

## The Reason for Desire

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# The Reason for Desire

[ MATTHEW MCMAHON ]

**A** fundamental pillar of our modern economic systems is the idea that everything has value. Whether it is a small house plant, a wristwatch, or even the naming rights of a fictional character, humans can and do assign prices to every object and concept we create or discover in our world. It can be agreed upon that the value of any given thing comes from its desirability, but what bestows this desirability upon an object or concept? While one might assume that there is some generally accepted characteristic or logical basis for the reason we desire things, this does not appear to be the case. Commonly, it is thought that desire for objects, or concepts, is due to some inherent utility they bestow upon the possessor, but the French philosopher René Girard would instead argue that desire comes from an instinctual urge to imitate others, which he calls “mimetic desire.” Through an exploration of mimetic desire, we can realize how this theory applies to our daily lives and discover that by accepting the theory we can begin to alter our behaviors, and those of our societies, for the better.

To begin our exploration of mimetic desire, we must first understand what the theory states. A defining characteristic of the theory of mimetic desire is that desire is not focused on objects or concepts, as is commonly thought. Rather, Girard argues that desire is focused on states of being and that individuals only seek out objects or concepts as a means to achieve these states. In his novel, *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard describes mimetic desire as follows:

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

superior being, desires some object, that object must surely be capable of conferring an even greater plenitude of being.<sup>1</sup>

Girard starts this passage by explaining that man is often confused by the desires he feels. This confusion, he continues, is caused by the fact that man desires “*being*.” As states of being are rather hard to conceptualize from thin air, humans rely on finding examples as seen in other humans, picking out individuals, who are perceived as having a comparatively better state of being, as so-called models. As mimicry is often the simplest way to achieve the same results as another person, individuals then feel an instinctual urge to imitate the models they observe in order to achieve the same higher states of being. This mimicry is what ultimately creates the desire for objects that humans feel, as we project the success of models onto the objects that they possess. Similarly, if a model, who an individual believes possesses a higher state of being, desires something, then that object is also desirable to the individual as it is seen as able to grant even greater success, or as Girard puts it, “an even greater plenitude of being.”

To further understand what Girard defines as mimetic desire, consider the following scenario in which two children express desire (or lack thereof) for the same toy. In the example, one child, Child A, is idly sorting through their toy chest, and another child, Child B, enters the room while Child A is holding a specific toy with the intention of putting it off to the side. However, upon seeing Child A hold the toy, Child B begins to feel an intense urge to have it and excitedly asks Child A if they can play with it. Though originally unamused by the toy, Child A, upon seeing Child B’s interest in the toy, gains an interest in the toy themselves and refuses to part with it. In this story, the toy originally held no amount of desirability as shown by Child A’s intention to put the toy aside. However, once Child B saw Child A holding the toy, and presumably perceived in them some higher state of being, such as feeling a comparatively greater sense of enjoyment, the object gained desirability in the eyes of Child B and therefore they began to desire it. The desire of Child B to have the toy then sparked a desire in Child A to also have the toy. This is because Child A might see Child B as having some higher state of being than themselves and therefore may wish to imitate Child B in much the same way that Child B wishes to imitate them. This desire to imitate causes Child A to desire the same things that they perceive Child B as desiring, including the originally uninteresting toy. While it might seem counterintuitive that both children can see each other as models possessing higher states of being, Girard notes that every model, “no matter how self-sufficient he may appear, he invariably assumes the role of disciple,” with “disciple” in this case referring

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<sup>1</sup> René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 146.

### **34 inter-text**

to an individual observing a model.<sup>2</sup> Through this example, we can see the way in which all items gain their desirability through the lens of mimetic desire, both for the individuals who gain the desire to obtain them, and for those who already possess them.

With this idea of mimetic desire in mind, we can reevaluate the reasons that we all desire objects in our daily lives. A common example that we can discuss is the increasingly puzzling—from a purely utilitarian point of view—desire for watches. In many modern societies cell phones are ubiquitous, and on the screen of every cell phone is a digital clock that can tell the time as accurately as any watch one can buy. Despite this, however, it is still a common sight to see individuals buy, or otherwise show desire for, watches. One might argue that watches are still useful, and therefore desirable, as time-telling instruments due to a sense of their increased reliability. (A watch is much less likely to run out of battery over the course of a day than a phone.) However, this argument falls flat when one considers how long a modern phone can run on its battery, compounded by the widespread availability of battery banks that further increase phones' longevity. One might also argue that watches provide utility in the sense that they are attached to one's body, and therefore will always be on one's person when needed. This argument, however, fails to take into account that phones have become quite small and light in recent years, and have also become virtually essential to most peoples' professional and social lives. For these reasons, it is rather unlikely that the average person is ever without their phone, whether it is because they need to be able to speak with business clients at a moment's notice, or because they enjoy sending text messages to their friends throughout the day. A final frequent argument made in defense of watches' utility is that they are fashion accessories, but this argument is, in itself, one that supports the idea of mimetic desire.

In fashion, different styles exist, and each of these styles tends to be connected (or at least perceived as connected) to a certain lifestyle and group of people. A suit and tie combined with an elegant dress watch gives one the appearance of a businessman, while polyester shorts and a shirt paired with a rugged digital watch might give one the appearance as sporty or as an outdoorsman. By adhering to specific styles of fashion, one is matching their appearance to one or more groups of individuals. As individuals dress themselves, there is little reason that one would desire and subsequently choose to appear similar to a group unless they wished to be associated with it. This desired association must itself be due to some positive perceived characteristic—or state of being, present in members of the group—as no logic exists in the idea of an individual wanting to be

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2 Ibid, 147.

associated with groups that the same individual perceives as unlikable or lacking virtue. This desire to associate with and be seen as a part of a certain group is in its very essence a desire to imitate the individuals of said group, and therefore fits quite nicely with the idea of mimetic desire. In this way, we can see that mimetic desire offers a perfectly suitable, if not superior, explanation for our material desires.

However, mimetic desire is not limited to objects alone, as even the acquisition of ideas can be conceptualized through this lens. This can be seen through the example of a college student, whose primary purpose for attending their college is to fulfill their desire to obtain new knowledge. While one might struggle to see how imitation plays a role in acquiring new knowledge, as it is rather difficult to consider every student as desiring to imitate their professors, the possessors of the knowledge, one only needs to think further out in time. It can be agreed that the primary goal of attending a college and gaining new knowledge is to find employment in a profession. The profession that one desires to find employment in, however, cannot be just anything. If this was the case there would be little point in continuing one's education, as many jobs can be found without a college diploma. Instead, a student's desired profession must instead be one that they have somehow chosen for themselves. It is in this idea that the theory of mimetic desire can once again be applied. For an individual to want to take up a profession for the rest of their lives they must see that profession in one (or both) of two ways. The first way an individual might choose their desired profession is to pick one that would provide them with a financial abundance that they wish to obtain. If obtaining wealth was the reason behind one's goal, then it can be said that one sees some enviable state of being in the affluent that they wish to experience as well, and therefore act to imitate these individuals. This idea is one that makes a great deal of sense as the wealthy in a society are often championed as the smartest, more athletic, and/or most creative that the society has to offer, and therefore make excellent models. The second way one might choose their profession is to pick one that they admire the concept of, regardless of the financial situation it might bestow upon them. If, for example, an individual wanted desperately to become a nurse because they admired the concept of selflessly helping individuals and saving lives, then it would be rather simple to point out how the individual saw a desirable trait, or state of being, present in nurses and chose to pursue the same profession as a means of imitating them, and therefore obtaining that perceived positive state of being for themselves. Thus, we see that desire to obtain non-physical concepts, such as new knowledge, can also be understood as the desire to imitate some group of people, and therefore can be explained using the theory of mimetic desire.

If mimetic desire is then the true driving force behind our behavior,

## **36 inter-text**

what are the implications of this conclusion? The answer to this question comes in two parts, the first of which pertains primarily to individuals. By accepting the theory of mimetic desire as an explanation for behavior, individuals would be able to become more consciously aware of their desires to gain states of being through imitation. This greater awareness would allow the individuals, if they chose to do so, to begin to tailor their pursuits to better align with their true goal; that is, achieving the desired state of being. In doing so, rather than pursuing anything and everything possessed by a model, individuals might instead choose to selectively pursue only those things that have a likelihood of actually conferring the desired state of being seen in the model. In this way, individuals might find themselves spending less time and money than they otherwise would, and perhaps they may even gain more satisfaction from the objects and concepts they still choose to pursue. Additionally, by concentrating efforts on the goal of achieving a better state of being, rather than accumulating material and conceptual goods, individuals might find themselves improving their lives more significantly or more efficiently than they otherwise would have. Thus, accepting mimetic desire could bring with it a greater consciousness of the goals of one's behavior and could therefore lead to tangible benefits for individuals.

The second part of the answer to this question considers the consequences of accepting mimetic desire as an explanation for behavior in a broader sense; that is, how it might affect society as a whole. On a societal scale, the implications of acknowledging mimetic desire relies primarily on one idea: the ability to promote positive traits throughout a society. The advent of technologies such as radio, television, and the internet brought with them exponential increases in the amount of human exposure an individual can be subjected to throughout their lives. By removing distance as a barrier, these technologies allow individuals to see, listen to, and even meet countless people that they otherwise might never have known existed. By increasing the number of people that an individual can know of, these technologies also allow for an increase in the number of people that an individual can perceive as possessing higher states of being than themselves. In this way, these technologies can cause increases in the number of people individuals desire to imitate, and it is here that we see the potential for societal benefit.

As previously discussed, the theory of mimetic desire can explain desire for material goods as well as concepts, and therefore can be used to explain the desire to adopt character traits or behaviors by individuals. With this idea in mind, if these technologies were used to highlight and bring attention to people who embody characteristics that we as a society see as good and beneficial, then they would represent fantastic opportunities to spread these same characteristics in a natural and self-perpetuating way.

It would be unnecessary to tell people to imitate the traits of those that are highlighted, as the very act of highlighting these individuals would bestow upon them a perceived sense of importance, and therefore a sense of some higher state of being that the general public can feel a desire to achieve. This desire for the higher state of being can then cause individuals to desire, and therefore attempt, to imitate the highlighted models, and therefore the positive traits that these models embody. As individuals attempt to imitate these positive traits, they themselves can become models to others, further spreading the positive characteristics throughout society. Thus, we can see how acceptance of mimetic desire can bring with it realizations regarding our ability to modify societal behaviors that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Through this discussion of mimetic desire, we see that the theory offers us a logical explanation for our worldly desires. We also realize that the ways in which we understand our desires, and therefore behaviors, matter greatly, as the limits of our understanding of behavior so too limit our ability to modify our behaviors for the benefit of all.