Mimetic Theory: A New Paradigm for Understanding the Psychology of Conflict

By Kathryn M. Frost

Religion is the mother of culture.–René Girard[1]

Social psychologists excel at studying narrow, precise slices of psychological phenomena, but we struggle at the task of integrating disparate research findings to better understand complexities such as human conflict. Because grand theories of human behavior can help us to perceive and interpret our findings in new and insightful ways, the field of social psychology benefits from opening itself to thoughtful paradigms that integrate our research in novel ways. And when these paradigms are interdisciplinary—incorporating insights from anthropology, biology, theology, history, and more—they open up new and more comprehensive ways of perceiving and applying familiar psychological concepts. Put another way, social psychologists need to do more than grouping like-minded research on grand topics such as conflict. Our current practice inhibits larger ideas that could guide new research and be more relevant to people who are not specialists in psychology.

For understanding human conflict in particular, one could argue that the meta-theory of evolutionary psychology has served adequately as an organizing principle. But if conflict has been a fundamental part of human groups throughout time, then it cannot ultimately be understood fully through the lens of biological evolution.[2] Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt knew this, which is why he combined Darwin and Durkheim in his paradigm for understanding conflict.[3] By focusing on tribalism and groupishness, Haidt also knew that the role of religion as a cultural variable was key to the conflict question. That said, Haidt had no

central variable at his disposal tying together human psychological and cultural life. Enter mimetic theory.

Mimetic theory attempts to address age-old questions of intractable conflict by beginning with a thoroughly relational understanding of individuals due to our less-than-conscious imitative—otherwise called mimetic—propensities. This paradigm sees mimesis as fueling our attraction to desirable others while also being instrumental in our rivalries. And because rivalries and uncontrollable violence would have seriously threatened early humans who otherwise had no other cultural means of quelling possible annihilation, opting for small-scale violence in the form of scapegoating another must have been viewed as a miraculous, even godlike intervention. Any practice with the ability to move humans from a place of ominous violence to peaceful calm must have served as a type of religion for early humans. Perhaps the lingering tendency even now to pass on our pain, blame, and violence to others is an ancient solution humankind has only been trying to shake since the Gospels alerted us to this flawed method of transcendence a mere two thousand years ago. This paper aims to use this thick understanding of human conflict as a lens for reinterpreting and integrating social psychological research for a new way of thinking about human conflict.

Imitation and the Relational Self

The beauty of mimetic theory is its parsimony, beginning with the concept of mimetic desire, this pervasive tendency for humans to imitate others, not deliberately or consciously, but somewhat helplessly.[4] Unlike natural appetites directed at real objects, human desire is largely an act of imagination where desire rests not in an object itself, but in a model who indicates for us an object's value. René Girard developed mimetic theory based on his comparative analysis of great novels and the common finding that characters in these stories, often at a loss to know what to want, end up desiring the same things others around them desire. He proposed that mimesis is deeply woven into the fabric of our being and can be seen quite early in life, for example, in the case of preschool children in a nursery room filled with toys. Imagine Child 1 is contently playing with a toy. Child 2 enters the room and could easily play with any of the multitude of similar toys in the room, but inevitably Child 2 will want the toy that Child 1 has. It is as if by playing with a particular toy, Child 1 confers a unique status onto

[1]René Girard, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origin of Culture* (London: Continuum International, 2008), 70.
[2]Pierpaolo Antonello and Paul Gifford, "Introduction," in *How We Became Human*: *Mimetic Theory and the Science of Evolutionary Origins*, eds. Pierpaolo Antonello and Paul Gifford (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015), xi-liii.
[3]Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*: *Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Random House, 2012).
[4]René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure,* trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965).

the object (toy) that Child 2 unconsciously notices and cannot resist. In adult life, we certainly know the power of modern advertising to cultivate our desire for the latest celebrity, technological trend, or pair of Nikes. Children are fascinating to watch in terms of mimetic desire because they have not yet learned to mask their wishes. Adults, on the other hand, have learned to hide interest in others' desires so as not to reveal our tendencies toward conformity, a practice that will get a person labeled "inauthentic" or "fake" in modern, individualistic cultures.

Grounding a theory of human behavior in mimesis calls into question any psychology based on human autonomy or a bounded, contained self. It is not only that we learn from others, but our very core desires—from objects we want, to love interests we pursue, to what makes up our personal identity—are all highly influenced by the other even if we deny this understanding.[5] The formerly autonomous self in psychology is recast as thoroughly interdependent, knowable through relationships where "others come to dwell inside us" even if we discount their influence or delude ourselves about the spontaneous nature of our own desires.[6]

The idea that humans imitate each other has long held a place in the field of psychology even if it makes no one's list as the lynchpin of human behavior. Forty years ago, Meltzoff and Moore began showing that humans appear to be always already imitating those in their midst, even within hours of birth.[7] And in years since, over a dozen independent laboratories worldwide have found similar neonatal facial imitation. These researchers suggest that infant gaze-following behavior shows how imitation is serving as a powerful force that deeply connects individuals, revealing that infants are pulled into a "powerful orbit of adult behavior, goals, intentions, and desires" that "[serve] as the starting state that supports learning . . . including mutual-informing imitation between self and other."[8] Although there is evidence suggesting that imitation is not genetic,[9] we do know that very early in life infants pay attention to faces that mirror theirs compared to faces that do not.[10] Thus, even if the instinct to imitate is not present at birth, it appears to be a fundamental aspect of the infant and caregiver relationship.

Bandura's seminal work in the 1960s showing that children will imitate adult

[5]Jean-Michel Oughourlian, *The Genesis of Desire,* trans. Eugene Webb (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010); Frank C. Richardson and Kathryn M. Frost, "Psychology, Hermeneutic Philosophy, and Girardian Thought," in *René Girard and Creative Reconciliation,* eds. Vern Neufeld Redekop and Thomas Ryba (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), 185-215.
[6]Chris Fleming, *René Girard: Violence and Mimesis* (Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2004), 36.
[7]Andrew Meltzoff, "Out of the Mouths of Babes: Imitation, Gaze, and Intentions in Infant Research—the 'Like Me' Framework," in *Mimesis and Science: Empirical Research on Imitation and the Mimetic Theory of Culture and Religion*, ed. Scott R. Garrels (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 55-74.
[8]Ibid., 70.
[9]Cecilia Hayes, "Imitation: Not in Our Genes," *Cellular Biology* 26.10 (May 2016): 412-414.
[10]Andrew Meltzoff and Particia Kuhl, "Exploring the Infant Social Brain: What's Going On There?" *Zero to Three* 36.3 (January 2016): 2-9.

models powerfully influenced the field of psychology.[11] Bandura's social learning theory presumes a conscious, motivated, attentive subject who is carefully watching a model's behavior, retaining details in order to reproduce that behavior, and repeating the behavior in order to facilitate success. And for much of the twentieth century, the field of child and adult imitation research was presumed to operate in this highly conscious, self-determined, and deliberate manner. But as the experimental method of priming began to take hold in the latter part of the twentieth century, more psychological research attempted to bypass conscious information processing and alternatively target an individual's quick, automatic, effortless intuiting, now considered to guide persons throughout much of their daily lives.[12] From this focus on automatic processing, social contagion work opened up a line of research that Chartrand and Bargh called "the chameleon effect" showing how humans synchronize their behavior with others, mirroring others' speaking, grammar, gestures, and even others' feelings. As the field of psychology has evolved to better appreciate the unconscious, so too has the study of imitation and mimicry been recast as a more pervasive influence on human behavior even if we are hardly aware of it.

Plenty of evidence suggests that copying behavior operates on a massive scale. Social psychologists have been documenting the clear and consistent tendencies toward conformity since at least the mid-twentieth century.[13] And outside of the lab, evidence points to the very real risk of copycat suicides and the increased interest in suicide when high-profile persons take their lives.[14] Just as infectious diseases are caught within and among communities, so are social phenomena like suicide. Other research has found that mass shootings (deaths of four or more persons) as well as school shootings also show evidence of a type of conformity or social contagion.[15]

Neuroscience has also shed light on our understanding of imitation as a subtle type of conformity. Brain scans seem to suggest that when individuals go

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[11]Albert Bandura, Dorothea Ross, and Sheila A. Ross, "Transmission of Aggression Through Imitation of Aggressive Models," *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 63.3 (1961): 575-582.

[12]Tanya L. Charthand and John A. Bargh, "The Chameleon Effect: The Perception–Behavior Link and Social Interaction," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 76.6 (June 1999): 893-910; Jonathan Haidt, "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment," *Psychological Review* 108.4 (Oct 2001): 814-834; Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

[13]Solomon E. Asch, "Opinions and Social Pressure," *Scientific American* 193.5 (November 1996): 31-35.

[14]Steven Sack, "Media Impacts on Suicide: A Quantitative Review of 293 Findings," *Social Science Quarterly* 81.4 (December 2000): 957-997; Linda Caroll, "The Robin Williams Effect: Could Suicides Follow the Star's Death?" nbcnews.com, last modified August 12, 2014, https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/robin-williams-death/robin-williams-effect-could-suicides-follow-star-s-death-n178961.

[15]Sherry Towers et al., "Contagion in Mass Killings and School Shootings," *PLoS* 10.7 (July 2015).

against group pressure, they experience something akin to pain.[16] This finding from fMRI scans shows patterns not unlike those displayed when humans experience social rejection, suggesting that attempts to avoid conforming to others is a painful process. Furthermore, work in the area of the mirror neuron system also has intriguing implications for any study of imitation. Mirror neurons are the highly specialized brain cells which light up on an fMRI both when a person engages in a behavior and when they *watch* (with no corresponding movement) another engaging in the same behavior.[17] After these mirror neurons were first discovered in monkeys, several follow-up studies found that a similar mirror neuron system (MNS) in human brains in the premotor and posterior parietal cortices activates during observation and execution of mouth-, hand-, and foot-related acts. The jury is still out regarding the specific way in which these cells might be explaining imitation, and especially the type of imitation to which mimetic theory is pointing. The theory is not simply that we mimic others' minute gestures (though picking up on others' gestures is surely part of the doubling process); rather, it goes beyond mere mimicking to claim that we understand what others desire and we are imitating that emotion. There is research to support that the MNS is activated by detecting basic action intentions, that it plays a role in language semantics, and that it is invoked when detecting certain emotions.[18]

From traditional imitation research to the chameleon effect to mirror neuron work and beyond, psychological research appears to show a growing trend toward the importance of the not-so-conscious type of imitation that Girard believes is at the root of social interaction. Some psychologists have gone so far as to suggest that unconscious mimicry is a type of "social glue" that has served as an important evolutionary survival advantage throughout human history by facilitating group membership.[19] Though all of this psychological research points to the importance of a type of unconscious imitation in everyday life and may hint at how profoundly mimesis guides behavior, mimetic theory points us more broadly in the direction of desires. It is not simply or only that we desire another's possessions, but rather we come to desire the *being* of another.[20] We may convince ourselves that this other person has figured out the key to life and presume that adopting this way of being would fill any personal void we have. That said, we may not always own up to this type of conformity, especially in the modern Western world, because it

[16]Gregory S. Berns, et al., "Neurobiological Correlates of Social Conformity and Independence During Mental Rotation," *Biological Psychiatry* 58.3 (August 2005): 245-253.

[17]Giacomo Rizzolatti and Laila Craighero, "The Mirror-Neuron System," *Annual Review of Neuroscience* 27 (2004): 169-192.

[18]Marco Iacoboni, et al., "Grasping the Intentions of Others with One's Mirror Neuron System," *PLOS Biology* 3 (February 2005); Bruno Wicker, et al., "Both of Us Disgusted in *My* Insula," *Neuron* 40.3 (October 2003): 655-664.

[19]Jessica L. Lakin, et al., "The Chameleon Effect as Social Glue: Evidence for the Evolutionary Significance of Nonconscious Mimicry," *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* 27.3 (September 2003): 145-162.

[20]Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel,* 83ff.

threatens our sense of ourselves as original and spontaneous persons in control of our own desires. In a world where psychologists, life coaches, and YouTube gurus are finding every which way to instruct us on how to "be your own person," shrug off what others think, and maintain one's independence, mimetic theory is suggesting that all of these life prescriptions are largely impossible to fulfill. Our best bet would be to acknowledge our dependence on others and recognize that we are inescapably linked to others and their opinions of us. If we are to achieve any semblance of critical, creative, or rational decision-making, it will have to come only as a by-product of acknowledging our deeply mimetic condition.

Mimetic desire often operates rather peacefully among persons in relationship.[21] Think of numerous scenarios involving humans in unequal power relationships (for example, parent-child, master-apprentice, and so on) who get along just fine so long as there is one of the pair who is viewed as having less power than the other. When distinctions or social differences between the two remain stable and easily identifiable, mimetic desire moves unidirectionally (from apprentice to master) and the system is considered ordered, stable, and cooperative. These clear hierarchical relationships involve a safe psychological distance between persons and represent non-competitive, learning interactions. Indeed, the suggestion is that mimesis operating in this way has been fundamental to ways in which humans, indeed cultures, have come into being and continue to evolve.

The comparative psychology research by Michael Tomasello and colleagues also situates human cultural evolution in the ever-important space of human relationship.[22] In their work comparing chimpanzees and human toddlers when presented both intellectual and collaboration-demanding tasks, Tomasello and colleagues found that only the toddler group was able to show significant success using collaboration to solve problems. This body of work has centered on a shared attention and intention hypothesis to describe how hominization developed as part of humans sensing a common need, being committed to cooperating with others to address the need, and being willing to share with each other in the fruits of the group's labor. For example, two or more persons hunt an animal by coordinating their plan of attack where all persons know the overall strategy and understand each other's intentions in view of the goal. When our ancestors developed this kind of shared intentionality, their minds diverged from the previous form of mental capacity shown by earlier primates. The more humans evolved to emphasize the importance of this type of shared psychological space, the more this shared attention came to be valued for its own sake. We see this plainly in human toddlers who over-imitate adults by completing irrelevant or unnecessary steps in following a model and who may do so simply to "be with"

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[21]René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World,* trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 283-291.
[22]Michael Tomasello et al., "Understanding and Sharing Intentions: The Origins of Cultural Cognition," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 28.5 (October 2005): 721-727.

their model.[23] Furthermore, only human children present objects to adults for the sheer purpose of a type of shared enjoyment of the object. Consider the way children cry out for adults to "watch me" almost as if their forward roll is not quite real unless their important other is part of the experience. For Tomasello and colleagues, as for Girard, imitative and instructive learning play a profound and unique role in the human species and its ability to transmit culture through generations. And though Tomasello places significantly more importance on collaborative learning as a cultural driver, it may be that our capacity for imitation in the form of imagining or understanding another's mental state and intentions is a crucial part of the collaborative learning process.[24]

Violence

Mimesis may be instrumental in cultural learning, but mimetic theory also suggests that power struggles arise when hierarchies or power differentials begin to break down.[25] Competition ensues because persons are now vying for the same object or state of being. In dyads, a master and apprentice may work well together for extended periods of time until the apprentice gains enough acclaim that he threatens the master. With both striving for their esteemed status in the field, the master at some point becomes an obstacle to the apprentice's ascendancy. In this situation, the master becomes a rival and gets drawn into the mimetic spiral of reciprocating the apprentice's desires in much the way the apprentice had been imitating his master. Indeed, mimesis works to entangle the two persons completely; they become mimetically chained to each other because the desiring subject sees the other as the idol. Likewise, the model needs the imitator in order to prove his status. Just as Dostoevsky showed in his later novels, the proud hero could try to hide his deficiencies as much as possible, but he could not relinquish his need for others to approve of and confirm his worth.[26] Think here of celebrities who despise the paparazzi but then keep putting themselves in situations that fuel the attention. There is an overt claim to disliking the attention, but an implicit craving for it which sustains their celebrity identity and worth. Thus, the powerful, though portraying themselves as self-sufficient, need the other as much as the other needs them.

If unequal relationships and the rivalry entailed were not problematic enough, the desiring subject—which is to say, each of us—is also faced with another problem. Should the apprentice be "successful" at achieving the stature of her master, she will inevitably confront the futility of her aspiration as she realizes that the

[23]Ann Cale Kruger, "Imitation, Communion, and Culture," in *Mimesis and Science: Empirical Research on Imitation and the Mimetic Theory of Culture and Religion*, ed. Scott R. Garrels (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 111-127.
[24]Andrew Meltzoff, "Understanding the Intentions of Others: Re-enactment of Intended Acts by 18-month-old Children," *Developmental Psychology* 31.5 (September 1995): 838-850.
[25]Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 96-112.
[26]Ibid.

powerful other she has been imitating must not have been that powerful after all. The apprentice tells herself that, since she was able to achieve the level of the model/master and she still fails to sense the "self-sufficiency" she thought this stature would bring her ("why am I not content and happy now that I've achieved the status I wanted?"), she is then faced with another choice. She can give up this hopeless charade or redouble her efforts and search for more powerful models. Echoing Girard, Webb describes this predicament as "a disease that none of us is really immune to."[27] This kind of constant striving for that next, best choice or way of life that will ultimately bring satisfaction has been described well by the psychologist Philip Cushman.[28] He notes that over time, with increases in affluence and consumption, modern individuals have surprisingly not experienced increases in satisfaction with life. With the rise of an individualistic self, driven more by work and personal advancement than by family or communal ties, Cushman describes an "empty self" that is emotionally hungry and seeks to satiate itself with whatever the advertising industry suggests will provide life with meaning. And because consumption turns out not to be correlated with happiness, the empty self must continually be upping the ante in its search for deep, sustained life meaning. Barry Schwartz similarly describes the cycle of dissatisfaction that results from persons having too many choices at our disposal, not only in the realm of commodities for consumption but also in terms of choices regarding how or who we want to *be*.[29] Mimetic theory outlines this same vicious cycle, but explains the phenomena from the standpoint of mimetic desire and a search for the ultimate model to emulate. Yet it should be said: Mimetic desire cannot be extinguished by anyone no matter how many rungs up the ladder of prestige one successfully climbs.

Girard strongly believes there are better and worse ways to manage mimetic rivalry.[30] The good life, for Girard, involves first acknowledging in a conscious manner the human need to find models to imitate (a predicament from which none of us can escape), and second, the choosing of appropriate models. The suggestion here is that mimetic rivalry, hatred, and futile conflict ensue when one denies the need or interest in models. Our modern, individualistic culture perpetuates the notion that persons can "go it alone," decide things for oneself, rebel against the crowd, and otherwise shirk one's desire for wanting what others want. Mimetic theory puts forth that these modern-day goals are futile. We

[27] Eugene Webb, *The Self Between: From Freud to the New Social Psychology of France* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 104.

[28] Philip Cushman, "Why the Self Is Empty: Toward a Historically Situated Psychology," *American Psychologist* 45.5 (May 1990): 599-611. See also David G. Myers, "Wanting More in an Age of Plenty," *Christianity Today,* April 24, 2000, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/april24/6.94.html.

[29] Barry Schwartz, "Be Careful What You Wish For: The Dark Side of Freedom," *Handbook of the Uncertain Self*, eds. Robert Arkin, Kathryn C. Oleson, and P. J. Carroll (New York: Psychology Press, 2009), 62-77.

[30] Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 290ff.

would do better to acknowledge our reliance on models and recognize that we need others to better understand ourselves, especially our desires, and to solve problems in our everyday lives.

Girard sets up a supreme paradox. Worthy democratic ideals are meant to break down differences between persons, and yet differentiation is the very state that controls mimetic rivalry. Our modern values of justice, fairness, and equality mean that we are constantly working toward breaking down hierarchies between persons and groups. Psychologists rarely question the value of freedom and the flattening of cultural differences as a positive outcome variable; rather, the presumption is the more freedom the better.[31] However, the progression from mimetic desire to rivalry—in other words, moving from calm, ordered relating into conflict with others—entails a loss of differences where persons and groups no longer see themselves as distinct from the other. Thus, the conflict is more about the growing sameness between the two parties and the rush to try to re-establish the order that differences provide! This is a key point to understanding mimetic theory. In the field of psychology, we have a tendency to focus on group differences (or perceived differences) as the root or heart of what drives conflict. Mimetic theory, on the other hand, shows us that a conflict ramps up because persons or groups lose distinctiveness or recognition. Shouting matches tend to center, then, on persons or groups demanding they be recognized in a way that will re-establish lost distinctiveness. Consider the speech patterns of George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden in the events that unfolded after 9/11. From Bush, it was "Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." And from bin Laden, we heard "I tell them that these events have divided the world into two camps, the camp of the faithful and the camp of infidels."[32] The more fascinated Americans became with bin Laden and Al Qaeda (and vice versa) in an attempt to carve out good and evil, the more the two figureheads and wider cultures sounded alike. The collapse of distinctions exacerbated both the conflict and the drive to differentiate from each other.

From the mimetic theory perspective, freedom from oppression and equal opportunity among societal members increases conflict rather than solves societal problems because it promotes sameness rather than ordered differences. It should be noted that Girard is making a descriptive claim here rather than an ethical one:

Modern people still fondly imagine that their discomfort and unease is a product of the strait-jacket that religious taboos, cultural prohibitions and, in our day, even the legal forms of protection guaranteed by the judiciary system place upon desire. They think that once this confinement is over, desire will be able to blossom forth; it's wonderful innocence will finally be able to bear fruit. None of this comes true.[33]

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[31]Hazel Rose Markus and Barry Schwartz, "Does Choice Mean Freedom and Well-being?" *Journal of Consumer Research* 37.2 (August 2010): 344-355.
[32]"Text of Bush and bin Laden Speeches," October 7, 2001, https://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/481921texts.html.
[33]Girard, *Things Hidden*, 285.

Girard is not advocating a return to traditional, hierarchical societies where human rights are denied and peace is somehow manufactured. He writes, "But I find it even more absurd to hear people calling for a return to constraints, which is impossible. From the moment cultural forms begin to dissolve, any attempt to reconstitute them *artificially* can only result in the most appalling tyranny" (italics mine).[34] That said, he does think our denial of the complexities related to increasing freedom exacerbates the problems associated with it.

Mammals of all sorts contend with mimesis, as seen in their competition for food, mates, and territory, but non-human animals have a more well-defined hierarchical system of domination established that allows them only rarely to come to full blows when one animal desires what the other has.[35] You see this with dogs moving toward food. Very quickly, each animal senses the dominance or submission of the other, and the submissive animal will quickly back away from the bowl. Monkeys whose amygdala are stimulated will automatically attack another monkey *except* if that other monkey is the more dominant one.[36] Thus, in much of the non-human mammal kingdom, mimesis is present, but less likely to spiral out of control due to the smaller brains leading to the more ordered, established hierarchical systems of dominance and submission characteristic of their environments.

Girard imagines the scene of early humans around the time of hominization and the ways they might have dealt with the prevalence of violence in their time.[37] Evidence as far back as the Stone Age suggests that brutal intergroup violence was the norm for our hunter-gatherer ancestors.[38] Concern about impending violence must have been at the forefront of the lives of these early humans; indeed, they must have lived in fear that uncontrollable violence could break out at any time. Even with the evolutionary growth of the cerebral cortex and all its capacities for rationality, humans still seem to be affected by violence in their midst. Social psychologists have not only been zeroing in on the study of social contagion in general, but evidence seems to support the idea that violence, too, is contagious. Recent work by well-established violence researcher Brad Bushman has shown that adolescents are 183% more likely to commit an act of violence if they have a friend who has committed a similar act.[39] Researchers note a "clustering effect" when adolescents with similar interests, including tendencies toward violence,

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[34]Ibid., 286.
[35]Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 100-103.
[36]Hannes Rusch and Sergey Gavrilets, "The Logic of Animal Intergroup Conflict: A Review," *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* (May 2017).
[37]Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 89-118.
[38]Marta Mirazon Lahr, et al., "Inter-group Violence among Early Holocene Hunter-gatherers of West Turkana, Kenya," *Nature* 529 (January 2016): 394-398.
[39]Robert M. Bond and Brad J. Bushman, "The Contagious Spread of Violence among US Adolescents Through Social Networks," *American Journal of Public Health* 107. 2 (February 1, 2017): 288-294; Luke Glowacki et al.,"Formation of Raiding Parties for Intergroup Violence Is Mediated by Social Network Structure," *PNAS* 113.43 (October 2016): 12114-12119.

assemble together in social networks. Violence among social networks seems to suggest that there is something that connects humans together, makes them notice one another, and compels them to replicate their peers. If mimesis is not the glue that is driving individual fascination with one another, perhaps especially where violence is concerned, then we need a theory to help us better explain what is causing this powerful interpersonal attraction.

That parties in a quarrel show a keen fascination with the enemy and his level of violence has research support. Rivals in a conflict often believe that they are returning a blow to an opponent with the same force in which a blow was received, what we might call a "taste of his own medicine" tactic.[40] In practice, however, humans are more likely to return blows with greater force in a phenomenon called overkill—even when they are trying to match the aggression they perceive was directed at themselves. Girard found the same in his own research: "Everyone imitates the other's violence and returns it 'with interest.' Uninvolved spectators see this unmistakably."[41]

Mimetic theory paints a portrait of humans as creatures of passion, easily enraged, and blind to our own contributions to conflict situations.[42] We are not typically conscious of the motivations behind our behavior, especially when aroused, and we project evil onto our rival. Not only are we blind to our adversary's rationality, but we are also convinced of our own truth. The theologian Raymond Schwager describes mimetic rivalries where "everyone believes he has 'good reasons' for his actions."[43] Social psychologists have long studied the misperceptions that feed interpersonal conflict. Our self-serving biases steer us toward pawning off responsibility for our mistakes while taking credit for jobs well done.[44] Humans also have a tendency toward making *situational* attributions for themselves when they make mistakes ("I bumped you because the hall was crowded"), but making *personality* attributions for others experiencing the same problem ("You bumped me because you're evil").[45] And cognitive dissonance theorists have found substantial support for our tendency to deny, rationalize, and justify our behavior ("It was just a white lie"), all the while not conscious of our tendencies to do so.[46] These misperceptions happen at the intergroup level

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[40]Sukhwinder S. Shergill et al., "Two Eyes for an Eye: The Neuroscience of Force Escalation," *Science* 301.5630 (2003): 187.

[41]Girard, *Things Hidden,* 300.

[42]Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 143ff.

[43]Raymond Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats: Violence and Redemption in the Bible,* trans. Maria L. Assad (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 7-8.

[44]Constantine Sedikides et al., "The Self-Serving Bias in Relational Context," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74.2 (1998): 378–386.

[45]Lee Ross, "The Intuitive Psychologist and His Shortcomings: Distortions in the Attribution Process," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, ed. L. Berkowitz (New York: Academic Press, 1977), 173–220.

[46]For an overview, see Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson, *Mistakes Were Made, but Not by Me: Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions and Hurtful Acts* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007).

as well in the form of groupthink and polarization ("We are the righteous rebels, they are terrorists").[47]

The Nobel-Prize-winning behavioral economist Daniel Kahneman has been instrumental in uncovering a number of these social and cognitive errors or biases which cause individuals and groups to misjudge their abilities, intentions, and perceptions, especially when emotions are running high.[48] Kahneman and Renshon have further suggested that, of the biases uncovered during approximately the last four decades, *all* of them favor violence. They note,

> These psychological impulses . . . incline national leaders to exaggerate the evil intentions of adversaries, to misjudge how adversaries perceive them, to be overly sanguine when hostilities start, and overly reluctant to make necessary concessions in negotiations. In short, these biases have the effect of making wars more likely to begin and more difficult to end.[49]

For example, consider one experiment where Israeli Jew subjects reacted less favorably to a peace plan when they thought it was authored by Palestinians than when it was attributed to their own ingroup.[50] Though most psychological literature refers to these human tendencies as "errors," evolutionary psychologists generally point to them as adaptations.[51] These biases may be adaptive because 1) they serve as useful short-cuts (consider the fact that our stereotypes are correct much of the time, so employing a stereotype especially under cognitive load, when one is time or energy pressed, is an adaptive strategy); 2) error management—it's better to be safe than sorry (keep your child inside even though stranger abduction in the U.S. is exceedingly rare), or 3) humans are presented with problems for which they simply have not been designed to solve. In any case, as far as mimetic theory is concerned, humans appear to be oriented toward aggression in both a protective and reactionary manner.

This emphasis on human passions overriding rationality is also the reason Girard believes that any theory suggesting that humans can end conflicts by consciously calling on their better angels is not only shortsighted in thinking about how our hunter-gatherer ancestors resolved conflict, but also unrealistic when describing much modern day conflict resolution.[52] Yet if rationality is no match for violence, we must wonder what it is that breaks the cycle of an uncontrolled mimetic frenzy. If humans have as much difficulty appealing to their rationality as

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[47]Irving L. Janis, *Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Oxford, England: Houghton Mifflin, 1972); David G. Myers and Helmut Lamm, "The Group Polarization Phenomenon," *Psychological Bulletin* 83.4 (1976): 602–627.

[48]For a comprehensive overview, see Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow.*

[49]Daniel Kahneman and Jonathan Renshon, "Why Hawks Win," foreignpolicy.com, last modified October 13, 2009, https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/10/13/why-hawks-win/.

[50]Ifat Maoz et al., "Reactive Devaluation of an 'Israeli' vs. 'Palestinian' Peace Proposal," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46.6 (August 2002): 515-546.

[51]Martie G. Haselton, Daniel Nettle, and Paul W. Andrews, "The Evolution of Cognitive Bias," in *The Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology,* ed. David M. Buss (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2005), 724-746.

[52]Girard, *Things Hidden*, 409ff.

psychologists have found they do, then appeals to logic and good will are doomed to failure in the face of a massive desire to win out or prove one's rival wrong. The answer, based on mimetic theory, involves a continuation of the mimetic spiral described during conflict build-up. Mimesis reaches a not-so-conscious boiling point, and in the chaos and confusion of all the aggression, a finger gets pointed in the direction of a weaker group or individual. This finger-pointing is mimetically supported in domino-effect fashion until the previously warring parties are now united against an enemy, someone outside the original groups whereupon evil and violence can easily be redirected. American political rivals exemplify well the flow of mimetic rivalry: tensions between Democrats and Republicans are typically always simmering, though they sometimes build to a boiling point as they did during and following the presidential election between Bush and Gore in 2000. What did it take for the groups to come together in a massive, if fairly brief, expression of unity and flag waving? A common enemy: Osama bin Laden.

We said before that violence has been with us throughout our human evolutionary lineage, but so has the scapegoating mechanism—our ability to redirect violence onto a surrogate in order to quell what might otherwise turn into a Hobbesian nightmare.[53] If uncontrolled violence was exceedingly frightening to our early ancestors, then finding a solution to it would have been hailed as the ultimate form of grace. As Haidt has noted, our ancestors must have "stumbled upon" cultural innovations that allowed their groups to cohere, but unlike Haidt, Girard believes that coherence in and of itself was not the goal.[54] Imagine if ancient warring groups stumbled upon a scapegoat, a marginalized individual or group to be killed off, followed by a reframing of the original conflict narrative such that the scapegoat is blamed for what brought about the violence in the first place. For primitive humanity, finding a mechanism to control the violence and bring order was nothing short of the sacred. And imagine this kind of scene happening over and over, millions of times, becoming the primary way in which humans bond with each other and stave off conflict. If we twenty-first-century humans see scapegoating, exclusion, and the like as not necessarily waning, it may be because these forms of restoring peace and order in our lives of conflict are massively ingrained and have been going on since the dawn of humanity.

Scapegoating, sometimes labeled "displaced" or "redirected" aggression, has long been considered in social psychology as a cause of prejudice and aggression. It grew out of the work by Dollard and colleagues who put forth the "frustration-aggression" hypothesis.[55] Individuals thwarted on the way to a goal may take out their frustration on an opponent if available, but are otherwise likely to redirect their hostilities onto a safer target. Unfortunately, research in this area fell out of favor, perhaps influenced by the work of Sherif who viewed scapegoating as

[53]Girard, *Violence and the Sacred.*
[54]Haidt, *The Righteous Mind.*
[55]John Dollard, et al., *Frustration and Aggression* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1939).

simply extending the cycle of violence rather than quelling it.[56] But what if scapegoating is not simply another phase of aggression but rather a stopgap method of resolving the threat of clear and present danger evoked by a crisis? Two warring tribes find a scapegoat that both ends the violence and allows the two groups to unify (at least temporarily).

If Girard is on to something by pointing to scapegoating as a primary means of resolving violence, why is there not more social psychological research focusing on it? Anspach notes the work of Marcus-Newhall and colleagues who found that the neglect of research on scapegoating is unjustified based on meta-analyses which show a robust main effect size of +.54.[57] The mid-century was also a time when ethologists were examining "redirected aggression"—the tendency for an animal to suffer pain and then pass that pain onto another. But this work too, as with displaced aggression, fell out of favor and has only recently seen a resurgence. Barash describes studies of redirected aggression among rats repeatedly subjected to electric shocks.[58] Upon autopsy, these rats show physical syndromes such as adreno-corticoid secretion, hypertension, ulcers, and the like—what scientists otherwise refer to as "subordination stress." But when the rats are given a wooden stick to chew on in the midst of being shocked, it is as if their stress gets transferred to the stick, thereby reducing the rats' subordination stress. Even better for the rat is the case where another rat is present in the same cage. This time, the shocked rat can redirect its stress onto the other rat and show the lowest amount of subordination stress of all three scenarios. And humans are no less likely to engage in this stress-induced displacement of aggression. Robert Sapolsky reminds us of what subordination stress looks like in human life:

> Consider how economic downturns increase rates of spousal and child abuse. Or consider a study of family violence and pro football. If the local team unexpectedly loses, spousal/partner violence by men increases 10 percent soon afterward (with no increase when the team won or was expected to lose). And as the stakes get higher, the pattern is exacerbated: a 13 percent increase after upsets when the team was in playoff contention, a 20 percent increase when the upset is by a rival. . . . Far too often, giving an ulcer helps avoid getting one.[59]

As Barash notes, redirected aggression may be an animal's means to "self-medicate, reducing his or her own stress, at substantial cost to someone else, often an innocent third party."[60] What mimetic theory refers to as scapegoating, Barash is calling

[56]Muzafer Sherif, *The Psychology of Social Norms* (Oxford: Harper Torchbooks, 1966).
[57]Mark R. Anspach, "Imitation and Violence: Empirical Evidence and the Mimetic Model," in *Mimesis and Science: Empirical Research on Imitation and the Mimetic Theory of Culture and Religion,* ed. Scott R. Garrels (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 129-154.
[58]David P. Barash, "The Three Rs: Retaliation, Revenge, and (Especially) Redirected Aggression," in *How We Became Human: Mimetic Theory and the Science of Evolutionary Origins,* eds. Pierpaolo Antonello and Paul Gifford (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015), 121-133.
[59]Robert M. Sapolsky, *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 132.
[60]Barash, "The Three Rs," 123.

"pain-passing," a survival strategy when toxic stress can no longer be contained.

If pain-passing is so prevalent throughout the animal kingdom, why would the field of social psychology lose interest in the topic? It may surprise readers in the field of psychology to know that only recently has the classic Robbers Cave experiment of the 1950s come to be reexamined as a *series* of studies highlighting the tendency for conflicting groups to search for a "common enemy." The most commonly retold of Sherif's conflict studies is Robbers Cave, which turns out to be the third attempt by Sherif to stage group conflict between adolescent boys. At about the same time that Golding's *Lord of the Flies* was hitting the shelves, Sherif's widely published finding was that the intergroup conflict between adolescent boys could only be resolved by manufactured problems requiring interdependent work by the warring groups. This is the rendition of the story that has been repeated for decades in psychology textbooks. However, Cherry recently took a much closer look at Sherif's work and uncovered the importance of his previous two studies, which he had labeled "failures."[61] In Study Two, it turns out that the two groups in conflict ended up turning their hostilities onto the camp leaders (who were actually the experimenters themselves). The camp leaders or researchers became the common enemy sought out by the now-unified two groups of campers. And in Study One, Sherif was too concerned about excessive violence breaking out when the two original camper groups combined forces against an outsider camp team. Instead of perceiving this turn toward a common enemy as the natural unfolding of group conflict, Sherif's desperate focus on conflict *resolution* forced him to construe the process as a failure because it led to more violence toward a third party. Again, keep in mind that Sherif's hypotheses were consistently pointing toward ways to organize groups such that cooperation between them, without the messiness of further violence, would win out. This projected goal was in keeping with the growing liberal tenor of the times, goals he achieved by the third and now classic study at Robbers Cave. Indeed, Cherry's research examining more than 70 social psychology textbooks showed that it was "the finding of cooperation that was to live on rather than the more dismal message of the first two studies where the two groups of boys joined in a larger unit to fight a common enemy."[62]

Scapegoating only works to displace aggression if the scapegoaters are convinced of the third party's guilt.[63] The third party must be an individual or group who exists outside of the warring groups, otherwise killing this third party would be seen as further retaliation continuing the ongoing cycle of violence. By targeting a third party, each of the other groups can feel that justice has been done. But not any scapegoat will do. The sacrificed one must be sufficiently similar to the warring parties, and must also be perceived to be one capable of causing the chaotic feud. Jews as scapegoats for Nazi Germany were perceived to be powerful enough for

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[61]Frances Cherry, *The Stubborn Particulars of Social Psychology: Essays on the Research Process* (Florence: Routledge, 1995).
[62]Meltzoff, "Out of the Mouths of Babes," 106.
[63]Girard, *Things Hidden*, 288-291.

the majority to believe they were disrupting the economic system, but powerless enough to fight against the regime and its followers. Thus, the scapegoated one has to be delicately perceived as one who is *both* actually powerful and threatening to the ingroup or warring groups and powerless enough to be overtaken. The presence of these two seemingly contradictory attributes allows the scapegoaters to be free of any guilt or judgment in sacrificing their victim, but also truly able to rid the community of the same.

Mimetic rivalry can move easily and rapidly from initial mimetic desire all the way to resolution via the exclusion or elimination of a scapegoat. Two persons or groups mimetically fascinated with one another begin to compete for resources or status, which causes a loss of differences between the conflictual parties. As emotions run high and rationality wanes, mimesis is heightened and the groups are uncontrollably fascinated by each other within the conflict episode, mimicking tactics, speech, and so on. When the conflict reaches a boiling point, a common enemy is stumbled upon, some individual or group who can convincingly be seen as responsible for the conflict. This cycle, in various forms, has been recurring since early humans happened upon it as a means of surviving prior to the development of culture.

Religion

Girard's theory of victimization has a deep connection with the founding of culture and religion.[64] As the group senses the calm and peace that follows from ridding the community of the scapegoat, it also tends to credit the victim for this renewed order and calm, a peacefulness highly prized in primitive cultures without other methods (such as laws or prohibitions) to constrain uncontrollable violence. Fascinated and awestruck, the community now regards the previously-perceived evil one as having sacred, godlike qualities. If sacred figures are deemed so because they have the ability to expel or externalize violence and pain, then the sacred must be a form of human violence. The mechanism that kicks in when pain or violence is too much for an individual or community is the unleashing of that violence onto a third party, thereby making a god of the scapegoated one since his being killed allowed the community to transcend violence. The community is captivated by this peace and set on preserving it somehow, most commonly repeated in the form of ritual—channeling the violence, preserving order, and allowing culture to develop. Cultures, then and now, live by human sacrifice "from the civic temples of ancient city states to the ritualized expulsion of the king every four or eight years by the process of elections."[65]

Early religion, and much that still exists today, just *is* this ancient system of scapegoating or what Girard calls sacred violence. Myths tell the story of this

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[64]Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 89ff.
[65]Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence: Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 6.

cycle of order and disorder from the perspective of the lyncher or victor not the scapegoat or victim, and in this way they only hint at and never completely reveal the violent roots of a culture. Thus, even though the scapegoating process allows a society to manage its crisis, avert mutual destruction, and restore peace, it does so only because it is able to disguise *from itself* the reality of its actions. As the myth prevails because it hides the truth we cannot bear to see, we recognize that scapegoating only works when we don't know it's working—that is, it only works when we are thoroughly convinced that the victim deserved to be singled out. Germans and Austrians thoroughly believed in Jews' guilt before and during the Second World War. Widespread propaganda showed that Jews were manipulating the economic system and were the reason that Germany was in financial hardship. The truth did not arise until much later after Jews had sufficiently been scapegoated. Today, of course, nearly all Germans and Austrians realize they were blinded. At some point, the myth of Jews' guilt broke down. Once we begin to sense any inkling that the scapegoated one might actually not have deserved the brunt of the blame, this is a sign that the myth no longer holds.

In what is often called his third great insight, Girard discovered that this repetitive cycle of sacred violence was partially exposed through Greek tragedies and various sacred texts, but it was the Christian Gospels which ultimately offered a completely different perspective—that of the victim.[66] In Christ's siding with victims and ultimately taking their place, the Christian texts turned sacred violence on its head and exposed the ancient religious system of accusation and sacrifice that has been the cornerstone of culture for all of human history. Because of this revelation—that the scapegoated one is actually a victim of the system—the system of sacred violence has slowly begun to break down and lose its long-held grip on human conflict resolution. That this ancient system no longer works like it did has both positive and negative implications. The upside to the crumbling of sacred violence is that we humans are now more likely to recognize when we are scapegoating others or pushing our own pain onto others unjustly. The downside to this exposure is that without the mechanism's ability to externalize our mimeticism, we are not exactly sure how to deal with it.

But deal with it we must. Sacred violence is losing its grip on us because of a prevailing cultural norm that has developed over time—an empathy for the victim. Consider the famous 1991 beating in Los Angeles of Rodney King. Gil Bailie brilliantly analyzed the King beating by four police officers at the center of a crowd, an incident that was captured on video and went as viral as a video could before smartphones.[67] Here was a beating that fit with well-known social psychological principles. The "imbalance of power" rule that runs from chimpanzees to humans wherein more savage attacks are found when the ratio of attackers to victims is greater made King's attack more vicious. Also raising the stakes was the bystander rule at work whereby the greater number of bystanders reduces the likelihood

[66]Girard, *Things Hidden.*
[67]Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 47-55.

that any of them will object to the violence. Mimesis consumed the scene, with the bystanders copying each other's behavior (inaction) and the officers following each other in aggressively beating King. In the chaos of the moment, all the attention was on King as the guilty party. But if scapegoating were to have the same effects it used to have 2000 or even 100 years ago, the officers would not have been so quick to question their actions. As Bailie notes, "as early as the next morning," the officers were questioning what they had done.[68] Girard's insight is that the Christian Gospels long ago set in slow motion the revelation that sacred violence—scapegoating others—must always be questioned because ultimately the scapegoat is either innocent or at least only as culpable as many others in his midst. Rodney King was not completely innocent that night, but the tendency with scapegoating is to hone in on stark, categorical labels of good and evil. That said, the Christian message has caused us to question our categorical pain-passing. It has forever reshaped our minds such that we cannot dispense with that nagging question that forces us to ask, "How could I have done that?"

We might wonder why there is still so much violence in the world if the Gospels set in motion an empathy for victims more than 2000 years ago. In psychology, the prevailing understanding favors increases in empathy where possible due to its relationship with a multitude of prosocial outcome variables.[69] But, as most historians agree, the bloodshed of the twentieth century was anything but a waning show of violence, so we may surmise that a growing empathy for victims, by itself, has not had a solely positive affect on human tendencies toward aggression.[70] For a long historical time period, acts of sacred violence truly worked as a cultural organizing principle and a means of maintaining community bonds. But as societies and their moral sensibilities have evolved, causing humans to question their own scapegoating, sacred violence has increasingly failed to provide the peace effects it once did. Our growing emphasis on honoring human rights, dignity, and the equal worth of every human being makes scapegoating troublesome at best. We see business organizations moving from strict hierarchical structures to flatter, team-oriented organizations. We see the concept of the innocent victim taking prominence in the twentieth century.

These movements are typically seen as "positive" values in the field of psychology, but Girard warns that as we slowly reject sacred violence in favor of a greater empathy for the victim, we also open ourselves up to greater difficulty in distinguishing between "good" (legitimate) violence and the "bad" (unjustified) kind.[71] With our growing concern for human suffering—an historical phenomenon recognized by philosophers of various stripes,[72] we have likewise experienced an

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[68]Meltzoff, "Out of the Mouths of Babes," 48.

[69]For a recent critical analysis of our psychological understanding of empathy, see Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (Ecco, 2016).

[70]I recognize that this historical understanding of twentieth-century violence is not reflective of the historical analysis provided by Steven Pinker in *Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking, 2011).

extraordinary confusion about which types of violence are done to restore justice and which are not:

We hear the victim's cry from the concentration camps, and the Nazi myth is destroyed. We hear the voices of Kosovars while the Serbian paramilitaries are burning their houses, and the myth of Serb victim-hood is shattered. And, later, we hear via the Internet what it is like to live in Belgrade while NATO bombs away, and the myth of Serb aggression is likewise demolished.[73]

The legitimate aggressor and the true victim have become almost indistinguishable and a matter of who you ask or reference. But Girard's main point here is that the Gospels set in motion an empathy for the victim that is now the lynchpin upon which legitimate violence is evaluated.

Whereas sacred violence served a profoundly important function in past societies, there is no wistful looking back for a restoration of ritual violence that once brought ingroup cohesion. If sacred violence is, in fact, what held societies together in the past, and if sacred violence is losing its effectiveness today—after all, we simply cannot unswervingly send our troops off to war like we used to—what is going to hold our societies together?

At first glance, Girard's thesis leaves us feeling a bit hopeless in dealing with human conflicts today. After all, he says we are fundamentally mimetic creatures and will desire what others desire, inevitably leading to conflict. He also, however, feels that we can go a long way by realizing our own hand in mimetic struggles. In addition to our postmodern inclination to want to "see" the truth in the world, to break status quo barriers which oppress others, we must also take a greater hand in recognizing our own proclivity toward violence. Bailie puts it this way:

Unless the adoption of the anti-victimage ethic is accompanied by the recognition of one's own penchant for victimizing, in due course, the moral force of the ethic will be giving legitimacy to acts of cruelty virtually indistinguishable from those that its advocates purport to be trying to end once and for all.[74]

Our attempts to become the presiding judge in a conflict, to wield power over another rather than engage him in dialogue, only propel others to see us as a "party in the quarrel" rather than a judge.[75] And this is "why a loathing for violence can so easily become the license for similar violence."[76] Indeed, sometimes when we claim to be serving justice, say in our attempts to halt an oppressor at-

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[71]Bailie, *Violence Unveiled,* 24.
[72]Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Random House, 1968); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Michael Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (New York: Henry and Holt Co., 1999).
[73]Bailie, *Violence Unveiled,* 20.
[74]Bailie, *Violence Unveiled,* 61.
[75]Paul Dumouchel, ed., *Violence and Truth: On the Work of Ren*é *Girard* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 13.

tacking a perceived victim, our attempts to stop the conflict often show a greater fascination toward the oppressor than toward the victim who, ironically, was our supposed original reason for our moral outrage! Nowhere is this tendency more noticeable than with modern-day social media commentary and what turns into cyberbullying. Stanford psychologists found support for the fact that whereas *individual* remarks against offensive behavior are often perceived to be legitimate and admirable, accumulated "pile ons" of comments in moblike fashion can lead to a mass shaming and ultimately a greater sympathy for the original offender. Such confusion was the case with the January 2019 encounter on the National Mall when a group of Trump-supporting high school students engaged with a Native American man drumming during an Indigenous Peoples March. What began as outrage at the perceived harassment by the high school students of the man before long turned into a massive online shaming of these students which, in turn, prompted still others to come to the aid of the student "victims." Ultimately, it became difficult to determine who the victim was in this conflict. As news organizations piled on presuming the high school students' actions that day were racially motivated, thereby securing the Native American drummer as "victim," it then became apparent that a third group was actually responsible for hurling racial slurs. Victimhood was quickly redirected to the lead high school student whose photo was captured across several news outlets. That student eventually won defamation suits against at least two broadcasting companies. Mimetic theory predicts this outcome: attempts to halt the perceived oppressor's actions end up imitating the aggression already in play. This is also the reason that, whether in actual violence or mere argumentation, imitating one's rival tends to escalate the conflict and, ironically, makes us the victimizers we set out to eliminate.

Conclusions

The importance of having a grand theory to understand disparate pieces of research in a field cannot be overstated. Just as the Gibraltar skull was a meaningless artifact until Darwin's theory of evolution shed new light on its significance, so too does mimetic theory offer innovative new ways to understand much research on the psychology of conflict.[77] Mimetic theory is an anthropologically-grounded framework for psychologists and scholars desiring a way to make sense of a whole host of varied research findings in the field. By starting with a fundamental and parsimonious understanding of human behavior—that it is profoundly mimetic—Girard explains the extensive research from numerous angles suggesting that there is a "social glue" among humans that facilitates both interpersonal cohesion as well as conflict. By doing so, the theory shows how and why we are dependent on others for our being, needing others to understand ourselves even and including our own desires.

[76]Bailie, *Violence Unveiled*, 92.
[77]Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 167.

By showing the way in which humans desire what their models desire, Girard forces us to question whether greater freedom from others' influence is possible or even desirable. The field of social psychology has been telling us the same, even if the distinct areas of research—imitation, mimicry, conformity, and so on—are rarely brought together to show the power of this human tendency. And yet, the cultural messaging in much of the Western world and pervasive in the media and academia often steers individuals in a very different direction: the messages are often of the "don't rely on others" sort in the direction of autonomy and independent thinking. Of course, Girard is not eschewing the importance of skepticism and a push toward rational thinking, but his research has led him to understand that one is more likely to veer into self-deception by presuming that one's desires are wholly one's own. As he puts it, "mimetic desire makes us believe we are always on the verge of becoming self-sufficient through our own transformation into someone else."[78] Acceptance that individuals soak up much of the world around them puts more emphasis on choice in terms of how and with whom we spend our time and energy and allows us to give up the pretense that our desires are self-made.

As Girard further concludes, our intensely relational makeup also sets us up for interpersonal conflicts. Because rationality has a difficult time breaking through during conflict episodes, there appears to be substantial psychological research to support the human tendency to deflect our pain, fears, and blame onto others in an attempt to preserve our own righteousness. From a mimetic theory perspective, redirected aggression—or scapegoating—has been the primary way in which humans have long quelled violence. Our pre-rational ancestors lacked the brain capacity or support of a civil society needed to end large-scale violence, but they happened upon another strategy that worked to keep mass violence from spiraling out of control. Over thousands of years, our ancestors subconsciously recognized that redirecting violence onto an entity too fragile or few in number to fight back could contain frightening, uncontrollable violence. This successful strategy was repeated ad infinitum, with new forms of it being invented as consciousness increased. The killing of a scapegoat of premodern times may now resemble the exclusion of a friend, the blaming of a colleague, or the ousting of a candidate. This type of sacrifice allows all those doing the ousting to experience feelings of cohesion and satisfaction for having cast out the evil one. This strategy used to work quite well and have more lasting results, but this scapegoating cure would ultimately be deemed a poison.

Scapegoating is now widely condemned, and though this may seem like a self-evident truth, it was not always the case. Though many texts and historical paradigms contributed to seeing scapegoating for what it is, Girard ultimately credits the Christian Gospels for zeroing in on empathy for the victim. Unlike many other texts up until its time, the Gospels offered a way of understanding

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[78]René Girard, "Literature and Christianity: A Personal View," *Philosophy and Literature* 23 (1999): 36.

human entanglement from the perspective of the victim rather than the victor. This sweeping new way of seeing humanity from the victim's perspective has, over time, forced a wholesale reconsideration of our stark categorizations of good and evil. As the innocence of the victim became a predominant cultural value, it compelled us to realize the seductive but often mistaken projections placed on others, the true complexity of human entanglements, and the need to better understand the plight of those cast off and excluded.

Because scapegoating by our ancestors used to bring such calm and cohesion to the chaos of tribal warfare, it was presumed that only a god could have been at the center of this transcendent peacefulness. It is for this reason that Girard sees violence as the "heart and secret soul of the sacred." Culture itself evolved out of this chaos-turned-calm unfolding due to the violent sacrifice of a (mostly or entirely) innocent other. But if this kind of sacrificial religion served to keep species-threatening violence in check for millennia, it was a questioning of this scapegoating approach which forced us to see how easily we fall into the trap of presuming our own righteousness in assigning guilt to others. The old system of sacred violence worked well for a long time, casting out the weak and allowing the victors to maintain cohesion amongst themselves and proclaim that justice won out. But scapegoating no longer works that way, whether one credits Christianity as a religion, a morality, or an epistemology. Scapegoating only works well when we are blind to the fact that we are engaging in it! Seeing justice from the perspective of the victim sets in motion the necessity to question our own participation in the scapegoating process. Research from the field of social psychology offers the same message even if it is couched in scientific language: Humans have evolved to be self-serving and biased creatures who, in our struggles to survive over time, have built a substantial cognitive repertoire favoring denial, rationalization, and misjudgment of our own and others' culpability in conflict crises.

The unveiling of the scapegoating mechanism gave us a new way of being human and represents a conversion of both heart and mind. The picture we get from both mimetic theory and social psychology is that of a flawed human, full of biases and cognitive errors, and frequently caught up in petty jealousies and envy that leads to conflict. Mimetic theory explains why these tendencies are so and reminds us that we are not alone in our flaws because our fellow human traveler is caught up in them too. Acknowledging our entanglement with mimetic desire does not provide us with any kind of automatic salvation or newfound freedom, but it does remind us how profoundly relational we are and that any kind of progress toward peace will likely come from the slow, demanding, and thorny process of trying to understand better ourselves and our fellow beings.

Understanding involves more than a philosophical shift. It requires more than simply realizing there are no pure victims and no pure perpetrators. Even with the best of intentions, each of us finds ourselves invariably guilty of scapegoating others and at other times being the recipient of the same.[79] Progress entails

[79]Cynthia L. Haven, *Evolution of Desire: A Life of René Girard* (East Lansing, Michigan: Michi-

more than simply letting go of our own pettiness and grievances which, by itself, might simply entail a withdrawal from the social world to avoid conflict.[80] This new way of being human demands a "transformational and vigilant process that must be renewed daily against the tide of new or ancient resentments, and it must complete itself in an active reaching out to the other, a willingness to try again."[81] Much of the language of psychology tends to suggest or imply that humans move from conflictual or painful periods in search of some kind of pain-free mode of existence. Recognizing the power of mimetic desire forces us to concede that human life is always lived as part of what Webb calls an "existential tension" that "is not an unhealthy abnormality of which we need to be cured—it is our very normality."[82] In the recognition of the reality of mimesis, that even our desires are not our own, there is a new appreciation for the other as fundamentally a part of one's own creative unfolding. There truly is no self "other than the self-between."[83] Decentering the self in this way represents a new ontology for the field of psychology.[84] It opens up new language for the field which has struggled to describe this kind of spiritual transformation sometimes understood as a "dying to self." This new way of being human opened up by mimetic theory casts away the desire for the last word or other forms of revenge in favor of a turning toward "the charity that wants the good of the other as much as for oneself."[85] This turning toward is one of Girard's contributions toward understanding—and desiring—the self-transcendence we need.

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gan State University Press, 2018).

[80]Eugene Webb, *The Self Between: From Freud to the New Social Psychology of France* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993).

[81]Haven, *Evolution of Desire*, 278.

[82]Webb, *The Self Between*, 241.

[83]Ibid., 242.

[84]Frank C. Richardson and Kathryn M. Frost, "Psychology, Hermeneutic Philosophy, and Girardian Thought: Toward a Creative Mimesis," in *René Girard and Creative Reconciliation*, eds. Vern Neufeld Redekop and Thomas Ryba (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 185-213.

[85]Haven, *Evolution of Desire*, 276.