

THE QUEST FOR MAN

The Topicality of Philosophical Anthropology

DIE FRAGE NACH DEM MENSCHEN

Die Aktualität der philosophischen Anthropologie

Joris van Nispen and Douwe Tiemersma (eds.)



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Contents

<i>Jan Sperna Weiland</i>		
Some remarks on the quest for man		1.
<i>Odo Marquard</i>		
Der Mensch 'diesseits der Utopie'. Bemerkungen über Geschichte und Aktualität der philosophischen Anthropologie		3.
<i>Lothar Kuttig</i>		
Anthropologie und Humanisierung der Utopie		11.
<i>Michiel Korthals</i>		
Anthropologie zwischen Natur und Intersubjektivität		16.
<i>Raymond Corbey</i>		
Kant als Erblasser der philosophischen Anthropologie		21.
<i>Joseph M. Nyasani</i>		
The impact of different cultures on the image of man within a cultural milieu		27.
<i>Heinz Kimmmerle</i>		
How can the encounter of European and African culture be positive?		35.
<i>Lolle Nauta</i>		
Synchronie und Diachronie in der philosophischen Anthropologie Plessners		37.
<i>Jos de Mul</i>		
History and pluralism. Plessner: a Postmodernist avant la lettre ?		47.
<i>Antoine Mooij</i>		
The limits to mimesis. A critique of Girard's subject criticism		53.
<i>Anton Houtepen</i>		
Mimesis as ontological structure of the subject in the work of R. Girard.		60.
<i>M.B. ter Borg</i>		
Girard - his strength and his weakness		64.

<i>Hiroshi Kojima</i>		
Person und Leib. Versuch eines Weiterdenkens der Dialogik Martin Bubers		67.
<i>H.A. Fischer-Barnicol</i>		
Zwischen uns ... Randnotizen zur Philosophischen Anthropologie		76.
<i>Stephan Strasser</i>		
Fünf Thesen zum Begriff der menschlichen Erfahrung		83.
<i>Guy Widdershoven</i>		
The image of man in phenomenology, hermeneutics and deconstruction		94.
<i>Siep Kooi</i>		
The notion of experience		98.
<i>Ramakant Sinari</i>		
Man: the elusive reality		103.
<i>S.N. Balagangadhara</i>		
The reality of the elusive man?		112.
<i>Samuel IJsseling</i>		
On authenticity and inauthenticity and the problem of mimesis in Heidegger		117.
<i>A.W. Prins</i>		
Reference and occurrence		129.
<i>Kwame Gyekye</i>		
Man as a moral subject. The perspective of an African philosophical anthropology		135.
<i>Heinz Kimmerle</i>		
Intercultural philosophy as a language lesson		140.
<i>Hans Stoks</i>		
Language and reality		143.
<i>Theo de Boer</i>		
Von Subjektivismus zum Subjektizid; vom Subjektizid zur Subjektivität		145.
<i>Heleen Pott</i>		
Subjectivity, morality and the crisis of philosophy		160.

<i>Douwe Tiemersma</i>	
Intercultural invariants and intracultural variation. On the character of philosophical anthropology	163.
<i>Henk Oosterling</i>	
Universalism and particularism. Holsenhein against Foucault and Barthes	172.
<i>Etienne Vermeersch</i>	
The future of anthropocentrism	177.
<i>Jos de Mul</i>	
Is there a future for anthropocentrism?	187.
<i>Kees Vuyk</i>	
The future of anthropology and the end of man	192.
Biographical notes	195.
Index of names	201.

Girard – his strength and his weakness

M.B. ter Borg (Leiden)

It is not hard to imagine that René Girard would find Mooij's paper very interesting and helpful, not as a correction of some of his main ideas, but as a demonstration of their correctness.

Girard went to great lengths to refute the romantic idea that, although the norms, laws and language of a society may be social in character, one's emotions and desires are at least one's own. This idea is an ideological distortion that may be found from Rousseau to Freud and thereafter. What we do not know and what we do not want to see is, that even our most personal desires are not our own. If a subject desires an object, there is always a third, the model, that he wants to imitate. The subject desires something because somebody else desires it. He is bound to imitate others, because the object of his desires is only partly in his DNA. This is where man differs from other animals. But the romantic has chosen to deny this fact and to pretend that he is autonomous in his choices. The fact of his *mimesis* is kept in the realm of the subconscious.

This, René Girard would argue, is demonstrated by Mooij. Mooij simply denies the whole mechanism. Desire is not triangular he says, but dual: only a subject and an object are involved. But what is the reason of this denial? Mooij does not give any substantial arguments for his denial. Girard would say: 'Why should he reject my very plausible theory?' One is puzzled, until one realizes that Mooij himself is keeping unaware the fact that he is following another model: Lacan, who is following Freud.

Of course, Girard himself is also mimetic. He never makes own discoveries, but always rediscovers the discoveries of others, be it of great novelists such as Dostoevsky or Proust, or be it from the gospels. So he is, just like Mooij, an illustration of his theory. It is a theory of *mimesis* which itself is mimetic.

There is a second point where Girard would be glad to see his theory confirmed by the way Mooij tries to reject it. That is where the scapegoat comes in. Imitation also affects violence, as we can see so well for instance, in Laurel and Hardy films. If everybody follows everybody in being violent, a horrible situation comes into being, where revenge is answered by revenge. This crisis exists until somebody is killed by everyone, without being revenged. Then, a calm and salutary peace is showered on the mass. They feel one and they bless the victim they just killed, because he made one people out of the violent chaos they were before. The victim is sanctified. This is the primeval lynching, *le meurtre fondateur*, that is to say the beginning of society and culture with its taboos and rules and everything that Mooij at the end of his paper prefers to call 'the law'.

Now, whenever the mimetic crisis threatens to return, the people look for a new victim. It normally has, according to Girard, four characteristics: it is different from others, it is marginal, it has no one who is able to revenge it and it is considered guilty of a *fundamental crime* like violating the incest-taboo. It will be the scapegoat and as such the

focal point of aggression. According to Girard, the gospel undermines the social order, based on this scapegoat mechanism. It demonstrates, in the person of Jesus Christ, that the victim, the scapegoat, is innocent. That is the message which time and again we attempt to ignore.

Girard would say that Mooij demonstrates perfectly our wish to disregard the innocence of the scapegoat. Mooij says that it is not innocent in so far as it reminds us of the possibility of getting rid of the discontents of culture and thus undermines group cohesion. So, for Mooij, being willy-nilly different is, in a way, being guilty.

Thus far, I have criticized Mooij, taking Girard as my model. But, as Girard says, every mimetic relationship is ambivalent. The model is also a rival. Therefore, I will now criticize Girard, taking Mooij as my model. I completely agree with Mooij, where he says that mimesis, although an important characteristic of human behaviour, is not the only one, and not even the most important one. Unfortunately, I cannot agree with all of his arguments for this conclusion. Some of them do not seem adequate, and some of them are not understandable for the simple sociologist of religion that I happen to be. The reason for this, I think, is that Mooij is not criticizing Girard in his own right. In fact, he is defending Freud and Lacan against Girard. But, whatever the value of these arguments may be, let me add two others. From commenting I now turn to amending, and I expect that my intentions do not differ too much from those of Mooij.

It always bothered me as a sociologist, that Girard, in developing a social theory, never argued like a sociologist. I think that I know what the reason is. Taking sociological theory into consideration in a serious way would severely undermine the enormous pretensions of the theory. I will give two examples of this.

The first is, as a matter of fact, an old one. Here, the mirror of Mooij returns. But it is not a physical mirror, it is a social one. Since George Herbert Mead we know that mimesis is controlled by the reactions of others: I want to imitate the model, but the reactions of both the model and the object, teach me who I am, how I should behave, what I should desire and thus: how I should imitate the model. Due to these reactions, I know my identity, my position and my chances. This is what is called 'the looking-glass self'. If I want to imitate my model, I must do it according to the possibilities I know I have. Not every soldier has a Marshall's staff in his knapsack, and fortunately, he knows it! Thus, imitations are hardly ever literal; they are almost always socially mediated. This makes them less dangerous and less important. Furthermore, if the subject is socially constituted, as it is for a considerable part, this does not necessarily mean that it is in the first place mimetic. My social identity depends at least as much from mirror-functions of the others, as from mimesis.

The relativity of mimesis concerns its most important effect as well, and this is my second example. The most important effect of mimesis is the initial murder, that is the beginning of the social bond we call society. This, according to Girard, takes place when the victim stands alone and is not avenged. So, before the initial murder there was revenge. Revenge is not the same as mimetic violence. It presupposes very strong social bonds. Why should I risk my life for someone with whom I have nothing to do? There are no social bonds without rules, solidarity, mutual understanding and so on. That means that the initial murder presupposes what it pretends to explain: the existence of group cohesion in one way or another.

Let me now come to my conclusion. I think Girard has very important things to say. But

unfortunately he seems to confuse ideal-type and reality. Thus, his ideal-typical ideas receive an absolute status. They are no longer an aspect of reality, they become the paramount reality and the key to the total understanding of that reality. Sometimes I have the impression that Girard wants to be more than just a very brilliant scholar. As the first scholar in nearly 2000 years to understand what the gospel really means, he wants to be a guru, a model to be followed by everyone. That is his tragedy. From his own theory he might have learned that modern people do not want to be identified as followers. They want to seem to be autonomous subjects. Thus, they pass over those, who present themselves too obviously as a model for others to follow. The result is that Girard's insights are not taken as seriously as they should be.