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Girard and Heidegger: Mimesis, Mitsein, Addiction

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Girard and Heidegger: Mimesis, Mitsein, Addiction

Joachim Duyndam

Abstract *In his essay "Peter's Denial," René Girard draws a parallel between mimesis and Martin Heidegger's concept of being-with (*Mitsein*). In this essay I explore this parallel through a third, intermediate term—addiction—on the assumption that living in a world governed by mimesis, according to Girard, and living in the modus of* Mitsein*, according to Heidegger, can both be characterized as a kind of addiction. The clarification of the parallel between mimesis and Mitsein through this intermediate term may contribute to a better understanding of a central concept of Heidegger's philosophy and, at the same time, bring into view the philosophical dimension of Girard's mimetic theory. In my conclusion I propose Levinas's ethical approach as a possible cure to the addiction to mimesis and being-with.*

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Introduction: Community

In his essay "Peter's Denial," commenting on the well-known pericope from the Gospels, René Girard exercises his specialism as he does in most of his work: a hermeneutical reading of classical texts, to unveil the mechanisms of mimetic desire and scape-goating.[1] In "Peter's Denial," however, he does more. He correlates the mimetic mechanism with the desire for community. According to Girard, Peter's denial ("I don't know the man you speak of"[2]) demonstrates not so much his being a brazen liar, but his desire for belonging to a community. For Peter was explicitly asked, according to the Gospels, to admit that *he was with Jesus*. Since his being with the community around Jesus had fallen apart after Jesus' arrest, thus destroying the possibility of Peter's *being with Jesus*, Girard argues that Peter was looking for another community to belong to, to *be with*. This is why Peter moved to the High Priest's palace and joined the people gathered there around the fire.

It is exactly at this point of his reading that Girard launches Martin Heidegger's concept of being-with (*Mitsein*), on which, unfortunately, he does not elaborate.[3] I will nevertheless pursue the parallel suggested by Girard by focusing first on the most obvious similarities and differences between Girard's mimesis and Heidegger's being-with. I will then try to articulate the parallel between the two concepts from the point of view of addiction. Although the use of the concept of addiction may seem rather odd here, a third, intermediate term is needed for comparing *mimesis*, the concept of

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the literary scholar, and *Mitsein*, the concept of the ontological philosopher. The line of thought I will follow will therefore differ somewhat from conventional interpretations.[4] Addiction is used here in a general and broad sense: it refers to dependency on ruling heteronomous factors. The term can function as the mediating third term between mimesis and *Mitsein*, because both phenomena imply a necessary dependency, as I will demonstrate. In my conclusion I will propose Emmanuel Levinas's ethical approach as a possible cure to the addiction to mimesis and being-with.

1. Heidegger's Concept of 'Being-with'

At first glance, it is not too difficult to see similarities between Heidegger's being-with and Girard's mimesis. In Heidegger, the primary and fundamental characteristic of human existence is being-in-the-world, which is not only the being-in-the-world of the individual human being (*Dasein*) but which is "equiprimordially," as Heidegger calls it, being-with others (*Mitsein*, *Mitdasein*).[5] Like Girard, Heidegger's starting point is not the single individual—the individual who is opposed to other individuals; rather, for Heidegger, human existence is characterized by being together from the outset. The "inter-dividuality" of human existence precedes human individuality, as Girard would put it.

Without explicitly calling it mimesis, Heidegger nevertheless characterizes *Mitsein* as a form of mimesis. In the modus of *Mitsein*, which is the way or kind of being we all share in the first place, we live like "they" live.[6] It is one's inauthentic everyday life, in which one acts, thinks, judges, feels, like "they" act, think, judge, and feel. "They" (in German: *Man*; in French: *on*) is the answer to the question "*who* exists in the world?"; "who is *Dasein*?" The answer is not the authentic autonomous "I" but the "they," which refers to anybody and everybody, including myself. The "they" is thus the average life of mediocrity and distraction, where all possibilities are leveled down and equalized. Heidegger emphasizes that living like "they" live is not a matter of choice, let alone of moral choice, but that it is the way of life that we all habitually lead. Although he expressly does not intend a moral understanding, Heidegger characterizes this average mode of existence as the dependence and he articulates the "they" in terms of dictatorship, which he opposes to authentic existence. *Being and Time* describes the authentic way of life as a retreat from everyday ordinary life through resoluteness and conscience.[7]

It is important to stress that Heidegger has no intention of describing *Mitsein* in a morally negative sense. For him it is just the way things are. Human being is being-with insofar as it is human being, from the outset. The question remains open, though, why Heidegger uses ethically laden words such as conscience, resoluteness, authenticity, and dictatorship to analyze human being, especially being-with. William Richardson offers an answer to this by pointing to Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism* where he states that humanism suffers on the one hand from "oblivion of being" (*Seinsvergessenheit*), as most of Western culture does, including philosophy and ethics, and, on the other hand, because humanism has failed to think human existence adequately in terms of being, it has not yet become humanistic enough.[8] Rüdiger Safranski summarizes Heidegger's notion of authenticity as "Do what you want, but decide for yourself and let no one

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take the decision out of your hands"; or as Heidegger's students in Marburg put it, "I am determined, but I don't know for what." It may be suggested therefore that Heidegger's philosophy is morally driven. Thus Safranski adverts to the parallel between the retreat from inauthenticity in Heidegger and leaving the cave in Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" to see the truth of the Ideas and the Idea of the Good.[9]

Since Heidegger sees everyday, ordinary human existence as dependent and dictatorial,[10] it is not unreasonable to approach it, as I propose to do, in terms of addiction. Thus, according to Heidegger, we are addicted to the choices, thoughts, preferences, habits, and, in short, to the way of existence or "potentiality-for-being" dictated by others, or "they." He does not say "the others," because that would suggest that as their opposite, I am not included, whereas what he is emphasizing is that the "I" is principally also part of "others." Neither is he speaking of "each other," which would presuppose the plural presence of autonomous subjects related to one another. In Heidegger, *Mitsein* or being-with precedes the traditionally conceived individual subject. Before one may speak of a subject or subjects as related to one another, human beings are involved in *Mitsein*. This can be understood, according to Heidegger, in terms of the so-called "ontological difference," that is, by not looking for *Seiendes* (what is; entities), as traditional philosophy does, but by looking for the *Sein* of *Seiendes* (the being of what is; the being of entities). The *Sein* of human beings, the way we fundamentally are, is *Mitsein*; and this being-with is being addicted to the idle talk (*Gerede*), curiosity (*Neugier*), and ambiguity (*Zweideutigkeit*) of "they." Thus being dependent on and dictated to by others is being their slave: under their complete control.[11]

2. Addiction

What I want to claim is that it is not only Heidegger's being-with but also Girard's mimesis that can be interpreted in terms of addiction. I take addiction in a broad and general sense, as referring to a strong, inevitable or necessary dependence on ruling heteronomous factors. Such addictive factors show a great variety. They may range from substances (alcohol, drugs), behavior (watching television, gambling, sex), and manias (kleptomania, pyromania) to trends (crazes, fads, enthusiasms, obsessions). The former categories of addiction—substances, behavior, and manias—have become quite common in contemporary culture. Alcoholics, drug addicts, problem gamblers, and addiction-related criminals cause many problems and suffering, to themselves and to others. No wonder that the phenomenon is extensively studied, mostly from a medical or biological point of view.[12]

The latter category of trend-factors is particularly interesting regarding being-with and mimesis. It includes collective phenomena such as crazes and fads, but also rather noiseless trends like fashion-following and "joining the party line," which are mostly unconscious to those involved. What both categories of addiction share is the heteronomous influence on one's will. Far from being obviously autonomous, the will of the addicted is dependent on and determined by factors such as certain substances (dope), compulsory behavior, and the influence of others, such as one's peers, members of the group one belongs to (group-pressure), and fashionable trendsetters.

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These heteronomous relationships are clearly a form of slavery, for a slave is one who wants what the master wants. A slave has no will of his own; the slave's will *is* his/her master's will. Let me explain this in traditional philosophical terms. From the perspective of the modern autonomous subject, considered as the free and responsible centre of his/her own thinking, acting, suffering, giving meaning, etc., addiction is hard to understand: it can only be seen as a kind of insanity or disease, that is, in terms of the common currency of medical and physiological discourses. Viewed thus, the addict seems to lack both the responsibility and the freedom of the autonomous subject.[13]

Heidegger, however, criticizes this conventional understanding from a phenomenological point of view. The basic concept of phenomenology, according to its founding father Edmund Husserl, is 'intentionality': the fundamental relatedness between subject and object, on which all relations between subject and object are based (perception, thinking, acting, suffering, giving meaning, etc.). Elaborating on Husserl's concept, Heidegger extends the concept of intentionality to being-in-the-world. This means that the traditionally conceived subject and object are embedded in a prior relation of inclusion or belonging, which encompasses the allegedly central subject and the allegedly adverse object of classical modern philosophy.[14] Heidegger's concept of embedded intentionality means that the subject does not stand outside or opposite the object but that both are related to one another within my experience of being-in-the-world. This intentionality assumes a mutual relationship: the subject's involvement with the object and the object's involvement with the subject. Thus in experiencing the object and dealing with it I not only accord meaning to it, but the object itself appeals to me with meaning. The object may, for example, attract or repel me. The relationship of embedded intentionality between subject and object is analogous to that between the hungry and food, the curious and the secret, the hunter and the prey, the music and the listener, the philosopher and the truth: they are involved in one another in a tense, quasi-erotic mode.[15]

Seen from this phenomenological perspective, addiction no longer appears incomprehensible or mad, but rather to differ only in degree from what is seen as the norm. Being intentional subjects we are all attracted by some objects. Within the bodily existence of addicts, however, the attraction of some objects is so strong that they are completely ruled or determined by it.

It should be stressed that "Heideggerian addiction" is not a question of what some people, the addicts, may have, who only differ in degree from the normal, and others do not have: it is what we all have in the first place. Because of the ontological structures of "being-in" (*In-sein*), especially being-in-the-world, "being-alongside entities within-the-world" (*Sein-bei innerweltlich Seienden*), and "being-with" (*Mitsein*), we are principally not autonomous subjects, but are absorbed in the world. Answering the question who is being-in-the-world (being-in, being-alongside, and being-with), Heidegger stresses that this is not the traditional subject who is centre of its world, but rather that the "subject"

> as everyday Being-with-one-another, stands in *subjection* [*Botmäßigkeit*] to others. It itself *is* not; its Being has been taken away by the Others. *Dasein*'s everyday possibilities of Being are for the Others to dispose of as they please.

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But the *others* are not genuine others: As for oneself, I am not different from others, I belong to them:

> One belongs to the Others oneself and enhances their power. "The Others" whom one thus designates in order to cover up the fact of one's belonging to them essentially oneself, are those who proximally and for the most part "are there" in everyday Being-with-one-another. The "who" is not this one, not that one, not oneself [*man selbst*], not some people [*einige*], and not the sum of them all. The "who" is the neuter, the "they" [*das Man*].

Although the "who" of existence is always also mine [*jemeinig*], I am stolen away in the "they" from the very beginning. I am lost in distantiality, averageness, and leveling down, as ways of being "they."[16]

3. Girard's Mimetic Theory

Setting Heidegger's idiosyncratic wording aside, his philosophy of *Mitsein* could be seen as a translation of Girard's theory of mimesis into the ontology of being.[17] For Girard, as for Heidegger, human relationships and human society have a strong and undeniable aspect of slavery and addiction. For Girard, however, addiction is not conceived as operating between subject and object alone, as it could be understood from a phenomenological perspective, but rather it has a triangular structure. Girard demonstrates this triangular structure on the basis of the mimetic nature of desire. Desire originates neither from an authentic subject nor from an attractive object as such; it is always mediated by another subject that functions as a model. One desires whatever *because* others desire the same. The examples of Girard's insistence on the triangular structure of desire in almost all his works since the 1960s are too numerous to be cited.[18] Addiction in Girard's view means that the subject does not stand free toward the object, but is ineluctably addicted to the object insofar and because it is mediated by a mimetic model.

In phenomenological terms, Girard's "version of intentionality" is a triangular relationship: it is neither the Husserlian intentionality between subject and object nor the Heideggerian being embedded in the world (Heidegger's "version of intentionality"), but an intentionality that is per se mediated through a model. What I am trying to do is to recast Girard's mimetic theory in phenomenological terms. For, although as a literary scholar, Girard does not use philosophical, specifically phenomenological, terms, his theory, I argue, does have these philosophical implications. Interpreted thus, addiction for Girard depends on the model: not on the ruling object as such but on the object insofar and because it is desired by the model. And as the model in Girard also has a model itself, and the latter again (*ad infinitum*), the model is the anonymous crowd to which I myself also belong. It is "the they" of Heidegger's being-with. Addiction is grounded in Girardian mimesis, just as it is grounded in Heidegger's *Mitsein*. This is the important parallel or link between Girard and Heidegger.

There is, however, an important difference between Girard and Heidegger. Although in both thinkers collectivity precedes individuality, Girard is more specific on society than Heidegger is. One could argue, on the one hand, that for both

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Heidegger and Girard, human society is based on *Mitsein* and mimesis, respectively. On the other hand, whereas for Heidegger *Mitsein* is not intrinsically conflictual (only boring), Girard's mimesis is. Whereas one could in principle live forever addicted to the world of "they," acting and thinking as "they" do, and so being happy as slaves, the world of mimesis is conflictual at its root. For Girard mimesis is both society's essence and its most dangerous challenge. Since mimetic desire gives rise to conflicts over practically any object, it creates a state of war of everybody against everybody.

At this point, Girard introduces his scapegoat theory. When in a state of conflict a scapegoat is accused of being the cause of the conflict, the mimetic war of all against all turns into a war of all against one. So mimetic conflicts lead to expelling and sacrificing a scapegoat, after which it is often deified, because mimetic violence ends, albeit temporarily, with the act of sacrifice. According to Girard, the expulsion of the scapegoat is the "founding event" of society, which event is subsequently repeated historically as the ritual of religious sacrifice. Unlike Heidegger, for Girard society rests on exclusion; on the distinction between those who belong to society and those who are excluded from it. But for Heidegger, *Mitsein* is the way of living we *all* share originally, without exception.

If this line of reasoning leads to the conclusion that addiction is at the root of social life, be it through mimesis or through being-with, the question arises whether we can escape from the mechanisms of mimesis and scapegoating and from *Mitsein*, respectively. According to Heidegger, we cannot keep clear of the being we all share in the first place. We can only resolutely and consciously strive for authenticity, by focusing on being (*Sein*) itself, instead of resting with entities (*Seiendes*). Neither can we avoid mimesis, according to Girard, whose theory is supported by recent biological research into mirror neurons.[19] However, the possibility of avoiding this form of addiction can still be defended. Girard's work is one great fight against scapegoating, consisting—as I said—of reading classical texts, unveiling the mostly hidden mechanisms of mimetic desire and scapegoating, and unmasking the justifications of scapegoating in a variety myths and ideologies.

Can Levinas Provide a Solution?

I want to conclude by quoting a striking example of Girard's method of unveiling and unmasking the mechanisms of scapegoating. This quotation comes from *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, where Girard brilliantly interprets the famous passage from the Gospel according to St. John about an adulterous woman (John 8.3–11).[20] Girard points out that, in Jesus's formulation "let him who is without sin throw the first stone," all the emphasis falls on "the first stone." This continues to reverberate in the deafening silence after these words are spoken. Because the first stone to be thrown lacks a precedent, that is, it has no model, it forms the last obstacle to the act of stoning, says Girard. Once the *first* stone has been thrown, subsequent stones will follow easily because they will follow mimetically. Girard thus says that the fact that Jesus's words have become proverbial and symbolic proves that the same mechanism is today just as alive and virulent as it was 2,000 years ago.

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From Levinas's point of view, one may add to this that by placing the emphasis on the first stone, Jesus makes each one of the accusers responsible themselves. Each accuser holding a stone in his hand is holding the first stone. This makes each one of them "the only one," or unique. There is, after all, but one first stone, even though each of them might have it in their hand. What we see here is the making singular, the individualizing process of responsibility.

The gist of Levinas' philosophy is my responsibility towards the other. It does not concern a general responsibility applied to all, including me, but my unique inalienable responsibility for the other. According to Levinas, I am chosen for responsibility by the other: as *other*, not as an act of the other, but as an effect of his/her otherness.[21] Being chosen for responsibility—it may sound huge and heavy, but the effect of otherness can happen in the twinkling of an eye. All of a sudden you are called to account for your responsibility. And you are suddenly the only one. Thus it is that the one (in Levinas: me) who is singled out breaks up the *Mitsein* of the herd, to which we belong first and foremost according to Heidegger. The herd (horde, mob) falls apart through the uniqueness of responsibility. Jesus too withdrew himself from the *Mitsein*, which the Pharisees wanted to make him part of. By bending down and writing in the sand, before and after his words about the first stone, he does not look at his challengers. In this way, even though he is acting as a substitute for the adulterous woman, he avoids being sacrificed as a scapegoat in her place. After all, the intention of the whole scene was to trap Jesus, blaming either the woman or him.

From a Levinasian perspective, the story of the adulterous woman is not exceptional. Being chosen to responsibility happens whenever the "face of the other," as Levinas calls it, invites or elects me to take on my responsibility.[22] Levinas's "solution" if applied to Girard's theory of sacrifice is thus the individualizing effect of being chosen to responsibility, which is my unique responsibility.[23] The face of the other can, I suggest, break through the massive *Mitsein* and mimesis of human being. Elsewhere I have discussed the importance of Levinas's notion of enjoyment in relation to responsibility: the enjoyment that provides the subject (me) with a certain measure of *independency* from the totalizing structure of subjectivity, thereby creating an openness to the other and to unique responsibility.[24]

To conclude: by taking as my starting point Girard's reference in "Peter's Denial" to Heidegger's Being-with (*Mitsein*), I have attempted to draw a parallel between Heidegger's *Mitsein* and Girard's central notion of mimesis. By exploring the parallel between the two concepts through the phenomenon of addiction, I argued that both concepts converge on the "addicted" state of "the herd." By then approaching Girard's analysis of the story of the adulterous woman in the Gospels from a Levinasian perspective, I suggested that we may overcome this state of addiction by adopting Levinas's concept of individualized responsibility.

Notes

1. René Girard, "Peter's Denial," in *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 149–164, esp. 150–54.

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2. Matt. 26.69–75; Mark 14.66–72; Luke 22.54–62; John 18.15–18, 25–27. Girard's interpretation is mainly based on Mark 14.66–72, *New English Translation NET Bible*, https://www.biblegateway.com: Now while Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the high priest's slave girls came by. When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked directly at him and said, "You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus." But he denied it: "I don't even understand what you're talking about!" Then he went out to the gateway, and a rooster crowed. When the slave girl saw him, she began again to say to the bystanders, "This man is one of them." But he denied it again. A short time later the bystanders again said to Peter, "You must be one of them, because you are also a Galilean." Then he began to curse, and he swore with an oath, "I do not know this man you are talking about!" Immediately a rooster crowed a second time. Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said to him: "Before a rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down and wept.
3. Girard, "Peter's Denial," 150.
4. See, for example, Paolo Diego Bubbio, "Mimetic Theory and Hermeneutics," *Colloquy* 9 (2005); Gianni Vattimo, "Heidegger and Girard: Kenosis and the End of Metaphysics," in *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith: A Dialogue*, ed. Gianni Vattimo (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Anthony W. Bartlett, "A Flight of God: M. Heidegger and R. Girard," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 59.4 (2003): 1101–12.
5. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 149
6. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 149–68.
7. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 312.
8. William J. Richardson, *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), 530–32.
9. Rüdiger Safranski, *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 211, 212, 279.
10. In German: *Botmäßigkeit* and *Diktatur*. See *Sein und Zeit*, 126; *Being and Time*, 163–64.
11. In French, addiction is *asservissement* (lit. being made a slave); in Dutch, it is *verslaving* (lit. being a slave).
12. There is a range of scientific journals on the subject, including, among others, *Addiction*, *The Journal of Addictive Diseases*, *The American Journal on Addictions*. On the Internet I even found an "International Society of Addiction Journal Editors," an alliance of only the (apparently numerous) editors of such journals.
13. Not only is the word *addiction* in many languages closely linked to slavery (see note 11), but anyone who has worked with addicts or is an addict himself knows that they are barely capable of acting without being motivated by their addiction in some way, and what is more, that they cannot take responsibility for what they do.
14. Paul Ricoeur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," in *The Phenomenology Reader*, ed. D. Moran Mooney and T. Mooney (London: Routledge, 2002), 582.
15. In line with Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty interprets this prior relationship of belonging as bodily existence in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2008), 178.
16. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 149, 164, 165.
17. Of course, this is not a translation in the literal sense. Heidegger's (1889–1976) *Sein und Zeit* is from 1927; Girard (b. 1923) started publishing on mimesis and scapegoating in the 1960s.
18. See René Girard, *Mimesis and Theory: Essays on Literature and Criticism, 1953–2005*, ed. Robert Doran (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).
19. "Mirror neurons" in Google produces more than 1.2 million hits, thus illustrating the topicality of the subject.
20. René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 49–61.
21. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (first published in 1961), trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2000), 245, 246, 279;

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Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (1974) (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2004), 15, 50, 52, 56, 57, 106, 122, 124, 127, 144, 145, 153, 194.

22. Levinas discusses his notion of the face in numerous articles, published in a variety of journals. For an overview, see "The Levinas Online Bibliography" (www.levinas.nl). In his first chef-d'oeuvre, *Totality and Infinity*, the experience of the face is discussed on pages 187–204. Levinas's second chef-d'oeuvre, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, in which his previous work is radicalized, still rests on the notion of the face, albeit less predominantly.
23. Joachim Duyndam, "Girard and Levinas, Cain and Abel, Mimesis and the Face," *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 15.16 (2009): 237–48.
24. Joachim Duyndam, "Sincerely Me: Enjoyment and the Truth of Hedonism," in *Radical Passivity: Rethinking Ethical Agency in Levinas*, ed. Benda Hofmeyr (Heidelberg: Springer, 2009), 67–78.

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