

# **CONTENT FOR LIFE**

**EXPLORING THE POSSIBILITIES AND PITFALLS OF HUMAN EXISTENCE  
BY USING MIMETIC THEORY**

## **INTRODUCTION**

## A. HUMAN BEINGS AS CRISIS MANAGERS

We all have to deal with crisis situations. A crisis happens when we are challenged to renew or change the order of things as we know it. Therefore it is always a threat, big or small, to the systems that bring stability to our lives. A crisis is a time to make decisions in order to preserve a given system of stability or to create a new one. As such it is not just an event which forces us to adjust to its course, but also an opportunity to imagine other ways of being in the world. A crisis is violent when it is primarily experienced as an assault on our personal integrity and our socially defined identity. On the other hand, a crisis might contain the promise of a better protected personal integrity and an enhanced social identity when it is experienced as an assault on systems of stability that actually suppress us. In short, the crisis situations that befall us and subvert the world as we know it are experienced either as a curse or a blessing, either as doom or chance.

Confronted with crisis situations, every human being is able to ask three clusters of questions, one scientific and two philosophical. Here's what the crisis manager named human might think about:

### 1) SCIENTIFIC QUESTIONS:

How can a crisis situation be explained? What are its causes and consequences? How do we, people, deal with it and what explains our behavior?

To use a business analogy:

*How do people behave within the company and what problems arise out of this behavior?*

### 2) A FIRST SET OF PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS (MEANING):

Where do we want to go from here, confronted with this crisis? What is the ultimate goal of what we are trying to do? What are we hoping for?

To use the business analogy:

*What does this company stand for? What goals does it hope to accomplish?*

### 3) A SECOND SET OF PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS (ETHICS):

How should we behave ourselves if we want to accomplish our goal, dealing with this crisis? Should we deal with the crisis situation like we normally do, or should we change our behavior?

To use the business analogy:

*How should people behave within the company in order to accomplish its goals?*

Once the two sets of philosophical questions are answered, science of course functions as a means to make the fulfillment possible of thought-through goals which transcend (and therefore guide) the merely scientific endeavor.

## B. MIMETIC THEORY – INSPIRATIONAL THINKING IN TIMES OF CRISIS

### I. CONSIDERING "CRISIS MANAGEMENT" QUESTIONS

As long as we are alive and well as human beings, we are mimetically connected to each other. It is because of our mimetic (i.e. imitative) ability that we are social creatures. Mimetic theory, as it was initially developed by René Girard, tries to understand and explain the possibilities and pitfalls of human social behavior by studying its mimetic interactions. It attempts to answer the three clusters of questions, identified previously, concerning "crisis management" as the *condition humaine*:

#### 1) SCIENTIFIC QUESTIONS:

How do crisis situations in human life arise out of mimetic interactions? How are these mimetic interactions influenced by conditions of the natural environment? Or, on the other hand, how do mimetic interactions construct patterns of human behavior that influence the natural environment in negative or positive ways? How do we normally deal with crisis situations arising out of mimetic interactions?

#### 2) PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS (MEANING):

What goals are desirable for human life, considering the mimetic nature of human beings? What are we trying to accomplish by studying mimetic interactions?

#### 3) PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS (ETHICS):

How should we behave if we want to accomplish our goals? Should we deal with crisis situations, arising out of mimetic interactions, like we normally do – like our ancestors did, for instance? Should we accept certain morals (of which the origins can be scientifically explained)? Or should we try to change our behavior?

### II. OUTLINE FOR A COURSE USING MIMETIC THEORY

#### 1) MIMESIS AND EMPATHY

Any course using mimetic theory starts with a simple observation: the way we think about ourselves and the way we develop a sense of identity is always mediated by our social environment. And that which makes something like a social environment possible precisely is our – indeed mimetic – ability to put ourselves in each other's shoes.

Neuroscientists have discovered that so-called mirror neurons in our brains play a very important role in this regard. These brain cells allow us to *imitate* others. They allow us to *pretend* that we're someone else and to take another person's point of view. And this allows us to *imagine* what others are experiencing, thinking, expecting or even desiring. In short, our *mimetic* ability is the *conditio sine qua non* to empathize and bond with others, and to develop a sense of self. Of course our imaginative projections about others can be wrong. That's why we, rather unwittingly, constantly look for the confirmation of mutually established social expectations. The question "Am I doing this right?" seems to be the ever present subtext to our behavior. It really structures the interaction

between ourselves and others. As it happens though, the recognition we get from one social group might be of more importance to us than that of another. We might empathize more with the members of the San Francisco symphony orchestra we're part of than with the homeless of that same city. Or we might feel so close to our favorite football team that we become really hostile to its adversaries.

So our ability to empathize with others turns out to be a two-edged sword. It connects us *with* and disconnects us *from* others at the same time. It can connect us to the members of a group we want to be part of *against* a common enemy. Even more so, it can stir rivalry between members of the same group or the same social environment. That might be surprising, but on second view it will turn out to be quite logical. Our mimetic ability allows us to take other people as *models* for our behavior. It allows us to learn from them in all sorts of ways, but it also plays a significant role in structuring our desires and ambitions. For instance, there's more than one twelve year old soccer player walking around with a shirt of Lionel Messi or some other soccer idol, secretly dreaming of being the next soccer sensation.

## 2) MIMESIS AND RIVALRY – THE PROBLEM OF MIMETIC DESIRE

There seems to be no harm in identifying with someone you admire and take as an inspiration for your own desires and ambitions in life. At first glance, that is. As long as the model you imitate belongs to quite another world than your own, as long as there is a significant distance between yourself and your model – in space, in time, or both –, chances of a conflictual relationship with the model are reduced. On the other hand, when that distance is no longer experienced, things might turn ugly, both for yourself and your model. As a twelve year old forward in a soccer team, it's fairly easy to admire Lionel Messi, but it might be a hell of a lot harder to appreciate the talents of the new teammate who comes in and takes your spot. Identifying yourself as being the forward (or even "the Messi of the team") immediately complicates your relationship with this newcomer, as he arouses the desire for your former status and the recognition it is supposed to bring. You might, for instance, try to get rid of the new guy by locking him out. Good coaches, though, know how to deal with these types of situations, even strengthening their team in the process. When two or more forwards imitate and thereby reinforce each other's desire to be the best player on their position, it indeed can make them all better players in a consequently better team.

Good coaches and managers are able to use *mimetic rivalry* in constructive ways, allowing their employees to recognize and respect that "the best has won." However, all management efforts aside, mimetic rivalry remains a tricky thing. It is literally rivalry based on the imitation of desires for certain material and/or immaterial objects (e.g. a trophy, some sort of social recognition or status, power within a company, wealth, etc.).

Human desire is, beyond instinctive needs and wants, highly mimetic (i.e. based on imitation). True, we're all born with certain physical needs (for food, water, oxygen, etc.). But no one is born with the desire to become, say, a culinary chef. That is a socially (and therefore mimetically) mediated ambition that gets different cultural expressions. Mimetic desire and mimetically mediated ambition can easily lead to frustrations and destructive conflicts between people who take each other as model. When two or more people, consciously or more often rather unwittingly, imitate each other's desire, they become each other's annoying obstacle when they cannot or do not want to share the object of their desire. In short, they become antagonists because of *mimetic desire*. Paradoxically, it is because people are close to each other and can imagine what it is like to be in the other's shoes, that they can become each other's archrivals in the context of a mutually shared desire. As said, our mimetic ability connects and disconnects.

### 3) THE SCAPEGOAT MECHANISM AS RESPONSE TO MIMETIC CRISES

The mimetic building blocks of our psychosocial fabric are at once responsible for the preservation and disintegration of that very same fabric. One of the well-trying means to restore a social order that is in crisis because of escalating mimetic rivalry, is the so-called *scapegoat mechanism*. This restoration again rests on mimetic processes. Let's turn to the example of the soccer team once more. When a team loses time and again, that's normally no favorable factor for the group atmosphere. Teammates start blaming each other for bad results, maybe even sabotaging each other. There also might be ill-will towards the coach by players who feel they're not given enough opportunities to play matches. And when the coach becomes part of the rivalry and frustrations within the team, that's usually the end of his career there. As more players imitate the ill-will of some teammates towards their coach, the latter becomes the one held responsible for all the major problems within the team, and he'll be fired by the board in the end. Instead of recognizing the mimetic origins of social disorder, people tend to blame one outsider or a group of outsiders. This scenario is well-known. Coaches indeed often function as convenient scapegoats, unjustly blamed for a crisis they're not or only partly responsible for. Like other scapegoats they're interpreted in a twofold manner by the group they're expelled from: perceived as the main *cause* for the tensions, divisions and disorder within the group, and experienced as the main *cure* while being *sacrificed* (expelled, or worse) to restore unity and order within that same group. Scapegoats are at once villain and hero, monster and savior, hated and loved, unwanted and wanted, scorned yet needed. Think, for example, of dictatorial regimes who blame all their domestic problems on foreign enemies. As long as a dictator can unite his citizens against some outside enemy, he can at least prevent them from uniting against himself and remain in the saddle. This means that he cannot completely destroy the enemy he publicly loathes. Dictators need the periodic sacrifice of their scapegoat in order to preserve the social fabric on a very large scale, but human beings in general tend to use the scapegoat mechanism on a day-to-day basis, albeit often in smaller ways.

### 4) GOALS OF THIS COURSE

Because of the widespread presence of the scapegoat mechanism and the sacrifices that go along with it in the preservation of social order and peace, it is a real challenge to imagine other ways of building human communities. The question is how to create communities where differences between people don't lead to escalating rivalries that tend to leave no difference at all – except for the violently established difference between a group and its scapegoat or sacrificial victim. In other words, are there ways to create a social order and peace that leaves room for non-violent, creative conflicts that originate in the irreducible yet fascinating differences between ourselves and other human beings?

The goal of this course is, first, to become more aware of the psychological and social mechanisms this introduction already briefly touched upon. Among others, it will present three ways by which mimetic connections between ourselves and other human beings might become mentally and/or physically violent and destructive. Some stories, old and new and from different media, will function as mirrors that reveal some of those important aspects of who we are as human beings. It will allow participants to analyze actual events and to reflect upon their own life. For those interested, extracurricular background information is given, including some scientific and philosophical material. Secondly, this course invites participants to actively grow into a way of being that prospers non-sacrificial peace and a way of life that is giving and joyous.