



Book Reviews

Duane Armitage

Philosophy's Violent Sacred

Heidegger and Nietzsche through Mimetic Theory

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Duane Armitage's book *Philosophy's Violent Sacred. Heidegger and Nietzsche through Mimetic Theory* was published in 2021 by the Michigan State University Press in its series of *Studies in Violence, Mimesis, and Culture*. The book attempts to ground a critique of postmodernism and continental philosophy, defined here as the "French reading" of Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Nietzsche, and their attempt to overcome metaphysics and ontotheology, through an analysis of René Girard's mimetic theory. The book consists of four chapters, together with the author's preface and bibliography at the end of the book. Structurally, (1) the first chapter defines and explores Girard's mimetic theory and the concepts of violence and the sacred as a springboard for a further critique of the fundamental axioms of postmodern philosophy; (2) the second chapter concerns Girard's and Heidegger's interpretations of Nietzsche; (3) the third and most extensive chapter analyses Heidegger's philosophy through Girard's mimetic theory; (4) the fourth and final chapter is an overarching conclusion and a concluding argument for the necessity of a Judeo-Christian ethic as well as for the idea that postmodern philosophy leads to a form of Christian ethics indistinguishable from Marxism.

In the first chapter, titled "The Sacred as Violence" (pp. 1–14), the author creates a summary introduction to René Girard's philosophy of "mimetic theory", how it is devoted to violence and the sacred, and what kind of philosophical implications this theory rises in

a Judeo-Christian context. The term "mimetic desire" indicates that all human behaviour, even our most rational activities, is motivated by imitation. In Girard's view, we are all imitators; we imitate other people and events because we want to be like them or because they are like us. Our desire for the possessions and persons of others reflects this mimetic desire: we want to own something that resembles what another person has, or we want another person's body as our own (a kind of possession). For Girard, human desires, compared to animalistic biological needs, are thus *mimetic*, imitative, learned from other people, often called "models". With the imitation of another's desire, humans eventually will get into conflict, they become *scandalons* to each other, and rivalry and violence seem to be fated. Religion, which for Girard is the root of ethics, is a channel through which humans redirect their mimetic desire for violence to a *kaparot*, a scapegoat, a catalyst who takes upon himself the guilt and evil of society to be sacrificed and purified. Christ's death at Calvary represents a different sacrifice that is non-rival and voluntary. Only by imitating Christ's sacrifice, which is itself violent but repaid not with violence but with love and forgiveness, can we overcome violence, according to Girard. The author contrasts this idea with Hannah Arendt's and Martin Heidegger's philosophy of technology as the root of violence, arguing that technological innovation can, through *mimesis* and sacrifice, "move from having an almost wholly negative connotation [...] to being an absolute good in modernity" (p. 12), failing to mention that, for Heidegger, the evil of technology does not come purely from "innovation for innovation's sake", but from the forgetting of Being and seeing nature and humanity as a *resource*. It is possible to argue that the book, in many aspects, constructs a kind of *non-critique*; it presents the ideas critiqued in postmodern philosophy as a critique of that same postmodern philosophy.

The second chapter, titled "Nietzsche's Religious Hermeneutics" (pp. 15–40), is

primarily dedicated to the main argument of the book, namely, the idea that continental and postmodern philosophy misidentified the source of violence, through Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics, in Reason as a mechanism of oppression. It seems that the author's understanding of reason excludes (or, better said, tacitly integrates) the very aspects that postmodern philosophers were sceptical about, including both logocentrism and onto-theology. For example, the author argues that all postmodern attempts to overcome violence are self-defeating since they themselves embraced violence, even though it is entirely possible to argue, and the author comes close to this conclusion, that Nietzsche's idea of "philosophising with a hammer", which echoes through postmodernism since Pierre Klossowski and Georges Bataille, was an attempt to turn violence *against* violence, and thus reason against reason.

In the third chapter, titled "Heidegger's Violent Sacred" (pp. 41–88), the author also argues that Heidegger failed to recognise Christianity's central role in our understanding of God and morality. It is possible to argue that Heidegger's ontology is not a critique or a rejection of Christianity and Christian ethics, but an attempt to replace the theological concept of God in "Platonic" metaphysics as the *fundamentum inconcussum*, in favour of Being, and thus in favour of a rhizomatic ontology instead of an arborescent onto-theology. Heidegger, if we were to see him as a *religious* thinker, thus would stand in a line of thinkers like John the Scot Eriugena, Albert the Great, and Martin Luther, which understood God as an absolutely transcendent reality. The book as a whole delivers a masterful comparison of Girard, Heidegger and Nietzsche. It remains a comparison, however, because postmodern philosophy, its methods and goals, are not really presented accurately or critiqued directly.

The focal point of the book is the author's analyses of Nietzsche's "theology" of Dionysus in comparison with Girard's Christian ethics. While both theologies see sacrifice and violence as fundamental, Dionysus condones violence in the name of vitality, while Christianity condemns violence of any kind. In denying violence, Nietzsche's Christianity denies life, while Dionysus affirms life and its essential and necessary violence. The Christian ethic for Nietzsche is thus "unnatural", it goes against what is essential to humanity in favour of a "concern for victims, for the weak, the sick, and the ill constituted" (p. 18).

More than this, sacrifice and punishment of the *kapparot* constitute a catharsis for Nietzsche in which Christianity, in its rejection of violence,

leads to an emotional castration of those who feel unjustly treated, who then turn inward and inflict harm on themselves in the form of guilt. For Nietzsche, Christianity is obsessed with the victim and the weak, which runs counter to human's self-realisation through the will to power. The chapter continues with a comparison of Girard's and Heidegger's interpretations of Nietzsche's concept of the will to power. For Girard, the will to power is violence, which for the author - in light of Heidegger's understanding of Nietzsche as "the 'last metaphysician' who destroys the 'idols of being' - leads to a will to violence against Christianity that seeks to resurrect pagan mythology. For Nietzsche, overcoming Christianity included overcoming Platonism, a goal he apparently shared with Heidegger. The author defines Platonism as the "splitting of reality into the apparent and true world" (p. xi, xv, 33, 93), which is equal to the splitting of reality into becoming and Being. Heidegger understands Nietzsche primarily as a metaphysician who took upon him the goal of overcoming the "idol of Being", *Sein*, with "becoming", *Werden*, through the will to power and the Eternal Return. Nietzsche, citing Heraclitus, believed that "being is an empty fiction" and that the world is in a constant chaotic state of change and becoming. Becoming is opposed to Being in Parmenides, where it is understood in absolute. For Nietzsche, Being is synonymous with permanence, while becoming, like chaos, is what "sometimes is and sometimes is not", and the difference between Being and becoming could be explored through the distinction between the intelligible and the sensible.

The author, following Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche, argues that the will to power and eternal return correspond to the metaphysical categories of essence and existence, such that "will to power names what beings essentially *are*, whereas Eternal Return names *how* beings *are*" (p. 29); while the will to power stabilises becoming into stable being, through the Eternal Return, they are challenged and overcome to increase one's sense of power. The will to power is thus identical to becoming itself, and Being becomes a form of violent sacrifice, created to destroy as to gain power. Becoming is then the process of overpowering power and, as such, is the will to power itself. For Girard, Nietzsche's theology seems to be self-aware and affirmative of its own endless and reoccurring violent nature, with the addition that Nietzsche understood the innocence of the victims, while the pagan executioners did not. Nietzsche understood that Christianity, though its rejection of violence, had destroyed myth by exposing it as cyclical reoccurring violence against the weak

and innocent. With the rejection of Being in favour of becoming, there is nothing “left to imitate” except for the desires of others, which leads to Girard concluding that “existential authenticity”, in the sense that one can be completely original, is “pure fantasy”.

The author makes the mistake here of trying to understand authenticity as mimesis, imitation, of oneself; it is valuable to note that authenticity is not arborescent, someone cannot be more or less authentic compared to a certain stable authenticity which serves as a goal, but rhizomatic, and thus there is no-thing, to be imitated; it is the rejection of imitation in favour of being-oneself. The author writes that “[f]or Girard [...] the inauthentic self of Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit*, is, in reality, the more accurate description of the human being, insofar as human beings indeed borrow desires from others and can never conjure ‘authentic’ desires from the depths of their being” (p. 37), while Heidegger, in none of his works, sees inauthenticity as a corruption or distortion of human nature, but as the everyday way of being and thus part of our human nature. The author seemingly misinterprets Heidegger’s concept of authenticity as a “desire for complete originality”, which then according to Girard’s philosophy remains an impossibility, which leads Nietzsche to formulate an ideology of mimetic desire, and thus a metaphysics of violence in the will to power. Authenticity, like inauthenticity, represents a way of *Dasein*’s being, where one resists conformity and takes their personal decisions as irreducibly their own, even though they may be incommensurable or irreconcilable with the societal norms that apply to everyone. Authenticity thus represents a rejection of the mimetic desires and not an affirmation of mob violence.

The point about the eternal recurrence is solid, Nietzsche spent a lot of his energy trying to transform this most horrible idea into something we can receive with joy, but he only succeeded partially, by hypothesizing the *Übermensch*. Other than that, the points brought up about Christianity and the Dionysian could be seen as misleading; Girard fails to acknowledge the interplay between the Dionysian and Apollonian, which is a theme in Nietzsche’s work and is also not brought up in this book. It is possible to equate the Apollonian with Christianity, but Nietzsche’s emphasis on the Dionysian is more a reaction to its absence in Christianity than an unconditional commitment to its supreme rule. By identifying the Dionysian lynch with a memetic contagion, but not Christianity, the author overlooks the fact that despite its best intentions and desires, it never succeeds in defeating it; the same violence of

the Dionysian is present in Christianity and Christian civilisation and erupts in the most subtly cruel forms, as we can see throughout history. The mimetic quality of the Dionysian is to identify not only with the pleasure of the persecutor but also with that of the martyr, for only through this can the eternal return be joyful, whereas Christianity is its opposite.

When it comes to Nietzsche’s understanding of authenticity, it is a question of freedom not *from* what, but *for* what; the *Übermensch* is foremost a master of themselves, of their life, thoughts, beliefs, and actions. One cannot imitate the desire to be oneself from another, and one cannot become authentic for another. No one else can know what it means to be in my own position, to make the choices I face, and no one can formulate and understand them. In this way, each of us is individual and irreducible in our ultimate existence, because the relationship with self is structurally different from the relationship with another. The author’s rejection of authenticity here seems to take on a Freudian aspect, for by rejecting the inherent uniqueness of each individual’s existence and experience, the individual is reduced to a flesh automaton animated by desires, whose self is inchoate until it is expressed through violence. When it comes to Heidegger’s critique of Platonism, the concept of becoming still denotes the act by which a thing becomes “real” and not “presence” in the original Greek sense of appearance, disclosure and concealment, as Heidegger understood it. Moreover, becoming would denote a kind of synthesis of Being, and nothing, i.e. the process of the disappearance of “something into nothing” and the creation of “nothing into something”, which in a broader sense would certainly become “real” again. Furthermore, Nietzsche, in equating Being with the will to power, makes the same mistake as Plato in equating it with *idea*; what “is” is presented as it is in a certain way, as a being, and not Being.

One of the overarching ideas in this book, which is also the main theme of the concluding chapter titled “A Girardian Critique of Postmodernity” (pp. 89–106), is the author’s attempt to link postmodern thinking to Marxism, even though the author himself uses Jean-François Lyotard’s definition of postmodernism as “a mistrust of metanarratives” and as “a critique of truth” (which, somehow, excludes the Hegelian idea of Absolute knowledge and Marxist dialectical materialism as truth). Girard’s philosophy is presented here as a Christian “obstacle” to “atheistic” postmodernism. The author ends the book with an analysis of what he calls “the obsession with victims” in contemporary American culture, which has lost direction and the ability to

distinguish between victim and executioner (both in the sense that the apparent victims are those who use violence and that the violent person is seen as the victim) through the forgetting of Christian ethics. “They don’t realise that we’re bringing them the plague” - said Sigmund Freud to Carl Gustav Jung on the latter’s first visit to the United States. Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, after their ideas crossed the Atlantic, became some of the most misunderstood philosophers of our time. They spent most of their creative lives disagreeing with each other and became fused into a contradictory mess that lost any philosophical basis and connection to French and German philosophy after the 1960s. While European philosophers were quickly to wash away the stains of totalitarianism, was it after the concentration camps in the 1940s or the gulags of the 1960s, the United States, a completely separate cultural and intellectual entity, have yet to overcome their flirtation with 20th-century political ideologies. The author succeeds in pinpointing the contradictions, and their origins, in the contemporary American political climate, but makes the mistake of identifying the American political climate with post-modern philosophy. The conclusion comes with great irony if we were to recall Martin Heidegger’s or Jean Baudrillard’s writings on America and its culture. It would be fitting to conclude, in contrast to Sigmund Freud, with a quote from Friedrich Nietzsche:

“... the distinctive vice of the new world – is already beginning to ferociously infect old Europe and is spreading a lack of spirituality like a blanket.” (Friedrich Nietzsche, Walter Kaufmann (ed.), *The Gay Science. With Prelude in Rhymes and Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, Vintage Books, New York 1974, p. 259, §329)

Toma Gruica

Ivana Buljan

On Maintaining Power

The Theory of Rulership in Chapters 18–22 of the *Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals*

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In today’s world, it is probably not necessary (or at least it should not be) to convince anyone that a serious study of the thought of all great civilisations isn’t only necessary but simply indispensable. Pre-modern Chinese thought, which is complex and topically multi-layered, has been studied in the West for centuries, but while some of its areas have been explored and described many times over, there are still whole areas that are either untouched or only superficially known. One of these Chinese philosophers less explored in the West is Dong Zhongshu (c. 195 to 115 BC), and what makes this relative lack of interest in his work all the more curious is that he’s one of the thinkers portrayed by his own tradition as true giants, one of those who in a very real way helped to shape not only the thought but also the political practice of imperial China. Dong Zhongshu deserves a serious in-depth study in western languages and this is just what Ivana Buljan’s book is providing us with. Buljan, who has been publishing extensively on the Chinese philosophy (including Daoist thought, Huang-Lao thought, and Dong Zhongshu himself), presents us with a book which aims at presenting as faithfully as possible the important (and rarely studied) section of the *Luxuriant Dew* which she calls the “Statecraft Chapters”.

The book is firmly grounded in philology, which in turn provides a solid foundation for a detailed philosophical analysis of the political, social and (at least in part) ethical thought expressed in one of the most important texts of the Han period. The structure of the book is very clear and concise and is divided into two main parts: a philological and a philosophical one. The philological part consists of a richly annotated translation of the five “Statecraft chapters” with detailed explanations of vocabulary, technical terminology, relations to other texts, etc. The philosophical commentary (which takes up a larger part of the book) carefully analyses the content of the chapters, showing their roots both in the earlier tradition and in their (supposedly) contemporary context. The content analysis is again carried out with great clarity, beginning each time