

“The mimetic workplace: finding the admirable amidst rules and rivalry”

A paper on the *Law, Desire & Rivalry* panel

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1 October 2023

Prepared for the first *Novitate Conference*, 2–3 November 2023
Catholic University of America, Washington DC

I

Laws, if reasonable, are meant to foster the common good of a society. They do not favor one set of interests over another. And they do not narrow our moral vision; indeed, they broaden that vision by pointing to good, reasonable ends—free speech and assembly, or the use of private property, for instance. Law thus elicits desires—desires that pertain not only to our very selves and our own good, but also to our communities, the societies in which we belong, and with which seek to remain in communion.

Desires, of course, come in many forms. René Girard famously speaks of mimetic desires which, in the context of humanity’s selfish tendencies, manifest themselves through less than desirable behaviors. Violence in society, competition within families—these are but some of the consequences of Girardian mimesis. Here, law responds in a negative way to the inherent fallenness of human nature: it coerces to maintain a semblance of peace; it frustrates the violent hand to preserve the body politic.

But, if “optimists” from Aristotle to Jesus, from Confucius to Ghandi, are right, then desires are not merely of the violent sort. They can indeed be reasonable—indicative of, and inclining towards, true good in the world. Attending to such desires, law can motivate through good. It can create space, as well, for individuals to imitate the moral best in each other, to emulate exemplary others in non-rivalrous, mutually-rewarding, even selfless ways.

In this essay, I offer three brief reflections on the interplay between law, desire, and rivalry, doing so with mimesis—in both its positive and negative forms—in mind. These reflections—which acknowledge the mixed valence of human existence, particularly as seen in the prism of highly regulated industries—set the conceptual groundwork for our panel.

II

The more a tragic conflict is prolonged, the more likely it is to culminate in a violent mimesis; the resemblance between the combatants grows ever stronger until each presents a mirror image of the other.¹

Mimesis, I noted, can be violent. But it can also be morally reasonable—that is, not only aligned with (reasonable) law, but also surpassing law’s moral demands so that the imitator reaches new heights of what is morally and humanly possible. Linda Zagzebski describes such mimesis as emulation, an imitation that happens almost ineluctably (though subject to critical reflection) upon admiring an exemplary person. The psychological mechanism involved is the emotion of admiration; and admiration, Zagzebski claims, merits our trust since emotions are often—if not always—the first means by which humans perceive the world. They, like logical

¹ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick. Gregory (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 47.

propositions, are cognitive, not devoid of rationality; hence, they can provide reasons for acting, reasons for imitation.²

Interestingly, Zagzebski aligns the emotion of admiration with the “admirable” (for instance, a courageous hero), and she distinguishes the admirable from the “desirable” (for instance, a Platonic notion of courage itself).³ This is necessary, she thinks, because the desirable is difficult to understand: it demands tough definitional work about moral terms, such as “virtue”, “right act”, “duty” and the “good life”, which generate interminable disputes between people of good will.⁴ Better instead, she argues, to settle on the admirable—that is, people “like that” who elicit the emotion of admiration in a community, and who generate a positive moral emotion thereby grounding moral discussion *without* a need to define complex terms in the first instance.⁵

I do not aim to critique Zagzebski’s “admirable” turn in this essay. But the thought that moral discourse can rely, in the first instance, upon a positive memetic emotion is, in my opinion, attractive. It seems empirically probable: children imitate their parents’ good (as well as bad) behaviors. And it seems theoretically intriguing: perhaps Eleanor Roosevelt’s admirable qualities helped with the ratification of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, despite the signatories’ inevitable disagreements about what human rights even are. One speculation I have, however, pertains to the relationship between admiration and desire. As Girard suggests, though in a negative context, imitation can follow once an individual recognizes what a rival considers desirable. Cannot admiration—as a positive emotion with a positive, moral end—also recognize or point to desirable ends *as well as* admirable people? In other words, when we admire someone, do we not also have an accompanying intuition about what the exemplar views as desirable, or what is desirable about the exemplar his or herself?

I mention the possible relationship between the admirable and desirable because, in a mimetic context, it seems to me that the two are in some way operative, even necessarily intertwined: I *admire* a courageous exemplar because she is courageous, and courage is a *desirable* trait for a person in my community. If the relation between the two phenomena is as I think it is, then, turning again to law, I think the desirable and the admirable must be concurrently operative: law’s reasonable ends must be made known through the lives of admirable people; and admirable people must be admirable—not due to the subjective and potentially erroneous opinions of observers, but due to the desirable ends that reasonable laws seek to affect (or due to the supererogatory ends that laws themselves cannot affect on their own, but that they can point towards in their own limited way).

In heavily regulated industries, especially in large organizations that capitalize on economies of scale, is it not often the case that employees are bombarded with company speech that stresses the desirable, often with no mention, or embodiment, of the admirable? Company values echo in corporate hallways, but do they resonate in employees’ hearts and minds? Training programs summarize new regulations, but do the rules inspire? If Zagzebski is correct, the desirable may be too difficult, too cerebral, too abstract to catch employees’ attention. The desirable, in this context, is not caught, not imitated. Mimesis is not given wing. But a second imitative emotion awaits: admiration. Appealing to the heart, it moves towards emulation. It has the potential to make the desirable concrete. And it may do so without laborious effort—without organizational jingoism, without regulatory overkill.

² See Linda Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), chap. 2.

³ Linda Zagzebski, ‘The Admirable Life and the Desirable Life’, in *Values and Virtues: Aristotelianism in Contemporary Ethics*, ed. Timothy Chappell (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006), 53–66.

⁴ Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 3.

⁵ Zagzebski, 3–4.

But, say the desirable, once concrete, generates rivalrous envy amongst employees. Can admiration function as it is meant to—that is, resulting in the cultivation of genuinely moral exemplars? In the next reflection, I distinguish admiration from its morally suspect “near misses”.

III

Rivalry does not arise because of the fortuitous convergence of two desires on a single object; rather, *the subject desires the object because the rival desires it*. In desiring an object, the rival alerts the subject to the desirability of the object. The rival, then, serves as a model for the subject, not only in regard to such secondary matters as style and opinions but also, and more essentially, in regard to desires.⁶

Humans are fallible and may be mistaken about what is truly desirable and truly admirable. Girard reminds us that desires may be violent and imitatively so. Zagzebski, on the other hand, poses that admiration, including its imitative effect, is *only* positive. Yes, we may be mistaken about the admirable: Zagzebski thought Jean Vanier of L’Arche was saintly.⁷ But the emotion of admiration, Zagzebski suggests, is entirely morally positive: in particular, it imitates, but it does not wish the exemplar’s downfall. That latter motive is associated with admiration’s vicious counterpart: “spiteful envy”.⁸

Spiteful envy is a useful term for our purposes because, in the context of imitation, it better captures the psychological dynamics of Girardian rivalry than the notion of mimetic desire. To admire someone in a corrupt way is to resent (or be spiteful about) their admirable qualities, to wish those qualities were your own, to acquire those qualities, and (importantly) to wish the qualities were removed from the original exemplar. This is (one form of) spiteful envy. It is rivalrous at its core. And it involves an important negative emotion: resentment, famously associated with Nietzsche’s notion of slave morality, whereby hostility is directed towards an opposing moral system which stands as a source of moral frustration and jealousy for the “resenter”. True, Girard says this much about mimetic desire, but spiteful envy encapsulates the moral essence in plain English; and the fact that mimetic desire can also be associated—and has been associated—with positive emotions and morality (see above) speaks to its normative ambiguity.

So, rivals are spitefully envious of each other. In the second paper of our panel, it is argued that rules-based ethics programs pose a “rivalry risk” in heavily regulated industries. One way that I interpret this claim is with regard to situations in which employees are tempted to resolve interpersonal, non-compliance disputes through formal (legal) means, as opposed to informal means (e.g., just “talking things out”). To adopt legal means for resolution is to already be in a fraught emotional state, often one in which spite and rivalry are central features. If an organization’s ethical culture is such that rules are the de facto means to keep peace, then rivalry is to be expected. Now, rivalry in an inter-organizational context (for example, between competitors in an industry) is usually a good thing in a competitive market economy. But rivalry (of the type suggested above) in an intra-organizational setting is not only morally problematic for the parties involved, but it is also economically problematic for the firm itself: the organization must use precious resources to combat spiteful envy and quell disruptive rivalries. If it does not, it risks losses in efficiency, fallings short of quarterly targets, and inevitable retention problems.

Can firms in heavily regulated industries flourish when rules reign? The desirable may be so marred by envy that laws are the only recourse to peace. But what sort of peace is this, where the desirable cannot be made plain by the innocence of the admirable? In my final reflection, I argue that

⁶ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 145. Italics in original.

⁷ See Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, chap. 3.

⁸ See discussion of “spiteful envy” in Zagzebski, 56.

admiration requires space to be freely felt such that the desirable can come to life in myriad and desirous ways.

IV

Each community sees itself as a lonely vessel adrift in a vast ocean whose seas are sometimes calm and friendly, sometimes rough and menacing. The first requirement for staying afloat is to obey the rules of navigation dictated by the ocean itself. But the most diligent attention to these rules is no guarantee of permanent safety. The ship is far from watertight; ceaselessly, insidiously, it takes in water. Only a constant repetition of rites seems to keep it from sinking.⁹

The final paper of our panel describes a work environment in which the smallest infraction is subject to the strictest liability—where, in other words, mountains are made from molehills or, to use Girard’s metaphor, where the ship is constantly taking in water. In Girard’s view, what keeps the ship afloat is a constant repetition of rites—that is, sacrificial substitution, wherein a scapegoat is identified, blamed for the community’s wrongs, and is sacrificed on the altar of corporate unity.

In this environment, there is no room for a positive mimesis, the sort of emulation that Zagzebski thinks is part and parcel of our human makeup. One wonders, then, whether Girard’s commentary on human culture was actually developed with heavily regulated firms in mind: “hall monitors” are modernity’s corporate ritualists, one might say. Indeed, stories of workplace snitching, bullying, fear, and desperation are not uncommon. So, corporate ritualists—through use of less-than-desirable laws, or through less-than-desirable uses of law—find ways to generate negative desires, including spiteful envy, in and amongst employees.

Hall monitors thus function as a caricature of exemplarism—that is, of a true and positive mimesis, where moral goodness is desired through the admirable lives of exemplary individuals. Hall monitors point not to exemplary people, but to beguiling rules. Hall monitors take the oxygen out of the room, just when admirable individuals give that longed-for spark. Rules—the favored tools of hall monitors—are by no means bad *per se*. But to the extent that they lack intelligible ends, they fail to point to the truly desirable (i.e., the reasonable). Insofar as they favor a certain set of interests over another, they stoke spiteful envy. And inasmuch as they pass over the common good, they generate vicious rivalry. In short, the hall monitor’s (use of) rules fail(s) to meet what Aquinas would say are the marks of a true, or morally good, law.

What can stop the legalistic ritualism, the relentless scapegoating, of corporate hall monitors? Admiration, an emotion that seeks out the admirable in a free and seemingly spontaneous way. It reaches out for flesh-and-blood individuals who stand out for their moral character which, it must be said, is the result of free and voluntary actions—actions that are self-determinate, thus pertaining to moral and intellectual virtues. Hall monitors drive the admirable underground, replacing exemplars with rivals, whilst secretly (or not so secretly) enjoying their privileged place as company ritualists. But exemplars, if permitted, act in plain sight. They act with knowledge of what the law desires (law’s desirable ends), but they often go above and beyond the letter of the law, giving voice to the law’s spirit and doing so in myriad ways. And, indeed, this moral variety is to be expected since moral reasoning is not about deductions from what law demands, but rather about inducting from experience and allowing wisdom to determine what is the best thing to do in x situation given y circumstances.

How might we tell if a firm favors exemplars over hall monitors? Just ask employees who they admire. If they speak about rivals instead, be prepared to read more *Violence and the Sacred*.

⁹ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 267.