

René Girard's Hypothetico-Inductive Method. An Atheistic Demonstration of God's Existence

(El método hipotético-inductivo de René Girard.
Una demostración atea de la existencia de Dios)

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Abstract. This paper explains French anthropologist René Girard's notion of 'science', as it appears in his works. This idea of science is understood as a mainly inductive research method in which the central concept of 'hypothesis' does not refer to an attempt to solve a given problem. Instead, it is the very conclusion of an intellectual research process that, in Girard's case, has to do with humankind. Girard's project aims to build a really scientific-evolutionary Anthropology, which does not suppress human specificities. Rather, these specific human traits need to be radically understood in the context of biological animal life, without taking into account a priori philosophical or similar approaches. The idea around which Girard's research revolves is 'mimesis', which is an element that, in turn, due to its very nature and evolution, is linked to 'desire' and 'sacrifice'. However, paradoxically, Girard will end up stating that his 'hypothesis' reveals that creating a scientific reading of the field of Religious Studies is the proper way to interpret Anthropology and, in the end, even Metaphysics. In sum, Girard's 'hypothesis' proposes a theory of religion as a sort of "Fundamental Science" and as a reference for all other human disciplines. Such a Fundamental Science is also called Mimetic Theory and its clearly critical and apo-

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phatic character is only lessened by the positive contribution of the revelation of the biblical God in the Judaeo-Christian culture's rites and myths.

Keywords: science; hypothesis; mimesis; Anthropology; desire; sacrifice.

Resumen. En el presente artículo, se explicará la noción de 'ciencia' plasmada en las obras del antropólogo francés René Girard. Esta ciencia se entiende como método de investigación principalmente inductivo en el que el concepto central de 'hipótesis' no refleja una tentativa de respuesta a un problema dado, sino que resulta la propia conclusión del proceso de búsqueda intelectual que, en el caso de este autor, tiene por objeto al ser humano. El proyecto de Girard se cifra en construir una antropología realmente científico-evolucionista que no elimine las especificidades humanas, sino que trate de entenderlas radicalmente desde el mundo de la biología animal, sin apriorismos filosóficos o semejantes. La idea en torno a la cual se irá forjando esta antropología será la 'mimesis', que es un elemento que, por su naturaleza y evolución, está asimismo vinculado con el 'deseo' y el 'sacrificio'. Sin embargo, paradójicamente, Girard acabará declarando que su 'hipótesis' revela que los estudios religiosos son el ámbito donde, en definitiva, adquieren todo su sentido la Antropología e, incluso, la Metafísica. En suma: la 'hipótesis' de Girard erige la teoría de la religión en una especie de "ciencia primera" y referencia de las demás disciplinas del saber humano. Tal ciencia primera es llamada también 'Teoría Mimética' y está marcada por un claro carácter crítico y apofático, solo templado por la aportación positiva de la revelación del Dios bíblico en los ritos y mitos de la cultura judeocristiana.

Palabras clave: ciencia; hipótesis; mimesis; antropología; deseo; sacrificio.

Introduction

2023 marked the centenary of the birth of René Girard (1923–2015), known as the “the Christian master of suspicion” (González 2016), a figure who presents himself as a multi-faceted thinker. Indeed, his doctrine is characterised by a type of methodological approach that allows and requires an interdisciplinary analysis to support the construction of a truly scientific anthropology that accounts for what is specifically human, without reductionism or supernaturalism.¹ The author's own life and academic

¹ As Webb (1988) explains, “Girard thinks one of the great advantages of his theory [...] is that it serves to explain both the continuity between men and animals and their discontinuity without the need to minimise either or to invoke the supernatural as an explanatory principle” (pp. 194–195; italics not in original).

trajectory led him, precisely, to adopt a peculiar research method through which he would forge his Mimetic Theory. More importantly, such a general research procedure entails a conceptual change in the understanding of the notion of 'science'. Certainly, it could be said that Girard's "scientific method" is *hypothetico-inductive*, since this notion of science reformed by Girard concentrates on the idea of 'hypothesis', which takes on a very specific conceptual value for the French thinker. The Girardian 'hypothesis' is the theoretical conclusion drawn from a fundamentally inductive investigation and, therefore, such a word should not be understood in its usual sense of being the type of *a priori* guidelines that inspire a given investigation and are subject to verification. The Girardian 'hypothesis' is *a posteriori*. Girard (1982) contrasts his thinking with the surrounding epistemological framework and argues that:

This *hypothesis* has the advantage over psychoanalysis and Marxism that it eliminates all the false specificities of man. If one takes as a starting point the prohibitions of incest or the economic motive or socio-political oppression, one cannot really pose the problem of hominisation and symbolic origin on the basis of animality, as one must do henceforth by really renouncing to accept in advance everything that must be accounted for (p. 103; italics are not in the original)².

As can be seen, Girard's critical zeal, as well as his commitment to the Theory of Evolution, are clear. However, what will also become clear in Girard's thought is that, as Xabier Pikaza (1994) points out, "for R. Girard the theme of man cannot be interpreted on a level of biology, on an animalistic level [since] the human being is something different" (p. 233). In Girard (1982), the difference between the human and the animal is obvious, although it is denied that it is an essential difference:

Between animality in the strict sense and humanity in the making, there is a real rupture, which is *the rupture of collective murder*, the only one capable of

² Our own translation into English. This applies to all Girard's literal quotations in English when they are obtained from the Spanish version used, after having been duly compared with Girard's original writings. And this also applies to other non-English sources when cited in English in this paper.

ensuring organisations based on prohibitions and rituals, however embryonic they may be. It is therefore possible to inscribe the genesis of human culture in nature, to refer it to a natural mechanism, without depriving it of any of its specific character, of what is *uniquely human* in it (p. 111; italics not in the original).

The element in which Girard sees a sufficient scientific-biological basis to create a solid evolutionary anthropology is ‘mimesis’, a factor in turn linked to that which meant a break with the animal world, that is, ‘collective murder’, the origin of the ‘scapegoat mechanism’ (Girard 2006, 71). The idea of mimesis, present in ‘mimetic desire’ (Girard 2006, 42)³, together with that of the mechanism just mentioned (also called ‘victimizing mechanism’: Girard 2002, 179) are the two main theoretical contents of Girard’s ‘hypothesis’. In this article, the details of these two pillars of Girard’s thought will not be described in detail, but attention will be focused on the general procedure of epistemological discovery of these elements, the system of which is usually known as Mimetic Theory, a veritable “first science” in Girard’s conception.

1. The scapegoat mechanism as the source of human knowledge

Girard’s great intellectual work is the forging of what he calls Mimetic Theory, which argues that ‘mimesis’⁴ is the constitutive feature of what, within this theory, characterises man above the level of simple biology: ‘desire’. Neither consciousness nor intelligence is sufficiently explanatory in itself to account for human uniqueness. Desire, on the other hand, is;

³ “Unlike simple appetites, desire is a social phenomenon that begins with a previously existing desire, the desire of the majority, for example, or that of an individual that we take as a *model*” (Girard 2012, 39; emphasis in original).

⁴ “*Mimesis* is the Greek word for the concept of imitation” (Girard 1996, 55; italics in the original). However, “Girard, following the etymological meaning, considers mimesis to be imitation. But, unlike the historical tradition, our author is not willing to reduce the term mimesis to merely representative behaviour [...]. For Girard, mimesis is a characteristic mode of animal behaviour, which humanity has maintained throughout its biological evolution” (Ruiz 2005, 33; our own translation).

and this desire is intrinsically mimetic (cf. Ruiz 2005, 25) and is open to the transcendence of *being*, since “all desire is a desire for being” (Girard 1996, 24). Following Girard, the exponential increase of mimesis in the evolutionary process engendered human desire, absent in the animal world, where there is only mimesis (cf. Girard 2002, 33–34).

Girard's break with philosophies that make the primacy of consciousness an irreducible datum is clear. In fact, for him, human consciousness is derived mediately from mimesis and immediately from collective homicide, already mentioned in the Introduction. As Benoît Chantre (2023) points out in his recently published and voluminous biography of Girard, “si la conscience est meutrière, il lui faudra expier ce crime” (p. 58). Human consciousness, and with it the whole world of reason and human civilization, is murderous because it proceeds from a crime whose expiation, to a large extent, lies in its unveiling and exposure. This crime just alluded to is collective homicide which, culturally perpetuated, has as its centre (cf. Girard 2012, 75, and Girard 2010, 9) the ‘sacrifice’ of a ‘victim’⁵. Such a homicidal mechanism is caused, according to Girard, by the natural dynamics of mimetic desire, which generates such social violence (cf. Lev 2022, 11, and Cerella 2020, 103) that finds in the execution of scapegoats the only way out to avoid the destruction of the community. The relevance of these Girardian statements is essential, because to speak of consciousness, the locus of human intelligence, is to speak of an outstanding development of this intelligence, which is science, the object of attention in this study. Not surprisingly, for Girard, “symbolic thought has its origin in the scapegoat mechanism” (Girard 1998, 242), since it is “the symbolic matrix of all signifiers and all signifieds” (Girard 1982, 191). In this sense, following Stork (2007), it can be stated that mimesis “precedes reflection in its primordial orientation and openness to the other” (p. 9).

There is a fundamental fact that needs to be emphasised: the group resolution whereby the scapegoat mechanism is executed, whose sacrifice restores stability to the community, is not something deliberate or

⁵ “The scapegoat mechanism [...] really is: a simple murder of an innocent victim, who is killed in order to restore peace to a violent community” (Girard 2006, 71).

conscious, although neither is it subconscious. The Girardian concept that adequately expresses this peculiar idea of unconsciousness is *méconnaissance*⁶. What this word, which is difficult to translate into other languages, means is that “the scapegoat vision is not the self-conscious deliberate lie in which the liar does not believe, but collective self-deception. It is the system of representation in which human cultures have enveloped themselves since the foundation of the world” (Girard 1993, 351).

Méconnaissance is the general epistemological situation, both thematic and methodical, of the human mind after its evolutionary emergence, caused by the victimage mechanism. And it is precisely against this *méconnaissance* that the first Girardian science is directed, against “murder [...that] is an inexhaustible *fund*: a transcendent source of falsehood that reverberates in all fields and that structures everything in its image” (Girard 1982, 192; italics in the original). Thought, language, and elementary logical distinctions are permeated by the sacrificial fruits of the scapegoat mechanism: “There is no meaning that is not sketched in it [in the victim] and that does not at the same time seem to be transcended by the victim. It gives the impression that it is then constituted as a universal signifier” (Girard 1982, 116). In this context, religion⁷ would be the institutional development of the scapegoat mechanism, where “the rite is the deliberate repetition of the mechanism [... and] myth is the narrative of its genesis” (Girard 2006, 158). From the comparative reading of different mythological texts and the study of various rituals of disparate cultures, “an impression emerges: something real happened” (Girard 1986, 7). This ‘something’ is the victimage mechanism as a universal resource for social survival and an element across the spectrum of every culture, insofar as mimetic desire, which has become irrepressible violence, leads to it. Truly, “religion is the mother of all [...] and only on the basis of this

⁶ Thus, Girard (1982) points out that “the question of man and the question of violence as ignorance [*méconnaissance*, in the original in French] acquire their true meaning relating to each other” (p. 153).

⁷ According to Jones (2008): “religion develops out of the sacrificial action rather than sacrificial rituals being an expression of some religious impulse” (p. 145). However, it must be borne in mind that the term ‘religion’ has a certain semantic versatility in Girard (cf. Hodge 2018, 44), although its primary meaning is religion as archaic, polytheistic, arising from the victimage mechanism that emerged from the execution of a scapegoat.

idea can the emergence of ritual, language and the symbolic be understood [...] religion itself is produced by the scapegoat mechanism” (Girard 2006, 122).

It is clear, therefore, that, for Girard, religion is not an instrument of contact with transcendence but a means of controlling the immanence of Man, which has become violent and has become a false transcendence that threatens to annihilate society. Indeed, Dubouchet (2015), who relies on G-H. de Radkowski, argues that “Girard’s conception [is] ‘la première théorie réellement athée du religieux et du sacré’” (p. 183). Then, it is not the sacrifices that depend on the gods and their will, but it is the gods that depend, existentially, on the sacrifice (cf. Jauffret 1986, 239). It is not for nothing that “‘sacrifice’ means ‘to make sacred’” (Girard and Vattimo 2011, 37; inside quotation marks in the original). Without sacrifice, strictly speaking, there is neither ‘sacred’ nor ‘God’, because, without sacrifice, the sacred is simply violence (cf. Oughourlian 1986, 296). Furthermore, “God is nothing other than violence massively expelled the first time” (Girard 1998, 276). Such violence was dislodged from the social bosom in the elimination of the scapegoat who, although at first was seen as guilty of the evils of the people, was later deified: “in divinity, on the contrary, the interpretation emphasises the victim already sacrificed, it is the sacred expelled already outside the community” (Girard 1982, 67).

In relation to the above, on the one hand, it is evident that the *object* on which the restoration of scientific knowledge, the source and support of the others, will have an impact on, is religion. And, on the other hand, the fact that there is no *method* of direct access to reality is insurmountable, but rather the mediation of the victim is as indispensable for this task of epistemological contact with the real as it is only accessible in an *inductive* way. The induction that leads to the ‘hypothesis’ is based on the representative nature of rites and myths, religious interpretations of the murder of the victim, the root of Man’s social being: “the rites constitute an *interpretative continuum around the propitiatory victim that they never reach* and whose constellation draws their image in rotogravure” (Girard 1998, 316; italics are not in the original).

The essential features of Girard’s “scientific method” and his “hypothesis” will be discussed in detail in the next section.

2. The mimetic-sacrificial ‘hypothesis’, the core of Girard’s ‘first science’

The fact that Girard uses the word ‘hypothesis’ does not imply that Mimetic Theory is endowed with an inferior, degraded epistemological status (cf. Bureau and Bertrand 1982, 129 and Charcosset 1979, 43). Rather, it is characterised by a shift in emphasis from the usual process of proceeding scientifically: “the word *hypothesis* must not be interpreted as a precaution or a hesitation in the face of the current climate of opinion” (Girard 1976, 417; italics in original).

The choice of the word ‘hypothesis’ points out that factual truth (facts) is not directly accessible (cf. Tataru 2017, 49), *in presence*⁸, but with a certain mediation (which is *interpretation*): “le propre d’une hypothèse est de se détacher suffisamment des données empiriques pour qu’il soit possible d’opérer des confrontations décisives” (Girard 1973, 68). By adopting the term ‘hypothesis’, Girard rejects philosophy as a method of arriving at truth, since he considers it to be the wrong way to achieve ends that are nevertheless respectable. Philosophy thus conceived is in line with “dogmatic knowledge” (cf. Girard 1978, 42), that is, of wanting to grasp reality directly (cf. Vanheeswijck 2003, 100). The postmodern counterpart of such positivist or rationalist zeal is nihilism: emphasising the role of interpretation and a one-sided subjectivism in the configuration of the knowledge of truth, that is, of ‘representations’, a concept that will be discussed later. Between the two paths lie Girard and his mimetic-sacrificial ‘hypothesis’. Girard even considers that the death of modern meta-narratives and of philosophy in general is not a cause for weeping,

⁸ As Webb (1988) explains, “Girard is just as critical [...] of [...] ‘naive realism’ and what Girard, following Derrida, refers to as a ‘metaphysics of presence’. In contrast to any hope that the real is what can be known by perception, Girard advocates a science that would recognise the need to move through hypothesis and verification beyond data, which do not of themselves constitute reality” (p. 210; inside quotation marks in original).

but a condition for the possibility of a well-founded epistemological hope, which is what opens his 'hypothesis':

As a result, most people feel today that the end of all certain knowledge has arrived [...]. I believe the opposite to be true. When the failure of all dogmatic methodologies is fully acknowledged, the scientific threshold is close [...]. This is the threshold of hypothetical knowledge (Girard 1978, 42).

Crossing this threshold means leaving behind systems of thought of near or remote Cartesian origin (such as idealism or phenomenology) or empiricism: "any knowledge henceforth will be hypothetical in the sense that it will never stem directly from empirical observation or phenomenological intuition alone [neither] [...] the dogmaticists of pure empiricism, or empirico-phenomenological structuralism" (Girard 1978, 42). Thus, for Girard, in science there are neither only facts, nor only interpretations⁹. The former is just as important as the latter.

On the other hand, some authors, such as Grant Kaplan, support the characterisation of the Girardian revolution as "Copernican" and attribute this consideration of the Mimetic Theory to Girard's own reflection (cf. Kaplan 2016, 52). Perhaps more suggestive, however, is the description of his revolution as "Einsteinian revolution". Truly, as Jean Pierre Dupuy (2009) points out:

J'ai assimilé au premier chapitre [from his book *La marque du sacré*] l'oeuvre de René Girard à la révolution einsteinienne en physique. Mais la théorie girardienne du religieux s'avoue complètement tributaire du religieux, à laquelle elle attribue son savoir. Voici un cas où l'objet de la science agit sur la science elle-même (p. 120).

For Dupuy, the Einsteinian character of the Girardian method lies, therefore, in a mutual and relative dependence between science as

⁹ "In the pursuit of knowledge the last century and a half has been characterised by excesses that have moved in antithetical directions. First [...] the] positivist thought [...] forgot interpretations. This excess was followed by the opposite reaction [...]. From now on, let us try to believe in both facts and interpretations" (Girard and Vattimo 2011, 155; these are Girard's words).

a method and the object of science as the goal of epistemological activity. Other authors, on the other hand, while describing Girard's scientific reform as "Einsteinian", attribute its Einsteinian character to another aspect. Thus, Lenehan (2012), who leans on E. Webb, indicates that "the revolution represented by Girard's thought is better described as Einsteinian rather than Copernican, since in the new paradigm there is no absolute starting point in either the object of desire or its subject" (p. 258). Be that as it may, this Einsteinian character implies the complete rejection of wanting to grasp reality directly, in presence.

For Girard, truth exists and, of course, there is also truth about Man. But the world of human knowledge is purely and uniquely human: even the highest elements, such as transcendence and symbolism, emerge from Man and evolutionary dynamics. Certainly, "the word 'science' should not be reserved to what is completely based on mathematics and divorced from human perception" (Rose 2011, 32; inside quotation marks in original). Everything will depend on human perception, insofar as the entire human mental universe derives from the immanence of its being, which is equivalent to violence. Human perception, however, is not given at the outset as an immutable essence of *a priori* forms. The symbolic order is not eternal, but springs from Man as a social being. Apart from that, this symbolism has its historical evolution: "L'ordre symbolique n'a rien d'une donnée imprescriptible et inaliénable, analogue aux catégories kantienne[s] [...]. L'ordre symbolique naît du mécanisme de la victime émissaire" (Girard 1972, 986).

In light of all the above, Girard (1973) summarises in the following quotation the explanatory potential that he ascribes to his 'hypothesis':

Nous tenons donc une hypothèse qui permet d'ébaucher une genèse explicative a) des rituels, b) des mythes, c) du sacré et de toutes les notions équivalentes qui juxtaposent le pire et le meilleur, le maudit et le béni. Dans le mécanisme de la victime unique [...] nous verrons donc une véritable matrice culturelle (p. 67; italics in original).

Generally, methodologically speaking, Girard tries to be more critical than the critics, more positivist than the positivists, and more atheistic

than the atheists (cf. Girard 1982, 481), but not with a purely deconstructive (cf. McDonald 2002, 43), sceptical or nihilistic intention, but quite the opposite: to rescue a certain realism (cf. Girard 1978, 43), which could even be called “metaphysical.” The basic characteristic of Girardian realism is in connection with the scientific reform it carries out in order to find the function of religion. Indeed, “the real, reality, is not rational, but religious” (Girard 2010, 170; italics in original). Thus, despite distrusting any *a priori* metaphysics or theology (cf. Dubouchet 2015, 183), Girard leads to metaphysical and theological conclusions from his strictly scientific-anthropological and cultural procedure (Girard 2002, 18).

The cultural resources that form the backbone of society make it see itself in a certain way, but always taking its footsteps in the reality from which it springs. In this dynamic of representation, it is Man who represents himself through the symbolism generated by the victimizing mechanism: “there is no human thought that is not born of the foundational lynching” (Girard 1982, 135). Man is the subject and object of his representation, but such representation is always mediated and made possible by the sacrificial mechanism and, more specifically, by the propitiatory victim. As has been pointed out, ritual and mythology, as instruments of acculturation par excellence, are interpreters that will try to embody violence in some way. Rites and myths are the most elementary representations of the human symbolic-representational order. Well, if there has been a particularly outstanding instrument when it comes to unveiling all this knowledge about mimetic violence, which has always been hidden under the fog of *méconnaissance* (already explained above), it has been the Bible (cf. Girard 1986, 214)¹⁰. The writings of the Old and New Testaments reveal the sacrificial mechanism and expose the “true representation” (the true ‘science’, in short) of what such a mechanism was but a false projection:

¹⁰ However, one can also go “beyond Girard’s commitment to the biblical legacy [...] some of his main insights are not limited to Judaism or Christianity but can also be discovered in Islam or in other world religions” (Palaver 2022, 109).

In the anthropological order, I define revelation as the true *representation* of what had never been represented to the end, or had been falsely represented [...] the victimising mechanism, preceded by its antecedent, the ‘interdividual’ scandals” (Girard 2002, 179; inside quotation marks and italics in original).

Biblical texts, not contaminated by the violence generated by mythology, can expose the truth that mythology hides: the innocence of the scapegoat (cf. Girard 2012, 89–90). Since mythology arises from the point of view of the persecutors, the truth of what it represents cannot come to light. On the contrary, the texts of the Bible, since they are not based on the disclosure of the guilt of the goat, can clearly denounce the victimising mechanism. The scapegoat mechanism is clearly revealed in the Gospels, but this, far from supposing that such a mechanism is justified, can only mean that it is publicly denounced. Such a denunciation is carried out precisely by the patent manifestation of stark violence (cf. Fiddes 2013, 53–54). What is more, only the truly religious sphere could have generated texts that unveiled the fundamental mystery of the human conscience, which is that “crime” alluded to in the second section, in the quote from Benoît Chantre (2023, 58). Curiously, the Gospels are truly religious texts because they are not religious (that is, because they are not religious as they have always been, in a mythological way). And such texts contain the unveiling of the primary object of human knowledge about violence, thus constituting an element of special importance for the development of Girardian science:

The triumph of the Cross is the fruit of such a total renunciation of violence that it can be unleashed as much as it pleases on Christ without even suspecting that, in doing so, it reveals what it takes so much care to conceal, without suspecting that the unleashing itself will in this case turn against it, since it will be recorded and represented very accurately in the accounts of the Passion (Girard 2002, 182–183).

In the words of Depoortere (2008):

All this brings Girard to subscribing to the divinity of Christ and the doctrine of the incarnation, for the truth about violence can only be brought to light by someone who is not held captive by violence. Yet, such a person cannot be generated by a world completely dominated by violence. Consequently, the only logical conclusion is that Jesus was not an ordinary human being, but God incarnate (p. 49).

Conclusions

In the light of what has been explained in this work, one cannot but notice the profound paradox of the Girardian intellectual enterprise. This paradox consists in trying to find for the first time a truly scientific, evolutionist and atheistic anthropology and ending up encountering instead the real existence of a transcendent God in human history, who has been found in an unexpected way, precisely in application of the methodological requirements of this same critical path. Girardian anthropology thus becomes a scientific theory about natural mimetic man made possible only by the historical action of the supernatural God, embodied in his cultural and literary legacy.

Girard's scientific method is the general path by which he leads to the construction of his all-encompassing theory of Man. Through the transformation of the concept of science that he carries out (and which has as its epistemological centre the notion of 'hypothesis'), Girard tries to put together a total anthropological theory that explains human desire and its link with transcendence, elements in close dependence on violence and religion. In Girard, methodology is modern in that it is scientific and does not set out to admit anything without sufficient criticism but, on the other hand, both the basic elements on which such scientific methodology is based, and the ends to which it is directed, go beyond Modernity. In particular, they go further in that Girard tries to give a scientific answer *to religion* as an object of preferential attention and a field of knowledge that is the foundation of any other possible topic of research and, especially, of anthropology.

In short, the Girardian hypothetico-inductive method exposes a 'hypothesis' that constitutes a *fundamental* critical science, facilitated by

Judeo-Christian divine revelation, embodied in historical facts and texts. Such a primary science has as its immediate aim, in short, to determine what is not true transcendence and divinity, however it may seem so, and to unveil the collective crime from which human consciousness and civilisation itself arise, enveloped in a persistent *méconnaissance*.

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