

Matt Packer with Luke Burgis, author of *Wanting: The Power of Mimetic Desire in Everyday Life* (2021)

M: Kia Ora, everyone! Welcome to this special conversation with Luke Burgis. My name is Matthew Packer and I'm here on behalf of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion, known to many as COV&R. COV&R is an organization devoted to the exploration and development of René Girard's Mimetic theory, and Luke has written a wonderful new book on mimetic theory, and he's here today with us to talk about it and to explore some of its implications. Welcome, Luke.

L: Hey, Matthew, it's good to chat with you again.

M: It's super to have the time together today. I'll just say a couple of things about the book for those who haven't read this yet. It's an amazing piece of work, which comes at mimetic theory from all sorts of angles and so it helps introduce it to a wide audience. It's a book that's full of pop culture and science and questions about spirituality. It's a generous book, it's lively and urgent and it's encouraging too. I want to say first off, well done on this publication and the work that you're doing to support it. It's a really provocative piece of work and it follows up from an earlier piece, an earlier work that you did with a colleague called *Unrepeatable*. I'd like to recommend both those works to listeners. Let's chat today about some of the key ideas in the book, and first off, perhaps, tell us a little bit about what inspired you to write.

L: Well, thanks a lot, Matthew. Those are very, very kind words and generous words. You know, this is a small contribution to Mimetic theory, I hope. There's been people that have been writing and talking about it for decades, and I had absorbed everything that I possibly could going all the way back, you know, to the beginning, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* and read all of René's work, and all of the many scholars' works and was really seeing mimesis everywhere as many people do, who are introduced to these ideas and, in particular, in my own life. You know, that was the harder part to see. It's often easy to see it in colleagues and in politics and in business, the world that I come from, and eventually I started to become a little more reflective. I have always been a very spiritual person and I wanted to sort of understand what mimetic desire means in the context of vocation, in the context of my faith, and also to connect it to everyday life in a way that would actually help me hopefully live a better life, and help me explain to other people

why this theory, is important. I mean, theory is a word that scares many people away right away. They say I don't want anything to do with theory.

I reached out to one gentleman, I won't name him and I asked him to blurb the book. This guy comes from the world of restaurants, a restaurateur, comes from the culinary world. He said, I don't know if this book is for me. He didn't even read it because it has to do with theory and, he said I'm sensory. I said, well, this is exactly why I wanted to write the book, is to convince people like this, that there is really meaty, relevant, incarnate stuff that affects our daily lives in this book. I gave it my best shot, and hope to connect the dots for some people so that it would at least act as a bit of a doorway. So that Girard's work was a bit less intimidating. It was intimidating for me when I first delved into it. I know I've heard the same from, you know, many of my friends and colleagues who had wished that I'd probably stopped talking to them about this guy. I think I can express myself often better in writing than I can in words. So I did the thing that I know how to do, and it took a couple of years and did my best to try to explain it as if I was speaking to my wife or somebody who had no idea what mimesis means. That was the audience that I lovingly had in mind as I was writing this book.

M: Thank you, Luke. That's a great way to think about the approach to this. From my own point of view, I think imitation to come around to some of the basics here that we're talking about seems to be something Girard used to say that it was such a pale phenomenon in a lot of ways that it's something we do or something that goes without saying. I think when a lot of people having first encountered Rene's work there seems to be a surface and then a layer or a condition of imitation that follows from that then becomes more problematic. There's a dark side to imitation. Often we just see the pale or the harmless side of imitation to the point it goes without saying. So can you say something about, um, mimesis generally or imitation generally? I mean, there seems to be a sort of wide spectrum of imitator behaviors that bear thinking about.

1. Mimesis: Imitation and Desire

L: I noticed two main reactions over the last five years to people that I would try to speak with about Mimetic theory. They would be just be on two sides of the spectrum. One side was, well, of course we're all highly imitative, we know that, what's so interesting about that. And then on

the other side, It would be like, well, there's no way that imitation is that prevalent. This doesn't make any sense to me, why is there an entire theory built around the role of imitation. I think that the truth is somewhere in the middle. There are many different kinds of imitation. There are many layers to this, and I think it's helpful to kind of unpack them and think about the different kinds of imitation. Aristotle recognized a very long time ago, almost 2,500 years ago, that humans are the most imitative creatures in the universe, and this is the primary way that we differ from the animals. This imitation is what allows us to learn languages, to build culture, to engage in very complex behavior. But the understanding of imitation, the role that imitation played from Aristotle and Plato on, really remained at a relatively superficial level.

We imitate facial expressions and language, which is much more complex than animals can do because it involves a faculty of abstraction. We can imitate ideas, we can imitate memes. We can understand what something like money is, even if it doesn't physically exist. It's incredibly complex behavior when you stop and think about it. And then there's, there's the imitation of representation like in arts or film for instance. But Girard's contribution was to understand that imitation was even a layer deeper than all of these things, and that humans have this ability to read beneath the surface layer of behavior, even what's represented and imitate the desires of others, so it's the imitation of desire.

The word mimesis really captures this level of complexity of this kind of imitation. Kind of implies mimesis has a negative connotation, because we're doing something usually unconscious to us or preconscious, and we're engaged in this social behavior without being aware of it and often leads to conflict, to insecurities, to rivalry, which is a big part of Girard's work as you know. Even just disambiguating these two words. Why is there another word in the first place? Why don't we just call this imitative desire? I think that's always a good place to start. And I usually try to explain it in the way that when the mimesis gets at a very deep level of human behavior that tends towards conflict and is really almost spiritual in nature, because it has to do with this human desire for something that we feel like we lack.

M: Hmm. That's great. That's really helpful. We see it in superficial ways so often, but really, as you point out, as Girard insisted it's a deeper,

much deeper and pervasive element of our intelligence, of our behavior, of culture as we move out into the world. Luke, one thing that René Girard emphasized was the difference between, perhaps we could talk about this, the difference between internal and external mediation. We have in the case of external mediators, people who are the role models, who are obvious influencers, perhaps beyond our sphere or add another level, moving outside our sphere of influence, perhaps. But he also said that with internal mediation, we are in the same sphere with our models and models often become rivals or even obstacles. And that's when we, you know, we encounter the problematic sort of mimesis. Perhaps you could talk about that. One thing I love about the book is that you've coined these two terms, Freshmanistan and Celebristan, to help us understand that. Could you perhaps talk about those two ideas in the book and why that is such a key part of understanding Mimetic Theory?

L: Yeah, I think it's one of the most important things to understand, to really take mimetic theory to a deeper level of understanding. And it's the difference, as you mentioned, between internal and external mediators of desire. I just coined these words because I think they're sort of memeable, they're a little sticky, and they sum up what really are relatively complex ideas. So Celebristan is the world of models who exist outside of our world of desire in the sense that we can't seriously become a rival to their desires and compete with them for the same objects. So an external mediator of desire for me as a kid would have been Michael Jordan. I had really looked up to him as a competitor, as an athlete, and he encouraged me to want to become a professional basketball player. You can't tell on the video call, but I'm only five-nine, and I don't have that great of a jump shot. But I really idolized Michael Jordan as a child. I bought the shoes that he wore. I drank the Gatorade. I did all the things that he modeled a desire for to me. And of course we know that advertisers make use of external mediators of desire all of the time, and they're highly effective. They don't try to necessarily sell us on the product they want us to buy. They show us somebody wanting the product that they want us to buy, and that's far more powerful than simply listing the specifications of the computer, or the electrolytes in the drink or whatever.

While they probably didn't realize that they were using the mimetic theory in an effective way, that's what they've always done. These

models like Michael Jordan exist in a world that I call Celebri-*stan* in the book and they need not necessarily be celebrities though. And they need not be separated from us by a ton of time and space. The great Cervantes book, *Don Quixote*. You have Don Quixote and his Squire, Sancho Panza. I think Girard himself said that Don Quixote was an external mediator of desire to Sancho because they were in different classes. Sancho was a Squire, he didn't see himself as being competitive with Don Quixote at any point in that novel, are they competitive. So even in that close relationship, almost like a much older brother to a younger brother, there's that dynamic where they're not serious competitors, there's less risk of conflict.

The other type of model, as you mentioned, is the one that I say exists in a world called Freshmanistan, because it's very much like being a freshman at university, freshmen in high school. It was a terrible time for me, I was miserable as a freshman. As a senior things are a little bit better, but you sort of enter this world where everybody's very similar to you. You have a lot in common and you can all sort of come into social and existential contact with everybody else. And you are all in some sense, competitive with one another for status, for grades to get into the certain colleges, if you're in high school. And that's a very different dynamic of desire. It's a very different world to be in. Two people or two groups can move between these worlds. People that are an external model of desire can become an internal model of desire for me, if something happens. So for instance, you could have a PhD advisor and a brilliant grad student. Once that brilliant grad student all of a sudden has his doctorate degree and he or she is now competing with the advisor for citations and papers, and you know how that is, all of a sudden what would have been a relatively safe, competitive dynamic, has now changed. I tell the story in the book about two entrepreneurs who were not in the same world who very quickly entered one another's worlds because one of them became extraordinarily successful. They quickly became internal models of desire to one another, and that's a Lamborghini and Ferrari, the founders of the two great car companies.

M: Would you like to say a little bit more about that? I remember reading that and being amazed that Lamborghini had been a maker of tractors earlier. I don't know why I missed that, but all of a sudden I was thinking, a Lamborghini truck sounded pretty good too. Do you wanna explain a little bit what happened there?

L: Sure. I'll be very brief. So Lamborghini made tractors and they're still around. You could still buy a Lamborghini tractor if you want to. Lamborghini came from humble roots and went into the tractor manufacturing business and meanwhile Enzo Ferrari, who everybody knew, had been making the most powerful, beautiful racing cars in the world. So Enzo Ferrari is giant in Italy, while for Ferruccio Lamborghini, the founder of this tractor company started from very humble roots, but he built a very successful tractor company. So successful in fact, that he was able to buy himself a couple of Ferraris, and would race these Ferraris down the highway. He kept having problems with his Ferraris though, the clutch was break and he eventually confronted Enzo Ferrari himself about the quality of his cars. Ferrari sort of rebuked him, made fun of him, and this could be apocryphal, but said something to the effect that you should stick to making tractors, who are you to come in here and tell me how to make a beautiful car. By this point, Ferruccio Lamborghini had been successful enough where he could afford to drive a Ferrari. He had a lot of money and, they lived within 20 miles of each other. But up until this point Ferrari and been this giant, he was in Celebristan, he was an external model of desire. But now Ferruccio could compete with him and he desired from that day forward to go make a car that would be a better vehicle even than the best Ferrari, and within a couple of years, he did exactly that. He made the first Lamborghini. This was in the early 1960s and became a very fierce competitor to Enzo Ferrari, and as you know, both vehicles are still made and are very fierce competitors to this day.

M: That's a great story Luke, thank you for sharing that.

2. Scapegoating

M: Shall we move to consider what happens in Freshmanistan, in the world of internal mediation.

We're thinking of rivalries that grow and scale, and with this is formalized in ritual contests, but it happens when things get tribal as well, people get together in groups and there will be conflicts or rivalries, competitions that can build to the point they get out of control. Girard looked at this in a lot of contexts. He looked at it through history. He became an anthropologist. He looked at conflicts within early societies and the way that these rivalries could build to the point where it became

a threatening problem. We're talking about mimetic violence now, build to the point where it was a danger to the very existence of the community, to the group, to a nation. And we could even consider international politics today where there are certain rivalries. We've seen this in some of the hotspots around the world. Girard's emphasized and wrote books about the mechanism of scapegoating, he called it. And looked at how conflict resolves, still through mimetic processes to restore a kind of peace, but that's a problematic restoration in itself. Would you like to talk about scapegoating and tell us what mimetic theory brings to that idea of scapegoating?

L: Sure. Well, let me just connect this to where we were talking before about these two worlds, Celebriestan and Freshmanistan. There's something that happens in Freshmanistan that doesn't happen in Celebriestan. Something happens in the world of internal mediators of desire, and that is reciprocal mimesis or reciprocal imitation. In Celebriestan, Michael Jordan is not going to start imitating me back. The imitation goes one way. In Freshmanistan, where somebody, my colleague, a friend, a business rival, something like that. We can begin imitating one another in this rivalry, and this is where the internal mediation can become dangerous because it's contagious and it escalates. Because we're both now parties to a game of mimesis, which really has no end. Like where does it stop? When will one ever acquire something that completely satisfies? Well, it will never happen. And in a community, a town, in a team, in an organization, in these sorts of closed system where there are a bunch of relationships of internal mediation, where everybody is in some sense, an internal mediator of desire, potentially to everybody else in the group, then the mimesis, the negative mimesis, the rivalry, the tension and conflict can spread by contagion. So something that can start with just a couple of people can spread to the whole group. Girard, you might know this quote, I'll get it wrong, he's speaking about globalization and he said at a certain point you'll be able to light a single match that will set the whole world on fire. He's referring to a world in which these internal mediators or internal rivalries can spread to more and more people very quickly, and technology can accelerate that through social media. What happens then? How do we put the brakes on this? How do we resolve this situation and put an end to it, as you said, it's been the scapegoat mechanism. This is a huge part of Mimetic Theory. Chapter four of my book is dedicated to it. I could have written a whole book on just the

scapegoat mechanism. It's daunting to think about having to do that. Societies have always sort of resulted or resorted to the scapegoat mechanism. You said it, Matthew, it happens through a mimetic process. So there's this great irony that the solution to the mimetic escalation is a mimetic process that results in a single person or a single group, singled out, and accused for the cause of all the problems and people unite around this victim and they unite through a mimetic process.

The ancient practice of stoning worked because it was a highly mimetic act. Once one person threw the first stone, the second stone was a lot easier to throw, and the third, the fourth and the fifth exponentially easier to throw. I think this is probably part of the rationale behind the old biblical prescriptions that you needed more than one accuser, or you needed two people who were both witnesses to throw at the same time or something because there's a mimetic process that is kicked off very easily through an accusation or through fear. We see how that has resulted in the unification of groups tragically. I mean it actually has brought a sense of catharsis and healing to the groups that participate in this type of scapegoating ritual. There's always a ritual behind it because the ritual is part of what brings the catharsis. You think about the ancient ritual on Yom Kippur where there was this highly ritualized symbolic transferring of the sins of the people onto a goat, and the goat was collectively driven out into the wilderness by the people and the fact that the people collectively did this together is a very important part of the process. If it was just the high priest that transferred the sins onto the goat and then secretly went out behind the temple and drove a goat out into the wilderness it wouldn't have the same effect on the community because they have to be involved in this collective process of expiating their own sins, so to speak. Which as we know is not actually possible to do so there's always a need of a new scapegoat and a bigger and better scapegoat.

M: Luke, today we see that pattern or that tendency in so many different places in popular culture. We think about the dynamic of the crowd, we think of mob mentality or the mind of the herd and cancel culture's other example of this today. Would you like to say a little bit more about some of these situations, I mean, how do we contend with that? It's a very powerful dynamic, because like you say, everyone joins in. And there are mimetic pressures. I mean, if we think of a high school, college, we

think about peer pressure. There's another term for what we're talking about here. How does mimetic theory help us understand these incredibly quick patterns that occur in popular culture all the time?

L: Well, there's dangerous power in anonymity. Even just think about what it's like to live in a big city. I've lived in New York City before. It's a very different experience than living in a small town where everybody knows everybody else. In some sense, you almost feel anonymous and people can engage in behaviors that they might not engage in if they lived in a small town. They walk into the sex shop or they do something like nobody knows who they are. There's a sense of anonymity and I think that's important. You look at the internet now and first of all, there are many pseudo anonymous people and profiles out there, but you have a sense of anonymity on the internet. Or at least if it's not anonymity, a sense that you're sort of safe behind the privacy of your own screen and there's not a lot of consequences for your behavior. At worst, you might get banned, or something like that. And now you can use your job, because it's part of a background check, people are checking social media profiles. I think that it's really easier to join in mob behavior in this kind of environment. Part of the reason that the scapegoat mechanism works, part of the reason why it worked even in the ancient cultures, is that there was a sense that no single person was responsible. One of the ways that in Greece, the scapegoat was called the pharmakos. That's a Greek word that means the poison and the cure at the same time, it's the origin of our word pharmacy today. One of the ways the pharmakos was made a scapegoat is the people would collectively drive this person off the edge of a cliff. They would quite literally put the person on the edge of a cliff and crowd around the person and keep crowding until they were backed off the cliff. There's a movie that came out just a couple of years ago called *Midsummer*, a terrifying horror film, where this exact thing happens in the movie. I'd be surprised if the director or the writer hadn't read Girard. And why is that effective? Well, not a single one person actually pushed the person off of the cliff. The whole crowd was responsible for the person getting pushed off the cliff. The blame can't be assigned. Nobody has to actually think of themselves as having single-handedly executed the person. I think with some of the online culture, with cancel culture, there's this element of anonymity that's very important. So how do we stop that? I mean, one way would just be to not make it so easy to join in. There have to be some consequences and some accountability for

that. We've got to have a way to put the brakes on it and not just add fuel to the fire. So, of course, I don't have a solution. I don't have an answer. But I think there's going to have to be some countermeasures and counter force that holds the people that join in accountable. It has to be harder to sort of join in some of this behavior when people's livelihoods and reputations are at stake. Somehow there has to be a way for the truth to eventually come out, because part of the scapegoat mechanism is a distortion of the truth where this scapegoat is perceived as guilty and through the mimetic process that we're describing the mimesis actually distorts reality and distorts the truth. Truth is hidden in some sense. This is a big part of Girard. This is where mythology is developed. Stories are told, and the stories are always told from the standpoint of the scapegoaters, never the scapegoat, with the exception of the apostles. Maybe we'll get to that later. The stories are always told with the people committing the violence absolving themselves of blame and shaping the narrative in such a way where it makes them come out looking squeaky clean.

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III: Dealing With Models

M: That's a great place for us to perhaps turn to consider counter narratives or perspectives on the scapegoating experience or perspectives from the people being scapegoated. And through the 20th century, some of the horrors have reminded us, we know more than ever what scapegoating is now, and we think about cancel culture and some of the crimes of the 20th century. There's a greater awareness about people being victimized, about groups being marginalized and so on. And we have the story in earlier observations of this and in scripture about a different way, or at least, a clearer understanding of what's going on in the scapegoating process. We talk about scapegoating in all sorts of ways today. Perhaps we could turn to the second part of the book and think about some of the spiritual questions that you explore in *Wanting*. Maybe one place to start might be to come around to some of the tactics that you suggest in the book. And one of the first ones suggests that we name our models, and that's a very simple counterintuitive thing to do. You have a whole series of tactics through the book which are thought provoking. And I think often because of the problematic kinds of imitation that we get caught up in, being explicit about models can be a difficult thing to do. Or sometimes we, because of internal mediation, we like to hide or avoid acknowledging who

models might be bad influences. There's another name for a model and influence. Do you want to say something about those tactics and the approach that you've taken in being quite explicit with some of these suggestions. Name your models, for example.

L: Yeah, well, there's 15 of them in the book. They're things that I've experienced and actually put into practice in my life. I say at one point in the book, mimetic desire is not something to be escaped or transcended, and I don't believe that's possible. But we can live with a greater awareness of this so that we don't participate in the negative forms of a mimetic rivalry and of scapegoating, and these things. Part of it's a spiritual practice, frankly. You alluded to the idea that we should have a greater awareness of scapegoats than ever, as stories have emerged from marginalized voices in the 20th century and earlier. We've heard these voices sometimes for the very first time, and there seems to be a level of consciousness of this, so you would think then well we just probably aren't making any scapegoats anymore. Well, we seem to be continuing to make them even while we have a greater awareness of the atrocities of the past.

So this is just quite simply a case of seeing the scapegoating everywhere, but in ourselves. Not seeing our own sin, to put it in Christian terms. To see everybody else's mimesis, to see everybody else's tendency to make scapegoats. This has to do with, for me, a spiritual practice. Naming my models is kind of like naming emotions, a very important thing to do. It's like naming my sins, and naming these influences positive and negative, both I think are a really important thing to do, and this is just the first tactic in the book. I would add this is a very important part of that process. That it's not something that I think anybody can do alone. I think this is something that does require good friends, mentors, if you're spiritual, a pastor or something like that. People where you can enter into just radical, honest dialogue with. My wife has a much better understanding of who my models are often than I do and makes sure to point them out to me sometimes. I've written a book about this stuff, and this is why it's tricky. The intellectual knowledge that this exists is different in a sense than the ability, which is kind of in the will, to overcome some pride and ego and to be able to look at ourselves and the forces that are driving us. Many people, including you, Matthew, have read, at least the second part of the book,

and been like, wow, this seems almost spiritual in nature, and I think that's because it is. That's certainly what the journey was like for me.

M: That's great, Luke, thank you.

3. Desire Thick and Thin: Interventions in Rivalry

You talk about thin desires and thick desires or I think you've called them worldly desires, and then the spiritual desires, the deep desires. And of course, if we're thinking about models and one of the compelling messages in your book and in René's work and in mimetic theory is that we're mimetic anyway, so we're going to be adopting models, choosing models. So one of the questions is who were the models? Where are you going to look to models? We have a freedom and you talk about nurturing, or meditating, focusing on those really important desires that last versus those ones that are thin. Do you want to say a little bit more about those two ideas that you've explored in the second part of the book?

L: Sure. I've grappled for a very long time with how to distinguish different types of mimetic desire. I don't think that all mimetic desire is alike, and it sort of exists on some kind of a spectrum. You could think of it, there are some things that are, that are hyper mimetic and there are other things that are less than mimetic. Usually our motivations are mixed. I know some people that bought Bitcoin for instance for what seems like purely mimetic reasons, they didn't do an ounce of research, they just sort of bought because everybody else wanted it. And I know other people that bought Bitcoin who spent hours and hours sort of looking into the cryptography and looking into the reasons and can make a very good case why this makes sense and is better than Fiat currency. Perhaps those people had less mimetic motivations than the people that bought without having done that. Maybe there's a little more reason involved, right. You get two people do the same thing and one may be doing it for more of mimetic reasons than the other. On the other side of the spectrum Girardian's disagree but I can imagine a world in which there are desires that are almost very little mimetic or perhaps not mimetic at all. In the spiritual tradition that I come from, it's been said that saints have had locutions or heard a direct calling from God. That would be an instance of just unmediated calling or desire. This is your desire. I think of that as mimesis, existing on a spectrum is helpful for me, and as you can tell from the book, I sometimes like to put

things into funny phrases or coin words to help me just as a shorthand. So for me, the thin desires were kind of the highly mimetic desires that are fleeting and the thick desires are the ones that I've been cultivating for very long periods. And thick desires, by the way, are not always necessarily good. I could develop a thick desire for a vice. But, in the context of the book, I speak of them as hopefully positive things. And from a theological perspective, I relate thick desires very much to the question of calling and the question of vocation. And I have come to the conclusion that God can very much work in and through my mimetic desire and can call me through other people and, and very much, and that's a beautiful thing, right? I live in a material world and I have people that are, that are in my life for a reason. And in some sense my mimetic desire, even perhaps, my negative mimetic desire, all things can work out to the good. So we're on this journey of life and as a journey of discovering who we are, what we're meant to do, and I've had people in my life. ... At one point, just to tell a very quick story and, in my late twenties, I realized that I had the chance to choose what kind of models of desire, we're going to be influential in my life. And I decided to exercise some agency and to step outside of the startup world that I was in, where all of my models were just other entrepreneurs, other hustlers, highly ambitious people, the kind of people that work 80 hours a week, and instead of sleeping, play poker in Vegas, cause I was living in Vegas at the time. I was very intentional about choosing models that were outside of that world. Models of holiness, people that I really admired for their, for their virtues, for their family life. These were extremely positive, models of desire for me, that in a sense began to sort of pull me into a different kind of world, a different kind of lifestyle and existence. I was being mimetic, I used mimesis in a powerful way, even though I didn't know what it was at the time. That's how I've come to think about vocation, that it's in and through our mimetic desire, in fact, that we eventually understand how we're being called.

M: So perhaps the things that resonate the most, that endure, are desires, that are fruitful, perhaps. One of the other tactics, they're all interesting, but one of the other ones you talk about is investing in deep silence. And that sounds like this phase that you'd moved to after Vegas, you talk about spending some time in retreat. Do you want to say a little bit more about that? And, in terms of mimetic desire or the question of models or attention. I mean, attention today seems to be such a precious or difficult thing to attain often. I mean, I've mentioned

to you the other day, I think it's an Andrew Sullivan quote, but the suggestion is that it's not hedonism in the church that's the, that's the great problem, but distraction. And this is something, we all get distracted on our phones, there are so many things that bombard us. We live in a world where there are models. It's a blizzard. Andrew Sullivan has a great article called, I think it's, *I Used to be Human*, and he writes really carefully about that experience of just being bombarded by models and influences all the time. One of the suggestions in your book is to come around to a kind of centering prayer or a centering silence. Do you want to say a little bit more about that experience?

L: Yeah. Well, attentiveness is really key. I hadn't heard that quote by Andrew Sullivan, but I think it's right. It's certainly been my experience. When I look at my spiritual life and my journey, it's the distractions that are the biggest battle for me, usually. I believe it was Mary Oliver, I'll get the quote wrong, but she said something to the effect of attentiveness is always the first step in prayer. The link between attention and prayer itself is very strong and very deep. Sometimes just being attentive is a form of prayer sometimes.

M: Yeah, it sounds like Simone Weil. She says something to that effect. It's a beautiful connection.

L: Maybe I'm misattributing or maybe they've both said something. I wouldn't be surprised if they both said something.

M: It's a beautiful realization.

L: It really is. So, that's what I was getting at with the silence. Being attentive to the deep desires of my heart, perhaps the desires that God has planted in my heart. And it takes the silence to rid myself of the distraction and the noise. I've try to take a week long or at least five day silent retreat every year. I've been doing it for a decade, with the exception of last year, long story. I've gotten to the point where I don't know what I would do without it, because it takes me three days. It's actually scary for me, because it takes me three days just for the noise to fully recede from my mind, from my heart, and it's very obvious when it happens. I wake up on day four and I just had crazy dreams the night before. It's like when you leave like a rock concert and you've got a ringing in your ears and it takes three days for the ringing to go away. That's how I feel with social media and the blizzard that I'm in on a daily

basis, that I'm immersed in. What it did for me, what it continues to do for me, and you don't need to take a week. You could do this even in 15 minutes, better than none. Helps to be attentive to what our desires are in the first place. Especially, looking back on our lives, this is a very Augustinian, kind of *Confessions* type exercise, but looking back on our lives and understanding what our desires were at a young age and tracing them, tracking them how did they change? When did they change? Did they change for the better? Did I lose a great desire that I once had? An admirable noble desire, why did I lose that? These are really important questions to ask and that takes attentiveness and the prerequisite for attentiveness is for me is the silence, right? That's where God speaks to me. That's where I'm able to get in touch with what's going on inside, that sense of interiority, which is really not a habit of being that many people in the modern world have. I'm somebody who didn't go on social media until my senior year of college. I can't imagine growing up with it from a young age.

M: Luke, you remind me of the scripture to be still, that's a starting point.

V: The Future of Mimesis: Technology and Love

M: I get the sense though, at the end of the book, you're working on something else, but we perhaps would come to that in just a moment.

Luke let's turn to consider the possibilities inherent in the escalation, the acceleration of culture. I was reading an article, there's a great intriguing piece by a writer, Eric Bonabeau. I think it's called *The Perils of the Imitation Age*. It was published in *Harvard Business Review* a few years ago, but he says that technology is amplifying and accelerating our copycat tendencies. And it's interesting in terms of mimetic theory, it's a very interesting observation. And of course we see it in a million ways. We're thinking about new technologies. We're thinking about social media. We're thinking about artificial intelligence. You cover a lot of these topics in the book. What would you say about thinking ahead to where the puck's going to be for a second if we take the hockey analogy. Where do you see this escalation? Girard talked about in political terms things escalating to the extreme, but in terms of social media and the acceleration of mimetic possibilities, you and I were at a meeting recently where we looked at artificial intelligence and the question of mimesis. Where do you see this convergence, arriving?

L: "Skating to where the puck is going to be", that's a Wayne Gretzky quote from a New Zealander. That's very impressive. What I think it's going to be, I mean, I don't know, and I believe you just have done some work on this question yourself, so I'd love to chat about it. We have artificial intelligence and it's getting all of the attention, AI, but it seems like we should also be thinking seriously about artificial emotions. Is there the possibility of that and what does that mean? And I sort of speculate in the book, well, what if there's such a thing as artificial desire? And I have not spent nearly as much time as you or the others that were part of the conference have thinking deeply about this, but I have thought a bit about it and I wonder, desire seems to be something uniquely human, something spiritual in my opinion. And you know, it's not something that I think an AI-powered robot will ever desire in the way that a human being desires. It's that metaphysical desire, right? Girard says all desire ultimately is metaphysical desire. It's desire for being, they'll never have that. There may be some way that they can mimic our desires and even mimic our metaphysical desire. Right? At least on a surface level, they could, an AI powered robot could seem to desire heaven or God or something. I've spent some time thinking about, how is artificial intelligence and robotics, how is it developing? How will future humanoid robots? There's some really interesting movies about this. *Ex Machina* as one that comes to mind, great film. I don't know if you've seen that, but will they desire in a way that is analogous to human beings and will that technology evolve through some kind of mimetic program? Will the machines learn to desire through pure mimesis by imitating what we desire. And how good at that mimesis will they be? Will they be as good as we are, or will they only be able to do the sort of superficial read of what we want? Will we have to say and articulate it, or will they be able to somehow read beneath the surface? That to me is a fascinating question. And a lot of progress is being made on it, but I think we have to be careful because then we have non-humans competing for human desires, right?

M: One theme, you mentioned *Ex Machina*. I'm thinking of another couple of novels, one's *Machines Like Me*, by Ian McEwen and there's another one, *Clara in the Sun*. They're fascinating books. One of the problems appears to be that as the AI learn from the creators, this is the case and in the film, especially, they're learning some terrible things. Steve McKenna was pointing out that compound where I think it's

Caleb and Nathan going through the Turing test with Ava, she's imprisoned and when the tables are turned, what she's learned from them is that they can be locked up. So this is, in terms of a rivalry, there's a terrible example and I think that seems to be one of the points of the film. One of the other questions related to the programming of an AI is that if we install in the robots all the code or the principles of justice, then we're going to be in trouble once again, pretty quickly. In *Machines Like Me*, this is part of the crisis at the end of the book. The robot has expectations of the humans that they can't live up to. There's a crisis at that point because of it.

L: Well, it seems like there's a problem there. And even in programmatic rigid morality, like imagine if we could program sort of principles of justice. There's no way that we could ever foresee all of the contingencies and uncertainties in the world. This robot would get in a situation where the code would just have no idea what to do. Cause there's not the learning and discernment and prudence, right? I mean, prudence is the virtue that allows a human, if it's developed right, to know the right course of action in unforeseen circumstances. I usually kick off the school year, every year by telling my students this story. I went to one of the best undergrad business schools in the world at New York University. Got a great education, worked on Wall Street, started a company. And at a certain point, this is actually several companies down the road, I had a huge crisis financial crisis. Couldn't pay all my bills. And a guy who was essentially a hitman was sent to my front door with a gun on his waist. I tell the story in the book. I won't tell you how it ends, but it was a very scary situation. And I joke to my students, I say, I want to go back to NYU and ask them for my money back for my degree, because at no point did they teach me what I was supposed to do when I have a hitman on my front door with a gun in his belt, threatening to kill me. They didn't tell me that this was some situation that I would ever encounter as a business person, as an entrepreneur, what's wrong. And the point, the reason I tell them this story is I say, listen, I can't hand you a playbook that will tell you what to do in every situation. That's not what this is about. I'm not here to program you, I'm here to help you understand who you are, help you be able to think rigorously and thoughtfully and ethically to find your moral compass so that when, God willing, that will never happen to you. But you know, things that neither one of us can foresee will happen to you. That's just part of what life is about. And I hope that you are confident enough to

act in a way that you're happy with when the time comes. I share that, I think that's part of the ethical dilemma with the robots and with the AI.

M: That's great, Luke, thank you. Any final thoughts on what mimetic theory suggests for us?

L: Hm, final thoughts.

M: There's a lovely story, you've got several in the book. One is with the chef Michel Bras. You've talked about others' appreciation of mimetic theory. Are there any closing suggestions?

L: You've hit on something and this word hasn't been mentioned yet in our conversation, Matthew, but I think it's been on the tip of our tongues or at least on our minds. We've used some other words that are hinting at the same thing, but the word I would suggest is freedom. Freedom is part of this. I think some people can come into mimetic theory and, I think, wrongly interpret it, it could seem a bit deterministic, right? Like we're just born and we're taken up into these mimetic processes and our desires are just completely shaped by others. To those who have read the book, I usually get that there's this deep sense of agency and sort of freedom, especially in the second half. Sort of an appeal to freedom maybe because we can make a decision, we can make a choice and choosing our models, certainly in stopping ourselves before we get too far down the line and destructive negative behavior or joining in a crowd that's victimizing somebody. We do have the freedom to do that. We have profound freedom. I always distinguish a few different levels of freedom. There's at least three. There's physical freedom. If you're locked up in a jail cell, you're not free. There's psychological freedom. And then there's spiritual freedom, the freedom that allowed Christ to say nobody takes my life from me, I lay it down on my own. This profound, existential freedom. It's the kind of freedom that some found in the Nazi concentration camps. Take everything from me, but at the end of the day, I'm free to create my own meaning, my own life. And this is an important part of what this all means for me, and I think for all of us. As we come into contact with our own mimesis, with mimetic desire, and we look at some of the things that are happening in the world around us, we may not be happy with all of them. We may desire change. That we do have the freedom to step out of the mimetic systems, the mimetic processes, that are not positive, right. That are not loving and healthy. I share the story in the book, about a very famous

French chef named Sébastien Bras, who just found that the Michelin star system that he had been in his whole life, he was sort of born into it because his dad was a Michelin star chef. He and his father had had three Michelin stars for many, many years. And every year, the year started with him setting out to keep that Michelin star. And he realized that he was stuck in a system of desire that he sort of defaulted himself into. Many times in life we can sort of default into things and onto paths. And he realized at some point and not by coincidence, I think he was out mountain biking in his beautiful hometown of Laguiole, in the Aubrac, part of France. He was silent and you had this moment of realization and he found the courage and the confidence to say, you know what, nobody's keeping me in this system. I mean, I've sort of voluntarily allowed myself to be part of this and I'm going to step out. And he actually told the Michelin guy to not come back to his restaurant and said, I don't care about your stars because I've subjected myself to them in such a way that I'm not able to create anything beautiful to do the things that I deeply desire to do. There's nothing really wrong with Michelin. I use the guide myself when I'm traveling to find quality restaurants, so the point is not that they're the bad guys. The point is that chef Bras realized that he was caught in a negative mimetic cycle and system, and he had the agency to step outside of it. I've experienced that in my own life and in my own way. And it wasn't a one-time thing, by the way. It's something that I've had to do numerous times. And that's a really beautiful, powerful thing that we can do.

M: One of the lovely suggestions at the end of the book is this question of what it means to love. You shared the Italian expression *Ti Voglio Bene*. This is a regard for the other that is aware of the way not only that we're affected by influences, but that we influence others. What's the last tactic? What do you say?

M: The last tactic is to live as if I have a responsibility for what other people want, and in a regard for the other, that I want their good, that I want what's best for them. And that Italian expression, *Ti Voglio Bene*, I find so beautiful, because it's really the definition of love. But it's, it's sort of just spelled out: wanting your good. And that's the opposite of me wanting to impose my desires onto you. Girard has said something there's a quote. I know that you know it, Matthew, I can't remember the quote off the top of my head, but something like, modern man professes to love his neighbor, all the while, wanting to impose himself on his

neighbor, while, while professing to love him or her. It's this idea of we're in a battle for our wills, a battle of desires. We treat the world or we treat other people, perhaps, maybe even our own partner or spouse as a rival. It's her desires against mine. And the beauty of love, whether it's marital love or friendship, C. S. Lewis has some beautiful writings on this, is just desiring the good of the other and, and not imposing my idea of who that person should be on them. God's idea of who that person is far greater than mine. So there's a humility involved in letting go of imposing my desires onto others, and loving them and wanting what's best for them even if it might be something a bit different than what I would want for myself or what I would want for them. There's a letting go involved in that. That's why the last tactic sums up the whole book, because desire, we've been talking about desire this whole time, and desire, ultimately needs to be subsumed or transformed into love. Love is the highest form of desire. It doesn't always start out as love, but the journey of desire, I hope, in my life would be desire that becomes love, becomes that kind of sacrificial desire, giving myself for the other. I was like, I don't know if I have the energy to write a book that it ultimately isn't about something as important as love.

So if you're listening, I would say that at the end of the day, we have the freedom to love and we have the freedom to desire in a better way. My life has been kind of a process of refining my desires. There is something powerful about this and I've tried to make my mimetic theory as personal and existential as possible because, for me, I don't think I would be interested in it if it didn't somehow inform my relationships and help me live a happier, better life.

M: Luke, thank you, it's been a pleasure, a real honor. I hope listeners can follow up. I hope they can get a copy of the book. the earlier the earlier work of yours with your colleague is it Joshua Miller?

L: Dr. Joshua Miller, right.

M: *Unrepeatable* also ties into the things we've been talking about. The Colloquium on Violence and Religion has an annual meeting, and a team of people working on these different ideas in so many different fields. Luke, you draw on a number of these writers in your book and there's too many to name, what a wonderful group. But I'd encourage listeners to explore the different fields we're talking about: theology,

anthropology, politics, economics. What are some of the others just off the top of your head?

L: Film studies, literature, business. There's a great book on office politics. That's part of the beauty of this community. You and I, Matthew, we met at COV&R a few years ago, in Denver actually, went to one of your talks and we've stayed in touch. It's a great place and I would encourage anybody listening to explore it. And this coming year we're meeting in South America, I think for the very first time.

M: I'm looking forward to it. Luke, thank you so much.

L: Thank you Matthew for the conversations.

M: Blessings to you. Thank you, Luke. Cheers.