

## **Mimesis, Evolution, and Differentiation of Consciousness**

by

Eugene Webb

University of Washington

Originally presented at a conference at the Free University of Berlin in June 1994.

Published in Paragrana: Internationale Zeitschrift für Historische Anthropologie, 4, no. 2 (1995): 151-165.

We are gathered to share our reflections on the links between mimesis and autopoiesis, or self-organizing systems. Autopoiesis is a topic that could lead in many directions, since it encompasses a vast range of types of system, physical, social, psychological, and so on, from the macroscopic to the microscopic. The astro-physical universe could be studied as such a system, and so can the evolution of forms of life. Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, for example, discuss the human brain in these terms; rather than as something like a computing machine, they interpret the brain as a cooperative system of agents that develop links like those of a network, but one that is less like a single network than like "a patchwork of subnetworks assembled by a complex process of tinkering."<sup>1</sup> In a somewhat similar manner, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, has studied the development of economic markets as fluid systems which derive both their dynamism and their form from the fact that they "contain," in two different senses of the word, the panic contagion of mob psychology: they both protect against it and bear it within them — so that "the reality of mercantile society... manages to make coincide

---

<sup>1</sup>*The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, p. 105.

both a stable order and a state of permanent crisis."<sup>2</sup> Since I am not myself a specialist in any of these domains, perhaps the most useful contribution I can make to this discussion may be to step back from such particular systems a few paces to consider a broad perspective and then offer a few reflections on the role psychological mimesis of the sort studied by René Girard and Jean-Michel Oughourlian may play in the processes that constitute our lives in their various dimensions.

An especially useful broad perspective, it seems to me, is that of animal and human evolution as a whole. René Girard has suggested that psychological mimesis — that is, the unwitting imitation of the attitudes and desires of others — is the basis of a victimizing mechanism that is in turn the basis of humanity as we now know it, having served not only to ground group formation but also to generate signification and language and even our capacity for focused attention.<sup>3</sup> This would imply that mimesis was a key element in at least the later stages of human evolution. It will be worthwhile to consider, therefore, both from this point of view and from others, what role mimesis may have played at still earlier points in the evolutionary process.

By a pleasant coincidence, there is a recent study that discusses evolution from the earliest forms of life to the development of electronic external symbolic storage systems, considered as integral extensions of mind, and that also presents a hypothesis about the role of mimesis in this process: Merlin Donald's *Origins of the Modern Mind: Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition*. I say this is a coincidence because Donald gives no indication of any acquaintance with Girardian thought on this question and his own perspective is quite different — in ways that can be harmonized with the Girardian in some aspects but not all.

---

<sup>2</sup>*Le Sacrifice et l'envie: Le libéralisme aux prises avec la justice sociale*, p. 329. See also Jean-Pierre Dupuy and Paul Dumouchel, *L'Enfer des choses*.

<sup>3</sup>René Girard, with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, pp. 99-103.

Donald's own angle of vision is that of an experimental psychologist (just as his book makes no reference to Girard, so it also makes none to Freud, Jung, Lacan, or even to psychoanalysis as such). He is interested in how organisms have evolved with capacities for sensory awareness and mental organization and especially in the role that the capacity for different types of mental organization can be understood to have played in the development of animal and human culture. Donald sees cognition and culture as developing in a series of four stages that depend on particular psychological capacities. On the level of the life we share with apes, there are what he calls "primate cognition" and "episodic culture," which are founded on episodic memory. This is the ability to remember a set of experiences as linked into a rudimentary pattern, or episode, thus providing a mental grasp of a concrete situation. There is little or no grasp of abstract pattern in the situation, which tends to be remembered with pattern and detail indiscriminately mixed. Apes are able to employ episodic memory to solve problems (as in the famous example of Wolfgang Köhler's chimpanzees that used boxes and poles to enable them to reach bananas), but they have a very limited ability to abstract a pattern from the mass of detail it is embedded in and thus to represent a situation in a way that would make it available for disengaged reflection. Accompanying episodic memory on the level of primate cognition there is also procedural, which is distinct and employs different neural pathways. This is more primitive and is shared with a large number of lower species as well. It consists of completely non-representational memory of how to perform learned operations.

Where Donald's discussion becomes especially interesting for our present purpose is in his account of the next evolutionary step: the transition from episodic to mimetic culture, which he describes as "a category of archaic but distinctly human culture that mediated the transition from ape to human" (p. 162) and which he suggests is the "missing link" not only between apes and humans but also between the earliest hominids, such as *Australopithecus afarensis* and *Homo habilis*, and our own species. The

archeological evidence regarding the earliest hominids shows no indication of a major cognitive and cultural change that would indicate an advance beyond the episodic mind. *Australopithecus* appeared in Africa about 4 million years ago, where it lived in the same small region for millions of years — which suggests it had no special cognitive development beyond that of the apes it lived among. *Homo erectus*, which appeared about 1.5 million years ago and survived until about three hundred thousand years ago, is a quite different story. *Erectus* manufactured a variety of sophisticated tools and migrated far from its African place of origin, spreading widely over the Eurasian land mass and adapting to a wide variety of climates. It used fire and cooked food and lived in a complex society in which cooperation was essential, engaging in cooperative hunting, training others in the use of tools, and so on. This implies the development of a type of culture and means of cultural transmission capable of supporting such a life.

What made this possible? With the development of language, there would be no mystery about this, but not only has *Erectus* left no evidence of linguistic ability, he seems to have lacked the anatomical basis for it. Donald says that “on anatomical grounds, high-speed vocal language was a relatively recent invention, unique to *Homo sapiens*” (p. 164). More importantly, he also suggests that before language could be developed, the cognitive stage for it would have had to be set.

Hence his hypothesis of mimesis as a cognitive development leading beyond episodic memory and providing a means both of communication and of representation. Mimesis enables the invention of symbolic gestures which can be used expressively for social communication or artistic enjoyment. It can also be used for the purpose of rehearsing and refining a skill on the part of an individual and for teaching skills to others. The pedagogy of tribal societies today is still primarily mimetic in character, as is instruction in manual skills even in our own culture. (I remember hearing how Ernst Leitz GmbH ran into difficulty when they first moved their lens manufacturing operation to Canada. Canadian workers could not be adequately trained with instruction manuals,

no matter how detailed. The problem was solved only by moving German technicians to the Canadian plants so that Canadian ones could learn by working alongside them.)

With the capacity for mimetic representation comes the ability to objectify for reflection. Equally important, mimesis also adds the capacity for referential signification. In miming one recognizes, for example, the difference between the miming act itself and the acts it mimes. Also, miming is an intentional process, and ability to perform it brings with it an ability to grasp the intentions of others. Human children can do this (for example, following the direction of a mother's gaze or looking at what she points to), but chimpanzees cannot; the episodic mind is inherently egocentric. Donald suggests that archaic hominid mimetic skill must have started on the level of intention, "beginning with elementary intentional attribution, long before graduating to more exotic communicative media" (p. 171).

Now this conception of mimesis may not be exactly congruent with that of the Girardians, since their discussion places more emphasis on unwitting and non-representational processes, but it is easy to see the relevance of Donald's hypothesis to those processes as well. I will speak further about that in a moment. Before doing so, however, I would like to sketch briefly the last two of the four stages of development Donald discusses. The first were the episodic and mimetic. The third is the mythic, and the fourth the theoretic. In the mythic stage language develops and is used to build narrative structures that go beyond single episodes to provide stories that interpret human life. Donald considers that, as such, they play a major role in the formation and maintenance of group identity. (Here too we can see a potential link with Girardian thought.) Myths are narratives that explain where the group came from, why it took its present form, why its members do things the way they do, and so on. In this way myths offer models of the universe that define collective purposes and the place of individuals in them.

Mimetic representation is limited to fairly simple episodes, but language and metaphor make it possible to link up many episodes and levels of meaning. As Donald puts it, "The myth is the prototypal, fundamental, integrative mind tool" (p. 215). He suggests that language may even have developed among early hominids primarily for the purpose of the large scale modeling of universes of meaning that myths offer. That is, vocal language may have developed as a byproduct of the effort to develop integrating narratives through the extension of simpler mimetic instruments such as ritual, music, chant, and a repertoire of standardized mimetic gestures.

Although there will never be a way to prove definitively that mimesis served as the basis of the culture of *Homo erectus*, without that as a hypothesis it would hardly seem possible to explain the vast differences between the achievements of *Erectus* and prior hominids and apes, nor is it possible to see how the cognitive capacities of *Homo sapiens* could have suddenly leapt so far beyond theirs.

*Homo sapiens sapiens*, our own species, seems first to have appeared in Africa about 125,000 years ago, in Europe and Asia about 45,000 years ago, and in the Americas about 25,000 years ago. Speech may have been developing from as long as 200,000 years ago, on the basis of evidence of the physical capacity for it, such as the larynx and the shape of the vocal cavity, and evidence of it from at least 50,000 years ago seems generally convincing. Mimesis is a more primitive form of representation than language, remaining closely tied to the episodes it traces. It is also slower in communication, more ambiguous, and comparatively restricted in subject matter. The development of language made it possible not only to link episodes into longer narratives but also to break with narrative as such and develop more strictly schematic forms of symbolic representation that focused on the features essential to abstract patterns. This produced the transition to theoretic cognition and culture.

Also fundamental to the theoretic stage is a further step in representation: the development of what Donald calls external symbolic storage. This can take the form of

writing, of pictures, of graphs, and so on. The crucial contribution this makes is that it renders the representation publicly available for criticism and refinement. Anyone can tinker with the representation to make it more adequate. Anyone can also call its adequacy into question and devise tests to assess it.

The development of theoretic thinking also set in motion a reflection on the operations that go into it which, if carried to its conclusion, leads ultimately, in a process we are still going through, to the sort of self-appropriation of our interpretive and critical capacities that Eric Voegelin referred to as the "noetic differentiation of consciousness" consisting of "the adequate articulation and symbolization of the questioning consciousness as the constituent of humanity."<sup>4</sup>

This is a sketch of the evolutionary process to the point that we still find ourselves involved in it. We are still embedded largely in mythic consciousness, and we are still struggling to assimilate the full implications of theoretical consciousness. We find ourselves therefore engaged in a multi-dimensional process of self-appropriation. The noetic differentiation of consciousness bears on the operations of conscious intentionality, distinguishing them and relating them to one another. But we are not only self-reflective agents of theoretical knowing. We also remain caught up in uncritical movements of mind under the control of the other types of mentality that evolved earlier and that still remain fundamental to our functioning as human beings. But, being uncritical, these can easily go wrong.

This is where the Girardian reflections on mimesis seem especially important. If mimesis is as basic to our mental functioning as Donald's hypothesis suggests, then it is to be expected it might affect us in many more ways than he considers. Jean-Michel Oughourlian, following the lead of Girard's hypothesis about our unwitting mimesis of the attitudes and especially the desires of others, suggests that mimesis is the essential

---

<sup>4</sup>"Reason: the Classic Experience," p. 93.

ground of the human self: that is, that our psychological "selves" are constructions built up of memories that take shape around patterns of desire formed through unwitting imitation of the desires we perceive, or feel we perceive, in others. There is, he suggests, what amounts to a mimetic reflex that continually reaches out to appropriate desires, which then become the nucleus of the self that forms around them. In his groundbreaking study, *The Puppet of Desire*, Oughourlian shows how this hypothesis correlates with experimental evidence from hypnosis in which multiple psychological selves, each with its own set of memories and desires, can be artificially generated or dissolved through suggestion, which he explains as itself an expression of mimesis — the subject imitating (that is to say, appropriating to himself or herself) what he or she perceives as the wishes of the hypnotist.

René Girard himself has worked out an extensive analysis of the psychology of rivalry, envy, obsession, masochism, and sadism through considering the permutations that mimesis can undergo in human relations. A person A, for example, may sense (whether truly or mistakenly makes no difference) a desire for an object C on the part of person B and, by a process of unwitting imitation of B's desire, may come to desire it himself. If the object is also perceived as being desirable to B because of its ability to enhance B's power or ontological plenitude, then it may also become an object of what Girard calls "metaphysical desire," the desire to possess not only the goods of the other but also, and more importantly, the other's "being," or source of power. Depending on the way A perceives B's power and tries to appropriate it, physically or imaginatively, this metaphysical desire can express itself as a will to dominance, in the case of sadism, or to submission, in the case of masochism — which Girard interprets as actually an attempt at imaginative participation in the power of the dominator.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup>*Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, p. 334: "To invite brutal treatment from a love partner who plays the role of the model, or conversely to treat the partner brutally — making him submit to the ill-usage one believes oneself to suffer at the model's hands — is always to seek to become a god

All of this, as Girard and Oughourlian interpret it, takes place below the level of explicit reflection. Donald's discussion of mimesis, on the other hand, focuses primarily on cases of conscious imitation, such as imitating another in the use of a tool. His reference to the way the mimetic capacity may also serve as the basis for discerning the intentions of others, however, also points toward mimesis on a deeper, less explicitly conscious level. It may be useful therefore to identify some terms that can be used to distinguish between mimesis on these different levels. I will refer to the conscious imitation process as "explicit" mimesis, and to Girard's unwitting process as "implicit" mimesis. Explicit mimesis, that is, would be imitation we engage in with awareness that we are doing so. What Merlin Donald talks about is explicit mimesis, but it seems clear that for that to be possible there must already be a neurological base that can also operate implicitly. And if it does so, it is easy to see how it could draw us into the sort of misguided pursuit of false objects of desire that Girardian thought analyzes. Implicit mimesis is also what Jacques Lacan was talking about in his discussion of "the mirror-stage." In the mirror-stage we identify not with our actual life but with an image of it, pursuing not our real possibilities but a phantasm. Thinkers like Lacan and Girard call our attention to the fragility of the psychic life founded on the mimetic neurologic base. Mimesis may play a necessary role in making us social beings, but its inherent ambiguity makes it unreliable as an automatic pilot.

If the Girardian approach to mimesis offers an essential supplement to an evolutionary one, however, the evolutionary may also have important implications for the Girardian. The fact that there is reason to think the mimetic function and its neurological basis must have evolved before hominids and have played an essential role in the culture of *Homo erectus* for at least a million years before our own species appeared calls into question the necessity of one of the central elements in Girard's own hypothesis about

---

mimetically. The subject increasingly aims at the model in preference to the object it initially designated... ."

human origins: the role of the victimizing or scapegoat mechanism. In *Violence and the Sacred* Girard argued that the earliest humans would have been driven by their mimetic automatism into a murderous free-for-all of rivalry by the imitation of each other's desires for particular objects. He further argued that the only possible resolution of that crisis must have come, through a further mimesis: from the triggering of the victimizing mechanism, as the hostile feelings of various individuals came to coincide mimetically and thereby to polarize onto a single victim (p. 161). This union of fighters into a brotherhood defined by their hostility toward a common enemy is for Girard the basis of society as such. Jean-Pierre Dupuy and Jean Dumouchel have argued, on the other hand, that this crisis of competitive desire can be resolved in another way through the economic market place. Girard might reply that markets could not themselves develop until an initial peace and basis for cooperation were arrived at through the workings of the victimizing mechanism. The existence long before our own species, however, of a mimetic capacity that could express itself in a variety of ways besides only mimesis of object-desire, suggests that even if the victimizing mechanism Girard hypothesizes is real and important, it is not necessary to assume it as the diachronic point of origin of humanity as we know it and of every possibility of human cooperation.

Let us consider some other possibilities. One of the important features of the human species is a capacity for musical expression and involvement. Language may have developed for the sake of narrative construction, as Donald suggests, or it may have developed, as Girard suggests, for the sake of reference to the originary victim, but musicality is a completely different function. "In virtually all studies of the structure of intelligence," says Donald, "musical talent is isolated as a separate factor from verbal skill" (p. 40), and it seems to have developed earlier (pp. 38-40). Charles Darwin assumed that the voluntary vocalizations of early hominids were achieved with the standard mammalian vocal apparatus we share with apes, with its first use being the production of cadences or modulations that would have resembled singing more than

speech, like those which gibbons produce during courtship. In *The Descent of Man*, he wrote that "it would be altogether opposed to the principle of evolution, if we were to admit that man's musical capacity has been developed from the tones used in impassioned speech. We must suppose that the rhythms and cadences of oratory are derived from previously developed musical powers."<sup>6</sup>

Music is clearly a mimetic activity and could not develop at all unless the neurological base for mimesis were already present. Rhythm, the most rudimentary musical structure, is simply repeated patterns of beat, and the capacity of humans both to produce it and to respond to it can only be understood on the basis of mimesis. A drummer invents or discovers a pattern and repeats it. The audience also repeats it, if not vocally, then silently and with motions of the feet, hands, head, and so on. Melody also is founded on mimesis; it is always a sequence of notes short enough to be perceived as a *Gestalt* and repeated so as to impress it on the hearer and draw him or her into a felt need to reenact it. Dr. Oughourlian discusses music in just these terms in *The Puppet of Desire*

---

<sup>6</sup>*Great Books of the Western World*, 49: 570. The idea of a biological, evolutionary basis for musical ability seems further supported by recent research on song birds, which also suggests that mimesis plays a role in music even on that level. It also suggests both that social factors and mimesis play a major role in determining what songs a bird will sing and that the singing of the songs shared with other birds plays a role in the bird equivalent of group formation. Michael D. Beecher, S. Elizabeth Campbell, and Philip K. Stoddard report that young song sparrows, although they are exposed to a vast number of types of song, tend to select their own characteristic songs by imitation of some three or four older birds who have neighboring territories. They say that "[t]his song-learning strategy functions to maximize the number of songs the bird shares with his neighbors — not only his tutor neighbors [the birds imitated] but also the younger birds who will eventually replace his original tutors, for they will have learned many of the same songs." See their "Correlation of Song Learning and Territory Establishment Strategies in the Song Sparrow," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA*, 1994, no. 4: 1450-54. It also seems significant in this context that these researchers found that this mimetic learning process takes place very early in the bird's life ("especially in his second and third months"), a fact congruent with Oughourlian's suggestion that mimesis works with particular force in the very young (*Puppet of Desire*, pp. 3-6).

(pp. 113-17) in connection with African possession cults, likening the musical effect to patterns of spirit-possession.

The mimetic power of music, besides giving it the ability to elicit intense feelings in individuals, also enables it to arouse similar feelings collectively in a group of hearers and thus to form an emotional bond among them. Music has been a universal element of human culture as far back as we can tell.<sup>7</sup> It certainly seems credible to think that long before speech, during the millennia of the life of *Homo erectus*, rhythmic chant and melody could have bonded individuals into groups, or at least powerfully reinforced whatever other bonding effects may have been contributed by such biological mechanisms as the hormonal effects that bond parents and infants.

With such other powerful sources for the formation of social bonds, it seems unnecessary to suppose with Girard that only the victimizing mechanism can explain how human community arose. I pointed out in my 1988 study, *Philosophers of Consciousness* (pp. 197-98), that evidence suggests that there must have been a long period of human life in primitive, comparatively less violent societies before the emergence of the type of society in which sacrificial violence of the sort Girard discusses began to play an essential role. There have been such societies — and we even have good historical information about some of the comparatively recent ones, in Africa, early Hawaii, and Polynesia, for example — but these seem to have developed as a result of the transition from a society of small, kinship-centered groups to large-scale groupings that could be held together only by powerful coercive authority. In the broad perspective of human evolution, however, this is a very recent occurrence. *Homo erectus* hunted cooperatively but never lived in such large groupings at all, and *Homo sapiens* has come to do so only in the last tickings of the evolutionary clock. Long before this, the same mimetic capacity that makes possible rivalrous desire must also have provided a powerful

---

<sup>7</sup>Bruno Nettl, *Music in Primitive Culture*, p. 6.

instrument for the formation of cooperative groupings united by shared feelings and common participation in the activities of chanting, dancing, and even rituals, which may as easily have grown out of primitive experiences of chant and dance as out of acts of sacrifice. Sacrifice seems more likely, in fact, to have come later and in connection with the sort of mythic culture that could only develop with the use of language.

Where, then, does this leave Girard's theory of origins? It seems clear that social systems must be supposed to have taken shape to a large extent on the basis of mimetic processes which evolved over millions of years as part of the evolution and autopoiesis of life on earth as a whole. Girard's hypothesis of the sacrificial crisis and its resolution by the victimizing mechanism hardly seems necessary as a diachronic theory of origin, although I think it is clearly not negligible either. Even if the scapegoat is not needed to explain how the earliest simple groupings of hominids into hunting, gathering, and perhaps rudimentary musical societies took place, it also clearly plays a role in *some* situations, as should be evident to any observer of recent history. The rise of the Nazis to power in Germany in the aftermath of defeat in World War I and the ensuing turmoil of runaway inflation and economic depression seems to have been greatly aided by their identification of a scapegoat in the fantasy of an international Jewish conspiracy. The process in which that took place looks like a textbook example of the phenomenon Girard projects. It was also predictable, in the light of his conception, that after the Shiite mullahs managed to overthrow the Shah of Iran, their traditional symbol of worldly opposition to true Islam, it would become a virtual necessity for their own survival in power to find another scapegoat toward which to direct the hostility of their followers — which they promptly did by labeling America "the Great Satan." So if Girard's theory of the grounding of society in victimization is not needed as a diachronic explanation for *every* grouping, nevertheless, as a synchronic, structural factor, it certainly seems to play a central and perhaps even essential role in the formation and maintenance of *some* groups.

This answers the question about the role of victimization in human social auto-poiesis. A further question that could be asked in the light of the picture of human development sketched here is "What is the next step?" — what is our task now, what do we need to concern ourselves with in order to contribute to the best further possibilities of human development? Donald's sketch of evolution culminates with the development of external symbolic storage as the basis for future developments in theoretical consciousness. The invention of writing and pictorial symbolism began something that he says led to the birth of theoretical thinking in ancient Greece. Now the invention and rapid continuing development of digital data processing machines and electronic transmission systems is accelerating its pace, with implications not only for science but also for evolution, since, he says in conclusion: "As we develop new external symbolic configurations and modalities, we reconfigure our own mental architecture in nontrivial ways.... [W]e may not yet have seen the final modular configuration of the human mind. Theories of human evolution must be expanded and modified to accommodate this possibility" (p. 382).

This may be true. In fact, I think it probably is. And yet this is not where I think our essential task as humans really lies. The development of theoretical knowledge through the application of electronic extensions of the brain may indeed reconfigure our mental architecture in important ways. These will provide us with objective knowledge about the world around us, and they may change the ways we gather, organize, and store such knowledge, but they will not inevitably lead to the development of a more reflective, rational and responsible human person. This last will also require an explicit reflection on the human knower and actor himself. I spoke earlier of the development of theoretical thinking as involving a noetic differentiation of consciousness, which I defined not as the development of theoretical knowledge of the world around us but as a process of reflection on the operations of conscious intentionality that distinguishes them and relates them to one another. To the extent that this takes place it is a major step in human

development, but not a step in evolution — since it is something that must be consciously re-enacted by each individual in every generation, not something that can be handed on genetically. Evolution takes place as the impersonal effect of environmental pressures, but the development of a differentiated consciousness can only take place through an exercise of freedom, and when it does, one of its effects is to increase the degree of freedom — and hence also of responsibility — on the part of the individual who enacts it. At a certain point in development, one might say, autopoiesis is challenged to become conscious and voluntary. It is in this sort of free pursuit of rational and responsible personhood that I think we find the essential human task.

There are also other types of conscious self-appropriation of our humanity that must be done anew by each individual who comes into the world. The noetic differentiation renders conscious our capacities for intellectual and rational operation. But equally important are the non-representational, non-rational operations of mimesis by which we form our relations with others and become the selves we are in those relationships. This is where I think Girardian thought has a further invaluable contribution to make. Jean-Michel Oughourlian has suggested that the discovery of the mimetic force as an essential element of our fundamental humanity is comparable in its significance to the discovery of gravitation, of which it is a social analogue, since without it no child would feel impelled to reproduce what an adult says or does and therefore would never learn language or form relationships; we would all be isolated, autistic (*Puppet of Desire*, p. 2). The realization of the role mimesis can play as an unwitting assimilation to the patterns of desire we perceive around us in the social field, moreover, can help us to win freedom from false desires and fascinations, just as the realization of its role in determining our hostilities may help us to win freedom from them too — not to mention the benefits it might bring for our potential victims.

The Girardians are well aware of these implications of their discoveries. There are, however, some other implications they have not yet fully thematized and may not

sufficiently have considered, so I would like to conclude with some suggestions for further reflection in this area.

Just as there is a noetic differentiation of consciousness, so there can also be others. Eric Voegelin spoke of what he called a "pneumatic" (that is, spiritual) differentiation of consciousness, by which he meant the realization of the difference between intracosmic or immanent divinity and radically transcendent divinity. It is the realization of this distinction, he said, that made for the break between the ancient cosmological religions of divinized natural forces and the transcendent monotheisms of Israel, Christianity, and Islam. Voegelin considered the pneumatic differentiation equal in importance to the noetic, and he thought the drama of Western thought was largely to be understood as a struggle with the problem of how these can be related to one another.

I think myself that there is a third differentiation he essentially overlooked, even if his discussion of Plato's idea of the Agathon (the Good as such) indicates that he had some sense of the issue. This is what I will call an "appetitive" differentiation of consciousness. What I mean by this is the realization of the difference between true and false desires, between, that is, our appetites for goods that offer us the possibility of real satisfactions and those that seek illusory goals and often develop through unwitting mimesis of the supposed desires of others. Girard talks about this differentiation, but only briefly, when he distinguishes between "desire" (which he always interprets as mimetic and hence artificial) and "appetite" (which he interprets as genuine but merely physical), as when he says, with reference to Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, that "some of Sancho's desires are not imitated, for example, those aroused by the sight of a piece of cheese or a goatskin of wine."<sup>8</sup> I think, however, that this needs to be understood as more than just a distinction between genuine physical appetites and illusory imaginative

---

<sup>8</sup>*Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, p. 3. For the formulation of this as a distinction between "desire" and "appetite," see *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, p. 283 and "To double business bound," p. 90.

ones. Nor do I think it will be consistently helpful to confine the use of the word "desire" to the latter alone, since the word is bound to continue in general use as a reference to genuine appetites as much as to illusory ones. Thomas Aquinas, after all, used the word, in the phrase "*desiderium naturae*" to refer to the "wonder" (*admiratio*), that Aristotle said was the beginning of philosophy, and he argued that this "natural desire" will find its ultimate fulfillment in the vision by the blessed of God in His existential actuality.<sup>9</sup> This is also the same idea as that of the "*disio*" that Dante the pilgrim speaks of as moving him to ask questions of Vergil, to follow him up the mountain of Purgatory, to love Beatrice, and God through her, and to ascend finally to the empyrean, where his "desire and will" will be moved by "the love that moves the sun and the other stars." Following Girard's use, but extending it from the physical to the spiritual, I will call this mode of desire "appetite." The other mode of desire consists of the various forms of disordered yearning that Dante has to purify by his journey through the inferno and purgatory. Dante's *Commedia* as a whole depicts a process of the education of desire based on Christian and Aristotelian teachings by which the pilgrim comes to know the difference between his genuine appetite for life in God and the deceitful lusts that dominate him while his mind is not yet clear. The purification in question is precisely the achievement of the appetitive differentiation of consciousness that I have in mind. For the problematic mode of desire I will follow Buddhist use — as also taken up by Varela, Thompson, and Rosch in *The Embodied Mind* — and call it "craving." Particular cravings may or may not be caused by mimesis, though I think with the Girardians that mimesis plays a major role in them; what is essential to craving is that it is disordered, a pursuit of a false good that leads away from true life rather than toward it.

---

<sup>9</sup>*Summa Theologica*, I, question 1, article 1.

What I think needs further appreciation, however, by both the Girardians and Buddhists is that desire, in the sense of an appetite for genuine goods, both physical and spiritual, leads toward true life — that is toward the existential fulfillment of the natural dynamism of human nature, which can be described as an appetite for genuine experience of existence in all its dimensions. These include not only the physical, in which cheese and wine can be genuinely enjoyed, but also the spiritual dimension in which, through the differentiation of desires and the practice of mindfulness, human beings can rise to and enjoy the actuality of reasonable and responsible existence.

What makes human life endlessly challenging is that the work of such existence is never simply finished but must be enacted ever again in the processes of embodied mind, with all their possibilities of becoming lost in illusions. Because we have at the root of our psychic lives a neurological basis for both episodic memory and mimetic modeling, our consciousness consists not only of our experience of organic life but also of our imaginative experience. The latter includes also an ongoing imaginative experience of our organic life, which is therefore a double experience: both the experience of embodied life and the experience of an image of that life. Unless there is an explicit differentiation of the two within consciousness, we have no sense of any duality here but merge our organic and imaginative experience as though they were simply one. This is why we experience artificial appetites as though they were vital to us.

This also is why we need not just two but three differentiations of consciousness. The noetic is needed to enable us to reflect carefully and critically in the pursuit of objective knowledge and also in the enactment of the other differentiations. But it depends on the others as well. It depends on the appetitive differentiation for the discovery of the dynamism of the appetites that drive it, and it depends on the pneumatic to deliver those appetites from fixation on mundane objects. Both the noetic and pneumatic differentiations constitute a break with the mythic culture in which the objectifying imagination did one's thinking for one, but both take on their full

significance only when they are connected with a differentiation of desire that discloses the goal of the dynamism of consciousness, that is to say, of existential appetite. The real point of the pneumatic differentiation is the break with idolatry that can free us from the illusion that any object in the world, any imaginative locus of power can satisfy our real appetite to exist. Only the adequate exercise of our capacity for existential operations (those operations that constitute our existence as conscious agents) will satisfy our real appetites — which are precisely appetites to perform those operations. The three differentiations — noetic, pneumatic, and appetitive — are mutually dependent therefore, like the legs of a tripod.

I would like to note in conclusion that this has implications as important for theological thought as they are for psychological and anthropological. Without the appetitive and noetic differentiations, it is easy for a person who tries to understand the pneumatic to slip into thinking of God as another form of objective entity, just a supremely powerful one. Such a God easily becomes a model for sado-masochistic obsession or a model-obstacle in Girard's sense. To develop this thought would take more time than we have available on this occasion, but I hope it will be taken up and pursued. The future of religious thought, and of a civilization supported by all three legs of the tripod of differentiations of consciousness, may well depend on it.

#### **Works cited**

- Beecher, Michael D., S. Elizabeth Campbell, and Philip K. Stoddard, "Correlation of Song Learning and Territory Establishment Strategies in the Song Sparrow," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA*, 1994, no. 4: 1450-54.
- Darwin, Charles. *The Descent of Man. Great Books of the Western World*, 49. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952.
- Donald, Merlin. *Origins of the Modern Mind: Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1991.

- Dupuy, Jean-Pierre, and Paul Dumouchel, *L'Enfer des choses*. Paris: Seuil, 1979.
- Dupuy, Jean-Pierre. *Le Sacrifice et l'envie: Le libéralisme aux prises avec la justice sociale*. Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1992.
- Girard, René, with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort. *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*. Translated by Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987. Translation of *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*. Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 1978.
- Girard, René. *"To double business bound": Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. Translated by Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Violence and the Sacred*. Translated by Patrick Gregory. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.
- Bruno Nettl, *Music in Primitive Culture*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1956.
- Oughourlian, Jean-Michel. *The Puppet of Desire: The Psychology of Hysteria, Possession, and Hypnosis*. Translated with an introduction by Eugene Webb. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991. Translation of *Un Mime nommé désir: Hystérie, transe, possession, adorcisme*. Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 1982.
- Varela, Francisco, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch. *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 1991.
- Voegelin, Eric. "Reason: the Classic Experience." In Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis*. Edited by Gerhart Niemeyer. Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978.
- Webb, Eugene. *Philosophers of Consciousness: Polanyi, Lonergan, Voegelin, Ricoeur, Girard, Kierkegaard*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1988.

