

The Non-Violence of Love: A Hildebrand-Girard Encounter

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Abstract

If love is a social as well as a personal reality, it could be fruitful to compare von Hildebrand's understanding of love and desire with that of cultural anthropologist René Girard. Girard depicts love and desire as a triangular process which arises from imitation, rather than the result of auto-generative affection. In this sense, Girardian theory would seem to convict von Hildebrand of what is called the "romantic lie" wherein desire is thought to arise through the mutual appreciation of two subjects. However, in *The Nature of Love* von Hildebrand shows awareness of the possibility that love can be awakened by imitation. Moreover, the lack of a sufficient reason in Girardian theory for avoiding violence can be answered by turning to von Hildebrand's appreciation of the ontological basis for desire.

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If the notion of love is central to communal living, whether in its differing degrees for friends, neighbors or spouses, then Dietrich von Hildebrand's *The Nature of Love* cannot but be relevant to reflection on the structure and dynamics of the social sphere, and of human culture in general.¹ The value responses of every individual, which inform von Hildebrand's understanding of love and of ethics in general, are educed within a community also shaped by values, goods and social relations. As von Hildebrand observed in an early work, the community too has its own metaphysics.

We can wonder what correlations, or indeed tensions, can be identified between von Hildebrand's view of love, and love as framed by the anthropological and cultural theories of René Girard. Girard, a now-retired

¹Dietrich von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, trans. John F. Crosby with John Henry Crosby (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2009).

professor who taught at Stanford University for many years, established his reputation on the back of the following three major theories: first, the imitative or mimetic origin of human desire; second, the universal tendency of human societies to purge themselves of desire-driven conflict through the process of scapegoating; and third, the unique character of Christianity, which parodies the scapegoating process in the Crucifixion, but yet resolves conflicts through non-retaliation, forgiveness, and renunciation. If we consider that Girard places love at the heart of this last theory, the interest in facilitating a Hildebrand-Girard encounter becomes more tangible. Of course, we are dealing with two bodies of thought that express quite different intellectual perspectives and convictions and since no critical work has been conducted so far in this area, this paper is itself entirely exploratory. Still, so influential have these thinkers been in reflecting on “the human” that some comparison is quite in order and potentially fruitful for Hildebrandians and Girardians alike.

In confronting Girard’s thought with that of von Hildebrand, we could consider a range of concerns, but this investigation will focus on just two. First, we ask to what extent von Hildebrand’s description of love falls afoul of Girard’s criticism of desire as auto-generative, or originating in the subject. If, as Girard believes, an object’s desirability is grasped only through our perception of others’ desires, what becomes of the “I-Thou” axis which is so central to von Hildebrand’s understanding of love? Second, we can ask whether Girard’s insistence on the avoidance of violence relies on a voluntarist reading of action; a reading which, unlike von Hildebrand’s, neglects the metaphysical plane almost entirely. Hildebrandians and Girardians are understandably protective of their masters’ legacies, but in this writer’s opinion, this is an even greater reason to subject such legacies to robust and fearless discussion. Von Hildebrand and Girard surely deserve nothing less.

Desire and Love: von Hildebrand’s Acknowledgement of Imitation

Girard’s initial achievement in the realm of cultural studies was to develop a theory of literature which sought to attack what he called the “*mensonge romantique*”—the “romantic lie.” The romantic tradition interpreted desire and love as the fruit of a binary encounter between choosing-subject and chosen-object. The themes of romantic desire evoke the supremacy of personal choice, the power of the subject’s desire, the embodiment of that desire through passion, and a restricted focus on the individual’s agency. Nineteenth-century questioning of this tradition is usually located in the emergence of literary naturalism and realism which sought to objectify experiences related through

literature. In the work of novelists such as Émile Zola, for example, theories of heredity called into question whether the individual, his inclinations and his choices, could ever be free from the physiological and psychological influences of his forbearers; desire for Zola was not so much the exercise of the individual's free subjectivity as the moral fallout of his psychological, physiological, and environmental conditions. Subsequent theories of psychology, such as that of Sigmund Freud's, likewise questioned the somewhat simplistic model of an all-conscious self whose desires were literally *monarchical*—ruled by the authentic “one.” In other words, by the time Girard came to question the romantic lie in his first book, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, it had already been well tested by artists and theorists, even if it lived on—and continues to live on today—in popular culture.²

Girard's questioning of the romantic lie took, however, a distinctive shape. In studying a number of major European novelists, notably Stendhal, Dostoyevsky, and Proust, he remarked that at a certain point their works began to portray desire not as a binary process but as the result of imitation. For Girard, *desire* is to be distinguished from appetite or need, both of which are binary. (We can note here in passing the correlation between Girard's thought and that of von Hildebrand's, which carefully distinguishes between the biological and instrumentalist purposes of sensible or utilitarian goods, as opposed to things that represent a value in themselves.) Now, since biological need and instrumentalism can be found in the animal kingdom, *desire* is a peculiarly human phenomenon, according to Girard. And yet, he observes, desire (as opposed to need or appetite) seems to be aroused not by the direct perception of something as a value or good, but by the perception that something is desirable because it is the object of another's desire. In any given situation, another's desire for some object, value, or person unveils to me its very desirability. Girardian desire, therefore, is not a binary encounter between choosing subject and chosen object, but a triangular process—Girard even calls it “*le désir triangulaire*”—in which the subject imitates a model's desire and in which desirability is thus mediated rather than immediate.

Now, imitation has of course long been recognized as an essential aspect of human education: *anima quaedamodum omnia*, as the Scholastics used to say. Girard's originality, however, lies in identifying how a certain canon of authors—those who produce what he calls “*vérité romanesque*” or “novelistic truth”—have depicted imitation or modeling as an essential process within the generation of human desire and choice. Such imitation can be mediated through a living person with whom the subject can potentially come into

² René Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité Romanesque* (Paris: Grasset, 1961), published in English as *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965).

conflict, but it can also, as in the case of Don Quixote, be the result of reading or some other cultural experience. As children we learn through imitation what is desirable—witness the dispute between two children over one toy when the nursery is packed with toys—but, according to Girard, even our adult desires tend to follow this triangular dynamic. As a corollary of this triangulation, and in later works such as *La Violence et le Sacré*, Girard would come to regard as mythological all cultural narratives which portray desire as a binary encounter between choosing-subject and chosen-object.³ Cultural narratives become mythological insofar as they veil the mediated or imitative processes which engender desire, hide the source of conflict which arises from our wanting what our neighbor wants, and veil its violent resolution.

If, for the time being, we allow Girard's theory to stand, it is clear that it poses problems for a Hildebrandian view of love which is rooted in value-response. Von Hildebrand does not of course consider love as a category of desire, but love must necessarily involve the moral process which encompasses the freely chosen association of lover and beloved. Indeed, many of von Hildebrand's descriptions and distinctions appear to indicate that in his view both desire and love are not mediated but binary in character. For example, love arises when the other person's being and existence become fully thematic for the subject and elicit a person-focused value response. In Chapter 1 of *The Nature of Love*, von Hildebrand argues that love involves a perception of the overall beauty and preciousness of a person, even if those value qualities surpass our value concepts.⁴ For von Hildebrand, the pathologies of love concern mostly its confusion with needs and appetites, rather than the conflicts which can arise from triangulated desire. We find the same binary understanding of love and desire in Chapter 6 of *The Nature of Love* which studies the *intentio unionis*. Here the binary character of love is reinforced as a reciprocal and mutual value response. There is an interpenetration of looks between the lovers who participate in, and enrich, each others' happiness; there is a reciprocal self-donation which, at the same time, does not annihilate but rather reinforces the self as person.⁵ Thus von Hildebrand's description of love, from initiation to fulfillment, sits apparently within the tradition which understands desire as a binary process of choosing subject and chosen object. That von Hildebrand defends the right of the beloved not to be objectified or instrumentalized is arguably tangential to von Hildebrand's binary understanding of desire. The beloved is still ontologically the direct object of the lover's value response, regardless of how much their

³ René Girard, *La Violence et le Sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972), published in English as *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

⁴ Von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, 22.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 126–30.

mutual value responses become perfected in the *intentio unionis*, with all that it represents.

If we look at von Hildebrand's analysis in light of the Girardian theory of desire, should we conclude that von Hildebrand's description and analysis of love are guilty of the romantic lie? As we have shown above, by romantic lie Girard does not mean the selfishness, instrumentalization, or objectification to which lovers are subjected by pathological versions of love (and all of which von Hildebrand is more than well aware of), but rather Girard has in mind a model of love which does not acknowledge or disclose the imitative character of desire; a model of love which elides the process by which value comes to be perceived as desirable.

Such a conclusion would, however, be precipitous and tendentious. We should, in fact, refrain from accusing von Hildebrand of the romantic lie for two reasons: First, in the introduction to *The Nature of Love* von Hildebrand does in fact acknowledge a certain form of mimesis or imitation in the moral life:

Virtues are in fact primarily given to us in *other* persons. What humility is can only be grasped in another person; kindness is primarily given to us in *others*. . . . For our purposes the important thing is to see that the essence of love is not only given to us when we ourselves love; it is also given to us immediately and primordially in the love of *others*. . . . How often has someone who was never in love been awakened to such a love by the spousal love of *another* person for him.⁶

Von Hildebrand's insistence on imitation (observe in the Crosby translation the use of adverbs such as 'primarily' and 'primordially') is more honored in the breach than in the observance in the development of von Hildebrand's subsequent analysis, but its importance is clearly acknowledged in the above cited passage. The vital difference between Girard and von Hildebrand on this point is that Girard tends to make all desire dependent on imitation, while von Hildebrand acknowledges this imitative process in describing the initial genesis of some value response.

Von Hildebrand and Girard thus share the observation that love and desire are potencies actualized from without. For neither theorist can desire be merely auto-generative; and for von Hildebrand the binary process of love appears ("how often," he says) to find its psychological roots in the moral awakening provided mimetically by encountering values in others. Some might advance the objection that here von Hildebrand is only evoking imitation as a purely epistemological phenomenon, such that we can learn what is desirable in a general sense through imitation (which procures for us

⁶Ibid., 11–12.

intellectual insight) but that our desire in any particular and concrete case is not thus conditioned. Such an objection, however, would fail to account for the process of love having been “*awakened*”—surely descriptive of an actual moral affection—to which von Hildebrand alludes. The argument is not that von Hildebrand thinks all desire is generated mimetically but rather that he concedes the possibility that it can be. When interpreting the Hildebrandian “I-Thou” axis one would do well to be aware of this possibility. To argue the point *per absurdum*: denying that von Hildebrand concedes the possibility of desire through imitation would lead us to assume that he holds envy or jealousy to be impossible!

Why Avoid Violence? Girard’s Need for Ontology

The second reason for exonerating von Hildebrand from the accusation of the romantic lies in a logical problem inherent in Girard’s theory: if all desire is imitative or mediated, then we have a perpetual chain of learned desire (which is neither need nor appetite) going back *ad infinitum*. In other words, how has anyone ever desired anything in the first place without someone from whom they could learn the desirability of what they would then come to desire? This is not to say that the process of mimesis identified by Girard should not retain its recently acquired foothold in the analysis of culture. Still, this question indicates one of the fundamental problems with Girard’s thought: that in making all desirability the result of human acculturation—of our learning from others what is desirable—it subtly renders occult the existence of a transcendent and ontological good or value to which our wills are ordered intrinsically.

In order to unpack the consequences of this problem it is useful to dwell for a few moments on the problem of objectification and consider the differences between von Hildebrand’s and Girard’s criticism of it; for, in this difference lies an illustration of Girard’s weakness and the potential usefulness of an application of von Hildebrand’s ethics to Girard’s anthropology.

According to chapters two and three of *The Nature of Love*, objectification is said to arise when the value response to a person has been substituted by the drive to satisfy a need. What is thematic is no longer the person encountered, but the satisfaction of some desire within the desiring subject. It is important to distinguish here between von Hildebrand’s use of the word ‘desire,’ which is always associated with *appetitus*, and Girard’s use of the word ‘desire’ which means either (a) a legitimate longing acquired through imitation or (b) a longing which vies with another for the object that both desire. For example, according to von Hildebrand, *objectification* leads the legendary figure of Don Juan to forget the themacity of his beloved, to focus instead on the

satisfaction of his desire. According to Girard, in contrast, *objectification* leads the subject to forget the nature of what he (perhaps) legitimately desires, and to turn his attention to any rival who threatens his possession or enjoyment of it. While for von Hildebrand objectification results from the themacity of self-satisfaction in the subject's perception, for Girard objectification arises when the rivalry between subject and model becomes thematic, relegating the object to being merely an instrument of their rivalry. In Chapter 6 of *The Nature of Love*, von Hildebrand observes that even the *intentio unionis* can become vitiated by possessiveness and selfishness. For Girard, on the other hand, the vitiation of desire lies always in rivalry, in the conflict it produces, and eventually in the outbreak of violence. At this point, says Girard, the rivals forget about the object they are fighting over and focus all their energies on their rivalry, while at the same time the logic of imitation turns them into monstrous doubles of each other.⁷

Thus far, both critiques of objectification express vitiations of human conduct, be that through self-centered substitution of desire for value response, or in the turning of desire into a pretext for conflict. Still, the problem with Girard's theory becomes all the clearer in his justification for turning away from mimetic rivalry. Girard's second book, *La Violence et le Sacré*, was an immense study of primitive religion and of the mechanism of the sacrificial scapegoat which it theorized as a universally attested means of purging communities of latent violence (violence being the result of rivalry induced by mimetic desire). Subsequently, however, in his *Des Choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, Girard identified in Christianity a different way of dealing with violence.⁸ In the Crucifixion, says Girard, Christianity parodies the sacrificial scapegoat mechanism of purgation in other religions, but short-circuits its logic by seeing in this act the refusal of God to retaliate for his Son's death. According to Girard, this non-violence on the part of God makes Christianity unique, for through it Christ lived out the very fullness ("*la plénitude*") of love.⁹ In Christianity, therefore, there lies a different solution to the dangers of mimetic desire and conflict: in love and self-renunciation the threat of latent violence can be avoided and the Kingdom of God established. Such was Girard's conclusion in *Des Choses cachées*, though under the influence of Raymund Schwager, SJ, Girard would later correct his denial of the sacrificial character of Christ's death. Originally, Girard had wanted to exclude from his account of Christianity readings of the Crucifixion which see it as an act of

⁷ Girard pursues this line of argument in *La Violence et le Sacré*.

⁸ René Girard, *Des Choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (Paris: Grasset, 1978), published in English as *Things Hidden from the Foundations of the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

⁹ Girard, *Des Choses cachées*, 295.

punishment or anger directed against Christ by God the Father.¹⁰

Arguably, however, this was not the only error in *Des Choses cachées*. For not only did this work misinterpret the concept of Christ's sacrifice, but entirely failed to provide a sufficient reason to avoid violence in the first place (by violence, let us understand here not only force but all self-interested manipulation of circumstances, whether by physical, psychological or communicative means). In *The City of God*, St. Augustine claims that all men want peace, and that those who fight are only looking for the peace that comes after fighting. But is this really true? On the contrary, people are violent because it procures for them the things that they desire. People are violent because on a physiological and psychological level they enjoy the adrenalin rush which violence and power bring. Neither of these benefits are available to those who renounce violence. Girard's theories warn us admirably against violence, but do not tell us *why* we should not take the world by force.

Here is where von Hildebrand's ethics can arguably come to the rescue. For Girard, violence is something principally that we do to each other. For von Hildebrand, violence is no doubt something that we can do to each other, but it is also something that can be done to objects, goods, or values by our failure to recognize them for what they are or to treat them with due dignity. In von Hildebrand's concept of value response, we find not only an explicit ethic of conduct (which is what Girard's advocacy of non-violence depends on) but an ontological theory which looks to the being of things in their true character and which illumines our moral reaction to them. Conduct, after all, is not merely about the avoidance of evil—as Girard inadvertently implies—but about the pursuit of the good. Girard has perhaps been so preoccupied with the mechanism, or the *how*, of desire that he has not found room in his doctrine for the *what* of desire. In von Hildebrand's value response, however, we find not only a guide to conduct ("avoid violence through restraint") but an acknowledgement of its ontological roots. We can extrapolate, moreover, from such ontological insights the reason why peace is not merely the absence of violence, but the recognition and appreciation of some order of being, the highest of which elicits love from the lower orders. We can conclude that without understanding the very violence which desire can inflict on the order of being (whether through objectification or instrumentalization), no sufficient reason can be given for rejecting violence in the first place.

If we ask why Girard's theories fail in this regard, the answer might lie in the fact that anthropology is primarily a discipline of observation. That is, a discussion of the *what* of desire might raise questions that are too ab-

¹⁰ Raymund Schwager, SJ, *Must there be Scapegoats? Violence and Redemption in the Bible*, trans. Maria L. Assad (New York: Gracewing, 2000).

stract for any anthropology to contemplate. In coming to this conclusion we must not ignore for a moment the threat that evoking the specter of essentialism poses to a large section of the academy. And yet naming and identifying things—escaping from a logic which was first mooted in nominalism—might ultimately be the only sufficient reason not to succumb to the attractions of violence and power.

In any case, the moral corollaries which Girard undoubtedly draws from his anthropological account of Christianity are on uncertain ground without some ontological anchor that explains not only the value of the non-violence of love, but why that non-violence is proportionate to the goods, values, and ultimately, the persons which we learn to desire by mimetic behavior. If von Hildebrand's concept of value response can supply for this lacuna, it will not be the least of its achievements.

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