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A Discussion with Rene Girard on Reason and Faith

By

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This exercise was intended to be an interview but it turned out to be a long discussion, lasting more than six hours and taking place in three sessions. I have written this report on the basis of notes and memory. It is not the voice of Rene Girard himself, but I have tried to make it at least an echo of his voice.

I asked RG to tell me what difference he thinks Mimetic Theory (MT) makes in our understanding of how we think. I took “how we think” to be the equivalent of “Reason” and regarded it as the first of our two agreed topics, Reason and Faith.

He immediately answered that the stipulation in MT that thinking is an inter-subjective process is what makes the difference. The fact that we imitate each other at the level of desire, which is the fundamental level of existence, means that we give to, and take from each other the thoughts that we think. Thinking is a mode of imitative desiring and imitative desiring is the fundamental mode of being human. We step forth as human beings hand in hand and mind in mind with each other. The denial of this solidarity is the romantic lie, and it is also the fatal fantasy of traditional philosophy.

The power of advertising in our culture is one of the main symptoms of our mutual enthrallment. The enticement of the models, the sounds of the song, the commands to buy, the incitement to envy,

all these are parts of the mimetic force that drives the engine of exchange. Consider just how much of what we take to be our own subsisting identity is made up of these flashing images of desire. The self is a projection onto the screen of memory of a culturally composed story.

Our self-understanding is made of images, images absorbed every day, images remembered from yesterday, images projected into the future, and all integrated into a narrative that is constantly being composed and at a certain point comes to deserve the titles “culture” and “history.” The story of one life is told within the context of all the lives in a culture, and because all lives deploy themselves in time, within the context of a history. Imitative rivalry weaves the threads of a culture and its history and their fibers are violent constraints.

For this reason alone MT has much to teach us about the process of thinking going on at present through the burgeoning media of communication. Only now are some of us coming to understand that the effects of the internet through phenomena like Face Book are not additions to a metaphysically grounded, enduring core of human self-understanding, but are rather the accelerating process by which a malleable humanness is changing. There is a psychological and cultural evolution going on at “fast forward,” changes that used to take millennia are happening in decades, and the narrative of a life is being “text messaged” in haste rather than composed at leisure. We should no longer try to “see life steadily and to see it whole,” but rather to participate cannily, - by virtue of knowing MT - in the flux and on the fragments of a universal history that is approaching a state of

runaway escalation to total violence. This possibility is not an exaggeration, given the nuclear terror of the Israeli-Muslim standoff in the Middle East and the careless prodigality of a demographic that has long since begun to toll the bells of Malthusian alarm.

The opposite of inter-subjective thinking is the cogito ergo sum of Descartes, which stands for the essentially solipsistic mode of all philosophical thought. Philosophical reason is believed to be an endowment of the individual by which he has access to the transcendent principles of order that govern the world of thought and action. In order to see them the philosopher disengages from the network of the mimetically conditioned crowd and uses his solitude as a place to wait until he hears the voice of the transcendent reason.

The philosopher, methodologically speaking, withdraws from history. The fact that Plato wrote dialogues does not gainsay this claim, rather it shows, what Eric Voegelin taught us long ago, that Plato is not a philosopher who propounds doctrines but a consummate literary artist, who, when read as Girard read Dostoievsky and Proust, discloses human existence. Nor does the work of Hegel gainsay the a-historicity of Philosophy because he explained history from an impossible point of view outside of history, a motionless, clueless and self-deceived observer on an imaginary rock in the rapids of time.

There is no such thing as that grand abstraction "Being," in the sense that Parmenides proposed it and Descartes confirmed it. The sum (I am) of the cogito is a delusion; I do not exist because I think but I think because I exist, in inter-subjectivity. Thinking, both as opportunity and as substance is given me by another. "The un-lived

life is not worth examining.” This is the first difference MT makes in our understanding of the way we think, not a “flight of the alone to the alone” but a “give and take” in the mimetic arena of a crowd.

The second difference is that this new way of thinking entails a new appreciation of the origin and meaning of analysis by - means of differentiation - and synthesis - by the discovery that one thing, the victim, can stand for another, the mob.

Levi-Strauss and Structuralism thought that acts of distinguishing began with perception – the perception of dyads or binary opposites (“the raw and the cooked”), and that this ability and way of proceeding was innate in the human mind, as shown by the evidence of human language. If we ask how it came to be innate, that is, how the hard-wiring of the brain came to include it, the answer would be that it is a carry-over the line between hominid and homo sapiens engraved in the mind by the myriads of blind distinctions that were part of the phylo-genetic process of evolution prior to crossing the line into the cultural world of homo sapiens.

MT on the other hand holds that the acts of distinction begin on the Homo sapiens side of the line in the ritual imitation and repetition of the moment of the surrogate victim that was later to be called “sacrifice.” The origin of the mind’s process of thinking by differentiation and distinction (analysis) is the historical moment of the violent separation between the victim and the mob. The first distinction is a fatal blow; and repeated ritually the fatal blow feeds back on the mind and by this feedback from history onto biology eventually lays down the hard wires of logic.

If the fatal blow is the moment of analysis, the discovery of the

similarity of the struck to the striker is the moment of synthesis. The striker and the struck being mimetic doubles can stand one for the other can represent or symbolize each other. In this second moment, therefore, when one thing stands for another, language, which is a code of systematic symbolization or representation, comes to birth.

Therefore, in the debate about origins Structuralism favors myth and MT favors ritual. Myth is the currency of the cogito, of the ontologically transcendent reason that comes from “above.” For MT the capacity for differentiation, which is the basis of the nature of language, is the result of the feedback upon the brain of the ritual repetition of the singling out of the surrogate victim. This is a case of what we now readily recognize as “co-evolution” a name convincingly coined by William Durham,<sup>1</sup> and an historical rather than an ontological phenomenon.

Things done (ritual) shape things said (myth); first came analysis, the capacity to make distinctions, then came synthesis, the capacity to bridge the ditches of distinction and see how one thing is related to another and can stand for or represent or symbolize the other. This ultimately is what Girard means by the claim that “all culture comes out of the victim.

So MT makes two points: that thinking is inter-subjective by virtue of being imitative and ineluctably competitive, and the two fundamental forms of thinking -analysis and synthesis- are historical effects not ontological endowments. Language too, is historical and not ontological in its origin.

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<sup>1</sup> William H. Durham, Coevolution: Genes Culture and Human Diversity (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

## Faith:

Let me now move on to a brief account of our discussions on faith. RG is a traditional Catholic Christian and believes the doctrines of the faith on authority. He is adamant that the Cross cannot be properly understood without the Resurrection, but by now we can appreciate how he sees the danger to the faith to be not a Cross without the Resurrection but rather a Resurrection without the Cross, what Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the martyr to the Nazis called “cheap grace.”

MT’s articulation of faith centers in the cross/resurrection phenomenon. RG thinks the Passion Narratives of the Gospels are the definitive truth about the human world and the divine; Paul’s account of the phenomenon is an indispensable companion to the Gospels. Starting from the scriptures one might articulate the pivot of the faith as threefold: the historical event of the Cross, the trans-historical event of the Resurrection, and the miraculous event of the Apostolic insight and testimony, that this particular Cross, among all the many others, is unique.

The historical event of the Cross is the torture to death of a young Jew named Jeshua by the civic and religious authorities. The trans-historical event of the Resurrection is the sense-defying fact that the corpse of Jeshua was not found in the tomb where they laid it and that many encountered him alive after his death, including a crowd of more than five hundred (1 Corinthians 15:6). The Apostolic miracle is that Peter and the other disciples were able to testify that among all the young Jews that Rome and its Quislings crucified that

week, this Jeshua was special, not simply another victim but the divine representative of the human race and the Incarnate God intervening in the system of reciprocal violence that runs the world, once and for real, the final sacrifice, final because real and not just another ritualistic surrogate ruse to derail violence temporarily onto a side track and trick it into a brief respite, but a real confrontation and a bearing it away. For this reason God became a human being, so that he could expose his flesh to the violence of the mechanism, absorb it into himself and bear it away. I must quote here the Letter to the Hebrews, which RG once dismissed and now cherishes:

Quoting Psalm 40:6-8 in the Septuagint version the writer says:

”For it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins. Consequently when Christ came into the world he said,

‘Sacrifices and offerings thou hast not desired, but a body hast thou prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin-offerings thou hast taken no pleasure. Then I said, ‘Lo I have come to do thy will, O God, as it is written of me in the roll of the book’ (Hebrews 10:4-7- RSV translation).

MT holds that the Cross can be properly understood by the reasoning of anthropology and does not need faith to understand. It does not invoke the credo ut intelligam or the fides quaerens intellectum, or even its opposite, the intellectus quaerens fidem. Its account of the world can stand without faith, on the anthropological and archeological evidence of traditional religions and the literary evidence of the Greek Tragedies, Shakespeare, Proust, Doistoievsky, Cervantes and the Bible. So how do we explain MT’s fruitful

symbiosis with Christian theology?

In order to do that one would have to resuscitate the category Truth, as in “You shall know the Truth and the Truth will set you free (John 8:32).” Traditional philosophy devoted itself to this truth, but the word and its referent are now quite out of fashion, as is that philosophy. But consider this; the apostolic witness claims that this murder by torture discloses the truth of the world and the truth of God, who man /woman is and who God is. To know this is the purpose of traditional philosophy; so revelation has delivered what philosophy sought, and the delivery packet is ordinary history, the event of an execution. Up to this point faith and reason are potentially one, both understand the history of the Cross in the same human, rational way. The ordinary is revelatory by virtue of a miraculous moment of apostolic choice and identity, and the story of how he died proves true in two senses, that is, it is the beginning of an accurate rational account of the world, and a revelation of how God is acting in history to take upon himself the reciprocal violence of the world and thus end the mendacious deflection of violence on to defenseless surrogates and stop mythic theology and solipsistic philosophy. Reason and Revelation coalesce in the Passion narrative of the final sacrifice and the last victim. After this there is no more grace for the half-measures of the mechanism, which might in the long period from Cain to Christ have been seen as the imperfect and provisional action of grace, as Paul viewed the Law of Moses (Galatians 3:24-25) - a tutor to keep us on the straight and narrow until grace was fully come- there is just a perverse refusal of the grace of release from the mechanism and a stubborn perseverance in the torture chamber of

the past.

This apparent double truth is in fact only one single truth, God discloses to us who we are and who he is and that disclosure accounts for all things matter-of-factly. That means that reason and faith are one and the same thing, that they have always been sides of the same coin, that faith is to believe rationally and reason is to think faithfully, by means of MT, the theory of everything.

I know that this argument entails that MT is revealed truth. So I ask rhetorically, "Is there any other kind of truth?" Clearly RG would never claim that, which makes it clear once more that this is my account not his. The basic orientation and the creative insights are his, and the risks taken are mine.

In closing let me reminisce about Prof Eric Voegelin and Fr Robert Giguere. When I arrived at Stanford early in 1973, as Dean of the Chapel and Senior Minister of the University Church, among the first things I did was to arrange a course of public lectures on Faith and Reason by various distinguished minds in various fields of endeavor, and to go to school with Fr Giguere on Thomas Aquinas. I hoped to learn from him something about the subject of the lectures, and I was not disappointed. Both of these graced intellects left precious gifts in my life and shaped my mind decisively. I was present at their bedsides as they took leave of this life and I remember my solemn thoughts at those times, about the fragility of human excellence.

Now, however, I remember rather how both of them taught that the distinction between the two categories Reason and Faith is unreliable and unnecessary. I trust that my conclusion here, in

dialogue with Rene Girard, to whom I owe more than to Voegelin and Giguere, is nevertheless also shaped by the force of the deep memory of these two enlightened souls. I conclude with an excerpt from the Septuagint, which is not inappropriate to the men I have named, my teachers and friends, and is especially apt to Rene Girard, who informed and inspired these thoughts:

“From generation to generation Wisdom enters holy men and women and makes them friends of God and prophets.”

Sapientia Salomonis 7:27b.

RGHK 8/22/09