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Deconstructing the Victim-Perpetrator Paradigm: A Heuristic

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ABSTRACT

By taking sides, we inevitably ignore the true center of gravity of the process

— the scapegoat mechanism, still religiously transfigured . . .

René Girard, *Job: The Victim of His People* (Stanford, 1987; p. 59)

How can we deconstruct the real enemy of us all: the victim-perpetrator paradigm? 'Taking the side' of one or the other displays ignorance of the victim-perpetrator paradigm itself, specifically its deep structure according to which (by definition here) perpetrators are former victims-turned-perpetrators. On this view 'the enemy' is not our perpetrator. The final enemy, rather, is the 'victim-hold' that the experience of victimization still exercises upon our perpetrators.

Instead of one set of victims, therefore, we have two categories of victim to 'side with' or advocate for in any given conflict: the presenting victim on the one hand, and the former victim now-turned-perpetrator in that specific conflict. Thus we replicate the cyclical process by which we-as-perpetrators compulsively act out our own unresolved victimization onto our stereotypical classes of available victims: the mimeticism of 'the repetition syndrome.'

'Doing unto others what was done unto us' is the defining feature of that paradigm. Targeting our victims constitutes our desperate but misguided, mimetic-magical attempt to render our victimization as though it had never occurred. Our species attempts this chronically by recreating ourselves in the present as the empowered victimizer rather than the disempowered victim in our past.

This essay explores an alternative recourse(s) for victims-turned-perpetrators. Remarkably all the insights and resources for deconstructing the victim-perpetrator paradigm are available to us in the contemporary period. Yet we persist in regressive forms of ethics, law, justice, and policy that maintain that paradigm.
Deconstructing the victim-perpetrator paradigm consists in providing former victims with alternatives to the mimetic strategy by means of which we-as-perpetrators seek to counteract our victimization: by imitating the content of our victimization via role reversal. To be truly effective such an alternative would need to empower us with as much affective force as—but without the counter-victimizing goal of—role reversal. The challenge is how to achieve the power without the ‘vice’ of imitative role reversal?

Most former victims are psycho-dynamically incapable of realizing such alternatives unaided. Subsequent sections describe victims who are so capable as practitioners of ‘lucid victimization.’ But this facility requires developmental maturity, traditions of practice, and perhaps great good fortune. Most of us need rather some kind of external intervention by an observant mediator or community of mediation. Such a mediating agency can intervene by providing the kind of mimetically-effective compensation that we-as-perpetrators seek to achieve when we counter-victimize others.

Subheadings include:

**Truth Commissions as Heuristic**

“*No-Fault Reconciliation*” (C. Eric Lincoln, *Coming through the Fire*, 1996)

**Bipartisan Reparations**

**Joint Venture Restitutions.**

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1[1] A heuristic (cf. 'Eureka! I found it!) is a conceptual device for 'finding' an answer to a question or problem as a ‘thought experiment’ (Kierkegaard).