IMITATION GAME

If you think your wants and opinions are entirely your own and not influenced by the crowd, a new book will shake up your perceptions. by MATTHEW PACKER • illustration by ANTHONY ELLISON

When our friends buy a new car, why do we want a new one, too? When the office gossip shares a story, why do we join in with glee? And when we set our heart on a fancy job, how can we be sure it's going to make us truly happy?

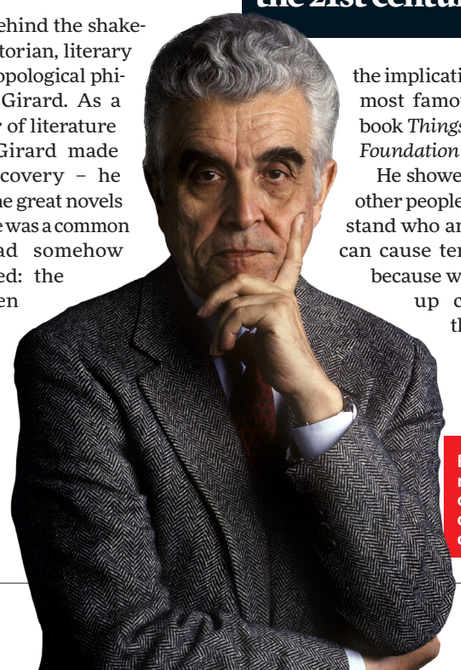
These everyday conundrums have fascinated philosophers for centuries, and yet it's only in the past few decades that a surprising new theory has shaken up thinking on the matter.

The person behind the shake-up is French historian, literary critic and anthropological philosopher René Girard. As a young professor of literature in the 1960s, Girard made a stunning discovery – he noticed that in the great novels and dramas there was a common factor that had somehow been overlooked: the characters often surreptitiously desired what others desired.

It seems like a simple idea – that humans want what other people want. But at the time, romantics preferred to believe that people were original and spontaneous. It came to be known as "mimetic theory", and although he was swimming against the intellectual current of his time, Girard patiently developed the implications of his theory, most famously in his 1978 book *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*.

Billionaire Peter Thiel has declared that Girard holds the key to understanding the 21st century.

He showed that relying on other people to help us understand who and what we want can cause terrible problems, because we very easily end up competing with those people for the object of our desire. Our rivalry can even lead to all-out war.



René Girard: realised literary characters often desired what others wanted.

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What began as a simple idea eventually grew into a complex thesis covering pretty much all human culture, including fields as diverse as theology, economics, and neuroscience.

Girard ended up spending most of his career at Stanford University in California, and although he retired more than 20 years ago, and died in 2015, he remains a major figure in social science. Yet most people have never heard of him, probably because the word "mimetic" is a roadblock for many, and some of the ideas it has spawned are difficult to digest.

When I heard Girard speak at his last conference, in 2008, he said he hoped his theory could be translated into something "simpler, more readable". In 2004, Eric Bonabeau wrote about mimetic desire in the *Harvard Business Review*, noting how technology was amplifying our copycat behaviour. However, the most likely introduction for many people to how it affects our modern lives is a new book by Washington, DC, writer and entrepreneur Luke Burgis.

MEETING OF MINDS

I first met Burgis in 2018 on a bus in Colorado during the annual conference of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion, an international organisation dedicated to "exploring, critiquing and developing" Girard's theory. He is an unassuming man, who spoke softly about heady times in the

Good wanting

When it comes to desires, it's helpful to distinguish the thick from the thin.

Coming to terms with desire can be tricky, as it calls for a certain degree of humility. We may need to face the fact that what we thought was most precious or unique to us may not be original after all. But if we are going to copy someone or something anyway, the question becomes, "Who should we imitate?"

Burgis offers several tips for responding to the challenges. First, he suggests, name your models, since "naming anything gives us more control". Some are easy and often role models – people we want to emulate.

He also suggests testing our desires and finding out where they lead. "Thin desires" are often fleeting or fashionable, dependent on others' whims or a fad. "Thick desires" seem to resonate more deeply with us and last longer.

From another perspective, thin desires can be thought of as worldly, and thick desires as more spiritual. Wanting a tiger after watching *Tiger King* was a thin desire for Burgis. Wanting a dog was far more promising.

Sharing stories of fulfilment also helps us reflect on desires that endure and that lead to genuine gain, unlike the sugar rush we get from such activities as shopping. Burgis cites the teacher-philosopher Parker Palmer: "Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am."

In this vein, too, Burgis encourages investing in deep silence, in stilling the mind, clearing away the noise of the world, and listening and discerning deeper desires that resonate peacefully.

Ultimately, by realising that desire can become love – or *ti voglio bene*, as the Italians say ("wanting your good") – we discover a power that moves us beyond ourselves. We know that our desires depend on those around us anyway. In other words: "Live as if you have responsibility for what others want." This is desire transformed; desire in service of the other; looking, as Christ put it, to "what you would have others do unto you".

Just because we're highly mimetic doesn't mean we're robots. Although we're often predisposed to copy others, we're also free to choose who that is. When our desire aligns with the best model, we can move beyond merely dreaming to realising life in its fullest potential.

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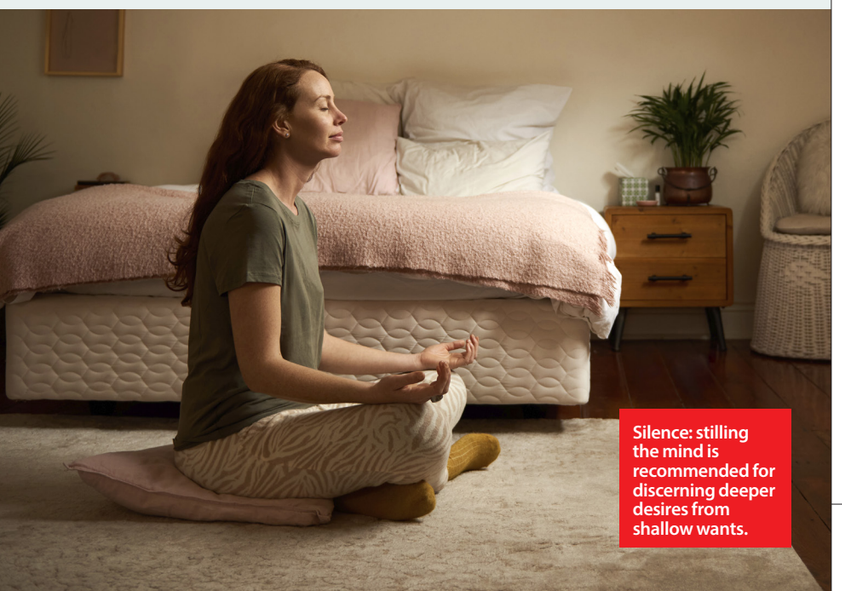

Silence: stilling the mind is recommended for discerning deeper desires from shallow wants.

business world and how to discern your true calling.

When we caught up again last year at the same conference, Burgis had just published *Wanting: The power of mimetic desire in everyday life*. The book, his second, has been described by neuroscientist Andrew Meltzoff as "stunning, even revolutionary". Adam Grant, professor of psychology at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, has called it a "spellbinding read" to leave you "rethinking your motivations". It's not merely a big-idea book, but a careful, brave and loving account of mimetic theory's transformative power in people's lives, including his own.

Love triangles are another example of how mimetic desire can get awfully messy.

Burgis discovered Girard's theory the hard way. After going to a top business school at New York University, then working on Wall Street and chasing the Silicon Valley dream, he had been poised to sell his e-commerce business to the online shoe giant Zappos. In Las Vegas in the giddy days leading up to the deal, however, he had that "bad feeling before a break-up". He was no longer sure of his own motivations. Most troubling, he'd lost the desire to support and lead his company, vacillating between his own ideals and his lust for money.

"I experienced a sort of existential vertigo," he writes, "like I was jumping off the top of a skyscraper onto a giant trampoline that catapulted me back to the top before I plunged back down again." The strangest thing was that after he heard from Zappos that it had changed its mind – there would be no acquisition, no windfall, no second home in Sicily – he felt relief.

His company was on the rocks, with bankruptcy looming, and the soul-searching that followed involved some deep rethinking. His mission to recalibrate involved bars and books and travel to exotic destinations. "But it all seemed," he writes, "like palliative care, not the treatment of the underlying condition."

PASSION AND DISILLUSION

Burgis knew there were "mysterious forces outside myself that affected what I wanted and how intensely I wanted it. I couldn't make any serious decisions until I knew more about them." He couldn't start another company, and he hesitated about the idea of getting married, in case his desire for that (or someone) also morphed into something else. "Discovering what those forces were seemed like a responsibility."

At a spiritual retreat, a mentor introduced him to Girard's ideas, which helped him understand why desire had "entrapped me in cycles of passion followed by disillusionment".

For a long time, Girard had remained a relatively obscure academic, but by 2015 his influence had grown to the point that he was named an immortal by the Académie Française and called "the new Darwin of the social sciences". One of his former students, billionaire Peter Thiel, has declared that Girard holds the key to understanding the 21st century and is the most important thinker of his generation.

What Burgis found in Girard was "a Sherlock Holmes of history and literature, putting his finger on overlooked clues while everyone else was busy following the usual suspects. He was playing a different game than other academics." His discovery explained many other things, "linking biblical stories with volatility in the stock market, the collapse of ancient civilisations with workplace dysfunction, career paths with diet trends. He explained, well before they existed, why Facebook [first funded by Thiel], Instagram and their progeny have been so wildly popular and effective in selling people both stuff and dreams."

Imitation has long been acknowledged in philosophy – it's there in Plato and Aristotle, who both noted the human tendency to copy others as being fundamental to creativity. But Girard realised these thinkers had failed to delve into the dark side of the phenomenon.

Girard realised thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle had failed to explore imitation's dark side.

As Burgis writes, "Humans learn – through imitation – to want the same things other people want, just as they learn how to speak." This goes on to play "a far more pervasive role in our society than anyone had ever openly acknowledged".

Girard's genius was recognising that it is not difference that divides us, but sameness. This is because our relationships with people outside our own sphere are often harmless. When we look to role models in another world or league from us, we can imitate them without our paths crossing.

Celebrities, for example, are often successful because they are seen as being different from mere mortals. Some cement their celebrity status by guarding their identity and remaining aloof, to heighten the intrigue.

Saints, too, were celebrities in their day – like Francesco Bernardone, who in 1206 renounced his hereditary rights to focus on the poor and later got "liked" as Saint Francis of Assisi by hundreds of thousands of followers, including the Pope. There was no chance their paths would cross.

For people on an equal footing, however, the stakes are quite different. When we live and move in the same circle as the people who influence us, dangers arise.

If you and I both want something, our mirrored interest means we converge on the same desired object or person. We'll likely confirm for each other how desirable

Luke Burgis: describes Girard's mimetic theory in *Wanting*, his acclaimed new book.

The crucifixion of Christ, Jennifer Lawrence's *Hunger Games* and the 9/11 terror attacks in the US all have the hallmarks of people under the influence of mimetic rivalry.

our common interest really is, and things can easily get out of control. Think of a Twitter pile-on, for example, or toddlers scrapping over the most popular toys.

It is often the case that the more we are alike, the greater the risk of rivalry. Siblings are an obvious example – think Cain and Abel – but it is also true of religions (Catholic and Protestant), tribes (Tutsi and Hutu) and politics (National and Labour).

And although it may take two to tango, three can definitely be a crowd. Love triangles are another example of how mimetic desire can get awfully messy.

LAMBORGHINI v FERRARI

The business world is rife with such struggles. One of the most famous stories that illustrates the point is the legendary rivalry between Ferruccio Lamborghini and Enzo Ferrari. Before he made supercars, Lamborghini made tractors, and bought some of his parts from Ferrari. But after a row between the two over the quality of the parts, Lamborghini decided to take on the Italian stallion at his own game.

It probably helped that Maserati and Ducati were nearby when Lamborghini started poaching top engineers. But Lamborghini clearly understood the value of imitation, by boasting: "I don't invent anything. I start where the others came from."

Girard called this "mimetic rivalry", and noted how it could ultimately lead to violence: think tit-for-tat contests, blood feuds, utu and the Cold War's doctrine of mutually assured destruction.

Mimetic violence seemed to Girard to be the oldest human problem. It's another way of describing envy – or in theological terms, the desire that Satan nursed in Eden to possess heaven, then modelled for Eve and Adam.

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The consequences of mirrored conflict can be deadly serious. When battles "escalate to extremes", as Girard wrote in his final book, you can end up with mimetic rivalry on a global scale, such as the September 11 terrorist attacks.

You will also, almost inevitably, end up with scapegoats. Throughout history, Girard observed, the most common way of defusing such situations has been to unite against a common enemy and blame them for the chaos.

In other words, as Burgis notes, "they used violence to drive out violence. They would expel or destroy a chosen person or group, and this action would have the effect of preventing more widespread violence."

According to Girard, all of human culture is based on scapegoating and ritual repetition. Turning to ancient religion and anthropology, he noticed that instead of ending in a duel, mimetic currents eventually swirled to form a war of all-against-one – a unanimous desire and a mob mentality.

At first spontaneous, this practice of singling out and sacrificing a victim became ritualised as a means for restoring the social order. In ancient Israel, sins would be transferred on to a goat, then driven out into the desert. In Greece, the pharmakos played a similar role – a substitute victim sometimes forced off a cliff, not by an individual, but by everyone.

This is the scariest part of mimetic theory, because scapegoating happens without people realising they're doing it. For someone who's part of the crowd, there's psychological safety, and much of history has been first written from the crowd's point of view. But it's often only from the victim's perspective that the truth can be seen – and the victim may well be innocent and unable to make it known.

Tractor-maker Ferruccio Lamborghini decided to outdo Enzo Ferrari's supercars after a parts-supply row.

Even today, we have many TV shows based on ritual exclusion, such as *Survivor*, *The Apprentice* and *Project Runway* (where "one day you're in, the next you're out"). It's also the basis of "cancel culture".

Countless books and films capture the terror for the victims of a crazed crowd, from Stephen King's novels and *Lord of the Flies* to *The Hunger Games*. And pioneers, prophets, foreigners, kings, queens and beggars (as well as tech entrepreneurs, as Thiel says in *Zero to One*, co-written with Blake Masters) are all vulnerable to a mob mentality.

But an older tradition of wisdom, a counter-narrative Girard saw running through the Hebrew-Christian scriptures, exposes this problem for human society, arguably once and for all. Even in Genesis, Girard notes, there's a counter-current in the tale of Joseph and his brothers in Egypt, when Judah offers up his own life to save Benjamin's. Again, in the Judgment of Solomon, the good mother offers to give up her child to save its life. There's a pattern of slowly exposing and overcoming the sacrificial culture.

As Burgis explains, Girard urged everyone, regardless of their religious beliefs, to pay attention to what happened at the crucifixion of Jesus. "What he found was human behaviour operating differently than he had seen anywhere else in his reading of history."

In the last hours of Jesus' life, the mob tried to scapegoat Jesus. Pontius Pilate wanted to appease the mob, to unite the community. But the crucifixion "did the opposite – it caused enormous division".

There are different perspectives. At first, the crucifixion seemed to have the desired effect, but "shortly after Jesus's death, a small number of people – those who knew Jesus intimately – came forward to proclaim his innocence and said that he was alive".

Pioneers, prophets, foreigners, kings, queens, beggars – and tech entrepreneurs such as Peter Thiel – are all vulnerable to a mob mentality.

FOLLY OF THE CROWD

The story of the Passion is so extraordinary, says Burgis, because it exposes the mechanism of sacrifice and the old hierarchy of culture. We're invited to read the story from the crowd's perspective, but "also to see the folly of the crowd and to move beyond it – to finally, for the first time, grasp the truth about human violence".

This revelation about conflict has worked slowly in culture through history, but its far-reaching effects cannot be undone. These include a role, according to Girard, in the birth of modern science. "We didn't stop burning witches because we invented science; we invented science because we stopped burning witches," he said to David Cayley in a Canadian radio feature in 2011. "We used to blame droughts on witches; once we stopped blaming witches, we looked for scientific explanations for droughts."

The staggering implication – one of mimetic theory's bigger challenges – is that this understanding, there in biblical narrative especially, had to have come from outside us. "Did it come merely from the Enlightenment – the conceit that we are now smarter, rational people who can judge the past rightly from our heightened, enlightened perch?" Girard didn't think so.

"This awareness," Burgis stresses, "couldn't have come about by thinking about it hard enough. We had a blind spot because we were part of the crime."

Mimetic theory, then, issues a challenge to our understanding of it: is this true of me, too? It's easy to get swept along in politics, in a crowd, by peer pressure. We can see ourselves in a mob and recognise some complicity, some of the time. But what about personal reckoning? If our mimetic intelligence – evidenced in the discovery of mirror neurons in our brains – animates us in groups, what about in more personal relationships?

Burgis recounts the tale of *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*, the story by Ursula K Le Guin, in which a utopia depends on the abject misery of one child chained up in a dungeon. Many of the country's people seem happy or settle for compromise. But there are those who refuse to accept this term – the ones who walk away and seem to know where they're going. As Girard writes, "Each person must ask what his relationship is to the scapegoat." ▮

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