

Is Competition Negative for Learning?

Imitation, Learning, Competition, and Innovation

A Girardian Perspective

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### **Abstract**

This article contains a discussion on how imitation may be considered an essential premise for learning and innovation. Imitation has been considered, until lately, a wilful representation of the world. However, today imitation or mimesis is viewed by many first and foremost as a desire, evoked by the other. The emphasis on the other is fundamental in René Girard's mimetic theory. Such an understanding of imitation also has implications for how we understand learning.

Currently, learning is seldom seen as a direct relationship between the subject and the object; there is always a model or mediator present in the process, enabling and/or hindering learning.

Because of the instability of imitation, there is no point from which to measure the degree of learning, other than studying the actions of people imitating others. Thus, the essential factor in learning depends upon the relationships, the quality of the model/mediator's feedback, and the intensity of the desire. Therefore, the act of learning consists of a triangular framework. When desire vis-a-vis the other becomes too intense, it inverts the learning process and becomes a hinderance to learning. Learning can, however, be optimal when there is a high degree of competition. Competition and cooperation seem to exist simultaneously - despite a strong scepticism towards competition among teachers. To find the right balance between imitating a model and the intensity of the desire entailed in imitation seems to be decisive for the degree of innovation.

**Key Words:** Girard, Imitation, Mimesis, Desire, Competition, Rivalry, Violence, Innovation

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**Biographical notes:** Per Bjørnar Grande is professor at the Faculty for Education, Culture and Sports, Department of Pedagogy, Religion and Social studies. His main research interests are on Imitation and learning, Anthropology of religion, and Comparative Literature. All these themes are seen through the theoretical framework of the French philosopher René Girard's work on mimetic desire.

Imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation. (Aristotle. *Poetics*, 1448b5-10.)

## **Mimetic Desire**

The French-American literary critic, religious scholar, anthropologist and philosopher René Girard (1923-2015) is known today as one of the most influential and controversial contemporary thinkers. During the course of over fifty years, Girard developed an interdisciplinary cultural theory based on research in the field of literary theory, anthropology, the science of religion, philosophy, psychology and theology.

Girard's system is extremely ambitious as he tries to re-think the founding principles of human culture from basically two structures: *mimetic desire* and *the scapegoat mechanism*. According to Girard himself, his system has been developed at a most inconvenient time. The great systems, which flourished in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, appear to have vanished with Freud. Today there is an immense scepticism surrounding this kind of thought.

Girard's system is a scientific hypothesis. On a par with Darwin's hypothesis of evolution, Girard's aim is to provide a coherent theory on cultural origin and development. He does not claim to have found the only truth concerning human development, but he postulates a hypothesis, capable of integrating a number of facts that make historical phenomena plausible.

Mimetic theory is no didactic theory; no more than Freud's, Darwin's or even Piaget's theories can be labelled didactic theories. On the other hand, every theoretical innovation within the human sciences has an impact on the teaching field. In this respect, Girard's emphasis on mimetic desire and the amount of competition, which it produces, seems especially important when one tries to understand innovation in learning.

## **Imitation and Learning in Antiquity**

In order to grasp the importance of mimesis related to learning, I will begin by discussing how mimesis or imitation was understood in Antiquity. The term *mimesis* is considered to have been first used in the fifth century BCE (Sørbom, 1966, pp, 12-13, 18). It can be traced back to artistic sources where it was manifested in magical rituals and dances. In the fifth century, mimesis referred to external objects, without becoming the object's double (Gebauer, Wulf, 1995, p, 42). But at the same time, in the practice of magic rituals and dances, objects or things were imitated, which meant that there was an attempt to be identical to the object. Both the term *mimesis* and related words have probably been used in the context of the Dionysian Cult-dramas. All words related to mimesis are also related to imitation (Sørbom, 1966, pp, 12-13.) From the original concept, one can derive three main meanings of the word (Else, 1958, p. 79):

1. To mimic. A direct mimicry of men and animals through appearance, action, song and dance.
2. To imitate. A more general imitation, which is not expressed through direct mimicry.
3. To represent. To depict a person through a material form, for example, a statue, a picture and so on.

Since Antiquity, imitation has been emphasized in the way disciples imitate their masters. The imitation in learning was often instrumental; for example, in the Jewish-Christian tradition the disciple learnt what the master said by heart and was supposed to imitate the life of the master (Gerhardsson, 1973, pp. 25, 413-415).

## **Aristotle and Plato on Imitation and Learning**

From Plato onward, mimesis was discredited with regard to learning and knowledge. Socrates claimed that mimetic learning should be avoided because it could become habitual (Plato, 1997, *Republic III*, c-d, p. 1033) and Plato's philosophical dialogue was created in order to avoid imitation (Melberg, 1995, p. 16). Aristotle, however, is more positively disposed towards a mimetic learning concept. He even describes the Socratic conversation as an imitative form (Aristotle, 1984, *Poetics*, 1447b10), thereby indicating the way the participants learn from the others, and especially how the others learn from Socrates. Plato, on the other hand, as the inventor of the Socratic dialogue, would never have called his dialogues imitative, as that would have undermined both the philosophical ideal of anti-mimesis and the importance of such a philosophical discussion.

Aristotle's view was that knowledge becomes knowledge by experiencing through custom (1984, *Magna Moralia*, 1190b25-32). He seems to dismiss a biological foundation for learning and ethics. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, he clearly touches upon a theory of morals that abolished inherent qualities and referred to *habit* to explain how intellectual excellence is dependent on learning. In addition, he considers moral excellence to be a result of habit. From this perspective, none of our moral habits arise in us by nature (Aristotle, 1984, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a14-20). In this view, the mimetic nature of learning and good habits are therefore first and foremost created through imitating a good and excellent model. Passions, on the other hand (appetite, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, love, hatred, longing, emulation, pity and feelings in general accompanied by pleasure or pain) are elements that belong to the soul (Aristotle, 1984, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1105b20-25). These feelings are a part of our nature, and we feel them without conscious decision. We are neither good nor bad in feeling these passions, since they are ours by nature, and we are neither good nor bad by nature (Aristotle, 1984, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106b7-10). According to Aristotle, they are

amoral except for resultant actions such as shamelessness, envy, adultery, theft and murder (1984, *Nichomacian Ethics*, 1106a3-6, 1107a9-26).

Thus, according to Aristotle, good or bad behaviour is mimetic, arising from conscious choice. He maintains that this depends on how we act on our passions. Excellence, therefore, involves feeling fear, pity, confidence, anger, pleasure and pain at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right aim and in the right way (1984, *Nichomacian Ethics*, 1106b19-24).

Thus, passions for Aristotle is basically motivated by learning and habits, which again emphasizes free will. However, today we would clearly disagree with Aristotle and see anger, fear, envy, pity and such as something brought about by imitating each other's desires. Our choice, considering both Freud's understanding of the subconscious and Girard's desire for the other's desire, limits our freedom to choose the positive option.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Girard criticises Freud's understanding of desire as object-related, and primarily driven by two separate desires: the Oedipus complex and narcissism (Golsan, 1993, 21-24). Girard does not see mimesis as primarily sexual (Freud) or governed by the will to power (Nietzsche). Neither is mimetic desire primarily understood in moral/ethical terms such as good and evil. However, the Freudian act of projection resembles the act of doubling, the intense mimesis of the other that creates doubles. From a Girardian perspective it is the doubling of desire that leads to violence. Mimesis is born out of a desire according to the other and controlled by models. In this respect desire can assume any form depending on the mimetic influences. The Oedipus complex, the death wish, narcissism, sado-masochism, paranoia etcetera are interpreted as different forms of mimetic binds, caused by violence. These complexes and illnesses are not necessarily something inherent but are usually activated by different mimetic

## The Violence of Catharsis

One might think that tragedy would be the place to reveal imitation as Aristotle saw it, as an imitation of serious action (Aristotle, 1984, *Poetics*, 1449b24-25). Tragedy, however, is not reality, and the imitation is symbolic as it purges the audience of their violent impulses (catharsis). This action is based on imitation, but its symbolic performance is enacted in order to prevent the imitation of tragic deeds. In contrast to Aristotle's own view, catharsis may be seen as violent, because it can lead to violence. Much of the research on violence claims that watching violence escalates the potential for violence. Tragedy, especially from a mimetic

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games (Grande, 2009, p. 28). The Oedipus complex for instance, is not regarded as something inherent in the child, but something that appears when he or she imitates the father's (or the mother's) jealousy and aggression (Girard, 1987, pp. 352-367). Therefore, Girard blames Freud for seeing the child as guilty, since he or she only imitates the mimesis of the parents. Such complexes are not, according to Girard, biologically founded in humans, they are consequences of some kind of violent mimesis. Many illnesses and complexes can be seen as variations of mimetic desire. They are therefore neither static nor refer necessarily to the early years of childhood. Human psyche changes according to its mimetic models. In this respect Girard dismisses the primacy given to libidinal desire in Freudian theory and the Hegelian desire for acceptance (Girard 1988, p. 201) - even if the latter resembles Girardian desire. Acquisition in Girardian mimesis is mimesis *according to the other's desire*, and the other's desire can take numerous forms.

point of view, is just as likely to support the violent desires inherent in human beings, as liberate them from those same desires.

Aristotle, whose tendency is to write from the perspective of the good and excellent human being whose actions are based on free will, does not see any problem in imitating violence, which again highlights his view that repetition is less important in people's relations to the world. Aristotle separates imitation from the pathological conditions of violence and rivalry, without any moralizing comments. Because of this, and because of Aristotelian catharsis, his emphasis clearly lies on positive imitation. And the paradox is that, in *Poetics*, Aristotle emphasizes how fundamental imitation is, while at the same time, his understanding of tragedy is rather anti-mimetic: tragedy should lead to anti-mimesis, an anti-mimesis of the tragic persons. Tragedy, according to Aristotle, purges the spectators of the need to imitate the cruelty of the actors, who are imitating the tragic heroes (1984, *Poetics* 1449b21-28). This experience of catharsis is also present in music and learning (Aristotle, 1984, *Politics* 1342b11-17). One could speak of mimetic acts that end up anti-mimetically. If one interprets Gebauer and Wulf's claim that in *Poetics* the poet 'creates something which there are no models for' (1995, p. 53) in a negative, or, in a mimetic manner, the lack of models stems from replacing imitation with creativity, paving the way for a non-realistic *ars poetica*. In my view, only violence can transform reality in such a way.

Imitation today should encompass the negative as fully as the positive and life affirming. In this way, Plato's fear of mimesis, his desire to expel the mimetic artist, can be viewed as the result of seeing the potential disruptive force of imitation. One could therefore conclude that he understands the dangers of conflictual imitation better than Aristotle. And from this



perspective of fear of imitation, Plato, despite his stress on ridding oneself of imitation, has, by seeing its disruptive nature, become one of the first to identify it as a desire.

Imitation in Antiquity was seldom seen as a dynamic force capable of great innovation. The somewhat limited understanding of imitation in Antiquity arose from seeing it first and foremost as a re-presentation of life. Imitation was thought to represent life anew through both rituals and writing, but the process was considered to be limited to simple and wilful copying. However, very few have, until recently, been able to perceive that imitation is a desire deep within us, and that we imitate, often unconsciously, both the positive and the negative, and are unable to control its effects. This is the kind of imitation I wish to introduce in order to understand learning in a less idealistic and more disruptive way.

### **Contemporary Understanding of Imitation**

Our understanding of imitation in the modern world differs from the understanding in Antiquity, since today it is linked to desire and the subconscious. Imitation is both a desire and a drive, giving it a darker, crueller, more subversive and dynamic meaning - also in learning. Learning and cultural transference is imitative, and, especially in its early stages, comes about as a desire to want what other people want. We request that another person pay attention to our action. Action as such is not enough. This is a conceptualization of imitation that the Stanford philosopher René Girard developed. From this perspective, imitation is no longer simply re-presentation; it is first and foremost an acquisitive impulse brought about by the other. This desire to acquire what others desire is therefore essential to our understanding of learning, identity and personal development.

Given Girard's conceptualization of imitation, desire may be evoked by other people's desires. In this way, desire is something distinct from instincts. Desire is fundamentally and exclusively human and exclusively imitative (Girard, 1986, p. 146). Imitation is something that can be observed taking place in newly born babies, only minutes old (Oughourlian, 2010, pp. 88-95), indicating that it is both inherited and learned, and thus, deeply imbedded in our biology (Girard, 1996, pp. 268-269). According to Susan Ross, this discovery was revolutionary, since everyone seemed to accept Piaget's theory that children learn to imitate from the age of two (Ross, 2012, p. 97). What scientists call "*deferred imitation*", which is delayed re-presentation of past events, begin as early as six weeks, (Garrels, 2011, p. 59) and at 12 months children can defer imitation for four weeks (Klein, Meltzoff, 1999, pp. 102-113). This discovery has changed our understanding of the relationship between imitation and learning, from learning to imitate to learning by imitation (Ross, 2012, p. 97).

Humans imitate before they can use language; they learn through imitating but don't need to learn to imitate (Meltzoff, 2011, p. 59).

Discoveries in development psychology related to early imitation (Meltzof, More, 1997, pp. 179-192) have changed the way we understand learning. Evidence from social psychology demonstrates that just thinking about a certain kind of action automatically increases the likelihood of engaging in that particular behaviour:

Imitation used by preverbal children has since been studied extensively and has shown to be the basis for primary forms of human intersubjectivity, including social and affective coordination, nonverbal communication, and self-other differentiation. Early imitative exchanges allow children to communicate intentions, negotiate turn-taking and role-switching, share in pretend play, and collaborate in joint projects. In essence, the contingency and reciprocity of intersubjectivity afforded by imitation in early

infancy is understood as the basis for emergence of more complex and interpersonal skills (Garrels, 2011, p. 20).

We here see that Garrels claims imitation to be the foundation in childhood development.

According to Girard, imitation and learning are inseparable, and he criticizes Piaget for restricting development to a person's childhood:

What we have in the social sciences are normally theories, as for instance in Piaget, which account for these phenomena and behaviours as limited to the early stages of psychological personal development, and they are seldom extended to the lives of adults. We don't resign ourselves to the recognition that we are imitating people we admire and envy as the expression of our desires. We see it as something we are ashamed of (Girard, 2007, p. 59).

Thus, Girard seems to claim that imitation is only fully accepted as a phenomenon, which takes place among children.

During the 1990s, innovation within cognitive neuroscience allowed researchers to study in more detail the activity of the brain. Such studies found that merely seeing an action performed activated the same neural areas in the brain as if the subjects were performing the action (Garrels, 2011, pp. 24-25). This seems to reveal a biological predisposition towards imitation - closing the gap between learning and imitation. From imitative desire, stems a world of virtual reality. Imitation (imitative desire) seems to be the factor that both generates symbols (from an encounter with the other) and puts them into effect in society.

If imitation was biological in a purely instinctual way, mimetic desire would encompass all kinds of 'natural' desires or needs, but Girard tends to use the words imitation and desire in a way that distinguishes them from normal biological satisfaction.

Once his basic needs are satisfied, man is subject to intense desires. (Girard, 1986, p. 147.)

Thus, all appetites, such as food and sex, can be contaminated with mimetic desire as soon as there is a model (Girard, 2007, pp. 56-57).

Already from *Mensonge romantique et vérité Romanesque* (1961) (*Deceit, Desire and the Novel*), Girard's basic understanding of desire was that it was a desire *according to the other*. He labeled the desire between subject, object and mediator *triangular desire*. The mediator or model plays the significant role in Girardian thinking. If there is a mediator present, there cannot be a desire which is linear and unchangeable. Everything seems transformable and takes on a triangular structure. The mediator can receive and hinder desire. He/she can transform desires into secondary and rivalistic desires. In *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, Girard concludes that there is no such thing as autonomous or spontaneous desire. All desires are interdependent and mediated. He also maintains that freedom and spontaneity are also mediated; it all depends on the model's feedback. The consequences of desiring through a mediator/model often leads to rivalry in the form of jealousy, hatred and envy. The fact that desires are not original but mediated, creating secondary desires, means that desires have become *metaphysical* in that they are no longer based on primary or natural needs (Girard, 1965, 83-85).

## **The Mediator's Role in Learning**

Thus, Girard claims that desire for objects, initially created *through the other*, is essential to learning. Motivation, the force which makes us take an interest in things, should therefore be viewed in relation to the influence of the other. This force's influence is evident not just in the initial phases of learning; it is what motivates people all along. Even if motivation does not necessarily indicate rivalry in a negative way, it is easily sparked off by identification, admiration, jealousy, and hatred. Motivation is too often seen in relation to the object of knowledge only, while what motivates is often the desire to outdo the other. Therefore, rivalry in a traditional society has often been checked and controlled by strict prohibitions in order to avoid violence. For example, the teacher's authority stems, in part, from this fear of disruptive behaviour among pupils/students.

To apply this to learning situations in schools the teacher as mediator is still essential for learning today, although in a much less authoritative manner. Many would say she is clearly the most important factor in learning. But she is hardly as important as in the classic setting of master and disciple. According to Enrique Gomes León, the teacher is no longer the voice of tradition and knowledge, but the voice of popularity. Today the pupils imitate each other, not the teacher, León claims. The teacher has no other authority than that of a leader of opinion (1999, pp. 100-101). This seems to weaken the teacher's mediation of knowledge.

In Girard's triangular understanding of how desire works, it is the mediator who guides the pupil/student into the world of knowledge. Desire according to the other's desire, both supports the classical learning scheme of a teacher (master), pupil and object of knowledge, and destroys it since desire to outdo the other disrupts the scheme. At a certain stage of

imitation, rivalry seems to break down relations between pupils/students. The teacher can be a negative model, behaving arrogantly and aggressively towards the pupil/student, thereby undermining the striving for knowledge. The teacher, therefore, needs to make knowledge attractive and accessible, without focusing the desire of the student on herself (Martinez, 1999, 75). The teacher, as well as anyone acting as a mediator, runs the risk of becoming attracted by the prospect of being the object of fascination (Ross, 2012, p. 117), taking advantage of the situation and thereby becoming both an object of fascination and a hindrance to knowledge achievement.

### **Sacrifice and Learning**

According to Marie-Louise Martinez, violence is inherent in the symbolic process of learning (1999, p. 54). This means that imitation tends to alienate the pupil/student who is not able to break the educational code. Learning could be seen as a by-product of a sacrificial ritual. The rites de passage of learning emphasizes the initial crisis of a ritual and becomes the test or ordeal one must undergo in order to participate and function in society (Girard, 2007, 169). School and learning, as such, are comprised of attitudes and retributions that remain after a sacrificial scene; those sacrificed are those who are unable to understand the symbols that a society requires to succeed in the education system. Martinez claims that symbolic violence in education is built on intimidation. Illiteracy, therefore, is an effect of alienating the pupil/student (Martinez, 1999, pp. 54-64). From such a perspective, education systems can function as a gigantic scapegoating machine.

In higher education, David Bartholomae claims that *“every time a student sits down and writes for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion.(...)The student has to learn our*

*language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community.”* (Bartholomae, 1985, p. 623). As learning is so closely related to both forced adaptation and competition, the question arises: How is it possible to avoid people being hurt in such a rivalistic environment, with such a demand for compliance?

### **How to Prevent People Becoming Losers**

Thus, by revealing scapegoating within the educational system it may be possible to prevent people becoming losers. This also means creating winners in that people experience success and feel good about themselves. Therefore, I would disagree with León that school today is the equivalent of an initiation rite devoid of any resurrection (1999, p. 101) since school and university in so many cases are door openers to success in life and help so many out of a life in misery. Life in general would certainly be much more violent for young people without a school system. In this context, I would suggest that a high degree of competition does not have to create losers, but can, in favourable circumstances, both enhance self-esteem, and, at the same time, contribute to innovation. My hypothesis is that learning and competition are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is all about the intensity and direction of desire.

In Sonja Sheridan/Pia Williams’ research on competition in kindergarten and school, there seems to be an awareness of competition as something constructive. Competition plays a positive role in both intellectual and physical achievements - as it also does in artistic and creative work. Competition as something, which undermines society and only enhances individuality, develops into an understanding that competition is closely linked to cooperation. At the same time, their research, on a whole, reveals that the pupils and teachers

who they interviewed were very hesitant to call different forms of interaction competitive. They go on to point out that there are very few works on the positive aspects of competition in a pedagogical context (Sheridan, Williams, 2007, p. 161). Clearly, there is a tendency to censure anything positive associated with competition. The reason, however, seems to be to hinder pupils from becoming losers.

### **Considering Competition together with Cooperation**

Sheridan and Williams claim that it is impossible to distinguish between inner and outer motivation (2007, pp. 38-39). To separate competition and cooperation means that one does not understand the complexity of competition. The one-sidedly negative view of competition in school and elsewhere in society seems to be at odds with a mimetic anthropology, since humans learn from imitation and imitation can turn to cooperation just as easily as into rivalry.

Competition creates a climate in which one is forced to attain certain skills. It helps people to identify their strengths and weaknesses (Sheridan, Williams, 2007, p. 163). Sheridan and Williams refer to J. Giota, who views the pupil as being required to adapt to situations where the teacher or his parents force him to work towards a goal that is far beyond his interests and needs. However, the pupil who is competitive manages to learn things which are outside of his/her comfort zone (Sheridan, Williams, 2007, p. 37). This attitude may seem harsh, but it is also a help towards succeeding in life.

Sheridan and Williams refer to Eastern Europe under Communism, where everything tinged by competition was bad (2007, pp. 25-27), although, at the same time, winning in sports by



cheating and doping caused many scandals. However, Sheridan and Williams seem to choose a middle path, trying to fuse competition and cooperation into a healthy ideal. On one hand, if the goal is simply to outdo the other, learning can easily turn nasty. On the other hand, fierce competition can be helpful if the goal is less to hinder the other than to achieve one's own goal. In their efforts to distinguish the opponent from the competitor Sheridan and Williams go far in revealing the beneficial sides of competition; for example, it can help to cope with envy (2007, pp. 40, 61).

In my view, the distinction they make between the opponent and the competitor makes sense only if one considers the intensity of the desire vis-a-vis the other. However, Sheridan and Williams do not consider the degree of desire in the other sufficiently; this is necessary in order to understand the heightened intensity, the development from where one simply competes to where one is solely focused on outdoing the other. Their research clearly enhances our understanding of the close relationship between competition and cooperation. They have a rather robust understanding of human nature as competitive and, thereby, they see friendship and competition as closely related. Pupils function best in an environment where they are not fixated on outdoing the other but see competition as a tool for learning. The optimal for learning is to let the pupil combine learning and teaching (Sheridan, Williams, 2007, p. 168).

### **Competition versus Rivalry**

According to Girard, imitation does not have to be conflictual. In *Evolution and Conversion*, he uses the expression "cultural mimesis" to emphasize a kind of imitation that is less acquisitive - in areas such as learning (2007, 78). This is reminiscent of Bryan R. Warnick's

understanding of imitative learning,<sup>2</sup> since it involves both selecting a model's actions and goals, and making the learner feel attracted by what they are imitating (2008, p. 29). This kind of affective imitation could, I think, enhance learning to a degree unthinkable using any method of learning based on the autonomous self. However, imitation is usually acquisitive and competitive and, in the area of learning, seems to work in paradoxical ways. The outcome is reminiscent of the outcomes of Adam Smith's invisible hand:<sup>3</sup> the initial urge to outdo the other creates a wealth of new knowledge. Very often in imitation and learning, the mediator, either a teacher or a fellow pupil/student, through intense competition, becomes a rival. However, this does not mean that knowledge is necessarily hindered. Competition clearly enhances learning, sometimes to an unheard of degree, if it does not lead to the participants' desire to destroy things for each other, or if competition does not become so heated that it leads to psychological problems. It is therefore important, when trying to find improved ways to facilitate learning, to focus more on the mediator - both the teacher and the other pupils/students - and less on the subject's innate disposition.

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<sup>2</sup> For Warnick imitation is the basis for learning. His study consists mainly of learning through examples. His analysis of the complexities of the narrative-self theory does not completely disregard the negative sides of imitation, but his understanding of imitation as first and foremost exemplary, becomes too willful, too rational, too one-sidedly positive, and therefore rather shallow. This happens when imitation is not seen as a desire taking control over relations. (See Bryan R. Warnick. *Imitation and Education. A Philosophical Inquiry into Learning by Example*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008.)

<sup>3</sup> According to Adam Smith, the invisible hand functions by virtue of the innate inclination among people to maximize their well-being. As we compete, driven by our own needs and wants, we involuntarily benefit society at large.

In most cases, what inspires or motivates is not the theme as such, but how it is presented. Especially children learn by imitating a model. It is not uncommon that competition itself is the initial cause of interest, and can, if moderated or redirected, develop into a more object-oriented desire for knowledge. Thus, the other can be both a catalyst for knowledge acquisition and a hindrance.

### **Innovation Comes Through Imitation**

If innovation is considered imitative, one cannot view imitation as simply copying. Warnick is right when he views imitation in learning as first and foremost a process rather than a copying of the end results. Nonetheless, he limits imitation's role in learning by disregarding it as a force contributing to a dynamic and pluralistic society (Warnick, 2008, 114-119). Many people are sceptical of imitation (as innovation) because they fail to see that what is considered novel arises from a process of imitation, in which existing ideas and theories are combined in daring and exciting ways:

Moreover, innovation is itself a kind of conservation. The modernist poet T. S. Eliot reworked the *Divine Comedy* in *The Waste Land*; the old Volkswagen Beetle is still perceptible beneath the new. To innovate is thus less to abandon the past than it is to tinker, transform, and revise what came before (Edelstein, 2010, Retrieved February 21, 2020) <<https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/how-innovation-taught-humanities-and-knowledge-economy>>

Thus, innovation arises from a highly complex ability to forge, mix, and change existing ideas and theories into something avant-garde. It cannot be explained, therefore, as an autonomous and rational process. It is primarily imitative.

In a modern society, desire has been let loose in a way the world has never experienced before. According to Girard, innovation was, until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, viewed unfavourably as heresy, while since then the word has become “*the god that we are still worshipping today*” (2008, pp. 230-234). In most capitalistic and democratic countries, people can act on their desires in ways never allowed before - especially when considering the masses. The consequence is increased rivalry, innovation, and freedom. Freedom to act according to one’s desires, however, creates many moral challenges. At first glance, freedom to compete seems to be something positive since it speeds up production both in schools and universities, and, not least, in the business world. All in all, a greater freedom to desire is vital in all areas of society as competition seems essential for innovation. In the modern world, everyone can compete relatively freely and compare oneself to others. Nevertheless, in some cases, competition may become too intense and develop into a state of being possessed by the other. Thus, fascination with others can, if it reaches a level of possession, totally disrupt the process of learning. Mental health problems related to school and education should be considered in the context of fierce rivalry with others.

### **Rivalry Turned Sour**

One could say that competition may be innovative until it reaches a certain level of rivalry, a stage where resentment hinders, or even counteracts, innovation. However, innovation may go on long after people have become enemy twins - even if their relations transgress the ethical guidelines. A warning may appear in those transformative moments when competitors become rivals. This transition is fleeting, and it would be impossible to pinpoint the exact threshold between healthy competition and unhealthy rivalry; however, at gut level one may

feel it when competition gets out of hand, goes sour, and grows into something destructive. This happens so often that it is usually the way relations tend to evolve, except in instances when one party is able to let go of one's pride.

Disruption is the result of serious conflicts. Clearly, this is a legacy of imitative desire, and caused by both pupil's intense desire vis-à-vis the other, and the other's negative desires in response (double mediation). Competition aggravated into rivalry may give rise to a fear of violence. Therefore, aggression must be channelled into acceptable expressions. Only when violence is moderated and aggression is channelled into acceptable expressions can desire be tolerated. The act of learning today is extremely dependent on a lack of violence. Physical and psychological violence is the prime reason for a child's lack of concentration. The object of study becomes unimportant because the attention is directed exclusively towards the other, fearing his or her action. At the same time, fascination can, if it does not become too intense, be just what is needed to enhance learning. Everything seems to be dependent on the degree of desire.

The deconstruction of prohibitions, a feature of the modern world, creates an atmosphere of individual rivalry, which, if it is not controlled by ethics, easily leads to conflict. At the same time, it can also become a liberating force which leads to innovation. The tension caused by intensified imitation may lead to creativity, which is seen most clearly in the field of technology.

**Handle with Care**

To work with learning involves understanding the double effect of desire. Thus, desire needs to be handled with care. Desire can, in an atmosphere of extreme polarisation, become apocalyptic (Girard, 1987, pp. 26-27). This can be the situation in international politics, as well as in schools when the atmosphere in a class becomes wild, turbulent, and violent. If competition leads to serious rivalry and a break down in the social framework, the violence that it can unleash might have the potential for mass destruction, in a worst-case scenario. The subversive force of imitative desire is therefore something one must always consider in the larger picture; in a process of liberating culture.

### **Side Effects**

Mimetic theory considers the main weakness of desire to be the fact that humans are not only unable to fulfil the goals set by their desire, but that they also invert the goals (Girard, 1987, pp. 294-298). Freedom to act on one's desires may not only heighten healthy competition, but also pollute relations with envy and jealousy. A side effect of a liberal society is that, even though everyone is free to compete with everyone else, the results are not always innovative. In many cases intense competition is unnecessary. In this climate of ongoing rivalry, distinctions related to age, class, work, gender etc, seems to dissolve.

While a development towards equality must be seen as positive since, in principle, everyone is able to succeed in life, the conflicts that arise from a greater freedom to compete with each other, reminds us of the necessity to establish certain forms of hierarchies to minimize violence. One could say that many of the taboos and prohibitions of a traditional society protected people from the effects of unharnessed desire. It is important, therefore, to understand that freedom to act on one's desire, sometimes traps people in mental isolation.

Thus, it is important to maintain a certain awareness of what happens when hierarchies disappear:

Modern people imagine that their discomfort and unease is a product of religious taboos, cultural prohibitions, even the legal forms of protection. They think that once this confinement is over, desire will be able to blossom forth (Girard, 1987, p. 285).

Imitative desire, despite being an incredibly innovative force, leads to conflict; it breaks up relationships, and in extreme cases, when desire is not moderated, leads to murder, suicide, and madness.

### **Desire and Innovation**

Girard, despite his rather one-sided focus on the violent effects of imitation, also uses the term mimetic desire to describe its positive effects on the modern world:

Everything that makes our world the most energetic and creative that has ever been in art, politics, modes of thought and, especially, science and technology is a consequence of the liberation of mimetic desire (Girard, 1987, p. 285).

One of the liberating effects of desire lies in the tolerance of competition. Desire in mimetic theory can, when linked to an environment of heightened competition and demystification, be seen as a very creative force. It is essential, therefore, to focus on both the destabilizing and liberating effects of desire, in order to understand how it changes society. The reason why one can handle so much rivalry in our modern world, is the emphasis on pliability, tolerance, and concern for victims. These advancements in inter-individual ethics have produced a lack of

repercussion, totally unheard of in the past. In ancient times, severe rivalry was normally regulated by sacrifice:

Modern society is extremely refined and developed in the symbolic sense. It can permit and encourage growth of mimetic rivalries that are normally forbidden to man (Girard, 1987, p. 93).

### **The Advantages of Competition**

However, by lessening the taboos on competition and rivalry, viewing them as remnants from ancient cultures, modern society has allowed imitation to flow more freely, creating societies of unimagined refinement and complexity. This is evident in the innovation taking place in various technical fields - cars, aeroplanes, computers. The gradual refinements throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century have far excelled any other age.

The enhanced freedom to compete has great advantages. Freedom to imitate is a shortcut to innovation. It is a force driving globalization, stimulating people from all spheres of life to work together in groups, and by so doing, enhancing production to an unheard of level. The speed of innovation comes from comparing and imitating other companies' products and refining them. A CEO for a make of car follows closely what is happening among the competitors, and will copy anything that seems to work better, whether it is improvements to motors, design, etc.

### **Imitation and the Humanities**



If one compares the development in industry during the last century or so with that in the humanities, the latter seems to be at something of a standstill. This could be the result of the taboo against imitation. In the humanities, there is a tendency to believe that imitation reduces originality; for example, Kant proclaimed that “*learning is nothing but imitation*” and at the same time believed that “*genius is entirely opposed to the spirit of imitation*” (1987, p. 176). Of course, one needs to consider the differences between the humanities and the natural sciences, and consider the key characteristics of each. Nevertheless, the formal differences in these fields between understanding and explaining - which are so often considered a basic difference between the natural sciences and the humanities - seem exaggerated since studies in both fields are built upon imitation. In the humanities, due to a fear of the banality of imitation, there is a strong desire to be original, not in a generative way, but in an individual and autonomous manner, devaluing and neglecting the many-layered expressions of imitation. One often fails to ask: Will this theory really work? Is it generative? What might be its consequence for society?

Enhanced imitation, in the sense of “*minimal respect for the past and a mastery of its achievements*” (Girard, 2008, 244) could make the humanities more generative. By going behind the idea-oriented level and considering how imitative structures lay the foundation for ideas, the concern with originality may decline and that with whether a theory works in a generative way may increase. Instead of evaluating originality for originality’s sake, it might be beneficial to considering its usefulness. At times originality and usefulness coincide, but all too often they are totally at odds. Usefulness in the humanities is often rejected in the name of free research. As desire is stronger and more fundamental than rationality, research can, even if it is rational in form, be driven by a desire to either distinguish oneself or outdo the other. Research, if it is to achieve its goal of enhancing productivity and objectivity, must

acknowledge and include the imitative in the process of understanding human behaviour. At the same time, the researcher should be concerned with discovering and, at times eradicating, his/her own desires.

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