CHAPTER 1

BIRTH OF HOMO MIMETICUS

From now on therefore, historical philosophizing will be necessary, and along with it the virtue of modesty.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, Human, All Too Human

Genealogy is suspicious of searches for origins, yet this does not mean that it cannot diagnose specific forms of mimetic communication that gave birth to humans. Despite the conflicting opinions the protean concept of mimesis continues to generate, one point at least is clear: as we enter deeper into the twenty-first century, the ancient concept of mimēsis can no longer be confined to realistic representations of reality to be seen from a safe aesthetic distance. Rather, mimesis should be considered as an all-too-human and perhaps also nonhuman and posthuman condition that animates anthropological, aesthetic, social, and political phenomena constitutive of the history of western civilization—and, perhaps, of Homo sapiens tout court.

To further the heterogenous history of our all-too-mimetic condition in the twenty-first century, I start by taking a genealogical step back to the pre-history of Homo sapiens in its auroral phase of emergence. And I do so to leap ahead to the current resurgences of philosophical, aesthetic, and political manifestations of homo mimeticus. While we have no written traces of this long and obscure period, genealogical lenses will allow us to uncover imitative principles that were not yet known in the most informed accounts of the historical vicissitudes of mimesis at the twilight of the last century, yet fully inform the transdisciplinary theory we now propose at the dawn of the present century to open the field of new mimetic studies.
At the most general level, my goal in this first chapter is to unearth a mimetic hypothesis on prelinguistic forms of bodily communication that have been neglected in the past century dominated by linguistic and discursive turns; and yet this hypothesis arguably played a decisive role in the origins of language, consciousness, communication, and by extension, civilization. This opening chapter, then, provides new genealogical foundations consonant with the mimetic turn—or re-turn of mimesis in philosophy, aesthetics, and politics—that, as the threefold division of this book suggests, provide three related perspectives animating Homo Mimeticus.

Nietzsche’s Mimetic Hypothesis

Since Charles Darwin’s *The Expression of Emotions in Men and Animals* (1872), the role played by emotions and facial expression in the development of language has fascinated philosophers, anthropologists, and paleontologists. In what follows, I will not reiterate the various hypotheses on such a controversial topic, which traverses western thought and goes from Plato to Locke, Rousseau to Herder, Saussure to Wittgenstein, among others. Instead, I will be strategically selective in my approach by choosing a more specific point of entry. I shall drive a wedge between two of the most influential theorists of mimesis from the end of the twentieth century, to whom *Homo Mimeticus* steps back in order to begin anew: namely, Jacques Derrida and René Girard. Despite their obvious differences, these two French thinkers both posit mimetic principles at the origins of human culture and civilization—namely, writing and scapegoating, or to use their language, the *pharmakon* and the *pharmakos*, with all the similarities these twin concepts entail, as we will see in more detail in chapter 3. But let me start by inscribing my genealogy of homo mimeticus in an untimely figure who has been aligned with the linguistic turn in the past century, yet, at a closer look, develops a hypothesis on the origins of language in line with the mimetic re-turn we are currently promoting in the present century: his name, you will have guessed, is Friedrich Nietzsche.

My opening genealogical wager is that Nietzsche’s hypothesis on the birth of language and, by extension, consciousness, not only anticipates poststructuralist concerns with the linguistic sign and its “arbitrary” relation to the referential world, nor does it solely provide a genealogical confirmation of the role of violence and sacrifice in the origins of culture and morality, specifically Christian
morality—though he does both, thereby paving the way for both deconstruction and mimetic theory. More important for us, Nietzsche also anticipates, by over a century, an evolutionary hypothesis on the origins of language and consciousness that is currently returning to the forefront of contemporary developments in evolutionary anthropology, paleontology, and, more recently, evolutionary psychology as well as the neurosciences. He also provides both philosophical substance and historical perspective to recent returns of attention to affect, performativity, and materiality in different strands of critical theory. Looking back, genealogically, to the birth of human communication will thus bring us back to contemporary concerns with both the mimetic and hypermimetic condition that haunts philosophy, aesthetics, and politics, among other perspectives we shall explore in the chapters that follow.

Due to the spell cast on the structuralist and, later, poststructuralist generation, Nietzsche’s theory of language has long been confined within a linguistic ontology not deprived of idealist tendencies—tendencies Nietzsche’s immanent thought contributed to overturning. Due to the interpretative brilliance of readers like Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, it is now well known that, in a youthful text published posthumously and previously largely unknown except to Nietzsche specialists, titled “Truth and Lies in an Extramoral Sense” (1873), Nietzsche develops a hypothesis on the origins of language that was taken to anticipate structuralist and poststructuralist insights into the arbitrary nature of the sign. Nietzsche, in fact, conceives of language as a metaphorical process in which “nerve stimuli,” as he puts it, are transferred (metaphor, from metapherein, to transfer) into an arbitrary “image” and, later into a “sound” (Nietzsche 1992, 635), twice removed from what the stimuli originally signified, generating an arbitrary chain of images and sounds, signifieds and signifiers that constantly differ and defer meaning away from its origins. After a number of iterations, this view eventually led to the foregrounding of a relativist Nietzschean phrase posthumously collected in the fragments of The Will to Power (1901) that was repeated like a mantra in the 1980s and 1990s and was taken as a slogan for postmodernism tout court: namely, “there are no facts, only interpretations of facts” (Nietzsche 1968, 481:267).

But is Nietzsche’s thought as relativistic as this decontextualized phrase makes him appear to be? What is certain is that genealogy as he practices it fosters what he calls, in On the Genealogy of Morals (1887), an “art of interpretation [das lesen als Kunst]” that requires, among other things, “an acute sense of discrimination in matters of psychology,” as well as “some schooling in history and philology” (Nietzsche 1996, 10, 5). This transdisciplinary, psychologically oriented, interpretative, and
qualitative approach leads to a method of reading that Nietzsche will often refer to in terms of “perspectivism,” which is not the same as relativism, for it entails a sense of discrimination that is particularly sharp when it comes to diagnosing “mimetic pathologies” turning the ego into what I call, echoing Nietzsche, a “phantom of the ego.”

Now, as Nietzsche’s perspectival thought unfolds into his middle and more mature period, this self-proclaimed “philosophical physician” (Nietzsche 1976, 35) continues to sharpen his genealogical lenses to reveal how mimesis does not simply take the ideal form of an image or imago far removed from material reality—a view that inverts a vertical Platonic ontology to unmask the illusionary and arbitrary nature of the world of ideas (his negative thesis). Rather, his genealogy develops horizontally, on a plane of immanence, by fostering a diagnostic evaluation attentive to “nerve stimuli” that tie humans to other humans in intersubjective, relational, and communicative terms that are far from arbitrary in nature—if only because they are tied to bodily instincts that generate forms of unconscious mimicry out of which Homo sapiens is born (his positive thesis).

Consistently in his career, from Human, All Too Human (1878) to the fragments collected in The Will to Power (1901), Nietzsche pays close diagnostic attention to the involuntary tendency of humans to mimic others with their bodies so as to understand them with their psyches, or souls. To that end, he develops what he calls a “genuine physio-psychology” (Nietzsche 2003, 53) that bridges ontological dualisms that divide the body from the psyche, but also self from others, mimetic pathos from linguistic logos, animal from human, nature from culture, among other structural binaries. As Nietzsche succinctly puts it in Human, All Too Human, it is thanks to an involuntary imitation that mirrors others’ expressions and emotions that “the child still learns to understand its mother” (1995, 216:143–144). There is thus a mimetic principle at the origins of individual communication at the level of the development of the child, or ontogenesis. But as the adverb “still” indicates, Nietzsche has a longer genealogy under his lens. Thus, he immediately doubles down on the diagnostic, as he specifies that this is also “how we learned to understand one another” (219).

Understanding without language, you may think: fair enough but how is meaning conveyed? Well, on the basis of what Nietzsche calls “an ancient association between movement and sensation” (1982, 89). For our purpose it is crucial to note at the outset that this association is mimetic without being arbitrary or metaphorical. In fact, it leads a relational, embodied, and porous ego, or “phantom of the ego” (89), to unconsciously mirror the movements seen in the other outside, and by doing so, feel the other’s sensation inside. This is one of those
philosophical arrows directed toward the future Nietzsche addressed but did not get to see; yet it entails, in embryo, a hypothesis concerning the birth of consciousness of a genial species that is not simply sapiens but also mimeticus—or better, a species that becomes sapiens because it is already mimeticus.

For Nietzsche, in fact, imitation is paradoxically central to human originality. Or, put differently, mimesis serves as a relational matrix—or womb—out of which language and consciousness are born, both individually and collectively. As Walter Benjamin also recognized, an account of the human compulsion to imitate must consider ontogenesis but also “presupposes an understanding of the phylogenetic significance of the mimetic faculty” (2007, 333). And confirming Nietzsche’s insight, he adds: “Perhaps there is none of his [man’s; sic] higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role” (333), including the birth of that higher functions par excellence, which is, of course, language and consciousness.

Nietzsche fundamentally agrees. Contrary to dominant existential interpretations under the spell of death, he is arguably the philosopher who did most to push birth to the forefront of philosophical consciousness. I will return to Nietzsche’s account of the birth of the ego out of the “mimetic unconscious” at the level of the development of the child (or ontogenesis) in chapter 3. For the moment, let us look further back and take an additional genealogical step to find out how “ancient” this association between “movement and sensation” actually goes from the perspective of Nietzsche’s relational psychology. This also means that we need to first consider his genealogy of the birth of an all-too-mimetic species (or phylogenesis).

**Birth of Language: Out of a Mimetic Stimulus**

Nietzsche discusses phylogenetic evolutionary processes at different moments in his career, but it is probably in *The Gay Science* (1882) that he goes furthest in his diagnostic. In a brilliant section of book V titled, “On the ‘genius of the species’” (1974, 354:297–300), Nietzsche makes clear that when he speaks of an ancient association between movement and sensation, he means it literally. He was trained as a philologist, after all, but he also goes beyond the temporal confines of his discipline, paving the way for interdisciplinary approaches to come.

Nietzsche’s compressed genealogy of the origins of both consciousness and language, in fact, goes back to prehistoric times, to the origins of the species.
That is, an original species whose genius, he argues contra Romanticism, does not stem from a supposed transcendental subject qua genius considered in autonomous isolation—for Nietzsche posits an evolutionary “need for communication” (298) with other human beings at the origins of consciousness. Nor does it rely on a conception of consciousness that frames mimesis as a stabilizing visual representation that realistically mirrors the external ego—for Nietzsche argues, contra idealism, that life is “possible without seeing itself in a mirror” (297), that is, a mimetic device that reflects the stabilizing logic of the same. Rather, both consciousness and language, for Nietzsche, stem from the dynamic—which is also a power or *dunamis* of—involuntary, and in this sense *un*-conscious, imitative relations with other human beings who are part of a social network of prelinguistic, intersubjective, and bodily communications. As Nietzsche makes clear, this hypothesis does not fit within arbitrary conceptions of the linguistic sign caught in what he now derogatively calls “the snares of grammar,” or, alternatively, “the metaphysics of the people” (300). Instead, it promotes an intersubjective, and thus relational psychology rooted in a network of mimetic communications as its evolutionary possibility of emergence.

As in “Truth and Lies,” Nietzsche’s starting point remains immanent and physiological, but the focus is now *not* on mimesis qua arbitrary image far removed from material reality in the abstraction of a linguistic chain. Rather, his diagnostic focus is on mimesis qua physio-psychological instinct that connects humans attempting to survive in the animal and natural world. While Nietzsche’s genealogical focus is on the emergence of human consciousness and language, it would be a gross misreading to consider his genealogy as simply human-centered or anthropocentric. On the contrary, his evolutionary perspective transgresses the human/animal opposition, for it goes beyond the nature/culture binary still dominant in the past century but increasingly obsolete in the present century. Hence, Nietzsche clarifies at the outset that “physiology and the *history of animals* place us at the beginning of such comprehension [of the problem of consciousness]” (1974, 354:297; emphasis added). For Nietzsche, then, to begin to comprehend the emergence of *Homo sapiens*’ distinctive characteristics (language and consciousness), we need to start with the physiology of animals—including, of course, one of the most thoroughly mimetic animals, which, as Aristotle also saw, is the human animal (Aristotle 1987, 34).

This is not the first time that Nietzsche establishes a genealogical connection between the human and the animal world via the transdisciplinary medium of a behavioral, embodied, and biologically driven mimesis. Already in *Daybreak* (1881), for instance, in a section titled “Animals and Morality,” Nietzsche had
established a genealogical link between human imitation and animal “mimicry.” He did so to diagnose a loss of individuation that is as physiological and biological as it is psychic and moral—thereby anticipating political insights we shall explore in more detail in part 3. For the moment, it suffices to say that Nietzsche establishes an evolutionary “parallel” with ethico-political implications between animal mimicry and human mimetism: just as mimetic animals “adapt their colouring to the colouring of their surroundings” via the “chromatic function” to “elude one’s pursuers,” he writes, so “the individual hides in the general concept of ‘man,’ or in society” out of fear and “prudence” (1982, 26:20–21). Paving the way for Roger Caillois’s diagonal connection between human and animal “mimicry” (1938) as a pathological condition, Nietzsche considers “what English researchers designate ‘mimicry’” (20) purely negatively here. That is, as a dissolution of individuation that renders the ego porous and open to influences that generate a type of psychic and social conformism constitutive of what I call mimetic pathology.

Part of a broader unmasking operation whereby the high value of human (Christian) morality is overturned and reframed in terms of low animal (evolutionary) instincts, Nietzsche diagnoses human mimicry as an animal defense mechanism of survival, whereby the singular hides under the general, aggressive personal drives dissolve into fearful gregarious norms. Thus, Nietzsche states: “the animal understands all this just as man does, with it too self-control springs from the sense for what is real (from prudence)” (1982, 26:21). Interestingly, this prudence, for Nietzsche, stretches to in-form (to form from the inside) philosophical prudence as well. Thus, he reframes the noble “sense for truth” characteristic of idealist and moral philosophers that dominated western culture in terms of a less flattering material “sense for security, man has in common with the animals” (21). In an arrow directed contra idealism and moralism, Nietzsche’s insight strikes a narcissistic blow to the pride of Homo sapiens, as he continues: “The beginning of justice, as of prudence, moderation, bravery—in short, of all we designate as the Socratic virtues, are animal: a consequence of that drive which teaches us to seek food and elude enemies” (21). High all-too-human virtues born out of low animal drives: this is not only how philosophy is born; it is also how herd security is gained and sovereign individuality lost. Subjected to imitative drives, humans become general, average, and lose personal consciousness in pathological terms Nietzsche often associates with “slavery,” the “many,” or the “herd”—all of which are characterized by a mimetic consciousness. Death of individual mastery, birth of social slavery: this is, in a nutshell, Nietzsche’s dominant genealogical perspective on the pathology of mimesis.
And yet Nietzsche’s diagnostic evaluation of homo mimeticus is never unilatera- 
lateral for the pathology is always followed by what I call a balancing patho-
logy: namely, a rational thought (or *logos*) internal to mimetic affect (or *pathos*) that is charac-
teristic of the mimetic turn or re-turn this book promotes more generally. 
Thus, in a characteristic inversion of perspectives, in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche 
starts by stressing the formative, rather than deformative, properties of animal/
human mimicry. In fact, his focus is now on an evolutionary formation, or bet-
ter metamorphic transformation that leads to the birth of human consciousness 
and language. This birth is not individual or autonomous. On the contrary, it 
emerges out of the womb of intersubjective forms of mimetic communication 
constitutive of what he calls, not without irony (notice the quotation marks), 
“the ‘genius of the species [*‘Genius der Gattung’*]’” (1974, 354:297). His evolu-
tionary hypothesis, in fact, goes back, via “whole races and chains of generation” 
(298) to the dawn of *Homo sapiens*, in order to account for its natural descent— 
and the cultural ascent of a homo mimeticus whose contemporary implications 
we have barely begun to evaluate.

At the most general level, Nietzsche provides a patho-*logical* supplement to 
Darwin’s theory of *biological* evolution along *bio-cultural* lines that depart in origi-
nal ways from universalizing metanarratives of *cultural* evolution that held sway in 
the twentieth century. Thus, he does not posit a violent murder, or sacrifice, at the 
origins of culture on the basis of a racist connection between “savages,” “children,” 
and “dull-witted people” qua obsessive “neurotics,” as Sigmund Freud speculates in 
*Totem and Taboo* (1940, 15)—a psychoanalytical thesis that neatly fits an Oedipal 
myth but is hardly considered a hypothesis in the social and evolutionary sciences 
today. Nor is Nietzsche in line with René Girard’s creative reformulation of the 
Freudian hypothesis of a founding murder in which violence is discharged against 
a sacrificial victim, or “scapegoat,” to put a cathartic end to a “crisis of difference” 
and install morality, law, and culture more generally, as he suggests in *Violence and 
the Sacred* (1977, 1–118)—a speculative, ahistorical move central to Girard’s mi-
metic theory yet still in need of a contemporary theory of homo mimeticus root-
ed in immanent atheological foundations. While Nietzsche is indeed attentive to 
the violent and unconscious origins of culture, positing aggressive instincts based 
on re-resentiment at the foundations of morality, he also explores a different, less 
rivalrous and violent, more cooperative and communal, but also more future-or-
iented route to the origins of consciousness and language. To do so, he zooms in 
on the role played not so much by mimetic rivalry and sacrificial death but by 
unconscious mimicry and intersubjective collaboration central for affirming the 
collective survival of a fragile, precarious, yet eminently social species.
As we now turn to see, it is Nietzsche’s cooperative mimetic hypothesis that comes closest to Darwin’s evolutionary account of “social habits” such as “language” as a supplement to his main focus on genetic evolution. Darwin had in fact noticed that “the intellect must have been all-important to him [man; sic], even at a very remote period, as enabling him to invent and use language, to make weapons, tools, traps &c., whereby with the aid of his social habits, he long ago became the most dominant of all living creatures,” while at the same time supposing that “the largeness of the brain in man relatively to the body, compared to the lower animals, may be attributed in part to the early use of some simple form of language” (Darwin 1970, 132–208, 199, 200). While Nietzsche is often critical of Darwin, his analysis of the origins of language both furthers and complicates a Darwinian evolutionary line of inquiry. More recently, it is also receiving the support of new developments in (post-)evolutionary theory that cross the nature/culture divide and span perspectives as diverse as paleontology, evolutionary psychology, and the neurosciences, all of which are embryonic in Nietzsche’s genealogy of the birth of consciousness and are constitutive of mimetic studies. Let us take a closer look.

**Genealogy of Consciousness: A Will to Mime**

Nietzsche’s starting point for his account of the birth of language and consciousness goes beyond nature and culture. It is neither purely biological nor solely cultural but emerges, phantomlike, out of the dynamic interplay of animal physiology and social practices. We could in fact say that he performs what the French sociologist, philosopher, and transdisciplinary thinker Edgar Morin would call a “bio-psycho-social integration” (Morin 1973, 185). Not unlike Nietzsche, Morin, as we shall see in more detail in the coda, also aims to account for a complex process of biological descent and cultural ascent that rests as much on a mimetic *instinct* of survival as on a mimetic *culture* of solidarity.

Specifying the diagnostic, Nietzsche posits the hypothesis that for prehistoric humans “the subtlety and strength of consciousness always were proportionate to man’s (or animal’s) capacity for communication [*Mitteilungs-Fähigkeit*] [...] as if this capacity in turn were proportionate to the need for communication [*Mitteilungs-Bedürftigkeit*]” (1974, 354:298). Nietzsche’s starting point is as physiological and evolutionary as it is psychological and social. Considering the
vulnerability of an animal born too soon, lacking instinctive specialization, and thus radically dependent on others, Nietzsche considers *Homo sapiens*’ biological, psychic, and social need to communicate with others to affirm survival as the immanent starting point for what he calls an “extravagant surmise” (297): namely, and this is his main thesis, that “the development of language and the development of consciousness [...] go hand in hand,” insofar as “consciousness has developed only under the pressure of the need for communication” (298). This may initially sound an extravagant hypothesis indeed, if only because it entails a radical overturning of perspectives that, Nietzsche anticipates, will sound “offensive” “to older [read idealist] philosophers” (297). The highest peaks of human achievement—namely, consciousness and language—are here not considered as the cause of communication but as their effect. It is not consciousness or a rational *logos* that brings communication into being. On the contrary, it is a pre-existing communicative need triggered by affect, or *pathos*, that is the source of our becoming human.

Language, consciousness, communication. How are these concepts genealogically related? And what does Nietzsche mean with “communication [*Mitteilung*],” since it does not presuppose language but is, rather, the fundamental presupposition for both language and consciousness to emerge? Crucially, for the Nietzsche of the middle period, communication is first and foremost not a linguistic form of exchange restricted to arbitrary metaphorical signs, words, or *logoi* uttered by a subject considered in isolation; it is rather physiological in origins, intersubjective in nature, and thus eminently social, embodied, and affective in expressive orientation. The physiological dimension of communication, which is expressed in gestures and facial expressions, is particularly important for Nietzsche.10 Thus, he stresses that “not only language serves as bridge between human beings but also a mien, a pressure, a gesture [*der Blick, der Druck, die Gebärde*]” (1974, 354:299). If such a form of prelinguistic, embodied, and affective communication is still triggered by “nerve stimuli,” as in “Truth and Lies,” the focus is now no longer on a disinterested autonomous subject who perceives the world in a condition of epistemic isolation, nor is it a question of being caught in the spell of a metaphorical chain of arbitrary associations that lead away from reality, to the creation of ideal worlds “behind the world [*Hinterwelt*]” (Nietzsche 1996, 5). Instead, his focus is now on an intersubjective, bio-socio-evolutionary dynamic that ties, *patho*-logically, subjects to other subjects, one gesture to another gesture, one facial expression to another facial expression, via an immanent social network of mimetic communication in which the ego is not autonomous and self-enclosed but is a relational phantom part of a larger cooperative community striving to survive in *this* world.
How does this prelinguistic communication operate? By relying on what nerve stimuli do best: namely, triggering motor movements such as gestures, facial expressions, or pantomime endowed with an affective power, or pathos, to bridge the gap between self and others. Nietzsche had already diagnosed this mirroring phenomenon in *Human, All Too Human*, as he writes:

As soon as people understood one another in gestures, a symbolism of gestures could arise: I mean that people could agree upon a language of sound signals by first producing sound and gesture (the former symbolically joined to the latter) and later only the sound. (1995, 216:144)

Again, this symbolism is not arbitrary. It is based on a continuity between gestures and sounds, the pathos of movements and the logos of communication predicated on an unconscious association between physiological movements seen outside and psychic affects felt inside.

If our deconstruction, to use an old-fashioned word, of mind/body, self/others dualistic binaries, goes beyond linguistic metaphysical principles, it remains firmly rooted in Nietzsche’s immanent embodied principles. In fact, for Nietzsche, this pathos is nothing less and nothing more than the clearest and most ordinary manifestation of one of his most influential and misunderstood concepts: namely, the “will to power.” Why? Because as he puts it in a fragment from 1988, this enigmatic concept goes beyond being/becoming metaphysical binaries to open up a fluid, embodied, and affective drive that opens up the ego to the outside: “The will to power not a being, not a becoming but a pathos” (Nietzsche, 1968, 635:339). The foundational concept of “mimetic pathos,” which, as we have seen, provides the first step toward the theory of homo mimeticus put forward in this book, finds thus in Nietzsche a privileged starting point. Out of this powerful affect, or pathos, then, a new theory, or logos, on imitation is born.

Let us be clear: mimetic pathos is not simply pathological for the psychic dissolution of the boundaries of individuation it entails; it is also patho-logical in the sense that the will to power of pathos triggers a mirroring form of unconscious communication that is not only older than any conscious language or logos and the idea of being it entails; it also brings both consciousness and language into an entangled form of evolutionary becoming. Nietzsche specifies this mirroring mechanism in terms of a “psychomotor rapport” in another fragment from the same year central to his genealogy of language, as he writes: “This is where languages originate: the languages of tone as well as the languages of
gestures and glances” (1968, 809:428). For Nietzsche, this physiological form of “transmission between living creatures […] is the source of languages” and goes back to the “beginning” (428); and yet this beginning continues to cast light on the present and perhaps the future as well. In fact, he continues: “even today one still hears with one’s muscles, one even reads with one’s muscles” (428). There is thus a muscular, physiological, or better physio-psychological form of mimetic communication that provides an embodied medium of expression that underscores, mediates, and renders possible the emergence of linguistic communication. Or, to put it in our language, a mimetic will to power, or will to mime, triggers a mirroring form of unconscious communication in homo mimeticus that is not only older than language or logos; it is also patho-logical, for it brings both consciousness and language into being—out of the powerful stimulus of mimetic pathos.

We are now in a position to confirm that, for the mature Nietzsche, communication is not based on arbitrary linguistic signs to interpret from a rational distance; rather, it originates in mirroring bodily movements and facial expressions that convey an unconscious pathos as shared affect, or sym-pathos. Nietzsche summarizes this dynamic with characteristic succinctness, as he states: “One never communicates thoughts: one communicates movements, mimic signs, which we then trace back to thoughts” (1968, 809:428). This mirroring principle that translates gestures into thoughts via an involuntary psychomotor mimicry is one of the foundational principles of what I call the “mimetic unconscious,” a pre-Freudian but also post-Freudian alternative I shall return to. 

For the moment, suffice it to say that this is a relational, physio-psychological, and thus embodied unconscious that ties the human soul (psyche) back to our animal body (soma), makes the ego, for better and worse, porous to external influences, renders it plastic and adaptable, and, we now add, emerges from modes of embodied communication that are not based on arbitrary linguistic signs but, rather, on mimicry of physical movements, which are at the origins of psychic sensations and thoughts.

Does this mirroring principle sound familiar? The contemporary reader attentive to recent developments in critical theory that go beyond the traditional two-cultures divide will not have missed the rather astonishing fact that Nietzsche, writing in the 1880s, anticipated by over a century what has been hailed as a revolutionary discovery in the 1990s: namely, the discovery of a set of neuronal cells that has triggered renewed interests in mimesis at the dawn of the twenty-first century and that has been grouped under the heading of “mirror neurons.” Initially discovered in area F5 of the premotor cortex of macaque monkeys by Giacomo Rizzolatti and his team at the University of Parma, Italy,
mirror neurons were later found in humans in the ramified form of a “mirror neuron system” (MNS) (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2008). In a nutshell, mirror neurons are motor neurons, that is, neurons responsible for movement, which activate or “fire” not only as we perform a movement but also—and this is the discovery—as we see others perform a movement, especially goal-oriented movements, such as grasping and holding, but also facial expressions, images, and sounds, triggering an unconscious activation, mirroring sensation, and embodied imitation in the self as well. A genealogy of the mimetic unconscious already showed that this discovery finds important and so far largely unacknowledged precursors in philosophical physicians attentive to the mirroring relation between movements and sensations, what we see and what we feel.

Furthering this emerging line of inquiry, we can now say that Nietzsche, for whom, let us not forget, “the body is a great reason” (2005, 30), already describes this mirroring mechanism with delicate phenomenological precision. His genealogy of homo mimeticus is characteristically Janus-faced: it looks back to the imitative origins of human practices but does so to better look ahead to the future. In Daybreak (1881), he unpacks this mirroring communication as follows:

To understand another person, that is to imitate his [sic] feelings in ourselves [...we] produce the feeling [of others] in ourselves after the effects it exerts and displays on the other person by imitating with our own body the expression of his eyes, his voice, his walk, his bearing (or even their reflection in word, picture, music). Then a similar feeling arises in us in consequence of an ancient association between movement and sensation (1982, 142:89).

This mirroring, nonarbitrary principle allows for an understanding of other minds (or theory of mind) that does not require the rational mediation of a linguistic consciousness (or theory theory). Instead, it perfectly conforms to what has been called “embodied simulation” (or simulation theory), opening up a shared and relational conception of subjectivity Vittorio Gallese designates as the “shared manifold of intersubjectivity” (2003, 171) and I group under the Nietzschean concept of “mimetic communication.” This also means that the tradition of the mimetic unconscious on which this mirroring mechanism rests anticipates by more than a century the discovery of mirror neurons, and thus paves the way for it.

This genealogical point is worth stressing in a culture that often thinks the future of original discoveries is primarily on the side of the hard sciences, while
the humanities are bound to endless repetitions of past ideas. This is indeed the risk of antiquarian history still dominating many areas in the humanities; yet, for genealogy, tradition and innovation are far from being opposed. On the contrary, what a genealogy of homo mimeticus is beginning to teach us is that revolutionary discoveries might actually turn out to be re-discoveries of ancient principles that are now finally confirmed on an empirical basis and contribute to promoting a transdisciplinary re-turn of mimesis on the critical and theoretical scene.

But Nietzsche allows us to go further. He also stresses, somewhat paradoxically, that his new genealogical connection is “ancient.” His genealogy has thus a broader philosophical point to make. The reflex of mimesis leads back to the phylogenetic emergence of Homo sapiens, and this step back allows us to leap ahead to more far-reaching hypotheses constitutive of the birth of homo mimeticus. Nietzsche, in fact, adds that human language and consciousness emerged out of an all-too-human dependency on others based on relationality, affectivity, and, above all, prelinguistic forms of communication based on mirroring reflexes constitutive of our species. Mimetic drives, for Nietzsche, are in fact amplified by a constitutive human fragility, dependency, and timidity, which, together, foster relationality, intersubjective communication, and, in the best life-affirmative scenarios, cooperation as well. He clarifies his genealogical hypothesis in *Daybreak* in a passage that continues to account for the birth of the “genius of the species”—out of the “fragility of human nature.” It reads as follows:

If we ask how we became so fluent in the imitation of the feelings of others [Nachbildung der Gefühle anderer] the answer admits of no doubt: man [sic], as the most timid of all creatures on account of his subtle and fragile nature, has in his timidity the instructor in that empathy [Mitempfindung], that quick understanding of the feeling of another (and of animals). Through long millennia he saw in everything strange and lively a danger: at the sight of it he at once imitated the expression of the features and the bearing [Ausdruck der Züge und der Haltung] and drew his conclusion of the kind of evil intention behind the features of this bearing. (1992, 142:90)

Fear, timidity, and fragility are thus at the origins of prelinguistic forms of mimetic communication that find in mirroring physiological principles a subtle and quick mode of understanding. How far we are from the caricature of Nietzsche as the unconditional advocate of strong, autonomous, anti-mimetic, but not all that quick-witted, beasts of prey.
This is, indeed, the same hypothesis that informs Nietzsche’s genealogy of consciousness and language in *The Gay Science*, where he states: “as the most endangered animal, he [sic] needed help and protection, he needed his peers, he had to learn to express his distress and to make himself understood” (1974, 354:298). Mirroring gestures and facial expressions allowed for this affective distress (*pathos*) to be communicated quickly, via an unconscious mimesis that paves the way for the emergence of consciousness and language (*logos*). For Nietzsche, then, the speed generated by a reflex sympathy (*sym-pathos*, feeling with) provides the immanent foundation on which dialogue (*dia-logos*, through words) actually rests. Due to their constitutive vulnerability, prehistoric humans turned out to be dependent, relational, and cooperative creatures. Their “consciousness” was thus not monadic, autonomous, and individually self-enclosed; it was rather, from its inception, part of a ramified network of mimetic *pathos*—or will to power—which Nietzsche also calls a “net of communication [*Verbindungsnetz*] between human beings” (298).

Mimetic pathos is at the origins of a communicative network on which the collective survival of *Homo sapiens* depends; our species evolutionary power does not lie in the autonomous ego but in the intersubjective network of communication connecting phantom egos. We can now better understand why Nietzsche says that the “will to power [or *pathos*] is the primitive form of affect, that all other affects are only developments of it” (1968, 688:366). Nietzsche, the philologist, uses the term “primitive” literally and, thus, etymologically (from Latin, *primus*, first) to foster a genealogical insight: namely, that the first mimetic *pathos* ties self to others via an originary *will to mime* that gives birth to an immanent, embodied, relational, and eminently social consciousness. This consciousness is thus not located in a solipsistic ego but in the social network of communication [*Mit-teilung*] that both connects [*Mit*] and disconnects [*Teilung*] self and others in a double movement between mimetic and anti-mimetic tendencies Nietzsche often called, in an oxymoronic and thus agonistic phrase, “*pathos of distance*” (1996, 12).

It is my contention that this dynamic tension or oscillation between the unconscious immediacy of pathos and the conscious mediation of distance is the palpitating heart of the mimetic turn, or re-turn to an immanent, atheological, and future-oriented theory of mimesis that animates the pages that follow. It also provides the *Stoßpunkt*, or *coup d’envoi*, that sets mimetic studies in motion as a transdisciplinary field attentive to intersubjective, relational, and communicative processes. Time and again, we shall see that homo mimeticus is radically vulnerable to the reflex *pathos* of mimesis, experiences its power with the body, sometimes for the worse, opening up a plurality of pathological perspectives that deserve new attention in the digital age. And yet, at the same time, and without
contradiction, this imitative subject can also mobilize all the tools of critical consciousness and the *logos* it entails to set up a diagnostic distance from mimetic *pathos* constitutive of the philosophical physician’s patho-*logy*—the clinical *logos* being all the sharper insofar as this mimetic *pathos* is seen outside and experienced inside. Homo mimeticus is thus Janus-faced not only because it looks in two opposed directions, presiding over departures and new arrivals, but also because it relies on both *pathos* and *logos* to chart territories yet to be explored.

There is again a powerful inversion of perspectives, or perspectivism, at play in Nietzsche’s Janus-faced mimetic patho-*logy*. The driving *telos* of his genealogy affirms that humans are not social animals because they have individual consciousness. On the contrary, they have a shared consciousness due to their precarious nature that leads them to cooperate, first unconsciously and then consciously, as eminently social creatures. Hence, Nietzsche reiterates the main point of his genealogical inversion, which he considers as nothing less than “the essence of phenomenalism and perspectivism,” as he says:

My idea is, as you see, that consciousness does not really belong to man’s individual existence but rather to his social or herd nature; that, as follows from this, it has developed subtlety only insofar as this is required by social or herd utility (1974, 354:299).

For Nietzsche, there is thus a mimetic principle or will to mime at the dawn of consciousness and language characteristic of that original species a.k.a. *Homo sapiens*. I echo that the “genius” of the species was ultimately a mimetic genius, for it was triggered by the unconscious power of mirroring reflexes characteristic of homo mimeticus.

This also means that human power does not stem from a self-sufficient, violent, macho power rooted only in sovereign, patriarchal and rather beastly individuals—though they certainly remain its dominant socio-political manifestation. Rather, it is born from a constitutive, all-too-human vulnerability and dependency to maternal forms of nonverbal communication that opens up the channels of mimetic *pathos* through which will to power flows as a network—inaugurating more collaborative and future-oriented genealogical steps for an ongoing hominization in the future.
Steps Toward a Hominization of the Future

With few exceptions, Nietzsche’s “extravagant surmise” that an unconscious bodily mimesis of gestures and facial expressions lies at the prehistorical origins of human consciousness and language remained in the background of rationalist and ahistorical philosophical trends dominant in western thought. That is, trends that, at one remove, cast a shadow on the (post)structuralist generation as well. For Nietzsche, in fact, it was soon clear that the “original failing of philosophers” is that they tend to consider the concept of “man” as an “aeterna veritas” (1997, 2:16). Because philosophers often lack a sense of historical discrimination, he continues, they do not realize that “everything essential in human development occurred in primeval times [Urzeiten], long before those four thousand years with which we are more or less acquainted” (2:16). To be sure, Nietzsche’s hypothesis on the birth of Homo sapiens will have to wait until the middle of the twentieth century to find empirical confirmations outside the confines of philosophy. As we have learned to appreciate, his observations often sound extravagant because they are untimely and thus anticipate discoveries yet to come. He might in fact have been offering a genealogical hypothesis to solve one of the greatest riddles in human evolution. Namely, the so-called “great leap forward” that occurred around seventy-five thousand years ago and marked a radical turn in the emergence of Homo sapiens.

Let us thus broaden the scope of our genealogy of homo mimeticus.

While paleoanthropologists tend to agree that the human brain reached its present capacity around three hundred thousand years ago, key human characteristics, including symbolic creation, the making of complex tools, cave painting, religious beliefs, music, and language started to appear only much later, around 70,000–50,000 BC. Why so late? A traditional (Darwinian) evolutionary hypothesis would look for a genetic mutation responsible for this leap ahead, but this hypothesis does not account for the speed in which such a human transformation took place and spread across the world. An alternative starting point was suggested by the French paleontologist André Leroi-Gourhan. In his seminal study Le Geste et la parole (1964, 1965), he provides evolutionary support in favor of the (Nietzschean) hypothesis that the origins of language cannot be dissociated from gestures and facial expressions. In fact, Leroi-Gourhan argues that the birth of language does not come out ready-made from sapiens’ brain—like Athena out of Zeus’s head, as a “cerebralist” anthropological tradition that goes...
from Rousseau to Lévi-Strauss suggested. Rather, it has lower, more immanent, and, pace idealist philosophers, modest physiological origins.

If our body is our greatest reason, then, philosophers should start shifting the gaze from the sky of ideas and begin to look at their feet and hands. According to Leroi-Gourhan, humans’ capacity for language stems from the foot and the vertical posture (station verticale) it allowed, which, in turn, freed the hand for the making of tools and gestures (le geste), increased facial exposure via what progressively became a “short face” (face courte), which physiologically allowed for the development of facial and eventual oral communication (la parole). As he summarizes his untimely thesis: “Vertical posture, short face, free hand during locomotion and possession of removable tools are really the fundamental criteria of humanity” (1964, 33; my trans.). This genealogy of the liberation of the hand attentive to the role of the “tool for the hand and of language for the face” (34), for Leroi-Gourhan, identifies the two main poles potentially responsible for the acceleration of the evolutionary process that led to the full development of Homo sapiens’ unique capacities, including oral and, eventually, written communication (1964, 33). Thus, Leroi-Gourhan continues by saying that “The prodigious acceleration of progress” characteristic of recent human history, “is simultaneously connected to the channeling of reasoning into technical operations and to the subservience of the hand to language in the graphic symbolism that culminates with writing” (1965, 260). Yes, writing is a foundational genealogical achievement. No one denies it, certainly not people who spend their days writing books.

And yet, before reaching the very recent stage of écriture and the externalization of memory it entails that fascinated poststructuralist readers of Leroi-Gourhan (see Derrida 1967, 124–130; Stiegler 1998, 43–179), genealogists of homo mimeticus start from a more modest but foundational embodied premise. It is in fact crucial to stress that it is the interplay of gestures and mimicry that, for the paleontologist, as for Nietzsche before him, led, via a long evolutionary process of hominization, to speech, consciousness, and, eventually, writing. Thus, Leroi-Ghouran specifies:

this reflective thought, which was expressed concretely in vocal language and mimicry [langage vocale et mimique] of Anthropians probably since their origins, acquires during the superior Palaeolithic the handling of representations allowing humans to express themselves beyond the material present. (1964, 270)
Nietzsche would have fundamentally agreed on the original function of mimicry. He might also have added a mimetic supplement: namely, that the fragility, dependency, and lack of specialization of the human animal played a key role in developing relational forms of mirroring communication, sharing, and cooperation that, according to more contemporary hypotheses, turn out to be central to the birth of homo sapiens-mimeticus—out of the immanence of mirroring reflexes.

From philosophy to paleoanthropology, let us keep turning the perspectival lens of the patho-logies of homo mimeticus. We can now add neurology as well to solve this evolutionary riddle from the transdisciplinary angle of new mimetic studies. Furthering mirror neuron theory from an evolutionary perspective, the neuroscientist V. S. Ramachandran, in a chapter of The Tell-Tale Brain (2011) titled, “The Neurons that Shaped Civilization,” develops a daring neuro-bio-cultural hypothesis that surprised many but would not have surprised Nietzsche: “mirror neurons play an important role in the uniqueness of the human condition: They allow us to imitate,” and Ramachandran adds, “miming may have been the key step in hominin evolution, resulting in our ability to transmit knowledge through example” (2011, 132). Taking his distance from a purely genetic view of evolution to account for a complex cultural transformation characteristic of Homo sapiens, Ramachandran, like Nietzsche before him, starts by stressing how “utterly depended on round-the-clock care and supervisions” (117) humans are. And he does so to foreground the role of imitation in general and mirror neurons in particular in the development of language and cultural transmission.

Focusing on major technical innovations but also aesthetics, the human ability to read other minds, and self-awareness, Ramachandran builds on Rizzolatti’s insight that mirror neurons “may be the precursors of our celebrated Broca’s area”—that is, a brain area linked to the “expressive aspects of human language” (123)—to provide a hypothesis for the emergence of language at the dawn of human prehistory. Thus, he argues that a “primitive gestural communication system [read MNS] [was] already in place that provided scaffolding for the emergence of vocal language” (120). This hypothesis allows Ramachandran to move beyond the Scylla of structuralist accounts predicated on language considered as an autonomous system and the Charybdis of universal transhistorical hypotheses on founding sacrificial murders. Instead, he opens up a genealogical hypothesis that relies on the powers or pathos of mimesis and the will to mime it entails for “translating gestures into words” and, more generally, for passing down cultural practices via imitation of examples rather than genetic mutation. Thus, he concludes that “increased sophistication of a single mechanism—such
as imitation and intention reading—could explain the huge behavioral gap between us and apes” (134).

More recently, Rizzolatti himself considers Ramachandran’s hypothesis “attractive”; he also lends supports to it. Thus, Rizzolatti suggests that, thanks to a genetic evolution that led to a “sufficient number of mirror neurons” in Homo sapiens, “humans liberated themselves from the slow Darwinian evolution and were able to set in motion a cultural evolution that rapidly changed the world, carrying us in a very short time to the present world” (Rizzolatti and Gnoli 2016, 182; my trans.). An embodied mirroring communication through mien and gestures might thus have served as a bridge between open, porous, and relational subjects on the way to the emergence of language, consciousness, and culture, after all. Perhaps it might even have played a role in the “evolutionary bridge” that made the emergence of the “genius of the species” possible—out of a communicative mimetic pathos, or will to mime. The paradox is not without ironies: imitation turns out to be the source of human originality; Homo sapiens is born out of homo mimeticus.

This, I admit, is a daring overturning of perspectives that urges us to rethink the foundations of who we are as a species. Skeptics might worry that it is biased by an excessive faith in mirror neurons. I share this worry. In fact, I have myself been critical of rationalist interpretations of mirror neuron theories that stress perhaps too much their role in understanding other people’s actions and intentions at the expense of other, perhaps less based on understanding but equally mirroring, violent, and irrational reactions that can equally be triggered—as we shall have the occasion to confirm with respect to political pathologies in part 3. To be fair to this hypothesis, however, if we keep turning the perspectival lens of our pathology, we should note that it also finds support in recent perspectives developed independently from mirror neuron theory yet relevant to account for homo mimeticus.

In the field of evolutionary psychology, for instance, Michael Tomasello posits a gestural imitation, or pantomime, as central to The Origins of Human Communication (2008). As Tomasello puts it: “my evolutionary hypothesis [is] that the first uniquely human forms of communication were pointing and pantomiming,” that is, gestures and expressions he considers central for human “cooperation” based on “shared intentionality” out of which, he adds, “arbitrary linguistic conventions could have come into existence evolutionarily” (2008, 9). While drawing on evolutionary anthropology and comparative studies of great apes and children, Tomasello argues that, philosophically, the “major theoretical arguments” for shared intentionality and cooperative communication are provided by “classic scholars such as Wittgenstein” (334). And rightly so, for Wittgenstein
also claims that “what we call meaning must be connected with the primitive language of gestures” (Tomasello 2008, 1; see also Gebauer 2017). Needless to say, the claim that “pointing and pantomiming [...] are ‘natural’ in the way that ‘arbitrary’ linguistic conventions are not” (9) finds in another classic scholar, who was also a scholar of classics, such as Nietzsche, an additional source of theoretical arguments on which the mimetic turn, or re-turn to mimesis, draws.

Lastly, and to bring us fully into the present, Nietzsche also adds a maternal touch to his genealogy. As his claim on the child understanding the mother with which we started suggests, he was in fact attentive to the birth of language and communication out of maternal influences and collective cooperation along immanent, embodied, and sympathetic lines that resonate productively with feminist philosophers like Adriana Cavarero we shall soon encounter. As the goal of this chapter is to trace as far back as possible the genealogy of the relational foundations animating homo mimeticus, let me turn to an anthropologist and primatologist who shares our mimetic hypothesis and adds a maternal supplement as well. Sarah Blaffer Hrdy is exemplary in this respect.

Building on Tomasello, Hrdy furthers a cooperative account of the evolutionary origins of humans’ empathic and relational consciousness that adds yet another confirmation to our genealogy. As the title of her book suggests, Hrdy focuses on Mothers and Others (2009) to foreground the “evolutionary origins of mutual understanding” (this being the book’s subtitle). She does so by zeroing in on cooperative, predominantly but not exclusively maternal forms of rearing, open to nonparental care (or alloparenting), which resonates directly with Nietzsche’s hypothesis of consciousness as a “social network.” As Hrdy succinctly puts it: “cooperative breeding came before braininess” (2009, 176). Her evolutionary hypothesis complicates dominant individualistic, violent, or selfish interpretations of human behavior (or genes) by focusing on the all-too-human need for cooperation as the source of the development of newborns’ mimetic faculty to both feel and think from the point of view of others. As Hrdy puts it: “were it not for the peculiar combination of empathy and mind reading [emerging from the child’s bond with a multiplicity of maternal/alloparental relations], we would never have evolved to be humans at all” (28). And in a passage worth reproducing here, she adds in an explicitly mimetic mood:

Without the capacity to put ourselves cognitively and emotionally in someone else’s shoes, to feel what they feel, to be interested in their fears and motives, longings, griefs, vanities, and other details of their existence, without this mixture of curiosity about emotional
identification with others, a combination that adds up to mutual understanding and sometimes even compassion, *Homo sapiens* would never have evolved at all. (28)\(^{16}\)

Had *Homo sapiens* not been first and foremost *mimeticus*, we would never have evolved to even aspire to becoming *sapiens* in the first place, which does not mean that this ideal has been successfully achieved. Quite the contrary, as we shall see. For the moment, let us register that affectively stepping in others’ minds and shoes, emotional identification, compassion, or, to put it in our language, *sym-pathos*, are all part of mimetic forms of communication that most likely gave birth to our cooperative species, allowing for our extraordinary evolutionary expansion on planet earth, for good and ill.

Numerous other recent evolutionary accounts that stress a return of attention to the centrality of mimesis in human development could be mentioned, but these must suffice to make my point.\(^{17}\) What was true for the latest developments in mirror neuron theory is equally true for the latest developments in evolutionary psychology and anthropology: from the awareness of human dependency and fragility to the centrality of mimicry and pantomime, from the importance of sharing and cooperation to the social nature of human consciousness, these new theories of the origins of communication find in Nietzsche an original and so far largely unacknowledged precursor that reveals the all-too-imitative foundations of a thoroughly innovative species I call, for lack of a more original term, homo mimeticus.

### Beyond Good and Evil Mimesis

Nietzsche, then, encourages genealogists developing new perspectives for mimetic studies to look back to the origins of language—out of mimetic *pathos*. He does so to foster a perspectival critical discourse (or *logos*) that looks ahead to the possible patho(-)logical destinations of homo mimeticus. To pull some preliminary strings that will guide us in what follows, let me schematically outline the relevance of the mimetic turn for an age that is no longer dominated by the primacy of the linguistic turn attentive to the centering power of language (*logos*), but is entangled in a number of re-turns to more embodied, performative, material, relational, yet not less mimetic and contagious affects (*pathê*).
In the past century, Nietzsche’s hypothesis paved the way for theories of language and cultural evolution that selectively drew on his genealogical, perspectival, and thus patho-logical insights to promote the view that mimesis goes beyond good and evil, for it operates both as a pharmakon (poison/remedy) and as a pharmakos (scapegoat). This lesson has been immensely productive for linguistic-oriented critical inquiries that, often via the privileged medium of print literature, paid close attention to the texture of texts. They did so not only to disrupt the myth of presence and the (Platonic) metaphysics it entails but also to decenter the subject, reinstate the power of the unconscious, affirm the primacy of the copy over the original, reveal the imitative foundations of human desires, and diagnose a type of sacrificial violence that does not originate in the myth of an ideal, immutable, and fully present rational consciousness.

The theory of imitation we are currently developing on Nietzsche’s and other modernist and contemporary shoulders remains genealogically connected to this past tradition of critique, especially when it comes to affirming the pathological consequences of the mimetic unconscious. In fact, in *The Gay Science*, after having stressed the positive role of mimesis in his past-oriented genealogy of language, Nietzsche overturns once again perspectives to diagnose the pathological side of a future-oriented consciousness. He writes:

> Owing to the nature of animal consciousness, the world of which we can become conscious is only a surface-and sign-world, a world that is made common and meaner; whatever becomes conscious becomes by the same token shallow, thin, relatively stupid, general, sign, herd signal [...] Ultimately, the growth of consciousness becomes a danger; and anyone who lives among the most conscious Europeans even knows that it is a disease. (1974, 354:299–300)

Nietzsche’s diagnostic perspectives change over time, but his mimetic patho(-)logies remain double: for him, mimesis not only gives birth to the logos of consciousness; the same consciousness born out of the pathos of herd-behavior can also spread contagious pathologies that, he warns us a few aphorisms later, are particularly intense in ages in which “actors, all kinds of actors, turn out to be the real masters” (1974, 356:303). There is thus significant diagnostic potential in a theory of homo mimeticus that draws selectively and genealogically on untimely thinkers attentive to the power of pathos to unmask contagious diseases that, in the age of (new) fascist infections amplified by viral infections and new media,
contribute to “thorough corruption, falsification, reduction to superficialities, and generalization” (354;300). Welcome to the world of social media.

Mimesis is not a new or original concept; yet the mimetic re-turn does not simply echo past linguistic theories that found in literature their primary source of inspiration—though literature continues to remain inspiring to the few. Rather, it introduces repetitions and differences that are constitutive of a digitized, mass-mediatized, and increasingly precarious world traversed by fluxes of (hyper)mimetic contagion that operate with increasing speed and potential of infection. Hence, a new theory of imitation for the twenty-first century cannot be restricted to mimetic desire alone. Rather, it must be expanded to consider a (post)human receptivity to the more generalized concept of mimetic pathos that includes all affects, good and bad, individual and collective, sad and joyous, pathological and patho-logical. It is only on such a dynamic, perspectival, and transdisciplinary base that we can keep up with the transformations of our species in the present and future.

At the same time, on the side of genealogical practices, Nietzsche offers an alternative foundation for mimetic studies. He puts us in a position to see that at the origins of consciousness, language, and by extension culture, is not a cry for murder against a sacrificial victim but a cry for help not to be a victim. Nor do we find the primacy of a linguistic trace over the presence of an embodied pantomime but, rather, the speed of intersubjective forms of non-verbal communication animated by a will to mime that bypasses consciousness yet informs, deforms, and transforms the mimetic unconscious nonetheless. Hence, a genealogy of mimesis should not be confused with a hypothesis that hinges solely on scapegoating mechanisms for culture to emerge, as Girard’s mimetic theory suggests; nor does it follow the forward movement of a linguistic grammeme that leads the subject to slide through a chain of signifiers in linguistic terms of appearance and disappearance that supplement the oral presence of speech and gestures, as Derrida influentially argued. Rather, for us following Nietzsche, Homo sapiens is born out of forms of preverbal communication that are physio-psychological in origin, relational and intersubjective in nature, and immanent in onto-bio-socio-patho(-)logical foundation. A genealogical focus on mimetic pathos and the perspectival patho-logies that ensue, then, turns dependency into relationality, individual weakness into social strength, a lack of fixed biological instincts into an excessive power of communication, a mimetic communication that gives birth to language and consciousness—out of unconscious gestures and expressions.
Sitting on the shoulders of a genealogy of thinkers that understood mimesis as a human, all-too-human condition, we have begun to see that this book does not simply advocate a return to the old stabilizing conception of mimesis understood as realistic representation. On the contrary, if we step back to the origins of communication not confined within the boundaries of a conscious *logos*, or a transparent *imago*, it is in order to provide a broader genealogical perspective to recent returns of attention to what I grouped under the ancient concept of mimetic *pathos*. Another genealogist of Nietzschean inspiration, Michel Foucault, usefully specifies that “affection, perturbation, in Greek is called *pathos* and in Latin *affectus*” (2004, 754). Indeed, the recent turn to affect and all it entails—embodiment, performativity, influence, mirroring reflexes, care of the self, inclinations, contagion, etc.—is actually a re-turn to ancient principles. This also means that new critical turns as diverse as the affective turn and the neuro turn, the performative turn and the posthuman turn, the ethical turn and the new materialist turn, among many exciting new turns, are currently returning to the ancient realization that humans are, for better and worse, vulnerable to the shared experience of a mimetic *pathos* that distributes consciousness on a network of communication.

In the end, a genealogy of homo mimeticus goes beyond good and evil. The patho(-)logies of mimesis open up complementary possibilities that look simultaneously in opposed directions: namely, both toward social pathologies that trigger violent rivalries, scapegoating, ressentiment, affective contagion, (new) fascism, epidemic contagion and related sicknesses, which, in some cases, can lead to a faith in what is behind the world; and, alternatively, and without contradiction, toward patho-*logies* that strive contra dominant life-negating currents animated by nihilistic forms of ressentiment to promote vital bonds of sympathy, cooperation, public happiness, and joyful inclinations, prompting chameleonlike metamorphoses that aspire to renew our faithfulness to the earth here and now.

This is a decisive, truly vertiginous, and, we are beginning to sense, potentially irreversible crossroads in the labyrinthine process of the becoming (un)conscious of homo mimeticus in the epoch of the Anthropocene. If we want to know whether the Ariadne’s thread of our increasingly precarious destiny as a dangerously genial species is still partially in our hands, there is only one way to find out—we shall have to follow it.