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René Girard and the phenomenology of mimetic desire

Abstract: René Girard has been critiqued for failing to ground his theory of mimetic desire in a discursive and philosophically robust framework. In order to meet this objection, I argue that René Girard's theory of mimetic desire can be successfully motivated by a phenomenology of the emptiness of selfhood and intersubjectivity. After grounding Girard's theory in a phenomenology of no-self, I reconstruct Girard's argument that violence is a necessary consequence of internally mediated mimetic desire¹.

Keywords: Mimetic Desire, Imitation, Selfhood, Otherness, Violence

I. Introduction

While the strength of René Girard's thinking lies in his interdisciplinary approach, his theory of mimetic desire lacks a well-developed philosophical ground. In his *Vagaries of Desire*, Timo Airaksinen points out that René Girard's theory of mimetic desire is literary, heuristic, and suggestive, but fails to provide a discursive account of desire². I aim to fill this theoretical

¹ My gratitude goes out to Takeshi Morisato, Nahum Brown, Edward Kwok, Hayden Kee, and Dan Zahavi for their comments on some of the initial formulations of the ideas developed in this paper.

² Regarding Girard's writings, he writes that "They tend to be heuristic rather than analytical, suggestive rather than convincing, and literary rather than discursive. He is more like an inventor than an architect of ideas, and a preacher rather than a teacher. Here I approach his writings as if his grand vision of desire were a theory, however impolite that may be. However, it is clear that the mimetic theory is interesting because it postulates triangular desires and, thus, we should focus on it" (Timo Airaksinen, 2019, p. 89-108).

gap by providing a discursive and systematic framework for Girard's theory of mimetic desire. By drawing on a variety of phenomenological and existential sources on the themes of selfhood and otherness, I demonstrate that Girard's heuristic and suggestive method can be re-configured as a robust and discursive approach to intersubjectivity³.

I begin by analyzing the meaning of mimetic desire and discuss some examples of the phenomena from modern literature. Because Girard's theory of mimetic desire is that process whereby the human being attempts to transcend the emptiness of the self, in order to provide a discursive groundwork for Girard's theory, I begin by showing that the self is an inherently *elusive* phenomenon⁴. After elucidating the insufferable condition of the emptiness of the self, I show how mimetic desire functions as a way to fulfill the desire for selfhood. Thereafter, I explicate how mimetic desire can function as a source for many malevolent dispositions in human life. While Girard claims that all desire is mimetic, here I focus on establishing Girard's claim that mimetic desire is essential to human selfhood.

II. Mimetic desire

Traditionally, desire has been conceived as a twofold relation between a subject and an object. In this twofold relation, the desirability of the object by the subject may be derived from an intrinsic quality of the object. For example, we might follow Plato, and proclaim that what we deem beautiful is what attracts us, and this we consider to be beautiful. For Plato, it is the 'Beautiful itself', in virtue of its intrinsic beauty, attracts the subject—regardless of whether the subject knows that it is in fact so drawn (Plato, 1997b, p. 211 a-d). If modern philosophy tends to reject this conception and privileges the subject as the factor that grants desirability, this does not necessitate abandoning the twofold structure of desire. Indeed, the common pedestrian view that 'beauty is in the eye of beholder' appears to entail that the object becomes desirable because it enters into some relation to the subject whose perspective upon it grants it desirability. Indeed, we might follow Nietzsche and proclaim that man himself creates beauty:

³ I should note in advance that this philosophical grounding of Girard's approach is my own, and by no means should it be understood as a reconstruction of Girard's philosophical views.

⁴ Here I follow Heidegger's sense of 'phenomenon' as that which shows itself (Martin Heidegger, 2001, p. 51).

Man believes that the world itself is filled with beauty—he forgets that it is he who created it. He alone has bestowed beauty upon the world—alas! Only a very human, all too human beauty... Man really mirrors himself in all things, that which give him back his own reflection he considers beautiful [...] (Nietzsche, 2003, p. 29).

Whether the desirability of the object is conceived as primarily emanating from the object, the subject, or the relationality of each to the other, a dominant paradigm of desire is to conceive of it as constituted by a two-fold relation.

Rene Girard's conception of mimetic desire challenges the two-fold depiction of desire by re-conceiving desire as triangular (René Girard, 1976, p. 2). Mimetic desire is quite simple: the subject desires the object because another desires the object. Thus, mimetic desire is threefold: there is the subject, the object, and the mediator in virtue of which the object is deemed to be desirable. Rather than consider desire to be an immediate relation of subject to object, mimetic desire posits a third term that connects the object to the subject. In the case of mimetic desire, the object could not be connected to the subject without the mediation of the third party. If mimetic desire is at least one kind of desire, conceiving of desire as merely a twofold relation of subject to object would not be sufficient to determine the *eidos* of desire *per se*.

That mimetic desire is at least a kind of desire is evident from the observation of young children. It is a common observation that a young child may initially be indifferent to the existence of a particular toy in the playroom in which they are happily engaged. Unfortunately, this contentment is quite often short lived. A second child, similar in age to the first, who is engaged with the world at a similar stage of development, finds great interest in this toy to which the first child was initially indifferent. Suddenly, the first child, quite inexplicably, appears to have acquired a great interest in this same toy. The object has not undergone any change in virtue of which it would suddenly attract the child. While everything else about the situation appears to have remained the same, a fundamental difference has been introduced into the situation. The difference, of course, is that the second child finds the toy desirable. Thus, it is plausible to infer that the first child desires the toy because the second child desires it. The object, or the toy, becomes desirable to the first child because of the mediation of another agency. The simple fact

that this second agency desires the toy is sufficient to produce a desire in the first child for the very same object⁵.

Why call this kind of desire ‘mimetic’? It is ‘mimetic’ because one agency imitates the desire of the other. Accordingly, the mediator models what ought to be desired. Girard defines the model as the “mediator of desire” (Girard, 1976, p. 2). As a model who confers value upon the object of desire, the model is an object of admiration to be imitated. Yet, the very same object of admiration cannot help but be transformed into a rival or enemy, for the object cannot be possessed by them both. As Girard states, “two desires converging on the same object are bound to clash” (Girard 1979, p. 146). Thus, the mediator is both admired and despised. Accordingly, mimetic desire can be defined as follows: “the subject desires the object because the rival desires it” (Girard 1979, p. 145). The mediator confers value onto the object through his desire and possession of it, yet that very possession in virtue of which he confers value to it transforms him into a stumbling block or obstacle that stands in the way of his acquisition of the object desired by the subject. Of course, the result is conflict: the subject and the mediator vie for possession of the object.

Many adults will readily admit that the child is subject to these kinds of desires. Indeed, Girard infers that the Romantic concept of the “autonomous childhood” is a myth for adults (Girard, 1976, p. 34). The desires of childhood do not become transparent to us if we insist that the child’s desires are autonomous or unmediated. But such desires might be explained away by proclaiming the child to be immature. Certainly, we do not often witness the mature adult overtly behaving this way. Girard, however, argues that it is the genius of the great novelists, (rather than the philosophers or scientists) such as Cervantes, Flaubert, Stendhal, Proust, and Dostoyevsky, who have uncovered the illusion of the autonomous self (Girard, 1976, p. 38). In order to highlight the ways that adulthood is also saturated with mimetic desire, I will briefly relay two stories Girard identifies as paradigmatic cases of mimetic desire from Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black* (1830) and compare them with the form of mimetic desire in *Don Quixote* (1615).

In *The Red and Black*, M. de Renal, the mayor of Verrières, desires to hire a tutor for his children. Valenod—both his rival and an object of his admiration, is the richest and most influential man in Verrières. M. de

⁵ For Girard, what subjects one imitates is contingent, but is certainly influenced by a number of various factors, such as exposure. One never imitates certain desires because one is never exposed to them.

Renal desires to hire Julien Sorel because he imagines that his rival Valenod also desires to employ Julien Sorel. The worry is raised that “Valenod has no tutor for his children—he might very well steal this one from us.” Being clever, Sorel denies the initial offer of M. de Renal. Sorel proclaims that “we have a better offer.” This response further hardens the mayor’s conviction that Valenod is attempting to acquire the tutor for himself (Girard, 1976, p. 6). As Girard states,

The ever-increasing price that the buyer is willing to pay is determined by the imaginary desire, which he attributes to his rival. So there is indeed an imitation of the imaginary desire, and even a very scrupulous imitation, since everything about the desire which is copied, including its intensity, depends upon the desire which serves as its model. (Girard, 1976, p. 6).

According to Girard, M. de Renal is a vain person, who desires the object “so long as he is convinced it is already desired by another person who he admires” (Girard, 1976, p. 7). Unlike in the case of the child, who competes with another child who actually desires the same object, for M. de Renal, it is of no consequence whether his rival, Valenod, actually desires to hire the tutor. What matters is that Renal believes this to be the case. Indeed, one can imitate an imagined desire.

Let us consider another story from the same novel, this time concerning the mimesis of erotic love. Julien Sorel desires to win back the love of his beloved, Mathilde de la Mole. In order to achieve this end, he contrives a scheme: by arousing the desire of another woman, he intends to arouse the desire of Mathilde. Sorel successfully seduces Marèchale de Ferraque, so that Marèchale is aroused with desire for him. Just as Sorel had hoped, Mathilde imitates Marèchale, and Julien successfully wins back his beloved (Girard, 1976, p. 7-8). As is evident, the success of the scheme depends upon mimetic desire. Mathilde takes Marèchale as her model and imitates her. Indeed, it is not any inherent quality of her beloved that draws her. On the contrary, it is the fact that her model desires the man that she does too. Naturally, this transforms Marèchale into her rival, for they cannot both be the one and-only beloved of Julien Sorel. Fittingly, she must overcome her rival in order to be with her beloved. The drama unfolds by means of mimetic desire.

Having considered *The Red and Black*, also consider *Don Quixote*. Having decided that he is a knight, Don Quixote does not have desires that are auto generated. Rather, he desires what his model, Amadis of Gaul, desires. As Girard states, “he no longer chooses the objects of his own desire—Amadis

must choose for him” (Girard, 1976, p. 1). Quixote is self-consciously a disciple of the master. The objects of his desire are determined by the “objects determined for him by the model of chivalry” (Girard, 1976, p. 2). For Quixote, according to Cervantes,

[...] Amadis was the pole, the star, the sun for brave and amorous knights, and we others who fight under the banner of love and chivalry should imitate him. Thus, my friend Sancho, I reckon that whoever imitates him best will come closest to perfect chivalry (Girard, 1976, p. 1).

Since his model is imaginary, or a fictional character from a chivalric romance, it is evident that his mimetic desire undermines his sense of reality, and his capacity for accurate judgment is “paralyzed” (Girard, 1976, p. 4).

Although the case of Don Quixote is quite different from the case of Renal and Mathilde, there is nonetheless a common feature: in each case the mediator’s prestige is “imparted to the object” and gives it value (Girard, 1976, p. 17). The desire in each of these cases is not autonomously generated by the subject but heteronomous and mediated by means of another agency—real or imagined. For the subjects of mimetic desire, each is determined by a desire according to another, rather than a desire according to themselves (Girard, 1976, p. 4). The unity of mediation in these stories is the fact that the object is transfigured (Girard, 1976, p. 23) for the subject by the belief that the mediator desires it. As Girard eloquently states, the mediator is as an “artificial sun” that makes the object shine (Girard, 1976, p. 18).

Unlike in the case of Stendhal’s characters, Don Quixote does not fall into rivalry with his model. Although Quixote is constantly quarreling with others in virtue of his imitation of Amadis, he does not become the enemy of Amadis. Stendhal’s characters fall into conflict with their rivals. What are the principles which enable this conflict? In order to clarify the conditions which make the rivalry possible, Girard introduces the distinction between external and internal mediation. On the one hand, the mediation is external when the “distance is sufficient to eliminate contact between two spheres of possibilities” (Girard, 1976, p. 9). Quixote’s mediator is “enthroned in an inaccessible heaven,” (Girard, 1976, p. 8) which precludes the possibility of conflict. In other words, in the case of external mediation, the model transcends the domain of being that is occupied by the subject⁶. Amadis

⁶ Naturally, even in cases of external mediation, the model is still accessible as a model. For this reason, all models can be said to be ‘immanent’ in one’s lifeworld, in the

transcends the domain of being and action occupied by Quixote. He exists in an imaginary space that is inaccessible to Quixote. Accordingly, Quixote will never become Amadis' rival. In addition, Quixote openly worships his model; he does not attempt to hide the fact that he imitates him. On the other hand, internal mediation occurs when "the distance is reduced to allow these two spheres to penetrate each other" (Girard, 1976, p. 9). In the case of Renal and Mathilde, their mediations do not transcend their domain of being and action. Their models are immanent within the same sphere of possibility as themselves. In Stendhal, the mediator is "down to earth" such that the difference is small enough to permit a rivalry of desires (Girard, 1976, p. 8-9). In the case of these stories of internal mediation, the participants tend to conceal the object of their desire, as well as their admiration for the model in virtue of whom they have that desire.

The distance of which Girard speaks is not always simply a physical distance, as is obvious already in the case of Quixote, since there is not a physical distance between the fictional and non-fictional. Nonetheless, physical distance can play a crucial factor in the kinds of conflict that is generated between rivals. Girard speaks of "social" and "intellectual" distance (Girard, 1976, p. 9). In order to fall into rivalry with one's model, the model must be immanent within the subject's own cultural lifeworld in which there is a life that is shared in common. Most generally, it is because a person shares a life in common that they can in principle fall into conflict. For example, if they have common ambitions, and they both belong to a certain social and economic class, wherein it is common to hire tutors for our children, they may find themselves more likely to fall victim to mimetic rivalry, as is the case with M. Renald.

To summarize, Girard makes it painfully clear that mimetic desire can affect not only children but also adults. What is more, Girard uncovers a typology of mimetic desire, in which we can distinguish between internal and external mediation. However, must all mimetic desire of the internal type necessarily devolve into conflict? Indeed, in the cases we have explored, it appears that the object desired cannot be simultaneously possessed by both persons. In the case of the children, the toy is a particular, or one in number. Likewise, in the case of the rival lovers, each desires a monogamous relation, which by definition cannot be polygamous. Even if children and adults are subject to the threat of rivalry posed by some mimetic desires, if the objects

desired did not preclude the possibility of a shared possession, rivalry could in principle be avoided.

As a literary anthropologist, Girard is at times opaque about the philosophical grounds of his own claims. By drawing on existential phenomenology, in the following sections I will offer a phenomenological motivation for Girard's account of mimetic desire. In the following section I will argue that even if some objects can be shared in common, the emptiness of the self makes mimetic desire, and the conflict generated by internally mediated mimetic desire, unavoidable.

III. The emptiness of the self

Girard claims that human beings desire what others desire because they lack being:

[...] he desires being, something he himself lacks and which some other person seems to possess. The subject thus looks to that other person to inform him of what he should desire in order to acquire that being (Girard 1979, p. 145-146).⁷

Because Girard's theory of mimetic desire begins from the experience of the emptiness of the self, it is very natural to approach Girard's theory via phenomenology, since its methodology is primarily concerned with the description of experience. I learn that I am a subject of desire by feeling my own desires. Because this feeling, the longing characteristic of desire, is a form of experience, my knowledge of my own desire would be impossible without experience. Likewise, if one subtracted all experience of other persons, one would undermine the conditions that make possible knowledge of the desires of others. Without my capacity to perceive, observe, imagine, or conceive others, I would not know that they are desiring agents. Because experience is impossible without consciousness, knowledge of desire presupposes the fact of consciousness. Only a conscious agent can experience desire. What is more, I can only ask 'what is consciousness?' from the standpoint of consciousness itself. The question 'what is consciousness?' cannot be approached from a non-conscious position. 'What is consciousness?' is a question a conscious agent asks about itself from within itself.

What is consciousness? As is well known, classical phenomenology teaches that consciousness is always directed towards an object—what Husserl calls intentionality. If I perceive, but perceive nothing, then I am

⁷ Girard,

not perceiving. Perception can only be on the condition there is something towards which it is directed. Whether I am perceiving, imagining, or speaking, I am perceiving something, imagining something, or speaking about something. In his *Ideas I*, Husserl argues that “a basic and essential difference arises between Being as Experience and Being as Thing” (Edmund Husserl, 1975, p. 120). Although the perceptions of the table change as one moves around the table, one continues to perceive the very same table. Because the perceptions of the table continually change, but the table one perceives remains the same, Husserl infers that the object one perceives is essentially distinct from the perceptions or the experiences of that very table (Husserl, 1975, p. 117)⁸. Husserl infers that the thing transcends consciousness: “Thus, the Thing itself, simpliciter, we call transcendent. In so doing we give voice to the most fundamental and pivotal difference between ways of being, that between Consciousness and Reality” (Husserl, 1975, p. 121). Husserl is very clear that this “essential difference” between Consciousness and Reality does not just apply to perceptual experience, but to “any possible consciousness” (Husserl, 1975, p. 120) such as the “consciousness of others” (Husserl, 1975, p. 121).

As is well known, Sartre too follows Husserl by emphasizing the transcendence of the object:

All consciousness, as Husserl has shown, is consciousness of something. This means that there is no consciousness which is not a positing of a transcendent object [...].[...] The first procedure of a philosophy ought to be to expel things from consciousness and to re-establish its true connection with the world, to know that consciousness is a positional consciousness of the world. (Jean-Paul Sartre, 1993, li).

‘Consciousness of,’ implies that consciousness is aware of an object that is not consciousness. As such, consciousness is of an object that is distinct from consciousness. For Sartre, intentionality has the further implication that consciousness is aware of an object that completely transcends it⁹.

⁸ Naturally, the unity of the table can only be noticed by employing recollection: one must be able to recollect one’s past perceptions of the table and compare them with one’s occurrent perceptions. Husserl gives a similar argument (in this case with a box) in the *Logical Investigations* (Husserl 2001, p. 221). There he concurs with the *Ideas* that “the experienced content, generally speaking, is not the perceived object.”

⁹ Sartre reads Husserl’s understanding of intentionality to imply that “consciousness is constitutive of the being of its object.” Sartre argues that this definition of intentionality is inconsistent. See Sartre, 1993, lx. Since Husserl makes the noema “an unreal, a correlate of the

However, if the object transcends consciousness, the intentional structure of consciousness raises a problem for self-consciousness. If experience always involves the consciousness of a transcendent object, how in principle can one experience consciousness itself?

Sartre offers a famous reflection that problematizes any naïve approach to self-knowledge:

The reduction of consciousness to knowledge in fact involves our introducing into consciousness the subject-object dualism which is typical of knowledge. But if we accept the law of the knower-known dyad, then a third term will be necessary in order for the knower to become known in turn, and we will be faced with this dilemma: Either we stop at any one term of the series—the known, the knower known, the knower known by the knower, etc. In this case the totality of the phenomena falls into the unknown; that is, we always bump up against a non-self-conscious reflection and a final term. Or else we affirm the necessity of an infinite regress (*idea ideae ideae*, etc.) which is absurd. Are we obliged after all to introduce the law of this dyad into consciousness? (Sartre, 1993, p. lii.).

Sartre argues that if one assumes that all consciousness is a form of self-consciousness, then self-consciousness cannot be reduced to reflective self-consciousness¹⁰. As a result, he introduces a form of pre-reflective self-consciousness that makes consciousness of an object possible. Phenomenologically, Sartre's argument against the duality of consciousness is well-motivated and can be appreciated without adopting all of Sartre's distinctions, and his various positions regarding self-consciousness. If we simplify Sartre's

noesis, a noema whose essence is *percipi*," "he is totally unfaithful to his principle" (Sartre, 1993, p. lxi). Sartre seems to have in mind passages in which Husserl characterizes the Thing in Itself as something that is "never out of relation to consciousness and its Ego" (Husserl, 1975, p. 134) and when Husserl speaks of "pure consciousness as "a system of Absolute Being, into which nothing can penetrate, and from which nothing can escape" (Husserl, 1975, p. 139). I do not mean to adjudicate the legitimacy of Sartre's reading or decide between these two interpretations of the intentional relation. Here it is enough to indicate that intentionality always implies the non-identity of consciousness and its object. For more on the connection between Sartre's interpretation of intentionality, the emptiness of consciousness, and Sartre's critique of the Heidelberg school, see (Zahavi, 2020, p. 132-33).

¹⁰ According to Sartre, "If we wish to avoid this infinite regress, there must be an immediate, non-cognitive relation of the self to itself." (Sartre, 1993, p. lii-liii).

argument, we discover that there are strong phenomenological grounds for Girard's position on the self and mimetic desire.

Because consciousness is directed toward an object that transcends it, every act of conceptual reflection is also burdened by this opposition. As a result, when I ask, 'who am I?' consciousness encounters itself as an object. However, since consciousness is directed towards a transcendent object, the I about which I am reflecting is an object that transcends it and is thereby other than consciousness. Hence, consciousness does not encounter itself in self-reflection. Indeed, it is of no consequence how often one performs the reflection, for in each case the self that appears—the I—is not the consciousness that asks the question. The empirical self, whether this be a physical, psychological, or psycho-physical self, can only ever appear as an object for consciousness. The so-called transcendental I—the condition that enables the givenness of that empirical self, always goes missing. The self fails to show itself—it is a phenomenon of absence. One can continue to posit oneself without end, i.e., infinitely, and the self will fail to appear. Or one can simply cease to self-reflect, in which case the series must bottom out in a consciousness that is unconscious of itself. Naturally, a consciousness that is unconscious of itself cannot encounter itself.

Because Sartre thinks it is absurd for consciousness to be unconscious of itself, for him all reflective self-consciousness is conditioned by a pre-reflective self-consciousness. Although it appears that consciousness cannot appear as a determinate thing or activity within reflective self-consciousness, can the conscious self even appear as a distinct and determinate being in pre-reflective consciousness? It cannot. When I do not reflect upon myself, my consciousness is directed towards something other than myself. For example, while reading the *Critique of Pure Reason*, I am not thinking that 'I am the one reading the *Critique*.' To the contrary, I am absorbed in the reading, and I do not attend to the fact that I am the one reading. Of course, if someone interrupts me and asks, 'what are you doing?' I can tell them that I am reading. For Sartre this is enough to indicate that I am aware of myself (although not reflectively) in such states of absorption. However, even if Sartre is correct on this point, in such pre-reflective states the conscious self never appears as distinct from that in which consciousness is absorbed. Therefore, the self is empty, i.e., the self never appears as a distinct or determinate being—neither

a determinate thing nor a determinate activity. While consciousness or the self certainly is, that selfhood is only ever indeterminately present¹¹.

If the determinate conscious self can neither appear in reflective nor non-reflective consciousness, then qua the self-conscious self it cannot appear at all. However, this would be absurd, for consciousness is aware of itself as that which is directed toward an object. Ironically, it is only on the assumption that consciousness transcends its object that one cannot encounter it. If consciousness really does transcend the object, then it must be distinct from it. However, it is the same distinction in virtue of which consciousness fails to appear. Thus, how can consciousness even appear to us as that which transcends the object?

If our reflections ceased here, we would certainly have failed to appreciate the depth of the phenomena. In every case of reflection, consciousness appears the very same way, namely as that which fails to be a distinct being. Consciousness can only ever appear to us in reflection as “a being, the nature of which is to be conscious of the nothingness of its being” (Sartre 1993, p. 47). Simply put, consciousness does in fact appear to us in every reflection, but as that which is not any distinct entity or act—it is not whatever it is said to be. Insofar as consciousness never finds itself in its object, in reflection it always appears as other than and distinct from any beings to which it is intentionally related. However, this description is a contradiction. Since consciousness is always distinct from all intentional objects, consciousness must also transcend itself when it has itself as the object of its intentional relation. Consciousness must transcend itself. Consciousness cannot even be ‘that consciousness which fails to be a distinct being.’ In conclusion, our experience of failing to know the distinct character of consciousness reveals consciousness to be constituted by self-contradiction.

As long as we acknowledge that we are conscious, and that consciousness is constituted by the intentional relationship whereby the object transcends the consciousness of it, consciousness cannot appear to reflective self-awareness except as something that is not consciousness. Thus, intentionality can only appear to reflective self-consciousness as a form of self-contradiction¹². The claim that ‘consciousness is intentionally constituted’

¹¹ Zahavi recounts a number of critiques, including one argument that Sartre re-introduces duality into pre-reflective awareness, thereby contradicting his position on the non-duality of pre-reflective self-awareness. (Zahavi, 2020, 135.)

¹² For readers of Hegel, this result should come as no surprise. *The Phenomenology of Spirit* begins with the assumption of the difference between knowing and its object that

is a self-contradictory claim. Through the failure of reflective self-knowledge, self-consciousness is revealed to be a contradictory unity of subjectivity and objectivity. Ironically, through failing to objectify the self, reflective self-awareness does appear to reveal the character of the self to be something trans-objective and contradictory¹³.

We have described the phenomenon of self-consciousness in negative terms as the nothingness of being. However, the negative description implies a positive description. Insofar as the self never appears to have any being of its own, it simultaneously appears as a being whose determinate identity always lies beyond it in another. In other words, the 'I' that appears to consciousness appears as other to it. In reflecting upon the 'I', the 'I' appears as transcending one's own conscious self, and appears as an I distinct from itself. Thus, one's own 'I' always appears as an other I. The only discrete self I can ascribe to myself is the selfhood of another. Accordingly, the self-contradiction burdening the appearance of self-hood can be re-formulated as follows: the I is the I of another. Self-alienation is our essential condition. Whenever I encounter myself as a being of substance, I relate to myself as though I were being gazed upon by another.

To summarize, the emptiness of the self signifies that the determinate self is always absent. The determinate self cannot appear to any reflective or pre-reflective consciousness. When the determinate self does appear, it can only appear as the self of another. However, this only signifies that the determinate self is present for me as self-transcending or inherently contradictory determinacy—as something inherently indeterminate.

Naturally, one might worry that there are significant epistemic issues to confront here. If there cannot be true contradictions, how in principle could this be the case? One might be inclined to doubt that we are conscious at all. However, as Descartes showed, that cannot succeed—by doubting that we are conscious, we are certainly conscious that we are doubting. Perhaps it would be more promising to simply deny that intentionality is essential to

constitutes intentional consciousness, and shows how this distinction collapses in absolute knowing.

¹³ If we allow the phenomena to guide our thinking, we should seriously consider whether the phenomenology of self-consciousness does not give us good reason to adopt a *paraconsistent* logic—one that allows the *possibility* of true contradictions, such as Priest's logic of paradox. Here it is enough to indicate that there are perfectly viable logics that can accommodate the position. Indeed, while the result may be unsettling, and may indicate that self-consciousness is an absurd experience, the presence of contradiction alone does not necessarily entail that the position is logically absurd.

consciousness. Although some have taken this route¹⁴, it certainly seems that at least reflective consciousness (whether this be imaginative or conceptual) is intentional. Whether I imagine or conceive myself, I reflect upon something¹⁵.

The ‘hard problem of consciousness’ nicely illustrates the contradiction that befalls selfhood. On the one hand, consciousness is not a body, for it transcends all entities whatsoever. It is empty. On the other hand, spatial consciousness is only possible if consciousness occupies some space. For example, one cannot see the trailhead without occupying a position in space from which the trailhead can be made visible. In short, spatial consciousness requires consciousness to be embodied—it cannot completely transcend the body. Hence, consciousness appears contradictory, for it transcends all entities, and thereby all embodiment, and must simultaneously be embodied. Note that this formulation of the problem neither contains a reference to the ‘what it’s like’ to experience the world, nor can it be easily evaded by absolutizing one side of the contradiction. Complete naturalization would undermine the transcendence of consciousness, while complete negation of the naturalized self would render spatial consciousness impossible. Because an adequate description of the phenomena of the conscious self appears to require contradictions, it would be a mistake to attempt to resolve it by absolutizing one side of the opposition.

Although the self must appear empty to itself in acts of self-reflection, the same fate does not appear to befall the I as other. Exactly because all consciousness is consciousness of something, the other self can only appear to the I as the object of consciousness. Hence, as long as the other subject appears to consciousness as another subject, it must also appear to the I as a separate unity of subjectivity and objectivity—as a non-empty ego¹⁶.

¹⁴ For instance, see Nishida (1992), where experience is construed as fundamentally non-intentional in character.

¹⁵ Rather than abandon intentionality or argue against the existence of consciousness or self-consciousness, in order to evade this self-contradiction, it may be more fruitful to challenge the definition of intentionality as the consciousness of a *transcendent* object, since it is this specific definition which leads to this paradox of self-consciousness. However, it is difficult to see how intentionality could be consistently conceived in such a way that consciousness and its object would be indistinguishable, for in this case the subject would not be a subject, which would be a contradiction. What is more, one would be forced to abandon Husserl’s “essential” distinction between Consciousness and Reality.

¹⁶ At this level of description, I do not distinguish between I as thou, the second person singular, and the I as the third person singular, he, she, etc. Whether the other subject I experience is encountered as a ‘thou’ or a ‘she’, they must appear as a subject that is simultaneously an object, otherwise they cannot be an intentional object. Further, Buber is

Although critical self-consciousness makes the I appear as nothing to itself, the I does appear as an object for others. Insofar as the other is a subject with intentional experiences, the I cannot appear to the other subject except as an object of consciousness. In short, if I appear to the other as another subject, and a subject can only appear as an intentional object to others, then I can only appear to others as a subject that is also an object, i.e., as a unity of subjectivity and objectivity.

Rather than survey all the varieties of theories of other minds in phenomenology, here I give special attention to Ernst Cassirer's theory of the experience of other minds, since it offers an attractive theory by which our experience of others may be explained. Regarding the expressive function, Cassirer observes that our experience of others is defined by an expressive function (Ernst Cassirer, 1955, 79), which is characterized by a fundamental indistinction: "Its particular privilege is precisely that it does not admit of a difference between image and thing, the sign and what it designates" (Cassirer, 1955, p. 92-93). In the case of other minds, the experience of others neither admits of a distinction between the subject and the object nor the mind and the body that one encounters. Via the expressive function "[...] that form of knowledge by which the reality not of natural objects but of other subjects is open to us" (Cassirer, 1955, p. 79)¹⁷.

The term for expression, 'Ausdruck', articulates this well—the subjectivity, which is not an object, is pushed outward into the object and is thereby expressed by it. This philosophical description corresponds to our experiences in the everydayness of our lifeworld. Consider one's everyday engagements with colleagues in an office setting. Upon arriving at the office, one may greet them with a friendly "It's good to see you." One sees the body, but the greeting does not say 'It's good to see your body.' The thou with whom

quite right to distinguish the I-Thou from the I-It relation. However, Buber denies that the Thou is a thing that can be experienced: "But where You is said there is no something. You has no borders. Whoever says You does not have something; he has nothing. But he stands in relation" (Martin Buber, 1970, p. 55). For Buber, one does not experience the Thou, one has a relation to it. However, since one can experience the Thou, the I-Thou relation both cancels and preserves the I-It relation within itself.

¹⁷ Cassirer's *Ausdrucksfunktion* is close to Scheler's *Ausdruckseinheit*, or expressive unity. Cassirer is with Scheler that "For we certainly believe ourselves to be directly acquainted with another person's joy in his laughter, with his sorrow and pain in his tears, with his shame in his blushing, [...] If anyone tells me that this is not 'perception', [...] I would beg him to turn aside from such questionable theories and address himself to the phenomenological facts" (Scheler, 1954, p. 260).

I interact is not distinguished from the objective, and in this case, the bodily presence of the other person¹⁸.

Naturally, the “indistinct” presence of the other in our pre-reflective experience does not mean that they only appear as objects. They appear as subjects who can understand and respond to our greeting. We do not ordinarily greet our office door with “It’s good to see you.” The other appears as an object who is also a subject—an indistinguishable unity of subjectivity and objectivity. Moreover, since subjectivity is never reducible to an object, to appear as a subject means that the other cannot appear identical to any object one encounters, such as a body in space and time. Cassirer notes that in the phenomenon of otherness, “its ‘givenness’ and ‘visibility’ makes itself known to be inwardly animated” (Cassirer, 1955, p. 92). I always already understand that the other subject has an “inner world” to which I do not have immediate access, that is expressed and articulated in and through their body. When I observe a grimace on the face of my friend, I may ask, out of interest and care, “how are you feeling today?” In the question I implicitly acknowledge that their subjectivity transcends that experiential content to which I have immediate access¹⁹.

Both self-consciousness and other consciousness are experiences of contradiction: both self and other are contradictory unities of subject and object. The self is always that being which is not any particular being. Since consciousness of the other subject is consciousness of a self, and the self

¹⁸ Ernst Cassirer would agree with Stein that empathy is a kind of perception. “Thus empathy is a kind of act of perceiving” (Edith Stein, 1989, p. 11). A further comparison of Cassirer and Stein would be warranted, for although they do not agree on all points, both reject theories of the consciousness of others based on analogy. Stein is close to Cassirer when she writes that empathy is “the experience of foreign consciousness in general” (Stein, 1989, p. 11). Simulation theory, which is the “grandchild of the argument from analogy” (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2008, p. 172) does not do justice to our ordinary engagements with others. As Zahavi and Gallagher point out: “A simple phenomenological objection to explicit ST is that when I interact with or come to understand another person, there is no experiential evidence that I use such conscious (imaginative, introspective) simulation routines. That is, when we consult own common experience of how we understand others, we don’t find such processes” (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2008, p. 176).

¹⁹ Stein further analyzes the experiences of others in terms of primordial and non-primordial content. As Stein would put it, one’s consciousness of the other is a primordial experience without primordial content. Although I do perceive the other, or the other’s pain, the pain I experience is not my own. In this case, I experience the pain of the other as their pain. Stein writes, “And while I am living in the other’s joy, I do not feel primordial joy. It does not issue live from my “I”” (Stein, 1989, p. 10-11).

is not an object, consciousness of the other cannot be consciousness of an object. However, since consciousness is always of an object, consciousness of the other is a consciousness of an object. Hence, the other cannot appear except as an object that is not an object—it too appears to be self-contradictory²⁰. Descartes' problem of other minds doubts the existence of other minds because other minds, unlike the self, are not given immediately to consciousness. However, this problem has a totally different formulation: given that the consciousness of other minds is inconsistent²¹, how in principle can one be aware of others? If the philosopher holds that contradictions cannot be true, the philosopher will struggle to simply accept the presence of self and other as true contradictions. On the one hand, one can affirm the existence of others as miraculous. Cassirer quotes Klages: "The world is governed by a magical power which may be regarded equally well as corporeal or spiritual and which is totally indifferent toward this distinction" (Cassirer, 1955, p. 103). If self and other are contradictory, the self and the other may be miracles—miracles that neither the philosopher nor the scientist can grasp. Such a response may place self and other squarely in the domain of religious experience. On the other hand, in order to preserve the coherence of the theoretical worldview, one can preserve the consistency of one's experience by denying the existence of others²². Of course, we can consider this as a logical possibility, but we cannot believe it. I write this article because I expect another to read it. This can only be the case if there are others. Indeed, the public character of meaning demands it.

²⁰ Although Cassirer would not agree with Sartre's description of consciousness as a kind of nothingness, he insists that consciousness is the 'window' by which objects are visible and cannot itself be an object. Consciousness is ultimately a basis phenomenon that makes possible our consciousness of objects. (Cassirer, 1998 p. 133,138).

²¹ Levinas is right to characterize the expression of the Other in contradictory terms. The expression of the Other is [...] a coinciding of the expressed with him who expresses, which is the privileged manifestation of the Other, the manifestation of a face over and beyond form. Form—incessantly betraying its own manifestation, congealing into a plastic form, for it is adequate to the same—alienates the exteriority of the other. The face is a living presence; it is expression. [...] He at each instant undoes the form he presents (Levinas, 2016, 66). I do not mean to endorse all of Levinas' claims concerning Otherness, but he is right to describe the experience of others in terms of contradictions. Naturally, this leads to contradictions in his own descriptions, such that "The Other alone eludes thematization" and "he overflows absolutely every idea I can have of him" (Levinas, 2016, p. 87).

²² Such an attitude may be nicely captured by what Levinas calls "atheism," whereby there is a separation of the self from the Other "so complete that the separated being maintains itself in existence all by itself." (Levinas, 2016, p. 58).

Rather than simply deny the existence of other minds or declare them to be miracles, philosophers might instead deny the absolute coincidence of subject and object in the experience of others. By taking this route, philosophy could attempt to evade the contradiction and achieve a consistent understanding of others. However, this approach has severe difficulties. On this model, one can be directly conscious of an object, e.g., a body, but only indirectly conscious of a mind or subject connected to that body. By comparing the object that appears with oneself, one could attempt to establish the existence of others by analogy²³. However, by dividing the subject from the object in the consciousness of the other, the other could not in principle appear, since consciousness would only ever be aware of the object, never the subject—not even indirectly. As a result, Cassirer is right to be skeptical that the theoretical worldview could produce knowledge of others (Cassirer, 1955, 81)²⁴. For the same reason, one cannot save the consistency of self-consciousness by invoking the absolute non-coincidence of subject and object, for consciousness would never encounter itself as subject, but only ever as an object²⁵.

The contradictory character of the appearance of self and other depends upon a critical self-reflection that attends to the critical gap between consciousness and its object. In naïve self-reflection, in which one does not attend to the difference between consciousness and its object, this problem does not appear. Without attending to the critical gap between consciousness and its object, the self may appear to the mind as an object as it happens to appear in naïve naturalistic or psychological attitudes towards selfhood.

²³ Cassirer also discusses a variety of strategies that employ such a distinction, such as the appeal to empathy whereby one simulates, e.g., via the imagination, what it might be like to be the other. See (Cassirer, 1955, p. 80-82).

²⁴ Cassirer argues that the operation of theoretical consciousness must assume the existence of others and can only operate on the presupposition of this assumption. Cassirer agrees with Scheler that the evidence of others is a certain and irreducible fact (Cassirer, 1955, p. 85). Cassirer would be sympathetic with the critique of the theory theory of mind as stated by Zahavi and Gallagher. If one needs a theory to understand others, then children in their first three to four years of life should not have any understanding of others, which they in fact do. See (Zahavi and Gallagher, 2008, p. 175).

²⁵ The options Cassirer considers here are unsuccessful ways of attempting to make knowledge of other minds consistent and is not intended to be a complete catalogue of all the ways philosopher account for knowledge of others. Although Cassirer thinks one cannot solve the problem by remaining within theoretical consciousness, he argues that one can avoid the contradictions by adopting or living into the expressive relation, rather than attempting to conceive it (Cassirer, 1955, p. 102).

Likewise, because I appear to others as a plenum of being, I am regularly treated as though I were a substance or had substantial being. Because I am routinely treated as a thing, I may be inclined to treat myself the same way. Indeed, in everyday life the self is not treated as though it were empty, for both the I and the other routinely appear as a plenum of being. Accordingly, without self-reflection, a person may labor under the presupposition that self and other are ordinary things that can be consistently articulated.

IV. The desire for selfhood

Girard's theory draws upon the emptiness of the determinate self and presupposes that the self-contradiction of the self is insufferable. Having established the emptiness of the self, in order to ground the theory of mimetic desire, we must also establish the insufferability of that emptiness. An alien species might imagine that human beings are the kinds of beings who not only lack determinate selfhood but are also content or satisfied with that emptiness. The phenomenology of love shows the inherent discontent human beings have with their own emptiness, and their inherent desire for determinate selfhood.

From a Girardian point of view, the phenomenology of love is not only consistent with the phenomenology of self-consciousness, but concretely exemplifies the contradictory structure of self-consciousness in lived experience. In the case of love, the desire for another is also a desire for oneself. Indeed, whether it be erotic love, familial love, or friendship, the desire for another is inseparable from one's own sense of self-identity.

To begin with, romantic love, ἔρως, is a kind of discriminatory love. People do not fall in love with everyone. Romantic love is directed towards a particular person or particular person(s). As all good existential phenomenologists know, by losing the beloved, either to death or to a rival lover, for example, one feels a sense of self-loss—as though one is not oneself, and indeed—cannot stand to be who one is. Kierkegaard speaks of the impotent desire to “eat oneself up:”

So to despair over something is not yet properly despair. It is the beginning, or it is as when the physician says of a sickness that it has not yet declared itself. The next step is the declared despair, despair over oneself. A young girl is in despair over love, and so she despairs over her lover, because he died, or because he was unfaithful to her. This is not a declared despair; no she is in despair over herself. This self of hers, which, if it had become “his” beloved, she would have been rid of in the most blissful way, or would have lost, this self is

now a torment to her when it has to be a self without “him”; this self which would have been to her riches (thou in another sense equally in despair) has now become to her a loathsome void, since “he” is dead, or it has become to her an abhorrence, since it reminds her of the fact that she was betrayed. Try it now, say to such a girl, “Thou art consuming thyself,” and thou shalt hear her reply, “Oh, no, the torment is precisely this, that I cannot do it” (Kierkegaard, 1941, p. 28-29).

This kind of existential crisis is a common portrayal in film: the forlorn lover never leaves the house, ceases to clean, and fails to take out the garbage. The external observer agrees, for we tend to idiomatically express their condition as a case of self-alienation. We say that the forlorn lover is no longer “himself.” Consider Romeo and Juliet. Romeo’s death means that Juliet must die. She feels that she cannot live without him; she is not herself without him—without him her being is intolerable.

This phenomenon is not isolated to instances of romantic love but appears to affect all forms of discriminatory or preferential love, namely forms of love that privilege particular objects over others²⁶. Take the case of familial love—στοργή. Parents love their children preferentially—they tend to privilege the well-being of their own children over others. If someone harms one’s kin (such as one’s daughter), one perceives this as a threat to one’s very being. In particular, it is a threat to one’s being as a parent. The anxiety or unsettledness that one feels about one’s own being does not require that another actually harm one’s kin. Rather, it is enough for one to simply imagine the thought of another harming one’s child. Indeed, it is not even necessary that a real threat exist. Even the simple consideration of the possibility of harm to one’s child is sufficient to instigate a feeling of anxiety about the potential loss not only of one’s beloved, but of one’s own identity, in this case, as a parent.

Finally, consider the case of friendship, φιλία. As Aristotle says, “friendship is reciprocated good will” (Aristotle, 1999, p.121). Whether that reciprocated good will is primarily concerned with utility, pleasure, or virtue, in each case of friendship one shares a common end. On the classical understanding of friendship, friendship too is also a form of discriminatory love, for we do not find all equally useful, pleasurable, or conducive to the cultivation of virtue. Studies have shown that the same parts of the brain that

²⁶ Agape, or divine love, would not fall under the rubric of ‘discriminatory love’ for it applies to all without preference. In Chinese philosophy, the Mohist concept of love (or universal care) is also a good exception to this rule.

signal a threat to oneself are also activated when one imagines one's friends being harmed (Lane Beckes, James A. Coan, and Karen Hasselmo, 2013, p. 670-677). This is certainly not to say that love is completely determined by neurological structures. Rather, it indicates how the conscious experience of the self's relation to one's friends is reflected in the biological structure of the body itself.

How do these cases of discriminatory love show the intolerability of the empty self? In these cases of heartbreak, the self originally identifies itself with the other. Since the other appears as a subject who is also an object, the self identifies its own selfhood with the objective selfhood of the other. By losing the other, one experiences a loss of oneself—a loss of one's own objective being. The loss of one's own objective being produces grief for the loss of the beloved, but also grief for the loss of the objective self. Having lost one's own determinate self, one feels fundamentally unsettled by the indeterminacy and non-objectivity of one's own selfhood. As Kierkegaard reminds us, even the possibility of lost love provokes anxiety in us, for anxiety is nothing other than this unsettledness before the indeterminate. In the case of lost love, one desires the lost other—the other self.

In sum, the phenomenology of discriminatory love shows not only that human beings experience the loss of their beloved as a loss of their own objective selfhood, but that this loss of selfhood is experienced as an intolerable state characterized by grief and anxiety. Thus, the phenomenology of discriminatory love shows that in those cases where human beings experience a loss of objective selfhood, human beings desire to overcome their own sense of non-being and reclaim the determinate, objective selfhood with which they originally identified.²⁷ Although I certainly can be without the other, in these examples of heartbreak, the I that can be without the other is felt to be an indeterminate state rife with anxiety—it is a self in despair—a self one cannot stand to be.

In order to stave off self-loss, a person must protect the other in whom one has invested themselves, and they are willing to harm others in order to protect ourselves individually and collectively (as a family, community, nation, etc.). The defense and protection of the loved one, the romantic partner, the family, or the friend, is not just the defense of the other, but a kind of self-defense.

This brief study of the forms of discriminatory love indicates that even when I do not take up an intellectual or reflective attitude toward myself,

²⁷ Sartre calls this desire of the self to be 'in and for itself' the desire for God.

in the experience of heartbreak, one's own self appears empty of objective, determinate being whenever it is separated from the beloved. Indeed, it is just this experience of the life world—the loss of good fortune—that so often elicits self-consciousness in us (Kierkegaard, 1941, p. 81). Through repeatedly experiencing the loss of myself as a consequence of the loss of my beloved, I can learn the same truth gleaned from the theoretical pursuit of self-knowledge: the indeterminacy and paradoxicality of one's own selfhood.

V. Mimetic desire: the singular metaphysical desire

To summarize our reflections: first, the human being is a self that is empty of determinate, objective, selfhood. Second, the human self is discontent with its lack of determinate selfhood and desires the selfhood that it lacks. Given the emptiness of self, and the desire to negate that emptiness, how in principle can that desire for objective being be fulfilled?

In our search for determinate selfhood, we discovered that the objective and determinate self—the I—could neither consistently appear reflectively nor pre-reflectively. Instead, the objective self could only appear as a self that is other to oneself, as another self-outside oneself. It is true that the objective self appears to itself in reflective self-consciousness as a representation of an alien ego. However, before the human being relates to itself via reflection, in childhood the human being is already pre-reflectively self-consciousness. Moreover, because the longing for selfhood is endemic to the human condition, the longing for selfhood must already be at work in pre-reflective self-consciousness—long before a person reflectively encounters themselves. We would do good to remember that self-consciousness of one's own objective selfhood cannot be achieved within pre-reflective self-consciousness alone, for in pre-reflective self-consciousness the objective I never appears as a separate, determinate being alongside the transcendent objects of intentional experience. Thus, from within the pre-reflective position, the objective self can only appear as an object that is completely external to one's own pre-reflective being.

Because the selfhood of the self can only appear as external to the self, it will either appear as an external object that is not a subject, or as an external object that is also a subject. One cannot discover one's objective self-hood by looking to other objects inherently devoid of selfhood, such as a planet or a stone. Thus, only one other possibility remains: in order to discover their own selfhood, human beings must discover their selfhood in the selfhood

of another subjectivity—such as other human beings²⁸. To be sure, Girard would not dispute that independently of the other self, the human being is always already a self. But for Girard, this independent self is constituted by the desire for the selfhood in another. Mimetic desire signifies just this longing to find one's own selfhood in another self. Mimetic desire is Girard's term for what is traditionally understood as the 'social nature' of humanity.

From within pre-reflective self-consciousness, the I cannot appear to itself as a determinate object. However, the self can appear as a determinate object to others. In virtue of being recognized by others, the self can appear as something that has some objective being. As a result, for the self that longs for objective selfhood, the other self appears to have the power to grant determinate selfhood through their power of recognition. For this reason, the determinacy of selfhood initially appears intersubjectively, for in mutual recognition each 'I' already contains a reference to a thou, thereby constituting a 'We.' Through the *mutual recognition* of each by the other, each self appears to every other I as a plenum of being²⁹.

If the other I appeared to be totally empty of determinate selfhood too, they would not appear as a source of selfhood for pre-reflective conscious life. Unlike one's own self, however, the other I does not appear empty of determinate selfhood, for the other I occupies the object position within consciousness, and thereby appears as a determinate subject. For pre-reflective human life, the other self not only appears to have the power to confer being onto the empty subject through its power of recognition, but the other also appears as an object—as a substantial being. For the pre-reflective subject (who is unaware of the emptiness of all human subjects), the other I appears both as a being and as someone who can confer being. Simply put, the other appears as a source of selfhood—a self whose desire for selfhood has been fulfilled and who can confer objective selfhood onto the self.

While the ego's desire for determinate selfhood is unfulfilled, the other appears to have fulfilled their desire for selfhood. Hence, in order to acquire

²⁸ Note that human beings are not the only kind of subject in which human beings may search for their selfhood. They may also search for themselves in the selfhood of other living entities or God(s), for example.

²⁹ We see this intertwinement of I and thou in the German Idealist tradition. Fichte writes, "no Thou, No I, no I, no Thou" (Johann Gottlieb Fichte, 1982, p. 172-73). As Hegel would put it, each I is a We, and each We is an I (G.W.F. Hegel, 2018, p. 76). While Girard would agree that the thou is necessary for the I to complete its striving for selfhood, for Girard the I nonetheless has its own being independently of that other. It can only desire the other's desire because it is other than the other.

selfhood, the human being must learn what to desire from the other self. By taking the desire of the other as a model for what to desire, the human being can learn what to desire and how to overcome the emptiness of their own desire for selfhood. In short, by imitating the desire of the other, the human being aims to fulfill their desire for objective selfhood, and thereby learn who they are. Because pre-reflective self-consciousness is anterior to reflective self-consciousness, before one can attempt to discover one's selfhood via reflection one must first seek one's selfhood in the selfhood of another³⁰.

According to Girard,

Once his basic needs are satisfied (indeed, sometimes even before), man is subject to intense desires, though he may not know precisely for what. The reason is that he desires being, something he himself lacks and which some other person seems to possess. The subject thus looks to that other person to inform him of what he should desire in order to acquire that being. If the model, who is apparently endowed with superior being, desires some object, that object must surely be capable of conferring an even greater plenitude of being (Girard 1979, p. 145-146).

The model, the one whom one imitates, appears to have being exactly because their desire for selfhood has an object. The imitator feels a lack of being exactly because their desire fails to have an object, while the model's object appears to have the power to grant being to the subject of desire. Accordingly, the imitator is drawn to desire what the model desires, for the model has the being that is absent in the imitator. Hence, Girard reasons that as soon as the human being has desire it is mimetic desire. One learns what one ought to desire by modelling one's desire on the desire of another. The desire for selfhood is mimetic—it is heteronomous and triangular.

³⁰ While reflective self-consciousness enables the self to relate to itself as an object, this self-relation is posterior to pre-reflective self-consciousness whereby the other treats the self as an object. Indeed, the reflective self-relation that arises in the question 'who am I?' depends upon language. The subject cannot learn language without the education of others. Indeed, it is only via the relation of the others that I can learn to speak. Hence, the inter-subjective relation to others is a condition for one's capacity to reflect upon themselves via language. In principle, there is good reason to affirm that one cannot relate to oneself as a determinate object in reflection without first being recognized as a determinate object by the other. In short: I must first be named by the other before I can name myself. In any case, even if there are non-linguistic forms of reflective self-consciousness, this would not undermine the argument that pre-reflective self-consciousness requires mimetic desire.

Girard boldly claims that “as soon as there really is desire, [...] we find the mediator” (Girard 1976, 21)³¹.

The inter-determination of self and other in the constitution of the human being is also mirrored in the neural structure of human brains. Scott Cowdell points out that mirror neurons are consistent with and reflect the inter-personal aspect of selfhood undergirding Girard’s theory. Mirror neurons are a kind of neuron that activates both when a person performs a certain motor-act and when that same person observes the same action being performed by another person. As Cowdell summarizes, while various kinds of monkeys have such neurons, they are more sophisticated in human beings:

It turns out that F5 in the human frontal cortex also contains mirror neurons, but more sophisticated ones than monkeys have. As brain mapper Marco Iacoboni puts it, they “fire when an individual kicks a soccer ball, sees a ball being kicked, hears a ball being kicked, and even just says or hears the word ‘kick.’ Also, F5 in humans, and Broca’s area, where language is generated, are close together, which supports a theory of language developing from gestures rather than from prelinguistic sounds, along with language being acquired mimetically (Cowdell, 2014, 222).

³¹ Girard generally reserves the term ‘desire’ for this specific longing: the longing for selfhood. Girard further distinguishes between in-born appetites and desires. Appetites are directed towards particular objects—hunger is directed towards food, thirst towards water, etc. However, in order for these appetites to constitute our selfhood, they must pass through the fires of mimetic desire, which is not indexed to a particular object (except selfhood in general). Naturally, these appetites are not fulfilled independently of culture. Indeed, how the appetite is fulfilled is inseparable from the practice of culture, which is not pre-determined by our biological species-being. Although appetite might have a fixed object, the realization of our humanity as a social and cultured being cannot be realized by biological impulse alone. Indeed, although the survival of the organism depends upon appetitive inclination given in advance, the form of human life that distinguishes it from other organisms—central to which is its cultural diversity—must be acquired in a different way. For Girard, what one desires as a human being cannot be exhaustively determined by biological species being. Although humans are biologically inclined toward imitation (as are other beings), selfhood is not prescribed in advance by our biological species-being. For Girard, while the object of the appetites, one’s basic needs, may be given in advance, the object of desire—the self—is indeterminate and is discovered by means of imitation.

Emotional life too is deeply affected by the presence of mirror neurons:

We now know that this MNS underpins human empathy, with a brain pathway connecting F5 via the insula to the amygdala and other parts of the limbic system, where emotions are experienced, such that witnessing and simulating emotions in others lights up the brain as our own experience of the emotion would do (Cowdell, 2014, 222-223).

Mirror neurons give further evidence that selfhood cannot be fully constituted in isolation from others but is co-constituted through the interplay of self and other.

What I should desire to be as a man, as a son, as a Christian, etc. depends—in some fundamental way—on the imitation of others. By means of the imitation of others, one conforms oneself to some form of culture through some form of enculturation. Of course, that human beings learn what to desire by mimesis is nothing novel—it is an ancient idea. Learning as mimesis is, for example, central to the education of the guardians in Plato's *Republic*. In order to raise virtuous guardians, who excel in the art of war, the guardians ought only to be exposed to stories of virtue, which they must imitate, in order to learn what it is that they should desire (Plato, 1997a, p. 1022, 386a-c)³².

In summary, without the desired object (selfhood), the human being is deprived of their own self-identity. Secondly, what they desire cannot be garnered except by means of the imitation of others. Thus, since the object of desire would fulfill their desire for selfhood, the object appears as that which would constitute their selfhood. Hence, they can only learn who they are by learning what to desire. Since they learn what to desire by imitation, they can only learn what to desire, and who they are as a human being, by means of the imitation of the desires of others.

Although Girard's theory of imitation is born from reflection on literature and philosophical analysis, it is also consistent with the most recent scientific literature on imitation. Like Girard, Michael Tomasello observes that imitation is a human universal:

³² Since human beings desire the selfhood of the other, Girard's account of mimetic desire can explain why one might invest our own selfhood in others, and can thereby explain why one might enter into certain relations of discriminatory love in the first place. Accordingly, one may love a woman because one's model loves the woman, and the attachment to that woman is a consequence of one's imitation of one's model.

Children in different cultural contexts may be differentially prone to imitation, and adult behaviour may influence this as well, but the basic way that children imitatively learn from others is very likely a human universal—indeed, something that is necessary for the creation and maintenance of distinct cultural groups in the first place (Tomasello, 2019, p. 146).

Girard does generalize about the character of learning across cultures, but as Tomasello notes, this is not inconsistent with our best scientific research, for there are “no findings demonstrating qualitative difference in children’s imitative learning across different cultural contexts” (Tomasello, 2019, p. 146).

The strength of the human drive toward imitation is especially evident in the phenomenon of “overimitation.” In a study by Haun and Tomasello (2011), children were asked to identify the larger of two elephants. When three of the children had publicly declared the smaller elephant to be the larger elephant, the fourth child would also say the same thing. However, in private the fourth child would change their answers (Tomasello, 2019, p. 144). The drive to conformity in these cases outweighs our desire to speak the truth.

Tomasello reasons that children are prone to imitate adults not only to learn something useful, but also because imitation “facilitates social bonding” (Tomasello, 2019, p.143). Although this is perfectly consistent with Girard’s account of mimetic desire, mimetic desire not only facilitates social bonding, but it is also the means by which the human being seeks to construct their very selfhood. This is also consistent with a study by McGuigan and Stevenson, in which they show that children are more prone to conform “more strongly with adults than peers” (Tomasello, 2019, p. 145). Because the desire to be can only be satisfied by the imitation of the other, the desire to be is identical to the desire for what the other desires. However, because the desire of the model constitutes the being of the model, the desire for what the model desires is nothing less than the desire to be another, or more specifically, the desire to be the model. Naturally, as the model, the model is an object of admiration.

Not all desires are mimetic, for mimetic desire itself is not born from mimesis: “Imitative desire is always a desire to be another. There is only one metaphysical desire but the particular desires which instantiate this primordial desire are of infinite variety” (Girard, 1976, p. 83). As is evident,

mimetic desire itself cannot be the product of imitation³³. Because imitative desire drives us into relations of mimesis, it cannot be grounded in mimesis itself. If one learned mimetic desire by imitating the desire of another, then mimetic desire would exist before it could arise. However, this would be absurd. Accordingly, Girard infers that there is at least *one metaphysical desire*, the desire to imitate the being of the other. This means that there is at least a minimal self that is not constituted by the other—the self that desires the other.³⁴

The human self is that self who is not satisfied with its own being but desires the selfhood of the other. The desire to be the other is the desire to be heteronomous. Girard thinks that though human beings can become aware of this process of mimesis, human beings are generally unconscious of this mimetic process—they imitate without knowing why. This unconscious disposition to complete themselves via the imitation of others leads to violence.

VI. The violence of mimetic desire

Having established that mimetic desire is that process whereby the human being seeks their being, Girard demonstrates why it is that people are inclined towards jealousy and hatred. The factors constitutive of mimetic desire, understood in this existential way, show why mimetic desire—internally mediated—inclines one towards conflict.

Girard grounds his account of the emotions of jealousy, hatred, and resentment on internally mediated mimetic desire, such that all human beings are inclined, in virtue of who they are, to be drawn into the feelings of jealousy, hatred, and resentment.

³³ Doran too observes a similar regress: “If the desire for “positive role models” is itself mimetic, are we not caught in an infinite regress?” (Doran, 2005, p. 176).

³⁴ Arguing against strong tendencies in anthropological research to reduce the self to a socially constructed identity, Zahavi argues that there is a minimal, non-constructed self that makes experience possible, and which further enables the possibility of the socially constructed self. (Zahavi 2022, p. 398). While Girard is certainly not committed to the Husserlian underpinnings of Zahavi’s argument, Girard certainly acknowledges the existence of Zahavi’s minimal non-constructed self. Mimetic desire itself is not socially constructed and constitutes at least one fundamental aspect of the non-socially constructed self. However, mimetic desire offers a way to explain the connection between the non-socially constructed self and its socially constructed identity. Because humans are constituted by mimetic desire, humans are impelled to model themselves on others. In short, the appearance of the socially constructed self is, at least in part, highly motivated by the other-oriented character of the non-socially constructed self.

First, because one's being is empty, one desires to have one's own autonomous being. Yet, since this being can only be acquired by desiring the very being of the model, one can only become oneself by acquiring the being of another. Thus, one is thrust into seeking out one's own autonomous being in the being of another, in a being that is not one's own.

The self is a particular self; it is one in number. Because it is one in number, in order for the self to be one's own, it cannot be shared in common with the being of the model. Since one's being is in the being of the other, in order to acquire the self one must wrestle one's being from the model. Their possession of the object expresses—from the perspective of the imitator—an affront and challenge to one's very being. Accordingly, in order to acquire one's own being, one cannot tolerate the model's possession of the object of desire. The model thereby becomes an obstacle to the realization of one's being. What is worse, it is the very fact that they are the model for one's being that they become one's rival—the one who prevents one from realizing one's being.

Selfhood is scarce, for it is singular, and cannot be shared in common. However, mimetic desire, at its root, does not only generate conflict on account of the fact that the objects desired are scarce. It generates conflict because I can only have my being from someone else—but I am not the other—and so must stand opposed to them. To put it tersely: my singular being cannot be shared and be my own. As long as the model, whom I imitate, possesses their object, they deny me my very being. As Girard states, “one cannot be the role model without appearing to act as the obstacle” (Girard, 1976, p. 7). Naturally, seeking one's autonomous being in another is a performative contradiction, and reflects the contradiction that constitutes the selfhood of self and other. In virtue of being the model, the model is no longer the model, but the obstacle.

As is clear from the analysis, Girard makes vanity the cause of the rivalry for those subjects whose models are immanent or internally mimetic: “The mediator is the rival, brought into existence by vanity, and the same vanity demands his defeat” (Girard, 1976, p. 7). The vanity, it seems, consists in the desire to be oneself or to “desire according to oneself.” As long as one aims to desire according to be oneself alone, one will be impelled toward transforming one's model into a rival. The vanity that generates the conflict between master and disciple is constituted by a pride in one's own being—a pride that is ultimately undeserving. And deserving of the name ‘vanity,’ for the subject has no being without the model, whom he means to punish. Rather than giving thanks, the vanity of the subject moves her to hate

her model. We might expect that “desiring according to oneself” might be a kind of desire that would eschew the violent tendencies of internal mediation. However, the opposite is the case: wanting to desire according to oneself alone is exactly the principle by means of which the conflict between model and rival is generated³⁵.

Because of the ubiquitous presence of mimetic desire, Girard discovers mimetic desire and the violence born from it to be prevalent throughout human society. One finds it in the relationship between academic advisor and advisee—the imitation of the advisor brings often brings with it a hostile relationship between advisor and advisee—one need only think of famous examples such as Husserl and Heidegger. In academia, there are many who desire what the elites desire—they measure the quality of academic work by the extent to which it is desired by others whom they privilege as a model—irrespective of the quality of the work itself. Generally, mimetic desire can be easily discernable in snobbery. The snob is a slave to fashion, who desires what a privileged person or class of persons deems desirable. Such snobbery is certainly not foreign to the academy.

For Girard, hatred and jealousy are various terms for “internal mediation.” The true object of hatred, ala Girard, “inspires a desire in us and yet prevents us from fulfilling it” (Girard, 1976, p. 10-11). The model inspires in us the desire for the object, but his possession of it prevents us from fulfilling it. Thus, the model becomes an object of hatred. The model, having become an enemy, a rival for the desired object, is an object of hatred. In the subject of mimetic desire, one finds two opposing tendencies: “the most submissive reverence” and “intense malice” toward the mediator of desire who is the model/rival (Girard, 1976, p. 9).

In addition to hatred, the model becomes an object of jealousy. Jealousy is the desire to possess what another has, and the model possesses what I want. Hence, I am jealous of the model. But in the case of envy, one ought to further add that there is a feeling of helplessness or powerlessness that accompanies the feeling. Girard agrees with Scheler that envy is a “feeling of impotence which vitiates our attempt to acquire something, because it belongs to another.” And further, envy occurs when “our efforts to acquire it fail and we are left with a feeling of impotence” (Girard, 1976, p. 13). Indeed, a person may both desire the same job, and having lost the competition,

³⁵ Unfortunately for virtue ethics, modelling one’s own virtue on a virtuous person might have the ugly consequence that one finds oneself *viciously* pit against the virtuous model.

one might feel impotent in respect to the desired object, and envious of the person who received the job offer. In the fundamentally existential situation of mimetic desire, jealousy and envy are directed towards the very being of the model. I may feel a profound helplessness that the being I desire is occupied by another. Of course, on Girard's account, Scheler is very much correct that "there is a tendency in all men to compare oneself with others" and that jealousy is based on that comparison (Girard, 1976, 14).

Against Scheler, however, Girard posits the mediator or rival as the principle of jealousy and envy—not the object that the subject desires. If we suppose that the jealous person directly or immediately desires the object, we can account for why the person expresses hostility towards the person of whom they are jealous, since the person of whom they are jealous happens to stand in the way. However, we may wonder why the jealous person also (at least secretly) always admires the person of whom they are jealous.

Girard suggests that if we approach jealousy through the lens of mimetic desire, we can see that the reason the subject desires the object is because the rival desires it. On this account, we can explain why jealousy always contains some admiration or fascination with the rival. Because I admire the person of whom I'm jealous, I desire what they have, and thereby come into conflict with them—they are simultaneously an object of love and hate. Jealousy, envy, and hatred are "triangular emotions"—endemic to (internally mediated) mimetic desire (Girard, 1976, p. 12). Mimetic desire accounts for the jealous and envious person in their admiration and disdain for the person of whom they are jealous.

Girard, like Scheler before him, recognizes self-deception at the heart of jealousy. But Girard generalizes this self-deception. For him it is a feature endemic to internally mediated mimetic desire. The vain person desires to possess an autonomous being, a being determined "according to oneself," not according to another. Accordingly, vanity, the desire for independent being, demands of us that one views the rival as external to our own being. Our vanity cannot allow us to acknowledge that the rival is the model of our being. Instead, vanity externalizes the being of the rival. By externalizing the being of the rival, vanity does not allow the subject to understand that her desire is mediated through the rival. Rather, vanity engenders a profound self-deception, namely the illusion that the subject desires the object without mediation from the rival.

Accordingly, it is not just the Don-Quixote type, in his imitation of the fictional character, Amadis, that leads one to lose a sense of reality. Vanity, the fundamental disposition that leads to conflict in cases of internal mediation,

also imperils our sense of reality, but in a different sense. By concealing the mediator's role, vanity also conceals its own imitative relation to the rival. It is imitative, but it considers itself autonomous. Having uncovered the source of conflict in (internally mediated) mimetic desire, we can now understand why it is that internally mediated desire in the stories of Stendhal and others is generally concealed.

Given this profound self-deception, the vain person cannot admit to themselves that they admire their rival. Rather, because of the externalizing of the rival from their own being, the subject views "the rival's possession of the object as evidence of his alleged hostility towards him" (Girard, 1976, p. 8-9). In part due to his intense focus on the rival as the primary cause of the problem, perhaps it is not surprising that the obsessed man has very little self-knowledge but appears to have extensive knowledge of his rivals (Girard, 1976, 74). But even knowledge of the rival is lacking, for he does not know the true place of the rival in his own desire. Having done nothing more than possess an object desired by another, the model becomes the enemy. Their possession is viewed as a deliberate attempt to degrade and humiliate the subject. Thus, vanity leads the subject not only to imagine that they first desired the object and then fell into rivalry with the other, but also to square responsibility for the rivalry solely and completely on the other—not on oneself. Vanity obfuscates—it only sees the rival, not the model, and so misjudges the reality of the situation. If we tend to think about jealousy, envy, and hatred in these terms, it may be because we view the jealous person as the jealous person would view the situation—not as it really is (Girard, 1976, p. 12). Vanity leads a person to critique the other (who is not wholly responsible) and exempt themselves from responsibility, while they, in point of fact, share responsibility for the rivalry. Simply put—vanity scapegoats the rival³⁶.

By challenging the mediator, the subject forces the model to lay claim to the disputed object. By affirming their right to possession, they strengthen their own attachment to the object. Moreover, having affirmed their right to the object, the subject is revealed to be a rebellious force, who threatens to steal away what is not their own³⁷. The model—having attracted a rival—must now rival their own rival.

³⁶ Scapegoating is central to Girard's theory of myth and his critique of myth. For more on the role of scapegoating in mythical life and ritual, see *Violence and the Sacred*.

³⁷ A common phenomenon, the imposter syndrome, is a symptom of a deeper problem, namely the fact that the self is essentially an imposter.

In order for the model to acquire and maintain one's most prized possession, it is counter-productive to announce to the world what one truly wants. As Girard states, "Every desire that is revealed can arouse or increase a rival's desire; thus it is necessary to conceal desire in order to gain possession of the object. Stendhal calls this concealment 'hypocrisy' (Girard, 1976, p. 103). Julien Sorel, for example, succeeded in winning back his lover by lying. He acted as though he did not love Mathilde. While he truly loved Mathilde, he behaved as though he loved another woman—his true desire failed to correspond with his action—he was hypocritical. Yet, wielding that hypocrisy was central to winning back his beloved. Not only is the vain person self-deceived, but the rival must conceal their true desire in order to win their object and thereby their self-fulfillment. In order to avoid attracting rivals, one can always lie about what one wants, and by such misdirection, one can diminish the rivalries that would truly impact one's capacity to win or maintain the object of one's desire. As Girard succinctly states, "The secret of success, in business as well as in love (perhaps also in academia?), is dissimulation. One must hide the desire one feels and pretend a desire one does not feel. One must lie" (Girard, 1976, p. 107).

The rivalry that ensues transforms each person, both the model and the subject, into an image of the other. Now the model must be the rival of the subject—each becomes the enemy of the other. By rivaling each other for the object, each aims to deny the right of the other to the object. Each is now a rival of the other and shares a common goal: negate the being of other. Both model and subject have been transformed into rivals: there are now two rivals. Upon rivaling each other, these two rivals also become models for one another. Each imitates the rivalrous action of the other—each takes on the character of the other as a rival, and a discipleship of rivalry ensues. In an initial stage of conflict, one might engage in small acts of sabotage to undermine their rival's capacity to hold onto the object. In an advanced stage of the conflict, "negating the other" might mean exactly that: to commit an act of violence against their person or kill them and/or their loved ones. Although the conflict may at first appear to concern itself primarily with a beloved object of desire, it culminates—in the worst case—with a violent struggle to the death³⁸. If there is no interceding force to slow the advance of

³⁸ Here Girard comes close to Hegel's master-slave dialectic. As Hegel writes in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, "self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another consciousness." "In the other" it "sees its own self" and attempts to "sublate this otherness of itself." "In so doing it proceeds to sublimate its own self, for this other is itself" (Hegel, 2018,

conflict, internally mediated mimetic desire culminates in mimetic violence, wherein each imitates and mirrors the violence of the other³⁹.

Thus far we have only spoken of external conflict between persons. But for Girard mimetic desire, and mimetic violence, is more profoundly a phenomenon that affects the internal life of the human being. The conflict between model and subject—mentor and mentee—arises within the self alone. Girard speaks about how mimetic desire is the fundamental cause of resentment. Resentment is, most minimally, as Scheler points out, a reactionary attitude toward another (Girard, 1976, p. 10-11). In Girard's reflections, resentment arises from mimetic desire, and is a reactionary attitude toward one's model.

The Master (the advisor) has a disciple (a PhD student). As the model for the disciple, the master commands the disciple to "imitate me!" Yet, the disciple is also a rival-in-potential. Accordingly, the master must conjoin his first imperative with another. "Do not imitate me!" Were the student to imitate the master, the student would be at risk of falling into rivalry with the master. We do, indeed, have plenty of examples to think about when we consider academic models who have become the rivals of their students. This is what Girard calls the "contradictory double imperative" which for him lies at the basis of all human relations. The model has what the student needs—the student should imitate the model. Yet, if the model does not want to fall into rivalry with the student, he must also encourage the student not to imitate. The model transmits contradictory signals (Girard, 1979, p. 147). Resentment is the internalization of the contradictory double imperative. The internalization of the contradictory double command is a psychological self-poisoning. This contradiction is a further concretization of the contradiction that burdens self-consciousness.

We can conceptually explicate the features of resentment in Girard's account by simply returning to the very basic opposition that constitutes

p. 76-77). Like Girard, Hegel's dialectic is born out of desire. Unlike Girard, in Hegel's dialectic is cancelled and preserved in reason which no longer looks on the self as one in number, but as a universal that can be shared in common. Insofar as each recognizes the universal as what constitutes the selfhood of the other, and the universal can be held in common, Hegel can eventually solve the problem of mimetically born violence through the mutual recognition of the rationality of each person in the moments of Reason and Spirit. See (Hegel, 2018, p. 95-96).

³⁹ Such violence is also reflected in the neural structure of the brain. As Cowdell points out, "The MNS (mirror neuron system) turns out to be involved in the communication of violence, the power of suggestion in advertising, and the reinforcement of prejudice" (Cowdell, 2014, p. 223).

mimetic violence. The subject lacks being and looks to their model to acquire the being which they lack. They internalize the command 'imitate me!' This is necessary, for otherwise they have no being. On the other hand, this is not their being—it is the being of the model, and as a consequence it cannot be theirs. They internalize the claim "do not imitate me!" They find themselves poised against themselves. They identify their own being with the model, yet they cannot be who they desire to be—for the being is that of another. Who are they? They are the being who is alienated from their own being (Girard, 1976, p. 43). They have internalized the model and identified it as who they are—in this way they certainly admire themselves, for they admire the model. But this self whom they admire teases them with being while simultaneously withholding it from them. They hate themselves. Who do they become? To employ Nietzsche's phrase from the *Twilight of the Idols*, their desires have become mutually antagonistic. They are certainly a decadent—very much in the sense of Nietzsche. Unlike Nietzsche's philosophy however, there is no overman exempt from this process—decadence is not merely a feature of herd morality.

Girard claims that the implications of the scandalous violence that arises due to mimetic desire is identical to the implications of a notion like Nietzsche's concept of resentment. This internal resentment is inexplicable without the acknowledgement of the specific way that the subject and model interact. Indeed, the subject's being is contingent upon the negation of the being of the master. Their being is not self-determined, for it can only be acquired in a reactionary way. The value of the master, whom they secretly admire, is inverted—the master becomes bad, an enemy who deserves punishment, while the subject who rivals the master takes itself to be good—even a victim of the master's prowess. Moreover, in order to negate the being of the master, and win the power, they must formalize the use of cunning, hypocrisy and lies as essential tools to overcome the obstacle in order to mis-lead and mis-direct the rival. Finally, at the height of the crisis of violence, the master will be transformed into an image of the subject—each becomes a decadent if they were not both so already—the model themselves transformed into a mirror image of the decadent.

Internally mediated mimetic desire turns us against each other, and it turns us against ourselves. Since all human beings are subject to the pressures of mimetic desire, decadence is not a wholly modern or novel phenomenon. This capacity to turn against oneself, according to Girard, is a fundamental disposition of the human being. Earlier we noted that the vain person conceals the presence of the model within. Thus, the decadent may be decadent

without knowing that they are such—they may be at odds with themselves without knowing why.

Indeed, one who is self-conscious of one's condition might find oneself in a deep existential despair. Having a heightened self-consciousness, and having seen the ugliness of one's own being, one cannot help but be disgusted at oneself. We find such a person in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*. In the underground, the man hates himself, and is incapable of action. His heightened self-consciousness about his own decadence has brought him underground with a cold greeting of resentment towards the world. The protagonist exclaims: "I swear to you gentlemen, that to be overly conscious is a sickness—a real, thorough sickness" (Dostoevsky, 1994, p. 6). He may consider his own fate particular to him—a cursed being—while everyone else he might suppose, does not feel this internal split in the soul. He may consider the ailment to be his own alone, without necessarily recognizing that this is a contagion that has spread throughout his society. The great novelists from Cervantes to Dostoevsky, recognized these trends of mimetic desire. Culminating with Dostoevsky, we discover a heightened sense of self-alienation and despair—the height of modern resentment. In sum, internally mediated mimetic desire brings violence against oneself as much as it brings violence against the other.

As we stated earlier, mimetic violence appears as a kind of uniformity, for each person now takes on the same role: each is the rival of the other. The differences between the persons in the relation has subsided. As Girard notes, they are monstrous doubles (Girard 1979, p. 56). Ironically, although they have a uniform goal to negate the other, in order to negate the other they must differentiate themselves from the other, and separate themselves from their rival. Given the impulse to overcome their rival, creative acts of negation may arise. I say 'no' to my rival, and create a scheme or engage in a creative act of cunning in order negate the other. Accordingly, escalating mimesis can give birth to reactionary creativity. As Girard notes, in a world of internal mediation, "the contagion is so widespread" that "everyone could be his neighbor's mediator without understanding the role he is playing" such that in "being tempted to copy his neighbor's desire" his desire becomes a "copy of a copy" of his original desire.

In a society in which human beings primarily desire by means of internal mediation, the source of the conflict is not necessarily one pair of models and subjects. Rather, in such a society one can expect a number of rivalrous pairs, each of whom instigates their own sequence of violent mimesis. If there is no interceding force to slow the advance of mimetic conflict,

internally mediated mimetic desire culminates in mimetic violence, wherein each actor imitates and mirrors the violence of the other. The violence itself is contagious in the sense that violence itself becomes the object of imitation, for it becomes the ideal after which the subjects strive. Here the performative contradiction is deepened: by negating the other I copy the other.

Even our acts of reactionary creativity work to re-enforce the uniformity of our mimetic violence. Ironically, our reactionary negativity, rather than create distance from the rival, brings us into a more intimate and violent uniformity with our rival. Violent opposition is the signifier of ultimate desire. It is the position of one who feels himself at the cusp of divine self-sufficiency (Girard 1979, p. 148). Such self-sufficiency is despair, for the self is not absolutely autonomous, and “builds castles in the air” such that “The Self is its own lord and master, so it is said, its own lord, and precisely this is despair [...]” (Kierkegaard, 1941, p. 111).

VII. Concluding remarks

In conclusion, Girard’s theory of mimetic desire has a solid philosophical grounding in the non-being of human selfhood. Mimetic desire is the disposition by which one seeks selfhood in others, a longing that always leads to violence as long as one seeks one’s selfhood in other persons. If we continue to pursue one’s selfhood in other persons, one is inherently disposed to fall into violence with one’s neighbors. The contradictory character of that violence reflects the contradictory character of one’s very selfhood. Only by becoming aware of mimetic desire, and the violent consequences of internal mediation, can one begin to seriously consider how the violence born from that desire might be extinguished.

First, we must become aware of the emptiness of all human subjects, and their need to locate their subjectivity beyond themselves via mimetic desire. Second, the solution to the problem of such violence does not necessarily demand relinquishing all desire. Rather, Girard calls us only to relinquish internally mediated desire. Indeed, let us not forget the case of Don Quixote. Don Quixote desires according to an external mediator, who is “enthroned in an inaccessible heaven.” Because the model transcends the domain of being that is occupied by the subject, Quixote never falls into rivalry with his model. To escape the travails of mimetic desire, we might do well to reconsider the wisdom of Quixote, whose foolishness is not without its merits⁴⁰.

⁴⁰ Girard himself never lays the blame for violence on mimetic desire itself. To see why, one must only remember that mimetic desire must not be internally mediated. In order

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to avoid the rivalry and violence at the heart of mimetic desire, Girard will argue that one must have an external mediator with whom one cannot in principle compete. Because human beings are finite creatures lacking their own selfhood, they cannot compete with God, for God is an infinite and perfect Other. Unlike Quixote's model who is violent, Girard calls us to imitate the God of the New Testament, in which Girard discover that God is love. If God is love (agape), as the New Testament teaches, then by desiring God one would desire agape—a form of non-discriminatory love. The content of agape is thoroughly and radically non-violent. Hence, Girard argues that by imitating the transcendent God of love, the subject can stop the cycle and contagion of violence born from internally mediated mimetic desire. While Girard solves the problem of mimetic desire by appealing to the Christian faith, there are other possible solutions, which Girard does not consider that must be taken into careful consideration. For example, rather than re-directing mimetic desire to God, as Girard argues, an alternative Buddhist response might advocate for the absolute detachment from all forms of mimetic desire.

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