

Metaphysical Desire in Girard and Plato

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At its birth, in other words at the very source of the subjectivity, one always finds a victorious Other. It is true that the source of the “transfiguration” is within us, but the spring gushes forth only when the mediator strikes the rock with his magic wand.¹

INTRODUCTION: GIRARD’S CRITIQUE OF PLATO

Rene Girard has an ambivalent relationship to Plato. His references to Plato are scattered, not fully developed and only rarely cite the Platonic texts. A few representative snippets of Girard’s Platonic critique should convey the flavor:

“The determination to eliminate all violence, by its very explicitness, becomes a form of censorship, a deliberate mutilation of the mythological text.”²

“Plato, like all Puritans, misses the goal, which is to reveal the mechanism of the victim and the demystification of the representations of persecution.”³

“If Plato is unique in the history of philosophy because of his fear of mimesis, he is for the same reason closer than anyone to what is essential, closer than primitive religion itself. Yet Plato is also deceived by mimesis because he cannot

¹ Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, p. 33.

² Girard, *Scapegoat*, p. 77.

³ Girard, *Scapegoat*, p. 81.

succeed in understanding his fear, he never uncovers its empirical reason for being. Plato never relates conflict to acquisitive mimesis, that is, with the object that the two mimetic rivals attempt to wrest from one another because they designate it as desirable to one another.”⁴

“Where Plato fails is ... right at the heart of the matter -- the origin of mimetic rivalry in acquisitive mimesis. Our point of departure is the object; we cannot stress this enough even though no one understands it, apparently. Yet, it must be understood in order to make clear that we are not philosophizing.”⁵

Girard’s critique of Plato, to the extent one can be assembled from such comments, has both a positive and negative component. On the one hand, he credits Plato with identifying the mimetic problematic that is at the heart of human violence. In fact, Plato seems to be the first theorist of the mimetic phenomenon and perhaps the greatest before Girard himself. On the other hand, he accuses Plato of being “terrified” of his mimetic discovery, of attempting to conceal the traces of collective violence at the heart of human culture by explicitly censoring revelatory myths⁶ and exiling the poets.

I would argue that the “terror” on display must be understood within a larger narrative arc, as one half of a full dialectical pairing, not as political prescription. Desire for Plato is a source of both terrifying madness and the highest aspirations of the human spirit, of both discord and concord, of both fecundity and death. There is a false interpretation of a rationalist Plato who, so dead set on purging the soul of bad desire, severs the body from the head (as in Martha Nussbaum’s essay on Alcibiades’ role in the *Symposium*⁷;

⁴ Girard, *Things Hidden*, p. 15.

⁵ Girard, *Things Hidden*, p. 15-16.

⁶ See Girard, *Scapegoat*, p. 76, where Girard quotes *Republic* 378 a-b.

⁷ I have in mind her essay “The Speech of Alcibiades: a Reading of the Symposium”, Chapter 6 of *The Fragility of Goodness*, Cambridge University Press, 1986.

perhaps also in Girard's characterization of Plato as a "puritan"). But consider: in the *Republic*, the desire-less (indeed, dead) Cephalos is ushered off the stage as soon as possible. In the *Phaedrus*, the non-lover, as revealed in the speech of Lysias, is treated by Socrates as thoroughly disreputable. And Plato himself penned the speech of Alcibiades. Plato's project is to redeem desire, not eliminate it.

We must be very careful therefore in attributing views to Plato from isolated assertions in his dialogues. It is an ironic fact that Plato violates almost every one of the *Republic's* strictures against mimesis in the composition of the dialogues themselves, most notably the presentation of error and falsity in the imitative mode. It is either the case that Plato is a hypocrite, as those who cast Plato as a totalitarian censor would be forced to maintain, or the irony itself is part of the teaching. His critique of mimesis is not primarily that it leads to violence, although Plato clearly knows that it does, but that its transmission of desirability works unconsciously and therefore uncritically. Modes of valuation can pass into the psyche through the medium of mimetic contagion, catching a person unaware, even if the message intended is something antithetical to the acquired mode.

If Plato is terrified of anything, it is this: that I should desire something in matters of grave importance that is not in the end desirable. Plato's educational strategy, as described in the central books of the *Republic*, is to effect a turn in the subject of desire,

a *periagoge*,⁸ such that the shadow fruit of mimetic desire is not eaten uncritically, not indulged in only to set one off on a frenzied quest for fleeting satisfaction in a theater of social conflict, but rather queried to find out what is really desirable as such, in other words, what is good. The call for censorship is really a summons to heightened criticality toward mimetic influence and a call for cultivated faculties of discrimination between real and apparent goods. The mimetic theory itself is a tool for just such a critical stance towards our own desire.

One odd criticism of Girard is that Plato failed to grasp the role of acquisitive mimesis in generating rivalry and disregards the object at the heart of mimetic tension. In fact, it is precisely Plato's sensitive attention to the objects of desire and their mimetic origins that makes him a worthy contributor to the mimetic theory, as I hope to show in what follows.

METAPHYSICAL DESIRE

Both Girard and Plato account in their respective fashions for the origin of desire. In Plato's mythologically playful account in the *Symposium*, desire (*Eros*) is the child of lack (*Penia*) and plentitude (*Poros*)⁹. For Girard desire is born from a mimetic model who awakens the imitator to the desirability of the object as well as his own want of it.

⁸ "Then education is the craft concerned with doing this very thing, this turning around (*periagoge*), and with how the soul can most easily and effectively be made to do it. It isn't the craft of putting sight into the soul. Education takes for granted that sight is there but that it isn't turned the right way or looking where it ought to look, and it tries to redirect it appropriately." (Plato, *Republic*, p. 190)

⁹ Plato, *Symposium*, p. 48.

But since each mediates desire of the other for the same object, an ever intensifying conflict ensues:

“As our mediators prevent us from possessing the object that they designate to us, we prize the designated objects more and more, but this is true only in a first phase; when the rivalry further intensifies, the object recedes into the background and the mediator looms larger and larger.” (*Theater of Envy*, p 42.)

Metaphysical desire issues when the imitator attributes possession to the model, which he perceives as a fullness of being, and lack in himself, a lack that one attributes not only to non-possession of the object but, more importantly, to his lack of being as such. As Girard quips, “Being is more important than having.” (*Theater of Envy*, p. 42) The model/rival occasions both desire for the object and the burden of this perceived lack of being. As Girard puts it: “The object is only a means of reaching the mediator. The desire is aimed at the mediator’s being.” The metaphysical nature of the desire, its objective in the being of another, remains largely veiled to the desirer whereas the objects that constitute the focus of metaphysical desire are of course many, varied and obvious:

“By invoking the notion of metaphysical desire, I am not in any way giving in to metaphysics. To understand this notion, we have only to look at the kinship between the mimetic structures we have discussed and the part played by notions such as honour or prestige in certain types of rivalry that are regulated by society: duels, sporting competitions, etc. These notions are in fact created by the rivalry; they have no tangible reality whatsoever. Yet the very fact that there is a rivalry involving them makes them appear to be more real than any object.” (Girard, *Things Hidden*, p. 296-7)

To this list of honor, trophies, and prestige, we can also add fame, success, popularity and every other manifestation of social interest. We can thus call such phenomena “metaphysical objects”.

“The value of an object grows in proportion to the resistance met with in acquiring it. And the value of the model grows as the object’s value grows. Even if the model has no particular prestige at the outset, even if all that ‘prestige’ implies -- *praestigia*, spells and phantasmagoria -- is quite unknown to the subject, the very rivalry will be quite enough to bring prestige into being.” (Girard, *Things Hidden*, p. 295)

Since the only substance of such objects is a resistance born of mimetic rivalry, it can only be acquired at the expense of the other’s frustration. Metaphysical objects of this kind are thus essentially scarce; they cannot be shared without diminishment. They require a parasitic relationship to others since I can only add to my “substance” at the expense of the other. And if the rivalry drops away, the being of the object drops away as well, producing a sense of profound disappointment:

The disappointment is entirely metaphysical. The subject discovers that possession of the object has not changed his being -- the expected metamorphosis has not taken place. The greater the apparent “virtue” of the object the more terrible is the disappointment, thus disappointment deepens as the mediator draws closer to the hero. (Girard, *Deceit*, p. 88)¹⁰

Successful satisfaction is inevitably bound up with threat of removal -- as in Plato’s brilliant examination of the tyrants soul, forced always to be on guard against others attracted by his mimetically attractive position, making a prison for himself of his own

¹⁰ Per Girard: “The disappointment does not prove the absurdity of *all* metaphysical desires but only that of this particular desire which has just led to disillusionment. The hero realizes that he was mistaken. the object never did have the power of “initiation” which he had attributed to it. But this power he confers elsewhere, on a second object, on a new desire. The hero goes through his existence, from desire to desire, as one crosses a stream, jumping from one slippery stone to another.” (Girard, *Deceit*, p. 89)

desire.¹¹ To pursue such a metaphysical object is thus to court frustration, anxiety and disappointment. It is to desire what is not in fact desirable, what is not, in truth, good.

¹¹ "In truth, then, and whatever some people may think, a real tyrant is really a slave, compelled to engage in the worst kind of fawning, slavery, and pandering to the worst kind of people. He's so far from satisfying his desires in a any way that it is clear -- if one happens to know that one must study his whole soul -- that he's in the greatest need of most things and truly poor. And, if indeed his state is like that of the city he rules, then he's full of fear, convulsions, and pains throughout his life. And it is like it, isn't it? -- Of course it is.

And we'll also attribute to the man what we mentioned before, namely, that he is inevitably envious, untrustworthy, unjust, friendless, impious, host and nurse to very kind of vice, and that his ruling makes him even more so. And because of all these, he is extremely unfortunate and goes on to make those near him like himself. " (Plato, *Republic*, p. 250)

THE SHARABLE & NON-SHARABLE

In the mimetic theory, it is not the case that all mimetic desire leads to conflict. Desire is always subject to mediation and Girard distinguishes two modes of mediation: external and internal. In *external mediation*, the model stands outside the field of play of the imitator; in such cases there can be imitation but not the mutually amplified rivalry that leads to violence and scapegoating. In *internal mediation* however the model/imitators become antagonists. In Girard's exposition, this difference between mediators provides a first litmus test of violent potential. But Girard's dichotomy is limited to types of mediation and another dichotomy is possible, one that distinguishes between types of metaphysical objects: *those that are essentially sharable and those that are inherently not so.*

The metaphysical objects that plague the characters studied in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* and many in Plato's dialogues are of the non-shareable kind. Prestige, for example, is a metaphysical good that is inherently *non-shareable*, a good that requires another's exclusion to maintain itself, a good that will always be in scarce supply. It is thus loaded with violent, even sacrificial, potential. If one performs any activity motivated by a concern of prestige, one is absorbed in a conflictual situation, whether the conflict is recognized or not.

Consider on the other hand a *sharable* good, learning say. Such a good is metaphysical in the Girardian sense in that it is a product of mimetic manufacture. It does not come about without mediation. But I can share this love of learning without diminishing one wit

what I am or what I have. On the contrary, the spirits are enforced by the presence of my mimetic other so that far from being an obstacle, the other is a positive aid to the object of my longing.

One can perform a single activity (e.g. teaching) from either of these two motives and while the activity may be the same, the effect can be radically different. We all have certainly experienced circumstances (in the university say) where one or the other type of metaphysical object is regnant; the difference between the two situations is palpable. In the dialogues, the two poles are represented by the sophist who peddles the non-sharable good of prestige and the philosopher who opens others, like the young Phaedrus, the possibility of shared quest for a sharable good. In the world of the sharable, envy has no part, or as Plato puts it, “Envy stands outside of the divine dance.” *Phaedrus*, 28

The difference is also expressed in Plato as a difference between *eristic* and *dialectic*, between competitive disputation and a common search for truth.¹² And the truth at issue in a Platonic search (*zetesis*) is one that promises to be held in common by each of the parties. The common (*xynon*) is an important technical term in Plato (and his predecessors like Heraclitus), distinguished always from the private, from the idiosyncratic conceptions of the sleeper. It was Girard’s great stroke of genius to notice

¹² “Ah! Glaucon, great is the power of the craft of disputation.

-- Why is that?

Because many fall into it against their wills. They think they are having not a quarrel but a conversation, because they are unable to examine what has been said by dividing it up according to forms. Hence, they pursue mere verbal contradictions of what has been said and have a quarrel rather than a conversation.” (Plato, *Republic*, p. 128)

that it is a similarity of desires, rather than a difference between them, that generates conflict. But Plato's notion of the *xynon*, or common, represents a higher degree of similarity. For "mine" is a relative notion, like "now" or "here", which even in the same in extension, is different in intension. But really, there is a difference between the two desires although they share a common object, a difference of perspective. Heraclitus wrote that "the *logos* is common but the many live as if they had a private understanding."¹³ As Eric Voegelin puts it in interpreting this statement:

Heraclitus had distinguished between the men who live in the one and common world (*koinos kosmos*) of the *logos* which is the common bond of humanity (*homologia*) and the men who live in the several private worlds (*idios kosmos*) of their passion and imagination...¹⁴

These "private worlds" are created and sustained by *doxa*, which is usually translated as "opinion" in the dialogues¹⁵ but which has an original meaning closer to "hearsay" or "reputation", translations that reveal more clearly the importance of mediation in the Girardian sense. *Doxa* is a necessary component of human understanding, but Plato is at pains to show that it at best occupies a middle position, a *metaxy*, between knowledge and ignorance, between the answer proper and the question itself, between

¹³ Quoted from memory. *Logos* here should probably be understood not as a "word" but as "ratio", as that which survives differences in perspective.

¹⁴ Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, p. 98.

¹⁵ *Doxa* is translated as "glory" in the New Testament.

being and non-being.¹⁶ *Doxa* at worst is a substitute for knowledge, a substitute that forestalls the quest, a substitute for being whose lack plagues me. The basic Socratic strategy is to reassert this lack of being against a presumptuous *doxa* that has driven it out. *Dialectic* is a therapy for the disease of *doxa*. Socrates champions the *aporetic* over hollow misapprehensions of metaphysical plenitude (a condition that one could dub *psychoporia*).

Please note that the *doxa* at issue need not be propositional; mimetic desire is *doxa* in the Platonic sense, in that can it either inspire a question of value or merely provide a substitute answer that forestalls the question concerning what is truly valuable. In this light one can best understand Plato's dispute with a pedagogy that is blind to the

¹⁶ "Then opinion is neither ignorance nor knowledge?"

-- So it seems.

Then does it go beyond either of these? Is it clearer than knowledge or darker than ignorance?

-- No, neither.

Is opinion, then, darker than knowledge but clearer than ignorance?

-- It is.

Then it lies between them?

-- Yes.

So opinion is intermediate between those two?

-- Absolutely.

Now, we said that, if something could be shown, as it were, to be and not to be at the same time, it would be intermediate between what purely is and what in every way is not, and that neither knowledge nor ignorance would be set over it, but something intermediate between ignorance and knowledge?

-- Correct.

And now the thing we call opinion has emerged as being intermediate between them?

-- It has.

Apparently, then, it only remains for us to find what participates in both being and not being and cannot correctly be called purely one or the other, in order that, if there is such a thing, we can rightly call it the opinable, thereby setting the extremes over the extremes and the intermediate over the intermediate. Isn't that so?

-- It is." (Plato, *Republic*, 154)

mimetic, and therefore *doxic*, ramifications of its modes of cultural transmission¹⁷ (e.g. poetry or pederasty). Socratic dialectic is always mindful of its place in a mimetic social order. Socrates' kenotic posture, his ironic humility, whether feigned or not, is the only vehicle that could possibly engage his interlocutors essential vanity without amplifying it. We might extend Ernest Becker's thesis that a "denial of death" is the source of all kinds of social and psychological mayhem to perhaps an even more fundamental "denial of lack". Socrates on-going battle with hollow representations of metaphysical plenitude can be understood as an assault on this denial.

This move from presumptuous vanity to a questing humility is far from an easy one and the inner turmoil of those under Socratic pressure of the conversion pressures felt by the characters in the great novels. As Girard wrote: "[If] it is true that metaphysical desire is a product of pride, we may have to conclude that whatever injures pride, whether it be guilt, suffering, or remorse, constitutes an important factor in the spiritual metamorphosis which turns a superficial writer into a great one." (Girard, *Mimesis & Theory*, p. 66.) Plato's dialogues share this mimetic insight.

¹⁷ See George Orwell on this point: "When I was fourteen or fifteen was an odious little snob, but no worse than other boys of my own age and class. I suppose there is no place in the world where snobbery is quite so ever-present or where it is cultivated in such refined or subtle forms as in an English public school. Here at least one cannot say that an English "education" fails to do its job. You forget your Latin and Greek within a few months of leaving school -- I studied Greek for eight or ten years and now, at thirty-three, I cannot even repeat the Greek alphabet -- but your snobbishness, unless you persistently root it out like the bindweed it is, sticks by you till your grave." *The Road to Wigan Pier*, London: Penguin, 2001, p. 128.

FROM POSSESSION TO FORM TO PHILIA

Finally, let me offer up a hypothesis about the Platonic Form, or *eidos*. I believe it is a common error for Plato's interpreters to decontextualize the hypothesis of the forms from its concrete setting in social interaction. Just as Girard effects an anthropological turn in order to understand both the novel and the myth, so I believe we must do the same for the texts we have inherited from Plato. For too long, the Platonic Idea has been kept concealed behind mythological veils. Aristotle's criticism of the "friends of the forms" is against just such mythological interpretations of the forms. The form for Plato serves a heuristic function. It focuses inquiry on formal possibilities that may or may not ever be realized. The form of an achieved actuality depends upon the formal possibility that it instantiates. Since the form precedes the concrete instantiation and since the actuality is achieved when the form is reached, for Plato, form is the really real. The formal hypothesis is just that, a hypothesis. To study the value of the hypothesis is to study how it works in Platonic practice. I believe Girard's theory of mediated desire gives us just the tool to perform such a study.

The forms that most concern the dialogues are those that search for what I have called sharable metaphysical objects.¹⁸ The desire that animates that search is therefore metaphysical desire, a desire for the being that one finds lacking in oneself, but which in the Platonic version transcends any of the mimetic models. The desire for the fullness is

¹⁸ "Then won't our citizens, more than any others, have the same thing in common, the one they call 'mine'? And, having that in common, won't they, more than any others, have common pleasures and pains?"

-- Of course." (*Republic*, 138)

also a recognition of one's lack and each models for the other both poles of this tension.¹⁹ What is mimed on each side is an openness to the form of virtue, either the achieved openness of the master or just the brief but exiting glimpses by the student. But the openness to the virtue is not possession of the virtue, but it is a type of actuation of the virtue desired. The implicit teaching of the so-called *aporetic* dialogues is that even when the search fails, it is the form itself that is already guiding the inquiry. Meno's paradox, that unless we already know what we are searching for, we wouldn't be able to search at all²⁰, is a testament to the heuristic anticipations²¹ that guide inquiry. The form stands as the *eschaton* of the search, transcendent to either partner but available in anticipation to each.. As Plato puts it in the *Phaedrus*:

“In spite of this great effort, all souls, everyone of them, leave the sight of Being, unfulfilled (*ateleis*), and, once departed, feed on the food of conjecture.”²²

The etymology usually given for "philosophy" is that it stands for the love of wisdom. But perhaps Girard's insight into the role of mediators suggests that the *philia* in question is not directed at the wisdom so much as for the mutual mediation necessary to pursue wisdom, that one is a friend not so much *of* wisdom as *for* wisdom. Philosophy requires sustained zeal, as Plato writes:

¹⁹ Notice the overt mimeticism of the following: “The boy is then in love, but he is at a loss to say with what. He doesn't know what he has experienced, nor is he able to explain it, but just as a person who has contracted an eye-disease from someone is unable to name the alleged cause, so he does not realize that in his lover he is seeing himself as though in a mirror. When that man is near, his pain ceases, as it does for the man. But when the man is absent, the boy yearns and is yearned for, again in the same ways, as he experiences a “return-love,” an image or copy of love. He calls and considers this to be friendship, not love.” (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 37)

²⁰ Plato, *Meno*, p. 16.

²¹ I owe this conception of “heuristic anticipation” to Bernard Lonergan. See *Insight*, Chapter 15.

²² Plato, *Phaedrus*, p. 29.

“Then, won’t it be reasonable for us to plead in his defense that it is the nature of the real lover of learning to struggle toward what is, not to remain with any of the many things that are believed to be, that, as he moves on, he neither loses nor lessens his erotic love until he grasps the being of each nature itself with the part of his soul that is fitted to grasp it, because of its kinship with it, and that, once getting near what really is and having intercourse with it and having begotten understanding and truth, he knows, truly lives, is nourish, and -- at that point, but not before -- is relieved from the pains of giving birth?” (Plato, *Republic*, 163-164)

But as Girard writes, “The human subject is incapable either of focusing his desire or sustaining its force.”²³ The mimetic other, the friend, is necessary to maintain and concentrate attention on a common form. It is probably the case that Socrates needs Glaucon as much as Glaucon needs Socrates. Philosophy is therefore as much a type of friendship as a subject of study.

One of the young members of Plato’s community of friends was Aristotle, whose mind and disposition was the fruit of a twenty year association that one could reasonably guess was as much mimetic as doctrinal. Aristotle’s study of “virtuous friendship” in Book VIII of the *Nicomachean Ethics* gathers many of the ideas explored in this paper -- mediation, desirability, concern for being and shared understanding -- and so I would like to close with a few words from there:

“For friendship is a sharing in common, and one has the same relation to a friend as to oneself, while in relation to oneself, the awareness that one is is something choiceworthy, and thus it is so in relation to the friend as well; but the being-at-work (*energia*) of this awareness comes about in living together, and so, naturally, friends aim at this. And whatever being consists in for any sort of people -- whatever it is for the sake of which they choose to be alive -- this is what they want to be engaged in with their friends.” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 179)

²³ *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, p. 478.

“And friendship seems to hold cities together, and lawmakers seem to take it more seriously than justice, for like-mindedness seems to be something similar to friendship, and they aim at this most of all and banish faction most of all for being hostile to it.” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 144)

“To whatever extent that they share something in common, to that extent is there a friendship, since that too is the extent to which there is something just. And the proverb ‘the things of friends are common’ is right, since friendship consists in community.” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 154)

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