

Girard and Levinas, Cain and Abel, Mimesis and the Face

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Genesis 4: [1] The man lay with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain. She said, 'With the help of the Lord I have brought a man into being.' [2] Afterwards she had another child, his brother Abel. Abel was a shepherd and Cain worked the land. [3] In due season Cain brought some of the produce of the soil as a gift to the Lord; [4] and Abel also brought some of the first-born of his flock, the fat portions of them. The Lord received Abel and his gift with favour; [5] but Cain and his gift he did not receive. Cain was furious and his face fell. [6] Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you so angry and cast down? [7] If you do well, you are accepted; if not, sin is a demon crouching at the door. It shall be eager for you, and you will be mastered by it.' (King James Version: *And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.*) [8] Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let us go into the field'. While they were there, Cain attacked his brother Abel and murdered him. [9] Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' Cain answered, 'I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?' [10] The Lord said, 'What have you done? Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground. [11] Now you are accursed, and banished from the ground which has opened its mouth wide to receive your brother's blood you have shed.

Introduction

Girard sees this universally known story from the beginning of the Bible as being very important. Within his theory of mimetic desire and the scapegoat mechanism, he ascribes special meaning to Bible stories, both from the Old and the New Testament. The story I just began with belongs to the genre of founding narratives. Stories telling of the beginning of the world, or more modestly: the beginning of a culture. A murder takes place in many of these stories as the culture commences. This is true for the story of Cain and Abel too. But Girard points out an important difference between Bible stories of origin and what he calls mythical founding stories. Whereas there is, for instance, neither judgment nor punishment for Romulus and Remus's murder in the founding myth of Rome and the Roman Empire – in a way, this murder is even justified by Remus's infraction in jumping over the boundary wall – God does judge and punish Cain for murdering Abel. Unlike Remus, Abel is innocent. This means that the mimetic motive, which Girard thinks is present in both murders, albeit hidden, is only

exposed and denounced in the Bible story.

In the myths, mimetic conflicts lead to sacrificing a scapegoat, after which it is often deified, because with the sacrificing the mimetic violence ends, albeit temporarily. In the Bible, the victim is not deified but rehabilitated. According to Girard, this difference exists not only in tales of origin but also between numerous other myths and Bible stories. Girard beautifully and convincingly interprets the difference between the Oedipus myth and the story of Joseph from the Book of Genesis. At first glance, the similarities between these two stories strike us from a mimetic perspective. Both central figures are ostracised twice by their own community; both narrowly avoid death the first time. Oedipus's parents first banish him when he is a newborn and later on the citizens of Thebe do the same, after his unmasking. Joseph's brothers first sell him as a slave and later on he is banned from Potiphar's house in Egypt when Potiphar's wife has caused him to be jailed. Both Oedipus and Joseph are violently ostracised as scapegoats to solve a crisis. The crisis in the narrative of Joseph and his envious brothers is most clearly mimetic. The fact that both protagonists are geniuses in solving puzzles is another similarity between these two stories. Oedipus solves the puzzle of the Sphinx and Joseph interprets dreams. Both use these talents to save their communities. Finally, both central figures demonstrate 'hubris': self-superiority or overestimation of oneself. Oedipus, as a typical, classical, tragic hero falls because overconfidence tells him he can escape his fate; Joseph exacerbates his brothers' mimetic jealousy with his predictive dreams of his own dominion.

But according to Girard, the important difference between the two stories is that Oedipus's persecutors turn out to be right and Joseph's do not. Oedipus is guilty of patricide and incest with his mother, even though he was unaware of it and did not want it himself. Joseph is victimised innocent, but he is rehabilitated. Or, more correctly: he rehabilitates himself, by conquering his persecutors with gentleness. By means of his trick, placing his silver cup in the sack belonging to Benjamin, his father's other favourite, he returns his brothers to the same situation in which they ostracised him: he threatens to enslave Benjamin. Only when Judah then takes Benjamin's place, substitutes himself for him, does Joseph reveal himself to his brothers and forgive his persecutors. The Bible story reverses the roles of the myth: the victim is right and not the mimetically driven persecutors.

Central question

This is also true for Cain and Abel. Abel is innocent, and God punishes Cain for his crime ('You shall be a wanderer, a fugitive on the earth'). Let us look more closely at this story. It contains important clues revealing what I am advocating: a connection between Girard and

Levinas. At first sight, these two French thinkers seem to have very little in common. But at exactly the issue of deploying a moral counterweight against amoral human nature they share a common motive and they supplement each other in important ways. It is the relationship between Girard and Levinas, their common motive and their complementarity that I want to investigate further here.

Ethical perspective

One could defend that since the story of Cain and Abel the ethical perspective has been introduced into the Bible. When God asks Cain: ‘Where is Abel your brother?’, he makes him responsible for his brother, and therefore responsible for another. That had not happened earlier. In Eden, God asks Adam: ‘Where are you?’ and not: ‘Where is [Eve] your wife?’ Cain answers rhetorically: ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ The answer is yes! Cain is being called to account: ‘What have you done?’ Responsibility is for people outside paradise.

Girard too emphasises that the unique character of the Bible with regard to the myths lies in how events are placed within an ethical perspective. Happenings between Cain and Abel very clearly bear the characteristics of a mimetic conflict: Cain envies and fights Abel because of something he is excluded from: God’s acceptance of his offering. But from a mimetic perspective, even more is going on. Cain is the first who ‘brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the Lord’, followed by Abel who ‘*also* brought some of the first-born of his flock, the fat portions of them’ (italics JD). One could say Abel was copying Cain, and therefore acting mimetically, but there is not yet any question of mimetic *desire* here. Probably Cain is the first because he is the eldest. But then something surprising happens: God reacts first to Abel’s offer, which He accepts, and only then to the offer brought first: that of Cain, which He rejects. God reverses a natural and logical sequence: first comes the younger; only then the older. Immediately after that, when ‘Cain was furious and his face fell’, God warns Cain against the desire foreshadowing the sin: he must maintain control over this desire. This warning comes prior to the murder.

Are this reversal, the ethical perspective, and the warning to constantly control desire interconnected? I’d like to use precisely this question to articulate the relationship between Girard and Levinas I’m looking into. Further along in the Bible, we come across this more often – this reversal of the natural, logical and traditional sequence between children, where the younger brother is chosen instead of the older: when God calls Isaac Abraham’s *only* son

(Gen. 22:2)¹; when God tells the pregnant Rebecca her oldest son will serve her youngest (Gen. 25:23), and when Jacob is blessed *before* Esau (Gen. 27); this also happens when Jacob blesses Joseph's sons later in Egypt. He does this with crossed arms, first with his right hand blessing Ephraim, placed on his left by Joseph, and then his left hand blessing Manasse, placed on his right (Gen. 48:8-20). Reversals like this continue through the New Testament. Think, for example, of the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32).

I intend to use the notion of election or being chosen to find and clarify the connection among this reversal, the ethical perspective, and the control of desire. This links us to Levinas, because being chosen is a central notion of his. The just-mentioned reversal seems to suggest election. Abel, with his offering, is chosen in preference to Cain with his; Isaac is chosen instead of Ishmael, Jacob instead of Esau, Joseph instead of his brothers, Ephraim instead of Manasse. And the prodigal, youngest son wins favour in preference to the conscientious oldest, who has worked hard all his life. But there seems certain arbitrariness to all these examples. The story does not make clear why one is chosen at the cost of the other. No positive reason, like obvious merit leading to election; no negative reason either, like the one passed over having done something bad or wrong. It seems happenstance, arbitrary, or lost in God's unfathomable ways. In addition, these examples illustrate a fracture in an obvious, a traditional, and an established order. This only confirms the unexpected strangeness of happenstance, of arbitrariness, or of God's unfathomable ways.

The 'content' of the election is not always identical in the examples cited. Whereas in Abel's case his offering is recognised or esteemed, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph's sons are blessed. Blessing in this sense would mean literally: sanctifying and protecting by making a *sign*. For that matter, Cain is also blessed once he admits his guilt (Gen. 4:15). But the sign of a blessing implies a task. It is not a one-off gift; it points to a future. Once blessed, Jacob cannot spend his days reclining; the complete burden of his people rests on his shoulders and, despite the accompanying protection, he's right to fear Esau. And Joseph, as I've said, not only saves the Egyptians, who are entrusted to him, but also his own people, for whom he has a duty of care in his role as the chosen.

Being chosen to care; and being accountable for the fulfilment of this task: the concept responsibility cannot be better defined. Being chosen to responsibility means being invited or asked to take it on. The word says all: responsibility – giving a response; i.e. answering a

¹ What about Ishmael? Abraham sent his first son into the desert (Gen. 21:14), but Ishmael has not completely disappeared, because later he will join Isaac to bury their father (Gen. 25:9). Yet, after Abraham's death, it is Isaac whom God blesses (Gen. 25:11).

prior question. In this sense, Levinas too speaks of being chosen to be responsible. Now, in view of our question of how Girard is related to Levinas, I will first briefly deal with Levinas's idea of election for responsibility. Then I will reveal the link between the two.

Responsibility

For Levinas, one is being chosen for responsibility in relationship to the Other. We can clarify this best using Levinas's well-known notion of the face. His thinking begins with how I experience the other's face. For Levinas, that is an ethical experience. It is my experience of a demand coming from the Other. The appeal the other makes during this ethical experience makes me responsible. The Other invites or elects me to take on what Levinas calls infinite responsibility. This is responsibility in the first person, my responsibility for the Other, the gist of Levinas's philosophy. The core, therefore, lies in experiencing the face.

Why the face? In the first place, because the appeal to responsibility can only be inferred in direct relationship with the Other. It is no ordinary demand, arising from an ethical theory and aimed at everyone. Levinas is not formulating a general order or universal call to responsibility. It's all about me. *I* have been chosen for responsibility; this task to care for the Other has been imposed on *me*. How do I know? I see it in the Other's face. I become aware of it when the Other looks at me. This is why Levinas's thinking begins with the Other's face.

The fact that the Other makes me responsible, as Levinas says, is, however, not something that Other *does*. The demand from the Other is not a deed carried out by an active subject. Rather, it is an effect emanating from the Other, even before he or she has said or done anything as a subject. In philosophical terms, it is an effect of the Other as an other: the consequence of the Other's otherness. This constitutes a second meaning for face, and a second reason for Levinas to start with the face of the Other. The Other's face immediately expresses his or her alterity and this instantaneous alterity precedes the mediated relationships we maintain with one another as subjects in a variety of cultural contexts. The Other as Other precedes the Other as teacher, student, patient, client, friend, neighbour, consultant, or whatever. The alterity of the Other also precedes the rivalry I can have with the Other. I will return to this point.

In a certain sense, the face of the Other breaks through the cultural contexts in which things around us gain meaning and through which we give meaning to our own lives. The face of the Other is extra-cultural or trans-cultural. This is a third meaning for the face. The fact that we can be interested in another culture, that we are prepared to learn another language, that we can see our own culture as a culture surrounded by others – these things indi-

cate to Levinas an underlying or trans-cultural meaning that is not itself culturally determined, but, prior to this, is implicit in the alterity of the face of the Other.

To give an example: I was once teaching my Master courses in philosophy, and noticed how the participation of an Iranian refugee influenced the rest of the group, consisting only of Dutch students. His simple presence, apart from his contribution to discussions, kept us on our toes, confronted us with our habits, our normal ways of teaching and learning, and our prejudices. His presence made us responsible for him. He did not do this himself actively; he did not ask for it, but 'did' it in spite of himself. It was an effect of his face, of his presence in our midst. It was pure coincidence that this course featured Levinas's philosophy, but his teachings were put into practice in a very thought-provoking way.

Although the effect of the Other's face is therefore a moral effect, Levinas's philosophy is no ethics. Levinas says nothing about the content of the responsibility to which the Other invites me, about what I would have to do to actually bear this adequately. He derives no rules, values, or virtues from it. All he says, in his later work, is that the answer to the responsibility consists of substituting for the Other. Not even that I *should* substitute. He does not seek a foundation for ethics found in responsibility for the Other either, as is usually done in ethical theory. He seems to do the reverse. He shows that ethics or morality *itself* is the foundation. This ethical principle lies at the base of the world, or more humbly: of the culture. Not that everyone sees this, or everyone would agree on it. On the contrary, it is seldom recognised, or at least, not nearly often enough. Metaphors like 'base' and 'foundation' must not tempt us to think we are dealing here with something sturdy and strong. It is, instead, something fragile, something usually unnoticed. It is an awareness that sometimes penetrates with difficulty, while at other moments it suddenly kindles intensely.

Once, the novelist Astrid Roemer gave me a precious example of this sudden kindling. Walking down a platform in the Utrecht railway station, she saw an old woman who had difficulty walking. At precisely the moment Astrid passed her, the woman almost fell. In a reflex, she caught the woman and led her to a bench. Then she started asking herself what else she could do for her. In principle, a great deal. She could have taken her home, helped her wash, given her food, helped her to bed, and so on. But what are the limits of her task of caring? Should she stay at the woman's side for the rest of her life in order to care for her? No, that would be absurd. But why exactly? We feel, on the one hand, that the responsibility has limits, but, on the other, we feel that to define those limits would be somehow unfair. Would one not have to limit that responsibility nevertheless because she, and all of us, meet several people in the world? If Astrid were to care exclusively for that one woman, she would short-

change all the others for whom she also bears responsibility. And ultimately, she would short-change herself. If this is true, then it is ‘the others of the Other’, or ‘the third’ in Levinas’s words, who restrict my infinite responsibility for that one Other. And it is through the third that I have the duty to care for myself as well.

Levinas sees the third, the other others, as the beginning of regulated society with mutual rights and obligations and the law before which all of us, including me, are equals. The comparative perspective begins with the third party. That is why rivalry too begins with the third party. But my primary responsibility for the Other precedes all of us being equal. The fact that Levinas calls this responsibility infinite means that it overcomes me; it comes from the Other’s presence; I cannot impose restrictions on it myself. My responsibility is only restricted because more others exist.

Being chosen, responsibility, uniqueness

Regarding our question about how Girard and Levinas are related, the following aspects of Levinas’s idea of being chosen for responsibility are important:

1. Being chosen is something between the Other and me. It appears and is experienced *in* this relationship. This means that election happens in an internal perspective. Responsibility is not granted from an external perspective, and thus not from a general morality or a theory of ethics.
2. Because election for responsibility appears *within* the relationship between the Other and me, it makes me unique. It has to do with my unique responsibility that no one can take over from me. In other words: my uniqueness depends on this responsibility for which I am being chosen.
3. Uniqueness is not established from outside the relationship, as if it involved comparing characteristics and someone with unique ones would emerge from the contestants. Uniqueness is a specific form of recognition (election) *within* a relationship. Quite different from a currently often ascribed (but overestimated too) quality like authenticity, uniqueness is a relational concept. You are not unique on your own, as you can be authentic; you are unique and irreplaceable *for someone*. For your friends, for your parents, for your children, or for God.
4. And in Levinas, I am unique for the Other, because he elects me for responsibility. As I have said: not through the Other’s action as a subject, but prior to this: through the effect of the Other as Other. From this internal perspective, I cannot say how respon-

sibility would look for another or for others in general. I would only know this if I were to leave the internal perspective and survey myself and others comparatively from an external perspective.

5. The difference between internal and external perspective is crucial if we are speaking of being chosen. Being chosen is beyond compare and only has meaning from an internal perspective. To say that someone, or that a group, has been chosen from outside means one is comparing and placing this person or this group first. This also applies if one speaks of oneself as chosen. That too happens from outside, usually through narcissistic mirroring. From an external perspective, only *one* can be the only one: the best, the largest, the most beautiful, etc. But from an equal number of internal perspectives, everyone can be ‘the only one’: unique and irreplaceable.

Mimesis and morality

How does being chosen in this sense relate to the Bible examples of election previously given? Is Jacob not being elected in preference to Esau, Joseph in preference to his brothers, and Abel in preference to Cain? In other words: can we speak here of a comparative, external perspective? Yes, and that is exactly the problem! The problem is that Cain compares his offering to Abel’s. Esau compares himself to Jacob and feels himself degraded. Joseph’s brothers are jealous of him because they compare themselves to him. And worst of all: they’re right – Cain, Esau, Joseph’s brothers, and the oldest son in the parable of the prodigal son. Isn’t it pretty hard to take that a squanderer and a swindler (Jacob) is elected in preference to them, hard-working and obedient people? That’s an upside-down world. It thwarts the natural, obvious, logical, traditional, established, in short, the fair order of things.

It is indeed hard to take from a mimetic, comparative perspective. Comparing is precisely what the oldest brother of the prodigal son, what Joseph’s brothers, Esau and Cain should *not* be doing. For it is precisely this comparative, external perspective that arouses and intensifies their mimetic desire. Does God not say to Cain, when his offering is rejected, but prior to the murder: ‘rule over your desire’? God warns Cain to control his desire, and when desire nevertheless prevails mimetically through the murder, God makes Cain responsible for his neighbour (‘Where is Abel your brother?’), and blesses him with a sign. Here we already have responsibility and election. This ethical perspective goes hand-in-hand with a warning against the comparative, mimetic, external perspective.

To introduce the ethical perspective together with a warning against the comparative, mimetic prospective is to speak not only to Cain but also to us, the readers. The election of Abel,

Jacob, Joseph and the prodigal son is a relative election, an election of one and not another, not only for their contenders, but also for the reader, for us. Doubtlessly, the reader will identify to a certain extent with one personage, while also remaining distant, and will, no matter what, encounter more personages. Therefore the reader will, of necessity, compare. It even seems to be the express intention. The reader is not God, but a human person, cursed with mimetic desire. The reader will easily identify with the mimetic perspective of Cain, the oldest son, and with the others.

The reversal of the natural, the obvious, and the established order forces the reader to face this mimetic reality. And these reversals place the ethical perspective of responsibility in opposition to and prior to this natural mimesis. If this is successful, the reader experiences a catharsis. In the suspense story of Joseph, that moment comes when Juda takes Benjamin's place – a substitution in the sense of Levinas – and Joseph reveals himself. This moves not only him but also the reader.

Conclusion

In this reading, I hope I have been able to clarify the connection I have been seeking between the reversals, the ethical perspective of responsibility, and the control of desire. This connection lies in the internal perspective of being chosen for responsibility. And it is on this point, the deployment of the ethical perspective against amoral human nature, across the natural, logical, established order, that Levinas and Girard share a motive and that they supplement each other's work.

Concluding, I want to illustrate the complementary relation between Girard and Levinas using Girard's brilliant interpretation of a passage from the Gospel according to St John about the adulterous woman (John 8:3-11). Girard points out that, in Jesus's formulation 'let he who is without sin throw the first stone', all the emphasis rests on the *first* stone. This echoes on in the deafening silence reverberating after these words are spoken. Because the *first* stone to be thrown lacks precedent, has no model, it forms the last obstacle to the stoning, says Girard. Once the *first* stone has been thrown, subsequent stones would follow easily because mimetically. Girard says that the fact that Jesus's words have become proverbial and symbolic proves that the mechanism is just as alive and virulent as it was 2000 years ago.

By placing the emphasis on the *first* stone, Jesus makes each of the accusers themselves responsible. Each accuser holding a stone in their hand is holding the first stone. This makes each 'the only one', unique. There is, after all, but the *one* first stone, even though each of them might have it in their hand. What we see happening here is the making singular, the in-

dividualising of the responsibility. Being chosen for responsibility – it sounds huge and heavy, but it can happen in the twinkling of an eye. All of a sudden you are called to account for your responsibility. And you are suddenly the only one. When you are singled out, this breaks up the *Mitsein* of the hordes, to which we belong first and foremost according to Heidegger. The hordes fall apart through the uniqueness of the responsibility. Jesus too withdrew himself from the *Mitsein*, which the Pharisees wanted to make him part of. By bending down and writing in the sand, before and after his words about the first stone, he does not look at his challengers. In this way, even though he is acting as a substitute for the adulterous woman, he avoids being sacrificed as a scapegoat in her place. After all, the intention of the whole scene was to trap him.

Resisting the temptation of mimetic desire and the scapegoat mechanism from an ethical perspective: voilà the common motive Levinas and Girard share and the point where they complement each other.