



Girard's Anthropology of Addiction. An Exploration through

Mimesis and *Mitsein*

1. Introduction: *Mitsein* and Community

In his essay “Peter’s Denial”, commenting on the well-known pericope from the Gospels, Girard exercises his specialism as he does in most of his work: hermeneutical reading of classical texts, to unveil the mechanisms of mimetic desire and scapegoating.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’s arrest, and since then any possible future for Peter’s *being with Jesus* had been destroyed, Peter was looking for another community to belong to, to *be with*. Therefore, he moves to the high priest’s palace and joins the people gathered around the fire.

It is exactly at this point of his reading that Girard launches Heidegger’s concept of being-with, although he does not elaborate on it.³ I will pursue the parallel suggested by Girard by focusing on the most obvious similarities and differences. Subsequently, I will try to articulate the parallel from the point of view of addiction. In conclusion, I will try to understand how from Levinas’s perspective addiction to mimesis and being-with could be cured.

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*).⁴ Like Girard, Heidegger does not depart from individuality – an individual I opposed to individual others – but in Heidegger human existence is being together from the outset. The 'inter-dividuality' of human existence precedes the individuality, as Girard would express it.

Without calling it mimesis, Heidegger describes *Mitsein* in a mimetic way. In the modus of *Mitsein*, which is the way or kind of being we all share in the first place according to Heidegger, we live like 'they' live.⁵ It is the inauthentic everyday life, in which one acts, thinks, judges, feels, etc. like 'they' act, think, judge, and feel. 'They' (in German: *das Man*) is the first answer to the question 'who is existing in the world?', 'who is *Dasein*'. The answer to the question 'who?' is not primarily the authentic autonomous I, but 'they'. 'They' is anybody and everybody, including myself. 'They' refers to 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 usually and primarily lead. Although he expressly does not intend a moral understanding, Heidegger characterizes this average mode of existence as dependence and describes the 'they' in terms of dictatorship, which he opposes to authentic existence. *Being and Time* shows the authentic way of life as a retreat from everyday ordinary life through resoluteness and conscience.⁶

Because of the dependent and dictatorial nature of everyday existence according to Heidegger,⁷ I would suggest to interpret this average mode of existence in terms of addiction. One is addicted to the choices, the thoughts, the preferences, the habits, in short the way of existence or 'potentiality-for-being' dictated by 'they'. Heidegger does not say 'the others', because that would suggest that I am not included, whereas I am principally also part of 'they'. Neither is he speaking of 'each other', which would presuppose the plural presence of autonomous subjects related to one another. Being-with (*Mitsein*) is being addicted to the idle talk (*Gerede*), curiosity (*Neugier*) and ambiguity (*Zweideutigkeit*) of 'they'. Being dependent on and dictated to by 'they' is being slave of 'they': under the complete control of 'they'.⁸

2. Addiction

Girard's mimesis can also be interpreted in terms of addiction. To clarify this, I will generally characterize the phenomenon of addiction first. Today, addiction is extensively studied, mostly from medical and biological points of view.⁹ Starting from the modern autonomous subject, who is the free and responsible centre of his/her own thinking, acting, suffering, giving meaning, etc., addiction can only be seen as insanity or disease, which is indeed common currency in medical and physiological discourses. The addict seems to lack both the responsibility and the freedom of the autonomous subject.¹⁰ A phenomenological perspective, however, can shed an interesting additional light on addiction, especially on some basic assumptions of current scientific approaches.

From a phenomenological point of view, subject and object are embedded in the prior relationship of intentionality. Heidegger has deepened Husserl's intentionality to

being-in-the-world, whereas Merleau-Ponty interprets, in line with Heidegger, the prior relationship between subject and object as bodily existence.¹¹ The bodily intentionality in Merleau-Ponty is mutual, i.e. it implies both the subject's involvement with the object and the object's involvement with the subject. The subject experiencing the object and dealing with it not only gives meaning to the object, but the object also appeals to me with meaning. It attracts me or puts me off. Subject and object are in Merleau-Ponty's view like the hungry and the food, the curious and the secret, the hunter and the prey, the philosopher and the truth.¹²

Seen from a Merleau-Pontian perspective, addiction is not incomprehensible or 'mad', but only gradually differing from the normal situation. Being intentional subjects we are all attracted by some objects. Within the bodily existence of the addict, however, the attraction of some objects is so strong that s/he is completely ruled by it. The addicted subject's behavior is completely determined by those objects. The slavery wording expresses it unmistakably.

As I stated above, the Heideggerian being-with can also be interpreted in terms of addiction. Unlike Merleau-Ponty, however, the 'Heideggerian addiction' is not what some may have – the addicts, who only differ in degree from the normal – and some have not, but it is what we all have in the first place. Basically because of the ontological structures of 'being-in' (*In-sein*), especially being-in-the-world, and 'being-alongside entities within-the-world' (*Sein-bei innerweltlich Seienden*) and 'being-with' (*Mitsein*), we are principally not autonomous subjects, but absorbed in the world.¹³ 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 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.¹⁴

But the others are no genuine others. As for me, I am not opposite or distinguished 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*].¹⁵

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' (ibid.: 165).

3. Girard

Setting Heidegger's idiosyncratic wording aside, his philosophy of *Mitsein* could be considered to be almost a direct translation of Girard's theory of mimesis into the ontology of being. Of course, stating this is an anachronism (Girard's work comes after Heidegger's¹⁶), but for the sake of the argument one could. Also in Girard, human relationships and human society are dominated by a kind of slavery and addiction – or at least, one could say, they have a strong and undeniable aspect of slavery and addiction. In Girard, however, addiction is not so much conceived as working between subject and object alone, as it could be understood from a phenomenological Merleau-Pontian perspective, but it rather has a triangular structure. 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. Girard's emphasizing the triangular structure of desire in almost all his work since the 1960s is too numerous to be cited. Addiction in Girard means that the subject does not stand free toward the object, but that the subject is inevitably addicted to the object as far as and because it is mediated by a mimetic model. Addiction is grounded in mimesis, as it is grounded in *Mitsein* in Heidegger. *Voilà* the important parallel between Girard and Heidegger.

There is, however, an important difference between Girard and Heidegger. Girard is more specific on society than Heidegger is. One could argue, on the one hand, that both in Heidegger and in Girard, human society is the result of *Mitsein* and mimesis, respectively. On the other hand, whereas in Heidegger *Mitsein* is not intrinsically conflicting, Girard's mimesis is. Whereas one could live forever, addicted, in the world of 'they', acting and thinking as 'they' do, and so being happy as slaves, the

world of mimesis is conflicting in its root. While in Girard mimesis is society's very foundation – people imitating each other's desires form by that a society – mimesis also undermines society by the conflicts it causes. Mimetic desire creates fighting over principally any object, and therefore it creates a war of everybody against everybody.

At this point, Girard introduces his scapegoat theory. When in a conflict a scapegoat is found who is accused to be the cause of the conflict, the 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 with the sacrificing the mimetic violence ends, albeit temporarily. Unlike Heidegger, in Girard society rests on exclusion; on the distinction between those who belong to society and those who are excluded. In Heidegger, *Mitsein* is the way of living we *all* share originally, nobody excepted.

All this raises an important question: could we escape from the mechanisms of mimesis and scapegoating, and from *Mitsein*, respectively? Yes and no. No, says Heidegger, we cannot keep clear from the way of 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*). No, we cannot avoid mimesis, according to Girard, and his theory is supported by recent biological research into mirror neurons.¹⁷ One may say, though: 'Yes we can'. The possibility of avoidance can be defended. Girard's work is one great fight against scapegoating, consisting of – as I said – reading classical texts, unveiling the mostly hidden mechanisms of mimetic desire and scapegoating, unmasking justifications of scapegoating in a variety myths and ideologies.

4. Conclusion

I want to conclude by quoting a beautiful example of Girard's reading, unveiling and unmasking. In *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Girard brilliantly interprets the famous passage from the Gospel according to St. John about an adulterous woman (John 8:3-11).¹⁸

Girard points out that, in Jesus's formulation 'let him who is without sin throw the first stone', all the emphasis rests on the first stone. This echoes on in the deafening silence reverberating after these words are spoken. Because the first stone to be thrown lacks precedent, i.e. it has no model, it forms the last obstacle to the stoning, says Girard. Once the *first* stone has been thrown, subsequent stones will follow easily because they will follow mimetically. Girard says that the fact that Jesus's words have become proverbial and symbolic proves that the mechanism is just as alive and virulent as it was 2,000 years ago.

From Levinas's point of view, one may add to this that by placing the emphasis on the first stone, Jesus makes each of the accusers responsible themselves. Each accuser holding a stone in their hand is holding the first stone. This makes each 'the only one', unique. There is, after all, but one first stone, even though each of them might have it in their hand. What we see happening here is the making singular, the individualizing process of responsibility. According to Levinas, one is chosen for responsibility by the other.¹⁹ Being chosen for responsibility – it may sound huge and heavy, but it 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. One (in Levinas: me) singled out breaks up the *Mitsein* of the hordes, to which we belong first and foremost according

to Heidegger. The hordes fall apart through the uniqueness of the 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.

Seen from Levinas' perspective, the story of the adulterous woman is not exceptional. Being chosen to responsibility happens all the time. The 'face of the other', as Levinas calls it, invites or elects me to take on my responsibility.²⁰ The core of Levinas's view, in relation to Girard, is the individualizing effect of being chosen to responsibility, which is my unique responsibility. Therefore, the face of the other can break through the massive *Mitsein* and the mass mimesis.

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¹ René Girard, "Peter's Denial," in idem, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 149-164, particularly 150-154.

² Matt 26:69-75; Marc 14:66-72; Luc 22:54-62; John 18:15-18, 25-27.

³ “Peter’s Denial”, p. 150

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 149.

⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 149-168.

⁶ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 312.

⁷ In German: ‘Botmäßigkeit’ and ‘Diktatur’. See *Sein und Zeit*, 126 (*Being and Time*, 163-164).

⁸ In French, addiction is: ‘asservissement’ (being made slave); in Dutch: ‘verslaving’ (being slave).

⁹ There is a range of scientific journals on the subject, including for instance *Addiction*, *The Journal of Addictive Diseases*, *The American Journal on Addictions*, etc. On the Internet I even found an ‘International Society of Addiction Journal Editors’, which is an alliance of only the (apparently numerous) editors of such journals.

¹⁰ Not only is the word addiction in many languages closely linked to slavery (see note 8), anybody who deals 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.

¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, “Phenomenology and Hermeneutics,” in D. Moran & T. Mooney (eds.), *The Phenomenology Reader* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), 582.

¹² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2008), 112-170, 178.

¹³ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 149.

¹⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 164

¹⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 164

¹⁶ Heidegger’s (1889-1976) *Sein und Zeit* is from 1927; Girard (1923) started publishing on mimesis and scapegoating in the 1960s.

¹⁷ ‘Mirror neurons’ in Google produces more than 1.2 million hits, thus illustrating the topicality of the subject.

¹⁸ René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 49-61.

¹⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh PA: Dusquesne University Press, 2000), 245, 246, 279; idem, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh PA: Dusquesne University Press, 2000), 15, 50, 52, 56, 57, 106, 122, 124, 127, 144, 145, 153, 194.

²⁰ Levinas discusses his notion of the face in numerous articles, published in a variety of journals. See for an overview The Levinas Online Bibliography (www.levinas.nl). In his first chef-d'oeuvre, *Totality and Infinity* (see note 19), the experience of the face is discussed on p. 187-204. Levinas's second chef-d'oeuvre, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (see note 19), in which his previous work is radicalized, still rests on the notion of the face, albeit less predominantly.