

**FROM ANIMAL TO HUMAN: WHAT MIMETIC THEORY
BRINGS TO THE UNDERSTANDING OF CULTURAL EVOLUTION.**

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Briefing no. 1 (sent out at end of June), offered an overview of the shape and movement of Girardian thought as a whole, highlighting the three or four key insights which RG has managed to articulate – with impressive coherence, if not great systematicity - into a ‘fundamental anthropology’.

From *Violence and the Sacred* (1972) mimetic theory – or MT, as this anthropology is usually called – is presented as elucidating ‘the origins of culture’. More radically, from *Things hidden* (1978), RG shows that the theory is capable of illuminating in a decisive new way the hidden and momentous things which Darwin saw when he hinted in the *Origin of species* that: ‘Light will be cast on the origin of man’. In general and more philosophically, this problem engages the whole sense and significance of ‘The Descent of Man’.

In bringing together Darwin and Girard, we are focussing on the problem of ‘hominisation’ (i.e. the passage from animal to human). Darwin himself, though he of course reveals and makes plausible the momentous fact of human derivation from the animal world, cannot really *explain* the articulation of nature to culture, or *comprehend* in any full and proper sense how the transition from animal to human is accomplished, still less say to what effect and with what meaning. Indeed, the way he, in his time and by his lights, conceived the descent of man put a shadow of reductionism and polemic upon his shoulder that made him shrink from examining these matters too closely, even had he possessed the tools to do so.

To make a pioneering foray in the exploration of the interface between, on the one hand, the theorist of evolution (Darwin) and his successors today and, on the other, a

leading contemporary theorist of culture (Girard) is the proposed task of our forthcoming colloquium.

What are the challenges MT poses to evolutionary thinking? How well does it account for both the continuities and the ‘quantum leap’ involved in hominisation? How do we assess the offer of a new intelligibility which MT brings to the evolutionary Big Picture, as we may decipher it with the augmented resources and insights of today?

How possible and how fruitful is it, in short, to review the theory of biological evolution in continuity with, and by the light of, the culture theory of Rene Girard? Can we have a theory of evolution that is ‘bio-cultural’? And in which respects, if so, will this differ from the picture Darwin himself saw and shrank from, the picture which still often sets the agenda of evolutionary thinking today?

We make a modest start on this agenda in the present briefing paper by suggesting that Mimetic Theory (MT) does challenge some basic assumptions which have considerable currency in the present cultural and scientific debate; and that it helps to refashion, in a fundamental way, the parameters within which specific issues, such as the relationship between evolutionary theory and religion, are discussed.

The Evolution of Culture and the Mimetic Theory

According to Elliot Sober, “biologists interested in culture are often struck by the absence of viable general theories in the social sciences. All of biology is united by the theory of biological evolution. Perhaps progress in the social sciences is impeded because there is no general theory of cultural evolution.” (Sober 1994: 486) The majority of available theories on the evolution of culture in fact take culture as a *given*: they do not explain how it emerged, but they start *in media res*, that is, when culture (technology, arts, beliefs, values, institutions – and the entire socially

transmitted and formative programme of references and rites, practices, symbols and meanings) is already present within a given society. Mimetic theory aims, on the contrary, to explain the emergence of culture among hominids, and to provide the missing explanatory links which connects the animal to the human. These are not envisaged simply as a series of incremental steps in the genetic blueprint of the species *homo*, but more as a catastrophic, systemic event which triggered a complex social and cognitive response which one can only call 'cultural' – and, and represents the inauguration of the genesis of human culture as such.

MT is an interpretative tool, and a basic explanatory principle. It offers to account for the emergence of culture for endogenous reasons: reasons not purely and simply relating to the physical evolution of specific individuals within a given species, but rather to the emergence of systemic group behaviour, which eventually and gradually shape the co-evolution of both the physical and the socio-cultural potentials of this given species. It provides a mechanism and a model of social interaction, which **is** based on instinctual structures and patterns observable in animal behaviour. Developing through catastrophic events, these constitute new forms of social organization which we can only be described as “cultural”, since they provoke the emergence of “proto-institutions”, and these in turn become the regulatory principles which stabilize and reinforce the cohesion of the social group - something no longer based on instinctual, and proto-cultural patterns (hierarchical system of social organization in animals, submission rituals, etc), but now on symbolic codes and fully ritual practices.

In this fundamental endeavour, MT helps everybody by getting rid of the most simplistic generalizations belonging to the tired and cliché-ridden nineteenth century debate on the relationship between science and religion in respect of evolutionary theory. If we use Daniel Dennett's terminology, MT approaches 'religion', not as a 'skyhook' but as a 'crane' (Dennett 1995: 73-80). It is *some crane*, of course, since this

is what induces *homo sapiens* as such to evolve culturally, thus lifting him into an new evolutionary phase and a new dimension of being... And – here’s the twist - it is a ‘crane’ that could only be conceptualized, understood and imagined by the subjects and actors of the process itself of hominisation, as a ‘skyhook’ (which is an imperfect persuasion, but perhaps in evolutionary time, redeemable...).

This leaves it, nonetheless, with the primary status of ‘crane’, as seen from our vantage point and for our purposes; but it does pose the question of how we have today come to see it as such (i.e. it raises fairly and squarely, for the first time, the entire question of ‘religion’ itself as a phenomenon open to evolution and as a factor in human evolution generally). Religion, in other words, is not simply to be viewed as ‘false’ in scientific terms; it is not just ‘superstition’, it is the key formative potential of an emergent humanity; a function carrying within itself an ‘epistemological fallacy’ (which is also a flaw of moral self-apprehension and a epistemic and cognitive blindspot), even as it sees itself as responding to an endogenous force perceived and conceptualized as transcendent.

This perspective itself is likely to become a point of debate in respect the theological implications of MT, since, within the self-proclaimed limits of his fundamental anthropology, and perhaps by default, or (as he himself says, ‘for want of the time to say everything’) RG *appears at first to entertain a totally immanent, sociological - and seemingly materialistic- view of religion, rather in the manner of Durkheim.* This implication will certainly suggest itself to those who did not or do not follow his theory all the way to its later rendez-vous with the Christian gospels. (It is helpful here to understand how Girardian theory itself is developed and evolves genetically). His apparent ‘materialism’, or his time-biding silence of abstention, is, certainly, the origin of some typical criticism that MT has suffered and continues to generate in theological quarters.

On the other hand, and clearly enough, MT evacuates the deeply flawed positivistic presupposition that frequently comes with evolutionary thinking: namely, that scientific explanation, by its own epistemic nature, must be opposed to religious belief and must depreciate or exclude any attempt to refer culture to a religious matrix. MT refuses to take ‘religion’ as a competing theory of scientific explanation, or, indeed, to equate ‘religion’ with Semitic (and later Western) monotheism, as

many evolutionary theorists or philosophers of biology do. 'Religion', on this view, is a universal phenomenon, both archaic and modern, that stands in great need of explanation (and definition); but a commitment to 'religion', or against it, is not itself - it cannot and it should not be - an ideological postulate of the explanation advanced. Moreover, one of the most certain effects of MT is to raise against any assertion we wish to make about 'religion' the instant question: what do you mean by that term (the archaic sacred, tribal cults, montheism, Christianity, etc). ?

Simply, RG shares the Durkheimian view that it is impossible to understand the evolution of culture if we discount the emergence and the evolution of religion as a distinctively human phenomenon. This is the nerve point of his quarrel with Dawkinsites now; as it was of the earlier quarrel with the British 19th century anthropologists (Frazer, Robertson-Smith, etc), and with Freud, Levi-Strauss and Nietzsche. For RG, as for Durkheim, *religion is the great matrix of all things cultural*: initially, in its first beginnings, culture is not distinct from religion; since 'religion' it is that generates and informs all the forms which cultural, social and political acts, beliefs and practices originally took in archaic societies. We can even say that the matrix of 'the archaic sacred' represents still today the secretly surviving generative logic from which stem many of the acts and attitudes and practices of more technologically advanced and 'civilised' societies. In evolutionary terms, therefore, MT asserts that man is *first and fundamentally* 'the religious animal'.

What is the evolutionary point of religion, in socio-cultural terms? It basically responds to the need to control group violence, which RG sees as the no 1 problem of human societies at all times and in all places. His theories of founding murder, the scapegoat mechanism and repeated (ritual) blood-sacrifice are invoked to deal with the 'struggle for existence' and 'nature red in tooth and claw'. They describe the mechanisms which *found* religion-and-culture. These are *triggered* when evolution reaches the *threshold at which animal defences fail*; when mimetic and acquisitive

violence *leaps exponentially*, made possible by enhanced brain capacity, driven by accelerating mimetic and acquisitive rivalry, made doubly perilous by the vulnerability of prolonged human infancy and by the superior destructive power of artefact weapons – at the point, in short, where *terminal crises* threaten to extinguish whole groups and communities of hominids, and of early man *unless...*

RG's account of 'hominisation' shows striking continuities with animal behaviour – in respect of mimetism, violence, the struggle for existence and even scapegoating in its proto-forms - but it also takes the measure of the effecting and all-important 'quantum leap' from animal to human. In doing so, it addresses the question posed by Pascal Boyer, based on an 'epidemiological' account of cultural evolution: why are religions, and “religious concepts ... so 'catching' that we find them in many different cultural settings, whilst other concepts of (seemingly) equal potential use or cognitive effect are very rare”? (Boyer 2000: 94). If the Girardian hypothesis is correct, this is just the sort of corroboration we would expect, and might reasonably hope, to find...

Ernest Gellner wryly comments that: “if a native says something sensible it is primitive technology, but if it sounds very odd then it is symbolic” (Gellner 1987: 163). There is indeed an interesting ambivalence in current evolutionary accounts of the process of hominisation: on the one hand, researchers assume proto-humans to be rational and consciously intentional agents, in reference, for instance, to hunting, toolmaking, foraging; but then, on the other, they lightly assume that religious practices, so ubiquitous and widespread, are merely 'superstitious', i.e., are forms of arbitrary and fundamentally 'irrational' behaviour. MT does not share this 19th century positivistic 'take' on the role of religion in human cultural development. It sees that religious practices were, on the contrary, the 'safest' and most 'economical' way to deal with structural violence, with the fear and danger of mob phenomena: they were, in this functional sense, *highly rational*. Not that they were devised

‘intentionally’; but they are, as Darwin shows all evolutionary adaptation to be, ‘advantageous’ in the sense of *fit-for-purpose, getting the job done*; and it sees that that adaptation has been structured here by basic cognitive and ethological mechanisms still visible in animals and in humans today, under specific social conditions.

MT further envisages a *genesis and cultural co-evolution of the human*. Culture emerged, that is, and was shaped by biological structures and instinctual patterns; but as it progressively became itself endogenous, and an increasingly complex and autonomous shaping ‘force’, it altered biological processes in response to cultural change. One key example is the chain of reciprocal interactions RG sees between increasing brain size on the one hand and, on the other, the surge in mimetic capacity, the exponentially increased threat of self-destructive human violence and the beginnings of symbolic and ritual practice. MT takes into account also the concept of group selection, much criticized in the context of evolutionary theory: groups which were able to find mechanisms to control internal, mimetic violence could cope better with larger and therefore more structurally organized social groups; which in turn increased the fitness of the members of the group. Religion thus acts as a form of protection for social groups against mob phenomena and violent social disruption: it has such an evident adaptational value.¹

One could say, perhaps, that culture evolves in Lamarckian terms: once it reaches a higher degree of symbolicity, it is preserved and diffused by repetition and mnemonic and cognitive reinforcement; however it also shapes the biological in a Darwinian sense, becoming a peculiar selective mechanism of adaptation. The so-called “neoteny” in humans, for instance, is for Girard a clear example of the way culture,

¹ As E.O. Wilson writes: “Religions are like other human institutions in that they evolve in directions that enhance the welfare of the practitioners. Because this demographic benefit must accrue to the group as a whole, it can be gained partly by altruism and partly by exploitation, with certain sectors profiting at the expense of others. Alternatively, the benefit can arise as the sum of the generally increased fitnesses of all of the members.” (Wilson 178: 175)

religion and society affected the biology of individuals. Religion in particular, according to Girard, allowed for the protection necessary for the kind of neotenic physical development that we now see in *homo sapiens sapiens*. “The formula ‘self-domestication’ has been used quite often in reference to the human being: man is a “self-domesticated” animal. No, says RG, he isn’t a self-domesticated animal in any unmediated or automatic sense: *it is religion, it is sacrifice that domesticated him.* (Girard 2008)

Epistemological assumptions, hermeneutical problems

Inserting, reshaping, rephrasing MT within the parameters of evolutionary theory is not an easy feat, but at any and all levels of its explanatory structure, it can rely on a good deal of circumstantial evidence. On the other hand, much like Darwin evolutionary theory itself, MT cannot be dismissed by the standard procedure of falsification in a Popperian sense. It is rather an explanatory hypothesis that would need to be corroborated empirically by inserting bits of evidence wherever they do fit in order to complete the jigsaw.

An illuminating parallel to this situation is addressed by Hocart in relation to Darwin’s theory of evolution: “The first Gibraltar skull was discovered in 1848: it passed quite unnoticed. The *Origin of Species* appeared in 1859. It wasn’t till men had become thoroughly used to the idea of man’s descent from an ape-like creature that the skull was brought out of its obscurity, in order to become a link in the evidence. It wasn’t the direct evidence of a man-ape that converted biologists. Rather, having been converted by [the] comparative evidence, they set out to find direct evidence in order to confirm their deductions and complete the confusion of their opponents. *It took thirty-five years of The ‘Origin of Species’ to set them really looking [our italics].* Then Dubois went out to find the ape-like fossil and found it. Since then discovery has

succeeded discovery, and the illusion of direct evidence has taken possession of the minds of anthropologists.” (Hocart 1936: 13)

Since theories of cultural change cannot be independently verified experimentally, at all events, what is considered ‘true’ must, for the time being, be simply what seems to read the picture of the jigsaw puzzle best and to best fit its bits together. Since archaeologists are not perfectly objective, the conclusions they reach will always be influenced by personal biases (Trigger, 1989: 379)

The problems MT faces in evidential and hermeneutical terms, in its offer to supply the crucial missing link, the transition that brings the advent of *homo sapiens* in evolutionary theory, are broadly the following:

- the relative scarcity of actual physical evidence (eg of fossil record) that would corroborate the theory;
- more than physical objects, cultural products (myths, rituals), for their very own nature, are subject to interpretation;
- the timeline in respect the emergence of culture which is very fuzzy;
- the set of ideological premises in current scientific research (methodological individualism, intrinsic Rousseau-ism) move against the grain of MT thinking;
- a dramatically limited view of what ‘culture’ and ‘religion’ are, which is not infrequent among scientists;
- the persuasion that genetic explanation must proceed one way only, from the *before* and the *below* of things, in the same direction as the timeline; *rather than* reaching steadily backwards in time, by a movement of reflective and regressive comprehension, from a higher platform of deductive intelligibility and interpretation situated in today’s evolved complexity. Can *observable phenomena of evolution in culture* help explain a long-gone evolutionary step in *biological nature*? (There is an unseen dimension of lexical

- and conceptual difficulty here, too: English speaks most readily of ‘human cultural *development*’ and, unlike Latin languages, reserves the word ‘*evolution*’ for biological change in animals and their environment. Do not Darwin and Girard both, in fact, illustrate the linguistic mindforms of their own native languages? And is this not an unseen problem in the differing persuasions of speakers of different European languages?);
- the difficulties in thinking in fully historical terms on the part of evolutionary theorists. MT entails a historical perspective which encompasses both history and pre-history;
 - the protracted ideological resistance to a meaningful and useful comparative approach to anthropology and religion;
 - frequent suspicion of the Girardian hermeneutics of myth. MT here provides a particular hermeneutics, seen as witnessing (despite mendacious efforts at concealment, to an overlaid and truthful subtext which surfaces when we know ‘how to read’). This reading is readily seen by critics as highly speculative and unscientific: especially, perhaps, in its founding postulate that, at the root of these narratives and rituals, there is a covering-up of systemic collective murder, which is what generates the symbolic structure in the first place and protects it in the telling. This proposition can indeed, at first encounter, seem far-fetched. Yet René Girard treats myths and rituals as veritable ‘cultural fossils’ which, rigorously deciphered, *attest to lost origins*, and are rigorously *confirmed* as universal, by a careful procedure comparing the structures, motifs and functioning of myths in the most widely different ethnic and religious traditions.

Key concepts of Girardian theory and their empirical confirmation

MT is formulated as a narrative of genesis, defining a proto-event which stands at the beginning of our cultural evolution, to be regarded as original for the emergence of

both symbolicity and of proto-institutions – and because it reveals a subsistent logic of culture formation which operates even today. According to Girard, convergent and mutually confirming ‘traces’ of , or ‘pointers’ to, this proto-event may be detected in what he regards as ‘cultural fossils’, i.e. in myths and rituals.

The proto-event itself (the founding scapegoat murder, subsequently ritualised in the form of blood-sacrifice) is not, of course, to be considered as a unique historical occurrence (RG roundly criticises Freud’s conception of a single Slaying of one historical Father). Rather, the event and its ritual elaboration, are thought of as being enacted in any number of ‘incidents’, no doubt repeated over time before the pattern was actually perceived as cogent in respect its socially pacifying and organising efficacy. The structurally common, ritualistic behaviour that later ensued among ancient humans was selected, for its reconciliatory and protective potency. This coincides with the beginning of religion.

As we have said, the formulation of this event, as deciphered by Girard, was made possible by a comparative reading of archaic myths and rituals, as well as of Greek tragedy (which registers an unbdoubted ‘memory of origins’), and of religious texts, in particular the Bible and the Veda scriptures, all of which are regarded as expressing a common anthropological insight in relation to ritual sacrifice, sacrificial mechanisms, scapegoating, and mob phenomena generally. This move in itself represents one of the greatest challenges to evolutionary thinking of Girard’s theory: MT here takes myths and rituals *seriously*, in the sense that it believes that they express a referential concern for actual events which were then eventually transfigured in the telling, and in the highly symbolic institutional forms that enacted their functionality.

The price paid by Girard for reading evolution backwards, through an art of decipherment, which he, for his part, sees as rigorous and novel, as well as tested in

its results, and of using myth and religion as a kind of fossil record, is that his narrative, almost instantly and inevitably, strikes scientists as ... merely speculative, irresponsible, perhaps even perverse! However, it is entirely possible to substantiate many of the claims of MT from a scientific standpoint. There is good evidence, at least, for three basic elements of genetic elucidation, which form the cornerstones on which the hypothesis is based:

- 1) acquisitive mimesis;
- 2) systemic scapegoating;
- 3) ritual or ritualistic sacrifice.

Mimesis: imitation and mirror neurons

One of the key concepts of Girard's theory is 'mimetic desire', that is, the imitation of other people's intentionality, in respect of desires, preferences and goals. He refutes the romantic notion of the autonomous subject who invents for himself what to desire, envisaging instead an inhabited or programmed subject who is part of the social fabric and constructs his or her preferences by constant imitative interaction with kin and peers. In the past fifteen years, the discovery of so-called 'mirror neurons' (MNS) has become the neuro-cognitive basis for a new understanding of human behaviour which confirms this basic assumption. The MNS in humans are directly involved in the imitation of simple movements (Iacoboni et al., 1999), the imitation learning of complex skills (Buccino, Vogt, et al., 2004), the perception of communicative actions (Buccino, Lui, et al., 2004), and the detection of action intentions (Iacoboni et al., 2005).

Imitation is pre-linguistic and preconscious, and therefore it works at the level of 'reflex' reactions, rather than conscious and willed intentionality, and it is partially

blind to itself.² As Vittorio Gallese writes in relation to imitation mechanisms: ‘The observed behavior is pre-reflexively understood because it is constituted as a goal-directed motor act in virtue of the activation in the observer’s brain of the neurons presiding over the motor accomplishment of similar goals.’ (Gallese 2010).³ Imitation, as a pre-conscious mechanism, is clearly evident in infants: the seminal study of Meltzoff & Moore (1977) and the subsequent research field it opened Meltzoff (2007) showed that neonates are innately prepared to link to their caregivers through imitation: ‘There is an intrinsic relation to others that infants feel preverbally’. This ‘felt connection’ colours infants’ very first interactions and interpretations of the social world and is foundational for human communication and development’ (Meltzoff 2010). Studies suggest that infants display sophisticated social cognitive abilities well before they develop sophisticated language abilities. [...] infants are able to understand goal-related actions already during the first year of life without relying on either language or fullblown metarepresentational abilities (Hamlin, Wynn, & Bloom, 2007; Tomasello and Haberl, 2003).⁴ The relevance of MNS for the MT has been recently discussed by Scott Garrels (Garrels 2006).

Jean Pierre Dupuy has argued that ‘Mimetic theory, though it can and does benefit from the discovery of mirror neurons, should not claim that the existence of mirror neurons *proves* its validity, since there are a number of competing theories of the mind that ‘can claim to be supported by that discovery’ (Dupuy 2010). However, it does seem to us that MNS theory challenges any purely mentalistic view of intersubjectivity, by providing a neuro-cognitive explanation which accounts for how skills and

² Paul Dumouchel claims that we don’t “get” imitation as a principle of explanation, so often are we unaware of its action, and the extent of its action, in our own attitudes and behaviour.

³ “Nonhuman primates—probably even rhesus macaques—are endowed with the ability to understand the intentional meaning of others’ behavior by relying on visible behavioral cues. These data do not demonstrate that nonhuman primates entertain metarepresentations of intentions, but rather that they might directly understand others’ behavior as intentional by detecting the intrinsic goal relatedness upon which motor behavior is organized and mapped. These studies, therefore, strongly challenge the traditional dichotomous account of primate social cognition based on a sharp evolutionary discontinuity between behavior readers (nonhuman primates) and mind readers (humans) (Gallese, 2007; Gallese & Umiltà, 2006).

⁴ It also accounts for social identification, as Gallese claims, which is adaptive: “because it grants the capacity to better predict the consequences of the ongoing and future behavior of other members of a given social group. The attribution of the status of “like-me” to other individuals automatically contextualizes their behavior. This, in turn, reduces the variables to be computed, thus optimizing the employment of cognitive resources by reducing the “meaning space” to be mapped.” (Gallese 2010)

information are transmitted within a given human group and through generations; and how intentions and goals are mirrored. This is relevant pre-eminently to MT.

Acquisitive imitation

MT is not a theory of cognition, however, but a fundamental anthropology. In respect of other, competing theories of imitation, MT is the only one which particularly emphasises the acquisitive aspects of imitation, that is, the competition engendered by the imitation of someone else's desire, normally a neighbour or a peer. In 1979 Girard criticized the corpus of work on imitation in the following manner:

If you survey the literature on imitation, you will quickly discover that acquisition [the goal of obtaining an object] and appropriation [the goal of obtaining an object exclusively for oneself] are never included among the modes of behavior that are likely to be imitated. If acquisition and appropriation were included, imitation as a social phenomenon would turn out to be more problematic than it appears, and above all, conflictual (Girard 1979: 9).

If we learn by imitating others, our preferences are then shaped by social conventions, and we eventually compete for the same limited resources, or even for 'metaphysical' benefits like self-image, social prestige or political power (they are 'metaphysical' in the sense that they procure an enhanced sense of being or self-identity as such). How much, then, did the increasing mimetic capacity in humans affect social behaviour and social structuring, beyond the simple fostering of learning capabilities, empathy, or understanding other people's intentions? MT assumes that encephalization and increasing imitative capacity in humans acted also as a disruption of social structuring.

An interesting finding in current primatological studies is the fact that cognitive attention, and the ability to understand others' behaviour as intentional is further enhanced in competitive situations,

rather than in cooperative ones (Hare, Call, Agnetta, & Tomasello, 2000; Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne, & Moll, 2005). This is a field of research that would need further exploration.

An in respect of the problem of competition, one question that arises is this: is aggression channelled and intensified by imitation? According to Girard, intraspecific violence is magnified by human mimetic capacity, by the acute level of reciprocity which antagonism takes among humans. Moreover, RG sees human mimetic capacity as overflowing the constraints set by the inhibitory mechanisms which control the intra-specific aggression observable among animals. If cooperation and altruism are certainly present in the animal realm, hatred, resentment, retaliation are emotional structures found *only* in humans; whereas everything we know in science, in politics and in the arts assures us that these emotions are indeed multipliers of the kind of violence humans are capable of perpetrating on fellow humans. (We do, surely, observe genocide, wanton slaughter and indiscriminate mass-killing in the human realm?)

MT thus moves decisively against a *surreptitious Rousseau-ism* which tints or taints the ideological premises of much recent thinking in evolutionary theory i.e., the assumption that human beings are in general naturally cooperative and ‘good spirited’, and, consequently, that institutions are contractualistic in nature (Girard claims that they are ‘rational’, certainly, in his functional sense, but not that they are forms of social contract).

Elliot Sober and E.O. Wilson’s *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior* would be one recent example among many of the irresistible persuasion of Rousseau-ism.

Cooperation and altruistic behaviour, they tell us, are evident in animals as well in humans, so they are in general *unproblematic from an evolutionary standpoint*: they are only a theoretical concern for evolutionary theorists who need to overcome the

stumbling-block of the dominant paradigm of individual selection, to solve the theoretical conundrum of selfishness and group behaviour. However, Sober and Wilson do aptly bring back the need to think the evolution of culture in terms of “group selection” (or “multilevel selection”): groups that cooperate better may have out-reproduced those which did not. In Girardian terms, groups which were able to find a means to regulate and control internally generated violence and infighting must assuredly have out-reproduced and out-lived those which did not.

Martin Nowak’s work on the mathematical modelling of direct and indirect reciprocity is also assuredly important, although it seems to model humanity as *homo economicus*, who tries to maximise benefit and income through rational behaviour (Nowak 2006). One can certainly apply mathematical models to explain the emergence of altruism, cooperation, empathy, but then we also need – and this is perhaps more urgent and more fruitful in a Darwinian perspective - to understand phenomena such as scapegoating, lynching, human sacrifice, cannibalism, witch-hunting, pogrom, massacre, warfare, genocide and holocaust. To state that these are exceptional accidents in human history is simply to overlook and set aside clear historical evidence to the contrary. Some dialectical conciliation between RG and Novak is no doubt however possible, once the words ‘sacrifice’ and ‘religion’ have been adequately specified, and their sense duly contextualised (the devil, here and elsewhere, is in the unobserved pre-suppositions and imported implications).

In reference to MT theory, one needs to consider how cooperation, altruistic behaviours within a given group, could be affected and disrupted by scarcity, by internal competition for given resources, by envy (i.e. by imitative or mimetic desire), and by the incremental play of such passions, becoming more contagious and more disruptive as the social group becomes larger and larger. We cannot discount ecological elements and systemic interactions in the understanding of human evolution: natural selection is not only produced by the external conditions of a given ecological niche or environment, but also by an internal structuring and ethological conditioning of increasing complexity within social groups. As community size increased over the course of human evolution, greater ethical and/ or disciplinary regulation to achieve group cohesion would have been required. Religion, rituals, moral rules, taboos may have evolved in bands of 100 to 200 people as a means of social control, conflict resolution and group solidarity.

A similar form of reasoning is also the basis of Robin Dunbar's point (1992) that the development of sophisticated cognitive skills and brain size resulted from the pressure of the social group's increased complexity. But larger brain size does not protect human bands and groups from endemic violence, from the disruption of social order caused by constant, mimetically escalating, infighting – either in the primitive human groups of pre-history or in our contemporary societies right now.

On the contrary, larger brains and reinforced regulatory constraints may well go together with more — and more destructive — violence. This is the – somewhat unpalatable or 'shocking' – implication of Girardian theory, which has, accordingly, real difficulties of acceptance, just as Darwin's 'pessimistic' theory also did. On the other hand, it does leave us less disarmed than we - Rousseauistically - tend to be by the *all-time exceptionality, in scale and destructive power*, of the violence generated by century we have ourselves lived through...

Systemic scapegoating

Scapegoating and mob lynching are phenomena that have occurred throughout human history. It is safe to assume that they were also common among hominids and in pre-historical times, the more so since institutional controls were not present.

Mimetism is basic to phenomena of 'emotional contagion' in social groups, not only in respect of the 'viral' transmission of content-based communication, but also regarding paroxysmic collective behaviour, like mass hysteria, movements of panic, lynching, and the like. Evidently, the greater mimetic capacity present in humans ought to increase the occurrence of these phenomena, because of their much greater tendency to copy and emulate each other's actions, above all in situations of crisis, or of decreased rational self-control (what degree of rationality and self-possessed intentionality can we assume in proto-humans?). And on the part of the

single individual, and within groups of a certain size? (Jean-Pierre Dupuy has thoroughly discussed the mimetic dynamics of panic phenomena in *Le panique*, 1991). Girard spoke of these events as a “crisis of undifferentiation”: in which individuals increasingly mirror each other in an automatic and contagious fashion, becoming ever more like one another - ‘non-differentiated’. Moreover, when aggression and violence kick in, within a situation of panic, such crises of undifferentiation develop into the most dangerous events imaginable for proto-social groups, because they could easily, and very likely did and do, end up in a collective and indiscriminate rage of “all against all” – prelude to a frenzied rampage of killing.

MT advances the hypothesis that the most effective form of reconciliation—the failsafe mechanism that was discovered by trial and error to stop this crisis, and save the community from self-destruction—is the sudden convergence of the collective rage towards a random victim, a scapegoat, designated by mimetism itself, i.e., by imitative unanimity forged by a rage-modelling leader, and which, once again like a viral infection, for arbitrary (or rather: “superficial” or “superstitious”) reasons, is adopted by the group. The systemic scapegoating of a randomly elected victim provides a discharge of the accumulation of tension (aggression, reciprocal violence, anger, response to stress and fear) which has been stored into the social group and is set loose in moments of radical crisis. The scapegoat could be defined as an endogeneously emerging fixed point: “In the frenzy of the mimetic violence of the mob, a focal point suddenly appears for whatever reason, in the shape of a culprit who is thought to be the cause of the disorder and the one who brought the crisis into the community. He/she is singled out and unanimously killed by the community. He/she isn’t any guiltier than any other, but the whole community strongly believes he is, because of the mimetic reinforcement of unanimity.” (Girard 2008)

Do we find non-Giradian confirmations of this hypothesis? In their anthropological work *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors and Gossip*, Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew

Strathern, explain with precision how rumors and gossip, virally spreading and reinforced in a snowball effect, are “often crucially involved of overt violence in communal settings”. (Stewart, Strathern 2004). Why are we unsurprised to hear this? Perhaps because we have frequently observed proto-forms of the same phenomenon; by the high priest Caiaphas or seen it spelled out and writ large in recent history – one thinks irresistibly of the recent Channel 4 dramatised documentary on ‘The rise of Hitler’.

The killing of the scapegoat ends the [internal] crisis, since the transference against it is unanimous. Here is the importance of the scapegoat mechanism: it channels the collective violence against one arbitrarily chosen member of the community, and this victim becomes the common enemy of the entire community, *which is reconciled as a result.*” (Girard 2008)

We must however beware of anachronism: this is not yet the form of calculating ‘economic’ rationalization illustrated in the gospels, (“It is better that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish”). We have to recall here that ‘sacrifice’ has any number of derived, disguised and transposed forms, recognisable once the basic ancestral mechanism is squarely understood, and that it too is an evolving practice and institution. No, in its initial, archaic form, it represents a systemic occurrence, and a spontaneous “discovery” of an intuitional kind which came subsequently to be rationalized in symbolic, religious and economic, terms. We are operating here before language, before consciousness, before symbolicity; we are still within the functioning of clusters of instinctual patterns, which produced a sort of cognitive short-circuit. We have to imagine a phenomenon of collective behaviour analogous to a lightning conductor that works without knowing how or why.

We also need to think in terms of “cognitive externalization of causality”. MT posits a lack of self-reflexivity in group behaviour. Under these conditions, is easier – already

for individuals but most especially for groups - and it is more “natural”, as it were, to assume an external cause in the emergence of social disorder. It is thus an almost universally observable, spontaneous attitude on the part of humans to “blame” external agents, forces, events for crisis and problems which are endogenously produced.⁵

Heider (1958) introduced the concept of “perceived locus of causality” (PLOC). From the perspective of the self, forces within the person may be experienced as compelling or heteronomous, and thus would not be appropriately described as having an internal locus of causality, even when environmental pressures are clearly absent. Buss (1978) pointed out many studies of self-perception confuse the issues of the causes and the reasons related to action. Actors, he argued, typically provide reasons rather than causes when explaining their actions.

The mimetic capacity in humans deeply affects the texture of social interactions: their intensity, the mechanism of identification, of transference, along with all sorts of cognitive “slippage” between “self” and “other”. This is the origin and basis of the disjunction between actual events and their cognitive understanding and representation in collective memory (something which eventually helped in producing symbolicity, since the symbolic imagination works between terms that are incoercibly associated, but whose relation is logically obscure and of a metonymic or allusive order).

Girard claims that when we engage in competition, we trigger a mechanism of ‘doubling’: in the play of mimetic rivalry, the competing subjects become increasingly prone to imitate, and hence, to resemble, one another, while producing at the same time, at the level of conscious cognition, compensatory act or judgment of differentiation, i.e., they perceive themselves as being *radically different.*, in the way that their own feelings of hostility suggest they are. There is, in short, a basic condition of cognitive distortion and moral obliquity which is generated by any progressive mimetic mirroring, and in such circumstances, a mechanism for

⁵ The sacrificing animal, proto-exemplar of *homo religiosus*, is also a blame-shifting animal (as the Eden narrative in Genesis very well understands).

preserving a differentiating ‘self-identity’ kicks in. Melvin Konner (Konner 2010) has spoken more generally about the human tendency to dichotomize the social world, which he sees as related to a low tolerance for ambiguity and a cognitive dissonance linked to negative emotional states (Festinger 1957). This accounts well for the representation of one’s competitor(s) as radically *other*, and for the construction of this alien *other* as *evil and dangerous*.

Konner also underscores the point that the social psychology of mimetic rivalry is well-grounded (Konner 2010). Classic studies in social psychology have traced the emergence and consequences of the Us-Them distinction, for instance in the Robbers’ Cave Experiment (Sherif, Harvey et al. 1961).

The potential collapse of social cohesion (for external or internal reasons) was, of course, perceived by the group or the tribe as extremely dangerous. Even more harmful and disruptive, in fact, than the danger represented by predators, because very hard to conceptualize, and for this reason, according to Girard’s reading of myths, often equated with natural catastrophes, such as floods, famine, droughts.

Again, Girard assumes that there was not such a sharp cognitive distinction as we ourselves make between what it was endogenous and what was exogenous, between violence coming from outside (predators, calamities) and from inside the group (infighting, mob phenomena). This is evident also in victimary behaviour in historical times: scapegoaters often picture and treat their scapegoat victims, as an external, polluting agents (thus: Jews, witches, gypsies, homosexuals, foreigners...).

However — and here we have the final twist of Girard’s theory —, because of this lack of causal understanding, the very same act of killing of a victim is perceived (as in fact it is) as beneficial; the killing of a scapegoat produces a strong, unexplained and mysterious, power of reconciliation and social bonding, based on purely ethological reasons (see below), which the proto-community or group cannot but perceive as an external positive “force”, as a source of “metaphysical” nourishment, or medicine, or healing. The ritualistic structuring of this form of social “pharmacology” is the

beginning of religion and of culture (through sacrifice). The victim in particular is the focal point through which the group “negotiates” the “meaning” of the event: the scapegoat is the culprit who brought the disorder into the community, but he/she is also the one who liberates the community from the disorder in which it plunged. This is the radical ambivalence that we find in archaic deities (which represent principles of *both* good and evil), or in the concept of *pharmakos* (*both* poison and medicine), or in the etymology of “sacred” (both holy and accursed), the fact that words for both “oath” and “curse” are regularly words of binding.

Deities, spirits, gods are nothing but the transfiguration of the “metaphysical” power which emanated from sacrificial victims in their killing, producing the sudden abatement of collective rage and a new reconciliation of the community. In this moment, there is, in Girard’s words, a collective “divinising transference” which credits the god or gods with the potent and obscurely ‘transcendent’ effects experienced.

In the frenzy of collective rage and scapegoating fury, the victim may be torn apart, dismembered, eaten up. The Dionysiac rites in ancient Greece offer a paradigm case: in the *diasparagmos*, the tearing apart of a live animal was celebrated as a solemn rite. A goat or other sacrificial victim was ceremonially hunted down, pulled limb from limb, and eaten raw by the communicants. The slain animal was regarded as a symbol of incarnation of the god, who had in myth likewise been dismembered and eaten—and afterwards resurrected. Sacrificial and ritualistic cannibalism would appear to stem from these origins.

The ethology of scapegoating: from animal to human

If the human and the animal do share some biologically grounded features, these must in all probability have structured human behaviour for a while (being still visible

in historical time) before cultural and institutional means came to overlay or replace them.

As already advanced in *Evolution and Conversion*, a possible approach to the ethology of scapegoating is to look at some classic texts and current research in relation to animal aggression.

a) Diverted aggression and the social bond

Konrad Lorenz in *On Aggression* describes, for instance, the behaviour of geese. When two geese approach each other, showing signs of hostility, most of the time the common aggression is redirected and discharged against a third object. (Lorenz: 165-219) The same structure of behaviour is visible in courtship. The motor sequence in courtship resembles quite closely the sequence we see when two geese charge each other in duel. This mechanism of redirection of aggressiveness has been “crystallized” by evolution in an instinctual pattern which is capable of creating bond: mainly between one male and one female (but there are also cases of homosexuality engendered by this very mechanism). In the case of geese, the couple is permanent or semi-permanent, and it is created through a kind of proto-scapegoating mechanism, even if it is not yet proper to call it scapegoating, since the ‘victim’ is often an inanimate object. Very likely, the redirection of the inner aggression of a specific group against an external element (or an internal element perceived as external, which is expelled) creates a strong cohesion within the group itself.

Lorenz, interestingly, refers likewise to human laughter as a form of redirected aggression: when a group of people laugh at somebody, this is a form of – relatively harmless – scapegoating; and one immediately perceives a form of empathetic chain, reinforcing the bond between members of the group. Or it may be enough to simply look at how bonding is structured in children and how victimization and scapegoating

form an extremely common, very purpose-handly means of effecting affiliation or bonding (i.e. of reinforcing group identity). The epidemiology of this behavioural pattern would probably show an increased probability of occurrence when young males are involved. The link between testosterone levels and aggression, although a point of contention, is a widespread and probably justified assumption.

The link between (redirected) aggression and bonding is also evident, curiously and challengingly, in mating. In many different mammalian species, sexual encounters look like fights, sometimes accompanied by thrashing about, loud noises, and (in cats) mock biting, scratching, and caterwauling, followed by a final act of pushing away ('rejection') that looks distinctly unfriendly. Among humans, too, aggression is sometimes diverted into sexual behaviour. This is a well-known pattern in certain dysfunctional (abnormal or poorly functioning) relationships. Fighting or arguments are part of a semi-ritual pattern that ends in "kissing and making up."

Inversely: studies of love and desire have shown that the bonding effects of romantic eros in human beings may also undergo a kind of *reversal of polarity* conducting, not to the harmonious unity and happiness of the couple, but instead to disunity, feuding and sado-masochistic persecution – 'mate and fall out' (Gifford, 2007). As most people will acknowledge from experience or observation, erotic love can become like, and, alas, often regresses to, fighting... The same evolutionary point is being made in this case and in the previously cited animal case.

Communal convergence, with focussing of aggression on the scapegoat, is not neutral, therefore, in its psychological and social effects. Above all, we have suggested, it activates instinctual mechanisms of social bonding. It has been assumed that bonding and group identification have been produced purely and simply by hunting, warfare, and other practical tasks conducive to various forms of 'clubbability'. But there is clubbability of the sociable type; and then there is a darker,

club-wielding, victim-making form of ‘clubbability’. And scapegoat lynching, with its ritual and symbolic prolongations and its religious emotions is really the strongest candidate for the status of prime vector of group identity, particularly in contexts of social disorder or threat. The practical-task type of bonding is outward looking; the symbolic and exorcising type is inward-referring. This latter form makes cognitive perception more tricky and oblique; and it destabilizes the common perception that danger, harm, and extreme peril come from outside the social group. On the other hand, we know perfectly well from wars between modern nation states that it is indeed the power of symbolic, quasi-religious group identifications – the mystique of the cause, patriotism and the flag – that sent young men, singing, clubbably, to the trenches...

b) The ‘stumbling block’ of animal nature: guilt and the fear of death

The intuitive strategy of scapegoat lynching, involving a member of the group, comes up against, a basic ethological obstacle or limit which causes the strategy to declare a deficit; something unresolvable for as long as *the animal remains simply an animal, with merely animal resources.*

Lorenz sees the point when he writes: “some of the most intelligent and social birds and mammals react in a highly dramatic way to the sudden death of a member of their species. It is safe to assume that the first ‘Cain’, after having struck down a fellow member of his horde with a pebble tool, was deeply concerned about the consequences of his action. [...] we are safe in assuming that the first killer fully realized the enormity of his deed.” (Lorenz 1966: 249-50)

One may assume that this enormity produced a conflation of instinctual patterns, in which the basic proto-awareness of the killing of a co-specific, and the impulse to dichotomize social reality into self and other, the sudden abatement of rage,

reinforced by an instinctual bond experienced by the scapegoaters, all converge to produce a cognitive *short-circuit* and an unresolved anxiety that required to be reprised, elaborated, exorcised and healed, on a higher plane of representation and cultural invention. This sublimation maketh man...

c) Ritualization

Locomotion along relatively fixed paths displaying specific motor rituals **is** ingrained in the behavior of normal animals in the wild. Rituals in animals are actions designed to improve communication during encounters that could bring conflict: hierarchy, mating, feeding, and territory ('turf'). Lorenz argues that breaking habits frustrates animals as well as humans: for instance, children who tenaciously cling to every detail and become quite desperate if a story-teller diverges in the very least from the text of a familiar fairy-tale (Lorenz, 1966).

The link between animal behavior and abnormally repetitive performance was made apparent by Lorenz (Lorenz, 1966: 160). Motor rituals in the context of animals in the wild, in captivity, in a model of obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), in normal humans, and in OCD patients, share an analogous form. Surveys on OCD indicate that an ethological approach to the study of compulsive rituals may reveal the structure (form) of such behavior (Reed, 1985). Indeed, studies of human compulsions frequently describe the abundant rate of performance of behavioral patterns using terms borrowed from ethology, such as 'displacement activity' and 'stereotypy' (Insel, 1988), or 'ritualized behavior' (Rapoport, 1990).

This point was taken by the anthropologist Alan Fiske in relation to religious rituals: comparing hundreds of ritual sequences with clinical descriptions of OCD cases, Fiske

showed that the same themes recur over and over again in both domains (Fiske 1985: 211-22, Boyer 2001).⁶

These behavioural structures are more easily activated or magnified when the community is under condition of severe stress, as for instance in moment of crisis, when some action must be taken to cope with the crisis (Lazarus 1966, Cullen *et al.* 1984).

According to Girard, coping with a new mimetic crisis (with its contagion of danger, fear, panic), might well activate mechanisms of repetition of acts and gestures already experienced by the group, and which have, in analogous circumstances, resolved a critical event of the same type. Religious sacrificial rituals in fact constantly stage a form of collective psychodrama, which mimics the original “crisis of undifferentiation” (with ritualized dance, noise, and all manner of suddenly permitted transgressions of taboo). This staged replay of anarchy and gathering mimetic crisis ends with some sort of resolution: normally, the sacrifice of a surrogate victim. This is a first building block of the sacrificial ritual constitutive of archaic religion.

RG in fact shows that the extraordinary relaxation of, or ‘holiday’ from, prohibitions within the first phase of the sacrificial ritual, may well be the origin of what universal folk practice and memory call ‘carnival’.

Luc-Laurent Salvador presents this link between imitation and repetition as a form of psychological and cognitive reinforcement through the idea of “*cycle assimilateur.*” (Salvador 1996: 23-32) Rituals act as a mechanism of pedagogical reinforcement.

⁶ “Fiske’s list of common themes in rituals could be used as a clinical description of the common obsessions in these patients. In both situations, people are concerned with purity and pollution; pollution can be averted by performing particular actions; (...) the actions consist in repetitive gestures; there is a sense that great dangers lie in not performing these routines, or deviating from the usual script; finally, there is often no obvious connection between the actions performed and their usual significance.” (Boyer, 2001: 273).

“Ritual in this way becomes like a form of schooling because it repeats the same scapegoat murder over and over, albeit using substitute victims. And since ritual is the resolution of a crisis, ritual always intervenes at points of crisis; it will always be there at the same point of the mimetic crisis. Therefore, ritual will turn into the institution that regulates any sort of crisis, like the crisis of adolescence and the rites of passage, like the crisis of death, which generates funeral rituals, like the crisis of disease, which generates ritual medicine. Whether the crisis is real or imaginary makes very little difference, because an imaginary crisis may cause a real catastrophe.” (Girard 2008). We begin, in short, to see here how and why the ritualised and staged ‘replay’ of the founding mimetic crisis might have developed.

The evolution of culture: symbolicity comes before language

Religion, culture, and symbolicity do not develop all of a sudden, but rather through the slow process of the ritualization of sacrifice. Girard claims that some evolutionists tend to minimize symbolicity, by trying to derive it from purely anatomical or biological considerations. The emergence of language is explained in such theories purely in function of the evolution of the brain, and they tend to display a functionalist approach in accounting for its emergence: the need for rapid and more effective communication in hunting is invoked, for instance; whereas the complexity of language and the emergence of symbolicity are, in reality, matters that go well beyond the reach of this explanation. Hominids such as Neanderthal no doubt hunted quite effectively without any complex symbolic system.

In *Evolution and Conversion*, Girard, Antonello and De Castro Rocha make reference to Merlin Donald’s perspectives in *The Evolution of Modern Mind*:

“The myth is the prototypal and fundamental, integrative mind-tool. It tries to integrate a variety of events in a temporal and causal framework. [...] The pre-

eminence of myth in early human society is testimony to the fact that humans were using language for a totally new kind of integrative thought. Therefore, the possibility must be entertained that the primary human adaptation wasn't language *qua* language, but rather integrative, initially mythical, thought. Modern humans developed language in response to pressure to improve their conceptual apparatus, not vice versa. (...) The primary objects of language and speech are thematic; their most salient achievements are discourse and symbolic thought. Words and sentences, lexicons and grammars, would have become necessary evils, tools that had to be invented to achieve this higher representational goal. In this view, language would have represented not an end in itself, but an adaptation that met specific cognitive and cultural needs, that is, ultimately for the formalization and unification of thought and knowledge. It wasn't so much a communication system as an integral by-product of a new, much more powerful method of thinking. Above all, language was a public, collective invention. Thus, the emergence of a new peripheral adaptation such as the modern vocal apparatus must have been contingent upon a corresponding change on the level of thought skills, a fundamental change that enabled, and then accelerated, linguistic invention." (Donald, 215-16).

MT, in its theory of ritualised sacrifice, provides the basis on which the emergence and development of human ritual, human symbolicity and human language actually occurred, consistent with this insightful understanding of the priority conditions and structural relatedness of these things.

In the part devoted to language in *The Symbolic Species*, Terrence Deacon very much emphasizes the opposition between indexation and symbolicity, and he constantly uses the word "counterintuitive." (Deacon 1997: 340-41) Symbolicity is counterintuitive from the viewpoint of indexation, since it dissolves the bond between the sign and the object.

According to Girard:

...in order to have a capacity for symbolisation you must have an origin and referent for the chain of meaning; and, to me, that is the scapegoat murder. In this way, one can explain how the increase in symbolic capacity is tied to ritual. This demands what philosophers used to call a 'totality', so those things within the totality can refer to each other, and therefore acquire meaning through indexation and through analogical, metonymical and metaphorical connections between elements of the totality. (Girard 2008)

The victim is the focal point of the whole scapegoating event and of the construction of meaning subsequently built around it. In an effort to prevent frequent and uncontrollable episodes of mimetic violence, acts of controlled, mediated and ritualised violence were periodically enacted: a form of a 'staged' representation or replay that involved the killing of a surrogate victim. This victim is no longer presumed responsible for the crisis, but he /she is both a *real* new victim that has to be killed, and a *symbol* of the proto-event. And this is *the first symbolic sign* ever invented: it is the first moment in which something *stands for something else* – here is the ur-symbol.

The victim may become a totemic meal, a protective token, a source of symbolic power. In his ethnographical work on cannibalism Edward Volhard reports what Carl Vogt wrote at the end of the 19th century: "I will in fact prove through examples that relatively highly advanced civilizations may be tainted by cannibalism; one can even go further and factually demonstrate that tribes devoted to cannibalism and to human sacrifices are in general more advanced in agriculture, industry, arts, legislation etc. than the neighbouring tribes, who reject these horrors." (Vogt 1873: 298) Girard comments: "This confirms how important is ritual for the symbolic development of the human species. The ritualistic and symbolic complexity that needs to be developed in order to handle cannibalistic practice was such that inevitably it produced cognitive, technical, artistic spin off. Of course, it is not cannibalism in itself which favours knowledge: it is not the type of victim selected to be sacrificed, it is the sacrificial mechanism and its rituals which engenders knowledge." (Girard 2008)

Counter-intuitive occurrences

In the evolution of culture, there are various events and cultural inventions that strike us as counter-intuitive from the standpoint of a rationalistic or functionalist explanatory approach.

a) *Exchange and gift giving*

“One cannot explain taboos, prohibition and the complexity of symbolic exchange systems simply via biological explanations of the emergence of unselfish behaviour. Exchange is at the centre of this system. The gift is the opposite of grabbing everything for oneself, which is what the dominant animal does. The process of getting not only the dominating animal, but the *whole* culture to give up that grabbing attitude and give everything to the other in order to receive from the other – this is totally counterintuitive. There must be that upheaval which forced the change in behaviour. This upheaval is absolutely indispensable. The only thing that can produce such a relational structure is *fear*, fear of death. If people are threatened, they withdraw from specific acts; otherwise chaotic appropriation will dominate and violence will always increase. Prohibition is the first condition for social ties and the first cultural sign as well. Fear is essentially fear of mimetic violence; prohibition is protection from mimetic escalation.” (Girard 2008)

In its etymology, the word “taboo” means both “under prohibition”, “not allowed”, or “forbidden”, but also “sacred”, “holy”. Malinowski, for instance, in *The Argonauts of the West Pacific*, illustrates this ambiguity when he speaks about objects which the natives keep exchanging and which never stay in the same place. Everybody in turn must possess them, because they are so *sacred* and so precious that they must shift from hand to hand, and this is part of a complex ritual, which keeps the Trobriand islands in touch with each other, without conflict. (Malinowski 1922: 81ff)

RG, and perhaps only he with full conviction, gives us to understand genetically just how this comes to be so. The gift, like all practices and institutions developing the logic of ritual sacrifice, belongs to the field of powerfully conflicting persuasions which sacrifice first addresses in its attempt to reverse the forces of rivalrous and desire-driven rage and refashion them into a power of control that protects from the contagion of violence and death, thus making social life possible. The power of the Girardian 'mimetic' hypothesis is here and always that - just like Darwin - an explanation is advanced that makes a clean sweep of the phenomena to be explained and offers a unitary framework capable, with care and great patience, of integrating all of them most impressively.

b) The Domestication of animals

Domestication of animals is normally accounted for in functionalistic and utilitarian terms. Cultural materialists consider the proto-humans as rational agents, who could envisage the spectacular outcome of seizing, capturing, taming, caging, dangerous animals like bulls, wolves, bears and wildcats for economic reasons (are wildcats or wolves particularly useful for a primitive group?). In fact, at first domestication must have been quite *un-economical*: the size of domesticated animals decreases in respect wild species; they suffer all sort of stress-related diseases due to captivity; captive animals fail to reproduce effectively; the amount of germs and viruses that domesticated wild animals introduce into the human community is extremely high, etc.

According to Girard, the domestication of animals is the accidental by-product of ritualized, sacrificial practices. It is a 'secular' outcome of religious rituals. Animals were introduced within the human community first of all in order to sacrifice them, substituting humans with animal victims (this would explain so-called

‘teriomorphism’ in myths). In this process, these animals were treated just like human beings, i.e., they were first of all symbolically and socially ‘tamed’, to make them part of the group.

Corroborating evidence:

- Ainu tribes in northern Japan tried to do the same with Polar bears, failing in their attempt; there can be no thought that they wanted a convenient and self-preserving source of fresh food...
- In historical times we haven’t had any significant new domestication of wild animals;
- There were areas in the world that didn’t have domesticated animals, like pre-Colombian Mexico, where, on the other hand, there were massive ritual killings of human beings, because the process of substituting animals for human victims in ritual sacrifices had not occurred. (Carrasco 1999).

RG’s theory may at first seem fantastic, over-expensive, frankly incredible here. But the longer we consider it, the more we may be prepared to come to terms with the counter-intuitive fact that the longest way round, hermeneutically speaking, can actually be the shortest way home – and abandon Occam to his razor (does Darwin’s account of the process of evolution remotely encourage or vindicate Occam?).

c) Invention of agriculture

The Neolithic Revolution was the first agricultural revolution—the transition from hunting and gathering communities and bands, to agriculture and settlement (settlement is currently being questioned). Archaeological data indicate that various forms of domestication of plants and animals arose independently in at least 7-8 separate locations worldwide, with the earliest known developments taking place in the Middle East around 10,000 BCE or earlier.

“From a scientific standpoint there is no generally accepted model accounting for the origin of agriculture, above all in the consideration that agriculture was anti-economic. Agriculture, far from being a natural and upward step, in fact led commonly to a lower quality of life. Hunter-gatherers typically do less work for the same amount of food, are healthier, and are less prone to famine than primitive farmers: why was this behaviour (agriculture) reinforced (and hence selected for) if it was not offering adaptational rewards surpassing those accruing to hunter-gathering or foraging economies?” (Wadley, Martin 1993: 96; also Lee, De Vore 1968, Cohen 1989). Nutritional standards of Neolithic populations were generally inferior to those of hunter gatherers, and life expectancy may in fact have been shorter, in part due to diseases. Average height, for example, went down from 5' 10" for men and 5' 6" for women to 5' 3" and 5' 1", respectively; and it took until the twentieth century CE for average human height to come back to the pre-Neolithic Revolution levels...

The British archeologist Ian Hodder, who directs the excavations at Çatalhöyük (Turkey), agrees that domestication developed for religious reasons: the earliest settled communities, and the Neolithic revolution they represent, actually preceded the development of agriculture. Hodder believes that the Neolithic revolution was the result of a revolutionary change in the human psychology, a “revolution of symbols” which led to new beliefs about the world and shared community rituals. (Hodder 1990)

According to Girard: “The hunter-gatherers started to settle permanently because of the increasing importance of ritual sites and the complexity of the rituals of which they were part, and which in turn produced, the domestication of animals and the discovery of agriculture. Climate changes or particular soil conditions were also important elements in this later development, but the discovery was very likely to have been made around the sacred burial sites in which any symbolic activity of the

primitive community was carried out (such as burying seeds along with human beings, for instance).” (Girard 2008)

Following Frazer’s anthropological study, Girard noticed that the vocabulary and the ritualistic practices associated with proto-agriculture, constantly relate to sacrificial rituals.

Roberto Calasso, for his part, remembers that “*Quechcotona*, in Nahuatl, means both ‘to cut off someone’s head’ and ‘to pick an ear of grain with one’s hand’.” (Calasso: 1985: 135).

Michel Serres points out that the Indo-European word for “to plant”, i.e., *pak*—from which words like *paysage*, *pays*, *pagan*, *paysan*, *stem*—refers to the tomb as the first sign, as the first human symbolic inscription on the natural landscape.

In *Myth and Reality*, Mircea Eliade promotes the same understanding by reading the myth of the girl Hainuwele, recorded by A.E Jensen in Ceram, one of the islands of the New Guinea Archipelago: “The next morning, seeing that Hainuwele did not come home, Ameta divined that she had been murdered. He found the body, disinterred it, and cut it into pieces, which he buried in various places, except the arms. The buried pieces gave birth to plants previously unknown, especially to tubers, which since then are the chief food of human beings.” (Eliade 1963: 104).

“Only if we understand the powerful causal link between ritual and nature, can we grasp the origins of practices like agriculture. Every natural element acquires meaning only if it is experienced within the space of ritual. We are not dealing with a “primitive” or “magical” mentality in cases like these: here is a form of ritual thinking in action, in which the effectiveness of ritual and religion is *actual*, it produces *real* effects. There you see how religion nurses human culture.” (Girard 2008)

Conclusion

We may perhaps leave the provisional conclusion on this sub-theme, and on RG’s mimetic account of the origins of culture and of man – to the author of the theory:

“In cases like this, I think the symbolic relation with the scapegoat phenomenon and with ritual is just marvellously enlightening. It is a machine for experimentation and

knowledge. Moreover, events which show contradictory patterns of development, or seem counterintuitive to our modern mind, start making perfect sense if one adopts the mimetic mechanism as explanatory model.” (Girard 2008)

And again we ask: how far will this model take us in rethinking the interface between the biological and the cultural, and the passage from animal and human? Our impression: it has only just started.