

# Demystifying the Negative

## René Girard's Critique of the "Humanization of Nothingness"

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**ABSTRACT** This paper will address René Girard's critique of the "humanization of nothingness" in modern Western philosophy. I will first explain how the "desire for death" is related to a phenomenon that Girard refers to as "obstacle addiction." Second, I will point out how mankind's desire for death and illusory will to self-divinization gradually tend to converge within the history of modern Western humanism. In particular, I will show how this convergence between self-destruction and self-divinization gradually takes shape through the evolution of the concept of "the negative" from Hegel to Kojève, Sartre and Camus. Finally, we shall come to see that in Girard's view "the negative" has tended to become an ever-preoccupying and unacknowledged symptom of mankind's addiction to "model/obstacles" of desire.

**KEYWORDS** Camus, Albert; death; Girard, René; Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich; humanism; Kojève, Alexandre; negativity; Sartre, Jean-Paul; suicide

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## INTRODUCTION

Ever since the revival of Hegelianism in France in the 1930s, the concept of the negative has been much debated. Some, such as Alexandre Kojève (1902–1968), made the negative one of the key operative concepts of their philosophy. Others, like Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995), aimed to introduce a philosophical critique of the negative. Still others, like Georges Bataille (1897–1962), argued that the negative goes beyond the limits of rationality and human language. Without going into the specifics of those debates, it is conspicuous that they pertain to the question of desire. In many respects, Kojève still belongs to the tradition of post-Kantian idealism. In statements such as “X is not there,” negation is regarded as the result of an operation of the human mind. While things are always perfectly identical to themselves, negation “stems for the freedom of the mind, a freedom which must be defined by the power to oppose a *no* to whatever is simply given.”<sup>1</sup> Kojève clearly states that the negative should be understood this way,<sup>2</sup> and that this freedom to negate the given is what sets apart human beings from the rest of the animal kingdom. To him, the negative defines what makes human desire distinct and free. In contrast to Kojève, Deleuze champions the thesis of desire taken as essentially affirmative, creative and productive. On the one hand, he expands on Bergson’s idea that the negative is mainly an effect of language (i.e. desires and operations of the mind are inherently positive and only sometimes appear as negative through the words and statements we use). On the other hand, in his very own reading of Nietzsche, Deleuze regards the negative as a hallmark of the philosophies of resentment (primarily Platonism, Christianity, Hegelianism), which posit desire as stemming from a lack and thereby dismiss the possibility of affirmative desire.<sup>3</sup> Like Deleuze, Bataille wants to get beyond Hegelian dialectics. However, he does so by redefining the negative as the most excessive and destructive component of human desire. In other words, the negative refers to actions and expenditures that are radically opposed to any kind of calculation or predetermined plan. It further and more specifically refers to what draws desire in the direction of murder, carnage, death and ruin. Hegel had failed to acknowledge the deeply irrational dimension of the

1. Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott Fox and J.M. Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 24.

2. “Thus, all action is ‘negating.’ Far from leaving the given as it is, action destroys it; if not in its being, at least in its given form.” Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 4.

3. See especially Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 8–10.

negative. Instead, Bataille contends, the German philosopher included the negative in a rational discourse aimed at the reconciliation of opposites.<sup>4</sup>

In his very first book, René Girard wrote that “The *Negative* which so many modern philosophers identify with freedom and life is in reality the herald of slavery and death.”<sup>5</sup> In this paper, I aim to address his critique of the negative, which I take to be most enlightening and highly novel. Admittedly, triangular desire may be defined as negative inasmuch as it rests on a “lack of being.” However, it also entails the effective (yet often unacknowledged) imitation of a model of desire. Contrary to Kojève, Girard does not merely define desire as the negation of the given. Moreover, freedom, far from being negative, implies a choice in favor of turning towards positive models of desire (especially Jesus Christ, the perfect model of desire). Although Girard contends that an unacknowledged resentment draws philosophers to the concept of the negative, unlike Deleuze he does not vindicate the thesis of autonomous, spontaneous and affirmative desire.<sup>6</sup> On the contrary, we shall see that an important part of Girard’s critique consists in showing that “The affirmation of the self ends in the negation of self. The will to make oneself God is a will to self-destruction which is gradually realized.” Bataille rightly argues that the negative is related to mankind’s desires for destruction and death, and that those desires go beyond Hegelian dialectics. Nonetheless, in contrast to Bataille, Girard thinks that such desires have underlying logics and dynamics that can be uncovered. For the negative, as we shall see, is primarily the name of a symptom suggesting humanity’s ever more increasing obsession with models/obstacles of desire.

In addition, what is novel about Girard’s approach is his attempt to trace back the origins of philosophers’ fascination with the negative. This fascination culminated with the “humanization of nothingness,” which Vincent Descombes defined as the philosophical enterprise that consists in divinizing or dignifying mankind through what seems the most diametrically opposite to it, namely the negative or nothingness.<sup>7</sup> From this perspective,

4. See Georges Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” *Yale French Studies* 78 (1990): 9–28, doi:10.2307/2930112. See also Jacques Derrida’s essay on Bataille “From restricted to general economy: A Hegelianism without reserve,” in *Writing and Difference* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), 317–50.

5. René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), 288.

6. For Girard’s critique of Deleuze, see “Delirium as System,” in *To Double Business Bound* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 84–120.

7. See Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, 9–54. “The humanization of nothingness” is the title of the first chapter, which is focused on the works of Alexandre Kojève and Jean-Paul Sartre.

humanity is not related to the divine because (however we interpret the meaning of this verse) “God created man in His *own* image; in the image of God He created him” (Genesis 1:27 NKJV). On the contrary, humans are considered to be divine because they are mortal beings. They are held to be divine due to, so to speak, the qualities of “nothingness” or “negativity” they possess. The “humanization of nothingness” denotes a specific kind of humanism that started with Kojève’s attempt to turn Hegel’s *Phenomenology* into a promethean philosophy, then continued further with Sartre’s *Existentialism is a Humanism* and Camus’s atheistic humanism. Girard obviously sees this kind of humanism as indefensible. Mankind’s attempt at self-divinization is bound to lead to self-destruction. More than any other kind of humanism, the “humanization of nothingness” shows that humanity’s self-divinization is a *dead-end*. But Girard does not merely want to assess the drama of atheistic humanism: he also aims to demonstrate what gave rise to it. He clearly shows how mimetic desire can compel human beings to endow death or self-destruction with the highest metaphysical prestige or, otherwise put, how desire is likely to generate the illusion that death is an attribute of self-sufficiency. This illusion, he contends, gradually permeated the history of Western philosophy and led to a philosophical praising of the negative. Hence, it is not the power of rational reasoning that turns death and nothingness into the source of absolute freedom or the divine. Rather, human reason comes to serve a desire for death.

The present paper will first address Girard’s very own conception of the desire for death and how it relates to his interpretation of the history of Western philosophy. In this way, we shall be brought to see how he understands the rise of the “humanization of nothingness” and will come to understand, in outline, his critique of the modern “exaltation of the negative.” In the remaining sections, I then show how Girard’s critique of the negative applies to philosophers such as Hegel, Kojève, Sartre and Camus. As my paper mainly expands on *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* and *Resurrection from the Underground*, I will, in my conclusion, briefly touch on Girard’s critique of the negative in his later writings. Lastly, I will situate Girard’s critique of the negative within the context of his Christian way of thinking about death and resurrection.

#### THE DESIRE FOR DEATH AND WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

Girard argues that desire should not be defined as a straight line connecting a subject to an object. Rather, our desire for the object is mediated by the real or apparent desire of a model (or mediator) that we imitate. In other words, desire is triangular; it involves a disciple (or, so to speak, the

“subject” of desire), a model that he or she imitates, and an object. In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, “external mediation” refers to the context in which the distance separating the disciple from the model is large enough to prevent rivalry. In contrast, this safe distance between the disciple and the model no longer applies to the context of “internal mediation.” In this case, the disciple, by getting closer to his model or mediator, unwittingly suggests to the latter that it redirect its desire towards the object. It is through unconscious imitation that the model blocks the disciple’s way to the object. From this point on, the disciple’s model turns into an obstacle and may thus be referred to as a “model/obstacle.” The model/obstacle only makes the disciple’s desire for the object more vivid. And by persisting in his will to acquire the object, the disciple will become in turn a model/obstacle for his mediator. This new context is that of “double mediation.” As agents are a model/obstacle for each other, they gradually lose sight of the initial object of their rivalry. From now on, each wants “to be what the other becomes when he possesses this or that object.”<sup>8</sup>

#### *The Dead-End of “Obstacle Addiction”*

“Double mediation” is the reinforcement of people’s desire through reciprocal and unconscious imitation. In the end, the model/obstacle becomes the standard of the highest degree of intensity of desire. One’s encounter with a model-turned-obstacle is far from being an anecdotal experience: it leaves a trace that memory can hardly erase. If someone manages to defeat the model/obstacle, then the initial purpose of the rivalry will lose its importance to them—especially since it is no longer mediated by the desire of a serious competitor. To them, finding further valuable objects of desire will amount to finding stronger model/obstacles. If, on the contrary, someone gets defeated by the model/obstacle, their fascination with the latter will only grow. Or, to put it otherwise, the disciple’s desire for the model constantly escalates with the model’s resistance. As the disciple’s desire to become like their model grows, their frustration grows too. The more they feel rejected by the model/obstacle, the more they admire it. Eventually, powerful feelings of admiration and hatred alternate in the disciple, binding them more and more strongly to their model/obstacle. One way or another, the quest for the model/obstacle is meant to become an ever stronger repetitive, mechanical and irresistible pattern. At first, my model/obstacle is nothing other than the one who blocks my way to the object.

8. René Girard, *Battling to the End: Conversation with Benoît Chantre* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010), 31.

But it soon turns out that the value of objects to me strictly depends on the model/obstacle's prestige. It follows that where there is something worth being desired, there must be a model/obstacle. The conclusion then comes down to the following idea: the stronger the model/obstacle, the better. However, given that the model/obstacle's strength amounts to their capacity of blocking the disciple's way to them, we are led even to a far more radical conclusion: namely, that *what is the worthiest of being desired is whatever negates me the most*. Even stronger model/obstacles than people who reject, despise or ignore us are obstacles deprived of human consciousness. In a nutshell, *the ultimate obstacle is death*. Indeed, as Girard puts it in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*: "The truth of metaphysical desire is death."<sup>9</sup> The end of mankind's obsession with models/obstacles can be

found in the mineral world, the world of a death which the absence of all movement, of all quivering, has made complete and definitive. The horrible fascination ends in the density of lead, the impenetrable immobility of granite.<sup>10</sup>

Girard's first reflections on mankind's morbid fascination with models/obstacles—or on what he sometimes refers to as "obstacle addiction"<sup>11</sup> (*manie de l'obstacle*)—already contains the main features of his critique of Freud's theory of the "death instinct,"<sup>12</sup> on which he will expand years later in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*.<sup>13</sup> Admittedly, it is through very complex and hardly scientific speculations that Freud comes to postulate the idea of a further instinct beyond the pleasure principle. But, more importantly, Girard notices that the hypothesis of a "death instinct" fails to explain the problem Freud's essay was supposed to address in the first place: namely, the "compulsion to repeat." Given that the death drive is defined as an "instinct to return to the inanimate state"<sup>14</sup> that is, as an instinct, strictly independent from imitation, it is hard to see how such a notion might account for someone's constant repetition or reenactment

9. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 282.

10. *Ibid.*, 287.

11. See René Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground: Feodor Dostoevsky*, trans. James G. Williams (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012), 81.

12. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961).

13. See René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 411–5.

14. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 32.

of painful or traumatic events. As he often does, Girard argues that Freud multiplies entities needlessly. Undoubtedly, for a distant observer death seems to be the prime and direct “existential aim” of those who repeatedly engage in self-destructive behavior. Accordingly, the observer is tempted to postulate dynamics which significantly differ from those regarded as usual and normal in human desire. However, in Girard’s view, what we call the “death drive” or “death instinct” is nothing more than a pathological complication stemming from the dynamics of mimetic desire. From the moment we know that triangular desire may develop into a destructive or self-destructive “obstacle addiction,” we no longer need to add further notions to explain such seemingly paradoxical and enigmatic phenomena as the “compulsion to repeat”:

The subject who is not able to decide for himself on the object that he should desire relies upon the desire of another person. And he automatically transforms the model [of] desire into a desire that opposes and frustrates his own. Because he does not understand the automatic character of the rivalry, the imitator soon converts the very fact of being opposed, frustrated and rejected into the major stimulant of his desire. In one way or another, he proceeds to inject more and more violence into his desire. To identify this tendency is to recognize that, in the last resort, desire tends towards death, both the death of the model and obstacle (murder) and the death of the subject himself (self-destruction and suicide).<sup>15</sup>

In contrast to Freudian theories, Girard contends that the desire for death cannot be separated from the broader context of inter-subjective (or “inter-individual”) relations. Even man’s desire for death is mediated by his imitation of models; we must go beyond the illusion of death taken as an innate and direct object of desire.<sup>16</sup>

15. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 413.

16. Note here that suicide out of physical pain or necessity is an exception to this rule. In this instance, self-destruction is based on need or appetite, which, in Girard’s view, are different from mimetic desire. Some might contend that Girard’s approach is utterly reductionist. However, I do not regard this criticism as convincing. First, it would be too simple to dismiss the explanatory merits of the “obstacle-addiction” theory without any further investigation. Second, the theory obviously leaves room for an inquiry into psychological trauma (i.e. a brutal encounter with a model/obstacle may leave a more or less indelible trace on the human psyche). Third, there is no a priori reason to dismiss Girard’s bold contention according to which destructive and self-destructive behavior, far from being an almost unexplainable phenomena, entails a dynamics of desire that becomes ever more impoverished, rigid, and nearly automatic.

*From the Cartesian Self to the "Humanization of Nothingness"*

Aided by Girard's writings, I will now briefly point out how modern Western history has gradually paved the way to the "humanization of nothingness" and the praising by philosophers of the negative. Before starting this brief historical inquiry, it is important to note that while, as we shall see, the modern Western world fosters "obstacle addiction," it is also a world in which the use of physical violence is usually suppressed. Girard is fully aware that the pathologies inherent in "obstacle addiction" need not necessarily translate into acts of murder or suicide. When the use of violence is prohibited, most of us will vent out their envy, frustration and anger through more devious routes. Human psychology tends to become an "underground" phenomenon: that is to say, people will strive to deny the actual role played by the model both in their public relations and in their own personal lives. As Girard puts it: "All underground people carefully hide their imitations, even from themselves, so as not to give their models the psychic reward of seeing themselves imitated, not to humiliate themselves by being revealed as imitators."<sup>17</sup> Given that "obstacle addiction" renders the mediator's (or model's) position more and more important and inescapable, people will use ever more refined and radical strategies in order not to appear as imitators to either themselves or others. Among many other things, this implies that human beings will also use intellectual means to rationalize and justify their denial of "obstacle addiction."

Let us see how such an underground psychology has gradually come to permeate the history of modern Western philosophy. Girard considers Descartes (1596–1650) the founding father of Western individualism. Admittedly, Descartes's radical doubt and *cogito* lay the foundations of modern philosophy by showing that what is certain and rational can only be grounded on our "subjective experience." However, the gradual triumph of Cartesianism will raise multiple issues. To be sure, the rise of rationalism frees humanity from the superstitions and beliefs that were supposed to explain the world they inhabit. But the other side of the coin is that mankind, whose only guide henceforth is his "subjective experience," will have increasing trouble orienting himself in a more and more rationalized and complex world. Given that the extent of what he can know for certain and by himself is inevitably limited, he will have to seek further guidance through the authority of experts—who can more or less guarantee that they have personally and thoroughly inquired into the issue or matter at stake. On the level of humanity's attitude to knowledge, the position of

17. Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, 78.



the Cartesian self thus reinforces that of the Girardian “disciple” who can only orient himself or herself in the world by borrowing his or her desires from others. In other words, Cartesianism paves the way to a modern “cult of experts” which very likely leads to a general and unconscious cult of models/obstacles of desire.<sup>18</sup> This will become more and more evident starting from the age of Enlightenment and the French Revolution, which put an end to the era of *external mediation* in which mankind’s spiritual and intellectual life was mainly based on the imitation of transcendent and culturally stable models. This era now gives way to that of *internal mediation*, “in which, at least in principle, individuals and communities are free to adopt whichever models they prefer and, better still, no model at all.”<sup>19</sup> On the one hand, over the next centuries innovation will gradually become an end in itself and a notion that radically excludes imitation. On the other hand, advances in social equality, free economic competition and technology will reduce the distances separating individuals and thereby nurture rivalrous imitation. While models of desire multiply, imitation is getting more and more denied and concealed. Regarding Western philosophy, we may for instance notice that the underground psychology of rivalrous imitation will become the blind spot of the modern ethics of “enlightened self-interest.” Indeed, mankind’s obsession with models-turned-obstacles is diametrically opposed to the idea that holds that advancing the interests of the group and serving one’s own interests go hand in hand. This is well illustrated by Dostoevsky’s novel *Notes from Underground*,<sup>20</sup> in which the narrator is at the same time fascinated with those who reject him (the officer and his former colleagues during the school reunion) and repelled by those who are attracted to him (Liza, the kind prostitute). Due to his morbid obsession with obstacles, the narrator of the *Notes* is stuck at a stage where his interests, as well as those of others, are mutually negated. In the end, Dostoevsky’s novel offers a radical critique of Adam Smith’s (1723–1790) “invisible hand” as well as of Bentham’s (1748–1832) and Mill’s (1806–1873) utilitarianism, and the economic theories of “*laissez faire*.” In Girard’s reading of the *Notes*, it is the unacknowledged phenomenon of obstacle addiction that shows why

18. “Our cult of experts is really one with the underground fascination for the obstacle/model of mimetic rivalry. It verges on archaic man’s magical faith in terrifying idols. Having repudiated religion in order to be more rational, modern man comes full circle and, in the name of a superior rationality, embraces a rational and technical form of irrationality.” *Ibid.*, 84.

19. René Girard, “Innovation and Imitation,” *SubStance* 19/2–3, no. 62/63 (1990): 11, doi:10.2307/3684663.

20. Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

the idea of a spontaneous harmonization between rational and egotistic individuals is nothing but wishful thinking.

If the era of internal mediation comes gradually to reject the culturally stable and transcendent models of the past, the question of the Cartesian self will also change radically. In Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*, *cogito ergo sum* is the starting point of philosophy, but it is also meant to be inseparable from God as the cause of my existence.<sup>21</sup> However, once philosophy has got rid of the idea of God, the ever more pressing issue will be to determine how the Cartesian self can become, ontologically speaking, its own measure and foundation. Gradually, the solipsistic self will aim to found itself through self-affirmation: it will strive to claim, like God in the Old Testament, that "I AM WHO I AM" (Exodus 3:14 NSAB).<sup>22</sup> Girard contends that this tendency will become particularly conspicuous with the onset of post-Kantian philosophy:

In the course of its history Western individualism took over little by little the prerogatives that had belonged to God in medieval philosophy. This is not a matter of a simple philosophical mode, a passing infatuation for the subjective. Since Descartes, there is no longer any point of departure except the *cogito ergo sum*. Kant succeeded for a time in keeping the Watergates [sic.] of subjectivism closed; he managed this with a completely arbitrary compromise, but the truth must out and it does so with a bang. Absolute idealism and Promethean thought will push Cartesianism to its extreme consequences.<sup>23</sup>

In his first writings, Girard contends that an ontological deficiency, or "lack of being," is integral to mankind. The disciple is always in search of a "fullness of being" of which he or she is deprived. "Metaphysical desire" is the ultimate end of triangular desire. It is a desire for the model's only seemingly self-sufficient being. It rests on an adulteration of humanity's desire for God, or on "deviated transcendency" (as opposed to authentic "vertical transcendency"). According to Girard, our longing for transcendence does not vanish with the dawning of the era of internal mediation. On the contrary, our inescapable need for it begins by seeking "satisfaction

21. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. John Cottingham, 2 ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 28–41.

22. "Each mode of subjectivity must found and justify the being of the real in his totality and affirm I am who I am." Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, 43.

23. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 42–43.

in the human world.”<sup>24</sup> Traditional belief in God recedes, as human beings gradually become “Gods in the eye of each other.”<sup>25</sup> Their desire for transcendence cannot be suppressed. As they turn away from the vertical transcendence of God and religious tradition, it becomes harder for them to renounce their pride. Metaphysical desire gives them the illusion that self-sufficiency is within their reach.

In the age of internal mediation, humanity is ever more unconsciously drawn to model/obstacles. Although philosophical systems may plainly and simply ignore the irresistible logic of “obstacle addiction,” it will inevitably, and just as with the return of the repressed, manifest itself in Western philosophy. However, as the dynamics leading to the desire for death are still largely unconscious, they will not be taken for what they are. Rather, philosophical discourse, deluded by metaphysical desire, will turn obstacles of desire (including death) into features advancing mankind’s freedom or self-divinization. Starting with the “humanization of nothingness,” it will become conspicuously apparent that in the history of modern Western humanism, the underground psychology of “obstacle addiction,” and mankind’s will to become God, were bound to converge. The two main trends that we have briefly identified in the history of modern philosophy eventually collide with one another. Indeed, the interplay between “deviated transcendence” and the pathologies inherent in mimetic desire will encourage a sacralizing of humanity’s desire for death. It is only in retrospect, at the end of a long historical process, that it will emerge that “The affirmation of the self ends in the negation of self. The will to make oneself God is a will to self-destruction which is gradually realized.”<sup>26</sup>

This historical overview helps us to understand the key idea of Girard’s critique of the negative. His main contention, indeed, is that the concept of the negative is the result of an unconscious process which turns obstacles of desire into features elevating mankind. I shall now show how we may uncover this process in Hegel’s philosophy. In the Master–Slave dialectic, as we shall see, the negative is an artefact generated by “obstacle addiction.” Through the concept of the negative, Hegel mistakenly turned the Slave’s desire for his Master (i.e. his model/obstacle) into a feature advancing the Slave’s own freedom.

24. *Ibid.*, 159.

25. *Ibid.*, 53.

26. *Ibid.*, 287.

### THE NEGATIVE, OR THE DESIRE OF THE SLAVE

Much has already been written on the differences and similarities between Girard's mimetic theory and Hegel's struggle for recognition.<sup>27</sup> However, at least to my knowledge, none of these studies have tried to make sense of Girard's bold contention that "negativity ... is never anything other than a reflection of human relationships at the level of double mediation."<sup>28</sup> If I understand Girard correctly, he means that "negativity" is a philosophical concept which mistakenly turns phenomena inherent within conflictual human relations into something else. Now, provided we pay close attention to the position of the Slave in Hegel's dialectic, we will come to realize that Girard's idea makes perfect sense. Note that I do not conflate Hegel's philosophy with the "humanization of nothingness." Rather, I aim to show that the role played by the negative in the Master–Slave dialectic (that is, not in his philosophy as a whole) foreshadows the role the negative will come to play, more than a century later, in the "humanization of nothingness."

#### *Labour, Death and the Negative in the Master–Slave Dialectic*

In Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the struggle to the death—which will eventually lead to the dialectic of Master and Slave—starts with two agents aiming to prove to each other that they value their "independence above life itself."<sup>29</sup> The only way to attest this independence is to negate animal life or, to put it otherwise, to show another human being one's willingness to sacrifice one's own life. Henceforth, each is determined to prove their independence to the other through radical self-sacrifice, and this mutual aim will give rise to the struggle. Although they do not see that their aims are perfectly identical, each desires what the other desires, namely, to be recognized as more than a mere living organism, as more than a mere thing. This reciprocal desire will lead to a reciprocal violence in which both jointly push themselves to put their lives at risk. However, no one can gain recognition if the struggle ends in violent death.<sup>30</sup> Both agents need to survive because, otherwise, the negation of life would not be ascertained

27. For an overview and critique of scholars conflating Girard and Hegel, see Andreas Wilmes, "Portrait of René Girard as a Post-Hegelian: Masters, Slaves, and Monstrous Doubles," *The Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence* 1, no. 1 (2017): 57–85, doi:10.22618/TP.PJCV.20171.1.95007.

28. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 287–8.

29. Terry Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology. The Sociality of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 58.

30. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 114.

by another human consciousness. According to the logic of what is required for there to be recognition, someone has to cling to his or her life and abandon the struggle. One of the agents, the Slave, will have stepped back during the conflict, while the other, the Master, will not have given up on putting their life at substantial risk. From this point on, we enter a new relation in which the Slave works for the Master's enjoyment. At first, the Master believes that they have achieved recognition, while the slave regards himself or herself as inessential.

Even so, Hegel would show that the Master–Slave relation is, in fact, quite the opposite of what it seems. It turns out that the Master is dependent on the Slave's work. In addition, the Master does not achieve authentic recognition, since the Slave has been reduced to the rank of an object, whose recognition thus cannot be regarded by the Master as proof of their purportedly essential independence from natural life. In contrast, the Slave has experienced something far more significant than the Master: it is they who backed down during the struggle, after having been faced with the possibility of their own death. As Hegel put it:

For this consciousness [the Slave] has been fearful, not of this or that particular thing or just at odd moments, but its whole being has been seized with dread; for it has experienced the fear of death, the absolute Lord. In that experience it has been quite unmanned, has trembled in every fibre of its being, and everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations. But this pure universal movement, the absolute melting-away of everything stable, is the simple, essential nature of self-consciousness, absolute negativity, *pure being-for-self*, which consequently is *implicit* in this consciousness.<sup>31</sup>

At first glance, it seems that the Slave, in contrast to the Master, has failed to prove their independence. But this is only true if we analyze the situation in a superficial way. If we take a closer look, Hegel argues, we notice that the Slave, by experiencing the possibility of their own death, envisages their own nothingness. Paradoxically, the Slave goes beyond animal life by preserving it. They have proved to be more than a mere living organism, because their experience of death made them see themselves as “Nothingness maintained in Being.”<sup>32</sup> This experience of “absolute negativity” is pivotal. Admittedly, the Slave also gains independence by serving and working for the Master. Through being in the service of their Master they learn to delay

31. *Ibid.*, 117.

32. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 48.

the satisfaction of their own desires, as opposed to engaging in the mere activity of consumption, in which objects of desire constantly reappear, and which only serves to show mankind's dependence on nature. Given that they transform the objects around them for their Master's enjoyment, they give form and content to their negating activity. However, if the slave were not laboring out of fear, their freedom would not be universal, but rather limited to the particular talents they make use of to satisfy their Master. Fear of death without labor is a universal but abstract freedom: it is a freedom without any form or content. Labor minus the fear of death is, strictly, just a particular freedom, deprived of all universality. Without that fear, the Slave would not come to understand that their freedom goes beyond the specific activities they are performing *here and now* for their Master. As Houlgate puts it:

If ... the slave labours out of fear and the accompanying experience of himself as pure negativity, he can regard any particular activity as the particular, concrete expression of his *universal* freedom from, and freedom to negate and transform, everything given and determinate around him, or what Hegel calls his "universal formative activity." Accordingly, he will understand himself to be capable of all kinds of labour and not to be dependent on, or slave to, any one of them.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, Hegel always sought to stress the idea that the Master–Slave dialectic is completed if, *and only if*, the fear of death and labor are deeply bound together.

### *The Negative as "the Herald of Slavery and Death"*

From a Girardian perspective, the Hegelian struggle to the death is utterly mimetic. The rivalry escalates because each imitates the disregard for life that the other displays. Gradually, each comes to see in the other the obstacle to their affirmation of independence over life. The struggle very likely leads to death, given that the opponents are nothing more than "obstacle addicts" who are incapable of recognizing that they are the same. If the Master manages to prevail over the Slave, then the latter is no longer an obstacle. It is therefore right to conclude, as Hegel does, that the victory of the Master is a double-edged one: as soon as the Slave is no longer an

33. Stephen Houlgate, *Hegel: Freedom, Truth and History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 70.

obstacle, the Master can no longer consider the Slave proof of his or her own independence.

However, the Master is still an obstacle to the Slave. So, should we conclude, like Hegel, that there is some experience of “absolute negativity” beyond the Slave’s relation to their model/obstacle? That goes to the heart of the matter. Hegel’s depiction of the struggle is notoriously abstract, insofar as we barely know anything about the opponents and the kind of violence they use. We do not know whether the rivals differ in age, strength, intelligence, etc. Moreover, we do not know if they fight with their fists, with weapons of opportunity, by showing skill, by using their tactical mind, etc. This lack of more concrete information about the conflict in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* plays an important rhetorical role, in that it somehow puts the reader’s mind to sleep and encourages him or her to accept the seemingly most plausible, general, and radical conclusion of the Slave submitting to their Master out of fear of death. Yet, common sense shows us that many other conflict scenarios are possible. I may surrender because I am out of breath and no longer have enough strength to fight. I may abandon the conflict because I can no longer endure my pain and suffering. It is also possible that I be forced to recognize that my opponent is stronger and smarter than me. Or maybe I am stronger and smarter than my opponent, but it turns out that he has been luckier than me. After all, there is always a certain degree of contingency in conflicts that may work in favor of one or the other of the two opponents ... In his analysis of Hegel’s dialectic, Marquet notes in passing that the Master, contrary to the Slave, was not perceptive and smart enough to sense danger. According to Marquet, we can even go so far as to say that the Master “did not have the courage to be afraid, to face death, to comprehend what death means.”<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, as we just saw, it is also possible to imagine that neither the Master, nor the Slave had the courage to face death. It is also conceivable that both the Slave and the Master experienced fear of death at nearly the same time, but, by a fortunate coincidence, the Slave was the first to show their submission to the other. In the end, it is even conceivable that only the Master truly faced death—that it was through their fear of death that they found the strength and willingness to survive and defeat their opponent.

Among many other conflict scenarios, Hegel chooses to favor only one. His scenario is no more and no less likely than any other. It neither directly

34. “... il [le maître] n’a pas eu le courage d’avoir peur, de voir la mort en face et d’appréhender ce qu’elle signifie.” Jean-François Marquet, *Leçons sur la Phénoménologie de l’esprit de Hegel* (Paris: Ellipses, 2009), 100.

follows from some form of logical necessity, nor from some empirical law. But it could be argued that Hegel focused on the only scenario involving a universal philosophical lesson concerning death, labor and freedom. This argument would only be convincing if we could show that Hegel's account of the Slave's fear of death is perfectly accurate. Unfortunately, though, we are in a position to raise serious doubts about the idea that the Slave could learn something about their own freedom through their fear of death. To be sure, the Slave did not contemplate death *in abstracto* (i.e. realizing that everything comes to an end, that all of us will die some day). Rather, they were afraid of being killed by their opponent. Their fear was a fear of *violent death*, inseparable from the Master. Indeed, it is the concrete threat represented by the Master that, in the eyes of the Slave, shook "everything solid and stable ... to its foundations."<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the Slave supposedly experienced "the absolute melting-away of everything stable"<sup>36</sup> while staying alive only because the Master decided not to kill him. The idea of animal life negated and preserved at the same time is what best defines, from the point of view of the Slave, the Master's power over life and death. The Slave sees himself as nothing, precisely because the Master is everything to them. In other words, life being simultaneously suppressed and preserved corresponds to the Slave's experience of the Master as a model/obstacle. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, we move from this entirely intersubjective experience to the Slave's private and universal experience of their own mortality, through which they contemplate "absolute negativity" and thereby realize their "essential nature [consisting] of self-consciousness."<sup>37</sup> Henceforth, several issues arise. The first problem is that we cannot be entirely sure whether Hegel's account of the Slave's experience of death should be taken for granted. Admittedly, the Slave did envision that their whole life might come to an end. However, this need not necessarily imply that they experienced the "absolute melting-away of everything stable."<sup>38</sup> In instances of extreme survival, physiological responses are usually very specific, the threat to life is perceived very distinctly, people have strong thoughts about their dearest relatives, all their life passes before their eyes. These experiences are very different from that of "absolute negativity." Furthermore, one may prefer to define the fear of death as a fear of the Unknown, rather than defining it in terms of "negativity." In any case, there

35. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 117.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*



will always be an unbridgeable gap between experiencing the possibility of one's own death and experiencing death as "absolute negativity." Bataille is surely right when he contends that nothing can "reveal to the living the invasion of death." As he puts it, Hegel's conception of negativity leads us to the idea of an experience that is always already impossible to achieve in human terms:

The privileged manifestation of Negativity is death, but death, in fact, reveals nothing. In theory, it is his natural, animal being whose death reveals Man to himself, but the revelation never takes place. For when the animal being supporting him dies, the human being himself ceases to be. In order for Man to reveal himself ultimately to himself, he would have to die, but he would have to do it while living—watching himself ceasing to be. In other words, death itself would have to become (self-) consciousness at the very moment that it annihilates the conscious being.<sup>39</sup>

Given that death is a non-rationalizable and non-objectifiable phenomenon, we may indeed wonder whether it could really play a role in Hegel's dialectic. What is more, death *per se* does not occur in Hegel's conflict scenario. As is shown by Bataille, Hegel's problematic idea of self-consciousness as "Nothingness maintained in Being" may somehow apply to a more radical scenario, namely that of a human being's identifying with the sacrificial victim he or she is putting to death. (Moreover, we should note in passing here that sacrificing the other, and religion, play absolutely no role in Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic). Although negativity does not truly manifest itself in sacrifice, either—this still being just "negativity" in scare-quotes, so to speak—it nonetheless comes closer to the idea of mankind staying alive while seeing the "absolute negativity" of death at work.

In the end, the negative is nothing more than a distorted image of man's fascination with models/obstacles. At first, Hegel's depiction of the struggle to the death is very close to the logic of "obstacle addiction." During the struggle, opponents aim to become an ever-stronger obstacle to each other. This increasing obsession with the other (the model/obstacle) ultimately leads to destruction and death unless one of the opponents surrenders. And it is at this very moment that Hegel aims to conjure away the inescapable logic of "obstacle addiction." The *Phenomenology of Spirit* invites us to believe that fear of death and labour show the Slave's independence with respect to animal life, and advance his or her freedom. However, although

39. Bataille, "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice," 19.

we may of course pity the Slave, it turns out that their situation makes them no freer than the Master. The only significant difference between the struggle to the death and the Lordship–Bondage dialectic is that the latter is an asymmetrical relation. In this latter context, the Slave suppresses their violence, and their ambivalent feelings towards their Master are thereby repressed. From this point on, Hegel’s dialectical solution does nothing more than express the underground psychology of the Slave—or, to put it differently, the Slave’s resentment. “Nothingness maintained in Being” ultimately corresponds to the power over life and death that the Slave believes they are seeing in their Master. It corresponds to the Slave’s experience of the model/obstacle—to what the Slave desires, not what the Slave actually is. Hegel thereby turns the mimetic desire of the Slave into a strictly individual feature that will characterize the Slave, like freedom as such. The arbitrary dismissal of the model of desire (i.e. the Master) shows that negativity is nothing more than a symptom of a repressed fascination with obstacles. In Hegel’s struggle for recognition, the negative turns out to be an illusory by-product of intersubjective and conflictual relations of desire. The negative is the desire of the Slave. And both Slave and Master are similar insofar as they depend on the unconscious dynamics of obstacle addiction. That is why, according to Girard, the negative can never serve to prove that mankind is independent or free: “The *Negative* which so many modern philosophers identify with freedom and life is in reality the herald of slavery and death.”<sup>40</sup>

#### THE DRAMA OF THE “HUMANIZATION OF NOTHINGNESS”

More than a century would pass between Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) and the first publication of Alexandre Kojève’s *Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit* in France (1947). During the nineteenth century, it became obvious how deeply “deviated transcendency” permeates Western philosophy. In France, Auguste Comte (1798–1857) would aim to replace traditional religion with his positivist “Religion of humanity.” In Germany, Nietzsche (1844–1900) would introduce the *Übermensch* as a way of overcoming the “death of God” and Christian “slave morality.” Meanwhile, Left Hegelians such as Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872), who very likely influenced Kojève, would contend that God is nothing more than a human projection. Humanity was supposed to overcome its alienation through religion by reclaiming its own attributes mistakenly granted to God.

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

Two world wars would subsequently undermine humanistic ideals, but humanism has still not yet come to an end. This is not unrelated to the phenomenon of technological growth, for through technology, human beings seem to have finally built an environment which is entirely their own; more than ever, they appear like “masters and possessors of nature.” That, in turn, translates into an expansion of material comfort, but also into new means of mass destruction such as nuclear weapons. At first glance, the rise of the technological society offers a compelling illustration of Kojève’s conception of the negative. *Prima facie*, mankind appears as the being who realizes its freedom by transcending and negating the given. First, it negates nature by assimilating it to its own needs. Second, its weapons endow it with a power over the life and death of its entire species—that is, with the real possibility of negating mankind as a whole. In the end, the negative does not appear solely as the expression of humanity’s freedom: it seems to correspond to the latter’s god-like features. Yet at bottom, the negative remains a symptom of mankind’s obsession with model/obstacles of desire.

*Man: A “Nothingness that Nihilates”*

Through his very influential and rather controversial reading of Hegel, Kojève radicalizes the concept of the negative. First, “deviated transcendence” is definitely at work in his philosophy. While Hegel aimed to show how God actualizes Himself through World History, Kojève unambiguously states that World History is the development of mankind’s divine nature. The following quote from Kojève’s *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* clearly shows that, as noted by Girard, modern individualism aims to take over “the prerogatives that had belonged to God in medieval philosophy”<sup>41</sup>:

Christian Man can really become what he would like to be only by becoming a man without God—or, if you will, a God-Man. He must realize *in himself* what at first he thought was realized in his God. To be *really* Christian, he *himself* must become Christ.<sup>42</sup>

In Kojève, the historical process through which humanity re-appropriates the attributes it mistakenly granted to God is based on an anthropological reading of Hegel’s Master–Slave dialectic. It is only once the struggle for

41. Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, 42.

42. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 67. Kojève further states that “it is sufficient to say of Man everything that the Christian says of his God in order to move from the absolute or Christian Theology to Hegel’s absolute philosophy or Science.” *Ibid.*, 73.

recognition has been resolved that Human History is fully achieved. Girard himself acknowledged that Kojève had influenced him somewhat when he wrote *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*.<sup>43</sup> Many scholars have already tried to point out the similarities between Girard's mimetic theory and Kojève's conception of the struggle for recognition.<sup>44</sup> Yet I think that the commonalities between Girard and Kojève are most often overstated

Admittedly, Kojève understands the struggle for recognition in terms of "a desire for the other's desire."<sup>45</sup> Each wants their human worth to be recognized by the other. That is to say, each wants to be desired by the other as a properly free being. The desire for the other's desire of independence is what sparks the struggle. Given that desire is mediated by the desire of the other, there are indeed some insights in Kojève that seem to anticipate Girard's conception of mimetic desire.<sup>46</sup> However, Girard's theory is not about "a desire for the other's desire," but rather about "a desire for what the other possesses"<sup>47</sup> or, put otherwise, a "desire according to that of another."<sup>48</sup> What is more, Kojève's theory of desire is not mimetic at heart. According to Kojève, desire is based on mankind's ability to transcend the given. Desire is essentially a power to negate that sets humanity apart from the Animal. While the natural world is characterized by an identity which is always equal to itself (i.e. *this* thing is nothing more and nothing less than *this* thing), human beings are not what they are, and are what they are not. In Kojève, human desire is deeply bound to freedom and nothingness. It

43. Girard, *Battling to the End*, 30.

44. See Eugene Webb, *The Self Between. From Freud to the New Social Psychology of France* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992), 116; George Erving, "René Girard and the Legacy of Alexandre Kojève," *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 10 (Spring 2003): 111–25, doi:10.1353/ctn.2003.0002; Guy Vanheeswijck, "The Place of René Girard in Contemporary Philosophy," *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 10 (Spring 2003): 98, doi:10.1353/ctn.2003.0004; Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *Lacan: The Absolute Master*, trans. Douglas Brick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 254.

45. Girard, *Battling to the End*, 30.

46. For instance, Kojève's contention that "Desire directed toward a natural object is human only to the extent that it is 'mediated' by the Desire of another directed toward the same object: it is human to desire what others desire, because they desire it. Thus, an object perfectly useless from the biological point of view (such as a medal, or the enemy's flag) can be desired because it is the object of other desires. Such a Desire can only be a human Desire, and human reality, as distinguished from animal reality, is created only by action that satisfies such Desires: human history is the history of desired Desires." Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 6. See also Erving, "René Girard and the Legacy of Alexandre Kojève," 111–25.

47. Girard, *Battling to the End*, 30.

48. Wolfgang Palaver, *René Girard's Mimetic Theory*, trans. Gabriel Borrud (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 119.

is thanks to mankind's capacity to negate as a desiring being that historical becoming is made possible. If a human being were not a "negating," it would be nothing more than a "static and given being"<sup>49</sup> belonging to the realm of animal life. As Kojève puts it: "Man is not a Being that *is* in an eternal identity to itself in Space, but a Nothingness that *nihilates*."<sup>50</sup> In the end, desire, death and freedom are equivalent:

Man is a (free) Individual only to the extent that he is mortal, and he can realize and manifest himself as such an Individual only by realizing and manifesting Death as well.<sup>51</sup>

Kojève further adds:

In fine, then, human death does indeed present itself as a "manifestation" of Man's freedom, individuality, and historicity—that is, of the "total" or dialectical character of his being and his existence. More particularly, death is an "appearance" of Negativity, which is the genuine motor of the dialectical movement.<sup>52</sup>

Here, we are touching on an unsolvable contradiction. On the one hand, Kojève is bound to maintain the dialectical spirit of Hegel's philosophy—which, primarily, is about reconciliation between the finite and the infinite, mankind and God. On the other hand, his definition of desire is incompatible with any form of dialectical thinking: if mankind is what it desires, and if desire is pure negativity, how could it make its freedom its own? At bottom, it would have to follow its desire for death to the end: attaining its freedom would amount to losing it. Kojève wrote that History is about humans creating their own reality, and that this process is only completed once the Master–Slave dialectic is overcome through authentic and universal reciprocal recognition. However, given Kojève's definition of desire, we can see that recognition is always already bound to fail. To be sure, I may desire the desire of the other insofar as only another human being is capable of expressing its will to transcend the given (the natural world) through negation. Yet, the other will never become a mirror showing me the

49. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 5.

50. *Ibid.*, 48.

51. *Ibid.*, 251. "Man's freedom and individuality indeed presuppose his death." *Ibid.*, 252.

52. *Ibid.*, 253. Kojève also states that "Death and Freedom are but two ('phenomenological') aspects of one and the same thing, so that to say 'mortal' is to say 'free,' and inversely." *Ibid.*, 247.

pure negativity that defines me. Pure negativity is nothing more than my fascination with an obstacle that could prove capable of destroying me. One can never appropriate pure negativity. Hence, we can only conclude that:

If strictly human Desire is the desire that desires itself as desire of nothing, then man can never take his proper place except as *desire* of himself, as *impossible* desire of himself. “Man” was the name of the impossible. Man is not in man, he is always beyond himself.<sup>53</sup>

In Hegel, the negative was the philosophical artifact of the Slave’s fascination with their model/obstacle, their Master. However, the negative was also part of a dialectical process about the self-reflection of life. Moreover, the Master–Slave dialectic marks an early stage within the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: the German philosopher’s conception of freedom goes well beyond the idea of a mere liberty to negate. Last but not least, Hegel offered a speculative philosophy regarding the Christian Revelation which, however we interpret it, cannot be reduced to mere individualism. With Kojève, the negative remains an artifact of mankind’s fascination with model/obstacles, but the scope of the concept is becoming much broader and more extreme. The negative now defines humanity as a free being who is essentially different from the natural world. Furthermore, the negative becomes the principle of mankind’s self-formation through History. It is thanks to its power to negate that mankind takes the place of God. Ultimately, the negative becomes a strictly individualistic and non-dialectical concept.

From a historical perspective, we have reached the stage where, as Girard puts it, “The affirmation of the self ends in the negation of the self. The will to make oneself God is a will to self-destruction which is gradually realized.”<sup>54</sup> With the gradual amplification of internal mediation, stable and transcendent models are receding as models of desire multiply. At the same time, “underground psychology” is taking the lead and compelling philosophical discourse to conceal the actual role played by models of desire in the formation of the self. Mimetic desire is becoming ever harder to dissimulate, so that philosophical individualism/humanism must use ever more radical strategies of self-deception. In their vain attempt to bypass the mimetic reality of the human world, human beings may pretend that they no longer desire anything, or that their desires, unlike those of their fellow beings, are utterly spontaneous and authentic. Kojève’s strategy is

53. Borch-Jacobsen, Lacan: *The Absolute Master*, 20.

54. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 287.

even more radical, insofar as he contends that humanity may express its most essential freedom and desire in its self-destruction. Purportedly, since mankind can die, or put its life at substantial risk, out of sheer pride (as demonstrated by the Hegelian struggle for recognition), its power to negate makes it inimitable. The actual role played by the mediator is immediately ruled out by Kojève's definition of desire as pure negativity. Desire is only mimetic in a rather secondary way—that is, inasmuch as individuals enter the circle of reciprocal violence through their attempt to prove the extent of their power to negate to one another. That is why Girard argues that “The exaltation of the negative is rooted in ... *blind lucidity*.”<sup>55</sup> There is some form of lucidity in the philosophical praising of the negative, insofar as it reveals the ultimate end of individualism in the age of internal mediation. The ever-constant stubbornness in not acknowledging the role played by the mediator of desire leads the individual to literally expel himself from human reality. The individual's refusal to renounce its pride ends with its self-destruction. Nevertheless, this lucidity is “blind” insofar as it entirely reverses the chronological sequence of mimetic desire. With the “exaltation of the negative,” the very last stage of “obstacle addiction” is turned into a first principle concerning the nature of mankind's desire and freedom. But in fact, imitation comes first, and “negativity” is nothing other than the outcome of unacknowledged mimetic rivalries. “Negativity” is a quality one believes one can see in the model/obstacle of desire, and that one vainly aims to appropriate.

Incidentally, Girard's critique also applies to Sartre's existentialism. Like Kojève, Sartre's philosophical framework rests on a strictly dualistic ontology. He distinguishes between the *in-itself* (*en soi*) and the *for-itself*.<sup>56</sup> To put it briefly, the *in-itself* refers to things or non-conscious beings belonging to the animal world. It is characterized by self-identity. By contrast, the *for-itself* refers to human consciousness, which is non-identical to itself. In a similar vein to Kojève, Sartre relates this lack of self-identity of consciousness to humanity's unlimited freedom, which is nothing more than their inborn power to negate the given. Like Girard, Sartre states that human beings have a desire for being. As mankind is both *in-itself* and *for-itself*, its nature is essentially ambiguous. The human being is torn between being and nothingness, and will vainly strive to achieve self-identity (i.e. to become *in-itself-for-itself*), especially given that its fellow beings tend to objectify it (i.e.

55. Ibid.

56. See, especially, Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1993).

they deny its nature as a *for-itself*). My point here is not to understate—as, unfortunately, all too often happens—Sartre’s influence on Girard’s early writings.<sup>57</sup> I mainly want to point out that the *in-itself/for-itself* distinction is incompatible with Girard’s way of thinking. For, in Sartre’s existentialism, the negative is taken as a constitutive trait of human consciousness rather than a by-product of mimetic desire, a symptom pointing to our relation with models/obstacles of desire. As Girard puts it: “The massive and dumb *en-soi* [*in-itself*] which the *pour-soi* [*for-itself*] always denies, is actually the obstacle that the masochist avidly seeks and on which he remains fixed.”<sup>58</sup> Which means that the absolute power to negate is not a feature that we possess but a feature we believe we are seeing and covet in the other.

Years later, in 2008, Girard would maintain his criticism of Sartre’s existentialism. He sought to further explicate his main disagreement with French existentialism, which pertained to the pivotal thesis according to which “existence precedes essence.” In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre explained this core idea as follows:

What do we mean here by “existence precedes essence”? We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself. If man as existentialists conceive of him cannot be defined, *it is because to begin with he is nothing*. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature since there is no God to conceive of it.<sup>59</sup>

Existence is thus deeply bound up with negation and nothingness. Essence only comes into play later, when the human being defines itself through its actions, or through the models (essences) it identifies with. For instance, the *garçon de café* identifies with the essence of the waiter.<sup>60</sup> However, from an

57. Girard acknowledges Sartre’s influence on him in *La conversion de l’art* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010), 19–20. According to Girard, Sartre’s influence on him had been even more important than Hegel’s. For interesting studies pertaining to Girard and Sartre, see Robert Doran, “René Girard’s Concept of Conversion and the ‘Via Negativa’: Revisiting ‘Deceit, Desire, and the Novel.’” *Religion & Literature* 43, no. 3 (2011): 170–79; Claudio Tarditi, “Manque d’être, désir et liberté: pour une comparaison entre Jean-Paul Sartre et René Girard,” *Le Philosophoire* 2, no. 23 (2004): 238–51, doi:10.3917/phoir.023.0238.

58. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 288.

59. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 22. Emphasis mine.

60. “Let us consider this waiter in the cafe. His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes towards the patrons with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous



existential perspective, the *garçon de café* is primarily a free being, that is, a “nothingness that nihilates.” Sartre argues that the *garçon de café*, in imitating the gestures and attitudes of the waiter in an almost mechanical way (“in playing at *being* a waiter in a café”), is acting in bad faith: that is to say, the *garçon de café* is not acting in an authentic way—he is deceiving himself in believing he is waiter, and is thereby repudiating his original and existential freedom. Now, in Girard’s view, Sartre’s account is problematic in at least two respects. First, by defining existence in terms of negativity, Sartre “aims to purify existence of otherness in full”<sup>61</sup> [*Sartre veut purifier l’existence de toute altérité*]. To Girard, this philosophical claim is wrong, since the other and imitation always already permeate man’s existence. Second, by defining existential freedom in terms of negativity, Sartre is compelled to equate mimesis with original sin. The mere fact that the *garçon de café* imitates those who worked as waiters before him is already a sign of inauthenticity and repudiated freedom. According to Girard, Sartre’s conception of bad faith is, morally speaking, wrongheaded and too demanding.<sup>62</sup> For imitation is not a sin *per se*. Mimesis is often positive, in that it helps individuals to orient themselves in the world they inhabit, to build their skills and knowledge, and furthers good reciprocity (mutual assistance, politeness, love, friendship, etc.). Men are only sinful when they start aiming to acquire the being of the model they imitate (pride, envy, resentment, jealousy etc.). Furthermore, to Girard, freedom and imitation are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, freedom rests on the conscious imitation of positive models of desire. This is a major point of disagreement between Girard and the philosophical proponents of the “humanization of nothingness.”<sup>63</sup>

for the order of the customer. Finally there he returns, trying to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton while carrying his tray with the recklessness of a tightrope-walker.... All his behavior seems to us a game... But what is he playing? We need not watch long before we can explain it: he is playing at being a waiter in a café.” Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 101–2.

61. Girard, *La conversion de l’art*, 20. For a good commentary of Girard’s critique of Sartre, see Doran, “René Girard’s Concept of Conversion,” 174–6.

62. Girard, *La conversion de l’art*, 20. With regards to the *garçon de café*, Girard argues that Sartre creates an untrue and counter-intuitive moral dilemma [*La notion de mauvaise foi crée un dilemme moral qui n’a aucune vérité*]. Indeed, if we followed Sartre, we would have to blame virtually everyone who imitates a model in order to learn their job.

63. Drawing on Payerson’s writings, Tarditi shows that whereas Sartre defends a strictly negative conception of human freedom (*libertas minor*), Girard defends a conception of freedom as *libertas maior*. To Girard, freedom does not merely rest on the absence of external constraints. Rather, freedom is the positive choice of non-violence and good mimesis. On my reading, Tarditi’s remarks also generally apply to Girard’s critique of the “humanization of nothingness.” See Tarditi, “Manque d’être,” 238–51.

*The Myth of the "Superior Suicide"*

The modern "exaltation of the negative" fails to recognize that mankind will always aim to fulfill its need for transcendence at any cost. The glorification of the negative has nothing to do with what the negative is *per se*. Rather, in a world devoid of vertical transcendence, the negative appears as the last illusory form of absolute for the religion of individualism. "Obstacle addiction" gradually leads to the idea that what is most desirable is what negates me the most. And it must be added here that self-destructive behavior is very likely to be equated with the idea of a self-sufficient individual. A suicide carried out without external constraints, as freely as possible, may appear as the highest example of mankind's sovereign power to negate. Through such an act, the human being would seem to entirely appropriate its negativity. It would thereby seem to demonstrate that its power to nihilate only depends on itself. Through its capacity to transcend its own life by suppressing it, it would then show that the power granted to the Christian God is actually limited, and that humanity itself is God. By carrying out a free suicide, mankind would achieve its biggest victory, through its own defeat. Hence Kojève's claim that:

suicide, or voluntary death without any "vital necessity," is the most obvious "manifestation" of Negativity or Freedom.<sup>64</sup>

Nevertheless, the philosophical praise of the negative, when pushed to such extremes, is nothing more than an illusion generated by the combined effects of "obstacle addiction" and "deviated transcendency." Free suicide is a contradictory idea because even such a radical act of self-destruction involves a mediator or model of desire. In this instance, the human being does not acknowledge that they are drawn by an irresistible delusion that they will become divine by becoming a model/obstacle. They do not see that the transcendence they would like to achieve for themselves is always already beyond them. For this transcendence is never a quality they may ultimately possess: it is the illusory by-product of their rivalrous imitation of the other. In fact, free suicide is pure madness, it is an obsession with the model/obstacle leading to death.

For Girard, this is best illustrated by the character of Kirilov in Dostoevsky's masterpiece *Demons*.<sup>65</sup> Kirilov wants to kill himself in order to

64. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 247.

65. Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, *Demons*, trans. Richard Peaver and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

become God. Mankind's ability to willingly take its own life will supposedly show that it can fully embrace its own finitude. Then, by having proved that it can be self-sufficient and finite at the same time, it will finally be able to do away with the illusory transcendence of the Christian religion. Kirilov is certain that his theory is true. At first, it seems that the mere idea of freedom guaranteed by suicide should be enough. But humanity is still too much enslaved by its fear of the afterlife and of physical pain. Someone needs to enlighten mankind about the freedom it already possesses here and now. Kirilov will therefore put his theory into practice. He will purportedly kill himself without fearing death (since acknowledging his finitude amounts to acknowledging his freedom) and out of love for humanity (since his fellow beings must learn to recognize and enjoy the freedom that they already possess). In the end, he will be the main actor and messenger of the new religion of atheistic humanism.

Then, the man who showed mankind the road to attain its supreme freedom will ascend the empty throne of God, while God, the author and idea of pain and fear, will disappear. But to accomplish this great cosmic transformation, man must show his defiance of God and his total insubordination in a conscious self-annihilation.<sup>66</sup>

In Dostoevsky's novel, Kirilov's project turns out to be a gruesome and tragic failure. Before taking his life, he writes a false letter declaring his responsibility for the murder of Shatov. In practical terms, Kirilov's suicide mainly serves the interests of the political projects of Verkhovensky and Stavrogin. After handing his letter to Verkhovensky, he commits suicide in an atmosphere of fear, anger, and madness. Verkhovensky sees the terror on Kirilov's face and hears him screaming like a beast. Before Kirilov shoots himself in the head, he yells at Verkhovensky and bites his finger until it bleeds. One could sum up the failure of Kirilov's project by saying that, after all, he showed that he was afraid to die and was therefore incapable of fully embracing its finitude. However, Kojève argues that Kirilov managed to demonstrate his freedom nonetheless, by deciding to kill himself for an arbitrary and purely human reason, namely shame:

Kirilov wants to commit suicide solely in order to demonstrate the possibility of doing it "without any necessity"—that is, *freely*. His suicide is intended

66. Ervin C. Brody, "Dostoevsky's Kirilov in Camus's 'Le Mythe de Sisyphe,'" *The Modern Language Review* 70, no. 2 (1975): 292, doi:10.2307/3724282.

to demonstrate the absolute freedom of man—that is, his independence in relation to God. Dostoevsky’s theistic objection consists in saying that man cannot do it, that he necessarily shrinks from death: Kirilov commits suicide out of shame for not being able to do it. But this objection is not valid, because a suicide “out of shame” is also a free act (no animal does it). And if, by committing suicide, Kirilov annihilates himself he has, as he wished, overcome the omnipotence of the external (the “transcendent”) by dying “prematurely,” before it “was written,” and has limited infinity or God.<sup>67</sup>

Shame does not imply a vital necessity of killing oneself. Therefore, committing suicide out of shame could still be taken as a purely free act of self-destruction. But this objection does not apply to Girard’s interpretation of Dostoevsky’s novel. As he argues, Kirilov’s model/obstacle is Christ Himself:

The death of this possessed person must put an end to the Christian era, but at the same time it intends to be very much like, yet radically different from the passion of Christ. Kirilov is so convinced of the metaphysical efficacy of his gesture that he is indifferent to all publicity: *Quidquid latet apparebit* (Whatever is hidden will appear)... He does not imitate Christ, he parodies him. He does not seek to collaborate in the work of redemption but to correct it. Underground ambivalence is here borne to the highest degree of intensity and spiritual meaning, for the rival who is simultaneously venerated and hated is the Redeemer himself. To the humble imitation of Jesus Christ is opposed the prideful and satanic imitation of the possessed.<sup>68</sup>

Kirilov’s shame betrays his rivalrous imitation of Christ. Given that the Passion of Christ brought forth the lies of the resurrection and the afterlife, Kirilov contends that a more perfect and enlightening death is needed, a death that would teach human beings to be perfectly content with their finitude. Kirilov wants to appropriate the divine being of Christ. But the closer he comes to the act of suicide, the more he realizes that, just like Christ on the cross, he is experiencing his own moment of doubt. His first failure to calmly and spontaneously become one with his own finitude leads to his sense of shame, and makes the divinity he wants to usurp from Christ even more inaccessible—and desirable—to him. Now, the more

67. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 248.

68. Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, 50. See also Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 275–8.

Kirilov persists in not renouncing his pride, the more his model will reflect his actual lack of self-sufficiency. In the end, Kirilov's suicide is not at all "the most obvious 'manifestation' of Negativity or Freedom."<sup>69</sup> Kirilov kills himself out of self-hatred: "His suicide is an ordinary suicide."<sup>70</sup> There is no trace of an active freedom to negate in Kirilov's tragic death. In this instance, negativity appears as the most acute symptom of a relation to the model/obstacle, a symptom that becomes unbearable. It is the concrete and increasing negation of himself experienced in front of his model/obstacle that Kirilov has internalized. It is because his rivalrous imitation confronted him with an insufferable feeling of emptiness that he expelled himself from the human world.

In the *Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus made Kirilov into one of his philosophical heroes. As shown by the theater adaptation of Dostoevsky's *Demons*<sup>71</sup> that he completed shortly before his death, his admiration for this tragic character remained constant. He always claimed that the tension between human reasoning and the silence and meaninglessness of the world must be maintained. The human being must live out its absurd condition, rather than trying to escape it through suicide. However, he also believed that Kirilov's theory introduced a "superior" and "pedagogical" form of suicide. Through his revolt against God and Christianity's arbitrary conception of grace and justice in an afterlife, Kirilov would teach mankind to be aware of the absurd. Camus defended Kirilov's theory against Dostoevsky. In his opinion, Dostoevsky had shrunk from the tough consequences of Kirilov's reasoning and opted to seek an easy (and perhaps not that sincere) refuge in Christian faith. Camus takes some liberties with the rules of literary criticism in order to vindicate his thesis.<sup>72</sup> In order to further his argument, he inverts the chronological sequence of Dostoevsky's writings (especially regarding the *Demons* and the *Diary of a Writer*). Also, he "completely disregards all the gory details of Kirilov's death in Dostoevsky's version and merely states that he kills himself."<sup>73</sup> Moreover, he forgets to mention that Dostoevsky introduces Kirilov as a mentally unstable person. This interpretation has perhaps slightly been encouraged by the French translation of the novel that Camus had at hand. Indeed, in the translation by

69. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 247.

70. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 277.

71. Albert Camus, *Les Possédés* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010).

72. See, for instance, Brody, "Dostoevsky's Kirilov in Camus's 'Le Mythe de Sisyphe,'" 291–305.

73. *Ibid.*, 297.

Schloezer, Kirilov's character appears a good deal more rational than in the original Russian version.<sup>74</sup> Camus does not even mention that Kirilov's suicide becomes the instrument of Verkhovensky's and Stavrogin's political schemes. He will only refer to it in passing in *L'Homme Révolté*<sup>75</sup>—without, however, questioning the theory of a “superior” suicide he himself had defended a few years earlier.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is noticeable that there is something typically French about Kirilov's portrayal as a profound and compelling philosophical hero. In Russia, Germany, or the Netherlands, Kirilov has been regarded as a caricature of the liberal intelligentsia, a vivid illustration of Dostoevsky's own religious doubt or the impasse of atheism, or even as a case study in psychiatry.<sup>76</sup> In France especially, under the influence of Camus and the “humanization of nothingness,” Kirilov became the proponent of a supposedly convincing philosophy of freedom through suicide. While Girard often explicitly presents Dostoevsky's late writings as an antidote to the Nietzschean illusions of the superman, it should not be forgotten that his reading of the Russian novelist was also a way of opposing the intellectual fashions of his homeland. His interpretation of Kirilov's suicide in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* and *Resurrection from the Underground* is, very likely, an implicit critique of Kojève and Camus (authors whom Girard had already read prior to the publication of his first book).<sup>77</sup> This then means that Girard's portrayal of Kirilov also constitutes a statement in opposition to the French philosophy of his time which, to a large extent, revolved around the “humanization of nothingness.” If one follows his reading of Dostoevsky, it seems likely that Camus took Kirilov's reasoning very seriously, because he overlooked the latter's rivalry with Christ. As a matter of fact, Camus states:

It might be thought that this springs from a concern to distinguish himself [Kirilov] from Christ: But in reality it is a matter of annexing Christ. Kirilov,

74. Julie Vincent, “Le Mythe de Kirilov: Camus, Dostoïevski et les traducteurs,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 8, no. 3 (1971): 245–53.

75. Albert Camus, *The Rebel. An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 176.

76. Vincent, “Le Mythe de Kirilov,” 251. Vincent's paper also highlights the fact that, to a large extent, Camus's portrayal of Kirilov was taken for granted by French intellectuals of that time.

77. Wolfgang Palaver has noted that Girard's interpretation of Kirilov's suicide can be regarded as a statement in opposition to Kojève. See Palaver, René Girard's Mimetic Theory, 121–2. However, at least to my knowledge, no study has yet been devoted to Girard's critique of Camus' conception of a “superior” suicide.

in fact, fancies for a moment that Jesus at his death *did not find himself in Paradise*. He found out then that his torture had been useless. "The laws of nature," says the engineer, "made Christ live in the midst of falsehood and die for a falsehood." Solely in this sense Jesus indeed personifies the whole human drama. He is the complete man, being the one who realized the most absurd condition. He is not the God-man but the man-god. And, like him, each of us can be crucified and victimized—and is to a certain degree.<sup>78</sup>

This, I believe, furnishes another example of the thesis I have been seeking to defend throughout the present paper: namely, that the negative, understood as the pivotal expression of humanity's freedom, rests on a denial of mankind's relation to models/obstacles of desire.

#### CONCLUSION

I should, of course, concede that my paper has at best offered readers an overview of Girard's critique of the negative and of the "humanization of nothingness." I have only considered some of his statements directed against certain major philosophers. It goes without saying that a more thorough study would need to take into consideration a larger sample of both thinkers and doctrines. However, this would be more the subject of a book than a paper.

In closing, I wish above all to stress the place of Girard's critique of the negative within the larger context of his Christian anthropology. First, it is worth noting that Girard's critique of the negative does not only apply to his early writings. It is a critique he maintained throughout his entire career. In *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* he states that "There can be no question of returning to mystical formulations or their philosophical counterparts, such as ... the magical power of the negative."<sup>79</sup> This remark is consistent with what we saw during this study. Given that the negative is, in Girard's view, mainly a symptom of mankind's obsession with models/obstacles of desire, this concept can neither be taken as a component of dialectical thinking (see our discussion, above, of Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic), nor as a feature of humanity's absolute freedom (see our earlier discussion of Kojève, Sartre, and Camus). However, due to the illusions conveyed by metaphysical desire, Western philosophy has granted such magical powers to the negative. In *The Scapegoat*, Girard

78. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 98.

79. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 62–3.

criticizes the concept of the negative in passing in his analysis of the beheading of Saint John the Baptist:

By espousing the violent desire of Salome, all the guests feel as if they are satisfying their own desire. Everyone shares the same frenzy toward the model obstacle ... It is not Hegelian negativity or the impersonal death of the philosophers that guarantees the symbolic quality of the prophet's head, but the mimetic contagion of collective murder.<sup>80</sup>

It is through mimetic contagion that the desires of the guests converge towards the same model/obstacle. And "the symbolic quality of the prophet's head" is due to the cathartic and collective effect of murder. Since the concept of the negative overlooks the proper dynamics of mimetic desire and obstacle addiction, Girard very briefly stresses how irrelevant a tool of interpretation the concept of the negative is.

My final remarks will pertain to the relation between Girard's critique of the "humanization of nothingness" and his thoughts on death and resurrection. Obviously, death is one of the most significant themes in Girard's writings. His inquiry into the origins of religion and culture leads to the discovery of the corpse of the innocent victim. The hypothesis of a scapegoat mechanism holds that, from the onset, death and culture are inseparable. Beneath the language and symbols of primitive religion, one always discovers the reality of violent death. "There is no culture without a tomb and no tomb without a culture."<sup>81</sup> Jesus dying on the cross unveils what has been hidden since the foundation of the world, which is the burial ground on which human culture has been built.

However, Girard's writings also lay emphasis on a very different attitude towards death. This is already evident in his early writings. As shown in *Resurrection from the Underground*, Dostoevsky's late novels are concomitant with his progressively acute understanding of the universality of triangular desire. A step at a time, the Russian novelist constantly pushes further his inquiry into "underground psychology," which confronts him with an increasingly bleak picture of human nature and an ever more shameful image of himself. In his last novels, Dostoevsky rehearses the final and most tragic stages of metaphysical desire. He thereby uncovers an inferno where masochism, sadism, self-deception and, ultimately, death

80. René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 135.

81. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 83.



reigns. But there is light at the end of this terrifying tunnel, for his examination of the darkest corners of the human psyche is accompanied by a gradual form of spiritual healing. He comes to comprehend that behind the romantic illusions leading to self-destruction and death there is always mankind's delusional attachment to its pride, which is nothing other than a denial of the actual similarity between itself and the other. On the one hand, the renunciation of pride is a long and painful process—one which confronts Dostoevsky with his feelings of incompleteness or, better still, the realization of his own "lack of being." However, on the other hand, romantic fallacies of pride end in nothingness and are shown to be nothing more than grotesque deviations from the authentic transcendence of the Christian religion. The death of pride—and the realization that pride ultimately equals the nothingness of death—leads to the novelist's rebirth, expressed by the radical freedom of his choice to turn towards God and to Christian ethics. As Girard puts it:

Pride goes always toward dispersion and final division, which is to say, toward death. *But to accept this death is to be reborn into unity.* The work that gathers in place of scattering, the work that is truly one, will thus itself *have the form of death and resurrection, i.e., the form of victory over pride ... the entire oeuvre and the very existence of the novelist have the form of a death and a resurrection.*<sup>82</sup>

In the final chapter of *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Girard notices that the same Christian symbolism of death and resurrection applies to all great novelists (Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Proust, etc.) who, in dismissing the mediator of their desire, achieved a passage beyond their romantic delusions of pride and "divine autonomy."

Girard would further explore the topic of resurrection in his anthropological writings. While in primitive religion the victim is sacralized through the cathartic effects of collective violence, Jesus is not turned into a god by His persecutors but rises again on the third day. Through His death and resurrection Jesus shows that the archaic sacred was nothing other than sacralized violence, and that a radically different kind of sacredness, based on love, self-sacrifice and the renunciation of violence, had arisen. Furthermore, as Jesus's disciples were not immune to mimetic contagion within the crowd, it is only thanks to the miracle of resurrection that they themselves come to be capable of breaking away from the unanimity of the scapegoat mechanism. In Girard's words,

82. Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, 72–3. Emphasis mine.

*Only the Resurrection*, because it enlightens the disciples, reveals completely the things hidden since the foundation of the world, which are the same thing as the secret of Satan, never disclosed since the origin of human culture.<sup>83</sup>

How do these considerations relate to my subject matter? For Girard, if there were no movement from death back to life, there would be nothing beyond the disaster of mankind's obsession with models/obstacles of desire. Kirilov sees Christ's Resurrection as a lie, and carries out his suicide because he cannot see himself in any other way as His rival. From Kirilov's perspective, if the Resurrection is a lie, then there is room for a more perfect death than the Passion of Christ, a death that would lead to a better religion: atheistic humanism or the "humanization of nothingness." His firm belief that there is nothing beyond death prevents him from regarding Christ as a positive and authentically transcendent model to imitate. In order to get beyond the illusory fascination with the negative, one has to become open to the possibility of vertical transcendence. Or, to a more limited extent, one has at least to be open to the idea that there might be a new life after the death of metaphysical desire. The fascination with the negative may well be a preamble to the discovery of a deeper self which eventually recovers from the symptoms of obstacle addiction. However, such a process should not be defined as some sort of Hegelian dialectic, in which the nothingness that mankind covets would, in effect, ultimately and necessarily reveal itself as such. There is no negation of the negation that would automatically lead to a "*sublime lucidity*."<sup>84</sup> Rather, Girard contends that it takes conversion to achieve such lucidity. And it is through conversion that the last obstacle, namely death, will be removed. In the end, Girard's critique of the negative shows that he stayed true to scripture:

For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.

1 Corinthians 15:25–26 (King James Version Bible)

83. René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 125. Emphasis mine.

84. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 314.

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