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The Joker Is Satan, and So Are We: Girard and The Dark Knight

Abstract

This essay comments on *The Dark Knight* from the point of view of Rene Girard's theory of violence. The notable Girardian resonances of the film are mentioned in connection with such themes as socially mediated desire for money, romantic rivalry, and scapegoating. The Joker is interpreted as a particularly powerful Satan figure, who illuminates Girard's conception of the satanic basis of human culture.

The Dark Knight is a movie that is breaking box office records. Why? Because it is a powerful expression of theological ideas. I need to elaborate a bit on this apparently odd statement. Let's list, in no particular order, some of the main themes of the movie: The Joker's main goal is not acquiring money, but sowing chaos and destruction; Bruce Wayne and Harvey Dent are rivals for the affection of Rachel Dawes; the police force is filled with corruption; Batman's exploits have produced copycats, imitators; the "law-abiding citizens" and the "criminals" are distinct groups of people . . . aren't they? . . . or are they all in the same boat?; a symbol of "justice," such as Harvey Dent, can be seduced to join "the dark side"; criminals often kill each other, taking greed to an irrational extreme. These themes can be elucidated very effectively with reference to the writings of René Girard.

If you are not familiar with Girard, I will provide a brief outline of his theory of culture. The theory begins with the concept of desire. Human beings have basic natural desires. If my stomach sends hunger signals to my brain, then I have a desire for food. But because human beings are highly social creatures, our basic natural desires very quickly become overlaid with complex patterns of social mediation. I may feel hungry, which is an internal, natural desire, but if I see a commercial for Burger King and decide to satisfy my hunger by eating a Whopper, then my desire has become socially mediated.

Girard uses the phrase "mimetic desire" to describe this bedrock phenomenon of human psychology. We may think that our desires are internally generated, but most of the time we do not know what we should desire until we look around at others and see what they are desiring. We mime, mimic, imitate the desires of others, particularly those others who appear to us as models of successful living. The models strike us as having a greater fullness of being than we have; in order to be like them we must desire to possess the things that they possess. There are many examples of mimetic desire. If two small children are in a room that has many toys in it, what will happen? One child will start playing with a particular toy and the other child will then want that toy also, and a tug-of-war will ensue. This will happen even if there is an identical or equivalent toy in the room. This is a perfect example of the phenomenon of mimetic desire, which is not predicated on scarcity; the scarcity of objects is not relevant because an artificial scarcity is created by the process of mimicking another person. When children grow into adults, mimetic desire does not fade away; it simply takes more sophisticated forms. I have already referred to advertizing as a key shaper of socially mediated desires. In general, the strategy of advertisers is to present happy, beautiful, successful people who own or use a certain product. You should own the product also if you want to mimic their success in life. In many ways the stock market is a mimetic phenomenon, as is fashion. The concept of "fashion" is not limited only to clothing; it also includes lifestyle items such as iPods, cars, computers, and avid devotion to

sports teams or NASCAR drivers. The phenomenon of the romantic triangle, two men fighting over a woman, is a common theme in literature, television, and movies. In his works of literary criticism, Girard traces the roots of romantic rivalry as it is unveiled in the works of key authors such as Shakespeare, Cervantes, Flaubert, and Dostoevsky.

This concept of rivalry is the second major element of Girard's theory of culture. If human beings are copying the desires of other human beings, the stage is set for envy, rivalry, conflict, and violence. If I am imitating someone else's desire for an object, then by definition I am setting myself up as a rival and potential enemy of the other person. If mimetic desire is the bedrock of human social psychology, then human society is always a conflictual field of mutual antagonisms which can lead to generalized chaos. If I imitate others then those others are always stumbling blocks for me, impeding my ability to get what I (and they) want. The phenomenon of the stumbling block is designated by a very precise term in the Greek language of the ancient world: skandalon. Mimetic desire and the rivalry to which it leads are inexhaustible sources of scandal, which Girard interprets as our inability to break free from the entangling webs of imitation and the violence to which it leads.

How do societies prevent themselves from suffering a meltdown into generalized chaos, into a war of all against all? Girard answers this question by

pointing to the phenomenon of scapegoating. If the members of a society can single out a victim, they can channel their violent emotions toward that victim and do away with him. This cathartic release of pent up violence serves to give the society a new sense of unanimity and purpose. Instead of hating each other, people can agree to hate a particular victim or perhaps a minority group or class within society. It is easy to find examples that illustrate the scapegoat mechanism. In the Middle Ages in Europe, if the plague were to break out in a certain city, usually what would happen is that a rumor would be started that the plague was caused by the Jews poisoning the drinking water. This rumor would lead to a massacre of local Jews. The fact that the Jews were also dying of the plague and had been drinking from the same water sources as everyone else is irrelevant. Scapegoating violence is irrational and subconscious. It is commonly noted by historians that those who were preaching in favor of the Crusades and whipping up public fervor for them, such as Pope Urban II, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Catherine of Siena, would commonly say to the people that European Christians should stop killing each other in petty internal wars. Instead, they should become united, march to the Holy Land, and slaughter the infidel Muslims. This is a clear example of how the scapegoat mechanism serves to unite people and channel their violence toward a scapegoated Other. The lynching of blacks in the United States is another particularly stark example of the scapegoat mechanism at work. The ideology of slaveholding specifically taught that persons of African descent are subhuman and can therefore

be killed with impunity to maintain what was claimed to be a superior white civilization. The killing of Jews by the Nazis is another immense example of scapegoating at work, as is the killing of so-called "counter-revolutionaries" in Stalinist Russia. In Japan in 1923, there was a major earthquake that killed thousands of people. False rumors began to circulate that persons of Korean descent living in Japan were taking advantage of the situation by looting, robbing, and raping. Vigilante groups of Japanese men began to massacre anyone they suspected of being Korean. The similarity between this situation and the medieval plague is striking and undeniable. It also shows that the phenomenon that Girard is describing is not simply "Western." He is unveiling the social psychology of human beings as such. Human culture is a lynch mob which has normalized and structured the process by which scapegoats are identified, vilified, and killed. The lynch mob always sees itself as innocent and the victim as a guilty transgressor who must be killed to restore "law and order" in the universe.

Girard's theory of violence comes to a head in his discussion of Satan. He says that Satan is not an individual person but rather the entire complex process that we have just summarized. Satan is the seducer who alienates people from God and insinuates to them that they must long for something that they supposedly lack. They must seek out models of success and imitate them. Satan is also the one who "kicks it up a notch" into rivalry, conflict, and chaotic violence. And Satan is the

whisperer behind the lynch mob, the voice demanding that One must be sacrificed for the Many. In this way, "law and order" will be restored.

Some scholars have commented, regarding John Milton's poem *Paradise Lost*, that Satan is the most interesting character, much more so than Adam, Eve, the angels, or Christ. In a similar way, the Joker is clearly the most interesting character in *The Dark Knight*, and he is obviously a figurative version of Satan. His main purpose is to sow chaos, confusion, and destruction among human beings. He does this by stoking the flames of the skandalon -- the intense fascination that human beings have with each other in the pursuit of their desires. There is the obvious romantic triangle of Bruce Wayne, Harvey Dent, and Rachel Dawes; two men seeking the affection of one woman is one of the most common mimetic plots. The Joker says to Batman at one point: "Does Harvey know about you and his little bunny?" which throws Batman into a predictable jealous rage. On a larger scale, there is the rivalry between the criminals and the "law abiding citizens," who are all seeking money, mammon. In modern Western culture, which is highly secularized, money is the new god that people worship. The movie is saying that all people are greedy; the difference between the citizens and the criminals is that the latter take greed to an absurd extreme, killing each other off in the process. The Joker recognizes all of this and uses the fascination with money to create all kinds

of temptations and conflicts, so that the police become just as corrupt as the criminals.

The Dark Knight is a movie that has so many resonances with Girard's ideas that the question inevitably rises as to whether or not the film makers have read him. It may be that his ideas have filtered into the consciousness of the Hollywood intelligentsia. It may be that the comic book authors and the film makers are simply drawing on the same inspirations that Girard draws on: the Bible and great works of literature. The answer to this question is not germane to our discussion here, but it is an interesting sidebar. The quotations from *The Joker* that I will present shortly have such strong Girardian resonances that it is hard to believe that the film makers have not read Girard. One can speculate that they knew Girard's ideas would make the movie philosophically powerful in addition to being visually dazzling. The combination would be a box office hit because of the public's mimetic desire (word of mouth patronage). The film makers, motivated by a desire to make millions of dollars, employ Girard's ideas. Delicious irony, isn't it?

The interrogation room scene in the middle of movie is its center, where the entire story is revealed under the blinding lights. This scene shows that *The Joker* is the most astute observer of human psychology in the film. His insights into mimetic desire and the scapegoating activities of the "civilized" people reveal a transcendent perspective; precisely the sort of transcendent perspective that Girard

claims is the fruit of biblical revelation. The Joker says to Batman: "They need you right now. When they don't, they'll cast you out like a leper. You see, their code, their morals, it's a bad joke." Girard's theory maintains that an individual who is lifted up as a hero today is likely to become the scapegoat tomorrow. The King who is obeyed by his loyal subjects today will have his head chopped off tomorrow. Society sees itself as moral, as being comprised of the good people who can judge the bad people. But what society cannot admit to itself is that its need for scapegoats is itself immoral. Society cannot recognize its hypocrisy. The Joker says that "When the chips are down, these civilized people, they'll eat each other." He also says "I'm not a monster, I'm just ahead of the curve." He is revealing that "law abiding society" is a mystification; human culture is a lynch mob riding the bucking bronco of chaotic violence. By thinking that it is attacking Satan in the form of the scapegoat, society is actually acting according to the satanic principle. When The Joker says "the only sensible way to live in this world is without rules" he is speaking the voice of chaotic, Dionysian violence. But he also reveals in this scene that the "rules," the laws and prohibitions that society invents to contain violence, are a sham. The police and the legal system think of themselves as stemming from a different spiritual source than the demonic criminals; but in reality they all flow out of the fountain of the complex, shapeshifting satanic event. The violence of the criminals and the brutality of the police, symbolized by Batman slamming the Joker's head into the table, reveal that the ultimate basis of violence is reciprocity.

The enemies who attack each other come to resemble each other more and more until they are indistinguishable. This is recognized implicitly in the film's underlying question: "How can evil be struggled against without allowing evil to overcome the one who is struggling, turning him to the dark side?"

The Joker's statement to Batman – "You complete me" – is profound, perhaps more profound than the film makers realize. Like the phrase from the gospels, "It is finished," it offers the perfect summary of the entire story. The Joker is saying that his role as the chaotic Satan is complemented by Batman's role as the "law and order" Satan, whose good violence is supposedly casting out the other Satan's bad violence. This is why The Joker can say with such confidence "You have nothing to frighten me with, nothing to do with all your strength." He realizes that Batman is actually his ally in the satanic event. The Joker knows about satanic shapeshifting, Batman does not.

It is customary in movies to present the criminals as evil and the cops as good. But the radical implication of Girard's theory is that evil is present in the structure of "law abiding society;" Satan is ultimately not a person but a complex process. Satan is at work in the actions of the criminal, but when the criminal is apprehended, tried, and retributively punished, society is acting as a lynch mob which is also secretly inspired by Satan. When this is seen, the rhetoric of "Justice" becomes empty, or worse than empty, it becomes the evil of hypocrisy. This is why

I say that the film makers may have put into The Joker's mouth a line that is more profound than they realize. To understand that Satan is a shapeshifter who can be in the criminal and in a defender of Justice, such as Harvey Dent or Batman, is to deconstruct the (good guys vs. bad guys) genre of the film. In contemporary political parlance, if the bad guys, the evildoers, and those who are carrying out the War on Evildoing are all fulfilling Satan's agenda without realizing it, then the world is utterly dark. How can such a world ever change? "Who can deliver us from this body of death?"(Rom. 7:24) This is a question that can only have a christological answer, which is articulated in Romans 12:21: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." But while The Joker is clearly a Satan figure, it is my argument that Batman is at best an ambiguous Christ figure, in that he willingly accepts the role of scapegoat at the end of the movie. His willingness to use violence within the movie works against the notion that he is a genuine Christ figure.

Christ is not a character in the movie, but he is present throughout, in the sense that his defeat of Satan on the cross, through nonviolent love, put Satan on display, thus making the revelatory insights of the movie possible. This also is an idea which is articulated clearly by Girard. When The Joker says to Batman "I know the truth. There's no going back. You've changed things forever ..." his words

intimate that he is really addressing another conversation partner, the same one to whom Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor was speaking.