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What is mimetic desire?

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Abstract

This essay provides a conceptual analysis and reconstruction of the notion of mimetic desire, first proposed in Girard (1961). The basic idea behind the idea of mimetic desire is that imitation can play a key role in human motivational processes. Yet mimetic desire is distinguished from related notions such as social modelling and imitation. In episodes of mimetic desire, the process in which the imitative agent's desires are formed is oriented by a particular species of belief about the model or mediator whose desire is copied. These 'tutelary beliefs' essential to mimetic desire are distinguished from the 'thin' and purely instrumental beliefs about the model central to Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory and similar models of observational learning. The problem of the identity of the objects of desire in episodes of social modelling motivates a distinction between internal and external forms of interpersonal mediation. Girard's claims about cognitive constraints associated with mimetic desire are examined, and scenarios of reciprocal mimetic modelling am analysed.

Introduction

The term 'mimetic desire' was coined by Rene Girard (1961), who makes a number of strong claims about the 'mechanisms' of interpersonal and social dynamics. The present essay neither elucidates nor defends all of these claims. Instead, my aim is to provide a selective and analytic reconstruction of the concept of mimetic desire, one which follows Girard's lead in some respects while diverging from it in others. Along the way I shall compare the notion to some related ideas in contemporary social psychology. I do not assume that my reconstruction of the notion of mimetic desire is compatible with all of the rival frameworks in contemporary psychology, but I do believe that it can remain neutral in regard to many outstanding issues and debates. For a sophisticated framework within which the notion could be developed, see, for example, Alfred R. Mele (1987, 1992) and John Heil (1992). What follows is largely a matter of conceptual clarification and analysis. Examples from literary fictions are used to illustrate--but not to provide empirical support for--the notion of mimetic desire.

1. The mimetic triangle

Girard's basic psychological intuition concerns the role of imitation in human motivation. In a deceptively simple phrase, he defines mimetic desire as le desir selon l'Autre--desire according to, or following, the Other--where this Other is a mediator who provides a pattern for an agent's desire. Mimetic desire is contrasted to desire selon soi, desire according to one's own intrinsic preferences.

Mimetic desire is said to be triangular because its elementary structure includes three terms: the desiring agent, the object of this agent's desire, and a mediator or model.

Girard declares that 'at the origin of a desire there is always the spectacle of another real or illusory desire' (1961, p. 126). For example, in Proust's narrative the young Marcel longs to see la Berma perform because he has learned that the writer Bergotte greatly admires this actress. Marcel happens to be right about the nature of his mediator's desire, since Swann, as well as Bergotte's book on Racine, inform him reliably about the writer's attitudes. But imitators can be wrong about what their mediators desire. In Stendhal's Le Rouge et le noir, when M. de Renal wrongly thinks that Valenod wants to engage Julien Sorel as a tutor, his own desire to hire the young man is strengthened by the imaginary desire he attributes to his rival. Mimetic desire, then, is a desire linked to a belief about another-desire. We may refer to the class of beliefs in question here as the mimetic agent's 'attributions of desire', as it is a matter of the desiring agent attributing a state of desire to a mediator. The belief may be inaccurate or accurate, but in either case it is what initiates and orients the mimetic agent's own desire.

A number of questions arise in regard to this simple schema, for even if one is easily persuaded that there are many examples of the basic triangular configuration that has just been delineated, one still wants to know how this sort of motivation works, and what factors typically condition the triangle's emergence. The issues can be identified with reference to a schematic example. Suppose we have the following situation. An agent, M, has at least four different beliefs, namely, beliefs to the effect that:
(a) Some other agent, B, desires S.
(b) Some other agent, B, desires S'.
(c) Some other agent, C, desires S.
(d) Some other agent, D, desires S''.

(Where S, S', and S'' designate significantly different kinds of situations desired by the others.) For example, clause (a) refers to Marcel's belief that Bergotte desires to see la Berma perform, while clause (b) stands for Marcel's belief that M. de Norpois also wants to see her perform. Clause (c) could be filled in by Marcel's belief that Bergotte prefers a particular variety of cognac, and clause (d) by the young man's knowledge of his father's love for meteorology.

To say that someone desires something 'according to' a mediator's desire is to claim that one particular attribution of desire and one particular concept of a mediator jointly generated the desire. So let us also imagine that at a later point in time, the agent M has a mimetic desire for S, and that belief (a) was the attribution of desire that played the crucial role in the formation of A's mimetic desire for S. My questions about the basic mimetic triangle have to do with why belief (a) was the

cognitive item linked to the generation of M's desire for S. We want to know what conditions led M to desire S because M believed (a), and not because M believed (c), even though the latter belief could also have resulted in a mimetic desire for S. Also, M's mimetic relation to mediator B could have contributed to the creation of a situation where M desires S' mimetically. Why did it fail to do so? And why didn't M's belief (d) lead M to have a mimetic desire for S"?

The issues just evoked essentially amount to two major questions that may be raised in regard to the emergence of any instance of the mimetic triangle:

(Q1) Why does one agent and not another serve as the mediator in a particular episode of mimetic desire?
(Q2) Given that a mimetic agent believes that the mediator has a number of different desires, why does one attribution and not another contribute to a particular episode of mimetic desire?

Girard's insistence on the role of the mediator in the formation of desire suggests that he thinks the first problem has conceptual priority over the second. It will not do to try to answer (Q1) by proposing an answer to (Q2), arguing that a prior selection of the desire to be imitated in turn guides the selection of a mediator. That would make every instance of mimetic desire depend on an anterior desire, which would sharply diminish the mediator's role. What is more, if the mimetic agent's anterior desire were itself mimetic, we would have an explanatory regress, for we would need to explain the anterior episode of mimetic desire, which would lead to another instance of the same problem. So we turn first to (Q1).

Why one mediator as opposed to another? We cannot explain M's mimetic desire by saying that the selection of the mediator was motivated by a desire to have this mediator. The latter desire would itself need explaining, and should it be mimetic, we would be faced with another regress, for we would then have to explain the selection of the mediator figuring in the latter desire. My solution to this problem is to argue that it is some of the agent's beliefs, and not the agent's anterior desires, that guide the selection of the mediator, it being understood that a 'selection' does not imply that the agent consciously and/or deliberately chooses the mediator. An intentional choice is in fact ruled out: the agent does not form an intention to single someone out as the mediator of his or her desires. Nor is the effective selection of a mediator generated by some other intentional action. It is a mental event, but not a mental deed or action. Nor do I assume that the determination of the mediator is always the result of a focal or conscious inferential process. Even so, beliefs about potential mediators may figure among the conditions shaping the process that results in the effective emergence of a mediator, a selection implicit in the fact that it is a belief about one person and not another that functions in the agent's mind to designate someone whose desires are potentially worthy of being copied.

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Does this explanatory strategy lead to a regress? Not if the beliefs in question are not directly derived from some prior instance of mimetic desire. The crucial beliefs do have an evaluative dimension, and explaining mimetic desire in terms of them makes the mimetic states depend on a prior acquisition of evaluative beliefs, which would have to be explained in a broader account of mimetic desire's conditions. A proximal explanation can start with the beliefs that guide the selection of a mediator and attribution of desire; a distal explanation must in turn explain the acquisition of those beliefs. In what follows I focus on the former type of explanation.

2. Tutelary belief

I use the term 'tutelary belief' to refer to the beliefs that inform the selection of mediators and that thereby determine which attributions of desire are relevant to the imitator's own motivation. In the example introduced above, some of Marcel's beliefs about Bergotte serve to motivate the selection of Bergotte as his mediator. Coupled with the recognition of the writer's admiration for the actress, this tutelary belief gives rise to Marcel's desire to see her perform. The young Marcel also believes that M. de Norpois admires la Berma, but not having the right sort of tutelary beliefs about him, he is not disposed to conceive of any burning passions or preferences following his example. Bergotte, however, is surrounded by the proper aura of tutelary beliefs in the young Marcel's mind: Marcel deems his style and philosophical ideas exquisite, and knows that his works enjoy the esteem of many other refined admirers. The inquisitive young man seeks to follow his lead in regard to all matters concerning aesthetic discernment and sophistication, and thus is easily carried away by the master's evocation of la Bergma's superior talent. Yet Marcel is at the same time indifferent to some of Bergotte's other preferences, particularly those that have little or nothing to do with his status as a brilliant writer and arbiter of taste.

In terms of the schema evoked above, we can say that if M did not desire the same S mimetically 'according to' agent C's desire for S, this was because M did not have the requisite tutelary beliefs in regard to C. And if M did not desire S' according to B, this was because the tutelary beliefs that M held concerning B did not qualify B as a model or mediator in regard to the desire S'. Tutelary beliefs single out mediators as well as the kinds of desires in relation to which their attitudes are relevant.

My manner of identifying what is immediately 'upstream' of any particular manifestation of a mimetic desire places a great deal of explanatory weight on the tutelary beliefs that orient the mimetic agent's selection of the mediator and attributions of desire. Such a strategy can only work if the notion of tutelary belief is handled successfully. So far I have provided only a broad, causal characterization of tutelary belief, contending that this category of attitudes is identified in terms of the role played in the genesis of mimetic desire. This approach is, in my view, essentially the correct

strategy to adopt. The particular contents of actual instances of tutelary belief are context-specific. In some cases, such words as 'reverence', 'esteem' and 'admiration' would best characterize the mimetic agent's attitudes toward the mediator, but in others, notions of purity, efficacy or power might be more appropriate. There are simply many different contents involved when people come to have a deep confidence in some mediator's superiority, or perhaps more generally, in the kind of hierarchical difference that is described by Girard as 'deviated transcendence' (by which he means to refer to a kind of displaced religiosity in which human agents sacralize each other). And there are many different ways in which such beliefs will be generated, justified and sustained.

It remains possible, however, to explore some schematic formulations of the typical contents of tutelary belief. In this regard, Girard's intuitions about mimetic desire may be usefully contrasted to the kind of 'thin' tutelary belief emphasized by some contemporary social psychologists. One such idea may be schematically conveyed as follows:

(1) Agent M knows which x is the best (or a superior) instance of kind X.

The basic idea here is that an agent serves as a model because this agent is held to possess a certain type of knowledge, i.e. knowledge about the value of instances of something desirable (see, for example, Ross & Fletcher, 1985). A somewhat different formulation that appears in the literature runs as follows:

(2) Agent M knows which x will successfully yield some desired result y.

The idea here is that of an instrumental imitator for whom imitation is a means to some other, pre-established end (see, for example, Bandura, 1986). Equipped with a set of preferences, the imitative agent observes the consequences of others' actions and then copies those agents whose actions result in outcomes the agent would find rewarding were he or she in a similar situation. A related tutelary schema runs as follows:

(3) Agent M knows in general how to get things done.

The idea here is that someone may appear to be a singularly efficient agent and thereby emerge as the model to follow.

The notions of imitation just evoked may describe aspects of human motivation, but they do not capture the idea of mimetic desire. The utilitarian imitator has certain desires but is uncertain about how to satisfy them, and so looks to others for an answer to the problem of ways and means. In contrast, the mimetic agent is uncertain about what to desire, but this uncertainty is conjoined with a tendency to believe in the qualities of another agent, whose example can provide a solution to the problem of choosing ends as well as means. Formula (2) focuses the agent's interest on a particular task, not on the mediator's personal qualities, and thus fails to capture the mimetic emphasis on the agent's relation to a mediator. Formula (3) stresses the relation to a particular mediator, but subordinates this relation to the imitator's instrumental interest. By focusing on the mediator's

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'know-how', schemata (1)-(3) all differ from the mimetic insight.

One alternative that has been proposed is to adopt a 'metaphysical' understanding of the content of tutelary belief:

(4) Agent M has the Being I lack.

Girard has expressly adopted this formulation in some of his writings, sometimes using 'mimetic desire' and 'metaphysical desire' interchangeably. Agents beset by the most egregious forms of mimetic mediation have what he calls an 'ontological sickness', their impulse to copy the mediator's desires being motivated by the illusion of a more perfect Being. For example, in a recent publication, Girard endorses his early emphasis on 'metaphysical' desire: 'Being is what mimetic desire is really after' (1991, p. 43).

My objection to this general schema for the content of tutelary belief is that it wrongly turns all mimetic agents into existential philosophers. It is hard to believe that human motivation across a wide range of sociohistorical contexts is oriented by agents' gnawing concern for some philosophers' key metaphysical term. For example, it seems counterintuitive to think that the young Marcel believes himself to lack 'Being', and adopts some of Bergotte's values because he thinks this writer embodies the ontological difference. Such a characterization of the contents of the young man's tutelary belief distances us from a psychology of subjective attitudes. It may very well be the case that no general schematic formula can accurately convey the complex, relational nature of the content of tutelary beliefs, but it is possible to improve on the metaphysical abstraction of schema (4).

Consider another alternative:

(5) Agent M is (an instance of) the kind of person I would like to be.

The basic idea here is that the key mimetic attitudes involve a belief in the existence of kinds of persons, these kinds being at least implicitly and. partially ranked. Some of these kinds correspond to culturally designated roles or types; others are more or less idiosyncratic composites of such types. The agent adopts someone else as a mediator because that person is deemed to be a sufficiently good--if not the best or the only--instance of a type that the agent already finds desirable. The idea that this individual embodies the virtue or distinction required by the kind in question will be supported by various sorts of evidence. Thus schema (5) will be extended as follows:

(5') Agent M is (an instance of) the kind of person I would like to be, because M is q, has r and knows s, where q, r and s are typical qualities of the superior kind in question.

The variables are filled in with whatever people take to be the tangible or other signs of the mediator's superiority: high birth, wealth, beauty, manifestations of passion, unique talents or exploits, enjoyment of popularity, exceptional discernment or taste, courage, political virtue,

suitably transgressive attitudes, etc.

The key assumption made in this formulation is that people have beliefs to the effect that there are different kinds of people; they also believe that there are hierarchical differences between these kinds. Furthermore, it is assumed that people sometimes do not consider themselves to belong to the kind they would like to, and thereby find themselves taking a special interest in those who do. In the Proustian example, the young Marcel perceives Bergotte as the exemplary stylist, arbiter of taste, and philosopher. This kind of prestige already takes precedence over other types in the young man's self-concept. Although he may admire M. de Norpois's diplomatic skills, such an individual cannot inspire him the way the famous writer can.

Mimetic desire, then, is essentially a matter of an agent's attitudes toward a mediator whose qualities and desires are thought to manifest a relevant hierarchical difference between self and other. The specific nature of this difference, however, and the qualities and actions thought to embody it, vary from context to context. Consequently, in any particular explanation of the genesis of mimetic desire, the schematic formulation of the tutelary belief (5') must be filled in with a description of the actual contents of the relevant beliefs and desires. Yet this explanatory task leads to additional problems.

3. That Obscure Object of Desire

In Luis Bunuel's 1976 film, Cet Obscur Objet du Desir, an elderly man narrates his fascination with a young woman, who is portrayed in the film's flashback sequences by two strikingly different actresses. This unusual bit of casting has the effect of emphasising the elusive and highly subjective nature of the 'object' of the man's passion--a rather spirited person who changes radically from one situation to the next. Bunuel's film is itself rather obscure, but can be taken as illustrating an important point: in describing the semantic content of someone's desire, we must remain faithful to the perspective and context of the agent who has this desire. This idea has been emphasized recently in philosophical psychology by Fred Dretske (1988), who argues that attitudes of desire share the opacity that has long been associated with attitudes of belief. Thus, although we know that Jocasta is the mother of Oedipus, the fact that Oedipus desires Jocasta does not warrant us to draw the conclusion that Oedipus desires his mother. As soon as he learns that Jocasta is his mother, Oedipus no longer desires her in the same way, if he desires her at all.

This point about the semantic content of desire makes a difference when we analyse what it means to say that one person conceives of a desire according to another person's desire. Girard frequently claims that in cases of triangular or mimetic desire, the two agents desire 'the same thing'. He writes, for example, that 'Mediation begets a second desire exactly the same as [parfaitement identique a] the mediator's' (1961, p. 21). But a closer look reveals some important ambiguities.

The issue can be framed with reference to another schematic example. Imagine that Gilberte is disposed to desire mimetically with Odette as her mediator, which means that Gilberte has the right sort of tutelary beliefs about Odette. Let us also suppose that these two women are both members of a certain committee. Odette has been serving as the head of the committee, but her term is up and a new chairperson must be elected. Now, Odette is eligible for a second term, and Gilberte knows that Odette would like very much to keep the position. Gilberte's knowledge of Odette's desire serves as the mimetic agent's attribution of desire. What, then, is the content of the desire that Gilberte acquires mimetically, 'according to' her accurate belief about Odette's desire?

The answer to this question is not as straightforward as one might think, for we can plausibly imagine at least two very different objects of Gilberte's mimetic desire. Thus, Gilberte could desire the realization of either one of two mutually exclusive situations:
(S1) Odette is renamed chairperson of the committee.
(S2) Gilberte becomes chairperson of the committee.

Do we want to say that both (S1) and (S2) correspond to instances of mimetic desire, or only one of them? It seems to me that we have to say both if we are not going to restrict the scope of the theory very severely. There are some contexts, such as cultural systems having very stable hierarchies, in which people's desires are often formed in ways analogous to (S1), in the sense that these people imitate a leader's desires in a cooperative and subordinate fashion. There is no good reason why a theory of mimetic desire should rule such cases out. Nor is there any good evidence to support the idea that in all such cases, a fundamental 'ambivalence' toward the mediator is present, being somehow 'repressed' if it does not make itself manifest. In that direction lie psychodynamic speculations and a circular positing of unconscious death drives, killer instincts or a metaphysical 'will to power'. But if my argument is accepted, the much-discussed tendency of mimetic desire to generate rivalry all of the time is put in question. I have in mind here, for example, Girard's contention that 'mimesis coupled with desire leads automatically to conflict' (1972, p. 205). Given a definition that embraces cases of types (S1) and (S2) above, mimetic desire does not necessarily generate rivalry or even a potential for it. It is not synonymous with 'emulation' or with a desire to surpass the mediator.

What has the potential to generate rivalry is not mimetic desire in general, but a type of mimetic desire in which the agent wants to appropriate for his or her own exclusive possession what the mediator is thought (or known) to desire in a similar way. This competitive subset of mimetic desires can be identified in terms of the type of contents that are involved, namely, those that exclude any possible cooperative sharing or harmonious coincidence of the goals implicit in the mediator's and the imitator's desires. Gilberte's emulative desire to supplant Odette as chairperson is an example.

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Desires of this sort are not externally imposed on an agent, but amount to a specific manner of imitating a mediator's desire.

There is a lesson here about the puzzling question of the contents of attitudes of desire. Strictly speaking, the contents of an agent's mimetic desire and that of the mediator's desire are not equivalent, even when the contents of the real mediator's desire are faithfully mapped by the mimetic agent's attributions of desire to that person. This is so because the mimetic agent's desire is adapted to that agent's own situation and perspective. The actual content of a desire is, so to speak, always in the first person. My imitation of your desire for your lunch is not the same as your desire for your lunch, even if what I want is not to eat your sandwich, but to see your hunger be satisfied. Gilberte's desire to steal Odette's seat may be based on, but is not equivalent to, Odette's desire to keep Odette's seat. Nor is Gilberte's desire to help Odette keep Odette's seat equivalent to Odette's desire to keep Odette's seat. Only a schematic similarity obtains.

This point makes a difference to the analysis of mimetic relationships. Consider, for example, Girard's discussion of what he presents. as a very common mimetic configuration. Two young people make no declaration of their mutual love because both feel it would be dangerous to be the first to speak. Why? Girard writes:

The desire that speaks first puts itself on display and, as a result, can become a mimetic model for the desire that has not yet spoken. The displayed desire runs the risk of being copied rather than reciprocated. In order to desire someone who desires us, we must not imitate the offered desire, we must reciprocate it, which is vastly different . . . If Benedick spoke first and Beatrice took his desire as a model, she might reorient her desire toward herself in imitation of Benedick's desire; she would prefer herself to him. (1991, pp. 80-1)

The feared 'copying' of desire to which Girard refers cannot amount to anything like a simple equivalence of the two situations desired by Benedick and Beatrice. Should Beatrice hear Benedick say 'I love you' and then translate this mimetically into her own internal 'I love myself', her desire would be a rather bad copy of his. Girard seems to be reasoning that the anticipated danger resides in a 'copying' that in fact amounts to a radical transformation of the content of Benedick's utterance, namely, one that extracts from his 'I love you' something like 'I believe you desirable', which, when given an egotistical twist, becomes a reaffirmation of Beatrice's vain 'I am desirable and need not reciprocate your desire'. If Beatrice has negative attitudes about herself, she might take Benedick's 'I love you' as evidence of his lack of good judgement, and hence as a reason for not reciprocating. But in neither of the two cases just evoked would it be a matter of a faithful copying or imitation of the initial desire--unless, of course, that initial desire were not a desire for reciprocal affection, but something egotistical and predatory, such as the desire to make an erotic conquest. But then the 'I

love you' was a dishonest and misleading utterance in the first place. Any danger that Beatrice may 'prefer herself' stands prior, then, to any danger that she may 'copy' or imitate Benedick's declaration. Although imitation may exacerbate romantic rivalry, it does not generate it ex nihilo or convert two unspoken desires for mutual love into two selfish desires for conquest. The young lovers' hesitation is more simply explained by pointing out that they are both uncertain about the other's response and are afraid that a declaration will not be reciprocated, which is something they could fear for any number of reasons having nothing to do with imitation.

4. Internal and external mediation

Mimetic desire would appear to be a concept that embraces two highly divergent kinds of cases. On the one hand, mimetic desire is said to involve an agent's emulative relation to another person, a relation that is inherently conflictual: the other person is at once a model and an obstacle, with rivalry being a likely result. On the other hand, mimetic desire is said to involve an agent's hierarchical relation to another person, a relation that is essentially one of subordination. Is this not a matter of seeking to explain two rather different things in terms of the same kind of desire? What does the theory of mimetic desire have to say about the difference?

The difference between what may be called the imitative (hierarchical) and emulative (conflictual) varieties of mimetic desire should, I think, be linked to two different kinds of tutelary beliefs about the mediator. One kind of belief posits a mediator who is not only superior, but whose superiority seems unassailable. To desire following such a figure's desire is not to seek to equal or to surpass the mediator, but to subordinate one's wishes and efforts to those of the mediator. There are many examples of this sort of thing in many different cultural contexts, especially those where religious beliefs serve to ground social distinctions in a source believed to be transcendent and extra-social. Girard elaborates on this theme in his discussion of Shakespeare's conception of an hierarchical order based on 'degree' (1991, pp. 165-6).

The other constellation of tutelary beliefs about the mediator also involves a notion of the mediator's superiority or hierarchical difference, but this advantage or difference is not thought to be permanent. Instead, it is taken as something to be overcome. The other's perceived difference is a spur to motives having the goal of diminishing this difference, or more frequently, of maintaining the relation of inequality while reversing the roles. This is the world of envy, superbly illustrated in Girard's analysis of the conspirators' mimetic relation to Julius Caesar in Shakespeare's play (1991, pp. 85-99).

Girard speaks of the 'distance' between the mediator and the desiring subject, distinguishing between 'internal' and 'external' forms of mediation. The latter involves a desiring agent's relation

to a mediator whose hierarchical difference is deemed to be permanent and unassailable. The former involves an agent's relation to an 'obstacle model' in an emulative type of desire. The distinction has nothing to do with the physical presence or absence of the mediator within the desiring agent's sphere of existence. The world of internal mediation as Girard describes it is one in which social hierarchies and stratifications no longer have the legitimacy and stability they once enjoyed. This is a world of acquisitive individualism and 'upward social mobility', a world where equality is held forth as the yardstick of justice, while at the same time a perpetual quest for personal distinction is the lifetime burden of the 'successful' and 'well-adapted' individual. Thus the difference between external and internal forms of mediation corresponds directly to the historical emergence of certain notions of equality and to the discovery of the arbitrary and illusory bases of the institutions and concepts that once erected stable barriers between classes of agents.

5. Mimetic desire and cognitive constraints

A key term in Girard's discussions of mimetic desire and patterns of interaction is the word meconnaissance, which may be translated variously as 'misrepresentation', 'failure to recognize or appreciate fully', etc. Girard speaks of mimetic desire leading to false conclusions, to a crucial sort of forgetting, and to an inability to recognize certain important facts. In the context of a discussion of Freudian theories, he proclaims that the failure to recognize the true nature of mimesis is 'the real unconscious [le veritable inconscient]' (1972, p. 260). Are there, then, some cognitive constraints that accompany mimetic desire?

In response to this question, Jean-Michel Oughourlian has proposed that all 'romantic' (that is, all non-mimetic) psychologies have two blind spots: they do not acknowledge the role played by desire in the constitution of the self, and they fail to understand the role that others play in the formation of desire (1982, p. 34). In the pathological forms of mimetic desire, this lack of awareness is replaced by a deluded affirmation of the individual's ability to desire spontaneously. The latter belief, then, would be the typical delusion of the pathological mimetic personality, while a mere absence of knowledge of one's own mimetic desire would be a cognitive constraint typical of more normal forms of selfhood. This is not, however, either an adequate interpretation or a plausible extension of Girard's intuitions. Girard explicitly refers to cases in which agents are not only acutely aware of the sway of desire, but understand its mediated nature. The young Swann knows that his desire to see la Berma began when he learned of the revered Bergotte's admiration for her. Don Quixote has many blind spots, but he consistently and doggedly holds that he cannot find the right path in life without referring to his chivalric models. Agents often recognize the nature and role of at least some of their own passions, and thus stand as exceptions to Oughourlian's first blind spot.

If types of cognitive constraints are to be correlated with mimetic desire, it is necessary to provide a

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precise description of the constraints in question. Such descriptions could be based on a number of conceptually distinct cognitive items, including at least the following: (1) the mimetic agent's beliefs about the objects of his or her own desires; (2) the mimetic agent's beliefs about the provenance (mimetic or non-mimetic) of his or her own desires; (3) the mimetic agent's beliefs about the objects of the mediator's desires; (4) the mimetic agent's beliefs about the provenance (mimetic or non-mimetic) of the mediator's desires; (5) the mimetic agent's beliefs about his or her relation to the mediator; and (6) the mimetic agent's beliefs about the mediator's beliefs about the mimetic agent and their relationship. What is more, in regard to each of these categories of beliefs, the analysis should distinguish between cases where the agent (a) holds at least a partially accurate belief, (b) holds an inaccurate belief, and (c) holds no belief on the topic. Additional complexities could be introduced by including reference to the agent's justification (or absence of justification) for holding or failing to hold the beliefs in question--following diverse specifications of the relevant norms of epistemic justification.

A theory of the cognitive constraints of mimetic desire could claim, for example, that in all cases of internal mediation, the desiring agent's beliefs under category (4) are systematically of type (b), i.e. all emulative desirers believe the mediator's desires are non-mimetic, when in fact they are mimetic. Yet it is easy to think of plausible counterexamples to such a constraint. General theories along these lines may be unlikely to pass any empirical test that is more stringent than selective readings of novels biased by a search for 'confirmation'.

Girard does not set forth a universal theory of the cognitive constraints associated with mimetic desire, but he does advance some ideas about how particular patterns of mimetic interaction may be associated with types of 'meconnaissance. Of special interest in this regard are his discussions of 'double mediation', that is, cases where two agents take each other reciprocally as mediators of mimetic desire in an iterated and personally significant sequence of interaction. Girard discusses this pattern of interaction as follows:

The model-disciple relationship precludes by its very nature that sense of equality that would permit the disciple to see himself as a possible rival to the model. The disciple's position is like that of a worshiper before his god; he imitates the other's desires but is incapable of recognising any connection between them and his own desires. In short, the disciple fails to grasp that he can indeed enter into competition with his model and even become a menace to him. If this is true for adults, how much truer it must be for the child experiencing his first encounter with mimetic desire! (1972, p. 242)

Girard's intuition can be illustrated by evoking the kind of scenario he has in mind. Alidor greatly admires his older friend Cleandre and tends to follow his lead in various matters. One day he sees

him in the company of the lovely Angelique. Imagining that the discerning Cleandre is courting her, Alidor emulates the fancier desire and begins to long for Angelique. Unbenownst to Alidor, Cleandre had not in fact singled Angelique out as the object of his desire. Cleandre thinks of his young friend Alidor as an especially discerning companion, so when he learns that Alidor is courting Angelique, he in turn mimetically conceives of a powerful passion for her. The initial steps of Cleandre's amorous pursuit of Angelique are from Alidor's perspective but a continuation of a romantic quest that had already begun, just as Alidor's efforts to win Angelique are perceived by Cleandre as having already arisen from his friend's direct relation to the woman. The two agents' desires are in fact interdependent, but neither of them is aware of this fact.

What Girard calls the fundamental error of the disciple is the mimetic agent's inability to see that the person taken as mediator in turn imitates the disciple. As a result, the disciple consistently misunderstands the mediator's desires and behaviour, a misunderstanding that in turn distorts the perception of the rivalry that often arises in such situations. Alidor cannot imagine that Cleandre has copied 'his' desire for Angelique, a mistake that is partly explained by the fact that Alidor experienced no such desire prior to the moment when he conceived of one following the illusory spectacle of Cleandre's romantic advances. The disciple does not think the admirable and self-assured Cleandre would copy someone else's desires, least of all his own. At the same time, Cleandre holds schematically similar beliefs, and thus suffers from the same kind of blind spot with regard to Alidor's mimetic relation to him. Alidor's initial error about Cleandre's desire does not have a mimetic basis, but their relationship of reciprocal mimesis engenders and sustains two new misconceptions: both will go on desiring, unaware of their role in producing each other's passions.

Girard's claim, then, is that in at least some instances of internal mediation, mimetic agents misrecognize or have an erroneous belief about the provenance of their mediators' desires. Does he also suggest that every mimetic agent is unaware of, or deluded about, the mimetic nature of his or her own present desires? It would be inaccurate to make either of these two strong cognitive constraints a necessary feature of all episodes of mimetic desire, or even of only those involving reciprocal, internal mediation. There is no reason why Alidor must be unaware of the fact that his desire for Angelique arose when he first came to believe that Cleandre loved her. 'When I saw that Cleandre loved her, so did I' is a proposition he could entertain. Given the right sort of tutelary belief and a particular kind of self-concept, the mimetic agent could coherently acknowledge the mimetic origin of a desire without this acknowledgement resulting in the desire's demise. But given another sort of tutelary belief and a different kind of self-concept, the agent could systematically overlook or fail to recognize evidence that would otherwise support the conclusion that his own desire has its source in an attribution. Imagine, for example, a Cleandre who thinks of himself as an autonomous and self-directed individual, and whose admiration for his mediator/Alidor is muted by a sense of their ultimate equality of status and discernment. Although Cleandre actually admires

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Alidor enough to conceive of a mimetic desire following his example, he does not think of himself in such terms and does not experience the desire as having been informed by his beliefs about Alidor. The link between the tutelary belief, the attribution, and the onslaught of the mimetic desire is part of Cleandre's mind, but there is no direct and inescapable experience of this link, like the sharp pain that is evidence of a heavy object having fallen on one's foot. Nor is the link part of some 'radical unconscious' that can in principle never be sounded by the agent. Cognitive constraints on a mimetic agent's self-knowledge are contingent and relative to particular constellations of belief and experiences.

Girard suggests that in situations of reciprocal mediation, the interaction between the two mimetic rivals will tend to strengthen each of their desires. Just as Cleandre's false belief about the non-mimetic nature of Alidor's passion initially gave rise to Cleandre's desire, so will this very desire be reinforced by the erroneous idea that Alidor engages in renewed non-mimetic efforts to win Angelique's affection. The idea here seems to be that the mimetic agent's estimation of the value of a goal varies in direct proportion to the agent's estimation of the strength of the mediator's non-mimetic desire for the same goal. Alidor initially attributes to Cleandre a certain amount of passion for Angelique and in turn experiences a desire for her. When he later perceives that his rival is actively engaged in courting the woman, his estimate of the rival's passion increases, which in turn strengthens his own mimetic desire.

Such a scenario is indeed possible, but one should be cautious about adopting a simple equation linking the motivational strength of a desire to the desiring agent's belief concerning the strength of the mediator's desires. Even more tenuous is the putative link between a perception of the rival's resistance and the strength of one's own desires. It seems correct to say that some agents are disposed to desire more avidly when a rival seems to be putting up a fight, but this disposition does not follow simply from the mimetic nature of the agent's initial motivation. We can plausibly imagine a Cleandre who mimetically conceives of a desire for Angelique with Alidor as his mediator, but whose desire wanes when he finds himself embroiled in a situation of protracted rivalry with a friend. Girard sometimes suggests that desiring something mimetically and desiring to compete with a rival are fundamentally the same, but they are not. Some of the objects of mimetic desire are cooperative and complementary. When our desires do aim at the goal of exclusive possession or victory, and thus are in some sense conflictual, it does not follow that they are reducible to a desire for conflict. Sometimes people really would prefer to get something without having to compete for it.

6. Conclusion

The focus of this paper has been on the proximal conditions of a species of desire. Little has been

said about the specific role of desire in the motivation and orientation of an agent's behaviour and action. Girard sometimes seems to work with a very strong, implicit hypothesis to the effect that behaviour is largely determined by unconscious desires, all of which are mimetic. Mimetic desire is presented as the very mainspring of behaviour and of extensive sociocultural dynamics. It would seem more prudent to hold open the possibility that mimetic desire need not be the only motivational state, nor the one that is always preponderant. Nor does it seem a good idea to assume that mimetic desire determines behaviour in a direct and univocal manner, i.e. in the absence of practical deliberation. Even when an agent is effectively motivated by a mimetic desire, the agent's choice of a practical means to the realization of the desired end will depend on a complex network of background beliefs, which implies that a single mimetic desire could contribute to a range of significantly different actions. And desires--even our strongest ones--do not always move us when the time for action comes. These points cast in doubt the notion that mimetic desire constitutes a 'mechanism' that determines action and interaction, if by 'mechanism' is meant a closed system of factors that function together to produce certain invariable types of effects. The concepts evoked in this paper describe a cluster of motivational factors, but are not meant to provide a comprehensive theory of the generation of action and interaction.

The concept of mimetic desire has a basic, intuitive appeal. It seems right to say that people often learn preferences from others who have emerged as salient models. Today's noisy public discourses of persuasion, prestige and stardom are designed to foster precisely this sort of modelling. Persons designated as our superiors invite us to desire what they desire, even when the advertised prestige and pleasures are illusory or well out of our reach. Parents, caretakers, friends, lovers, educators and others serve as long-term personal mediators whose desires may inspire anything from a specific gesture or attitude to an entire way of life. It is hard to imagine a personal history devoid of such relationships, and Girard has ably shown that many of our best narratives and dramas systematically evoke them. Girard has also identified some patterns that can emerge when mimetic relations go wrong. Threatened by the progress of the disciple, the mediator may withhold encouragement and begin to compete, thereby vitiating cooperation. In a world that prizes individual talent and success, imitation must be disguised, often at the cost of delusion and deceit. Runaway systems of mimetic competition mete out bitter rewards of failure and envy. Girard's valuable discussions of these phenomena have opened up many avenues of enquiry.

Acknowledgements

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