
MEDITATIONS

THE UNDERGRADUATE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

SPRING 2026

ISSUE 13



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DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

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THE UNDERGRADUATE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY AT
UCLA

ISSUE 13, SPRING 2026

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Editor's Letter

Dear Reader,

Thank you for tuning in to another year of the *Meditations*. Next year we will have our own radio show, and you will be able to tune in more than metaphorically. I want to thank all of our editors, all of our authors, and every member of the working class whose labor makes our labor possible (the first two sets are exclusive of one another, but not with the third). I am honored to have worked with you all, however proximate our co-working was.

Without further ado, it is my pleasure to introduce the thirteenth edition of *Meditations*.

Best,
LOGAN CARY
Editor-in-Chief

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DYING NOW AND LATER: THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF ANTICIPATORY GRIEF¹

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Epicurus contends that “death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are no longer.”² For Epicurus, our inordinate fear of death, and our commitment to the project of escaping it at all costs is both foolish and vestigial. To tremble, as we do, at something the badness of which we will never bear the brunt is an irrational expenditure of our emotional resources. Nevertheless, death’s affliction is not contained to the one who dies. As such, a discussion of its badness concomitantly requires an engagement with the phenomenology of grief, which I believe to be the version of death that we can experience. Rupert Read, in his paper “*Can There Be a Logic to Grief? Why Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty Say ‘Yes,’*” captures the distinct phenomenology of grief, revealing why it cannot be understood as a typical emotion, but as a phenomenon demanding its own conceptual framework. Read contends that the death of someone close instantiates a rupture in the very fabric of our lifeworld.³ Accordingly, grief is the process of rebuilding our lifeworld in its wake, a process that is predicated on paradox, and one for which

1. I am indebted to Logan Cary and Jack Stebbins for their guidance in the editing process, as well as all the staff of the UCLA Meditations Journal for the privilege of a publication. Additionally, I want to thank the members of UCLA’s Philosophy Club for their questions and feedback following a presentation of an earlier iteration of this paper, as well as Sare Ghorbani Khaledi for her notes on a previous draft.

2. Epicurus. *Letter to Menoeceus*. Translated by Robert Drew Hicks, The Internet Classics Archive, MIT, classics.mit.edu/Epicurus/menoec.html. Accessed March 24, 2025

3. The term “rupture” shows up only one time in Read’s paper in footnote 30, in reference to something that our internal relations with others can undergo. Rupert Read, “Can There Be a Logic of Grief? Why Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty Say ‘Yes,’” in *Wittgenstein and Phenomenology*, ed. Oskari Kuusela, Mihai Ometita, Timur Uçan (New York: Routledge, 2018), 189.

objective thought is explanatorily fruitless. My writing of this paper is motivated by the question of whether Read's conception of grief—as a process of lifeworld reconstruction—can be extended to anticipatory grief, which precedes, rather than follows, death. Read argues that the death of a loved one amounts to a rupture in our lifeworld, to which grief is the response. As such, it appears that anticipatory grief lacks a crucial component of what I will refer to as “normal” grief. At the core of Read's position is his understanding of grief as a response to a rupture, which, if taken to be instantiated solely by an individual's death, excludes anticipatory grief from the category of normal grief.⁴

In part I, I will fill out Read's view of grief as an a priori and paradoxical process, which he examines through an instance of his own grief over his close friend Matt, who tragically lost his life in a shipwreck. Read limits the nature of his inquiry to grief that is brought on by a sudden, unexpected loss, and addresses the various intellectual tensions that a griever may contend with— not as irrationalities, but as integral components of the logic of grief. Grief gives rise to various paradoxes: a griever may have a desire for companionship and empathy, while simultaneously wishing for their experience to remain beyond the understanding of others. They may find themselves both harboring the belief that a loved one has passed, while resisting the acknowledgement of a reality in which this loss has occurred.⁵ These are all normal components of a process that Read describes as the reconfiguration of our lifeworld following a rupture.

In Part II, I will turn to a contrasting framework of grief that Martha Nussbaum offers in her book, “Emotions as Judgements of Value and Importance.” My intention is not to evaluate Nussbaum through a Radian framework, but to highlight the contrast between a phenomenological approach and a cognitive approach to grief, and show why the former, as a first person account, is more explanatorily fruitful for capturing the experience of a griever in the instance of normal grief; in

4. I will henceforth employ the term “normal grief” to refer to non-anticipatory grief.

5. Read, “Can there be a Logic of Grief,” 180.

this sense, I am defending the use of Radian phenomenology. In so doing, I hope to illuminate the demands of an account of anticipatory grief, as well as mine for resources in service of its further articulation. If it turns out that normal grief is qualitatively different from anticipatory grief—perhaps being cotenable with objective thought—then Nussbaum’s account is better equipped for explaining the latter.

In part III, I shift gears to a discussion of anticipatory grief, offering a potential definition and contending with a possible challenge to my attempt to reconcile it within Read’s framework: if anticipatory grief amounts to nothing more than the intellectual recognition of impending death, then it lacks the unique phenomenology of normal grief. In such a case, it will be better served by a Nussbaumian approach, and understood as an emotion arising from the knowledge that a person of value in one’s life will die. Though the existence of a phenomenological disparity may reasonably preclude Read’s view from fruitfully accounting for anticipatory grief, in Part IV I argue that Read’s discussion of lifeworlds provides a conceptual basis for broadening our understanding of a rupture. An examination of my understanding of my own lifeworld grounds this discussion and provides the scaffolding for understanding anticipatory grief as arising from its own particular kind of rupture. Finally, in Part V I will give an account of the paradoxes inherent in anticipatory grief.

1 Grief as a Process of Lifeworld Reconstruction

Read introduces the notion of a *lifeworld* to refer to “one’s lived world,”⁶ the fabric of which is co-constituted by our relationships with others. Our lives are not individual events that overlap with one another, but made intelligible through “our collective wholeness,”⁷ which shapes our agency—how we interact with the world and one another. The loss of a loved one does not merely translate into the absence of a being in our

6. Read, “Can there be a Logic of Grief,” 177.

7. *Ibid.*

lives, it distorts our world as we know it. Read notes that “grief springs from the depth of our interconnectedness”⁸ and thus cannot be explained as a heightened form of deep sadness. It is not simply a response to loss, but a transformation of our world— “a change not in figure but in ground.”⁹ The death of a loved one is unlike any other loss we may endure. It mutilates, deforms, and disables the griever (Read 183), ripping through our world, and leaving in its wake a gaping hole that cannot be sidestepped or evaded. Grief resists intellectualization, for there is no formula for constructing a new way of inhabiting one’s own world. As such, Read takes grief to be a process that is a priori to our nature as living beings; importantly, adopting Merleau-Ponty’s conception of a prioriticity, not as something that transcends our lived experience, as in the Kantian sense, but as something that is “fundamentally contingent” on it.¹⁰ While Kant maintains that our knowledge of ourselves as sensibly affected beings arises *a posteriori*, through experience, Merleau-Ponty argues that our experience of the world is made possible by virtue of the type of beings we are.

With this understanding in mind, Read contends that our having a world depends on the existence of other beings in it. Because we are inherently *mortal* beings, it follows that the people in our lives (who are constitutive parts of *our world as we know it*) will inevitably cease to exist. In this sense death is a priori— not in the sense of being known without reference to experience, but as an existential certainty that is fundamental to our being. As such, grieving “is part of what it is for human beings to be in the world. . . [for] we are the kinds of beings who have at least sometimes to grieve.”¹¹ These considerations undergird Read’s account of grief as a process with a distinct phenomenology.

Grief’s unique phenomenological structure is typified by paradox: The transition towards accepting a loss unfolds partly by way of denial. Denial is not an outright rejection of someone’s death, but a motivated

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Read, “Can there be a Logic of Grief,” 187.

11. Read, “Can there be a Logic of Grief,” fn 3.

refusal to accept the radically different world that they are left with. A griever may find themselves both harboring the belief that a loved one has passed, and actively resisting a reality in which this loss has occurred (Read 180). Read recounts his grief over his friend Matt, and describes that in the time following Matt's death, he found himself holding two contradictory beliefs: Despite having the mechanical knowledge that Matt was irrevocably gone from this world, Read's beliefs remained beholden to a world in which he was alive. He continued to engage with the idea of his friend as though he were still an active element of his practical reality—an existing and expectant element of the world as he experiences it. Matt's smile remained a part of this world, as did Read's belief of their shared project as something they would still complete together.¹² In this sense, acceptance in grief is not merely a coming-to-terms with an intellectual recognition, but a forced assimilation into a new terrain. Read writes:

The process, over time, toward 'acceptance' in more than a thinly asserted cognitive fashion seemingly-ineluctably involves things like the assertion of apparent absurdities. What 'denial' really means is the profound difficulty of marrying one's beliefs with the facts even as one assents to them.¹³

We cannot make sense of loss without the emergence of these absurdities. The process toward acceptance demands that we rebuild our world anew, in service of a reality marked by the absence of our loved one. Until that happens, we remain epistemically attached to the only world that has ever been available to us—namely, a world where this loss never occurred, for "it is not believable that one has lost the person; the world would have to be radically different, in order for one to have done so."¹⁴ This radically different world is not yet our world, and grief is the process by which we are assimilated into it.

12. Read, "Can there be a Logic of Grief," 181.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Read, "Can there be a Logic of Grief," 181.

2 Emotions as Evaluative Judgments

The distinct pull of the Radian view is best illuminated through its contrast with alternative accounts of grief. Thus far, I've noted the potential explanatory power that his account has for grappling with anticipatory grief; while Read offers a first-person phenomenological account, wherein one's experience of the world as such is typified by the onset of grief, Martha Nussbaum offers a third-person cognitivist understanding of grief as a particular kind of judgement. Unlike Read, for whom grief is "undoubtedly not contentable with objective thought,"¹⁵ Nussbaum considers grief an emotion—a neo-stoic evaluative judgment about an object that an agent values eudaimonistically.¹⁶ She describes having learned, while abroad, that her mother was in critical condition back in the United States, and grounds her discussion of grief in an explication of the emotional upheaval she underwent, both on the plane ride back home, and upon finding that she did not make it to the hospital in time. Nussbaum contends that inherent to the nature of an emotion is "[its] aboutness, [its] intentionality, [its] basis in beliefs, [its] connection with evaluation."¹⁷ Her grief was the evaluative judgment that a person she loved deeply was permanently lost; the proposition that "Betty Craven is dead,"¹⁸ derived its potency from her mother having been an intentional object of tremendous value.

I believe that conceiving of grief as an emotion misses something crucial about its phenomenology. Emotions in the Nussbaumian sense are judgments of states of affairs as they relate to us, grounded in our normative assessment of significance, and her presupposition that emotions have a predictable temporal structure is one way in which this problem shows up. My elation may be instantiated by my attainment of something that I recognize as pleasing *in the moment*, just as my sadness,

15. Read, "Can there be a Logic of Grief," 177.

16. Martha C. Nussbaum, "Emotions as Judgments of Value," *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, 19–88, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pg 31.

17. Nussbaum, "Emotions as Judgements of Value," 33.

18. Nussbaum, "Emotions as Judgements of Value," 39.

anger, or frustration is a product of encountering a situation that I perceive as bad for me *at the time*. Emotional upheaval is followed by the eventual restoration of equilibrium as I come to accept the situation for what it is. Yet, if grief is a process that has denial as a constitutive element, then Nussbaum's framework, which requires that one assents to a loved one's passing, fails to capture the processual development of grief.

The fundamental distinction between Nussbaum and Read's views is subtle but crucial in order to meaningfully justify my privileging of the latter. The specific object of an emotion is imbued with a particular kind of value—namely, eudaimonistic value—which underscores the agent's flourishing.¹⁹ The emotion “[embodies] the person's own commitment to the object as a part of her scheme of ends.”²⁰ My life is made my life in virtue of the individuals that are constitutive of my telos, or highest good. To value something (or someone) eudaimonistically is to value it as something that is fundamental to the project of my life and inextricable from my very notion of goodness. In this way:

The notion of loss that is central to grief itself has this double aspect: it alludes to the value of the person who has left or died, but it alludes as well to that person's relation to the perspective of the mourner.²¹

Thus, the divergence from Read's position is not immediately perceptible. Neither view the people in one's life as contingencies, but rather constitutive of the kind of life one leads. The subtle and crucial distinction is that for Read, people are not just constitutive of meaning, but are the very preconditions for the existence of a world in which one can pursue a telos. On his account, a loved one's death requires a fundamental existential reconstruction, whereas Nussbaum's account frames the issue as one of object. While emotions are normative evaluations whose instantiation and resolution are contingent on an intact world, grief is a rupture in its very foundation; it necessarily assumes an extended

19. Nussbaum, “Emotions as Judgements of Value,” 30-31

20. Nussbaum, “Emotions as Judgements of Value,” 33

21. *Ibid.*

temporal form, and ends in our adoption of a new practical reality.

3 A Proposed Account of Anticipatory Grief

In laying out the Radian framework, I have hopefully demonstrated its theoretical virtues and shown why grief requires an analytical system distinct from that of emotions. I will now turn to discussing whether Read's account is capable of accommodating anticipatory grief; grief that precedes death. If grief, on Read's view, is the process of reconstructing our lifeworld following a rupture, my attempt to reconcile anticipatory grief within his framework may be met with difficulty: anticipatory grief does not clearly have a rupture. My intention in the following part of the paper is to determine whether anticipatory grief involves a lifeworld rupture or is simply an intellectual recognition of impending death.

Put simply, anticipatory grief is grief for someone who has not yet died. Read understands grief as a process of coming to terms with a reality that accommodates the permanent absence of a constituent part of my lifeworld. I can thus expect him to define anticipatory grief in the same vein, as *the process of coming to terms with the fact that one will have to come to terms with this reality in the future*. Anticipatory grief arises when one learns of the impending death of a loved one, and its impetus may be something like a terminal diagnosis. When my grandfather received his cancer diagnosis, we were told that he had a year to live. My aunt was given roughly 3 years. In both cases, a timestamp placed on the lives of two people I loved dearly marked the instantiation of my anticipatory grief.

I am sensitive to the fact that there is no uniform way to capture the phenomenology of anticipatory grief, and will center my discussion on my experience following my aunt's diagnosis in particular. ALS marks a fruitful investigatory space for understanding and presenting the paradoxes inherent to anticipatory grief, and has shaped my understanding of it. I am open to other terminal diagnoses having different paradoxes, or not even fitting into my proposed account. I am

hopeful that by investigating and expanding the notion of rupture, my method will be fruitful for anyone trying to navigate other cases of anticipatory grief.

If anticipatory grief is to be understood as the expectation of a rupture, what, other than a timestamp, distinguishes it from a general awareness of our own mortality, the essence of which is made certain by the simple truth that *death doesn't discriminate*.²² People die every day— young, old, sick, healthy. We tell a friend embarking on a trip to “have a safe flight,” to “get home safe”, doing so precisely because we know that there’s a chance that they don’t. We know that dying will never cease to be a property of human life and that it is merely a question of *when* rather than *if*. And if this acknowledgment of our life world’s fragility imposes on us an inordinate degree of distress, it may not be entirely implausible to suggest that this phenomenon may constitute anticipatory grief. I *do* anticipate my boyfriend’s death every time he leaves for work, because I know that my fear of him being involved in a fatal collision is far from inconceivable. I am keenly aware that I may never again see my parents every time I leave their house, or hear my sister’s voice the moment we hang up the phone. In this way, acknowledging that my life— and my loved ones lives— can end at any moment is evocative of how I felt knowing that my aunt was going to die.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that by itself, the general knowledge that our loved ones will die is not itself a marker of anticipatory grief, but a simple fact of our mortality. The dread of a rupture happening simply because we know that it can is more akin to what I take to be a form of existential anxiety. Grief requires certainty in one’s knowledge that they have suffered a loss; if anticipatory grief is an extension of grief, a belief of impending loss must be justified by reference to experience, rather than presupposed abstractly.²³ After all, the potency of a terminal diagnosis inheres in its nature as an

22. Lin-Manuel Miranda, “Wait for It,” *Hamilton: An American Musical* (Original Broadway Cast Recording), performed by Leslie Odom Jr. and Original Broadway Cast of *Hamilton*, Atlantic Records, 2015.

23. A terminal diagnosis is one, but perhaps not the only instantiation of anticipatory grief. I am open to there being other events that suffice as its impetus.

unambiguous, irreversible, and definitive. An abstract belief that Person A may die if they keep smoking becomes a justified true belief only when they get diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. The former does not produce a shift in how we relate to the person—viewing them as endangered—whereas the latter necessarily does. Knowing that one will die is importantly different from knowing when and how one’s life will end. Our lifeworlds are not changed by the possibility of death, but only when we have a basis for believing that death has, or will occur.

This gives rise to the central challenge for accommodating anticipatory grief within Read’s schema; do we have a sufficient basis for contending that anticipatory grief involves a change in one’s lifeworld at all? To recount, Read maintains that normal grief is instantiated when we come to learn of a loved one’s death, which fundamentally distorts our lifeworld; It is the process of adapting to a new reality through its reconstruction, and is therefore marked by an experience of paradox. Yet, if we take anticipatory grief to be the mere anticipation of a rupture, then it occurs within a stable lifeworld and it could not be considered a form of Radian grief. The phenomenological disparity between anticipatory grief and normal grief may render the former more appropriately understood as an emotion. In this respect, Nussbaum’s account, which does not regard a change in the lifeworld as an essential part of grieving, might provide a more fitting explanatory resource.

Read is resistant to classifying grief as an emotion because emotions are contingent on the world being as it is. However, an understanding of anticipatory grief within the Nussbaumian context of emotions is not necessarily befallen by the same implausibility. Nussbaum contends that emotions are evaluative judgements that are about intentional objects of value. My anticipatory grief, if considered an emotion in this sense, was the evaluative embodiment of my belief that a person very dear to me was going to die. My judgment that “my aunt is terminally ill” consisted of a series of necessary beliefs about my aunt: I loved her dearly; my being her niece (rather than my uncle’s for instance) typified the intentional

position her aunthood occupied in my life;²⁴ and her terminal diagnosis was indeed hopelessly terminal. Anticipatory grief was the evaluation of these beliefs through the lens of their objects centrality to my flourishing.

Anticipatory grief, understood as the anticipation of a rupture, does not straightforwardly fit into Read's framework. In the absence of an apparent rupture, it appears to lack the existential disruption characteristic of normal grief. Without this essential quality—which for Read distinguishes grief from emotions—anticipatory grief may be more coherently understood as an evaluative judgement concerning an impending loss. As of now, it thus remains unclear whether anticipatory grief can be adequately accommodated within Read's phenomenological account, at least without a reconsideration of what constitutes a rupture.

4 Broadening our Understanding of Rupture

If grief is taken to be a response to a loss that has occurred, then there exists a compelling basis for precluding anticipatory grief from this category, and instead seeing it as an emotion born from our expectation of loss. If grief is importantly dependent on the instantiation of a rupture, anticipatory grief appears to lack this precondition. Nevertheless, this claim is not inconsequential to Read's theory. To contend that a rupture necessarily amounts to nothing short of a biological death seems too sterile of a condition, considering the complex fabric of the human experience unearthed by Read in his discussion of lifeworlds.

If we are to assume that anticipatory grief takes place within a lifeworld that hasn't yet been damaged, then my aunt should have remained a stable figure in my life until the very end. ALS made it such that she was no longer someone who *could* die, but rather, someone who *would* die in the near future. I struggled to see her as fully alive before she had even passed. Pre-ALS, Bella was a stable figure of my lifeworld. Post diagnosis, she was a sand sculpture of her former self, crumbling before

24. Nussbaum writes that the essential aboutness of her grief was "her [mother], from among all the many wonderful people and mothers in the world, [because she was her] mother, a part of [her] life." Nussbaum, "Emotions as Judgements of Value," 31.

my eyes and disappearing from this world even as she continued to inhabit it. I've noted that anticipatory grief, when conceived of as an emotion, involves the judgment that a person of value will die, and necessarily entails the belief that the loved one is *currently* alive. Seeing as the affirmation of a judgement is a necessary condition of an emotion, the resistance I felt to the adoption of the belief that my aunt was alive is not resolvable within the Nussbaumian framework.

If our lifeworlds are made possible only through the existence of other people in them, then in grieving a loved one we are also grieving the version of ourselves we can no longer become. We orient ourselves towards some future— not as a detached and contextless state that occurs at a time beyond that in which we currently exist, but as one centered around certain goals, hopes, fears, and expectations. Our worlds are not made up of individual slivers of reality, but are temporally extended, such that our future self is a continuation of the same “self” within the same world. It cannot be divorced from the people upon whom our world's existence is contingent. Prior to the night that a drunk driver rammed into the car that my friend Anya and her partner were in, setting it ablaze, Anya and I shared an indeterminate amount of potential lifelines, all predicated on the versions of ourselves as defined by our shared existence. Her death, in causing a rupture in my world (not to mention the worlds of all who loved her), redefined all of the possibilities that were open to us while she was alive. Thus, the process of rebuilding a world without Anya required me to come to terms with the fact that no version of myself will ever be shaped by the continuation of her presence. This is not to say that in grieving others we are actually just grieving ourselves, but rather that the process of reconstructing a shattered lifeworld forces us to reckon with the annihilation of possible futures. Though a rupture in Read's view is instantiated by an individual's death, setting this as a precondition for grief dilutes the complexity and richness of a lifeworld into something that depends on the biological existences of its constituent parts.

The structure of our lives cannot be severed from the people in

them, and our orientation toward the future suggests that this structure is founded on a set of expectations. Read writes that the process of grief is a non-contingent feature, but intrinsic to us as “beings whose worlds are not the windowless worlds of monads, but who depend on some of those around them, in order to have worlds at all.”²⁵ When I think of myself 10 years from now, my understanding of my future is based on how I currently see myself: as the daughter of my parents, as a sister, as a best friend, and as a student with aspirations. But if in the next ten years, I were to lose my parents, or other loved ones, I’m certain that this same “self” would no longer exist. Denial is a necessary component of grief for this very reason. Acknowledging a loss means “acknowledging the character of the lost one as part of the ground of one’s world, rather than a substitutable element in it.”²⁶

As Read suggests, denial is a “transitional form of acceptance,”²⁷ intrinsic to the process by which we reconstruct our lifeworlds following a loss. The beliefs we hold about the world inform our understanding of ourselves. My future self is a temporal extension of my current self, and so my expectation of it hinges on certain things remaining as they are. The world *would* be radically different if 10 years from now I no longer had my parents. Yet, when I think of my future, my expectations are oriented around a world as it currently exists, and not this radically different one. This is not just because I pray my parents are still alive when I am 33, but because I cannot conceive of myself in a lifeworld in which they are not.

Through a reconceiving of a rupture as something more fundamental than a being’s actual death, anticipatory grief is shown to be phenomenologically consistent with normal Radian grief. A lifeworld is not merely the sum of the biological presence of its inhabitants, but is instead made intelligible through the network of meaning, expectations, and future possibilities that orient our existence. My aunt’s ALS diagnosis destabilized her as a stable entity in my world, thereby

25. Read, “Can there be a Logic of Grief,” 188.

26. Read, “Can there be a Logic of Grief,” 181, 182.

27. Read, “Can there be a Logic of Grief,” 182.

deforming it long before her actual death. The unraveling of a shared future that had aligned my understanding of both her and myself suggests that a rupture need not be a temporally isolated event. Rather, it can unfold over time with the extended erosion of a world formerly shaped by a loved one's continued presence.

5 Expectations of Continuity and the Paradoxes of Anticipatory Grief

Anticipatory grief, as defined in this paper, arises when an individual learns of a loved one's terminal diagnosis. My discussion thus far has focused on a particular subset of cases of anticipatory grief. Nevertheless, while a terminal diagnosis gives rise to a specific category of rupture—in the form of a definite timestamp—it is necessary to make note of the fact that the nature of a particular diagnosis characterizes the kind of change one's practical reality endures. In the same respect, our general expectation of the future takes into account the varying existential statuses held by the people in our lives. Every person is framed by a unique set of expectations based on the different facets contained within our understanding of them. This is particularly relevant to anticipatory grief, whose instantiation depends largely on how we expect the future to be.

While my aunt became a mirage, my grandfather retained his place as an active element of my world until the very end. This is because within my concept of him as an 88-year-old human, was my understanding of him as a non-enduring being. Under ideal circumstances, it is through our grandparents that, as children, we first become acquainted with the existential category of oldness. We conceptualize death as something that happens to people within this category, and if we're lucky, the loss of a grandparent serves as an introduction to this concept.

I am extremely fortunate to have had two sets of grandparents until I was 18 years old, and I know that it was somewhat of an anomaly. For

much of my life, my grandpa had been in poor health, which declined steadily with age. For this reason, I had long become accustomed to the belief that his presence in my life was not one to take for granted. No expectation of continuity remained to be ruptured by the knowledge of his diagnosis. Instead, my world endured a rupture only after his death, which instigated the process of normal grief. In contrast, my aunt—technically my great aunt—though well into her 70s, was not someone to whom I consciously attached the predicate of oldness. It is for this reason that I only ever referred to her as my aunt. Bella made gin and tonics. She took community college classes, and volunteered as a docent at the local art museum. She was not just an enduring figure, but a flourishing one.²⁸

The world did not have to change for me to see my grandfather as approaching death. But it would have to be a different world, unrecognizable in its crudeness from this one, for me to see Bella not only as dying, but eroding before my eyes, mangled by what could hardly be considered an illness, but an act of existential violence. It is at this point important to note that the nature of my anticipatory grief was inextricable from her condition. Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) is a neurodegenerative disease that indiscriminately targets and degrades the neurons responsible for motor function. The sufferer is impaired of all forms of voluntary movement and left trapped in their own body as all of their muscles—including, ultimately, those required for respiration—progressively degenerate. In this way, my anticipatory grief was not simply the intellectual recognition of impending death, but the effect of an extended process of unworlding.

28. This appears to be in tension with a claim I made in section III, where I noted that anticipatory grief is distinct from a mere awareness of our mortality; Its instantiation depends on an unabstract justification for our belief that someone will die (such as a terminal illness). Yet, here I make note of the fact that my grandfather's existential status (as a non-enduring being) precluded my knowledge of his diagnosis from invoking a rupture in the same sense as it did for my aunt. In this sense, I am committing myself to the belief that a rupture in expectation varies in magnitude depending on what our expectations are. If I am to stay consistent with how I've been employing the term rupture (a tear in the fabric of our lifeworld) it seems like a rupture is something that either exists or doesn't. Nevertheless, the extent to which a tear deforms the fabric depends on its severity. My grandfather's diagnosis was not as dramatic of a tear as my aunts, but it was a tear nonetheless.

The paradoxes inherent to the process of anticipatory grief²⁹ are uniquely bewildering. If normal grief gives rise to cognitive contradictions because it's "not cotenable with objective thought,"³⁰ anticipatory grief complicates matters further. The denial/acceptance paradox in normal grief comes about because acclimating to a new reality necessarily depends on recognizing incoherence in our world. Imposed on my reality in which Anya was alive and well is the knowledge that she was killed. Though I move away from the former as I come to accept the latter, these two realities will conflict before I can fully accept it. However, in my anticipatory grief, I was confronted with the knowledge that Bella will die, but is not yet dead. Simply by virtue of her biological presence, my world was oriented around the fact of her existence, and theoretically should've remained as such until her death. Yet I've established that—given the certainty of death that her diagnosis provided—my anticipatory grief was not simply an intellectual recognition that she will die, but involved a necessary rupture in my expectations. If we maintain that our conception of a future self depends on our assumption of lifeworld continuity, it follows that my future self is a temporal extension of my current self. Yet, if I am suddenly given a justified basis for knowing that my lifeworld will endure a rupture, then I can no longer take this for granted. Nevertheless, we encounter a certain epistemic resistance to imagining a future without some constituent parts, and it is only when a rupture actually occurs that we are forced to do so. Thus, the paradox here is apparent: my aunt's biological existence established her as an enduring object in my life, which conflicted with my knowledge that she was going to die. This led me to view her both as non-enduring and not fully alive.

The more certain our knowledge of impending loss, the less certain becomes our judgment of the loved one as fully alive. After all, we view someone as a stable aspect of our world when we have no reason to

29. As I've experienced it. I imagine that the paradoxes inherent to the anticipation of a death occurring within the next two to five years versus within the next six months will vary in their nature. Moreover, as previously noted, this is also the case in regards to the kind of illness one endures.

30. Read, "Can there be a Logic of Grief," 177.

doubt their continued existence. I never *could* have known that I was really hugging Anya goodbye the last time I saw her, because we orient ourselves in service of a “next time” until given a reason not to.

Conversely, neither one of us really believed it when Bella said “see you next summer,” for as future oriented beings, our experience of worldhood is dependent on a certain presupposition of permanence. When anticipatory grief deprives us of this basis, we are left straddling two vastly different worlds: beholden to a reality artificially structured by their presence, while having the foreknowledge to recognize this artifice.

If grief arises from a rupture in our lifeworld, then the justified belief that a person is going to die constitutes more than a mere anticipation of death—it is itself a rupture in our expectations, and one that alters our world before the physical death occurs. We understand ourselves both as future-oriented beings within a temporally extended world and as inherently interconnected with others. The future—our future—is not a temporally abstracted externality, for its existence as a concept depends on our awareness of ourselves within our worlds. However, while normal grief is a temporally extended process of reconstruction, anticipatory grief complicates how we orient ourselves in time and in relation to our future. Beyond a rupture in expectations, we also endure a fragmentation of the self. Once we can no longer take for granted the future as we had previously conceived it, our awareness of ourselves as future-oriented is called into question. The knowledge of an impending rupture therefore becomes a rupture in itself. This becomes a catalyst for a phenomenological shift precisely because the future, as a fundamental part of our self-concept, becomes epistemically inaccessible to us. Recognizing that the structure of our lifeworld will change alters our present lived experience.

In establishing that anticipatory grief begins with a rupture in our body of expectations, I hope to bring to light a parallel between the process of normal grief and that of anticipatory grief. On the Radian account, the logic of normal grief is accounted for by the nature of our lifeworlds as dependent on the existence of other beings in them. The

death of a loved one is akin to a tear in our reality, the fabric of which is co-constituted by other people. As a result, grief is necessarily a process whose origin possesses its own logic; one that is served by the concomitant denial and acceptance of a loved one's death.

Anticipatory grief begins when we are given a reason to believe that the structure of our lifeworld is importantly different from what we imagined. While the confrontation creates, for the griever, a dissonance between their knowledge and belief, this paradox does not resolve itself as it does in normal grief. As an extended process of deformation, anticipatory grief stagnates us in the liminal space between two realities, neither of which we can fully access.³¹

6 Conclusion

That Orpheus will turn and look at Eurydice just before they reach the threshold can never be concealed from us once we read the myth— it is for this reason that I cry even before the first song of Hadestown finishes. Anticipatory grief is much like this: its instantiation narratively precludes our world from ever being how it was, yet no matter how accustomed we become to anticipating loss, its blow cannot be cushioned by expectation. This, I believe, captures the central paradox of anticipatory grief: It is the preparation for, and simultaneous resistance to a future world shaped by a loss. The act of preparation is entirely incompatible with the nature of loss, but we are nonetheless given a glimpse of the reality that is to come. Ultimately, Read's view is better equipped to account for anticipatory grief than Nussbaum's because it distinguishes between what is necessarily a part of my world's constitution, and what exists because the world does. On Read's account, grief is not a particular kind of normative evaluation, but a rupture in the very structure which conditions its possibility. Anticipatory grief is necessarily prior to normal grief, but neither replaces nor presupposes normal grief. It directs us towards an

31. While a rupture in our expectations is sufficient to instantiate a form of grief that precedes death, it is important to note that anticipatory grief does not replace normal grief, but guarantees it.

ending that remains just out of our grasp, as a prologue to a process whose unfolding depends on death.

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THE GENESIS OF DESIRE: FROM MIMETIC THEORY TO AN AESTHETIC ACCOUNT

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Abstract. This paper surveys the theory of desire, and in particular the underexplored question of its genesis. I first map the field for unfamiliar readers, offering a taxonomy of its central approaches. I then focus on René Girard's mimetic theory of desire, outlining its core claims, its contemporary cultural reach, and its strongest defensible formulation. Next, I advance several objections that render Girard's universalizing thesis doubtful even when charitably strengthened: scope and boundary problems, first-mover and childhood cases, false positives, causal-direction difficulties, mediator plurality, and methodological elasticity. In response, I propose a new account, the Aesthetic Theory of Desire (ATD), on which metaphysical desire is generated by aesthetic resonance with an ideal: a felt alignment by which a form of life or self-image becomes salient, inhabitable, and worth pursuing. On this view, models matter, but not primarily as sources from which desire is borrowed; rather, they are among the inputs that shape an agent's aesthetic palette and make certain ideals motivationally live. I test ATD against Girard on his own terrain, using his preferred literary cases and his own criterion of what "works better" phenomenologically. I argue that, under these conditions, ATD better explains why agents desire, handles counter-cases that trouble mimetic theory, and absorbs the valid insights of rival views, including mimetic influence itself. Taken together, ATD thereby offers a more holistic account of desire's formation and endurance, and gives a more precise account of how mediation becomes desire. Practical implications follow: if desire is formed by what becomes

aesthetically salient, then prosocial formation depends on making worthwhile ends feel compelling and antisocial ones flat or repellent, using stories, exemplars, rituals, media, and institutions to orient taste toward virtue and give the good firmer conditions for formation.

1 **The Landscape of Theories of Desire**

Desire, or our being drawn toward certain ends, sits at the center of the human condition and experience. It steers our life trajectories and achievements, shapes the beliefs we trust and the values we endorse, and plays a central role in organizing human society; understanding its formation is therefore paramount to understanding human life and thought. Though often eclipsed by adjacent philosophical concerns, sufficiently many accounts have been advanced to permit a brief taxonomy of the field's main positions, which fall into a few broad families. The first family treats desire as a non-cognitive process (with classic expression in Hume, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche), on which desire does not require evaluative judgment, and reason mainly supplies means to desire's ends. Within this family are pleasure-based, learning-based, and action-based approaches, as well as twentieth-century lack-based approaches and opposing productive approaches.

On pleasure-based accounts (following Hume), to desire p is to be disposed to find p (or its prospect) pleasant, with pleasure (and pain-avoidance) activating the brain's reward circuits to motivate present pursuit and condition future wanting. Neuroscience has added to the discussion: Morillo's neural-identity view identifies desire with dopamine-mediated reward events¹ that motivate action when paired with beliefs about how the desired end can be secured. Learning-based accounts are closely related; they hold that desire is not pleasure itself but the brain's reward-based learning signal, which strengthens the link

1. Carlos Morillo, "Reward Event Systems: Reconceptualizing the Explanatory Roles of Motivation, Desire and Pleasure," *Philosophical Psychology* 5, no. 1 (1992): 7–32.

between representing p and moving toward p each time p is rewarded. Over time, merely thinking of p can trigger pursuit even without current pleasure. Action-based views offer a dispositional account on which to desire p is to be disposed to take whatever actions one believes will bring about p , a position sometimes paired with a teleofunctional justification that treats desire's biological role as producing desire-satisfying action.² Twentieth-century lack-based approaches depart from these presence-based models by locating desire's genesis in absence. For Lacan, a structural lack in language leaves us pursuing an unattainable *objet petit a* (the missing object desire keeps trying to reach) and chasing unsatisfying substitutes.³ Conversely, Sartre roots the lack in consciousness's lack-of-being,⁴ driving an endless project of self-completion. In opposition, Deleuze and Guattari reject lack in favor of a productive view:⁵ desire is a connective force arising from "desiring machines," wherever wanting links up with the world and makes something happen.

In contrast to these non-cognitivist accounts, cognitivist views hold that motivation stems from evaluative judgment: a thought with classical roots in Socrates and the Stoics, who treat the passions as cognitive value judgments. In contemporary form, Michael Smith argues that reason can generate desire:⁶ If I believe my fully rational self would desire p , that belief will tend to produce a desire for p . T. M. Scanlon similarly treats desire as responsive to judgment about reasons,⁷ and adds an attention-based description on which to desire p is for the thought of p to recur in a favorable light, repeatedly drawing one's attention to reasons for p . Finally, holistic theories of desire reject one-factor accounts, holding that desire is present when enough "desire-like" features (readiness to act

2. Tim Schroeder, *Three Faces of Desire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

3. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998).

4. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956).

5. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

6. Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994).

7. T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

for p , taking pleasure in p , p seeming good, etc.) are present. Desire therefore arises from that convergence, whether internally (the mind's systems jointly orienting toward p) or externally (a stable pattern that treats p as worth pursuing).

Having sketched this explanatory landscape, two orienting observations are in order. First, the debates are comparatively fragmented: rival approaches have often been developed in isolation, and are often motivated by such different considerations that direct head-to-head critique across camps is rare, slowing progress and clarity. Second, against this backdrop, the question of how desires arise has been comparatively sidelined (especially within the analytic tradition) as debates gravitate toward definitional disputes about what desire is. Although such semantic work has value in its own right, it is striking that the genesis question, arguably the more practically consequential one, has received less sustained attention.⁸ If we could better grasp how desires come into being, we would thereby unlock the most practical levers for improving individual and collective flourishing. Despite historically limited interest in the topic and still less in its origin question, it is an origin-based theory of desire that has recently helped renew interest in the field. Where the foregoing theories largely treat desire as internal to the mind, Girard challenges this assumption by locating desire's origin in social mediation. I therefore set out his account in depth for unfamiliar readers, before assessing whether its strongest formulation can provide the genesis account the field has largely lacked.

2 **The Mimetic Account of Desire**

Girard's theory of mimetic desire holds that desire is not autonomous but imitative: admired models teach us what to desire by endowing objects with value. As he puts it, "Man is the creature who does not know what to desire, and he turns to others in order to make up his mind. We desire

8. Tim Schroeder, "Desire," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edited by Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2017 Edition, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/desire/>.

what others desire because we imitate their desires.”⁹ This theory rests on two core premises: (1) any object is considered desirable only through social mediation rather than intrinsic appeal or distinctive preferences for *p*, and (2) desire is triangular, structured among the subject (one who desires), the model (one whose desire is imitated), and the object (the thing desired).¹⁰ This mimetic desire underwrites Girard’s all-encompassing mimetic theory, which unfolds in three stages.¹¹ First, mimetic desire acts as the sole catalyst for all human competition and resulting violence, setting up a dynamic where the subject and model become rivals in pursuing the same object. Then, to resolve such conflicts, an unconscious scapegoat mechanism arises in which blame for the crisis is collectively (and unfairly) cast onto a suitable target. The target is finally expelled through violence, and peace returns. Girard argues that the mechanism’s effectiveness in restoring order makes it largely invisible, prompting communities to deny that mimetic desire produced the crisis and to conceal the scapegoating through subsequent myths. In turn, mimetic theory purports to vindicate the religious–metaphysical truths Christianity implicates by claiming that it uniquely proclaims the victim’s innocence and thereby reveals the scapegoat mechanism, with God incarnate himself coming down to unmask the sacrificial lie and its ritualized violence. In this broad form, then, Girard’s account presents itself as a totalizing one, stretching from realities prior to creation, through the birth of human societies (via a collective, unanimous scapegoat murder), to their possible modern ruin (even nuclear apocalypse), and beyond history’s close.

In recent years, Girard’s mimetic theory has acquired broader visibility beyond academic literary and philosophical discussion, circulating in wider cultural and public conversations. Part of what gives the theory its present force is that contemporary social life often seems to

9. René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), 15.

10. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 15.

11. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).

heighten the kinds of mimetic dynamics Girard describes, making participation more visible, imitation more easily amplified, and rivalries over status and recognition more intensely staged (e.g., social media and other highly public contests for prestige). At the same time, mimetic theory has not only interpreted these developments but, in some influential settings, helped guide the decisions of elites and thereby shaped the very environments it now appears to explain. Its wider uptake is therefore not merely a sociological curiosity; if broader publics and elites alike rely on it to interpret desire and social life, its claims must withstand demanding philosophical scrutiny and retain comparative superiority as the best available explanation.

In what follows, I reconstruct Girard's strongest formulation, grant it several charitable constraints, and assess it on its own terms, focusing on its scope, evidential support, and comparative adequacy. I argue that, despite its descriptive resonance, mimetic theory does not warrant epistemic confidence or practical reliance. I then propose the Aesthetic Theory of Desire (ATD) and test it against Girard's strongest formulation and his preferred literary cases, arguing that even under these stipulations, ATD more plausibly explains the genesis of metaphysical desire.

3 The Limits of Mimetic Universality

Scope and Boundary Problems

The foremost attack on mimetic desire targets its all-encompassing ambition. It certainly appears plausible that some desires arise mimetically, but our intuitions balk at a theory presented as exceptionless, especially when it runs against introspective experience. The most immediate pressure point is biological need: Girard's broadest formulations can make it sound as though even our most basic motivations are socially mediated, rather than rooted in needs that could arise without any model. Such critics point to Girard's blunt formulation in *The Scapegoat*: "Human beings have no desire of their own; men are

strangers to their desires; children don't know how to desire and must be taught." In response, Girardians appeal to later refinements distinguishing appetites or basic impulses from desire proper, and Girard himself later recasts the contrast as one between physical and metaphysical desire. On this narrower reading, mimetic theory is not primarily a thesis about hunger, thirst, sleep, or other physiological drives, but about distinctively human, non-appetitive desire shaped through models, especially in domains bound up with status, prestige, recognition, and identity rather than straightforward utility. In affluent, highly networked conditions, where basic appetites are more easily met and models are especially visible, Girardians can therefore argue that this metaphysical terrain becomes especially contested, leaving mimetic desire as a first-order driver of social life and rendering the *Homo Economicus* picture of agents rationally maximizing fixed preferences increasingly implausible.

Setting aside accusations of circularity, we are thus left with a considerably stronger formulation: not that every bodily impulse is mimetic, but that distinctively human desire, insofar as it exceeds appetite and becomes entangled with status, prestige, recognition, and identity, arises through social mediation. Yet this strengthening may come at a price: the more tightly mimetic theory is confined to metaphysical desire, the more it seems to imply that desire proper becomes central only where basic appetites are already largely secured. The view then looks less like a universal anthropology than an account of relatively affluent, highly mediated social environments, where models, comparison, and public recognition are especially visible. It is then unclear why persons outside such settings would count as any less participants in distinctively human desire.

A related attack appeals to borderline or pathological cases, and more broadly to the stability of the boundary between physical and metaphysical desire itself. Some objectors point to disorders like pica, where individuals feel drawn to ingest non-food items (hair, dirt, paint

chips).¹² A Girardian may reply that this is not a counterexample because it is not “desire” proper in Girard’s target sense but pathology. This seems plausible, yet such a reply matters only if the boundary on which it relies can be drawn in a stable and principled way; the difficulty is that similar pressure arises even in ordinary cases that are not obviously biological. When parents model enthusiasm for a particular story or picture book, a toddler may still resist it. That instance of resistance is not mimetic, since the model positively endorses the object. Yet, it is also not a homeostatic appetite like hunger or thirst, nor a plausible instance of Girard’s “negative mimesis” (by which he means defining oneself against a model rather than by imitating it), since that form of mimesis seems to require a reflective contrarianism that a toddler lacks. The broader worry, then, is not simply that pathological cases exist, but that once recalcitrant cases are repeatedly reassigned to appetite, pathology, or contrarianism, the boundary of Girard’s theory begins to look less principled than protective.

First-Mover Cases

Another counterargument to mimetic desire centers on the first-mover issue: if all desire is imitation, then who was the model for the first imitator of each given desire? Girard himself brings this objection to mind in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, where he reads Genesis 4 as illustrating how mimetic desire yields rivalry and violence: Cain and Abel each offer sacrifice to God, Abel’s is favored, and Cain kills his brother.¹³ Yet if the relevant desire here is wholly mimetic, where exactly is the imitation located (especially if this is among the earliest human scenes)? A Girardian can reply that the mimesis lies not in the murder itself but in Cain’s adopted desire for divine favor, with the violence following from that rivalry as Cain’s attempt to remove the obstacle. But this reply reveals a deeper methodological difficulty: in a case Girard himself treats as primal and paradigmatic, his theory is preserved not by showing directly that the act is mimetic, but by

12. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), “Pica.”

13. Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*.

relocating the relevant desire behind it. The worry, then, is not simply that this one case is misread, but that the theory can answer an apparent counterexample by redescribing its true object elsewhere, making its explanatory target less direct and its defense harder to distinguish from an ad hoc preservation of the view.

Moreover, challenging universal mimesis need not rely only on desires with no historical precedent; we can also point to epistemic first-mover cases, where an agent lacks access to any model for a desire yet develops and maintains it. The clearest instances appear in early childhood: children often insist on a goodnight kiss or the same story on loop, even when no model displays such preferences. In the former case especially, the desire seems not merely physical but already bound up with reassurance, attention, and a ritualized form of recognition. Girard addresses a bedtime-kiss scene in Proust by denying “spontaneous” desire and suggesting that the boy’s plea is somehow instigated by his mother (but without explaining how). Such a defense is further weakened by Girard’s underdeveloped account of children’s desires. He remarks that “nothing is more mimetic than the desire of a child” and that “children don’t know how to desire and must be taught.”¹⁴ Yet those remarks leave unclear how particular childhood desires arise when no model is visible or when the offered model is resisted.

False Positives and Causal Direction

Given these counterarguments, a natural conservative reply is to weaken the thesis: not all desire is mimetic, but some is, and Girard’s central observation about social mediation remains important. This retreat, however, collapses the theory into a truism. It is easy to grant that imitation shapes some desires, especially in domains like fashion, consumer taste, social status, and public recognition, and that imitation can sometimes escalate into conflict and even subsequent scapegoating. But once the claim is softened to “many desires are mimetic,” it appears no more illuminating than “many books are nonfiction”: a safe, largely

14. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*.

uncontested observation. A stronger, more useful theory might name the boundary conditions under which mimesis is likely and estimate its prevalence, but absent those, it adds little.

Girard and many of his followers therefore maintain the sweeping thesis by adopting protective strategies that require increasingly heavy interpretive labor. One symptom is a propensity for false positives: apparently non-mimetic cases are shoehorned into the framework through elastic definitions or after-the-fact appeals to hidden models, as when a child's resistant preference is redescribed as "negative mimesis," Cain's violence is relocated behind a deeper desire for divine favor, or the child's bedtime plea in Proust is attributed to the mother without clear explanation. Another is seemingly cherry-picked textual interpretation; Joshua Landy, for example, flags Girard's readings of Proust: Girard insists that "Proustian desire is always a borrowed desire," meaning that desire in Proust is always mediated by another person whose wanting confers value on the object, yet Landy notes multiple central scenes that contradict this and are effectively passed over.¹⁵ The same impulse can yield strained, biased interpretations that cut against a text's plain meaning, as in Girard's reading of Joseph in Genesis 37. Here, Joseph is singled out by his father for special favor, a status marked outwardly by the gift of the coat; what his brothers seem to want is not simply Joseph's object, nor even primarily the coat itself, but their father's love, approval, and favored standing in the family. That good appears antecedently desirable: parental recognition is not valuable merely because another already possesses it, but because it is itself a basic relational good tied to belonging, security, and esteem.

This raises a causal-direction objection: do models make goods attractive, or do they merely help reveal goods that can matter independently of being desired by others? A Girardian may deny that goods carry any intrinsic "to-be-desiredness" and so fold this issue back

15. Joshua Landy, "Deceit, Desire, and the Literature Professor: Why Girardians Exist," *Republics of Letters* 1, no. 3 (2012), <https://arcade.stanford.edu/rofl/deceit-desire-and-literature-professor-why-girardians-exist> (accessed January 2, 2026).

into the first-mover problem. Yet even granting that point, a distinction remains between models as sources of desire and models as signals of value or availability. If the latter, mimetic theory risks overstating imitation by treating social mediation as the generator rather than the disclosure of desire. The same structure might be seen in mundane cases: seeing several unticketed cars parked where parking is usually prohibited, I take their presence as evidence that parking there is likely safe and decide to park there myself.¹⁶ Here, others' behavior serves as evidence for how to secure a desirable end (namely, a convenient nearby place to leave my car without penalty) rather than as the source of the desire itself.

Mediator Plurality and Methodological Elasticity

To finalize our critiques, we must address mediator plurality. At every turn, we may encounter competing models of seemingly equal force: consider two older siblings admired in roughly the same way who endorse different colleges, or two mentors of similar standing who recommend different careers. When multiple credible models pull in opposite directions, mimetic theory owes an account of why one prevails. Appeal to the mediator's "prestige" is the most plausible response, where a Girardian may well deny that exact tie cases ever truly occur. Yet the difficulty does not depend on perfect equality; even where one model is only marginally more salient, admired, or proximate than another, it often seems that what actually settles the matter is not prestige alone but some further consideration such as liking, fit, need, or enjoyment. In such cases, mimetic theory either leaves the decisive step unexplained, or imports non-mimetic tie-breakers to do the real explanatory work, thereby conceding precisely what is at issue.

Mediator plurality also reveals a broader methodological difficulty. Because essentially every act has some antecedent, a model can always be "found," insulating the theory from pressure by apparent counterexamples. Girard reinforces this flexibility by treating apparent

16. Landy, "Deceit, Desire, and the Literature Professor."

contradictions as confirmation (e.g., the scapegoat mechanism is said to be necessarily hidden, so its absence in texts like *Oedipus* counts as evidence), and by narrowing definitions in a question-begging way (if relevant cases are excluded *only* by redescribing them as non-desires, the theory avoids rather than answers the objection). Girard himself concedes as much: “the theory as a whole cannot be subjected to empirical verification or falsification . . . it is the sort of thing you either see or do not see . . . like a flash of lightning . . . Everything great is always a question of faith.”¹⁷ The view thus rests on comparative phenomenological adequacy, with Girard insisting that it “simply works better than (competing) theories.” I will bracket wider disputes about this standard and grant mimetic theory its strongest reading. I assume it is the best available explanation for most, though not all, non-appetitive desire; that when models compete, a single prestige mediator reliably prevails; and that its force lies in comparative phenomenological adequacy rather than strict empirical testability. This exceeds Girard’s own claims, but it gives the theory every advantage, and it is the charitable lens through which I have long assessed its plausibility. Even so, mimesis seems to me less a principled explanation of the phenomena than an illuminating but ultimately unstable way of redescribing them. I turn, instead, to an alternative account I call the Aesthetic Theory of Desire, which I claim better explains how such desires arise and persist.

4 **The Aesthetic Theory of Desire**

In the opening pages of Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, this short vignette introduces a point worth isolating.

A young lady of the last “romantic” generation threw herself one stormy night into a rather deep and rapid river from a high bank, almost a precipice, and so perished, entirely to satisfy her own caprice, and to be like Shakespeare’s Ophelia.

17. René Girard, *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre*, trans. Mary Baker (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010), 277, 267.

Indeed, if this precipice . . . had been less picturesque, if there had been a prosaic flat bank in its place, . . . the suicide would never have taken place. This is a fact, and probably there have been not a few similar instances in the last two or three generations.¹⁸

The Girardian reading of this scene is simple: the young woman borrows Ophelia as a prestige model and mimics her motif. This, however, misses a key feature of the act: the narrator stresses that she chose a “picturesque” precipice and that, if it were less so, “the suicide would never have taken place.” If imitation alone drove her, the act would go forward regardless of scenery, so what accounts for the narrator’s counterfactual? I propose that a more compelling framework for these desires’ genesis is the Aesthetic Theory of Desire (ATD). On ATD, metaphysical desire is generated by aesthetic resonance with an ideal: an experiential, partly ineffable “click,” a felt alignment between a person and a form of life or self-image. Such an ideal is not merely an object or role one wants, but an image of what inhabiting that object, role, or form of life would feel like from the inside. We register this resonance in ordinary talk of what speaks to us, grips us, or feels like a life we could actually inhabit.

These terms denote not an attempt to be seen as such by others, but the ideal’s felt claim to admirability, as if it could withstand an impartial (if imagined) observer’s judgment. Through this resonance, we are bound first to an ideal, which takes the form of a realizer desire: a want to be a certain way and inhabit a form of life as one’s own, an experiential, partly ineffable “click” by which an ideal stops being merely persuasive and starts feeling like a life one could actually inhabit. Individual items then become instrumentally desirable as routes for making that ideal present and legible, and this felt fit, not imitation or utility calculation, generates and sustains desire.

Following Hume and Kant, I treat aesthetic taste as enculturated.

18. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 4

Starting from infancy, models, norms, and exposure shape our aesthetic palette and what takes on salience, and both what we encounter and the appraisals that accompany it contribute to that formation, though our ultimate judgments remain personal. “Prestigious” models (in the Girardian sense) are simply those inputs with outsized weight, supplying not desires to mimic but options of ideals that may resonate, and whose perceived prestige increases how strongly they pull. Dostoevsky’s suicide vignette, therefore, presents a protagonist whose aesthetic palette was so captured by an ideal that it outweighed not only homeostatic impulses but competing allegiances. Imitation may tell us whom she echoes, but aesthetic resonance tells us why that echo grips her. The precipice is not incidental décor but part of the ideal’s staging: she does not desire death in the abstract, but death as aesthetically intelligible under the image of Ophelia, where the storm, river, and picturesque height make the act feel like the realization of a tragic form. Dostoevsky’s counterfactual thereby registers a mechanism of desire’s genesis; shifting the act into the prosaic would alter its aesthetic meaning and undercut its motivational pull.

Models are only the most conspicuous inputs into this palette; the enculturation at issue is far more pervasive, extending even to factors such as language and the pre-reflective texture of experience itself. Often, all we initially possess is a name and a first description, yet this alone can begin to shape connotative uptake. The contexts in which a term is learned, who uses it, and the affective and social freight it carries can function as a condensed aesthetic framing by loading even thinly specified objects with an atmosphere prior to explicit judgment and thereby tilting resonance in palette-dependent ways.

Beyond language, micro-features such as background associations, spatial orientation, perceived prestige, incidental facts, and subtle framing shifts help determine the atmosphere in which an object is received, and therefore whether it becomes salient as a part of a possible form of life.¹⁹ Mapping how a given palette comes to make such cues

19. Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, “The Framing of Decisions and the Psychology of Choice,” *Science* 211, no. 4481 (January 30, 1981): 453–458, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.7455683>.

salient resists exhaustive enumeration, as doing so would require tracing an agent's exposures and evaluations almost one by one within a dense, life-historical web. Even when an object is no longer thinly given but richly encountered, it is still taken up through interpretive expectations, including the linguistic and narrative frames by which we organize events into intelligible episodes and locate ourselves and others within them.²⁰ Often tracking reality only imperfectly, these frames nevertheless mediate how the world is taken up as meaningful and how salience and aesthetic pull are continuously formed and re-formed.

Stories and media further scale this framing across whole forms of life, circulating archetypes and scripts that render certain trajectories vivid and intelligible, while simultaneously deeply conditioning expectations (e.g., what love should feel like, what success looks like, which forms of suffering read as noble or humiliating). They thereby shape desire even without a specific prestigious model, because what is absorbed is often an interpretive orientation toward life itself, conveyed as much through narrative description as through explicit instruction, and capable of drifting from the facts while still governing salience, self-conception, and the ideals that become motivationally live. Yet this structuring is not confined to narrative description; in contemporary media (namely film, television, and social feeds), soundtracks and sonic cues supply an atmosphere that can alter the felt meaning of the same scene without changing what is shown.²¹

Music is a vivid non-discursive case because unlike words with reportable content, sound works through tone that resists restatement and varies with the palette already in place.²² In songs, melody, tone, and timbre govern how lyrics land, so that repeated listening trains not only preference but identity-affiliation. Music thus makes vivid how resonance

20. Jerome Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 1 (Autumn 1991): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1086/448619>.

21. Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman, foreword by Walter Murch (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

22. Patrik N. Juslin and Daniel Västfjäll, "Emotional Responses to Music: The Need to Consider Underlying Mechanisms," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 31, no. 5 (2008): 559–575, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X08005293>.

can be cultivated by non-verbal features that shape which ideals become salient, and with what force, for differently formed sensibilities.

This points to a further technologically driven acceleration in enculturation's scale and selectivity. In prior times, desire formation and its downstream expressions in action and life-trajectory were largely local, bounded by the limited models, institutions, and media one encountered. The internet shattered those limits in the information age, vastly expanding the menu of possible selves and scripts. Social media marks a further discontinuity: exposure is increasingly stochastic, atomized, and self-reinforcing, as opaque algorithms select what appears next for each user individually, loosening desire formation from shared local environments while repetition (paired with prestige and affect cues) amplifies new ideals into loops.²³ Short-form feeds can rapidly stabilize resonance around newly salient ideals, reshaping desire and downstream action with historically unprecedented independence from one's immediate environment.

5 Comparative Literary Tests

Taken together, these features specify ATD's mechanism of desire formation: resonance arises from an enculturated palette that makes certain ideals salient and motivationally live. That mechanism yields explanatory leverage where mimetic accounts face pressure, which becomes clear when we revisit several counter-cases already on the table. ATD withstands first-mover and epistemic first-mover cases because its generator is internally felt fit rather than imitation; it dissolves the chicken-and-egg worry by treating models as signals that help us recognize goods, not their source; and it resolves mediator plurality by letting choice track the stronger resonance. Even granting Girard the strongest reading (scope as most metaphysical desire, a definite prestige hierarchy, and Popperian testability bracketed in favor of

23. Hannah Metzler and David García, "Social Drivers and Algorithmic Mechanisms on Digital Media," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 19, no. 5 (September 2024): 735–748, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916231185057>.

phenomenological fit), ATD better tracks the phenomena; I show this by now testing it on Girard's own preferred, best-case literary examples.

I first invoke Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, a novel Girard treats at length in a dedicated study, and one written to probe the motives behind action. Its protagonist, Raskolnikov, embraces an "extraordinary man" doctrine, on which certain great men (e.g., Napoleon) may transgress moral law for higher ends, and subsequently murders a pawnbroker while telling himself he is removing a "louse" and redirecting the money to good use.²⁴ Girard's reading in *Resurrection from the Underground* is that the desire is borrowed: Napoleon's prestige makes the "extraordinary man" ideal appear legitimate and glorious, and the murder is staged as a test that Raskolnikov is above ordinary morality. Because the desire is borrowed, his dependence on others' verdicts yields anguish. Yet earlier worries return here: to preserve the mimetic reading, Napoleon has to function as the decisive source of Raskolnikov's desire, despite the text giving us a thicker constellation consisting of Raskolnikov's own theorizing, his self-test, and the broader ideal of extraordinary selfhood.²⁵ By contrast, ATD reads Napoleon not as a simple source of the desire, but as one emblem through which an ideal self becomes legible. This better matches the text: Raskolnikov formulates the doctrine himself in the unpublished article later cited by the investigating magistrate Porfiry Petrovich (III.5), and explicitly treats the murder as a self-test (I.6–7; II.1). Napoleon is only one emblem among several (Lycurgus, Kepler, Solon), a badge for an ideal he already embraces. The point is not the act, but the identity the act validates. As Razumikhin notes, he is "sick with theories" picked up from journals embedded in a Petersburg milieu and saturated with rationalist and utilitarian talk, all of which shape the palette of ideals available to him and what can take on salience as a compelling form of selfhood. The governing motive is the felt rightness of that self-conception; when it

24. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Classics, 1993).

25. René Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground: Feodor Dostoevsky*, ed. and trans. James G. Williams (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012)

collapses, his torment follows. On Girard's own "best fit" criterion, Dostoevsky seems to frame the desire less as simple imitation than as an idealized self-conception, one Napoleon helps make legible but does not simply generate.

Another example Girard draws from is Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Alonso Quijano immerses himself in chivalric romances and sets out to live as a knight-errant. Reasoning that every knight needs a squire, he recruits the peasant Sancho Panza by promising him an "island" to govern.²⁶ For Girard, the case is straightforward: Don Quixote imitates the knightly archetype he reveres, and Sancho's desire for governorship is borrowed from Quijano and planted "into his head." ATD shifts the emphasis: Sancho need not be copying Quijano's desire, especially since Quijano is not himself desiring to be governor. Quijano's promise instead presents a possible self-image, "Governor Sancho," and frames it as available. What grips Sancho is the felt fit of that role, strong enough to pull him from home and family. Imitation may explain who presents the option; ATD better explains why the option takes hold.

More cases could be added, but the contrast is already sharp enough for evaluation: even on Girard's own terms, and by his own criterion of what "works better" phenomenologically, ATD offers the better explanation. It is not "hidden since the foundation of the world"; once attended to, its influence becomes visible in our own motives and in those of others, as shown in the literary cases. The young woman does not merely copy Ophelia; Ophelia supplies the image under which death becomes aesthetically intelligible. Raskolnikov does not merely borrow Napoleon's desire; Napoleon is one emblem through which an idealized self-conception becomes legible. Sancho does not merely copy Quijano's desire; Quijano frames "Governor Sancho" as an available self-image. In each case, imitation may explain who presents or intensifies the ideal, but aesthetic resonance better explains why the ideal takes hold.

A further virtue of ATD is its ability to absorb, rather than discard the most useful insights of rival views: Humean reward and learning

26. Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. Edith Grossman (New York: Ecco, 2003).

(once an ideal “clicks,” reinforcement strengthens wanting), Scanlonian attention to reasons (the ideal keeps recurring “in a favorable light”), action-dispositional views (felt fit readies and directs action), Deleuzian delimitation (culture shapes the live menu of ideals), and even mimetic influence (others shape the palette, sometimes strongly enough that we imitate). Even familiar attempts to “naturalize” mimesis (for example, by appealing to mirror neurons) are no more compelling than empirical accounts congenial to ATD, such as Quartz’s claim that “cool” operates as a shifting status-and-identity signal that pulls preferences along with it. Taken together, ATD offers a more holistic account of desire’s formation and endurance. It does not reject social mediation, but gives a more precise account of how mediation becomes desire, and therefore provides a better-grounded set of practical levers for leaders who shape public life.

6 Desire Formation and Its Implications

ATD yields a practical upshot: if desire is formed by what becomes aesthetically salient, then to enhance prosocial desire formation, a society must make those ends feel compelling and antisocial ones feel flat or repellent. This answers Plato’s demand that formative stories orient taste toward virtue, now with a wider toolkit that includes narrative content along with other resonance-conferring cues such as framing, staging, and sonic atmosphere. Furthermore, it can work with what is already motivationally live by binding familiar ideals such as victory and mastery to prosocial ends, so that “winning” means winning at the right things (religion is often especially effective here, extending victory’s time-scale and recoding its criteria). A few concrete levers follow. In public life, this often concentrates on schools, where the stories, exemplars, and cultural materials students repeatedly encounter can be curated accordingly, since they quietly shape what feels salient and worth wanting. Schools and adjacent programs can then reinforce these ideals through mentorship and ritualized contact, so that even when local palettes are thin, children repeatedly encounter stable, prestigious forms of life as live options.

Finally, because social feeds now do much of this formative curating by default, some control over enculturation's "randomness" can be reclaimed by requiring greater transparency in algorithmic mechanisms and enabling users, especially parents, to choose how feeds are tuned, so that default loops privilege prosocial scripts over what most reliably captures attention (often negativity).²⁷ In short, if the good is made routinely aesthetically compelling throughout society, prosocial desire and downstream action are given firmer conditions for formation.

27. Roy F. Baumeister, Ellen Bratslavsky, Catrin Finkenauer, and Kathleen D. Vohs, "Bad Is Stronger than Good," *Review of General Psychology* 5, no. 4 (2001): 323–370, <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.5.4.323>.

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