

RENÉ GIRARD ON DESIRE AND RIVALRY
Part 1: Girard's Theory of Mimetic Desire

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The French philosopher René Girard (1923–2015) stands out as one of the most original and provocative thinkers of the twentieth century. Throughout his academic career, Girard made significant contributions to psychology, sociology, history, literary criticism, theology, and biblical hermeneutics, but the unifying thread is his commitment to philosophical anthropology. The fundamental question guiding Girard's *oeuvre* is: "What does it mean to be human?" Reflecting on the human condition through a multidisciplinary lens, Girard proposed a novel approach to understanding the human person in what he termed *mimetic theory*.¹

According to Girard's mimetic theory, human beings are constantly imitating one another. While imitation contributes to the development of society and culture, it also generates rivalries and conflicts, as individuals and groups begin to compete for the same objects of desire. Such conflicts can become endemic and threaten social harmony. To resolve these crises and restore order, societies often engage in *scapegoating*—assigning blame for communal disorder to an individual or a particular group. Violent action against the scapegoat—at times even death—is then deemed necessary to re-establish peace. René Girard was among the first to draw sustained attention to this destructive dynamic within civilizations and communities. Through his writings, he sheds light on the nuances of mimetic desire and scapegoating, while also proposing ways to address the negative consequences of mimetic rivalry.

Although not as widely discussed in philosophical circles as Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, or Gilles Deleuze, René Girard's work is increasingly recognized for its depth and originality. At a time when grand narratives were dismissed in favour of local or 'small narratives,' Girard dared to explore the *grand récit*.² As Cynthia Haven notes, he was "interested in human history, human civilization, and human

¹ Gabriel Andrade, "René Girard (1923—2015)" *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://iep.utm.edu/girard/> accessed on 24 November 2025.

² A *grand récit* (French for "grand narrative" or "master narrative") refers to an overarching story or ideology that seeks to explain human experience and historical-cultural developments in a unified way.

destiny. His questions were big ones: What is the cause of human strife; what are the roots of human violence? Why do we desire what we do?”³ Girard’s search led him to analyse myths, rituals, and religious texts in order to uncover recurring patterns of mimetic desire and the scapegoat mechanism.

This essay offers an overview of René Girard’s mimetic theory. It begins with a biographical note on Girard, focusing on his intellectual journey and religious conversion, and then turns to the theme of mimetic desire and rivalry. Although mimetic desire and the scapegoat mechanism are inseparable dimensions of the same theoretical framework—two sides of the same coin—this essay (Part 1) will focus exclusively on mimetic desire, while the scapegoat mechanism will be examined in the second part. The essay concludes with reflections on the relevance of Girard’s thought, along with some critical remarks on his mimetic theory.

1. Intellectual Journey and Religious Conversion

René Girard was born on 25 December 1923 in Avignon, France. His father served as curator of the library and museum of Avignon and of the Palace of the Popes, while his mother, a devout Catholic, cultivated in him a deep cultural and religious sensibility. Despite this environment, Girard distanced himself from religion at an early age, losing interest in Christianity by the time he was twelve. His return to the faith would happen much later, at the age of thirty-six, in 1959. Growing up during the Second World War, Girard’s intellectual and political sympathies were initially shaped by the French left. He studied medieval history in Paris during the difficult years of wartime occupation and defended his dissertation, “Private Life in Avignon in the Second Half of the Fifteenth Century,” in 1947. That same year he left for the United States of America, where he completed a doctorate in history at Indiana University in 1950, with a dissertation titled “Americans’ Opinion of France, 1940–1943.”⁴

Girard’s intellectual path shifted significantly during his early academic years in America. While teaching European literature at Indiana

³ Julie Mitchell, “Rene Girard,” Eminent Theorist, *Stanford Magazine*, available at <https://stanfordmag.org/contents/eminent-theorist>, accessed on 24 November 2025.

⁴ Chris Fleming, *René Girard: Violence and Mimesis* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004) 4.

University, he developed a deep interest in literary analysis, especially in the works of Miguel de Cervantes, Stendhal, Gustave Flaubert, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Marcel Proust. This passion culminated in the publication of his first major book—*Mensonge Romantique et Vérité Romanesque* (1961)—thereby establishing him as a literary critic of remarkable originality.⁵ This book, later translated into English under the title *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1965), marked a turning point in Girard's life. He underwent a conversion similar to that of the protagonists in the book.

As biographers have noted, René Girard's conversion unfolded in two distinct yet related phases: an initial intellectual awakening that paved the way for a deeper religious transformation. The first occurred while he was writing *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, when he recognized that his own experience mirrored the patterns he was analysing. He recalls:

When I wrote the last chapter of my first book, I had had a vague idea of what I would do, but as the chapter took form I realized I was undergoing my own version of the experience I was describing. I was particularly attracted to the Christian elements, for example, Stepan Verkhovensky's final journey... So I began to read the Gospels and the rest of the Bible. And I became a Christian.⁶

Later reflecting on this experience, Girard described it as an “intellectual-literary conversion,” one that was “deeply satisfying, even enjoyable,” yet entailed no real change in his life.

The second phase unfolded in a moment of crisis, when a suspected cancer diagnosis filled him with fear; he admits that he was “pretty scared.” Although the diagnosis proved false, the experience profoundly transformed him. As he confesses, “I could not but view the cancer and the period of intense anxiety as a warning and a kind of expiation, and now this conversion was transformed into something really serious in which the

⁵ Cynthia Haven, “Stanford professor and eminent French theorist René Girard, member of the Académie Française, dies at 91,” <https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2015/11/rene-girard-obit-110415>, accessed on 26 November 2025

⁶ Michael Kirke, “René Girard, Conversion and its Consequences,” Part 3, available at <https://garvan.co/2024/10/19/rene-girard-conversion-and-its-consequences/>, accessed on 13 April 2026.

aesthetic gave way to the religious.”⁷ In 1959, at the age of thirty-six, during Holy Week, he made a decisive return to the practice of his Catholic faith. He later remarked that God had liberated him to undergo a true “death and resurrection experience.” Reflecting on both stages, Girard acknowledged that while the first conversion “entailed no demands,” it nonetheless prepared him to “accept God’s grace and believe.”⁸

Girard’s academic career advanced through appointments at Duke University, Bryn Mawr College, and later Johns Hopkins University. In 1971, he joined the State University of New York at Buffalo, where he produced one of his most influential works, *Violence and the Sacred* (1972). Here he developed his groundbreaking theory of mimetic desire, arguing that human desire is imitative and that the rivalries it generates often culminate in violence, which are resolved through the scapegoat mechanism. He further elaborated this theory in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1978) and *The Scapegoat* (1982), among other works. Returning to Johns Hopkins in 1976 and later moving to Stanford University in 1981, Girard continued to refine his interdisciplinary approach, bridging literature, anthropology, theology, and psychology. His influence expanded globally with the founding of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion (COV&R) in 1990.⁹

In 2005, Girard was elected to the Académie Française as one of its *quarante immortels*, an honour that affirmed his status as one of France’s leading intellectuals. Fellow *immortel* and Stanford colleague Michel Serres described him as “the new Darwin of the human sciences.”¹⁰

Girard died at his Stanford home on 4 November 2015 at the age of ninety-one, leaving behind an intellectual legacy that continues to shape the study of mimetic desire and scapegoat mechanism, and their effect on human culture and society.

⁷ Kirke, “René Girard, Conversion and its Consequences.”

⁸ Kirke, “René Girard, Conversion and its Consequences.”

⁹ Michael Kirwan, *Girard and Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2009) 4-5; For details regarding the ‘Colloquium on Violence and Religion’ visit <https://violenceandreligion.com/>

¹⁰ He was also a *Chevalier de la Légion d’honneur* (Highest Civilian honour of France) and *Commandeur des Arts et des Lettres*, besides other important honours and recognitions. Haven, “Stanford professor and eminent French theorist René Girard, member of the Académie Française, dies at 91.”

2. René Girard's Theory of Mimetic Desire

René Girard's theory of mimetic desire lies at the very heart of his philosophical project. For Girard, desire is never purely spontaneous or self-originating; rather, it is imitative or mimetic. As he explains, "Man is the creature who does not know what to desire, and he turns to others in order to make up his mind. We desire what others desire because we imitate their desires."¹¹ In other words, desire is borrowed or learned from another person whom we take as a model, most often implicitly.

Imitation makes human desire distinct from animal appetite. Whereas animals pursue their needs in an instinctual manner—seeking food, shelter, or mating based on biological drives without reference to the desires of others—human beings learn *what* to desire and *how* to desire by observing significant others—parents, siblings, teachers, peers, famous personalities. An animal's desire is directly fixed on an object because of innate needs; it does not become desirable because another animal desires it. By contrast, human desire is mediated: we begin to desire things because others want them, or because they appear desirable through the attention and value others assign to them. Girard claims that this mimetic tendency is the source of both human creativity and human conflict.

We shall now consider some of the significant elements of the cycle of mimetic desire, beginning with the triangular structure of desire.

2.1 Triangular Structure of Human Desire

Desire is commonly understood as a direct relationship between a person and the thing they wish to possess. In this traditional view, the object appears desirable either because it possesses some inherent quality or because it satisfies a need or preference of the subject. In either case, desire is seen as arising within the individual and directed straight toward the object, without any reference to others.¹² For example, one might say that a person desires a particular fruit—say, dragon fruit—simply because

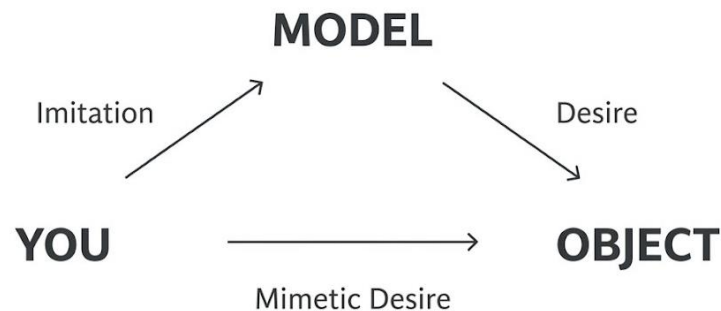
¹¹ Girard, "Generative Scapegoating," in *Violent Origins: Walter Burkert, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation*, edited by Robert G. Hammerton-Kelly (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987) 122.

¹² Gregory Moss, "René Girard and the phenomenology of mimetic desire," *Studia Z Teorii Wychowania Tom 14/2* (2023): 43-82, at 44.

it looks appealing or tastes good, assuming that the source of the desire lies either in the qualities of the fruit or in the individual's own preferences.

René Girard challenges this view by introducing a third element into the structure of desire. At the core of his theory is what he calls 'triangular desire.' According to Girard, every act of desire involves three elements: the *subject* (the one who desires), the *object* (the thing desired), and the *model* or *mediator* (the one whose desire the subject imitates). This triangular structure reveals that desire cannot be reduced to a simple relation between the subject and the object, as we often imagine, but is instead mediated by a third element, namely the model or mediator.¹³ As Moss succinctly puts it, "Mimetic desire is quite simple: the subject desires the object because another [the model] desires the object."¹⁴ To illustrate this point, I would like to draw on an example from my own experience. The first time I tasted soursop (*Annona muricata*), I abandoned it halfway because the flavour did not appeal to me. Later, however, I came to value it after learning from others that it is highly prized for its supposed healing properties, including claims related to cancer treatment, even though such claims are not supported by clinical evidence.

The diagram below helps us to understand Girard's proposal of the triangular structure of human desire.



¹³ René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976) 2; Fleming, *René Girard: Violence and Mimesis*, 11.

¹⁴ Moss, "René Girard and the phenomenology of mimetic desire," 45.

If we observe teenagers and young people closely, we notice that they often adopt particular styles of clothing, grooming, and behaviour because they wish to imitate their role models such as film stars, musicians or sportspeople. Mimetic theory explains that the desiring subject rarely takes note of the process of mediation, since mimetic desire operates at a pre-rational or implicit level. When a person desires something, Girard explains, it is not because the object is inherently valuable, but because someone else—the model—has already desired it. In this sense, our desires are fundamentally ‘second-hand:’ we covet objects because they are already valued by others. Girard’s insight thus reveals a profound truth about human psychology—our very sense of identity (who we are and who we wish to become) is shaped by imitation.¹⁵

Further, Girard claims that mimetic desire is not only the foundation of human freedom and creativity, but also the source of instability. Take, for example, a young student who deeply admires her teacher, who is passionate about teaching and much loved by the students. When faced with career choices, the student decides to become a teacher herself. Her admiration leads to imitation, and this mimetic desire is liberating, for it opens up a new world of possibilities for her. But imagine that another student, inspired by the same teacher, also wishes to follow the same path. This could lead to rivalry, since both might compete for the same recognition and limited resources (such as a seat, a scholarship, or other opportunities). Thus, the very mimetic desire that inspires the student to choose a meaningful career can also give rise to tension and instability because of the presence of other contenders.

2.2 Mediation: External and Internal

The concept of mediation is indispensable for a proper understanding of mimetic desire. Mediation refers to the process by which one person influences the desires and preferences of another. As indicated earlier, human beings learn what to desire by observing others. When a person’s desire is imitated by someone else, that person becomes a *mediator* or

¹⁵ René Girard, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture*, with Pierpaolo Antonello and João Cezar de Castro Rocha (London: Continuum, 2008) 58; Also J. Honey Goddess, “What is Mimetic Theory?,” <https://woodybelangia.com/what-is-mimetic-theory/> accessed on 25 November 2025.

model. This dynamic is clearly visible in modern advertising and marketing. For instance, when a celebrity endorses a product, consumers are drawn to purchase it—not necessarily because of its intrinsic qualities, but because the celebrity uses or recommends it. Thus, the celebrity acts as a mediator who shapes the desires of others. To help us grasp the nuances of mediation, Girard distinguishes between two types of mediation: *external mediation* and *internal mediation*, depending on the relationship between the subject (the one who imitates) and the model (the one who is imitated).¹⁶

External mediation occurs when the model and the subject exist in different social contexts or ‘existential spheres.’ In this form of mediation, there is a significant distance between them, making direct rivalry unlikely or even impossible. Because the model occupies a separate sphere—whether through differences in status, space, or time—the subject’s desire is shaped through admiration rather than competition. Chris Fleming sheds light on the distinctive features of external mediation:

[E]xternal mediation exhibits the main features of mimetic desire: (1) the desirability of an object is predicated as desirable by the mediator, rather than on any intrinsic qualities it possesses; and (2) the objects which are designated undergo a transformation in the perception of the desiring individual so that they are imbued with an ‘aura,’ the properties of which are, again, extrinsic to them. The distinguishing feature of external mediation is related to the field of action that the model and the desiring subject inhabit: although the model exerts a heavy influence on the thought and behaviour of the other, the distance between them in terms of either status or space and time is such that no rivalry develops as a result of the mediation.¹⁷

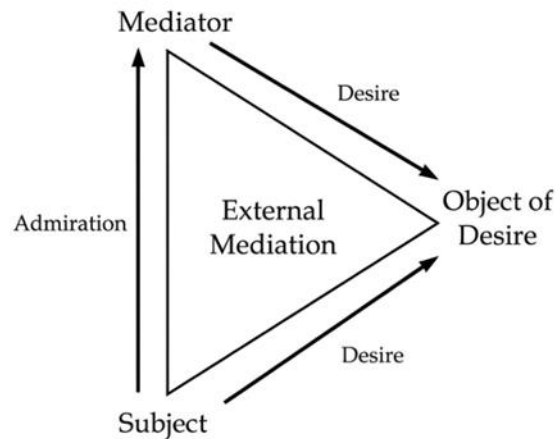
This distinction becomes clearer when applied to everyday examples. For instance, an individual may admire and imitate a famous actor, athlete, or musician. However, since their worlds do not overlap, they are not in competition for the same goals or objects. As a result, the model remains a distant ideal rather than a rival. This type of mediation is generally considered positive because it motivates individuals to imitate their model without leading to conflict.¹⁸ Modern advertising relies heavily on external

¹⁶ Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 56-57; Moss, “René Girard and the phenomenology of mimetic desire,” 45.

¹⁷ Fleming, *René Girard: Violence and Mimesis*, 19.

¹⁸ Andrade, “René Girard (1923-2015).”

mediation, where celebrities serve as models whose desires consumers are invited to imitate.

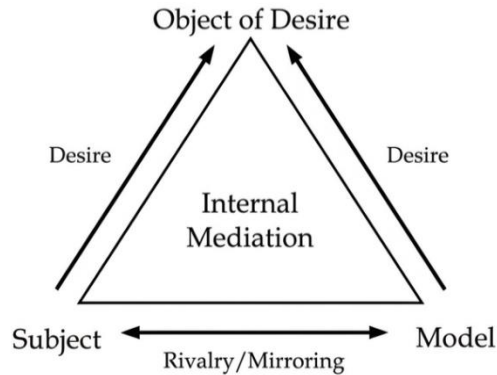


In contrast, *internal mediation* takes place when the model and the subject belong to the same social sphere and may share the same environment. Because of this proximity, both may desire the same objects, thus leading to rivalry.¹⁹ Moss explains: “In order to fall into rivalry with one’s model, the model must be immanent within the subject’s own cultural lifeworld in which there is a life that is shared in common. Most generally, it is because a person shares a life in common that they can in principle fall into conflict.”²⁰

For instance, a student may admire a classmate so intensely that imitation gradually turns into rivalry. Similarly, colleagues working together may initially respect and admire one another, but if recognition is bestowed on only one person, that initial admiration can quickly give way to jealousy and conflict. In internal mediation, the model is no longer a distant figure but becomes a close rival—and sometimes even an obstacle—to the subject’s desires. According to Girard, internal mediation unfolds into rivalry, and can lead to conflict.

¹⁹ Andrade, “René Girard (1923-2015).”

²⁰ Moss, “René Girard and the phenomenology of mimetic desire,” 49.



2.3 Mimetic Rivalry

In *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, Girard indicated that “If human beings suddenly ceased imitating, all forms of culture would vanish,”²¹ thus emphasizing that imitation lies at the heart of human civilization. Yet imitation has a darker side when it turns into appropriation—the desire to possess what another possesses. In this sense, we do not simply desire objects; rather, we desire the desire of others. This dynamic is evident in the behaviour of children. When two children are placed in a room full of toys, they often end up fighting over the same one, insisting, “*I had it first!*” or “*I wanted it before him!*”²² The presence of the other intensifies one’s own desire, making the object seem more valuable.

Within this framework, Girard understands rivalry as the driving force of human conflict. Rivalry arises less from material scarcity than from imitation between individuals. It begins when one person models themselves on another and seeks to acquire what the other possesses, particularly status or position. In this process, the relationship between the

²¹ René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987) 7.

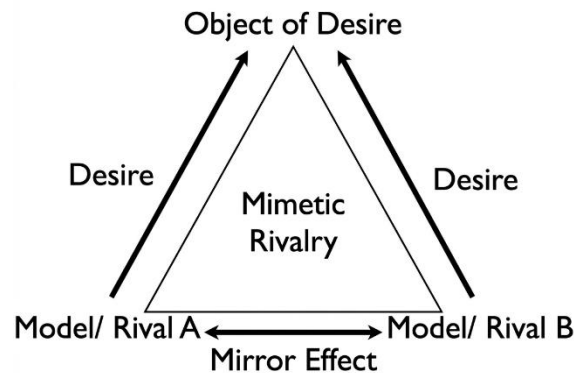
²² “Mimetic Theory,” <https://paul.copplest.one/knowledge/mimetic-theory.html#mimetic-desire>, accessed on 30 November 2025.

subject and the model shifts from admiration to competition, turning the model into a rival.²³

Girard sheds further light on mimetic rivalry:

Rivalry does not arise because of the fortuitous convergence of two desires on a single object; rather, the subject desires the object because the rival desires it. In desiring an object the rival alerts the subject to the desirability of the object. The rival, then, serves as a model for the subject, not only in regard to such secondary matters as style and opinions but also, and more essentially, in regard to desires.²⁴

The above quote highlights the central logic of mimetic rivalry: the rival is not accidental to desire but constitutive of it. The subject's desire is awakened and intensified by the rival's own desire, making rivalry intrinsic to the structure of mimetic desire itself.



As the rivalry develops, both parties become increasingly attentive to one another's desires and achievements. Each begins to define their own goals in relation to the other, constantly measuring themselves against their rival. What one pursues, the other also seeks. This reciprocal imitation is what Girard describes as *mirroring*. Mirroring occurs when

²³ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1979) 145-146; René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Herefordshire: Gracewing Publishing, 2001) 11.

²⁴ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 145, 216-17.

each person begins to reflect not only the other's actions but also their desires. As a result, the rivalry intensifies and often extends beyond the object that was initially desired.²⁵

Once mirroring sets in, Girard explains, the original object of rivalry becomes secondary. What truly drives the conflict is the desire to equal or surpass the other. Even when the material goal is achieved, rivalry often persists because its deeper aim is linked to recognition and superiority. As rivalry deepens, individuals no longer see each other merely as competitors but as obstacles, and eventually as threats to their own sense of self. Because those involved often fail to recognize the mimetic basis of their desire, rivalry tends to generate resentment, causing conflicts to escalate beyond their apparent causes.²⁶

To illustrate this dynamic, consider the case of a junior assistant who admires his supervisor and aspires to become like him. At first, the relationship is marked by respect and imitation: the junior employee adopts the supervisor's professional habits and works diligently. Over time, he is promoted to the same position. However, once the desired status is attained, admiration gives way to rivalry. As both now occupy similar positions, each begins to compare their authority, performance, and recognition with the other. This mutual comparison gradually turns into mirroring, as both start responding to and imitating each other's ambitions and actions. What initially inspired growth now becomes a source of tension, as both begin to see each other as rivals for power and recognition.

2.4 Mimetic Contagion

The notion of *mimetic contagion* flows from Girard's theory of mimetic desire. If human beings desire what others desire, then desire cannot be confined to the individual but instead spreads through imitation. What begins as a triangular relation between the subject, the model, and the object can quickly expand when others begin to imitate the same desire. As more individuals converge upon the same object, rivalry intensifies, and the conflict begins to spread across the group. In this sense, mimetic desire becomes contagious: one person's desire awakens the desire of another, and that imitation sets off a chain reaction.²⁷ A small

²⁵ Fleming, *René Girard: Violence and Mimesis*, 20-22.

²⁶ Fleming, *René Girard: Violence and Mimesis*, 22-23.

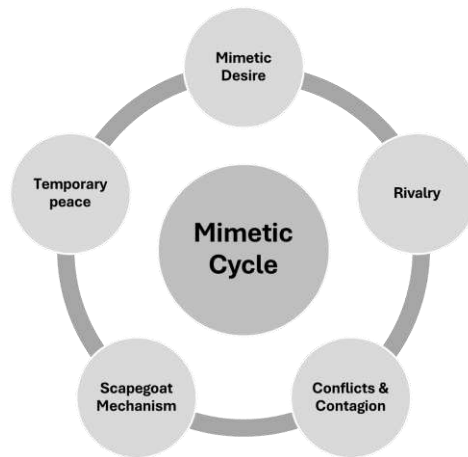
²⁷ "Mimetic Contagion," <https://mimetictheory.com/mimetic-contagion/> accessed on 13 April 2026.

disagreement or competition between two persons can therefore spread rapidly through families, student bodies, social groups, or entire societies, drawing more participants into the conflict.

This contagious dynamic has significant psychological and cultural implications. Over time, the original object of desire may recede into the background, while the rivalry itself begins to occupy center stage. People are no longer fighting primarily for the object but against one another. Such escalation can give rise to collective fear and even end in violence, as emotions are reinforced by imitation and group participation. Girard uses this insight to explain phenomena such as mass hysteria and communal unrest, which may eventually lead to the search for a scapegoat. When tensions rise beyond a certain limit, societies often seek relief by directing their hostility toward a single person or group who is blamed for the disorder. Once society reaches a breaking point due to the escalation of conflict, the various groups involved may unconsciously unite in identifying a scapegoat.²⁸

To demonstrate the concept of mimetic contagion, let us consider the example of an election to the post of a college representative or student leader. Imagine two students contesting for the same leadership position. At first, the conflict is restricted to the two individuals: each candidate desires the post and begins to view the other as a rival. However, as friends, classmates, and student groups begin to support one candidate over the other, the rivalry gradually moves beyond the two individuals. Supporters on each side start campaigning vigorously for the candidate, while criticizing the opponent. What began as a contest between two individuals has now turned into a group rivalry, with each side mirroring the hostility and competitive spirit of the other. Eventually, the original purpose of the election—service and representation—may recede into the background, while the primary concern becomes defeating the opposing camp. The conflict takes on the character of mimetic contagion, spreading largely through emotional reinforcement and collective participation.

²⁸ According to Girard, the scapegoat mechanism is a strategy for dissipating social tensions by redirecting violence towards an outsider; at times this includes 'sacrificing' the outsider in order to restore peace and maintain social stability. <https://www.britannica.com/question/What-is-the-scapegoat-mechanism-in-Rene-Girards-theory>, accessed on 18 April 2026.



2.5 Metaphysical Desire: The Desire to Be the Other

Beyond the desire for external ‘objects,’ René Girard identifies a deeper form of mimetic desire, which he calls metaphysical desire—the desire not simply to possess what another has, but to attain the very being that the other seems to embody. In *Violence and the Sacred*, he writes:

Once his basic needs are satisfied (indeed, sometimes even before), man is subject to intense desires, though he may not know precisely for what. The reason is that he desires being, something he himself lacks and which some other person seems to possess. The subject thus looks to that other person to inform him of what he should desire in order to acquire that being. If the model, who is apparently endowed with superior being, desires some object, that object must surely be capable of conferring an even greater plenitude of being.²⁹

Girard’s point here is that, in metaphysical desire, the subject does not merely covet the model’s possessions but aspires to be the model—to share in his or her very being.³⁰ For instance, some consumers do not simply desire a product for its inherent qualities, or even because their favourite model endorses it; rather, they may desire, one day, to become

²⁹ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 145-146.

³⁰ Fleming, *René Girard: Violence and Mimesis*, 24.

like the celebrity who promotes the product. Girard explains that this occurs when we attribute to the model a certain 'fullness of being,' believing that the model possesses qualities we ourselves lack: talents, skills, charisma, or a successful life. In response, the individual may even seek to acquire those same skills and talents in an effort to become like the desired model. It is equally important to note that the model, too, is not immune to mimetic desire. Feeling incomplete in himself or herself, the model may likewise long for something more or aspire to be like someone else. This gives rise to an unending cycle of mimetic desires that operates across multiple levels of human relationships and social life.

Since metaphysical desire is directed toward being rather than mere possession, it generally leads to resentment and obsession. The model—the person whose desire we imitate—becomes both *idol* and *obstacle*. The very person we imitate is also the one who prevents us from achieving what we seek. We look up to them (*model-idol*), yet we also resent them (*obstacle*), because their very existence seems to block our path to fulfilment.³¹ Girard asserts that metaphysical desire is inherently tragic and self-defeating: since we can never actually become the other person, our desire is doomed to frustration and will lead to conflict.

This tragic logic is illustrated with striking clarity in the biblical story of Cain and Abel.³² Cain does not merely resent the fact that Abel's offering is favoured by God; he resents Abel himself. Abel becomes both the model (the one whose favour with God Cain longs to share) and the obstacle (the one whose success highlights Cain's perceived failure). Because Cain cannot 'be' Abel—cannot occupy his place or identity—his admiration turns to envy and then to murderous rage. Abel's very existence becomes intolerable to Cain. Girard sees this as an illustration of metaphysical desire: when we desire to possess the being of another, we inevitably fall into rivalry. Instead of wanting something *with* the other person, we want it *against* them, and their presence intensifies rather than satisfies our longing. This is why Girard says human conflict often springs not simply from wanting others' possessions, but from envying their very existence. Cain's violence against Abel reveals the destructive end point of metaphysical desire: the desire to eliminate the model when imitation leads to frustration.

³¹ Paul Gifford, "René Girard and Mimetic Theory," *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al, 2003, available at <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/ReneGirardandMimeticTheory>

³² Genesis 4:1-16.

3. Contemporary Relevance of Girard's Mimetic Theory

René Girard's mimetic theory offers powerful conceptual tools for an in-depth understanding of contemporary social, political, and cultural life. His key concepts—mimetic desire, rivalry, contagion, and scapegoating—provide a compelling framework for uncovering the hidden mechanisms that shape human behaviour and social life. Far from being confined to literary criticism or philosophical reflection, Girard's thought offers significant insight into the subtle dynamics operative in modern society, particularly in the areas of consumer culture, social media, identity formation and communal conflict.

One of the most striking contemporary applications of Girard's theory can be found in modern marketing and consumer culture.³³ Contemporary advertising frequently capitalizes on mimetic desire by presenting celebrities, athletes, and public figures as models of an ideal life—a life to be aspired to by all who seek prestige or success. The purpose of such advertising is not merely to display the usefulness of a product, but to attach to it the prestige, beauty, charisma, and social status embodied by the model. Thus, the consumer is invited to imitate the model through acts of consumption. For example, when public figures such as LeBron James or Cristiano Ronaldo endorse products, the advertisement does not simply promote the item itself; rather, it encourages viewers to associate the product with excellence, success, and social prestige. The advertising industry thus transforms imitation into consumer demand by redirecting desire toward objects associated with admired figures. This example serves to illustrate Girard's central claim that human beings do not desire autonomously, but rather learn what to desire by imitating the desires of others.

Girard's theory is equally relevant in the age of social media and digital influencers.³⁴ Social media platforms intensify mimetic desire by constantly exposing users to carefully curated lifestyles, achievements, appearances, and personal narratives. Individuals often begin to desire not only the products displayed online but also the very lives, bodies,

³³ Teresa Klimowicz, "Rene Girard and the Genealogy of Consumerism," <https://metanexus.net/rene-girard-and-genealogy-consumerism/> accessed on 20 April 2026.

³⁴ Deian, "Unraveling the Threads of Human Desire: René Girard's Mimetic Desire," <https://medium.com/@deianrajovic/unraveling-the-threads-of-human-desire-ren%C3%A9-girards-mimetic-desire-2f6761dff77f>, accessed on 21 April 2026.

identities, and social recognition of influencers and public personalities. While it is important not to overlook the positive possibilities of digital connectivity and self-expression, these environments frequently generate anxiety, comparison, and crises of self-worth, particularly among young people. Mimetic theory thus helps explain why social media spaces so often become sites of envy and rivalry, where comparison spills from the screen into lived reality.

Girard's insights are equally illuminating in the social and political sphere, particularly in relation to group conflict and scapegoating. In times of political instability or economic uncertainty, societies often seek relief by directing their frustrations toward a single individual or vulnerable group. Religious minorities, migrants, or socially marginalized communities may then be blamed for social breakdown, unemployment, or other issues. Girard's analysis of mimetic contagion and scapegoat mechanism helps explain how societies can unconsciously unite against a chosen victim in order to restore a temporary sense of order and cohesion.³⁵

This dynamic became especially visible during the COVID-19 pandemic in India. Following the outbreak linked to the Tablighi Jamaat congregation at Nizamuddin in Delhi in March 2020, members of the group were widely blamed in public discourse for spreading the virus across the country. Early health ministry data linked a substantial cluster of cases to the gathering, making it one of the first major hotspots in India. However, beyond the epidemiological reality of the outbreak, the episode also revealed how public fear can rapidly transform into social scapegoating. Academic studies and media analyses have shown how the event was frequently framed in ways that contributed to the construction of an 'other,' intensifying communal suspicion and hostility. From a Girardian perspective, this illustrates how a society in crisis may channel collective anxiety onto a visible group, thereby producing a temporary sense of unity through blame.

This mechanism becomes even more visible in times of political polarization, when rumours, sensational narratives, and emotionally charged media discourse intensify what Girard describes as mimetic contagion. Hostility spreads rapidly as individuals imitate the fear and aggression of the crowd. In this sense, Girard's theory complements the traditional explanation that violence emerges from differences among groups by

³⁵ Rene Girard, *The Scapegoat*, translated by Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986).

introducing the deeper mimetic insight that violence often arises from shared imitation and collective rivalry. The crowd does not merely react to difference; it reproduces and amplifies its own hostility through imitation.

The contemporary significance of mimetic theory therefore lies in its capacity to uncover the hidden processes through which imitation shapes both desire and violence. Whether in consumerism, digital culture, or communal conflicts, Girard provides a powerful lens through which to interpret modern crises of identity and rivalry. By becoming aware of these mimetic patterns, individuals and societies will be better equipped to resist manipulation by structures of power and to critically question the origins of their desires and hostilities. Greater awareness of the mimetic cycle can help prevent societies from falling prey to the polarization fuelled by political interests and divisive ideologies.

4. Critical Appraisal

René Girard's mimetic theory possesses considerable explanatory potential while also revealing significant limitations. Although it has offered an influential framework for understanding desire, rivalry, conflict and violence, critics suggest that we should exercise caution regarding the universality of its claims.

The most common criticism of René Girard's mimetic theory concerns its tendency towards the over-universalization of desire. Girard makes imitation the central explanatory principle of all human desire, suggesting that desire is not autonomous, but always mediated by another. Sarah Coakley, René Pommier, and other critics argue that these claims are too sweeping and lack sufficient evidence.³⁶ While imitation undoubtedly shapes many human desires, it does not adequately explain those that arise independently of social mediation, particularly desires grounded in biological necessity, innate temperament, or deeply held moral convictions. Needs such as hunger and thirst originate in the body's physiological structure, while aspirations toward truth and justice may stem from conscience and individual disposition rather than imitation.

Further, Girard's mimetic theory, when viewed from a psychological perspective, appears highly reductionist. By making mimetic desire the

³⁶ Joel Hodge, "René Girard and His Critics: The Theological Compatibility and Framework of His Early Mimetic Theory," *Theological Studies* **82**/2 (2021): 259–284.

primary explanation for human action, it risks oversimplifying the complexity of human motivation. While imitation undoubtedly shapes many of our desires, it does not sufficiently explain those rooted in biological needs or those arising from reason, conscience, or love. Human beings often act from motives that cannot be reduced to imitation alone. As Aristotle emphasizes, human action is frequently guided by rational deliberation and habituated virtue, while Kant locates moral action in duty and conscience rather than in social influence. Thus, a person may choose to speak the truth out of conscience even when falsehood would bring personal advantage, and even when significant others have taken the shortcut of falsehood in order to advance in life. In this respect, Girard appears to underestimate human freedom and agency by portraying individuals as largely shaped by unconscious imitation.

From an academic perspective, Girard's mimetic theory lacks sufficient empirical evidence to support the universal claims it makes. Girard draws heavily on literature, mythology, and textual analysis to make broad anthropological conclusions. His theory of mimetic desire, in fact, first emerged from his reading of major European novelists, including Dostoevsky, Proust, Gustave Flaubert, and Stendhal.³⁷ Literary examples, however insightful, do not necessarily provide sufficient evidence to make universal claims about human behaviour. For instance, in *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky's protagonist vividly demonstrates the dynamics of envy and self-conscious imitation; yet such a literary portrayal, however psychologically penetrating, cannot by itself serve as empirical proof that all human desire is universally mimetic. Therefore, one may conclude that Girard provides a powerful hermeneutical framework for understanding the human person rather than a scientific theory grounded in empirical observation.

Finally, another important criticism of Girard's theory is that it places disproportionate emphasis on rivalry and violence. From experience, we know that imitation can also function constructively; however, this positive dimension remains comparatively underdeveloped in his work. In reality, imitation often plays a profoundly formative role in the growth and development of the individual, as well as in the cultivation of social skills, cooperation, and moral awareness. Children, for instance, learn not only

³⁷ René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, translated by Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965).

language but also social norms and values from significant others through imitation.

Critics therefore claim that Girard tends to overlook the constructive dimensions of mimesis by focusing primarily on its negative consequences. However, it is important to note that Girard does make reference to the positive side of mimesis. In the context of the Christian tradition, he distinguishes between *conflictual* and *benevolent* mimesis: the former leads to envy and violence, whereas the latter opens the human person to compassion, empathy, and communion.³⁸

Taken together, these criticisms do not necessarily invalidate Girard's insights but rather point to the limits of any attempt to explain the full range of human desire and action through a single principle. His theory offers a good interpretive lens, particularly in the analysis of human desire and rivalry, yet it may be more acceptable when treated as a partial account of human motivation rather than a comprehensive anthropology.

ABSTRACT

This essay traces Girard's intellectual journey and shows how his central insight—that human desire is fundamentally imitative—not only shapes personal identity but also leads to rivalry and conflict. It begins by explaining the triangular structure of desire through the relation between subject, object, and model, and develops Girard's distinctions between external and internal mediation, mimetic rivalry, contagion, and metaphysical desire. It further demonstrates the relevance of mimetic theory to consumer culture, social media and political polarization. Finally, the article offers a critical appraisal, highlighting both the interpretive power of Girard's framework and its limits, especially its tendency toward universalization and reductionism.

³⁸ René Girard, *The Girard Reader*, Edited by James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996).