

Conceptual Mimetic Engulfment And its Relation to the Christian Linguistic Enterprise

Bruce Wilshire, in his essay entitled *Mimetic Engulfment and Self-Deception*, introduces the thought that many forms of self-deception may occur when one is in a state of mimetic engulfment. In his later work, *Fashionable Nihilism*, Wilshire explores the repercussions of these self-deceptions, particularly in the form of a growing nihilism in professional analytic philosophy. In this paper, I will expand upon the idea of mimetic engulfment, in particular focusing on its linguistic aspect, and then show how this leads to self-deception. I then hope to show how this self-deception has led to a comparable nihilism in the Christian church. Finally, I will put forward my own prescription for how to curb this nihilism.

Mimetic engulfment is the undeliberate imitation of a person (or corporate self) by an individual. The earliest instances of mimesis occur in infancy when we mimic the movements and expressions of our parents, but as we mature the engulfment becomes more and more complex. Wilshire lists a few major degrees of awareness during engulfment, ranging from delayed verbal recognition (noticing you are seated the same way as your friend) to complete engulfment (inability to recognize the other as other). The exact degrees are inconsequential as engulfment falls on a spectrum of depth, but the important thing to note is that we can encounter all kinds of engulfment, making it difficult to determine what are and are not instances of mimetic engulfment.

The instances of self-deception I wish to explore may rely on any degree of mimetic engulfment and often involve multiple stages of mimesis. Additionally, I want to hone in on what I will call doxastic conceptual engulfment and its linguistic aspects. To do this, I want to offer three factors that compose any mimetic engulfment. First is the *medium* of mimesis, or what is being used to establish the engulfment. Many instances of mimetic engulfment rely on physical relations such as proximity or posture to elicit engulfment. While these are key to understanding mimetic engulfment as a whole, the examples I want to analyze use language and language-games as their medium.

The next component of engulfment is the *currency*, or what is communicated to the subject of the engulfment. The other in the engulfment may use a physical medium to communicate a currency of dominance by putting their arm around the subject's shoulders. The other may not be communicating this currency deliberately, but the subject uses this to form their own interpretation of what the other is communicating. Conceptual engulfment rules out purely physical or emotional currencies and instead deals with ideas. Put more simply, conceptual engulfment is when I am engulfed in what I believe you think of me.

The last component is the subject's *response*. This can take two forms within the conceptual currency. First, one could take an *active* response; imagine a class clown that tells jokes because she thinks everyone expects her to be funny. However, it could also happen that I assume the belief that I believe you to have of me, what I will call a *doxastic* response. A doxastic response by our class clown would look like her genuinely believing she is valued because people laugh along with her.

Having the tools to analyze such a case, I would like to set forth a paradigmatic instance of this phenomena in the church. A man, we will call him Frank, begins going to church and hears "Christianese" for the first time, in particular we will focus on the phrase "personal relationship with Christ."¹ As time passes, Frank feels more a part of the church and soon falls into mimetic engulfment with its members: he laughs at the same jokes, learns where he sits Sunday morning, and uses the same Christianese phrases. Other people talk about their personal relationship with Christ, and they talk with Frank like he is one of them, and so Frank comes to believe that they think he has a personal relationship with Christ. This leads him to think that he actually does (or at least should) have a personal relationship with Christ, even if Frank only has a minimal idea of what this phrase means. This instance is conceptual because the other is communicating ideas, linguistic because language is the primary medium, and doxastic because its immediate effect regards the subject's beliefs. So much by way of analysis.

This mimetic engulfment is not necessarily wrong; as a matter of fact, it is necessary for complex human interactions. However, there is one factor that determines whether this engulfment leads to self-deception or growth and understanding. This is

¹ Thank you to Dr. TenElshof for this very flexible example.

how one places oneself in the meta-structure of the community. In particular, we either focus on similarities between individuals in our community or else on our relative ascendancy (where each person stands relative to one another in the mimetic hierarchy of the community. A who-engulfs-whom, if you will). If our protagonist chooses the latter, he will see that those around him are more mature in their faith and are there to help him along. This kind of engulfment will lead to either the conclusion that he should have a personal relationship with Christ or that his relationship with Christ needs to be stronger to match the expectations of those in whom he is engulfed. Both of these outcomes are positive and lead to growth in the whole community. However, if Frank focuses on the former, then he will see the community as more homogenous and therefore infer that he, as part of the group, shares the quality of having a personal relationship with Christ just like everyone else.

Here, then, is the real issue. Our language, paired with mimetic engulfment, causes the community to unintentionally lead the subject into self-deception. Thus far we have only discussed mimetic engulfment, but I would like to quickly offer a hypothesis as to why our language, particularly in the Christian linguistic enterprise, so easily abets our self-deception. “Christianese” is a type of jargon used to describe certain spiritual and communal experiences that do not directly translate into the common vernacular. For example, a word like “justification” in Christianese cannot always be replaced with “exoneration”, even though they are listed as synonyms in the dictionary. Because of this, it can be exceedingly difficult to understand any such words/phrases since they are not always reducible to the general vernacular.

For Frank, if he thinks about what it means to be in a personal relationship with, say, his brother, that experience is very different than his relationship with Christ. On the other hand, if Frank asks someone else in the church what it means to have a personal relationship with Christ, they are likely to respond with further Christianese jargon and Frank is left without a real definition for the phrase. It is possible for Frank to be so caught up in the mimesis that he correctly uses all of the Christianese jargon in conversation, but the words are, at base, meaningless to him. However, Frank’s proficiency in the mimesis leads him to be self-deceived about his own growth and status in the community.

Now, this is not a critique of the Christian linguistic enterprise. We need to use these words because they are describing phenomena that are not describable in normal language. Additionally, Christianese is designed to mimic the language of the bible so that laypeople can read a phrase in the bible and understand what it means in their own context. These are wonderful results of our language, but they simply come with their own dangers. Whether or not to change Christianese and what those changes ought to look like are far beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I will simply assert that Christianese is worth keeping in certain forms in spite of the potential negative consequences.

It would be easy to pity Frank and think that this kind of self-deception is rare. However, this would lull us into a false sense of security. I think that if we seriously consider all of the ways we are engulfed in those around us, it seems reasonable to say that the vast majority of people are self-deceived at some level. For the young Christian, this may look like pride at being so developed in their faith when they still have a lot of growing to do. For the moderate Christian, this may look like seeing the good that their community does and equating it with their having done good, even if they had no part in that specific good. For the seasoned Christian, this may look like assuming everyone else is equally as developed because they mimic you, even though they need your assistance to grow stronger. These and many more instances are deeply rooted in the Christian community, but they corrupt relationships and lead to all sorts of hypocrisy.

There is one final consequence of this self-deception that I want to look at, and it is the pervasiveness of nihilism. In Wilshire's words,

“Nihilism means: to mangle the roots of our thinking-feeling-evaluating selves, to lose the full potential of our immediate ecstatic involvement in the world around us. It means to lose full contact with our willing-feeling-valuing life-projects: to have a shallow sense of what is valuable in human life. It means to be arch, smug, dried out—to be a talking head among other such heads. Speak and reason as we will, we are no longer moved in our depths.”²

Remember that Wilshire was not talking about Christianity, and yet his words bite with a deep truth. The beauty and vivacity of the Christian life is lost when we fall into this self-deception. We go to church, imitate the people around us, and leave. But at no point

² Wilshire, Bruce W. *Fashionable Nihilism : A Critique of Analytic Philosophy*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost (accessed December 15, 2015).

are we experiencing the power of the gospel in our lives or following Christ's directive to make disciples. Yet we feel good about ourselves because we are engulfed in a community that says nice-sounding things. And this affects everyone in the church, not just those who are self-deceived. This ought to motivate us to cure this self-deception if at all possible. The only question is "How?"

It may have occurred to you that if mimetic engulfment is necessary but only a certain type of mimetic engulfment leads to self-deception (those cases where the subject focuses on similarity), then all we need to do in order to curb the negative side effects is to apply to relative ascendancy and better understand our place in the meta-structures of our mimetic communities. And this is easy enough to do. As a matter of fact, it is built in to the age-old practice of discipleship. You bring the older and more mature alongside the younger and more naïve and the two work to enlighten one another. However, the issue seems to be more resilient than that. As soon as we introduce the idea of discipleship we must define that that concept, and the process may start anew, causing us to fall into yet another self-deception. Only, this time it is about how well we avoid self-deception. Even so, I believe there is a path of escape: unbendingness.

An unbending individual is one who does not allow others to be engulfed in them to ill effect. Unbending individuals are often aware of the way people become mimetically engulfed (though not necessarily in a verbal sense) and do what they can to alleviate the issue, namely by teaching them by example and calling them out when they are self-deceived. This requires knowledge of our mimetic tendencies and careful attention to the mimetic communities in our own lives.

In this paper I have only looked at one of the many types of mimetic engulfment and only offered one cure to a single type of self-deception. Much more work needs to be done on the issue, but, as with addiction, the first step is realizing we have a problem. Only then can we hope to implement a system for healing.