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# 1

## A New Synthesis in Process and Mimetic Theory

We're all in the process of making sense of our reality. Finding ourselves in an environment already filled with symbols, meanings, and stories, we naturally join in this meaning-making activity. We have moments of clarity on this journey in which the complex narratives that flood our world make sense. Contrasts find harmony, chaos finds a pattern, fragments find their place in the whole, scattered symbols find their sequence within a larger story, and we see our part in this unfolding beauty.

Two exceptional thinkers who can help us find such moments of clarity are the French academic René Girard (1923-2015) and the British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947). Some would consider Whitehead and Girard unlikely conversational partners. After all, Girard is known for his anthropological theory, and Whitehead is generally known for his metaphysics. However, I intend to show that deep, broad, and significant harmonies can be developed between process philosophy and mimetic theory. Harmonizing these two thought frameworks can transform the way we create meaning and enrich our experience.

## René Girard

Girard's mimetic theory begins with a central insight into the nature of human desire. Consciously, we consider ourselves the authors of our desires, but unconsciously desires are formed by our imitative/reflective relationships with others. From there, his narrative explanation expands, exploring the processes that made us human, including the development of symbolic thought, the evolution of culture and religion, and the dramatic way the biblical narrative subverts the meaning of the symbols that shaped us.

Mimetic desire, the unconscious way in which humans reflect the desires of others, shapes us individually but also communally, socially, and culturally. Girard recognized that desire does not erupt spontaneously between a person and the object of desire. Rather the movement of desire is triangular. Humans connect intimately with the interiority of others who are like them. And when we recognize in others what we think we lack in ourselves, they become models ... unconsciously. Consequently, their desires become our desires and the triangular movement is set in motion between subject, model, and object of desire. This mimetic capacity intensifies our ability to love... and to do violence. Girard does not sugar-coat the darker side of human development but acknowledges our capacity for both good and evil. He insists that we look at what we prefer to ignore. Humans have natural biases, blind spots produced by the very processes that made us human. For him, becoming human wasn't a smooth transition from animalistic violence to greater rationality. Instead, violence increased in proportion to our increased mental capacities. However, humans invented an ingenious way of controlling violence, making religion and civilization possible.

Girard recognizes the positive aspects of mimesis but primarily develops his theory around the conflictual/violent elements.<sup>1</sup> He explicitly acknowledged this focus on the negative: “Thus, in my work, the ‘bad’ mimesis is always dominant, but the ‘good’ one is of course even more important.”<sup>2</sup> This emphasis on the negative has understandably cast the mold for Girardian scholarship. Some have even suggested that his ideas constitute an ontology of violence.<sup>3</sup> Girard himself considered such an interpretation to be mistaken.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the emphasis on the negative side of mimesis remains predominant in Girardian scholarship.

*Good* mimesis is an underdeveloped area I intend to address in this present work, which “is of course even more important.” Girard acknowledged the transformative effect of the revelation of Christ on human history, but for much of his career he eschewed the theological aspects.<sup>5</sup> I will show instead that mimetic theory gives us a realistic understanding of our past, can be harmonized with Whitehead’s creative ontology, and leaves ample room for a hopeful

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1. “But I would say that mimetic desire, even when bad, is intrinsically good, in the sense that far from being merely imitative in a small sense, it’s the opening out of oneself.” René Girard, “Violence, Difference, Sacrifice: An Interview with René Girard.” Interviewed by Rebecca Adams. In *Violence, Difference, Sacrifice: A Special Issue of Religion and Literature* 25 no. 2 (Summer 1993), ed. Rebecca Adams, 11-33. Reprinted in *René Girard: Prophet of Envy*, ed. Cynthia Haven, 51-72. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

2. René Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*. (London: Bloomsbury Revelations), 56.

3. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 397–98; “Stories of Sacrifice,” *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 2 (1995): 75–102, <https://doi-org.dtl.idm.oclc.org/10.1353/ctn.1995.0003>.

4. Girard said in his 1993 interview with Rebecca Adams that many have misinterpreted his views, “notably John Milbank.” Girard, “Violence, Difference, Sacrifice: An Interview with René Girard,” 20.

5. Cynthia Haven explores the difficulty Girard had with speaking about his personal conversion within the academic world. See chapter 7 of Cynthia L. Haven, *Evolution of Desire: A Life of René Girard*. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2018), 148.

future. Without diminishing Girard's sobering and honest view of human history, I will develop his thoughts concerning the revelation of Christ and creative desire further to give them greater emphasis.

Girard's method of inquiry began with literary criticism. This discipline brings to us an inherent appreciation for narrative intelligibility. However, *narrative* for Girard is more than fantasy. Trevor Merrill notes:

In contrast to the once-fashionable deconstructive school, for which reality is a text, Girard placed great emphasis on his theory's realism: in his view texts speak about concrete reality and not only or primarily about themselves.<sup>6</sup>

Girard believes that great narratives expose our illusions of independent individualism and unveil the relational structure of reality. His first book, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1961), argues that what distinguishes great novels from the mediocre is the surprising conclusion in which the protagonists experience a type of conversion by recognizing how desire has bound them to their model/rival.<sup>7</sup> This revelation makes a profound reconciliation between the *self* and the *other* possible. In contrast, mediocre novels maintain the 'romantic lie' of an independent self and so remain blind to the true nature of conflict as well. Thus, Girard's literary insights begin spilling over into other disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, and philosophy.

In his second book, *Violence and the Sacred* (1972), Girard analyzes classical origin myths showing that despite cultural differences,

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6. James Alison and Wolfgang Palaver, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Mimetic Theory and Religion*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2017), 459.

7. René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

similar events gave birth to similar stories.<sup>8</sup> Structurally, these myths contain elements of mimetic desire, conflict, and what he identifies as scapegoating violence. One can see a definite shift in focus to anthropology in this work. The book received a positive review by G-H de Radkowski in *Le Monde*, heralding it as an “enormous intellectual achievement” and “the first truly atheistic theory of religion and of the sacred.”<sup>9</sup> In this context, Girard’s third book, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (1978), came as a surprise. Divided into three sections, it deals with anthropology (no surprise), psychology (no surprise), and the Judeo-Christian Scriptures (surprise!)<sup>10</sup> And so, with this book, Girard enters the theological domain from an anthropological perspective.

The strength of Girard’s theological contribution lies in this anthropological approach. However, the theological contribution made by mimetic theory can be limited if it is not contextualized within a creation or cosmological theology. This present work aims to provide a larger context and a trajectory to the Girardian narrative. Both Girard and Whitehead recognize a common weakness among many philosophies in the tendency to become entangled in theory and removed from experience. Mimetic theory provides process philosophy with a more grounded historical narrative, in which its concepts can find concrete application. In turn, process philosophy provides mimetic theory with cosmological context and ontological depth.

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8. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

9. Chris Fleming, *René Girard: Violence and Mimesis*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 111.

10. René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).



## Alfred North Whitehead

Whitehead's ideas are an adventurous quest into the nature of reality and the structure of possibility. Whitehead's universe is a living organism, made of intertwining processes—a flux of pulsating, rhythmic, and meaningful events. He shows us how contrasts seek harmony, and in the process, produce tension that fuels a creative advance. These are not mere mechanistic movements—they are more like organisms. For him, processes have an internal dimension that includes all the richness of feeling, motivation, and meaning. To convey this depth of what he means by process, Whitehead uses the word *experience* in a new way to denote a single and most fundamental ontological category.

We can't be disconnected observers with this view of reality. Human experience is not an exception in an otherwise mindless universe; rather, it is an exemplification of, and gives us insight into, the structure and workings of our universe. Whitehead sees his conceptual framework as a “system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted.”<sup>11</sup> He also recognizes a collective direction to events: “The teleology of the Universe is directed to the production of Beauty.”<sup>12</sup> Process philosophy concerns itself not only with explanation but also with appreciation. Reality appeals to our sense of value and worth. Our cosmos is ordered in such a way as to make the actualization of value possible. This value derives from the fact that God's valuation of possibilities is oriented toward truth, beauty, and goodness.

There are many nuanced ways of reading Whitehead. One of his terms, *atomism*, has led to significant differences in interpreting

11. Alfred N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*. Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh During the Session 1927-28. (New York: Free Press. Kindle Edition), 3.

12. Alfred N. Whitehead, *Adventures of ideas*. (New York: Free Press, 2010), 265.

him, altering the meaning of his philosophy. What did he mean by this term? Many have interpreted Whitehead's atomism, and consequently his concept of an *actual entity*, to refer to very small particles. However, several scholars have opposed this view. Wallack, for instance, describes such an interpretation as reducing Whitehead's philosophy to "a colorful and poetic atomism created for our literary delight."<sup>13</sup> Auxier and Herstein also argue for a more careful reading of Whitehead. They interpret Whitehead's *actual entity/opportunity* as both a unit of existence and an explanatory tool:

. . .we really must stress that Whitehead's concept of the "actual entity" is not a bit of physical existence. It is a conceptual tool that helps the inquirer arrest temporal passage and the flux of the physical universe.<sup>14</sup>

This interpretation of Whitehead is of particular relevance in chapter four where I begin analyzing mimetic processes using this perspective. As will become clear, I interpret *atom* to refer to a unit of value and *epoch* to refer to a unit of time.

### Intertwining Narratives

Whitehead and Girard's ideas have inspired many in diverse disciplines. The areas of overlap most relevant for this project are psychology, anthropology, philosophy of religion, and theology. Underlying all these areas of inquiry is Whitehead's understanding

13. Wallack, F. Bradford, *The Epochal Nature of Process in Whitehead's Metaphysics*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), 28, 29.

14. Randall E. Auxier and L. Gary Herstein, *Quantum of Explanation: Whitehead's Radical Empiricism*. (Abingdon, UK: Routledge), 7.

of the nature of reality, his metaphysics. This metaphysical schema provides us with the most creative possibilities for new meaning as we harmonize it with Girard's understanding of the processes that made us human. Whitehead's metaphysics can be further categorized as ontology and cosmology. Ontology considers the nature of reality, including the relationship between mind and matter and between possibility and actuality—what sounds like a standard definition of ontology. However, when we realize that reality refers to something very different within a process approach than in a typical substance approach, the meaning completely changes. Reality refers more to an ontology of becoming than being, for reality is not made of things but processes. This open ontology aims not at certainty but enriched experience. Based on these ontological assumptions, cosmology considers the origins, development, and future of our universe.

Whitehead's ontological claims directly affect Girard's claims regarding the processes that made us human. Mimetic theory can be understood as a series of nested and overlapping processes. Human imitative capacities form the base process on which to build the process of mimetic desire, which is then nested in a more complex relational matrix that births, what Girard describes as the scapegoating process, which then becomes the basis for ritual and religion, and so on. Whitehead's cosmology is inseparable from his ontological principles and seeks to understand the progression and trajectory of processes. As such, his cosmology offers a unique process perspective of Girard's anthropological theory of how humanity, religion, and culture developed and where they may be heading.

Girard and Whitehead are both empirical thinkers—passionate about getting to the actual events that explain our ideas, rather than getting lost in abstract theories. Their respective structures of

thought are logically coherent, for the most part.<sup>15</sup> Their ideas also display a narrative intelligibility. The method by which I will bring their thoughts together should inherently include the empirical and logically coherent qualities. However, narrative intelligibility will be the primary method of harmonization. I aim to show that the various claims made by Girard and Whitehead enrich each other in a combined and enlarged narrative.

Mimetic theory naturally lends itself to a narrative progression, starting with the events that made us human, continuing with the evolution of culture and religion, followed by the textual developments in both origin myths and biblical scriptures, and finding a crescendo in the story of Jesus. Although process philosophy does not have such an obvious plot, on an ontological level, Whitehead unveils the narrative capacity in all reality, and on a cosmological level it unites the micro stories and provides a trajectory to the narrative.

*Process* and *narrative* can be considered equivalent when referring to a structured series of events. Both concepts speak of a pattern of events that unfolds organically. From a substantialist perspective, processes are meaningless mechanical movements, but from the process philosophical perspective, processes have meaning, internal relationships, and teleological aims. Process, in this context, is therefore closely aligned to what is meant by narrative. Whitehead also applies these philosophical insights when he speculates about the origins and history of culture and religion.

In combining these two systems of thought, Whitehead's metaphysics provides both a cosmology and an ontology, complementing mimetic theory. Girard's ideas mainly concern anthropology, but

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15. Their ideas have been subject to extensive critical scholarship that have highlighted inconsistencies and proposed refinements. Yet, the central ideas have retained their integrity.

include some ontological observations. Within an enlarged story, Whiteheadian cosmology provides a larger context by which the trajectory of the combined narrative becomes clearer. Conversely, the Girardian anthropological narrative provides an opportunity for a concrete application of process concepts, thereby illustrating them in actual human history. In general, Girard enriches Whitehead through exemplification and Whitehead enriches Girard through an expansion of the overall narrative and deeper ontological insights into the processes. New opportunities for either harmony or conflict will emerge through new contrasts between the two discourses as well. As we navigate these potential conflicts, we embark on an adventure that can steer us to a beautiful new space: a larger and more useful meaning-making framework.

Some Girardian and Whiteheadian concepts have direct correlations and fit naturally into an ontological category. By ontological category, I mean that it is within the nature of reality for processes to have repeatable patterns. For instance, the *process* concepts of *prehension* and *appetition*<sup>16</sup> correlate with the concept of *mimetic desire*.<sup>17</sup> On a larger narrative scale, Whitehead's idea that history has a general direction, moving from force to persuasion, might complement Girard's idea that sacrificial violence undergoes a radical critique, culminating in the death of Christ which opens a new non-violent possibility of being human. But Whitehead and Girard also may disagree, especially about the evolution of religion and civilization. For Whitehead, the pursuit of beauty and peace fundamentally grounds the development of both religion and civilization. In contrast, Girard sees scapegoating violence as the origin and

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16. Defined in Chapter 2.

17. Defined in Chapter 3.

generative event behind religion and culture. These ideas so fundamentally inform their respective narratives that we may wonder if their potential incompatibility will greatly reduce the value of bringing the narratives together.

However, we should be able to overcome these potential obstacles and create what Whitehead calls, a novel complex harmony, greatly enriching the theological contributions made by each framework. Open and relational theology is a category that explores the non-deterministic nature of reality (openness) and the extent to which God is involved in temporal reality. Process philosophy explicitly supports open and relational theological views.<sup>18</sup> Mimetic theory, in contrast, does not make many explicit statements about God. Rather, as its anthropological narrative unfolds, it is through the radical transformation of meaning that the true nature of God is implied. Are open and relational ideas implicitly present in mimetic theory? We'll explore this question. I aim to make these implied meanings more explicit.

Whitehead passed away before Girard developed his ideas but as we'll see, many of his questions anticipated Girard's ideas. We know Girard was at least aware of Whitehead, for in an article examining Girard's place amongst philosophers, the author notes that Girard once quoted Whitehead.<sup>19</sup> The book Girard quoted from was, unsurprisingly, *Religion in the Making*.<sup>20</sup> Girard writes: "In 1926, A. N. Whitehead deplored our situation, in which 'Christianity lacks a

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**18.** Open and relational theologians might not support all the tenets of process philosophy. However, the openness and relational nature of reality are key principles for process philosophy and as such it explicitly supports open and relational theological views.

**19.** Guy Vanheeswijck, "The Place of René Girard in Contemporary Philosophy." *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 10, (2003): 95-110. doi:10.1353/ctn.2003.0004.

**20.** Alfred N. Whitehead, *Religion in the Making: Lowell Lectures, 1926*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

clear-cut separation from the crude fancies of the older tribal religions.”<sup>21</sup> So Girard had at least a rudimentary acquaintance with Whitehead’s thought.

Any introduction to either Girard or Whitehead could easily fill a book, as scholars of these figures know. Indeed, many excellent resources do just that. So, instead of providing comprehensive overviews of their ideas, I will adopt a strategy stressing the aim of overall narrative intelligibility mentioned before. The next two chapters are written in a narrative style, introducing the respective theories of Whitehead and Girard. These stories will serve as background paintings, providing the outlines of a plot within which the progression of meaning will find context. Detailed analysis commences in chapter four. This narrative style might differ from that commonly used in academic works, but that is the function of backgrounds—they need to be less technically focused to emphasize the details to come.

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21. René Girard, *Je Vois Satan Tomber Comme L’éclair*. (Paris: Grasset, 2016), 9.

subject and model are reduced to that of rivals. It's the disappearance of the object which makes it possible.<sup>25</sup>

This whole process reveals that the awakening of desire connects not simply to the object of desire, but to the fulness of being represented by the model.<sup>26</sup> This sense of lack-of-being is what unconsciously fuels rivalry. We perceive the rival as withholding what we desire. Genesis 3 has a similar perspective on the development of human consciousness, namely that the twisting of desire forms the basis for misunderstanding God and ourselves. This imagined god withholds what we think we lack. The felt lack within produces impatient grasping after the forbidden fruit.

This sense of lack (unique to the human sense of self) drives humans to fight more vehemently and do more barbaric things than animals. Animals engage in rivalry, but most animals will avoid physical damage in their rivalry. Typically, for instance, rivalry for a female animal will be resolved as soon as one of the animals demonstrates superior power. But humans may continue fighting until someone dies, for our sense of lack connects not directly to the nature of the object desired, but to an underlying sense of an insufficient self.

### Harmonization Terms and Clarifications

I will seek next to describe Girard's concept of mimetic desire through Whiteheadian categories, to see what can be gained. When Girard

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25. Ibid.

26. "Kristeva and Girard agree that human origins are shaped by imitation. According to Girard, mimetic desire arises in humans because we lack being. Looking at another to inform us of what we should desire, each of us finds our attention drawn toward the object that the other recommends. But ultimately the object is only an indirect means of drawing nearer the other, whose apparent plentitude of being we wish to acquire." (Alison, *The Palgrave Handbook of Mimetic Theory and Religion*, 39).



speaks of a person, be that the subject or the model, we are referring to an identity that could span multiple Whiteheadian “occasions.” Similarly, *desire* could span multiple occasions. As we have seen, according to Whitehead, appetite (or desire) serves as a guiding influence prevalent in every process of prehension. The sketch below will demonstrate that desire can be viewed as a complex instantiation of appetite and become the actual value (or what Whitehead calls the datum) prehended.

Using Whitehead’s concept of the “actual occasion” as an analytical tool means there are various ways in which the process of mimetic desire can be arrested and atomized. We have previously established that we can use two perspectives to analyze a process, namely coordinate and genetic analysis. From a coordinate perspective, we seek to identify a definite fact, a realized value. In this instance, the process of mimetic desire produces the realized fact of a person desiring something. From a genetic perspective, we seek to identify the processes that produce this fact. Therefore, we will consider the episode in a person’s life in which the desire forms to be the actual entity and subsequently, virtually divide the event utilizing prehensions. Hereafter in our discussion, I will use the terms “person,” “actual occasion,” and “actual entity” to refer to this episode or epoch within the person’s life.

Girard describes the event of mimetic desire as a triangular movement involving the subject, the model, and the object of desire. Whitehead describes prehension as having a vector character involving emotion, purpose, value, and causation.<sup>27</sup> Above, we defined mimesis as an unconscious form of imitation that extends beyond external relations and which includes the unconscious process of

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27. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 19.

perceiving and duplicating the interiority of another. Mimesis, however, does not necessarily imply an exact copy. Rather, it speaks of the unconscious transfer of a feeling. In the Whiteheadian schema, every prehension “consists of three factors: (a) the ‘subject’ which is prehending, namely, the actual entity in which that prehension is a concrete element; (b) the ‘datum’ which is prehended; (c) the ‘subjective form’ which is how that subject prehends that datum.”<sup>28</sup>

If Girard’s mimetic processes correspond to Whitehead’s concept of prehensions on an ontological level, we should be able to use this same analytical description. Therefore, we can view the process of mimetic desire as:

- (a) the episode within the person’s life (subject or actual entity) in which that mimetic relationship (prehension) is a concrete element;
- (b) the desire (the datum, or actual content) which is mimetically reflected (prehended); and
- (c) the ‘subjective form’ as how the person contextualizes and interprets (prehends) that desire (datum).

Put simply, we’ll be looking at that period in a person’s life in which a mimetic desire formed, the relationships that formed the desire, and the subjective processes that might have shaped the desire. Girard does not develop his thoughts around (c) - - the interpretation and contextualization of the desire. His emphasis remains on the imitation (a and b) of desire. He neglects, but does not explicitly exclude, the process of interpretation. Here Whiteheadian insights could be enriching to Girardian discourse.

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28. Ibid., 23.

### Analysis of Mimetic Desire

For Girard, all desire is desire for being, meaning that the subject perceives the immediate experience of self as less than what it could be. Metaphysically, to put it in Whitehead's terms, the actual entity prehends a previous occurrence of itself which emphasizes the fact that what it was, and what it is, is less than what it could be. This prehension of a previous instance is in the process of being harmonized with conceptual prehensions, that is, possibilities. For Girard, this sense of lack originates the process of mimetic desire. For Whitehead, the possibility of greater satisfaction as a unified self (being) awakens appetite in entities. He writes: "Appetition is immediate matter of fact including in itself a principle of unrest, involving realization of what is not and may be."<sup>29</sup> The tension created between what is actual and what is possible is the energy that animates the occasion. Appetition becomes an internal drive toward more intense, diverse, and complex experiences, thereby increasing/reaching satisfaction. Whitehead continues: "In its self-creation the actual entity is guided by its ideal of itself as individual satisfaction and as transcendent creator."<sup>30</sup>

Both Whiteheadian appetite and Girardian desire emerge in the space between what is and what could be; they can be understood as the tension created by the contrast between the actual and the possible. We can describe both as an urge to transcend the current self. Possibilities of an ideal version of the self, contrast with the previous occasion of self and are now seeking to be included in this creative process. So far, we have prehensions of the previous occasion of self that affirms a sense of lack, and prehensions of possibilities of

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29. Ibid., 32.

30. Ibid., 85.

greater “being” or an ideal version of self. Desire is how we feel the future or how we feel possibility. In other words, desire is how an entity envisions possibilities to be part of its future actuality.

Another prehension is in process, which is vital to Girard’s understanding. It is the relationship between the subject (the actual entity) and a model. Within the context of the human psyche shaped by its social environment, this difference between what is and what could be, could easily give birth to a sense of existential lack-of-being. Instead of focusing on the possibilities of being that are open to us, we would then focus on the insufficiency of the current self. Consequently, we tend to perceive in others what we sense we lack in ourselves. The possibilities of an ideal self find their concrete representation in the model.

However, attempting to apprehend the substance of a model proves to be complicated. What the subject prehends is, in fact, the model’s desire, which is the most substantial aspect of the human self. However, here we locate where misinterpretation can take place and desire become twisted. The subject’s desire for fulness of being is deflected to the model’s object of desire, which can never satisfy the underlying desire. All of this happens unconsciously. Consciously, a person might simply realize that they desire something specific. However, where this desire comes from is not easily recognized. We often perceive desires as originating within ourselves. However, in reality the self doesn’t just *have* desires, it’s formed by desire; both Girard and Whitehead recognize that desire is formative of self.

The formation of a mimetic desire need not necessarily spark the beginning of conflict, even though that tends to be Girard’s focus. The creation of a mimetic desire could be a positive development that gives direction and brings fulfillment to a person. For instance, a person might recognize qualities such as courage or kindness in a

model. To be inspired to be kind and courageous is unlikely to cause conflict with the model. We will discuss this type of possibility in more detail in the next chapter.

### **Intensification of Appetition into Mimetic Desire**

Whitehead's concept of appetition applies not only to humans but to all creative processes. Girard draws a distinction between appetites and desire, specifically to highlight the complex psychological movements within mimetic desire.<sup>31</sup> The correlations I draw don't nullify this distinction but exemplify it. I propose that what distinguishes Girardian desire from Whiteheadian appetite is the intensity and complexity of the psychological process. Girard's concept of mimetic desire is a complex and uniquely human instantiation of appetition. Whitehead recognized that the complexity of human consciousness reshapes appetition:

In physical experience, the forms are the defining factors; in mental experience the forms connect the immediate occasions with occasions that lie beyond. The connection of immediate fact with the future resides in its appetitions. The higher forms of intellectual experience only arise when there are complex integrations, and re-integrations, of mental and physical experience. Reason then appears as a criticism of appetitions. It is a second-order type of mentality. It is the appetitions of appetitions.<sup>32</sup>

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31. Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 41.

32. Whitehead, Alfred. N. *The Function of Reason*. (Baltimore: Agora Publications. Kindle Edition. 2014). Location 361.

Let's go back to our thought experiment. The episode we are considering seeks to describe the creation of a mimetic desire in which we have precisely the kind of complex integration Whitehead speaks of. We can see at least two forms of appetite operating here: first, the appetite that guides the process of prehension toward satisfaction, and second, the prehended desire itself. Using Whitehead's terminology, the first appetite is satisfied within the boundaries of the actual occasion. Its satisfaction is the creation of a desire. But the second complex desire isn't satisfied within the boundaries of this occasion. Rather it becomes part of an enduring identity that spans multiple occasions. We can interpret Whitehead's "appetitions of appetitions" as both a complexification and an intensification of desire. Whitehead's statement that reason "appears as a criticism of appetitions" has striking correlations with Girard's ideas of the emergence of symbolic thought, something I will explore later.

According to Girard, mimetic desire increases our capacity for both good and evil. To review,

If desire were not mimetic, we would not be open to what is human and what is divine. Mimetic desire enables us to escape from the animal realm. It is responsible for the best and the worst in us, for what lowers us below the animal levels as well as what elevates us above it. Our unending discords are the ransom for our freedom.<sup>33</sup>

We can see the theme of increased capacity and intensity of experience in both the concepts of appetite and mimetic desire.

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<sup>33</sup>. Girard, *I see Satan fall like lightning*, 16.

Despite using distinct terminology, they are both observing the same ontological process—the same reality.

For Whitehead, every occasion has a formative aim (a teleological lure) and the relevant possibilities necessary for a unique self, which constitutes a primordial fact—God, in Whitehead's language. Some possibilities are more attractive (desirable) than others within the creative event of becoming. Desire opens us up and connects us more intimately with specific relationships and possibilities. Appetition/desire, by its very definition, disrupts indifference and intensifies preference. Whitehead recognizes God's unique role in awakening our desire for beauty.

Girard does not often use God-language when describing the formation of desire, but that doesn't make these perspectives incompatible. Taking into account that for Whitehead, "God" represents not a separate entity but a process that is operative in all processes, it would be consistent with—even necessary—that the initial aim that shapes an occasion would come through the process of prehending other occasions. One might argue that the initial aim comes logically prior to the prehensions. However, there is no reason why the initial aim could not be a more general desire, which is subsequently defined more clearly by the prehensions. Girard's insistence that desire begins outside the person remains consistent with Whitehead's view that we are lured toward a beauty larger than our immediate selves.

When Girard asserts that mimetic desire opens us to what is human and to what is divine, I recognize in that statement a harmonization with Whitehead's idea of a divine lure. Girard recognizes the creative role of mimetic desire and the beautiful possibilities it opens in relationship with others and with God, but in his work as a whole does not develop the concept of this creative side. But

although Girard focuses on the conflictual aspects of mimetic desire and the many perils into which this increased capacity has led humanity, I would argue that the overall aim of this capacity and the trajectory of the Girardian narrative moves toward a greater degree of freedom—"Our unending discords are the ransom of our freedom."<sup>34</sup> Although it is not always obvious in his work, at least here we can see that Girard recognized a positive trajectory in mimetic processes. In fact, Girard states that "mimetic desire is inherently good," that is, in its ultimately creative capacity.<sup>35</sup> This creative mimetic trajectory correlates with the Whiteheadian concept of a divine lure towards beauty. For Whitehead, freedom is an essential part of beauty.

Mimetic desire represents both a continuity of the more general concept of appetite and a radical discontinuity from its animal instantiations. The Neurobiologist, William B. Hurlbut, who engages mimetic theory in his work, also recognizes the broader principle of desire, writes:

The emotions, which have their evolutionary origin in physiological regulation of basic body processes such as circulation, posture, and readiness of response, are drawn more deeply into the inward intensity of wider intentions, empowering persistence toward more distant goals. As the philosopher Hans Jonas explains, "Animal being is thus essentially passionate being" (Jonas 1966, 106). And passion

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34. Ibid.

35. Girard makes this statement in a 1993 interview with Rebecca Adams. See "The Goodness of Mimetic Desire," in *The Girard Reader*, ed. James Williams (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 62-65. This is an excerpt of a longer interview; see Girard, Rene. "Violence Difference Sacrifice: A Conversation with Rene Girard," interviewed by Rebecca J. Adams. *Religion and Literature* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1993), 9-33.



motivates and sustains effortful action toward broader and more distant horizons of need. Lifted beyond the immediacy of fundamental physical and chemical conditions, life extends its reach and realm. Jonas continues, “Fulfillment not yet at hand is the essential condition of desire, and deferred fulfillment is what desire in turn makes possible” (Jonas 1966, 101). In all of these ways, desire, as a primal principle of being, extends the scope of life, magnifying its freedom, intensity, and inward sense of meaning.<sup>36</sup>

Hurlbut’s insights are equally relevant to process philosophy and mimetic theory. The themes of self-transcendence, intensification of experience, freedom, and desire run through both. I would argue that Girard’s concept of mimetic desire is indeed a complex, intensified, and uniquely human instantiation of Whiteheadian appetite.

### **Analysis of Mimetic Conflict**

The event of mimetic conflict can also be analyzed as an actual occasion. Girard helps us understand that conflict arises most often as the result of frustrated desire. Furthermore, desire becomes frustrated because someone stands in the way, or becomes an obstacle, between the subject and the object of desire. For Girard, the obstacle is most often the model because they share a desire for the same object, through the subject’s imitation of the model’s desire. And when two hands reach for the same object, conflict frequently happens. This can be an uncomfortable truth, for it reveals that the one I am in conflict with is also a model for me on an unconscious level.

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36. Antonello, *How We Became Human*, Kindle Location 2898.

To return to our analysis, now looking at the second instance, in which we have what Whitehead calls *appetition of appetition*. Let us say the episode or epoch we will identify constitutes the period in the person's life where frustration arises and conflict results. We'll keep the same actors as in the previous episode in which we saw how mimetic desire comes about. However, the occasion is new. In this occasion, the subject inherits (prehends) the desire from the previous occasion, a previous instance of self. Consequently, the link to the model becomes vague and the illusion that the desire originates in self becomes intensified. Let's look at how the subject misinterprets this. Underlying the subject's desire is the conceptual valuation (and misinterpretation) that a new sense of fulness will be achieved in attaining the object of desire. The object of desire takes on a significance far beyond an external object as its attainment is now linked to the person's sense of self. Note however, that though this is a misinterpretation, it does not make the feeling less real.

Suppose the subject and the model both act to attain the object, two hands both reaching for the same thing. One of the actors in this scenario will likely deprive the other of attaining the object, with conflict erupting. This conflict will be likely to escalate far beyond what is reasonable, for unconsciously the value and very existence of self is at stake. But as the subject imitates the model, the person doesn't recognize the origin of their desire in the other, nor the misinterpretation that has joined the object of desire to their sense of self-worth.

So far, we have focused on the scene of conflict between subject and model, the scenario that Girard tends to stress. Combining Whiteheadian and Girardian concepts of desire, however, creates a richer insight into the process and helps us construct a creative model of desire. And it's to that construction of co-creative desire we turn in the next chapter.



## 5

### Co-Creative Desire

We now turn our attention to how combining Whitehead and Girard's understanding of desire, as done in the previous chapter, can help us construct a creative model of desire. As mentioned before, Girard chose the word *mimesis* rather than imitation because he wanted to emphasize the unconscious nature of the process.<sup>1</sup> This unconscious aspect, this lack of awareness, begins in the formation of desire, continues in conflictual relationships, and proves essential for the scapegoating process to work effectively.<sup>2</sup> "To scapegoat someone," Girard remarks, "is to be unaware of what you are doing."<sup>3</sup>

In our ancient origin myths, we find a conscious attempt to describe the events that were driven by these unconscious processes, but this results in a fundamental misinterpretation that manifests as blind spots in our myths. Girard uses the term *conversion* to describe the process that exposes our misinterpretations. Conversion can be

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1. "There is less awareness in mimetism and more in imitation." (Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 44).

2. "Moreover, there is always a blind spot in our perception of reciprocal hostility, competition and rivalry. We are ready to deconstruct anything except the idea that we are self-directed and that the persecutors are always the others." (Ibid., 8).

3. Ibid., 62.

understood as a revelation that makes us aware of what we were ignorant of, and which brings about a greater consciousness of the movements that shape our desires. As such, the death of Christ, according to Girard, is the moment that subverts our mythical misunderstandings most clearly because it exposes scapegoating for what it truly is.<sup>4</sup> Jesus' words on the cross: "Father forgive them for they know not what they are doing"<sup>5</sup> vividly illustrate this point about unconsciousness. In this moment of unveiling, we can see human actions were driven by motivations to which we were oblivious.

However, Girard did not apply this process of conversion to his concept of mimetic desire with the same rigor as he applied it to the concept of scapegoating. If mimetic desire is, by its very definition, reliant on the process being unconscious, then the form of that process will be transformed when it is brought into greater conscious awareness. Girard does recognize that something new happens in the person of Jesus and that we, too, can break free from the violent mimetic cycle.<sup>6</sup> However, exactly how and why the structure of desire changes is not clear in his work. I plan to show how the structure of desire changes as it is brought into conscious awareness.

I would reiterate that the process of desire, however, will never be fully conscious. Instead, we can find a new balance between the

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4. "The Gospels become the hermeneutical key that allows us to rethink both mythology and ancient texts as the progressive coming-to-terms of humanity with the violent matrix of the cultural order. Christ's sacrifice is the moment of complete disclosure of the arbitrariness of the victimary mechanism on which the sacred and symbolic order of archaic societies was built and kept stable. In this sense, Girard goes against common assumptions, and takes on board the Judeo-Christian tradition." (Ibid., 9.)

5. Luke 23:34.

6. "...but the individual isn't bound hand-and-foot to mimetic desire. Jesus himself was not. To talk about freedom means to talk about man's ability to resist the mimetic mechanism. Hence, the only freedom we have is to imitate Jesus, that is, by not joining the mimetic cycle. Or to imitate someone like Jesus." (Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 159).

conscious and unconscious aspects of desire, exactly the type of environment that makes creativity possible. The structure of desire then becomes semi-mimetic and semi-conscious. Part of this new unveiling of the structure of desire is accepting that others are involved in forming my desire. I propose the terminology “co-creative desire” to describe this synergetic and collaborative type of desire.

We will begin by examining the most basic Girardian assumption regarding the formation of desire. For Girard, models transform into rivals through acquisitive mimetic desire because of a foundational sense of lack-of-being. By providing a different foundation for the awakening of desire, or at least a more nuanced understanding of it, we lay the foundation for transforming the structure of mimetic desire.

In a cosmos drawn forward by beauty and goodness, there will be a natural advance in human development from force to persuasion, according to Whitehead.<sup>7</sup> We can add to this by saying that if indeed we have a God of love luring the world forward, we can also expect a progression from indifference to love and from self-preservation to self-giving. As humanity becomes more conscious of the processes that undergird it, we can expect that the human obsession with being and actualization through grasping or attempting to possess some substance will be tempered with an appreciation for *becoming* itself. Or stated another way, our definition of *being* needs to acknowledge the significance of the relationships and processes that shape our being. I’ve identified three areas in which we can make the movements of desire more conscious, thereby transforming the structure of desire into a more creative movement.

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7. Whitehead, Alfred. N. Chapter V. “From Force to Persuasion.” In *Adventures of Ideas*. (New York: Free Press, 2010).

## 1. From Lack-of-being to Possibilities-of-being

We've described the Girardian sense of lack-of-being as the tension between what is and what could be. Within the human psyche, this sense of lack is uniquely linked to our relationships with others. However, this sense of lack doesn't always have to develop into an existential crisis that transforms others into rivals. One of the ways we can introduce a more nuanced understanding of this sense of lack-of-being would be by examining where the focus falls in this tension between what is and what could be.

Let's begin with a hypothetical example: young children might be perfectly content with playing in a sandpit, yet if asked if they want to go to the beach, a new desire might be awakened by this new possibility. Then if some of the children got to go to the beach and others were kept behind in the sandpit, the tension would increase.

Let's take this step by step. Beginning with all the children in the sandpit, the possibility of going to the beach could awaken a new desire simply because the children are now comparing two situations. The tension between what is, and what could be, can be experienced as a sense of lack in the present situation, but probably not as a sense of *existential* lack-of-being. If the focus shifts onto the future possibility, then the experience would simply be excitement about new possibilities, rather than an overwhelming sense of insufficiency. I am happy to admit that this tension probably always includes a bit of both—an awareness of the present and a drawing toward a better future. However, where we place most of our focus will determine whether a perceived lack of the present, or the promise of an abundant future, serves as the greater motivator. Remember, Whitehead identifies three aspects to a prehension and the third is the *subjective form*. The subjective form is the way in which the situation is interpreted. How future possibilities become

reconciled with present realities is not a determined process but a creative interpretation.

When the situation progresses, and some kids are selected to go to the beach, the tension becomes more complex, for now we have not simply a comparison between two situations but between a “self” and an “other” like me. This triangular-relational dimension to desire is far more likely to give rise to a feeling of lack-of-being and shift the focus from the object/situation desired onto the being of the other—the *other* that seems to have what *self* lacks. A disproportionate focus on the present lack, combined with a comparison to others, will develop into a sense of lack-of-being and distort one’s vision of others as models that seem to contain a fullness of being.

I want to develop this thought further by applying this shift-in-focus principle, thereby defining two types of lack. The first type of lack refers to a sense of insufficiency based on my present state compared to others. Girard most often refers to this type of lack in describing twisted mimetic desire. The second type of lack simply represents the difference between the present and the future and might not involve a sense of insufficiency at all, nor a comparison to others. The fact that the present does not contain the fulness of actuality, but continues to actualize possibilities, can logically be interpreted as a form of lack. With this distinction it becomes possible to simultaneously be content with my present self and excited about future possibilities—a logical type of lack. This distinction will also become significant when we consider how desire and lack applies to God.

In summary, we can posit a sliding scale in the tension between the present lack and the future possibility, influenced by where we place the focus. We have the creative freedom to interpret the situation in such a way that it energizes us to reach for new possibilities,



or we can interpret the tension as a judgment on our present state of lack. Because we are social creatures, this tension takes on a complex structure. In the following section, we will look at how a process perspective of possibilities provides a solid foundation for this shift in focus.

## 2. Relocating the Possibilities-of-being

From a Whiteheadian process perspective, desire is awakened by possibilities of beauty that promise greater intensities and satisfaction of experience. In this generalized description of desire, we have no need for a human model. God is the source of this vision of beauty. Understandably, some may protest that Whitehead's description of desire remains too abstract, especially within the human context. But Whitehead allows for the idea to be brought into a more practical realm by noting that these divine possibilities are always contextualized to the situation in which an entity finds itself.<sup>8</sup> Whitehead sees God working through the reality of our conditioned standpoint—the relationships we find ourselves in—and describes the process as follows: “He is the lure for feeling, the eternal urge of desire. His particular relevance to each creative act, as it arises from its own conditioned standpoint in the world, constitutes him the initial ‘object of desire’ establishing the initial phase of each subjective aim.”<sup>9</sup> Consequently, part of the contextualization of possibilities comes through the awakening of desire by means of the models with whom we are in relationship.

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8. Whitehead sees the process of bringing pure potentials and actual entities together and adjusting desires accordingly, as the very definition of *relevance* and a function of the primordial nature of God. See Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 32.

9. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 344.

Combining Girardian and Whiteheadian perspectives of desire opens an important insight into the nature of the model. We could look at it this way: the model does not contain the fullness of being I lack, but instead plays a role in contextualizing and communicating divine possibilities of being. As such, one can honor the model as an inspiring exemplar and enabler of a fuller being without any need to possess the model's being. Exemplars are non-conflictual models. The qualities we find inspiring in them are transcendent values such as courage, kindness etc. Objects of desire are absent or vague in these relationships. Also, becoming more conscious that my desires always have a transcendent goal, namely a transcendent self, means that objects of desire become less significant. I think most spiritual leaders would agree that diminished desire for 'stuff'—material objects without a deeper relational meaning—is a good thing.

From a process perspective, the desirable possibilities of being always reside outside of any one entity, in the divine vision of beauty. Recognizing the model consciously as a mediator brings a healthy balance to the relationship, for it prevents me from forming an unhealthy attachment to one who supposedly possesses the fullness of being I desire. This recognition also makes it unlikely for rivalry to escalate dangerously in the mistaken belief that the rival has the power to give or take away my very being. This results in a more transparent and authentic model of desire, meaning that I'm more aware of the role others play in shaping my desires and simultaneously aware that the possibilities of a fuller being reside beyond these models, in the mind of God.

Authenticity is often associated with the absence of influences—and seen as the opposite of imitation. Such a view is deeply flawed because, according to both mimetic theory and process philosophy,

the very nature of reality is relational. Authentic desire is therefore not found in the absence of influences but in the recognition of the influences that uniquely shape desire. Authenticity has more to do with the interpretive/creative process than the singularity of origin.

The Whiteheadian perspective of relationality can also enrich the Girardian concept of *interdividuality*. Girard recognized that an individual constitutes a dynamic movement formed by its relationships with others, hence the neologism “interdividual.” As we have seen, desire energizes relational movements. Whitehead agrees but extends the idea of subjective relationship as a characteristic of *all* entities. Every relationship therefore becomes an opportunity, a contextualized possibility, to move closer to the divine vision of beauty. The *telos*, the ultimate aim of my being, will never therefore be located in any one relationship. Yet every relationship can be valued because it contains contextualized possibilities for greater beauty. This includes relationships with other humans but also with other non-human entities and processes.

Becoming more aware of where the possibilities of being arise, greatly influences our relationships with others, including those defined as models. Locating possibilities of being beyond any one model makes it more likely that our relationships with models will be healthy: neither over-attached nor dangerously rivalrous. A greater consciousness of this process of desire will likely reduce superficial desire for objects and enhance our desire for more meaningful relationships. Combining the insights of Girard and Whitehead makes the process of desire more transparent and, as such, allows us to participate in the process more consciously. The result is more authentic desire as one acknowledges the influences, recognizes the underlying source of possibilities, and applies creative interpretations.

### 3. Redefining Being

We began exploring the role others play in the formation of self in the previous section. From a process perspective, “being” shouldn’t be understood as a static possession; neither is it limited to my present condition. Rather, the possibilities of being open to me already constitute part of the dynamic that forms me in this moment.

The philosopher Jean-Luc Marion sheds further light on this theme and the human pursuit of being.<sup>10</sup> He begins his argument by showing that the being we seek will not be found in the measure of actuality but in possibility.<sup>11</sup> Marion’s observation has obvious correlations with Whitehead’s categories of actuality and possibility. In other words, simply knowing that I exist has little value. But what intrigues me and makes me come alive are the possibilities of being, which are open to me.

Marion develops his argument further by showing how certainty in my own existence is vanity, for it has a circular reference in which I assure myself. However, I need not self-certainty but an assurance that comes from elsewhere. For such an assurance that comes from elsewhere gives me a foundation that is more secure than my own mere vanity or self-certainty. From a Girardian perspective, this need for an assurance coming from elsewhere would partly explain why models emerge so naturally. Marion continues to show that this assurance, though, has to assure me of something more than my own existence—for we have already seen that the measure of my being won’t be found in actuality. What’s the use of simply existing? It has to assure me of my possibility, and a specific possibility in particular: that I am loved.

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10. Jean-Luc Marion and Stephen E. Lewis, *The Erotic Phenomenon*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008).

11. *Ibid.*, 11-37.

Finally, Marion asks if this love can only be reciprocal or whether, in some way, I can find the initiative to love; whether there might be a love that “issues from deep within an elsewhere that is more inward to me than me myself, preceded or validated by no assurance at all.” Such a love gives no assurance of being. In fact, it completely subverts the pursuit of being as a substance to possess. For this love is an act of giving or losing your being and it thereby overcomes the fear of loss. “Loving surpasses being with an excess that has no measure.”<sup>12</sup>

In the act of love, the pursuit of being becomes irrelevant. Love is therefore the antithesis of the pursuit of being (as a possession). This love does so much more than affirm my being; it continually draws me beyond the certainty of actuality into the future of possibility and transforms me into one be-loved. Marion writes: “For I could not be, nor accept to endure in being, without at least the open possibility that at one moment or another someone is loving me. For me, to be, signifies nothing less than to be-loved.”<sup>13</sup>

Girard helped us see how the movements of desire shape our sense of self. Whitehead shows that the continual flow of reality is a fundamental characteristic of being. Marion’s argument touches on the misunderstandings present in our pursuit of being and offers an alternative way of being, namely, to be-loved. Being be-loved means to find my existence in a source of love beyond myself. The possibility to love and be loved totally redefines my sense of self for this possibility does not reside in any one model, and not even in my current self, but in “an elsewhere that is more inward to me than me myself.”<sup>14</sup>

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12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 21.

14. Ibid.

Another contemporary philosopher who argues for a creative vision of mimetic desire is Robin Collins. In an essay entitled “Nature as a Source of Non-Conflictual Desire,” he begins a creative Girardian analysis by surveying religious and philosophical intuitions about the nature of being and desire.<sup>15</sup> He concludes the survey by noting that the “mystical idea of nature as a deep, unified, creative whole not only appears throughout the traditions discussed in this section, but as argued later, is suggested by major developments in twentieth-century science.”<sup>16</sup> He then continues to develop his definition of persons as distinct “loci of interbeing” whose “telos is to reflect, internalize, and appropriately interrelate with the reality of other beings.”<sup>17</sup> He names this interrelation with others, *interbeing*, a term borrowed from the Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. Regarding the way in which our awareness of interbeing can influence the nature of desire, he concludes:

Insofar as we come to truly recognize that our own being is constituted by our interbeing with others (including nature), we will come to recognize that the more they gain in fullness of reality, the more we enrich ourselves by internalizing their reality and their interconnectedness with us.<sup>18</sup>

The Girardian scholar Rebecca Adams clarifies how mimetic desire can be creative and further constructs a model of generative interdividuality or interbeing. Girard recognized her insights as an

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15. Ryba. *René Girard and Creative Mimesis*, 289.

16. *Ibid.*, 290.

17. *Ibid.*, 291.

18. *Ibid.*, 297.

extension of his own thought.<sup>19</sup> Adams shows that twisted mimetic desire always involves some form of objectification. The object then becomes the location or opportunity for conflict. However, Adams demonstrates how desiring the subjectivity of another as the “object” within the mimetic triangle transforms the very meaning of an object and enriches both the self *and* the other. Adams’s model of mimetic desire as love precludes objectification of either the one desiring or the one desired. This suggestion beautifully flows together with Whitehead’s ontological insights, for to objectify anything, from a Whiteheadian perspective, is to miss its internal value and actual meaning.

I conclude that redefining being by introducing the transcendent quality of love brings a balance to our relationship with others and opens new creative possibilities. For my being will not be made fuller by possessing what others have or possessing what others are, but by the act of love, in the process of becoming.

### The Scriptures and Co-creative Desire

Let’s look at how all we have said overlaps with theology and statements found in the New Testament. These ideas are not explicitly Girard’s or Whitehead’s, but rather my own harmonization of co-creative desire with the biblical texts.

The Apostle Paul also recognized the danger inherent in social comparisons: *“For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.”* (2 Corinthians 10:12.) The form desire takes and the consequences

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19. See Adams, Rebecca J. “Loving Mimesis and Girard’s ‘Scapegoat of the Text’”: A Creative Reassessment of Mimetic Desire.” In *Violence Renounced: Rene Girard, Biblical Studies and Peacemaking*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Telford, PA: Pandora Press, 2000): 277-307.