

Homo Mimeticus: A New Theory of Imitation

Nidesh Lawtoo. Leuven University Press, 2022. 358 pp.: ISBN 9789462703469

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Keywords: Mimetic theory, logos, pathos, Plato, aesthetic genealogy, Aristotle, Nietzsche, René Girard

This book introduces the idea of *homo mimeticus* as an expansion of the current theoretical understanding of human beings in a diverse fashion, “such as *sapiens or faber, economicus or deus, ludens*” (Edgar Morin, Lawtoo 2024, 299). It is possible to consider it as a transdisciplinary attempt to understand the concept of mimesis from artistic and philosophical perspectives. However, it would be more fruitful to see it in continuity of other texts that have tested and contested various ideas of being human. Most recently, the books *Sapiens* (2011) and *Homo Deus* (2016) of Yuval Noah Harari come to mind since both these books and their central arguments have been integrated into the expansion of the category of *homo mimeticus* in this book.

Mimesis as a concept has received periodic attention from some of the greatest philosophers. In fact, it can be traced back all the way to the *agon* [loosely translated as ‘a conflict in ideas’ in Classical Greek] in Plato’s Socratic dialogue *Republic* (c.375 BCE). The fact that this negative view of Plato was countered by Aristotle’s *Poetics*, arguably the first systematic treatise on literary criticism in the Western world, is so widely transmitted that readers might be falsely disarmed to pick up another book on this old debate. Therefore, the ambition of this text to establish a “re-turn” to the mimetic theory and to establish mimesis as a foundational aspect of being human is sublimely tricky. As the text clarifies, a “re-turn differs from yet another turn in the sense that it looks back, genealogically, to influential precursors in order to generate repetitions with a difference internal to a concept that spans nothing less than the history of western civilization” (Lawtoo 2022, 12).

This three-part text is further elaborated in three chapters for each part. Thus, the narrative structural argument of beginning, middle and end seemingly enforces itself in the Aristotelian and rhetorical tradition. The titles of the three parts are self-explanatory: “Genealogies, Aesthetics and Politics.” However, this discursive structure still contains a few surprising variations. For example, the inclusion of Jane Bennet’s three texts published between 2017 and 2020 offers “a political ecology of things” and experiences “influx and efflux” of Walt Whitman’s writing as a contrast to

“the romantic category of the imagination” employed by the British Romantic poets “to mediate the pathos of the other, which is only a partially shared or sym-pathos.” (Lawtoo 2022, 262) Even in chapters where the contents conform to the titular expectations, they do so usually as in the classics: the association is obvious, but until the author drew our attention to it, we never thought that obvious! This applies most pertinently to the analysis of the viral mimesis—in all the biological, affective and social senses—in the concluding chapter on political and social manipulations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Apart from placing the debate and the research question of centrality of mimesis as a foundational human attribute firmly within the Western philosophical tradition from Plato to Baudrillard and beyond, the book succeeds in making several key contributions. These contributions encompass both key concepts and key terminology to designate them. From the citations to earlier publications by the same author, it seems to be an ongoing achievement of the author since 2017.

Among the major interventions of this book, the most fundamental seems to be the formulation of “pathology” in the Platonic *agon* in the *Republic*. While—as mentioned above—Plato’s objection to the undesirable and perhaps uncontrollable *pathos* generated by visual mimesis is well-known, its context and format are often overlooked. For Lawtoo, this is the most important point of departure in the entire genealogy of the concept of mimesis. Even if Plato presented a clear hierarchy of *logos* over *pathos*, he actually presents this as an imagined situation in which the speaker is Socrates. Hence the dichotomy itself is created in an unclear contradiction. For the “return” to mimesis, this recognition remains the vital trigger.

The book develops this concept through various manifestations. Most importantly, the warp and weft kind of relationship between them is traced through Nietzsche to late twentieth-century neuroscientific discovery of mirroring neurons. The range of associations and their conceptual brilliance indeed makes a series of fine beads tied by a brilliant silver thread. The author cites several of his earlier formulations—gendered mimesis, racial mimesis and postcolonial mimesis, to mention a few of them—in specific relevant sections of this book as well. His reference to Conrad and Kurtz’s “horror” with reference to postcolonial mimesis is rather fascinating, and we will return to it in a different context.

This book is part of the publications and chapters of a 2017-2022 ERC-funded transdisciplinary—across philosophy and arts—eponymous research project. The website of the project documents all the results and milestones of the project (<http://www.homomimeticus.eu/>). From the list of publications, it is clear that even if this book is eponymous with the project, it occupies a pivotal place. However, the project has moved further on, and there is even a subsequent 2024 volume titled *Homo Mimeticus II*. Again, even if this is a review of a single book, it would be ideal to place it within the supplementary and complementary publications arising out of the project.

Technically speaking, the transdisciplinary audience of philosophy and arts would be the primary audience of the book. However, since the transdisciplinarity further includes such diverse

areas like cognitive sciences, linguistics, theatre, film and social media studies, ecological studies, and political and sociological theorists of crowds, its respective chapters could interest specialists in all those respective fields. However, as mentioned in the opening sections, the ambitions of the text and the project are to expand the horizon of Western understanding of the human condition. Therefore, anyone who is interested or even curious in that expanding horizon of human understanding of itself could be enlightened by the volume.

Having said that, this reviewer finds two specific barriers to this potential expansion of the general readership of this text. The dense philosophical foundation on which the genealogy of the key concept of the text *homo mimeticus* is constructed seems to be also mimetically affecting its structure. Often the syntactical structure seems to be overburdened by its semantic gravitas. The following example is not particularly a norm, but neither is this an exception. If the book decides to expand its readership, it certainly would make a greater contribution by removing such barriers.

This is especially evident if we consider the number of developments in continental philosophy, critical theory, political theory, and the social sciences that—often in dialogue with the neurosciences—we have been convoking throughout to give transdisciplinary substance to the telos of this book: namely, shifting dominant accounts of mimesis as an homogeneous aesthetic category restricted to realistic representation toward a heterogeneous conception of mimesis understood as behavioral (psychic, social, political) imitation that connects or interweaves all the chapters of *Homo Mimeticus* (Lawtoo 2022, 232).

Secondly, to my opinion while it is an accepted necessity in humanistic writing, particularly so for a long text like this, to remind the readers of the central thesis and a particular section's correlation with that central thesis, this necessarily leads to brief recollection of the thesis at periodic intervals. However, in this book, the central genealogical narrative starting from Plato to Derrida and Baudrillard, through Nietzsche and Girard, is repeated in almost each and every chapter. A reference rather than a complete recapitulation of the central argument could have saved readers of the whole book some tediousness and loss of attention due to.

Repeated contradiction and repudiation of Girard's mimetic theory finds its place in the text. This, of course, has its rightful place in establishing and clarifying the counter-thesis of this book. This reviewer thinks similar mention—even if in the spirit of repudiation—could have been made of the Classicist and Neoclassical thinkers who made the derivative meaning of mimesis as imitation so popular across centuries. This could have been significantly helpful in dispelling of such a notion from the popular understanding of mimesis.

Finally, returning to the concept of “postcolonial mimesis,” the unabashed Eurocentrism of the text makes the postcolonial reference acutely ironic. Without any hesitation or philosophical compunction, the book presupposes as if the span of human condition is sufficiently mapped by the Western tradition itself. That is, if this is a vital question in the Western tradition, it can be unproblematically applied to the universal human condition. Even worse is the presumption that if other traditions did not delve into the concept of mimesis, they might have failed to achieve an essential quality of being human. Thereby it seems extraordinary that a scholar of Conrad and

postcolonialism in the twenty-first-century could still lapse into the age-old colonial trap of considering others—even if without a mimetic capacity—to be less than human. Such essentialist failures have been discussed too long to be repeated here. At least a curiosity or openness to accept similar or dissimilar views in unknown traditions could have salvaged something for such a position. Off hand, *Xieyi*, *Anukrti* or *Shabih-sazi* come to mind as three widely discussed concepts in Chinese, Sanskrit and Persian traditions respectively that can meaningfully engage with mimesis in a fruitful conversation. After all, the philosopher’s project is to attempt to know the unknown—that is, unless this statement itself becomes essentialist!

While reading the chapter on application of the concept of mimesis to the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, it gives us a vantage point to assess the author’s realization of the mimetic nature of such a pandemic. This allows him to move beyond the limiting assumptions in the predictive statements by both Girard (in the 1960s) and Harari (in 2016). But at the same time, a reader in 2025 cannot but start feeling a similar advantage of facing the mimetic specter of generative AI, compared to the author’s position in 2022. This reviewer was about to make such concluding comments regarding the possibility of addressing the mimetic quality or possibility of the “cognition” and “knowledge” of such systems as the way forward. However, he is happy that such comments are not warranted anymore, as the final books and articles coming out of this project are all related to the mimetic potential in a posthuman condition. I hope readers of this review will join this reviewer in reading those works as well.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The reviewer has no personal acquaintance with the author or the institution or the publisher. There is no perceptible conflict of interest.

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