

Mimetic Theory, Ecoliteracy and Mindfulness:

Interweaving the work of René Girard, Fritjof Capra and Francisco Varela

1-How Mimetic Theory helps us to understand the socio-ecological crisis

2- To be ecologically literate : Fritjof Capra's ecoliteracy

3-Enacting the mimetic theory and the ecoliteracy throughout mindfulness

Introduction

In these times of crisis, the questions that we ask are : Can the mimetic theory be efficient ? Is it possible to *practice* the mimetic theory¹ ? An answer that the mimetic theory can give to the new and complex issues relies on the possibility of its articulation with Fritjof Capra's ecoliteracy and the Francisco Varela's enaction theory. Why do we put these two authors next to Girard's name ?

Capra's ecoliteracy helps us to build an ecological education based on systemic principles. Girard helps us to deeply understand the anthropological issues of our contemporary period.

The mimetic theory and the ecological principles seem so fundamental and urgent to be transmitted that we have to be endowed with approaches that give us tools to put it in a concrete form. That is to say, approaches which take into account human experience, in order to pass from an authoritarian moral that makes us (rightfully) feel guilt² but that has become insufficient and mimetically counter-productive, to an experience-based *pedagogy*. This pedagogy leads to a natural empathy and feeling of responsibility towards the world throughout the comprehension of the anthropological mechanisms on which social relations rely. The challenges are so huge that our hopes might only rely on education.

What we need may be how to *practice* and *feel* these theories in "our *bodies*" for transmitting and teaching them, not only through discourse but also by embodying this knowledge. What are the main obstacles against turning this theoretical knowledge into a daily practice, throughout our relations to the world ?

Varela's work on enaction is the perfect framework to make it possible. Varela used to remind us that contemporary science shows that the elements of our world are interconnected and devoid of an ultimate ground. But, he says, we only apply that knowledge toward the "objective" or "external" world and almost never to our own "self". As Pierpaolo Antonello and João Cezar de Castro Rocha says with girardian words : "Today we deconstruct everything except our certitude to be autonomous and that the persecutors always are the others"³.

Varela tells us that the key for understanding our "self" is *mindfulness* in the daily life. His proposition fills the gap existing between the global contemporary issues and daily human experience.

My main goal here is to propose an articulation between these three authors whose works can enlighten each other.

¹ This question was asked to René Girard by Maria Stella Barberi in *Celui par qui le scandale arrive*, p.189.

² Guilty in the sense that we are not innocent of the numerous scapegoats on which the foundations of our worlds rely.

³ *Les origines de la culture*, Girard René, p.18.

The contemporary crisis is multidimensional, but, in spite of its multi-faceted features the girardian hypothesis holds that both social and ecological aspects of the crisis are due to the apocalyptic⁴ effects of Christian revelation. What does this mean ? It means that the whole institutional ground which used to rely on the sacrificial mechanism is collapsing under the influence of Christianity. For better and for worse, this mechanism on which any (ethical, moral, political, social) limits used to rely on is denounced as being arbitrary. Science tells us every day that our world is devoid of any firm foundations. We are told that the certainties that we once had can be let down. This situation commonly leads to two alternatives :

-the willingness to re-establish firm foundations (which, according to the mimetic theory, will always be sacrificial)

-the temptation of falling into nihilism. Here I don't even make a difference between the sophisticated nihilism (Nietzsche's) and the contemporary popular one. Both of them lead to alienation and (auto-)destruction.

To avoid these two catastrophic alternatives, we can see two ways :

-the conversion to love, imitating Christ in order to escape from the torments of the mimetic desire and the subsequent rivalries

-mindfulness. But mindfulness of what ? Francisco Varela answered : mindfulness of the absence of an ultimate ground that leads to deepen a feeling of empathy with the world, because no more obstacles will then prevent the connection.

These two ways are, according to me, compatible.

I would like to describe the phenomenology of mindfulness or *epochè*⁵. I will try to deepen that point which has been evoked by René Girard himself in the last chapter of his book *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*.

When I read that, it was for me, a kind of revelation. I was already interested in the practical aspects of *epochè* and I was discovering that Mr Girard himself had talked about it as a liberation in the conclusions of the greatest authors' novels.

For that, I would like to shortly share my own experience with you. Not because it is singular but maybe because some of you have asked the same questions.

When I discovered René Girard's work, about ten years ago, at the end of high school, it was, obviously, a shock. During the next 3 or 4 years, I passed through a weird period. I could see the distance between what I was reading in his books and the reality of my own mimetic tendencies. I was suffering, because I was unable to fill the gap. I was taken into the trap and was oscillating between the poles of pride (of understanding these mechanisms) and guilt complex (for falling into the mimetic traps that I theoretically knew).

Simultaneously, I discovered Francisco Varela's work and was introduced to the practice of mindfulness. I can say today that the practice of mindfulness helped me get through this period.

⁴ In the double meaning of Apocalypse : revelation, development on one hand and final destruction on the other hand. See chapter XI "L'apocalypse dostoïevskienne" in Girard, René, *Mensonge Romantique et vérité romanesque*, Paris, Grasset, 1961.

⁵We will use these terms as synonymous

Mindfulness is an experience of conversion. Practicing mindfulness is to allow your body and your mind to rest, to observe without wanting to reach anything. Desire always leads us to act in order to reach something, to fill the distance between the situation that we are in (and that we don't like) and the situation that we would like it to be.

1-How Mimetic Theory helps us to understand the socio-ecological crisis

Basically a large definition of desire could be :

“Our grasping after an inner ground [which] is the essence of ego-self and is the source of continuous frustration... this grasping after an inner ground is itself a moment in a larger pattern of grasping that includes our clinging to an outer ground in the form of the idea of a pre-given and independent world. In other words, our grasping after a ground, whether inner or outer, is the deep source of frustration and anxiety.”⁶

But, as GB Shaw said : “There are two tragedies in life. One is to not get your heart's desire. The other is to get it”.⁷ That’s why we tend to suffer all life long.

Desire received a more precise and pertinent definition thanks to René Girard.

As the mimetic theory shows, as we are uncertain and partly undetermined beings, we imitate our models, those who seem to know where this existential “ground” lies.

Christ gave us freedom from sacrificial rituals and laws. He freed us as Dostoïevski describes it in Karamazov Brothers within the chapter "The Great Inquisitor". But as we are unable to welcome this message of freedom, we transformed it and only pride remained, romantic pride, which is a romantic lie as René Girard would say.

Pride and its suffering would then come from the fact that we see ourselves as independent from the "outer world" and because we simultaneously are fascinated by the others. In a contemporary universe where the individual has become the basic entity, we experience very violent oscillations, such as :

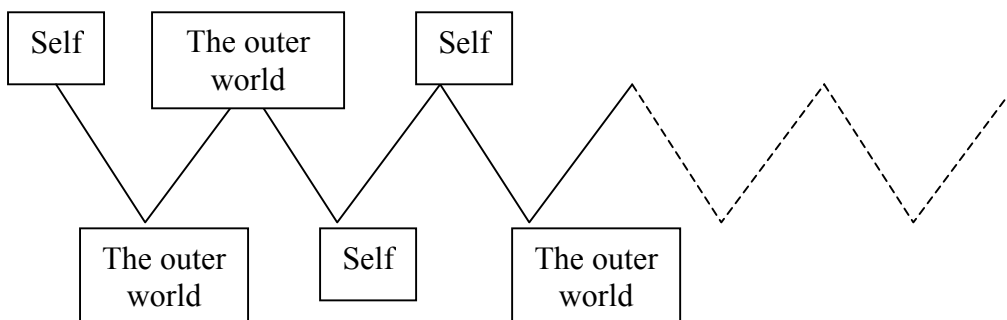


Figure I

These oscillations (and the suffering that comes from it) are only possible when we firmly believe in the rupture between “Self and the Others”.

These oscillations manifest themselves through thoughts such as :

⁶ Varela et al. (1991), p . 143

⁷ Man and Superman (act IV).

1-“I am on top of the world and the others are contemptible”. But as this position does not last very long, it leads to :

2-“the others are always better than me. I am a loser”.

The feeling of being isolated and the simultaneous fascination for the others would come from the fact that we don't see ourselves as being connected, whether we like it or not. I would like to show that this rupture may be responsible for the socio-ecological crisis in our contemporary world.

The mimetic desire, as it is “freed” from religious regulations, develops itself in an unlimited perspective. One could say that it wouldn't be so problematical if :

- everyone could enter in the global economic game and play by the same rules, resulting in many different winners instead of the same ones every time. And if,
- the Earth itself had unlimited natural resources to allow the game to continue forever.

Unfortunately, none of these conditions will ever be satisfied.

Let us now try to characterize the contemporary crisis according to the mimetic theory.

René Girard tells us that the modern ever-increasing equalitarianism does not lead to spontaneous harmony but leads to an ever-strengthening concurrence. This global concurrence generates spiritual suffering that no object can heal⁸. One of the major paradoxes of equalitarianism is that it is necessary and at the same time impossible because it leads to contradictory aspirations: when we are too similar with the others we want to distinguish ourselves from them and when we are too different we want to be similar to them.

That's why, according to this approach, the contemporary socio-ecological crisis has its roots in a spiritual crisis in the sense of our spiritual relation to our models. These models are like demigods, and we are all models (or counter-models) for one another. If we don't accept this cruel observation, we will continue to think that the crisis has technical and scientific causes that the "Progress" will resolve.

The mimetic theory teaches us that the everlasting quest for possessing objects is useless for reaching happiness. Our hopes are never satisfied. Tocqueville said it best :

“ Moreover, it is not always the ability to choose men of merit which democracy lacks, but the *desire* and the *taste*. We must not conceal from ourselves the fact that democratic institutions make the sentiment of envy grow in the human hearts to a very high degree. It is not so much because they give to each the means of equalling the others, but because these means continually fail those who employ them. Democratic institutions awaken and flatter the passion for equality without ever being able to satisfy it completely. This complete equality always eludes the grasp of the people at the moment they believe they have gotten hold of it, and recedes, as Pascal says, in an eternal flight... Everything which at some point surpasses it then appears to it an *obstacle to its desires*, and there is no superiority so legitimate that this sight of it is not an annoyance to its eyes.”⁹

⁸ *Mensonge Romantique et vérité romanesque*, op. cit. p.160.

⁹ *De la démocratie en Amérique*, Alexis de Tocqueville, Second Part, p.31.

As it has been demonstrated by René Girard himself, the logic of desire is the logic of the gambler. Winning does not interest the gambler because to win means that the object becomes accessible. As it is accessible, it loses its value, because its value is only due to the obstacles that prevent its access. The gambler is interested in gambling, which means looking for the insurmountable obstacle. The gambler is sick with his own desire. He is a victim of his metaphysical desire, that is to say that he is fascinated by his mediators or models. The object doesn't have any importance any more. No gain will cure him.

This form of desire is, indeed, an extreme and pathological form of the contemporary desire. But it helps us to understand the torments of our times and also the paradoxical logic of the famous consumption society.

All this to say that the ecological crisis is a human crisis, a spiritual crisis and a crisis of perception.

We want to fill the existential emptiness that we feel within ourselves, with objects (our models' objects), thinking that acquiring any object will allow us to catch the being of our models who seem so autonomous to us in their choices. In doing so, we are transforming our Earth into a sterile desert. That's why we urgently need to be ecologically literate.

2- To be ecologically literate : Fritjof Capra's ecoliteracy

Ecoliteracy is Fritjof Capra's proposal to include and diffuse ecology's principles in education to create communities that are ecologically sustainable. He proposes to broaden our views thanks to an integration of these principles into the organizational core of any institution. Fritjof Capra wants the ecosystems' organizational principles to help inspire human institutions to become sustainable. However, Capra is very aware that ecosystems and social communities are not totally comparable.

His work is one of an amazing synthesis between physics, micro-biology, biology, psychology, ecology, climatology and cognitive sciences. Fritjof Capra's work helps us to reconnect ourselves to the social and ecological systems. It helps us to see ourselves as being part of the web of life in order to see the hidden connections that link us to the world. We are all embedded in very intricate systems and every act that we make has infinite consequences¹⁰. We modify the environment to which we must adapt ourselves.

This point is problematical. For example : We adapt ourselves to the environment and in doing so we modify it. Air conditioning helps us to avoid heat, but the consumption of energy that is necessary for that, worsens the global climatic change when it is done on large scale, mimetically, as it has been pointed out for air-conditioned cars.

Being ecologically literate means to be able to appreciate any object in our vast ecological systems. It means that we are able to broaden our views and to understand that any object that we consume does not magically appear and does not magically disappear either. They are made of elements as old as the universe and any of these objects can become an opportunity for a mindful view.

These views lead to two notions : ecological footprint¹¹ and ecological threshold. How much can every one consume without endangering the world? How sustainable are our choices?

The dramatic question that these notions leads us to ask is : "Can everybody on Earth live like the average North-American or European today?" The answer is clearly : "No !" Because the level of

¹⁰ These consequences are, of course, mimetic and sacrificial from a social and ecological point of view. Being mimetic, they can be as much negative as positive. It depends on the models we imitate.

¹¹ I base this point on Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees's work from Centre for Human Settlements, University of British Columbia, Canada. To calculate one's ecological footprint : www.myfootprint.org.

destruction due to the ever-increasing consumption is catastrophic. Using an eloquent image, we would need three Earths if everyone consumed like this. As Mahatma Gandhi said: “there is enough for everyone’s need, not for everyone’s greed.”

So, as Jean-Pierre Dupuy¹² says, we are taken into a trap. On one hand the Occident has a universal aspiration to see its political and economic model spread. On the other hand, it is ecologically impossible.

It seems that since our contemporary society is devoid of ritual and sacrificial institutions to help contain the rivalry, this leads to a universal unfolding of desire. Jean-Pierre Dupuy and Paul Dumouchel¹³ clearly showed the paradoxical logic of contemporary economics which, at the same time, exacerbates the rivalry, also temporarily regulates it by providing objects abundantly. The result of this logic is the creation of scarcity. This logic is, today, showing its limits, socially and ecologically.

I do believe that, in general, no one wants to deliberately end life on Earth, but the global mimetic rivalry could lead to that extreme point. It is always the same mechanisms. Our fascination with our modern world tends to make us forget that we are compromising the basic conditions of a sustainable human life¹⁴.

Let us see how Fritjof Capra determined six criteria to characterize the ecosystems¹⁵ :



SOLAR ENERGY

Solar energy, transformed into chemical energy by photosynthesis of green plants, drives the ecological cycles



NETWORKS

All members of an ecological community are interconnected in a vast and intricate network of relationships, the web of life. They derive their essential properties and, in fact, their very existence from these relationships.



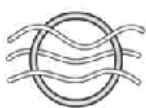
NESTED SYSTEMS

Throughout nature we find multi-leveled structures of systems nesting within systems. Each of these forms an integrated whole within a boundary while at the same time being a part of a larger whole.



CYCLES

The interactions among the members of an ecological community involve the exchange of energy and resources in continual cycles. The cycles in an ecosystem intersect with larger cycles in the bioregion and in the planetary biosphere.



FLOWS

All organisms are open systems, which means that they need to feed on a continual flow of energy and resources to stay alive. The constant flow of solar energy sustains life and drives all ecological cycles.

¹² *Pour un catastrophisme éclairé*, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, p.30, Paris, le Seuil, 2002.

¹³ *L'enfer des choses: René Girard et la logique de l'économie*, Paul Dumouchel and Jean-Pierre Dupuy, Paris, Seuil, 1979.

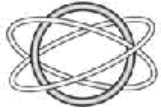
¹⁴ This is what French ecologist Nicolas Hulot calls “the Titanic Syndrome” : “We are dancing and laughing in the darkness of the night, as the passengers of the Titanic did just before the catastrophic collision”.

¹⁵ From www.ecoliteracy.org/pages/principlesofecology.html, see also *The web of Life*, Anchor books, 1996, pp.298-299



DEVELOPMENT

The unfolding of life, manifesting as development and learning at the individual level and as evolution at the species level, involves an interplay of creativity and mutual adaptation in which organisms and environment coevolve.



DYNAMIC BALANCE

All ecological cycles act as feedback loops, so that the ecological community regulates and organizes itself, maintaining a state of dynamic balance characterized by continual fluctuations.

Figure II

According to F. Capra, four main ecological principles - interdependence, cyclical loops, cooperation and partnership - are common to these six criteria and can be of great inspiration for human communities.

2-1-Interdependence :

As Capra describes, it means that all members of an ecological community are interconnected in a vast and intricate network of relationships, the web of life. They derive their essential properties and, in fact, their very existence from their relationships to other things. Interdependence – the mutual dependence of all life processes on one another - is the nature of all ecological relationships.

Understanding interdependence means understanding relationships. It requires the shift of perception from the part to the whole, from objects to relationship, from contents to patterns.

The interesting point here is that we find the same preoccupation in the mimetic theory. The object doesn't determine the rivalry. The mimetic theory helps to focus the attention on the "hidden connections". As Vaclav Havel would say: "Education is the ability to perceive the hidden connections between phenomena."

2-2-Cyclical loops

We are all embedded in cycles. The cyclical nature of ecological processes is a fundamental principle of ecology. The ecosystem's feedback loops are the pathways along which nutrients are continually recycled. Being open systems, all organisms in an ecosystem produce waste, but what is waste for one species is food for another, so that the ecosystem as a whole, remains without waste¹⁶. Communities of organisms have evolved in this way over billions of years continually using and recycling the same molecules of minerals, water and air.

To better illustrate, we will briefly examine the Gaia theory :

The Gaia hypothesis was formulated by climatologist James Lovelock and microbiologist Lynn Margulis at the end of the 1960's. It radically changed the conception we had of the planetary ecology.

"The Gaia hypothesis says that the surface of the Earth which we always considered to be the *environment* of life, is really *part* of life. The blanket of air – the troposphere – should be considered a circulatory system, produced and sustained by life. When scientists tell us that life adapts to an essentially passive environment of chemistry, physics and rocks, they perpetuate a severely distorted view. Life actually makes and forms and changes the environment to which it adapts. Then

¹⁶ Unlike our contemporary societies.

“that environment” feeds back on the life that is changing and acting and growing in it. There are constant cyclical interactions.”¹⁷

This approach teaches us that an ecological cataclysm would not be deadly for the process of *life*. But in order to survive, the Gaia goddess may need an extraordinary scapegoat. Perhaps humanity itself !

Desire makes us break from these cyclical loops. As we know from the mimetic theory, the ecological equilibrium of traditional societies was possible thanks to the regulation of the rivalry at the expense of sacrificial rituals. Today, one of the major double-binds, or dilemmas, we are faced with is that we have to regulate our rivalry without scapegoats and also without *transferring any more* our global violence towards nature, the silent victim.

From that point of view, recycling waste is a way of avoiding the “sacrifice” of raw materials stemming from rainforests or indigenous lands. In other words, it is a way to avoid a collective suicide¹⁸.

2-3- Cooperation and Partnership :

The cyclical exchanges of energy and resources in an ecosystem are sustained by pervasive cooperation. Capra tells us that partnership – the tendency to associate, establish links, live inside one another and cooperate – is one of the hallmarks of nature.

Partnership and network management have a strong ideological connotation. This ideology is to be willing to transform likely rivals into allies. It tends to neutralize the conflicting dynamics, making conflict unthinkable. It tends to negate it.

Etymology teaches us that partnership is a recent term, but “partner” was already evoked by Beaumarchais (1784). Partner is an alteration of *parcener*, stemming from the old French *parçonner*, which means associate, participant, companion, accomplice. But its Latin roots stem from *partitio*, *partitionis* (sharing, division) and from the verb *partio* (to divide, to share out, to distribute). The partnership contains in itself the association and also the division, the gathering and the separation. The single term of partner hides the fact that it is often a *confronting cooperation*. Partnership is essentially paradoxical¹⁹.

These points appeal a comment. It is clear that we should add to Capra’s list, these principles: rivalry, competition and concurrence, but this wouldn’t be ecologically correct !

The ecological thought is a network thought, i.e an anti-hierarchical thought. Hierarchy is commonly synonymous with unfair violence (and rightfully so) but we often forget, and I’m afraid that this be the case with ecological thought as well, that equality does not spontaneously lead to harmony, as the mimetic theory abundantly demonstrates.

To be clear. Of course, we are not including these points to promote them. There is no need to promote them. They promote themselves. As a reaction to a simplification of the so-called Darwinian “struggle for life”, certain ecological thinkers seem to diminish or eliminate the rivalry as a key component of evolution.

¹⁷ Margulis, Lynn “*Gaia : the living Earth*” dialogue with Fritjof Capra, The Elmwood Newsletter, Berkeley, California, vol. 5, n°2, 1989.

¹⁸ For further information about the implementation of these principles, see Pierre Rabhi’s work in France: <http://terrehumanisme.free.fr/> and in California, www.ecoliteracy.org

¹⁹ This has been noticed by Bertrand Bergier, professor at the Catholic University, Angers, France.

But between an over-consideration of the role of struggle in evolution and a naïve network thinking that totally eliminates the role of rivalry, there is a third path that we would like to propose.

Ecological thought is essentially pacifist but it has to face the cruel reality that evolution and ecosystemic relationships are partly (but not entirely) made with rivalry, conflict and violence as the mimetic theory in its evolutionary dimension allows us to understand.

Within any cooperation and partnership there can be conflict, rivalry and eventually violence. Groups or individuals that don't work together, that are physically and geographically distant (in other words that belong to different ecosystems or in girardian words that are in an external mediation) cannot enter in conflict. The rivals agree at least with one thing : to cooperate in their rivalry, as René Girard would say ²⁰.

Fortunately we (as human beings, endowed with this priceless faculty of self-awareness) can convert this tendency of violence thanks to our faith and/or a mindful practice.

What this means is that these principles (mimetic theory and ecological principles) are intellectually understandable but, in the daily life, we may tend to *forget* them. And at that precise moment, mimetic habits get stronger and stronger (along with their social and ecological consequences).

Let us now examine the pragmatic difficulties in implementing (or preventing) these theoretical principles.

3-Enacting the mimetic theory and ecoliteracy throughout epochè : the dynamics of conversion

The Sanskrit word for mindfulness is *smriti* that means “to remember”. In Buddhism²¹, it takes the sense of “remembering our true nature” which is in fact the exact opposite of ignorance and forgetfulness.

As we almost always live in a state of forgetfulness (with our thoughts occupied by past worries and future plans- which is the very nature of desire in the wide sense of an ever-unsatisfied mind), it might be crucial to deepen the comprehension of epochè.

We have chosen to explore the dynamics of epochè as a way of taking into account, in our daily life, the mimetic and ecological systems in which we are embedded. This choice can be seen as relativist²². I would rather think that it is a wish to find a transcultural practice that can be efficient for anyone²³ just as the mimesis is a transcultural mechanism that operates in any social groups in the world.

Epochè comes from the Greek *epokhè* that means suspension. Let us now examine the dynamics of becoming aware ²⁴.

²⁰ As Girard says, quoting Shakespeare : “Who shall tell the concord of this discord ?”

²¹ It so happens that it is under the Buddhist tradition that we can find the practice of epochè under its more achieved form. But it could be under another one. We could have mentioned hesychasm, for example, in the orthodox tradition.

²² The approach here is not theological but pragmatic and practical.

²³ It indeed appeals to the conscience, which is a universal human feature.

²⁴ This description is based upon *The Gesture of Awareness, An account of its structural dynamics* by Natalie Depraz, College International de Philosophie, Francisco J.Varela CNRS and Pierre Vermersch CNRS, in M.Velmans (Ed.), *Investigating Phenomenal Consciousness*, Benjamin Publishers, Amsterdam, 1999.

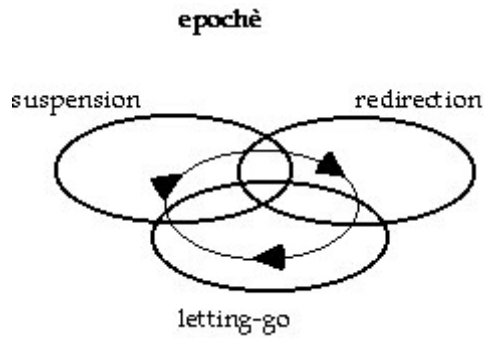


Figure III

Let us describe these three phases :

A. First, a phase of *suspension* of habitual thought and judgement. This is a basic precondition for any possibility of change in the attention which the subject gives to his own experience and which represents a break with a "natural" or non-examined attitude. The suspension is the phase at which we stop acting. This is the practice of stopping...

B. Next, a phase of *redirection* or *conversion* of attention from "the exterior" to "the interior". The attention then focuses on four domains : body, sensations, perceptions and cognitive activity²⁵ :

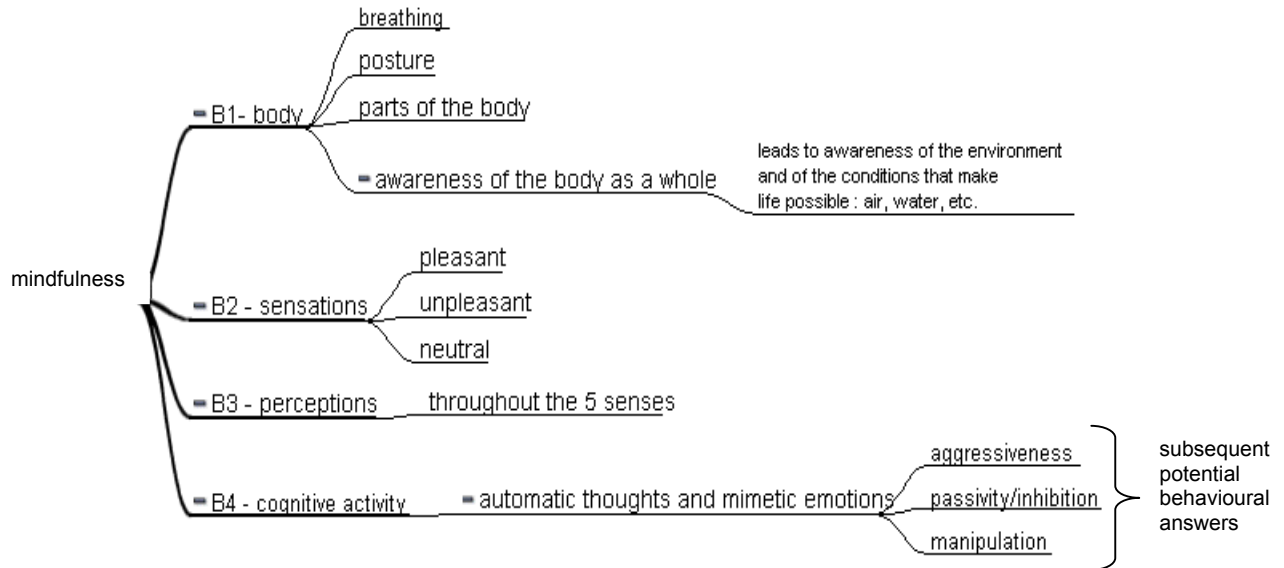


Figure IV

Let us now see what kind of observations this practice can produce :

B1- Mindfulness of the body can lead to such observations as :

“I am aware of the necessity of having clean air for living and I am determined to do my best to protect it.” (the same with water, etc). Once one becomes mindful of being embedded in the web of life, this becomes more and more obvious, because these basic elements appear as being fragile and priceless.

“I am aware of my body. My body carries in itself all our common biological history”. Once this exercise has been done, I feel connected with the “web of life”.²⁶

²⁵This method is inspired of the Satipatthana Sutta (The Great Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness) in the Buddhist tradition.

B2-B3 - We commonly complain about the fact that our rhythms of life go faster and faster. As Joanna Macy wrote²⁷ :

“Speed and haste [...] are inherently violent. The violence they inflict on our environment is not only because of our appetite for time-saving devices and materials, but also because they put us out of sync with the ecosystem. The natural systems that sustain us move at slower rhythms than we do. The feedback loop is longer, takes more time than our interactions with our machines.[...]. No matter how we writhe and turn to free ourselves from time, we twist ourselves more tightly in it. We become enslaved by what we would master, devoured by what we would consume, and increasingly view it - yes, view time itself - as the enemy”.

Time as the scapegoat of our frenetic rhythms of life.

But the contradictions of desire are subtle. We complain about the lack of time but we may be afraid to slow down. It would mean confronting the existential issues that we often prefer to elude. However, if one wants to slow down, an efficient way to taste the present moment is to be aware of our sensations and perceptions.

B4-In relation with the fourth domain (cognitive activity), for example :

“I am aware of being envious (full of anger, of fear, etc.) of that person. That’s ok, I accept that fact”. What is interesting is that a feeling (i.e. envy) strengthens itself while it remains unknown. Once we become aware of the contingency of that feeling, its intensity becomes weaker and weaker. Or another example :

“Okay, once again I fell into a mimetic / relational trap and as usual I used the same old ways : aggressiveness, inhibition, manipulation, etc. And as usual, negative emotions were generated (anger, anger of being angry, fear, complex guilt, etc., and, on the contrary, pride, arrogance, self-satisfaction, and so on...)”²⁸.

Once these four domains have been identified, we then can go into the third phase²⁹.

C- The third phase of epochè is *letting-go* which is a moment of receptivity towards the experience, it is to say that we do not intervene but we just *observe* without being attached to nor rejecting what we feel, what we perceive or, what we think. For example :

“Letting go : I welcome my own preconceptions, without being fascinated or attached to them nor rejecting them.” We can notice a typical feature of desire in the cognitive activity : the tendency to grasp and the tendency to reject.

Practicing “*letting-go*” can help to solve our inner contradictions. We want the world to be in peace, we want security, we want to have compassion for others, meanwhile there is still war within ourselves. Maybe we should start having compassion for ourselves. Compassion doesn’t mean self-satisfaction, but it means to accept our imperfections in order to better transform them. We then understand that we cannot positively change a bad habit that we do not first accept.

²⁶ These experiences can lead to an extended notion of the self. As Thich Nhat Hanh says : “Some people say that Buddhist practice is to dissolve the self. They do not understand that there is no self to be dissolved. There is only the notion of self to be transcended.”

²⁷ Macy, Joanna, *World as lover, World as self*, Parallax Press, 1991, pp.211-212.

²⁸ Obviously, it is possible to mark these emotions and their intensity on the figure I.

²⁹ The chronology here is complex. These three phases can be simultaneous.

Once one has identified the mimetic emotions that one feels, one can express oneself (or interact with other people) without falling into the same destructive relational traps : aggressiveness, inhibition and manipulation (see above)³⁰.

But as F. Varela tells us³¹, epochè is not spontaneous and can be triggered through several ways :

-an external or existential event may trigger the suspending attitude. For example, confronting the death of others, or aesthetic surprise.

-the mediation of others can also be decisive. For example, a direct injunction to accomplish the act of epochè as it is the case when someone plays the role of a model (as in the typical relationship between a master of meditation and his student).

-exercises initiated by the individual, presupposing a self-imposed discipline including long phases of training and learning until the newly acquired habits are stabilized.

But according to Varela, many obstacles prevent epochè to arise :

-The first one is massive : the necessity of turning away from the habitual form of cognitive activity, usually oriented towards the “external” world. This requires a constant effort to get out of the hypnotic effect that the daily experience has on us.

-But there are other equally pressing obstacles to this redirection of attention. Turning attention towards the interior is for some synonymous with turning it towards *their* intimacy, at the risk of becoming conscious of things which are in the domain of the peripheral, or even the repressed. So rejection is based on the refusal of full contact with one's own intimacy.

-This period which is at the same time empty and subjectively long can be the major obstacle to discovery and to the spontaneous putting into of action our awareness. It is difficult not to immediately succumb to the fear or worry that can be induced by the stance of receptive attention.

To know, Varela and Maturana³² say, is essentially an act of distinguishing a form from a background. In other words, it is an act of *discrimination*. But one tends to conceive the form as being *independent* from the background, for the connections are hidden. Mindfulness can help to cease being mistaken by the form.

Practicing mindfulness or epochè has no magical effects. But this moment is peaceful. We authorize our body and our mind to rest. We authorize them to stop struggling.

³⁰ These are complementary topics, but we could then use the tools given by the strategies of assertiveness. It would deserve a specific paper to deal with the articulation between mimesis and assertiveness. However we can say that aggressiveness corresponds in Figure I to the first phase when “Self” is up and inhibition when “Self” is down. Assertiveness then is the ability to get out of these infernal oscillations.

³¹ *The Gesture of awareness*, op. cit.

³² Varela and Maturana. *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding*, Shambhala Press, Boston, 1987

Conclusion

We based this paper on the girardian hypothesis which holds that the global crisis and its two main manifestations (increase of environmental issues on one hand and social, ethical and political issues on the other) are directly linked to what René Girard demonstrated : the paradoxical effects of Christian revelation.

Thanks to Varela's work on epochè, we have explored a possible transcultural practice that would help us embody the core elements of the mimetic theory and the Capra's ecoliteracy. A daily practice of mindfulness or epochè helps us to perceive ourselves as being like a knot of relations as Gregory Bateson would say. We are knots of relations, because we are immersed in the web of life, biologically, socially, cognitively and mimetically speaking. As Thich Nhat Hanh teaches us, we inter-are.

Epochè, enlightened by mimetic theory and ecoliteracy can, indeed, help us to be more present to and more aware of the natural systems in which we are embedded, as well as of the mimetic systems that we produce and that produce us. It allows us to put an end to our dualistic tendency to be the victim and at the same time the judge of ourselves. It enables us, at last, to transform the culpability (that always leads to aggressiveness, inhibition, manipulation or denial of ourselves or of others) into active responsibility, which is a *via media*.

Together, we have "travelled" from very global topics to very local action. Isn't it the goal of a sustainable development which invites us to "think globally and act locally"? We could then add : "live mindfully, live happily" and paraphrasing St Augustin, I would also say: "Be mindful, and do whatever you want".

I have some doubts about the possibility and the efficiency of annihilating desire. I think that it would be more interesting and more successful (in order to prevent suffering for ourselves, for others and the environment) to be mindful of *when* and *how* we desire in order to accompany and to understand the dynamics of desire.

We may say that all these methods are one more strategy, one more attempt to escape from the cruel and naked truth of our mimetic and persecuting tendencies... We may also say that to prevent or to diminish our tendency to persecute, we need to deal with our mimetic reactions. The practice of mindfulness can help with this.

The articulation of these three approaches which deal with such important topics won't change the world, but can help to positively change relations in worlds that are interconnected to one another.

As you may have seen, my interest here is more pragmatic than merely theoretical.

I would like to conclude on an epistemological point :

One could say that the issue of individual conversion is not very sociological ! In fact, as a sociologist, I agree with René Girard: it is a big question posed to sociology ! What is the purpose, the usefulness and the pertinence of sociology if it doesn't take into account these questions ?

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