere theater. Whereas theater sees you performing the actions of love without being motivated by love, hypocrisy sees you acting against love in the name of love. Hypocrisy actively persecutes its own victim in the name of protecting victims. The idea is this: The Christian revelation has exposed our evil tendencies towards persecution and as a result, our culture is one that sides with the victim and against persecution. But our stubborn human nature remains the same, and we still need to persecute. However, it's no longer fashionable, as was the case in, say, the day of Achilles, to openly share our desire for conquest, vengeance, and hatred. We can only pursue these desires discreetly, secretly, by disguising them with pro-social motives. In our culture, the only acceptable reason we can have for persecution is to stop persecution. The wolf must now don sheepskin.

Think back to the personal example I gave of my college acquaintance, who was an economic progressive. The story went something like this: he was very passionate about distributive justice, and every time I would meet him, he would go on and on about how much more we could be doing for the least fortunate and initially I thought well what a loving, compassionate, caring guy. However, as I got to know him better, I realized that he was a really resentful and spiteful person. I had a hard time squaring his seemingly religious concern for the poor with his own lack of concern and care for the poor person. But it all made sense when he confessed to me that what was motivating his progressivism wasn't a universal benevolent concern for the poor, but a localized resentment of the rich. You see, my acquaintance came from a middle-class family, grew up with upper-middle-class peers and was always made to feel poor. His orientation of values against wealth was not for itself, but to get back at his peers. By painting money-making as immoral, he found himself on the moral high ground. He wasn't concerned with economic victims that much at all, but in the culture we are in, the best way for him to attack his richer peers was to accuse them of victimization and economic exploitation.

I think this quote from Girard captures the essence of the story that I've been trying to tell quite well:

The victims most interesting to us are always those who allow us to condemn our neighbors. And our neighbors do the same. They always think first about victims for whom they hold us responsible.

On this front, Girard isn't convinced society has really changed that much at all – that we've really given up persecution. Rather, it's more a superficial switch of who we think it's acceptable to persecute. The canonical victims are completely off limits: the ethnic minorities, the lower classes, the disabled – and Girard thinks that's a great thing. But we've simply flipped it on its head. Now we feel warranted, perhaps even compelled, to persecute all types of privilege. Whether it's white privilege, ableist privilege, whether it's class privilege or men's privilege.

Girard has this to say:

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

And this cruelty is the first problem of hypocrisy. That it does exactly what it explicitly vows not to do – persecution. Now lest we trivialize the dangers here by just giving the example of a harmless economic progressive, Girard reminds us of the terrible atrocities committed in the name of protecting victims. I quote:

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

But there is an even more dangerous problem with hypocrisy, beyond doing explicitly what it vows not to do. And that's this: Hypocrisy delegitimizes love from the inside.

and legitimizes, engenders the opposite: violence. Recall, in Girardian psychology, we hold intellectual positions, political positions, less for the positions themselves, but because of our relationships with the people who hold those positions. Reductively: if we feel an affinity towards them, then we are nudged to adopt their position and if we feel disgusted or disdain towards them, then we are nudged away from their position. The problem is that people naturally feel repelled by hypocrites – so if most of the people who are espousing love are hypocrites, then love and concern for the victim itself would start losing its cultural prestige. Even though we may try to use our faculties of reason, it is very hard for people not to feel repulsed by the hypocrisy by those like my college acquaintances and pushed to the opposite side of the spectrum.

Again, lest I trivialize what is at stake here, let's briefly turn to Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* to see how hypocrisy engendered the Nazis. One of the key questions that Arendt wants to answer in this book is how Germany and most curiously of all, how the German intellectual elite, could have so readily welcomed Nazism after espousing humanistic, compassionate, loving values for centuries. Arendt's explanation begins with the bourgeois of Germany, the capitalist elite of that time. Not unlike the woke capital of today, Arendt reasons that a double morality emerged within the bourgeois German elite of the early 20th century: there was a private morality of acquisition that stood in stark contradiction with the publicly paraded humanitarian values of compassion, concern for the weak, tolerance that they paraded. In short, the bourgeois were hypocrites.

And it was none other than this hypocrisy that first, made the values they espoused hollow. It delegitimized love and compassion and pushed people towards the openly violent values of the Nazis. Second, it was the bourgeois lack of consistency that made the Nazis' consistency seem refreshing. If the bourgeois claimed they were saints and acted as gangsters, at least the Nazis acted like gangsters and claimed they were gangsters. That's why they were refreshing to the people of the Weimar Republic. In short, it is not a pull towards the value of the Nazis that made the intellectual elite go

their support, but a push away from hypocrisy. The Nazis were simply the opposite what the woke capital, the bourgeois, were. And that's why people rallied to them.

I will share with you Arendt's own words here. I quote:

Since the bourgeoisie claimed to be the guardian of Western traditions and confounded all moral issues by parading publicly virtues which it not only did not possess in private and business life, but actually held in contempt, it seemed revolutionary to admit cruelty, disregard of human values... those who traditionally hated the bourgeoisie and had voluntarily left respectable society saw [in the Nazis] only the lack of hypocrisy and respectability, not the content of Nazism itself.

**David Perell:** That's a terrifying thought.

**Johnathan Bi:** It is a terrifying thought. And I think it has very practical contemporary relevance to the disastrous consequences of the woke capital and progressive hypocrisy today.

To summarize, even within this one force of love that Christianity has let loose in modernity, we see three different strands that range from the divine to the worldly to the apocalyptic. Genuine Christian love helps others indiscriminately for the sake of others. It is a force as strong as ever that we can genuinely be proud of. Theatrical love performs the actions of love for the sake of one's vanity. Although conformist, it is somewhat laudable. Hypocritical love acts against love in the name of love. Girard sees this form of hypocrisy rampant in our victim-obsessed society and is capable of delegitimizing love altogether as a cultural value and engendering its opposite – a reactionary killing of victims – as it had in the Weimar Republic.

### 3.3 The Force of Truth

**Johnathan Bi:** The second force that Christianity injects into history, which reaches its pinnacle in modernity, is truth. Like love, it is one of our great triumphs. In fact, these two forces, truth and love, as we'll soon see, are inseparable. What does Girard

have in mind when he talks about the increase and proliferation of truth? There's too many things that I can bring up here. There are the countless victories of science, the mastery of travel on land, air, and sea. There's the victory over disease and starvation, the dispelling of illusions and myths. But I think Girard also has in mind the way reason has gained prestige. Look around our world. Everything is, or at least claims to be, grounded on reason. Social political theories all gain legitimacy not through divine mandates or hereditary lineage but appeal to reason. Our system of law is not based on God's prohibitions but claims, at least, to be the product of reason, however fallible. Reason also has not been as heavily praised or rewarded in industry than it has now in our knowledge economy.

More so than almost any civilization, we appear to value knowledge more and believe in reason's ability to obtain it. Far are we from the Garden of Eden's prohibition against the tree of knowledge. Far are we from the intellectual humility of Job. Far are we from the lessons of Oedipus that knowing more can lead to disaster.

So what caused this proliferation of truth, and who's responsible? It should be no surprise that Girard's answer is Christianity. This may seem an implausible answer initially. Indeed, we often pit Christianity and reason, certainly science and Christianity, as against each other. Girard's answer here then, is as interesting as it is counterintuitive. The first negative way that Christianity brought forth truth is that it dispelled myth. This should be a familiar idea at this point. Christianity exposes the deceitfulness of worldly foundations and begins to tear down prohibitions, rituals and all pagan religions. And it is only when we cease to look for truth in myth does reason even have the fertile ground to bear the fruits of truth. After all, if something is already explained by a wildly, wildly prestigious myth that it's fatal for me to question, then reason will not even want to begin to question it.

I think Girard's interlocutor sums up his views very nicely. I quote:

It is really Christianity that makes science possible by desacralizing the real, by freeing people from magical causalities. Once we stop seeing storms as being



triggered by the machinations of the witch across the street, we start being able to study meteorological phenomena scientifically.

Girard tells us that “the disappearance of religion is a Christian phenomenon par excellence” because Christianity was the original truth-seeking discipline that sought to dispel false religions. In this view, modernity’s concern for truth is more Judaic than Athenian. In fact, Christianity not only foresaw, but in some sense actively brought about its own demise, as the content of Christianity – the pursuit of truth – started to rebel against the religious form of Christianity. Science then, for Girard, is the patricidal son of Christianity. “Patricidal” because it unjustly scapegoated Christianity – rejecting all of it and not just the religious form. “Son” because science is a Christian discipline through and through, continuing the tradition that Christ began of accessing truth and dispelling myth.

### 3.4 The Epistemology of Love

**Johnathan Bi:** But there is a much stronger and positive reason that Christianity is responsible for the proliferation of truth, reason and science beyond just the negative dispelling of myth and clearing the fertile ground, so to speak. And that reason is nothing other than love.

Girard has this to say, I quote:

Love is at one and the same time the divine being and the basis of any real knowledge. The New Testament contains what amounts to a genuine epistemology of love.

Girard is arguing for a strong causal relationship here, that love – the first force we described – is a necessary precondition for truth. But why is that? Why is love a necessary precondition for truth? We conceive of truth as a self-standing activity. What does love – a relation of people – matter for truth? Well, when I frame it in that way the Girardian answer is quite obvious. The relationship between person and object,

say it with me here, really represents a relationship between person and person. This is one of the fundamental conclusions of mimesis: mediation. This is what it means that we're social creatures.

In order for my relationships with other people, to not mediate the truths I access, either positively or negatively then, I can't either hate nor unduly fetishize any single person. I mean, think about when the condition of love is not satisfied. Think back to my college acquaintance. He felt resentment for his rich peers, which mediated him into an economically progressive position. And think about German society – they didn't believe that Nazi's values were true, but they simply aligned towards them because they were resentful of the hypocritical bourgeois. Nazism was not the truth for German society any more than economic progressivism was for my acquaintance. In both cases, the truth has been distorted because of resentful mediation among people. And of course, this works in the positive direction too. If I overly fetishize someone, if they want to – to use Girardian language here – acquire their being, they might subscribe to their positions even if I don't find them true.

Christian love, as we discussed, is not possessive and deeply desirous. And it certainly isn't hate. It's neither a push nor pull from the self. Because the self really isn't in the picture here. It is a concern of the other for the other, which means that my own being, my own pride, my own self-conception falls by the wayside. When I love someone in this Christian way, it is a dissolution of myself which takes away the strength of metaphysical desire. And when we do this in an indiscriminate way, when we learn to love all – we become freed from mediation and we are free to pursue truth, whether that means our genuine desires or objective scientific inquiry. I hope this helps us make sense of Girard's quote. Christian love is the place of objectivity then, because it is the only type of relationship where the self is not in view and where the relations between self and other are in harmony. In love, we are not overly resentful or overly admiring of others and thus are not mimetically pulled by them.

This is all quite abstract, so let me give you a few examples. This is a story that I've shared before. I grew up idolizing entrepreneurs – the Steve Jobs of the world, and when I went to college, I felt like I had to drop out and start a company as soon as possible. So I did that. My freshman spring, I dropped out, raised a small round, and the company ended up crashing and burning out of vanity. And it's not that I didn't enjoy building companies, but the degree to which I desired it and certainly the urgency which I felt like I had to achieve it was disproportionate to my genuine desire. Dropping out was not my "truth". When I did go back to school, out of resentment toward my peers who had dropped out and built successful companies, I went the complete other direction. I rejected the worldly altogether, switching from CS to philosophy, going to a Buddhist monastery – for three years, I didn't do that much at all in industry out of resentment. Again, it's not that I didn't enjoy philosophy and Buddhism, but the degree to which I pursued it and certainly the degree to which I renounced the worldly was not genuine. This was not my "truth" either. In the first case, I was unduly fetishizing of entrepreneurs and positive mimesis took me away from my "truth" – I should have just stayed in school and started working on side projects. In the second case, I was unduly resentful of entrepreneurs and negative mimesis took me away from my "truth" – I should have continued to keep a pulse on developments in industry while I explored philosophy.

The reason that I feel like I'm doing a bit better job now of balancing and finding more authentic desires is because I resolved my deformed relationships. Before, when I met a philosopher or entrepreneur who was younger and more successful than I, I became both resentful and jealous. But now I can – to some degree, respect and affirm their life and wish them well genuinely, without exaggerated admiration or envy. And it was only when I first made peace with myself and made peace with the relationships around me that I was no longer so strongly mediated by other people's life decisions. Now, in the place of love alone could I access truth and genuine desires.

Here's another example. Whenever I get into a heated argument with a colleague, a friend, or a family member – no matter what they say, no matter what facts they

present to me with, I always see my own side. Reason becomes my spokesperson and lawyer and reason can't bring about a resolution by itself. I've found that in these scenarios, when I'm arguing with people, when there's a feud, when I'm angry at them, the best way to resolve the conflict is to wait it out and just let the anger pass, or perhaps even to think about the good times I've shared together and develop a degree of affection towards them. The removal of that hate is primary, only then are you at headspace to access truth and begin reconciliation. Spirit precedes reason – we are primarily social and not rational creatures, helplessly mediated by others. So what's most important is getting our relationships right. Truth does not have the power to engender love, but love has the power to engender truth.

Let me not trivialize this with just individual examples from my own life. The same goes for society-wide issues as well. I mean, take a closer look at what polarization is doing to our society. I would wager that polarization, which effectively is an absence of love, is seeing enemies in the other. It's not just silencing the exchange of ideas but it's limiting the very formation of ideas. For different groups of people, certain ideas are completely off limits not just to share, but even to entertain because they are associated with the other side whom they so loathe. Many people on the left can't even entertain that capitalism is genuinely bringing forth important technological innovations because these ideas are associated with the enemy. Similarly, many people on the right can't entertain the idea that there are legitimate claims within social justice movements because those are the talking points of those whom they hate.

It's not just normative political positions that are susceptible to mediation – intellectual positions can be off limits as well if we fail to practice love and respect. Nazi Germany, for example, theoretical physics was devalued because it was considered a Jewish science. The point here is that even for the most objective and theoretical of disciplines, we can still form subjective biases based on what we think about those associated with those disciplines.

What we find in Girard's epistemology of love then, is a solution to our perennial problem of mediation. How do we as individuals access our authentic desires and how do we as a society engage in meaningful dialogue? The answer is that we must have the right social relations in place before reason can even begin to access truth. We need to love.

Girard has a very famous but hard to decipher phrase. He says:

The invention of science is not the reason that there are no longer witch hunts, the ceasing of witch hunts is the reason science was invented.

This must be interpreted under the light of Girard's epistemology of love. In a violent world, truth and science do not have the power to bring about love – here represented by the ceasing of witch hunts. No matter what facts you present to people, if they are angry and violent, they are gonna keep on killing. Only in a loving world where we have stopped killing witches can science and reason flourish. I encourage you to relate all of this back to my example of personal conflicts: truth does not have the power to engender love, but love has the power to engender truth.

## 3.5 The Church of Science

**Johnathan Bi:** But just like love, Girard thinks that modernity is often hypocritical when it comes to truth, just as persecutions now proceed under the banner of the concern for victims, dogmas are now disguised as free inquiry.

Specifically, Girard thinks that we are idolizing and making a religion out of reason and science. I quote:

It is because we have wanted to distance ourselves from religion that it is now returning with such force and in a retrograde, violent form... (He's talking about how fervently people believe in atheism these days.) In this, it will perhaps have been our last mythology. We "believed" in reason, as people used to believe in the gods.

Girard's claim here is that there's been an intellectual founding murder since the enlightenment. What we have expelled is religion and what we have divinized is reason and science.

The best example I can think of, of us deifying science is this: in the old days, scientific rational activities – geometry, astrology, music – all wanted to snuggle close to divinity. For example, think about how musical composers wanted to show that they were capturing the harmony of the heavens. But today, the divinities of yesteryear are trying to snuggle close to science. I took a course in college on a Buddhist meditation and it was named Contemplative Science. My professor tried really really hard to argue that the Buddhists were doing science. I was also walking down New York I think on 5th Avenue and I saw a banner that said, Fifth Church of Christ, Scientists. The fact that the literal deities of yore are trying to cozy up to science is perhaps part of this divinization of science that Girard is talking about. But what's the problem with reason and science gaining such an immense prestige? What's wrong with that?

The first and most obvious problem is the one that we've been discussing for this entire lecture series. If we deify reason and attribute to it too much power in the human psyche, then we're designing society for what we want humans to be and not what they actually are.

But that's not the only problem. Second, by being deified, science can become unquestionable and can justify terrifying political actions. In the same way that appealing to Scripture or the edicts of the Catholic Church justified terrible political actions on the prestige of Christianity, Girard is deeply worried that political agendas are now wrapping themselves up in a veneer of science to be equally unquestionable.

Girard's worry is that science isn't independent from narratives and fashions and that it is also susceptible to mimesis and all of its problems – it's not as objective as we think it to be.

Here's the passage from an anthropologist, A.M. Hocart, that he always likes to bring up. I quote:

The first Gibraltar [half-man, half-ape] skull was discovered in 1848: it passed qu unnoticed. The Origin of Species appeared in 1859. It wasn't till men had become thoroughly used to the idea of man's descent from an ape-like creature that the skull was brought out of its obscurity, in order to become a link in the evidence. wasn't the direct evidence of a man-ape that converted biologists. Rather, having been converted by comparative evidence [Darwin's narrative essentially], they set out to find direct evidence in order to confirm their deductions... It took thirty-five years of The Origin of Species to set them really looking. Then Dubois went out to find the ape-like fossil and found it. Since then discovery has succeeded discovery and the illusion of direct evidence has taken possession of the minds of anthropologists.

This is an incredibly damning story for Girard, because it shows that even if science can objectively access the facts, that only gets us so far. The fact of finding a half-man half-ape skull did nothing and didn't change our understanding of the world at all. And it wasn't direct facts that convinced biologists of man's descent from apes. It was the power of Darwin's narrative – a narrative that's grounded on tangential facts like the evolution of bird beaks, but not the direct evidence like humanoid skulls. Not unlike many Christians then. The biologists believed before they saw the direct facts. We need a theory to situate facts in. We need a narrative to convince us and those narratives, even if they are checked by the facts, are incredibly susceptible to mimesis. This is why even in the most objective of sciences, there are intellectual fashions.

**David Perell:** Your point about Darwin and Gibraltar reminds me of the Planck principle, which comes from the scientist Max Planck, who said that science doesn't progress because people change their views, which is what most people think. But rather what happens is that, each new generation of scientists, they have different views, different ways of seeing the world, different beliefs. And then as old generations

die and pass away, new ideas are accepted because new scientists come into power. And then that, that changing of the guard is how scientific consensus changes.

**Johnathan Bi:** That's very interesting. And I think what both this Planck principle suggests, as well as the Gibraltar example from Girard, is that science is governed by facts and rational agents changing their mind objectively as we are led to think, that these interpersonal mechanisms of mimesis actually plays a much greater role, even in very objective science.

**David Perell:** I think so.

**Johnathan Bi:** But Girard has another concern for science that this Gibraltar example brings up. Even more damning for Girard. The Gibraltar example shows that science doesn't really truly have an objective command over those facts independently of narratives. Think about it like this. The first humanoid skull was ignored when the narrative wasn't there. And when the narrative was there, people began seeing them everywhere. I think it was Peter Thiel who had this line as an undergrad: "If we look for oppression, we'll find it everywhere." But I think it's not just oppression. Even objective facts become distorted by the narratives we hold. We are not truth-seeking creatures, but creatures who are able to believe in myths, lies, and narratives if other people around us believe them as well.

This is what worries Girard, that science, like reason, is quite impotent and turns out to be just as susceptible to narratives and mimesis by deifying it. We turn something we should all be very, very suspicious of into something unquestionable that can justify atrocities. For example, the terrible eugenics movements of the 20th century were draped with the veneer of science. Eugenics was a tremendously popular and prestigious discipline. It wasn't a pseudoscience at all. It was supported by Nobel laureates like Hermann Müller and political leaders like US President Theodore Roosevelt. There was even a chair for eugenics in University College London. Not only was the discipline of eugenics grounded on the most prestigious of sciences of the time, not the least of which being Darwin's theory of evolution, but some of the most



important developments of statistics flowed out of eugenics research. The fathers of eugenics, many of whom prestigious professors at UCL, invented the correlation coefficient significant tests to better measure populational differences in the same way that Newton had invented calculus to better understand physics. Hopefully, you can see Girard's point here. What is really a political agenda is dressed up in science. Indeed, the facts are that there does exist populational differences between races, but what people chose to do with those facts, that is really narrative dressed up in science.

Perhaps what is more damning for Girard then is that we didn't stop eugenics because of a scientific victory, because we defeated it on the fields of facts. We stopped because the narrative of eugenics had lost its prestige by being so closely associated with the Nazis. In fact, much of the same science continued under a different guise. Britain's *Annals of Eugenics* was renamed *Annals of Human Genetics*. American Eugenics Society became the Society for the Study of Social Biology and the magazine *Eugenics Quarterly* was renamed to *Social Biology*. Let me be crystal clear here. Girard is not an eugenicist. In fact, the opposite. He is terrified of eugenics and showing us the danger of deifying science.

Eugenics, unfortunately, does not stand alone in disastrous narratives disguised as science. History is littered with examples of scientific hubris, ranging from the comical to the disastrous. Think about Malthus in the 18th-century reasoning that living standards would go back to subsistence because population grows geometric while food increases arithmetically. Think about the 1970s where there was an entire wave of a ridiculous dubious climate science championed by the Times, the New York Review, Columbia, Brown. They were all publishing articles on an inevitable ice age.

Here's another example. In January 1970, *Life*, reported and I quote:

Scientists have solid experimental and theoretical evidence to support the following predictions: In a decade, urban dwellers will have to wear gas masks to survive air pollution. By 1985, air pollution will have reduced the amount of sunlight reaching earth by one half.

In many of these examples, it's not that the science was bad – people weren't faking numbers – but that the science and facts are extremely limited and open to a whole host of narrative interpretations. The reason certain narratives get selected often has nothing to do with science at all: it has to do with mimesis, prestige, shock value, career advancement of the scientists, grants, political agendas.

What is so hypocritical, Girard thinks, about our deification of science is that we disguise subjective opinions, public dogmas, mere narratives with the prestige of objectivity. The reason that it is dangerous to deify science is the same reason it was dangerous to deify the Catholic Church. Just as the European conquest of the Americas was, at least partially, legitimized through the appeal to Catholicism in spreading the gospel, today we too need to legitimize our political pursuits with a sprinkle of reason and a dab of science. And just as whomever used to disagree with the Catholic Church we called heretics, we call those who disagree with politically charged, questionable science as anti-science, someone whose positions we don't even have to contend with. When deified science becomes a blocker to truth and genuine inquiry, because it is a conversation stopper – therein lies the hypocrisy.

### 3.6 The Blindspots of Science

**Johnathan Bi:** Last but certainly not least, Girard believes that the deification of science leads to a systematic rejection of certain types of truth. Perhaps I can summarize Girard's position here like this: science confuses its epistemic limitations for an ontological theory. What I mean to say here is that one of the defining methods of science, verification, limits science to the study of objective/external/material phenomena. In the early days of science, that was fine because science confined itself to the study of external phenomena: astronomy, physics, et cetera. Yet as science became more successful and prestigious, it aimed to apply this criteria of verification on other domains such as psychology, social theory, but still only permitted external material phenomena to be used as evidence, thereby categorically rejecting whole domains of truth.

The best example of this is perhaps the behavioralists – John Watson, B.F. Skinner, those guys – who even in the most charitable reading, believe in the thesis that human behavior can be fully explained by appealing to externally observable phenomena, physical behavior and interactions with the environment. Tools like introspection and the objects of introspection: mental states, emotions, concepts, representations, were thought of as causally irrelevant in the most charitable reading and perhaps non-existent in the least charitable reading. And I don't think it's a stretch to see the development of behavioralism as the dogmas of science and the scientific method going too far where they don't belong. When it comes to matters of the human condition, material external events are quite limited in how much they can explain. Introspection, intuition, subjective experience and maybe even religious revelation, this is the one that Girard cares a lot about, are much more important. Yet these types of "truths" have all been deprioritized, if not excommunicated in our scientific age. While the crude materialism of the behaviorist no longer represents the most sophisticated views in the academy, I think it has captured a large part of society. How many times have you heard this sentiment walking around Silicon Valley? "Oh yeah, we're just a bunch of neurons firing. Oh yeah, we're just atoms squirting chemicals. This materialism is the default position for those educated in science – it certainly is for me. And I think, at the very least, it leads to a lot of nihilism and existential despair.

Do you see now, why I suggested we interpret Girard as saying that science confuses its epistemic limitations for an ontological theory? What began as "external material is all that science can perceive" – an epistemic limitation, became, with the behavioralists, as the best example, "external material is all that really matters." Not unlike the historical church, which had a monopoly on what sources counted as the most important truths – namely, Scripture – the Church of Science also has its dogma on what types of truths it does and does not consider as legitimate. Maybe it's good that we don't consider religious revelation as serious truths anymore, but we also, as an entire society, stop taking the fruits of meditation, introspection, maybe even philosophical inquiry and subjective experience as seriously. We want charts and

graphs, we want studies and numbers, we want opinion polls and measurements. We gave up the types of truths that matter most to humans in exchange for truths that can be reproduced, falsified and verified.

Girard's surprising conclusion here is that just as those who claim to fight for victims are the real persecutors of modernity, the staunchest rationalists and scientists are the most religious and dogmatic of all people in modernity.

Let me be crystal clear, Girard thinks that the development of science and reason are great things with fantastic achievements we should all feel proud of. In fact, Girard himself tries very hard to convince us that what he is doing for anthropology is science, like what Darwin did for biology. The problem is simply that reason and science have been deified, they've gotten out of hand. And this deification leads us to design poor societies, be exposed to disastrous political narratives posing under the guise of science, and systematically ignoring whole categories of truth quintessential to human flourishing.

But given Girard's love for truth, perhaps what he fears the most from the hypocritical deification of science and reason is the problem with hypocrisy we just discussed, that it corrupts the original position and pushes people to the opposite. Girard is worried that politicizing and deifying science will delegitimize science altogether. Just as liberal hypocrisy spawned Nazism, perhaps Girard would attribute the rampant anti-intellectualism today as a response to the hypocritical parading of scientific dogma over the heads of others. In the final analysis, then, what is most worrisome about the church of science and reason is that it threatens to push people away from science and reason altogether and towards a new dark age.

## 4. The Force of Innovation

**Johnathan Bi:** The third major force that gets introduced by Christianity is innovation, the creative ability for genesis.

The fact that we are the most innovative culture is so obvious that I won't even bother giving too many examples here – space flight, modern medicine, nuclear weaponry, political systems, gender norms, money – Western civilization at least in the past 300 years is defined by and prides itself with change. With probably little surprise at this point, Girard thinks that Christianity is responsible for our innovative capacities, because it provides the cultural firmware, if you will, for innovation.

That firmware is summarized in one utterance by Girard. I quote:

The main prerequisite for real innovation is a minimal respect for the past and the mastery of its achievements, i.e., mimesis.

There are two key ideas captured in this one sentence. The first is captured in the word “minimal.” A minimal respect for the past. Girard is heeding against an exaggerated worship of the past here. What is not conducive to innovation is the reactionary idea not uncommon throughout most history – perhaps most famously amongst Confucians and Christians – that our best days are behind us. And the best we can do is to blindly imitate the past and press the brakes on the downward trajectory of history. Under such a worldview, the very word “innovation” had very negative connotations in the West up until about the 18th century. Its connotations were so negative because innovation implied a deviation from a sacred, albeit static and rigid ideal provided by myths of yore. Innovation was “practically synonymous with heresy” before the 18th century. Such an exaggerated respect of the past is often grounded on a religious belief in a mythologized past. Christianity frees us from this blind worship because it is a force, according to Girard, that tears down myths. It reveals to us what we once thought of as immutable, as arbitrary.

**David Perell:** In terms of what you're saying, I see this in the ahistoricism of Silicon Valley. And people there are so oriented towards the future that they have this hubris sometimes that the past doesn't matter. And I think it's really interesting how the most innovative place in the world has the least respect for its own history. And I'll explain what I mean. If you talk to people there, they're freakishly intelligent. They pride

themselves on the expansiveness of their knowledge. They just know so much about the world. But then they know surprisingly little about the roots, the origins of their own industry. But I'll compare that to something like, I don't know, the oil industry something. And the oil industry is more slow changing. And people there, they have this reverence for what came before. They understand their history deeply.

**Johnathan Bi:** I think that's a quite interesting and relevant correlation that you draw out between Silicon Valley and the oil industry, that the more innovative an industry is, the less historically aware and respectful it seems to be. And I think that's precisely the correlation that Girard is trying to draw out with the first half of that sentence, that a minimal respect for history is required. Because we all need to have this, as you coined it, Silicon Valley hubris, to not believe that our best achievements are already behind us in order for us to all have a future orientation.

But there's a second idea here, and that's captured in the word "respect". Important: Girard does not say disrespect, but a minimal "respect". We must have enough reverence, or at least curiosity, to see history as worthy of engagement. What Girard is heeding against here is the exaggerated progressive idea that the past has nothing to teach us, that we are so much better, that we ought to bring down anything tainted with the stench of the old.

What does this "respect" allow us to do? Mimesis. It allows us to imitate the past and master its achievements. And herein lies Girard's most interesting views on innovation. I quote:

In a truly innovative process, it is often so continuous with imitation that its presence can be discovered only after the fact, through a process of abstraction.

How can this be? After all, Girard is seemingly drawing out a connection between imitation and innovation. Yet we all conceive of imitation and innovation to be polar opposites. How can this be?

What underlies this claim is Girard's understanding of innovation as always proceeding internally within a system. We, as humans, never create anything meaningful *ex nihilo*. Let me read you the passage that surrounds the original quote

Real change can only take root when it springs from the type of coherence that tradition alone provides. Tradition can only be successfully challenged from the inside. The main prerequisite for real innovation is a minimal respect for the past and a mastery of its achievements, i.e., mimesis. To expect novelty to cleanse itself of imitation is to expect a plant to grow with its roots up in the air. In the long run the obligation always to rebel may be more destructive of novelty than the obligation never to rebel.

Girard is making a Burkean conservative point here. That tradition, despite its many flaws, has a degree of wisdom and coherence that we must rely on to build meaningful things. As individuals, we need to stand on the shoulders of giants and we can't simply create *ex nihilo* any more than a plant can grow with its roots in the air. And so with this idea of innovation – at least meaningful innovation – as internal to a system, it's clear why innovation is synonymous with imitation. After all, how else do you understand all the intricacies of a system without learning and imitating?

History is littered with examples where repetition, replication, imitation is a necessary precondition for innovation – think about Goethe, who was a master of reproduction reproducing the great poetic forms before he began to pioneer his own. But not just artistic innovation, Girard reminds us that industrial innovation follows a similar pattern. I quote again:

It began with Germany, which, in the nineteenth century, was thought to be incapable of imitating the English, and this at the precise moment it surpassed them. It continued with the Americans in whom, for a long time, the Europeans saw mediocre gadget-makers who weren't theoretical or cerebral enough to take on a world leadership role. And it happened once more with the Japanese who, after World War II, were still seen as pathetic imitators of Western superiority. It's

starting up again, it seems, with Korea, and soon, perhaps, it'll be the Chinese. A of these consecutive mistakes about the creative potential of imitation cannot be due to chance.

This surprise of innovators, when they're imitators, when they're "copycats", sudden innovate in their own right – is perhaps a modern phenomenon. It is because we draw a false dichotomy between innovation and imitation. Let's take a look at two historical examples that we take to be polar opposites, but I think will reveal the same form: Jack Ma with Alibaba and Einstein with general relativity.

In the 2000s, many thought of Alibaba as but a copycat of eBay or Amazon. But transplanting an entire business model to a different country is not just about mere regurgitation – there are different customs, there are different needs, there's a different regulatory environment, such that they had to adapt the business model considerably, which necessitated innovation. It's a little surprise then that in the 2000s Alibaba genuinely started building completely new business models that did not exist in the Western tech ecosystem. And today, their entire careers in Silicon Valley may be by observing leading trends in the Chinese technology ecosystem, most of which in turn came from observing leading trends in the Chinese consumer, and applying that or seeding similar companies in the US. On the inverse we think Einstein's theory of general relativity is truly original, but he did not create it *ex nihilo*. Such a naive view occludes the years upon years of study, of training, of understanding, of imitating classical physics, which Einstein improved upon. These two activities which – in our modern mind – could not be further apart, reveal the same form, study and imitation, which leads to mastery, which leads to genuine and meaningful innovation.

This project, interpreting Girard itself, is an example of imitation being identical with innovation. I was trained in a historical philosophical approach where the philosopher in training learns by reconstructing the arguments within the canon, and not just philosophizing *ex nihilo* in an armchair. But reconstruction is not just regurgitation because you are burdened with interpretive freedom. Go read Girard and then come



back to these lectures. Go read Hegel and then go to Kojève – you'd be surprised at how much innovation has to come from the interpreter: there's restructuring, excluding, highlighting, adding, giving examples.

To summarize then, the necessary perspective for real innovation is a delicate tightrope between a reactionary idolization of the past and a progressive rejection of the past – we need to revere it just enough to learn all of its secrets, but not so much that we don't feel licensed to make improvements. This delicate, delicate balancing allows us to properly imitate those whom have come before us and in mastering the achievements, become masters and innovators ourselves. No act of innovation can be entirely done from a vacuum and thus must involve some degree of imitation. And no imitation can be adopted without being adapted and thus must involve some degree of innovation.

## 4.1 Fashion

**Johnathan Bi:** So how has innovation become perverted in modernity? The perversion takes on the form of hypocrisy. It's the same story over again. It's the fetishization of innovation, of the new, of change, of originality, that proves itself to be the most derivative conformity, disguised as rupture – and Girard encapsulates all of that under the word “fashion”.

While Girard means for fashion to encompass a much broader set of phenomena, we can tease out the form of this perversion by looking at fashion in the colloquial sense: our clothing. Fashion, at least to my understanding, a great deal of popular fashion, observes this logic. It derives its value from being original, from not being owned by others. It's a form of distancing. That distancing is conformist because it is determined by the other. This is the lesson we had learned in negative mimesis. Let me give you a funny example. I actually had a very good friend who wore two shoes, each with completely different colors, for the sake that no one else wore shoes this way. In some sense, this negative fashion is more arbitrary than pure conformity, as this example shows, because traditions such as wearing the same colored shoes usually exist for

good reasons. And I think fashion is also conformist because many times, the way we try to distance is exactly the same as others: think about the example we talked about in American Psycho and the business card scene, where all the bankers wanted to differentiate themselves, but they did so in the same way, printing and getting very, very similar business cards. And I don't think this intuition is too far off from the logic of popular fashion. A new trend is arbitrarily set off by some influencers to differentiate themselves from the crowd. Everyone in the crowd slowly starts to converge onto the trend because they too want to be different. And that trend slowly starts to lose its value and the whole cycle needs to start over again.

Fashion, then, is a desire for innovation for its own sake and a strong distaste for imitation and it has permeated society – more than ever, we want to be individuals, want to be original, but Girard warns us this way. I quote:

You can't subvert tradition except from within. Once you are exterior to everything you're in the void and you're there to stay. That's where I think we are today. The more we condemn imitation, the more we surrender to it under various guises. Fashion has never been more powerful than it is today.

We don't want to spend years anymore studying classical physics. We don't want to spend our youth imitating the traditional poetic forms. We no longer want to be mere interpreters of other philosophers and we feel ashamed when we imitate other people's business models. The problem is that meaningful innovation is dependent on imitation and as a result, what we get are grotesque displays of originality that are arbitrary and in fact, very derivative.

Girard has this to say again:

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

they're obliged to turn their coats inside out (perhaps not unlike my friend wearing two colored shoes) and with great fanfare, announce some new "epistemological rupture" that is supposed to revolutionize the field from top to bottom. This rage for originality has produced a few rare masterpieces and quite a few rather bizarre things... Just a few years ago the mimetic escalation had become so insane that it drove everyone to make himself more incomprehensible than his peers... The principle of originality at all costs leads to paralysis. The more we celebrate "creative and enriching" innovations, the fewer of them there are... For two thousand years the arts have been imitative, and it's only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that people started refusing to be mimetic. Why? Because we were more mimetic than ever. Rivalry plays a role such that we strive vainly to exorcise imitation.

**David Perell:** The thing that resonates with me about this quote is the section about the arts. I find that modern art is aimless and nihilistic and this quote gives me a window into why I feel that way. Modern art just tries too hard to be original and I compare that to the pre-modern era at a time when artists were pursuing beauty and trying to capture the world to try to be accurate instead of trying to be original. And now, I think modern art has devolved because it tries so hard to be original and quality, quality is no longer the primary pursuit.

**Johnathan Bi:** I think that's right, but the problem with fashion isn't just that no meaningful innovations can ever be produced, in the case of art, that there's no more quality and it's been traded for originality anymore, in your words – but that fashion can even turn us off from innovation itself.

For example, I think the public is growing sour on the technology sector, partly because of how much it exaggerates its own originality. The most trivial and derivative of companies are painted in the light of radical innovations and ruptures. I mean, go build Uber for dogs and go build Facebook for nannies – they might be great and meaningful businesses, but don't disguise them as radical innovations. I find that it

this type of hypocrisy that makes innovation somewhat of a laughingstock and delegitimizes it as a cultural value altogether.

What hypocrisy is to love, what dogma is to truth, fashion is to innovation. The perennial problem of all forms of hypocrisy is that it delegitimizes the position which it claims to champion.

## 5. An Ephemeral Triumph

**Johnathan Bi:** In summary, then, even when describing the triumph of modernity, Girard's theory captures both our highs and our lows – what is so unique, exciting, praiseworthy, but also what is so perverse, hypocritical and distasteful and why the two are intimately conjoined. It is the forcefulness of love that makes our hypocrisy unpalatable. It is the importance of truth that makes our dogmas all the more frustrating and it is the heights of innovation that makes our fashions all the more laughable. Think back to the rocket analogy. If love, truth and innovation is the divinely ordained trajectory which Christianity has laid out for us, then hypocrisy, dogma, and fashion are consequences of the gravitational pull from corrupt human nature.

But make no mistake. Overall, Girard is a champion of all these positive forces we mentioned today – from the birth of science all the way to the expansion of global capitalism. Just as a good parent does not hold back on necessary criticism and Tocqueville – a self-identified ally of democracy – certainly did not mince words on democratic shortcomings. Girard's criticisms are so severe because he desperately wants modernity to succeed. Modernity – then, for Girard – is a legitimate triumph of mankind despite the hypocrisies. We can embrace it wholeheartedly, even if we can't embrace the whole of it.

Girard's achievement, I would argue, is his ability to make sense of, legitimize, speak with, and give advice across the entire political spectrum, from the progressives who affirm the direction of history to the reactionaries who want to bring back classical

ideals and just about everyone in between. To the progressives, Girard legitimates their championing of the key forces within modernity: the concern for victims, just for all, science and the seeking of truth, innovation and all the technological advancements that have brought us here. However, Girard warns them to not fall prey to hypocrisy, to dogma, to fashion. For not only would they be committing the very mistakes they claim to avoid, they would be delegitimizing these positive forces within modernity and engendering the opposite. To the reactionaries, Girard sees them as primarily reacting against progressive hypocrisy. He is able to understand their distaste of modernity – after all, what is more disgusting in the championing of evil than championing evil under the banner of good. Girard warns reactionaries, however, to separate their dislike of hypocrites from the fundamentally good values that the hypocrites promote. Love, truth, innovation are praiseworthy, even if many who champion them today are not.

Even the triumph of modernity is tainted with perversion, as our stubborn human nature rebels against the path Christianity has set for us. The careful listener will observe violence lurking in the shadows behind all three of these forces. The hypocrisy of love engenders and legitimates violence. Truth tears down the rituals that make for easy resolution and the prohibitions that have kept violence in check. And innovation arms violence with increasingly powerful means. Violence is the fourth and final force and it will step out of the shadows and be the central topic of our next and final lecture. Alas, this triumph of modernity will show itself to be fragile and ephemeral indeed. The conclusion to Girard's theory will also be the conclusion to the story of mankind.

## 0. Introduction

**David Perell:** So far, we've only discussed René Girard's understanding of history. But in this lecture, we're going to leap forward and examine the present. For me, this will be the crescendo that we've been building towards for the past five lectures.

We're going to see how all of the Girardian concepts that we've come to understand together, such as mimesis, metaphysical desire, resentment, scapegoating, how all c

those things manifest in our world as it is today. The same forces that drove conflict old stories like Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet and historical events like the Trojan War, they still animate the world today.

Girard's theory puts words to what the biologist E.O. Wilson once said, and I quote

The real problem of humanity is the following: we have Paleolithic emotions; medieval institutions; and god-like technology.

And we've made great strides in our technological capacities, our institutional design and even our rational understanding of the world. But still, the stubbornness of human nature refuses to budge.

And with that tension in mind, let's dive into Girard's understanding of modernity.

**Johnathan Bi:** Two lectures ago, we began detailing our past – pagan religion and society. Last lecture, we discussed the rupture – Christianity. In this lecture, we're going to discuss the present – modernity. And in the next, we're going to discuss the near future – imminent apocalypse.

It should be evident, hopefully, from our last lecture that the values of Christianity – love and truth – are not just different, but diametrically opposed to the foundations of pagan and indeed all of human society, which are violence and deceit. Rupture, then, is really not an exaggeration to describe Christianity. How will human society digest such an incompatible and threatening substance? What trajectory has history been on with this foreign injection? These are the questions that I hope to answer in the last two lectures.

Christianity unleashes four powerful forces within human history, three magnificent and one less so, in fact, one is apocalyptic: love, truth, innovation and violence.

In this lecture on modernity then, we will be analyzing the cause and consequences the three good forces. And in the final lecture on apocalypse, we will examine the fourth and final force of violence. The split between these two lectures are temporal: one is about the present and the other is about the near future. But I also encourage you to understand the split between these two lectures as both examining modernity but from radically different lenses. This lecture will examine current society as if it already were the kingdom of God. The next lecture will examine current society as if we were still a pagan society. In the next lecture, by examining our current society as if we were still a pagan society – needing scapegoats and myths and lies and deceit – we’re going to understand how the Christian message has fundamentally altered mechanisms of violence. And in this lecture, by examining our current society as if we were already the kingdom of God, as actualizing love and truth, we can understand where we have made genuine progress and where our fallen human nature refuses to budge.

But before we delve into these three forces, let me give you an idea of the trajectory of history that the Christian rupture has set us on.

## 1. Modernity as Rupture

**Johnathan Bi:** For millennia, human society operated on a cyclical time, whose cycles were demarcated by founding murders. Societies would first descend into chaos — this was the mimetic contagion. A scapegoat would be arbitrarily chosen to inherit all the blame and be expelled, often meaning killed. And this founding murder would bring back a peace so miraculous that people attributed the saving force to the victim, the now dead victim, deifying it paradoxically. Of course, both the scapegoating and the deification are equally deceitful. The victim neither had the power to cause or end the chaos — it’s all a psychological projection by the crowd, grounded on nothing but unanimity. Myths then, would be created out of this real foundational event and out of these myths spawned core institutions of pagan societies: prohibitions prevented violence, and rituals acted as a release valve for violence. But as any ideology or

worldly order, these myths alongside their institutions would start to lose their prestige over time. The moral paradigm would lose its force and a society descend again into chaos, this whole process had to begin anew: chaos, founding murder, deification, myth-making, *ad infinitum*.

This four-fold process is called The Scapegoat Mechanism and for Girard was deep deeply ambivalent. It's a combination of both ultimate evil and worldly good. Sacrifice one for all, limit freedom of the parts for the stability of the whole and use violence and lies to establish worldly order. But the good thing about it is, you only need to kill one innocent man to save the entire community.

What is required for the functioning of the scapegoat mechanism was that its mechanisms had to remain hidden. Because sacredity and pagan power, as we discussed, are predicated and based on a deceitful unanimity, the victim's innocence must remain hidden, lest the whole arbitrariness be exposed and the entire edifice come crumbling down. For pagan religions to work, the crowd must not know that source of power of their god actually comes from the psychological projections of the crowd.

This is where Christ comes in. Christ, through the crucifixion, showed precisely the innocence of the victim, the guilt and the projection of the crowd and gave us a moral paradigm through which we can expose, decode and free ourselves from religion altogether. The Christian revelation for Girard becomes the rupture point of human history. Slowly but surely, humanity loses its ability to create myth out of these deified scapegoats. And with it, the legitimacy of prohibitions – now considered oppressive and the efficacy of sacrifice – now considered cruel – also began to deteriorate.

But remember, this is not an unqualified good thing. If violence and lies properly directed are the foundations of worldly order, then love and truth can only bring about worldly chaos. And so we might say, in a very reductive fashion, that the scapegoat mechanism is a worldly good but an ultimate evil, whereas Christ and Christ's



revelation is ultimately good but brings forth worldly chaos. Girard reminds us that Christ himself tells us as much.

I quote to you Matthew 10:34, Christ has this to say:

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

Christ pulls the cultural rug underneath our feet and takes humanity from cyclical time to a linear time.

## 2. Modernity as Continuity

**Johnathan Bi:** But history since Christ cannot only be interpreted as a rupture but also as a strong continuity with pagan society. It is continuity in the first and weak sense in that the Christian revelation takes time to work in the world. The demythologization takes time because mythology has been with us for so darn long. Even Christianity itself, according to Girard, became mythologized, succumbing to this inertia. The past 2000 years has been a gradually waning off of religion for the human race. But it is a continuity in a deeper and much more interesting sense because the building blocks of human nature have not changed. Everything that we discussed on the lectures on psychology, mimesis, mimetic desire, metaphysical desire, mimetic rivalry, our need for catharsis, all of that remains constant.

To put it succinctly then, what has ruptured is our social historical conditions. Culture is fundamentally different – we protect victims now whereas they used to be persecuted. We value truth now whereas we used to believe dogmatically. But what is continuous then are the people within those cultures, their yearnings and capacities, their psychology and needs. And the key interplay between the break in culture and the continuity in psychology will be the hidden motor driving these two final lectures.

If you consider that the cultural conditions we have been freed from are in some sense natural to the human condition – in the sense that we naturally create religion, we naturally scapegoat – and thus the conditions we are in now as unnatural, it is readily intelligible why so many problems of modernity take on the form of hypocrisy: persecution under the banner of protecting victims, rigid adherence to scientific dogmas under the guise of free intellectual exploration, or the most derivative of inventions packaged as the most radical innovations.

The core problems of modernity that we will explore in this lecture take on the shape of hypocrisy because we live in a fundamentally Christian culture that identifies and tries to correct the flaws of our natural psychological tendencies and as a result has gone against those natural tendencies. It is this incompatibility then between our cultural ideals and our natural tendencies that leads to hypocrisy. We are no longer living in a cultural environment which we have evolved and adapted to.

**David Perell:** Yeah, I've always liked the line from the biologist E.O. Wilson who said

The real problem of humanity is the following: we have Paleolithic emotions; medieval institutions; and godlike technology.

**Johnathan Bi:** I think that quote is apt and getting to the point if we consider culture to be a type of technology that we're really forcing ourselves to live up to these cultural ideals which are some form of technology that we really can't achieve.

## 2.1 Metaphor of the Rocket

**Johnathan Bi:** The metaphor then that I think best captures this radical break as well as stubborn continuity is the period when a rocket has launched but has not reached escape velocity. I think this analogy is apt first because such a rocket is clearly a radical break from when it was stationary but it is also a continuity because it is still governed by the logic of gravity and still within the gravitational pull. The same I think can be said for the point of history we are in now. There's a clear radical break

between our culture that protects victims and all the ones that have come before we made them into scapegoats. But the stubborn gravitational pull of the human condition remains the same. We still need to persecute and find victims to blame. The analogy of the rocket I think is apt second because such a rocket can either reach orbit and be freed once and for all or just be blown to smithereens. And for Girard, our future is just as binary, kingdom of God or violent apocalypse with no in between.

Christianity sets us free or perhaps just as aptly, exiles us from the comfort of circular time and sets us on a linear, accelerating path. The aim of these last two lectures then is to describe the forces within and the direction of this linearity. By thwarting the scapegoat mechanism, Christianity unleashes four forces within history that slowly but surely take us to the modernity which we find ourselves today. As with all things Girard, these forces are deeply ambivalent. Within the Pandora's box, we have the good – love, truth, innovation – and the bad – violence that are growing and have broken free all at the same time. What's more, even within these forces Girard's analysis is ambivalent. Love often manifests as hypocrisy, truth becomes dogma, innovation degenerates into fashion and even within violence Girard sees a key motivational force that has brought forth the most enviable living conditions of modernity when channeled through capitalism. Let us use the rest of this lecture then to examine and reflect on the three good forces of modernity, beginning with love.

### 3. The Force of Love

**Johnathan Bi:** The most laudable force that comes out of the Christian revelation after the destruction of pagan culture is love. This love stands in stark contrast to the Greek notion of Eros. Eros is marked by two qualities: First, a fundamental concern for oneself rather than the object that is loved. And second, Eros is limited often to a select group of individuals or objects.

**David Perell:** You know what's coming to mind here is that I wonder if romantic love is an example of both of these qualities. So let me explain what I mean. First, that

romantic love is, as you're saying, clearly limited to one person. Just think about how much in our world we prize monogamy in the modern West but there's a second point here that modern dating is often less about the other person as an end in themselves and more about using the other person actually as a means to look cool or to make yourself stand out and be proud and confident. But the problem with that is that you're not loving them for who they are, but you're loving them for what they do for you. And when that's the case, it kind of reminds me of buying clothes or something where it's less about love. It's a transaction.

**Johnathan Bi:** I think that is a good modern example of Eros. And I think your intuition is spot on there that there's something perverse about Eros because it's a concern for the other that really isn't a concern for the other. It's a concern for the self disguised as the concern for the other. The love that the Christian revelation has unleashed on the world – Christian love, agape – is not like this at all. It's different at both points. It's fundamentally, one, a concern for the other for the sake of the other. And two, importantly, it's indiscriminating. It is a love that stems from identification with the other and expands to all humanity.

The reason that Girard thinks Christianity is responsible for this agape love are obvious. Christ's defining quality, the one he asks us to imitate, is his unconditional unwavering love. Furthermore, the destruction of rituals, which legitimized catharsis and the violence and anger and hate that followed catharsis, also led to the growth of love.

But most importantly, it was the collapse of prohibition, of social difference – the breaking down of arbitrary distinctions among men that led to this love taking root in the world. In societies that have been touched by Christianity, we are no longer primarily Brahmin or Shudra, man or woman, German or Italian. We are first and foremost human. We are equals, and Christianity is this equalizing force. Framed negatively, the love predicated upon difference – say the concern a lord has for his subjects and serfs, or the serf's loyalty to the lord – it is incomplete because first, the

scale of it is rather limited – our social roles only have us have responsibilities toward so many people. But second, the love that stems from one's own social roles stems from a fundamental concern for oneself and is in a deep way prideful. My concern for you, my serf, is rooted in me wanting to maintain my own self-conception as a good lord. The love predicated upon difference, then, is Eros, whereas the love predicated upon Christian equality is agape.

And so much of our society nowadays is underpinned by this Christian love and the unique Christian concern for the victim, what appear to be secular concepts, secular intuitions, secular institutions. Once we look under the hood, so to speak, we will find Christianity underneath.

**David Perell:** To what you're saying here, we live in a Christian society and we don't even know it. Take the idea of human rights. It's self-evident, right? And that's why it appears in the Declaration of Independence. That's the wrong way to think about it. The idea of human rights, it's downstream of the idea of Imago Dei, which is the biblical idea that every person, no matter what they look like, is made in the image of God and therefore has inherent worth. So it's Christianity, it's Christianity that inspires the famous line from the Declaration of Independence, which says, and you've heard this before: we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal. But the craziest thing is that the same secular people who dismiss Christian values, those are the same people who are the most passionate defenders of human rights. And what's funny about it is they're in some sense the most religious of all and they don't even realize it.

**Johnathan Bi:** I think that's right, that most people don't realize the true source of where their ideas really stem from. But I don't think it's just concepts like equality and human rights that you've identified that's downstream Christianity. Take this phenomenon that I find quite curious, adding "big" to anything in our society automatically makes it bad: big tech, big pharma, big philanthropy. And I think this is another Christian concept. This goes to show how the Christian moral paradigm of

protecting the victim, protecting the little guy is so steeped into our culture. It's real everywhere.

And Girard identifies so many different institutions as well as modern intuitions that are really Christian in essence. For example, he sees Christian love and the concern for the victim as operating in domestic institutions.

Let me give you a quote:

Since the High Middle Ages all the great human institutions have evolved in the same direction: more humane private and public law, penal legislation, judicial practice, the rights of individuals ... When viewed in terms of the large picture, the social and cultural evolution goes always in the same direction, toward the mitigation of punishment, greater protection for potential victims.

But that's not it. Girard also sees this love as operating in foreign affairs. I quote again:

When a catastrophe occurs at some spot on the globe, the nations that are well off feel obligated to send aid or to participate in rescue operations. You may say these gestures are more symbolic than real and reflect a concern for prestige. No doubt, but in what era before ours and under what skies has international mutual aid constituted a source of prestige for nations? There is just one rubric that gathers together everything I am summarizing in no particular order and without concern for completeness, it's this: the concern for victims.

Even our refusal to declare our achievements, Girard believes, is an achievement of Christian concern for the victim. This is how pervasive it is. Let me quote one more time:

We can compare ancient societies to one another, but the global society now in the making is truly unique. Its superiority in every area is so overwhelming, so evident that it is forbidden, paradoxically, to acknowledge the fact, especially in Europe. This prohibition stems from the fear of a return to tyrannical pride. It is also the

fear of humiliating nations that don't belong to the privileged group. In other words, it is once again the concern for victims that dominates what it is permissible and impermissible to say.

Hidden uneasily alongside Girard's anticipation of apocalypse then, is a restrained nonetheless fundamental affirmation of modernity that can easily be missed between Girard's dense lines on violence. As these passages show, Girard praises modernity wholeheartedly. He answers a resounding "Yes!" to the question, "are we the best society that has ever been?"

### 3.1 Theatre

**Johnathan Bi:** Girard is not being naive here. As his sober analysis of international care suggests, he does not think that all that appears to be compassion and love actually takes on this noble Christian form of agape, this genuine indiscriminating concern for the other. More often than not, it's more that our society has rendered compassion prestigious and people are pursuing it out of vanity – we might call this theater because it's putting on a display for others.

And this is what Girard has to say. I quote again:

Even the renunciation of violent mimetic desire cannot spread without being transformed into a social mechanism, into blind imitation... Rather than an authentic exit from mimetic desire then there is mimetic submission to a culture that advocates that exit.

Girard's point here is that just as we have conformed to stoning victims before, we are now conforming to helping victims. The action may be different in content, but the form of that action is still the same: conformity of mimesis.

The acts of theatrical love that Girard has in mind are people who just play along with the cultural currents — "Yeah, sure, I'll volunteer my time." "Sure, I'll donate to this cause." "Sure, I'll post a social media post to spread awareness" — not because they

have a grounded belief, but simply because it's the fashion of the times and they want to be seen on the right side of history. What appears to be agape here then is really Eros. They are doing it for their own vanity and they only help the victims that are fashionable to help.

There's a deep critique here of contemporary culture, that humans have not fundamentally changed – we haven't let go of our pride in favor of love as individual choices. Or even more strongly, if you drop the same people who are sheepishly protecting victims in another cultural environment, they would readily join the stoners. But this is also a deep praise of our current society. After all, we shouldn't expect people to behave otherwise. That's what being mimetic creatures means. In social community, the amount of authentic individuality is relatively small compared to mimesis and its forces. So we should be glad that people are conforming to as no ideal as love.

Girard's comments here on this theatrical display would be his most urgent warning on the topic, if not for the fact that there is an even more pernicious mutation of love that threatens to delegitimize love altogether: That is hypocrisy.

## 3.2 Hypocrisy

**Johnathan Bi:** Hypocrisy goes a step beyond mere theater. Whereas theater sees you performing the actions of love without being motivated by love, hypocrisy sees you acting against love in the name of love. Hypocrisy actively persecutes its own victims in the name of protecting victims. The idea is this: The Christian revelation has exposed our evil tendencies towards persecution and as a result, our culture is one that sides with the victim and against persecution. But our stubborn human nature remains the same, and we still need to persecute. However, it's no longer fashionable, as was the case in, say, the day of Achilles, to openly share our desire for conquest, vengeance, and hatred. We can only pursue these desires discreetly, secretly, by disguising their pro-social motives. In our culture, the only acceptable reason we can have for persecution is to stop persecution. The wolf must now don sheepskin.



Think back to the personal example I gave of my college acquaintance, who was an economic progressive. The story went something like this: he was very passionate about distributive justice, and every time I would meet him, he would go on and on about how much more we could be doing for the least fortunate and initially I thought well what a loving, compassionate, caring guy. However, as I got to know him better realized that he was a really resentful and spiteful person. I had a hard time squaring his seemingly religious concern for the poor with his own lack of concern and care person. But it all made sense when he confessed to me that what was motivating his progressivism wasn't a universal benevolent concern for the poor, but a localized resentment of the rich. You see, my acquaintance came from a middle-class family, grew up with upper-middle-class peers and was always made to feel poor. His orientation of values against wealth was not for itself, but to get back at his peers. By painting money-making as immoral, he found himself on the moral high ground. He wasn't concerned with economic victims that much at all, but in the culture we are the best way for him to attack his richer peers was to accuse them of victimization and economic exploitation.

I think this quote from Girard captures the essence of the story that I've been trying to tell quite well:

The victims most interesting to us are always those who allow us to condemn our neighbors. And our neighbors do the same. They always think first about victims for whom they hold us responsible.

On this front, Girard isn't convinced society has really changed that much at all – that we've really given up persecution. Rather, it's more a superficial switch of who we think it's acceptable to persecute. The canonical victims are completely off limits: the ethnic minorities, the lower classes, the disabled – and Girard thinks that's a great thing. But we've simply flipped it on its head. Now we feel warranted, perhaps even compelled, to persecute all types of privilege. Whether it's white privilege, ableist privilege, whether it's class privilege or men's privilege.

Girard has this to say:

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

And this cruelty is the first problem of hypocrisy. That it does exactly what it explicitly vows not to do – persecution. Now lest we trivialize the dangers here by just giving example of a harmless economic progressive, Girard reminds us of the terrible atrocities committed in the name of protecting victims. I quote:

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

But there is an even more dangerous problem with hypocrisy, beyond doing explicitly what it vows not to do. And that's this: Hypocrisy delegitimizes love from the inside and legitimizes, engenders the opposite: violence. Recall, in Girardian psychology, we hold intellectual positions, political positions, less for the positions themselves, but because of our relationships with the people who hold those positions. Reductively: if we feel an affinity towards them, then we are nudged to adopt their position and if we feel disgusted or disdain towards them, then we are nudged away from their position. The problem is that people naturally feel repelled by hypocrites – so if most of the people who are espousing love are hypocrites, then love and concern for the victim itself would start losing its cultural prestige. Even though we may try to use our faculties of reason, it is very hard for people not to feel repulsed by the hypocrisy by those like my college acquaintances and pushed to the opposite side of the spectrum.

Again, lest I trivialize what is at stake here, let's briefly turn to Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* to see how hypocrisy engendered the Nazis. One of the key questions that Arendt wants to answer in this book is how Germany and most

curiously of all, how the German intellectual elite, could have so readily welcomed Nazism after espousing humanistic, compassionate, loving values for centuries. Arendt's explanation begins with the bourgeois of Germany, the capitalist elite of the time. Not unlike the woke capital of today, Arendt reasons that a double morality emerged within the bourgeois German elite of the early 20th century: there was a private morality of acquisition that stood in stark contradiction with the publicly paraded humanitarian values of compassion, concern for the weak, tolerance that they paraded. In short, the bourgeois were hypocrites.

And it was none other than this hypocrisy that first, made the values they espoused hollow. It delegitimized love and compassion and pushed people towards the openly violent values of the Nazis. Second, it was the bourgeois lack of consistency that made the Nazis' consistency seem refreshing. If the bourgeois claimed they were saints and acted as gangsters, at least the Nazis acted like gangsters and claimed they were gangsters. That's why they were refreshing to the people of the Weimar Republic. In short, it is not a pull towards the value of the Nazis that made the intellectual elite give their support, but a push away from hypocrisy. The Nazis were simply the opposite of what the woke capital, the bourgeois, were. And that's why people rallied to them.

I will share with you Arendt's own words here. I quote:

Since the bourgeoisie claimed to be the guardian of Western traditions and confounded all moral issues by parading publicly virtues which it not only did not possess in private and business life, but actually held in contempt, it seemed revolutionary to admit cruelty, disregard of human values... those who traditionally hated the bourgeoisie and had voluntarily left respectable society saw [in the Nazis] only the lack of hypocrisy and respectability, not the content of Nazism itself.

**David Perell:** That's a terrifying thought.

**Johnathan Bi:** It is a terrifying thought. And I think it has very practical contemporary relevance to the disastrous consequences of the woke capital and progressive

hypocrisy today.

To summarize, even within this one force of love that Christianity has let loose in modernity, we see three different strands that range from the divine to the worldly to the apocalyptic. Genuine Christian love helps others indiscriminately for the sake of others. It is a force as strong as ever that we can genuinely be proud of. Theatrical love performs the actions of love for the sake of one's vanity. Although conformist, it is somewhat laudable. Hypocritical love acts against love in the name of love. Girard sees this form of hypocrisy rampant in our victim-obsessed society and is capable of delegitimizing love altogether as a cultural value and engendering its opposite – a reactionary killing of victims – as it had in the Weimar Republic.

### 3.3 The Force of Truth

**Johnathan Bi:** The second force that Christianity injects into history, which reaches its pinnacle in modernity, is truth. Like love, it is one of our great triumphs. In fact, these two forces, truth and love, as we'll soon see, are inseparable. What does Girard have in mind when he talks about the increase and proliferation of truth? There's too many things that I can bring up here. There are the countless victories of science, the mastery of travel on land, air, and sea. There's the victory over disease and starvation, the dispelling of illusions and myths. But I think Girard also has in mind the way reason has gained prestige. Look around our world. Everything is, or at least claims to be, grounded on reason. Social political theories all gain legitimacy not through divine mandates or hereditary lineage but appeal to reason. Our system of law is not based on God's prohibitions but claims, at least, to be the product of reason, however fallible. Reason also has not been as heavily praised or rewarded in industry than it has now in our knowledge economy.

More so than almost any civilization, we appear to value knowledge more and believe in reason's ability to obtain it. Far are we from the Garden of Eden's prohibition against the tree of knowledge. Far are we from the intellectual humility of Job. Far are we from the lessons of Oedipus that knowing more can lead to disaster.

So what caused this proliferation of truth, and who's responsible? It should be no surprise that Girard's answer is Christianity. This may seem an implausible answer initially. Indeed, we often pit Christianity and reason, certainly science and Christianity, as against each other. Girard's answer here then, is as interesting as it is counterintuitive. The first negative way that Christianity brought forth truth is that it dispelled myth. This should be a familiar idea at this point. Christianity exposes the deceitfulness of worldly foundations and begins to tear down prohibitions, rituals and all pagan religions. And it is only when we cease to look for truth in myth does reason even have the fertile ground to bear the fruits of truth. After all, if something is already explained by a wildly, wildly prestigious myth that it's fatal for me to question, then reason will not even want to begin to question it.

I think Girard's interlocutor sums up his views very nicely. I quote:

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

Girard tells us that "the disappearance of religion is a Christian phenomenon par excellence" because Christianity was the original truth-seeking discipline that sought to dispel false religions. In this view, modernity's concern for truth is more Judaic than Athenian. In fact, Christianity not only foresaw, but in some sense actively brought about its own demise, as the content of Christianity – the pursuit of truth – started to rebel against the religious form of Christianity. Science then, for Girard, is the patricidal son of Christianity. "Patricidal" because it unjustly scapegoated Christianity – rejecting all of it and not just the religious form. "Son" because science is a Christian discipline through and through, continuing the tradition that Christ began of accessing truth and dispelling myth.

### 3.4 The Epistemology of Love

**Johnathan Bi:** But there is a much stronger and positive reason that Christianity is responsible for the proliferation of truth, reason and science beyond just the negative dispelling of myth and clearing the fertile ground, so to speak. And that reason is none other than love.

Girard has this to say, I quote:

Love is at one and the same time the divine being and the basis of any real knowledge. The New Testament contains what amounts to a genuine epistemology of love.

Girard is arguing for a strong causal relationship here, that love – the first force we described – is a necessary precondition for truth. But why is that? Why is love a necessary precondition for truth? We conceive of truth as a self-standing activity. What does love – a relation of people – matter for truth? Well, when I frame it in that way the Girardian answer is quite obvious. The relationship between person and object, say it with me here, really represents a relationship between person and person. This is one of the fundamental conclusions of mimesis: mediation. This is what it means that we're social creatures.

In order for my relationships with other people, to not mediate the truths I access, either positively or negatively then, I can't either hate nor unduly fetishize any single person. I mean, think about when the condition of love is not satisfied. Think back to my college acquaintance. He felt resentment for his rich peers, which mediated him into an economically progressive position. And think about German society – they didn't believe that Nazi's values were true, but they simply aligned towards them because they were resentful of the hypocritical bourgeois. Nazism was not the truth for German society any more than economic progressivism was for my acquaintance. In both cases, the truth has been distorted because of resentful mediation among people. And of course, this works in the positive direction too. If I overly fetishize someone, if they want to – to use Girardian language here – acquire their being, they might subscribe to their positions even if I don't find them true.

Christian love, as we discussed, is not possessive and deeply desirous. And it certainly isn't hate. It's neither a push nor pull from the self. Because the self really isn't in the picture here. It is a concern of the other for the other, which means that my own beauty, my own pride, my own self-conception falls by the wayside. When I love someone in this Christian way, it is a dissolution of myself which takes away the strength of metaphysical desire. And when we do this in an indiscriminate way, when we learn to love all – we become freed from mediation and we are free to pursue truth, whether that means our genuine desires or objective scientific inquiry. I hope this helps us make sense of Girard's quote. Christian love is the place of objectivity then, because it is the only type of relationship where the self is not in view and where the relations between self and other are in harmony. In love, we are not overly resentful or overly admiring of others and thus are not mimetically pulled by them.

This is all quite abstract, so let me give you a few examples. This is a story that I've shared before. I grew up idolizing entrepreneurs – the Steve Jobs of the world, and when I went to college, I felt like I had to drop out and start a company as soon as possible. So I did that. My freshman spring, I dropped out, raised a small round, and the company ended up crashing and burning out of vanity. And it's not that I didn't enjoy building companies, but the degree to which I desired it and certainly the urgency which I felt like I had to achieve it was disproportionate to my genuine desire. Dropping out was not my "truth". When I did go back to school, out of resentment toward my peers who had dropped out and built successful companies, I went in the complete other direction. I rejected the worldly altogether, switching from CS to philosophy, going to a Buddhist monastery – for three years, I didn't do that much at all in industry, out of resentment. Again, it's not that I didn't enjoy philosophy and Buddhism, but the degree to which I pursued it and certainly the degree to which I renounced the worldly was not genuine. This was not my "truth" either. In the first case, I was unduly fetishizing of entrepreneurs and positive mimesis took me away from my "truth" – I should have just stayed in school and started working on side projects. In the second case, I was unduly resentful of entrepreneurs and negative mimesis took me away from

my “truth” – I should have continued to keep a pulse on developments in industry while I explored philosophy.

The reason that I feel like I’m doing a bit better job now of balancing and finding more authentic desires is because I resolved my deformed relationships. Before, when I met a philosopher or entrepreneur who was younger and more successful than I, I became both resentful and jealous. But now I can – to some degree, respect and affirm their life and wish them well genuinely, without exaggerated admiration or envy. And it was only when I first made peace with myself and made peace with the relationships around me that I was no longer so strongly mediated by other people’s life decisions. When in the place of love alone could I access truth and genuine desires.

Here’s another example. Whenever I get into a heated argument with a colleague, a friend, or a family member – no matter what they say, no matter what facts they present to me with, I always see my own side. Reason becomes my spokesperson and a lawyer and reason can’t bring about a resolution by itself. I’ve found that in these scenarios, when I’m arguing with people, when there’s a feud, when I’m angry at them, the best way to resolve the conflict is to wait it out and just let the anger pass, or perhaps even to think about the good times I’ve shared together and develop a degree of affection towards them. The removal of that hate is primary, only then are you at headspace to access truth and begin reconciliation. Spirit precedes reason – we are primarily social and not rational creatures, helplessly mediated by others. So what’s most important is getting our relationships right. Truth does not have the power to engender love, but love has the power to engender truth.

Let me not trivialize this with just individual examples from my own life. The same goes for society-wide issues as well. I mean, take a closer look at what polarization is doing to our society. I would wager that polarization, which effectively is an absence of love right, it’s seeing enemies in the other. It’s not just silencing the exchange of ideas but it’s limiting the very formation of ideas. For different groups of people, certain ideas are completely off limits not just to share, but even to entertain because they :



associated with the other side whom they so loathe. Many people on the left can't entertain that capital is genuinely bringing forth important technological innovations because these ideas are associated with the enemy. Similarly, many people on the right can't entertain the idea that there are legitimate claims within social justice movements because those are the talking points of those whom they hate.

It's not just normative political positions that are susceptible to mediation – intellectual positions can be off limits as well if we fail to practice love and respect. Nazi Germany, for example, theoretical physics was devalued because it was considered a Jewish science. The point here is that even for the most objective and theoretical of disciplines, we can still form subjective biases based on what we think about those associated with those disciplines.

What we find in Girard's epistemology of love then, is a solution to our perennial problem of mediation. How do we as individuals access our authentic desires and how do we as a society engage in meaningful dialogue? The answer is that we must have the right social relations in place before reason can even begin to access truth. We need to love.

Girard has a very famous but hard to decipher phrase. He says:

The invention of science is not the reason that there are no longer witch hunts, the ceasing of witch hunts is the reason science was invented.

This must be interpreted under the light of Girard's epistemology of love. In a violent world, truth and science do not have the power to bring about love – here represented by the ceasing of witch hunts. No matter what facts you present to people, if they are angry and violent, they are gonna keep on killing. Only in a loving world where we have stopped killing witches can science and reason flourish. I encourage you to relate all of this back to my example of personal conflicts: truth does not have the power to engender love, but love has the power to engender truth.

## 3.5 The Church of Science

**Johnathan Bi:** But just like love, Girard thinks that modernity is often hypocritical when it comes to truth, just as persecutions now proceed under the banner of the concern for victims, dogmas are now disguised as free inquiry.

Specifically, Girard thinks that we are idolizing and making a religion out of reason and science. I quote:

It is because we have wanted to distance ourselves from religion that it is now returning with such force and in a retrograde, violent form... (He's talking about how fervently people believe in atheism these days.) In this, it will perhaps have been our last mythology. We "believed" in reason, as people used to believe in the gods.

Girard's claim here is that there's been an intellectual founding murder since the enlightenment. What we have expelled is religion and what we have divinized is reason and science.

The best example I can think of, of us deifying science is this: in the old days, scientific rational activities – geometry, astrology, music – all wanted to snuggle close to divinity. For example, think about how musical composers wanted to show that they were capturing the harmony of the heavens. But today, the divinities of yesteryear are trying to snuggle close to science. I took a course in college on a Buddhist meditation and it was named Contemplative Science. My professor tried really really hard to argue that the Buddhists were doing science. I was also walking down New York I think on 5th Avenue and I saw a banner that said, Fifth Church of Christ, Scientists. The fact that the literal deities of yore are trying to cozy up to science is perhaps part of this divinization of science that Girard is talking about. But what's the problem with reason and science gaining such an immense prestige? What's wrong with that?

The first and most obvious problem is the one that we've been discussing for this entire lecture series. If we deify reason and attribute to it too much power in the human psyche, then we're designing society for what we want humans to be and not what they actually are.

But that's not the only problem. Second, by being deified, science can become unquestionable and can justify terrifying political actions. In the same way that appealing to Scripture or the edicts of the Catholic Church justified terrible political actions on the prestige of Christianity, Girard is deeply worried that political agendas are now wrapping themselves up in a veneer of science to be equally unquestionable.

Girard's worry is that science isn't independent from narratives and fashions and that it is also susceptible to mimesis and all of its problems – it's not as objective as we think it to be.

Here's the passage from an anthropologist, A.M. Hocart, that he always likes to bring up. I quote:

The first Gibraltar [half-man, half-ape] skull was discovered in 1848: it passed quite unnoticed. The Origin of Species appeared in 1859. It wasn't till men had become thoroughly used to the idea of man's descent from an ape-like creature that the skull was brought out of its obscurity, in order to become a link in the evidence. It wasn't the direct evidence of a man-ape that converted biologists. Rather, having been converted by comparative evidence [Darwin's narrative essentially], they set out to find direct evidence in order to confirm their deductions... It took thirty-five years of The Origin of Species to set them really looking. Then Dubois went out to find the ape-like fossil and found it. Since then discovery has succeeded discovery and the illusion of direct evidence has taken possession of the minds of anthropologists.

This is an incredibly damning story for Girard, because it shows that even if science can objectively access the facts, that only gets us so far. The fact of finding a half-m

half-ape skull did nothing and didn't change our understanding of the world at all. And it wasn't direct facts that convinced biologists of man's descent from apes. It was the power of Darwin's narrative – a narrative that's grounded on tangential facts like the evolution of bird beaks, but not the direct evidence like humanoid skulls. Not unlike many Christians then. The biologists believed before they saw the direct facts. We need a theory to situate facts in. We need a narrative to convince us and those narratives, even if they are checked by the facts, are incredibly susceptible to mimesis. This is why even in the most objective of sciences, there are intellectual fashions.

**David Perell:** Your point about Darwin and Gibraltar reminds me of the Planck principle, which comes from the scientist Max Planck, who said that science doesn't progress because people change their views, which is what most people think. But rather what happens is that, each new generation of scientists, they have different views, different ways of seeing the world, different beliefs. And then as old generations die and pass away, new ideas are accepted because new scientists come into power. And then that, that changing of the guard is how scientific consensus changes.

**Johnathan Bi:** That's very interesting. And I think what both this Planck principle suggests, as well as the Gibraltar example from Girard, is that science is governed not by facts and rational agents changing their mind objectively as we are led to think, but that these interpersonal mechanisms of mimesis actually play a much greater role, even in very objective science.

**David Perell:** I think so.

**Johnathan Bi:** But Girard has another concern for science that this Gibraltar example brings up. Even more damning for Girard. The Gibraltar example shows that science doesn't really truly have an objective command over those facts independently of narratives. Think about it like this. The first humanoid skull was ignored when the narrative wasn't there. And when the narrative was there, people began seeing them everywhere. I think it was Peter Thiel who had this line as an undergrad: "If we look for oppression, we'll find it everywhere." But I think it's not just oppression. Even

objective facts become distorted by the narratives we hold. We are not truth-seeking creatures, but creatures who are able to believe in myths, lies, and narratives if other people around us believe them as well.

This is what worries Girard, that science, like reason, is quite impotent and turns out to be just as susceptible to narratives and mimesis by deifying it. We turn something we should all be very, very suspicious of into something unquestionable that can justify atrocities. For example, the terrible eugenics movements of the 20th century were draped with the veneer of science. Eugenics was a tremendously popular and prestigious discipline. It wasn't a pseudoscience at all. It was supported by Nobel laureates like Hermann Müller and political leaders like US President Theodore Roosevelt. There was even a chair for eugenics in University College London. Not only was the discipline of eugenics grounded on the most prestigious of sciences of the time, not the least of which being Darwin's theory of evolution, but some of the most important developments of statistics flowed out of eugenics research. The fathers of eugenics, many of whom prestigious professors at UCL, invented the correlation coefficient, significant tests to better measure populational differences in the same way that Newton had invented calculus to better understand physics. Hopefully, you can see Girard's point here. What is really a political agenda is dressed up in science. Indeed, the facts are that there does exist populational differences between races, but what people chose to do with those facts, that is really narrative dressed up in science.

Perhaps what is more damning for Girard then is that we didn't stop eugenics because of a scientific victory, because we defeated it on the fields of facts. We stopped because the narrative of eugenics had lost its prestige by being so closely associated with the Nazis. In fact, much of the same science continued under a different guise. Britain's *Annals of Eugenics* was renamed *Annals of Human Genetics*. American Eugenics Society became the Society for the Study of Social Biology and the magazine *Eugenics Quarterly* was renamed to *Social Biology*. Let me be crystal clear here. Girard is not an eugenicist. In fact, the opposite. He is terrified of eugenics and showing us the danger of deifying science.

Eugenics, unfortunately, does not stand alone in disastrous narratives disguised as science. History is littered with examples of scientific hubris, ranging from the comical to the disastrous. Think about Malthus in the 18th-century reasoning that living standards would go back to subsistence because population grows geometric while food increases arithmetically. Think about the 1970s where there was an entire wave of a ridiculous dubious climate science championed by the Times, the New York Review, Columbia, Brown. They were all publishing articles on an inevitable ice age.

Here's another example. In January 1970, *Life*, reported and I quote:

Scientists have solid experimental and theoretical evidence to support the following predictions: In a decade, urban dwellers will have to wear gas masks to survive air pollution. By 1985, air pollution will have reduced the amount of sunlight reaching earth by one half.

In many of these examples, it's not that the science was bad – people weren't faking numbers – but that the science and facts are extremely limited and open to a whole host of narrative interpretations. The reason certain narratives get selected often has nothing to do with science at all: it has to do with mimesis, prestige, shock value, career advancement of the scientists, grants, political agendas.

What is so hypocritical, Girard thinks, about our deification of science is that we disguise subjective opinions, public dogmas, mere narratives with the prestige of objectivity. The reason that it is dangerous to deify science is the same reason it was dangerous to deify the Catholic Church. Just as the European conquest of the Americas was, at least partially, legitimized through the appeal to Catholicism in spreading the gospel, today we too need to legitimize our political pursuits with a sprinkle of reason and a dab of science. And just as whomever used to disagree with the Catholic Church we called heretics, we call those who disagree with politically charged, questionable science as anti-science, someone whose positions we don't even have to contend with. When deified science becomes a blocker to truth and genuine inquiry, because it is a conversation stopper – therein lies the hypocrisy.

## 3.6 The Blindspots of Science

**Johnathan Bi:** Last but certainly not least, Girard believes that the deification of science leads to a systematic rejection of certain types of truth. Perhaps I can summarize Girard's position here like this: science confuses its epistemic limitation for an ontological theory. What I mean to say here is that one of the defining methods of science, verification, limits science to the study of objective/external/material phenomena. In the early days of science, that was fine because science confined itself to the study of external phenomena: astronomy, physics, et cetera. Yet as science became more successful and prestigious, it aimed to apply this criteria of verification on other domains such as psychology, social theory, but still only permitted external material phenomena to be used as evidence, thereby categorically rejecting whole domains of truth.

The best example of this is perhaps the behaviorists – John Watson, B.F. Skinner, those guys – who even in the most charitable reading, believe in the thesis that human behavior can be fully explained by appealing to externally observable phenomena, physical behavior and interactions with the environment. Tools like introspection and the objects of introspection: mental states, emotions, concepts, representations, were thought of as causally irrelevant in the most charitable reading and perhaps nonexistent in the least charitable reading. And I don't think it's a stretch to see the development of behavioralism as the dogmas of science and the scientific method as going too far where they don't belong. When it comes to matters on the human condition, material external events are quite limited in how much they can explain. Introspection, intuition, subjective experience and maybe even religious revelation, this is the one that Girard cares a lot about, are much more important. Yet these types of "truths" have all been deprioritized, if not excommunicated in our scientific age. While the crude materialism of the behaviorist no longer represents the most sophisticated views in the academy, I think it has captured a large part of society. How many times have you heard this sentiment walking around Silicon Valley? "Oh yeah we're just a bunch of neurons firing. Oh yeah, we're just atoms squirting chemicals.

This materialism is the default position for those educated in science – it certainly is for me. And I think, at the very least, it leads to a lot of nihilism and existential despair.

Do you see now, why I suggested we interpret Girard as saying that science confuses its epistemic limitations for an ontological theory? What began as “external material is all that science can perceive” – an epistemic limitation, became, with the behavioralists, as the best example, “external material is all that really matters.” Not unlike the historical church, which had a monopoly on what sources counted as the most important truths – namely, Scripture – the Church of Science also has its dogma on what types of truths it does and does not consider as legitimate. Maybe it’s good that we don’t consider religious revelation as serious truths anymore, but we also, as an entire society, stop taking the fruits of meditation, introspection, maybe even philosophical inquiry and subjective experience as seriously. We want charts and graphs, we want studies and numbers, we want opinion polls and measurements. We gave up the types of truths that matter most to humans in exchange for truths that can be reproduced, falsified and verified.

Girard’s surprising conclusion here is that just as those who claim to fight for victims are the real persecutors of modernity, the staunchest rationalists and scientists are the most religious and dogmatic of all people in modernity.

Let me be crystal clear, Girard thinks that the development of science and reason are great things with fantastic achievements we should all feel proud of. In fact, Girard himself tries very hard to convince us that what he is doing for anthropology is science, like what Darwin did for biology. The problem is simply that reason and science have been deified, they’ve gotten out of hand. And this deification leads us to design poor societies, be exposed to disastrous political narratives posing under the guise of science, and systematically ignoring whole categories of truth quintessential to human flourishing.



But given Girard's love for truth, perhaps what he fears the most from the hypocritical deification of science and reason is the problem with hypocrisy we just discussed, that it corrupts the original position and pushes people to the opposite. Girard is worried that politicizing and deifying science will delegitimize science altogether. Just as liberal hypocrisy spawned Nazism, perhaps Girard would attribute the rampant anti-intellectualism today as a response to the hypocritical parading of scientific dogma over the heads of others. In the final analysis, then, what is most worrisome about the church of science and reason is that it threatens to push people away from science and reason altogether and towards a new dark age.

## 4. The Force of Innovation

**Johnathan Bi:** The third major force that gets introduced by Christianity is innovation, the creative ability for genesis.

The fact that we are the most innovative culture is so obvious that I won't even bother giving too many examples here – space flight, modern medicine, nuclear weaponry, political systems, gender norms, money – Western civilization at least in the past 300 years is defined by and prides itself with change. With probably little surprise at this point, Girard thinks that Christianity is responsible for our innovative capacities, because it provides the cultural firmware, if you will, for innovation.

That firmware is summarized in one utterance by Girard. I quote:

The main prerequisite for real innovation is a minimal respect for the past and the mastery of its achievements, i.e., mimesis.

There are two key ideas captured in this one sentence. The first is captured in the word “minimal.” A minimal respect for the past. Girard is heeding against an exaggerated worship of the past here. What is not conducive to innovation is the reactionary idea not uncommon throughout most history – perhaps most famously amongst Confucians and Christians – that our best days are behind us. And the best

we can do is to blindly imitate the past and press the brakes on the downward trajectory of history. Under such a worldview, the very word “innovation” had very negative connotations in the West up until about the 18th century. Its connotations were so negative because innovation implied a deviation from a sacred, albeit static and rigid ideal provided by myths of yore. Innovation was “practically synonymous with heresy” before the 18th century. Such an exaggerated respect of the past is often grounded on a religious belief in a mythologized past. Christianity frees us from this blind worship because it is a force, according to Girard, that tears down myths. It reveals to us what we once thought of as immutable, as arbitrary.

**David Perell:** In terms of what you’re saying, I see this in the ahistoricism of Silicon Valley. And people there are so oriented towards the future that they have this hubris sometimes that the past doesn’t matter. And I think it’s really interesting how the most innovative place in the world has the least respect for its own industry. And I’ll explain what I mean. If you talk to people there, they’re freakishly intelligent. They pride themselves on the expansiveness of their knowledge. They just know so much about the world. But then they know surprisingly little about the roots, the origins of their own industry. But I’ll compare that to something like, I don’t know, the oil industry or something. And the oil industry is more slowly changing. And people there, they have this reverence for what came before. They understand their history deeply.

**Johnathan Bi:** I think that’s a quite interesting and relevant correlation that you draw out between Silicon Valley and the oil industry, that the more innovative an industry is, the less historically aware and respectful it seems to be. And I think that’s precisely the correlation that Girard is trying to draw out with the first half of that sentence, that a minimal respect for history is required. Because we all need to have this, as you’ve coined it, Silicon Valley hubris, to not believe that our best achievements are already behind us in order for us to all have a future orientation.

But there’s a second idea here, and that’s captured in the word “respect”. Important to Girard does not say disrespect, but a minimal “respect”. We must have enough

reverence, or at least curiosity, to see history as worthy of engagement. What Girard heeding against here is the exaggerated progressive idea that the past has nothing to teach us, that we are so much better, that we ought to bring down anything tainted with the stench of the old.

What does this “respect” allow us to do? Mimesis. It allows us to imitate the past and master its achievements. And herein lies Girard’s most interesting views on innovation. I quote:

In a truly innovative process, it is often so continuous with imitation that its presence can be discovered only after the fact, through a process of abstraction.

How can this be? After all, Girard is seemingly drawing out a connection between imitation and innovation. Yet we all conceive of imitation and innovation to be polar opposites. How can this be?

What underlies this claim is Girard’s understanding of innovation as always proceeding internally within a system. We, as humans, never create anything meaningful *ex nihilo*. Let me read you the passage that surrounds the original quote

Real change can only take root when it springs from the type of coherence that tradition alone provides. Tradition can only be successfully challenged from the inside. The main prerequisite for real innovation is a minimal respect for the past and a mastery of its achievements, i.e., mimesis. To expect novelty to cleanse itself of imitation is to expect a plant to grow with its roots up in the air. In the long run the obligation always to rebel may be more destructive of novelty than the obligation never to rebel.

Girard is making a Burkean conservative point here. That tradition, despite its many flaws, has a degree of wisdom and coherence that we must rely on to build meaningful things. As individuals, we need to stand on the shoulders of giants and we can’t simply create *ex nihilo* any more than a plant can grow with its roots in the air. And so with

this idea of innovation – at least meaningful innovation – as internal to a system, it's clear why innovation is synonymous with imitation. After all, how else do you understand all the intricacies of a system without learning and imitating?

History is littered with examples where repetition, replication, imitation is a necessary precondition for innovation – think about Goethe, who was a master of reproduction, reproducing the great poetic forms before he began to pioneer his own. But not just artistic innovation, Girard reminds us that industrial innovation follows a similar pattern. I quote again:

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

This surprise of innovators, when they're imitators, when they're "copycats", suddenly to innovate in their own right – is perhaps a modern phenomenon. It is because we draw a false dichotomy between innovation and imitation. Let's take a look at two historical examples that we take to be polar opposites, but I think will reveal the same form: Jack Ma with Alibaba and Einstein with general relativity.

In the 2000s, many thought of Alibaba as but a copycat of eBay or Amazon. But transplanting an entire business model to a different country is not just about mere regurgitation – there are different customs, there are different needs, there's a different regulatory environment, such that they had to adapt the business model considerably, which necessitated innovation. It's a little surprise then that in the 2000s Alibaba genuinely started building completely new business models that did not ex-

in the Western tech ecosystem. And today, their entire careers in Silicon Valley may be by observing leading trends in the Chinese technology ecosystem, most of which in turn come from the Chinese consumer, and applying that or seeding similar companies in the US. On the inverse, we think Einstein's theory of general relativity is truly original, but he did not create it *ex nihilo*. Such a naive view occludes the years upon years of study, of training, of understanding, of imitating classical physics, which Einstein improved upon. These two activities which – in our modern mind – could not be further apart, reveal the same form, study and imitation, which leads to mastery, which leads to genuine and meaningful innovation.

This project, interpreting Girard itself, is an example of imitation being identical with innovation. I was trained in a historical philosophical approach where the philosopher in training learns by reconstructing the arguments within the canon, and not just philosophizing *ex nihilo* in an armchair. But reconstruction is not just regurgitation because you are burdened with interpretive freedom. Go read Girard and then come back to these lectures. Go read Hegel and then go to Kojève – you'd be surprised at how much innovation has to come from the interpreter: there's restructuring, excluding, highlighting, adding, giving examples.

To summarize then, the necessary perspective for real innovation is a delicate tightrope between a reactionary idolization of the past and a progressive rejection of the past – we need to revere it just enough to learn all of its secrets, but not so much that we don't feel licensed to make improvements. This delicate, delicate balancing allows us to properly imitate those whom have come before us and in mastering their achievements, become masters and innovators ourselves. No act of innovation can be entirely done from a vacuum and thus must involve some degree of imitation. And that imitation can be adopted without being adapted and thus must involve some degree of innovation.

## 4.1 Fashion

**Johnathan Bi:** So how has innovation become perverted in modernity? The pervers takes on the form of hypocrisy. It's the same story over again. It's the fetishization of innovation, of the new, of change, of originality, that proves itself to be the most derivative conformity, disguised as rupture – and Girard encapsulates all of that under the word “fashion”.

While Girard means for fashion to encompass a much broader set of phenomena, we can tease out the form of this perversion by looking at fashion in the colloquial sense: our clothing. Fashion, at least to my understanding, a great deal of popular fashion, observes this logic. It derives its value from being original, from not being owned by others. It's a form of distancing. That distancing is conformist because it is determined by the other. This is the lesson we had learned in negative mimesis. Let me give you a funny example. I actually had a very good friend who wore two shoes, each with completely different colors, for the sake that no one else wore shoes this way. In some sense, this negative fashion is more arbitrary than pure conformity, as this example shows, because traditions such as wearing the same colored shoes usually exist for good reasons. And I think fashion is also conformist because many times, the way we try to distance is exactly the same as others: think about the example we talked about in *American Psycho* and the business card scene, where all the bankers wanted to differentiate themselves, but they did so in the same way, printing and getting very, very similar business cards. And I don't think this intuition is too far off from the logic of popular fashion. A new trend is arbitrarily set off by some influencers to differentiate themselves from the crowd. Everyone in the crowd slowly starts to converge onto the trend because they too want to be different. And that trend slowly starts to lose its value and the whole cycle needs to start over again.

Fashion, then, is a desire for innovation for its own sake and a strong distaste for imitation and it has permeated society – more than ever, we want to be individuals, want to be original, but Girard warns us this way. I quote:

You can't subvert tradition except from within. Once you are exterior to everything you're in the void and you're there to stay. That's where I think we are today. The more we condemn imitation, the more we surrender to it under various guises. Fashion has never been more powerful than it is today.

We don't want to spend years anymore studying classical physics. We don't want to spend our youth imitating the traditional poetic forms. We no longer want to be mere interpreters of other philosophers and we feel ashamed when we imitate other people's business models. The problem is that meaningful innovation is dependent on imitation and as a result, what we get are grotesque displays of originality that are arbitrary and in fact, very derivative.

Girard has this to say again:

The modern world rejects imitation in favor of originality at all costs. You should never say what others are saying, never paint what others are painting, never think what others are thinking, and so on. Since this is absolutely impossible, there soon emerges a negative imitation that sterilizes everything... More and more often they're obliged to turn their coats inside out (perhaps not unlike my friend wearing two colored shoes) and with great fanfare, announce some new "epistemological rupture" that is supposed to revolutionize the field from top to bottom. This rage for originality has produced a few rare masterpieces and quite a few rather bizarre things... Just a few years ago the mimetic escalation had become so insane that it drove everyone to make himself more incomprehensible than his peers... The principle of originality at all costs leads to paralysis. The more we celebrate "creative and enriching" innovations, the fewer of them there are... For two thousand years the arts have been imitative, and it's only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that people started refusing to be mimetic. Why? Because we are more mimetic than ever. Rivalry plays a role such that we strive vainly to exorcise imitation.

**David Perell:** The thing that resonates with me about this quote is the section about the arts. I find that modern art is aimless and nihilistic and this quote gives me a window into why I feel that way. Modern art just tries too hard to be original and I compare that to the pre-modern era at a time when artists were pursuing beauty and trying to capture the world to try to be accurate instead of trying to be original. And now, I think modern art has devolved because it tries so hard to be original and quality, quality is no longer the primary pursuit.

**Johnathan Bi:** I think that's right, but the problem with fashion isn't just that no meaningful innovations can ever be produced, in the case of art, that there's no more quality and it's been traded for originality anymore, in your words – but that fashion can even turn us off from innovation itself.

For example, I think the public is growing sour on the technology sector, partly because of how much it exaggerates its own originality. The most trivial and derivative of companies are painted in the light of radical innovations and ruptures. I mean, go build Uber for dogs and go build Facebook for nannies – they might be great and meaningful businesses, but don't disguise them as radical innovations. I find that it is this type of hypocrisy that makes innovation somewhat of a laughingstock and delegitimizes it as a cultural value altogether.

What hypocrisy is to love, what dogma is to truth, fashion is to innovation. The perennial problem of all forms of hypocrisy is that it delegitimizes the position which it claims to champion.

## 5. An Ephemeral Triumph

**Johnathan Bi:** In summary, then, even when describing the triumph of modernity, Girard's theory captures both our highs and our lows – what is so unique, exciting, praiseworthy, but also what is so perverse, hypocritical and distasteful and why the two are intimately conjoined. It is the forcefulness of love that makes our hypocrisy



unpalatable. It is the importance of truth that makes our dogmas all the more frustrating and it is the heights of innovation that makes our fashions all the more laughable. Think back to the rocket analogy. If love, truth and innovation is the div trajectory which Christianity has laid out for us, then hypocrisy, dogma, and fashion are consequences of the gravitational pull from corrupt human nature.

But make no mistake. Overall, Girard is a champion of all these positive forces we mentioned today – from the birth of science all the way to the expansion of global a Just as a good parent does not hold back on necessary criticism and Tocqueville – a self-identified ally of democracy – certainly did not mince words on democratic shortcomings. Girard's criticisms are so severe because he desperately wants modernity to succeed. Modernity – then, for Girard – is a legitimate triumph of mai despite the hypocrisies. We can embrace it wholeheartedly, even if we can't embrac the whole of it.

Girard's achievement, I would argue, is his ability to make sense of, legitimize, spea with, and give advice across the entire political spectrum, from the progressives wh affirms the direction of history to the reactionaries who want to bring back classica ideals and just about everyone in between. To the progressives, Girard legitimates their championing of the key forces within modernity: the concern for victims, just for all, science and the seeking of truth, innovation and all the technological advancements that have brought us here. However, Girard warns them to not fall pi to hypocrisy, to dogma, to fashion. For not only would they be committing the very mistakes they claim to avoid, they would be delegitimizing these positive forces wit modernity and engendering the opposite. To the reactionaries, Girard sees them as primarily reacting against progressive hypocrisy. He is able to understand their distaste of modernity – after all, what is more disgusting in the championing of evil championing evil under the banner of good. Girard warns reactionaries, however, to separate their dislike of hypocrites from the fundamentally good values that the hypocrites promote. Love, truth, innovation are praiseworthy, even if many who champion them today are not.

Even the triumph of modernity is tainted with perversion, as our stubborn human nature rebels against the path Christianity has set for us. The careful listener will observe violence lurking in the shadows behind all three of these forces. The hypocrisy of love engenders and legitimates violence. Truth tears down the rituals that make for easy resolution and the prohibitions that have kept violence in check. And innovation arms violence with increasingly powerful means. Violence is the fourth and final force and it will step out of the shadows and be the central topic of our next and final lecture. Alas, this triumph of modernity will show itself to be fragile and ephemeral indeed. The conclusion to Girard's theory will also be the conclusion to the story of mankind.



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