# CONFLICT, MIMETIC RIVALRY AND NONVIOLENCE: FRIENDSHIP AS AN ETHICAL HORIZON OF COEXISTENCE

# CONFLITO, RIVALIDADE MIMÉTICA E NÃO VIOLÊNCIA: A AMIZADE COMO HORIZONTE ÉTICO DA CONVIVÊNCIA

# CONFLICTO, RIVALIDAD MIMÉTICA Y NO VIOLENCIA: LA AMISTAD COMO HORIZONTE ÉTICO DE LA CONVIVENCIA

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines, from a philosophical perspective, the status of conflict in human relations and investigates to what extent nonviolence can interrupt the mimetic logic that turns difference into hostility. It begins from the hypothesis that conflict belongs to the relational condition of the human being and therefore cannot simply be eliminated from social life. The problem emerges when conflict is captured by violent reciprocity and rivalry, producing forms of enmity that degrade the bond with the other. Based on bibliographical research with a qualitative and theoretical-conceptual approach, the text brings into dialogue Jean-Marie Muller, René Girard, Georg Simmel, Zygmunt Bauman, Norberto Bobbio, José Maria da Silva Rosa, and Leo Tolstoy. It argues that nonviolence does not mean passivity, but an ethical practice of resisting violence without reproducing it. The article concludes that friendship may be understood as an ethical horizon of coexistence, since it allows one to think relations shaped by responsibility, recognition, and the refusal of revenge.


**Keywords:** Conflict. Imitative Desire. Nonviolence. Peace. Relational Ethics. Responsibility.


## RESUMO

Este artigo examina, em perspectiva filosófica, o estatuto do conflito nas relações humanas e investiga em que medida a não violência pode interromper a lógica mimética que converte diferença em hostilidade. Parte-se da hipótese de que o conflito integra a condição relacional do ser humano e, por isso, não pode ser simplesmente eliminado da vida social. O problema surge quando ele é capturado pela reciprocidade violenta e pela rivalidade, produzindo formas de inimizade que degradam o vínculo com o outro. Com base em pesquisa bibliográfica, de abordagem qualitativa e caráter teórico-conceitual, o texto articula contribuições de Jean-Marie Muller, René Girard, Georg Simmel, Zygmunt Bauman,



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Norberto Bobbio, José Maria da Silva Rosa e Liev Tolstói. Sustenta-se que a não violência não significa passividade, mas uma prática ética de resistência à violência sem sua reprodução. Conclui-se que a amizade pode ser compreendida como horizonte ético da convivência, na medida em que permite pensar relações marcadas por responsabilidade, reconhecimento e recusa da vingança.

**Palavras-chave:** Amizade. Conflito. Ética Relacional. Mimese. Não Violência.

**RESUMEN**
Este artículo analiza, desde una perspectiva filosófica, el estatuto del conflicto en las relaciones humanas e investiga en qué medida la no violencia puede interrumpir la lógica mimética que transforma la diferencia en hostilidad. Se parte de la hipótesis de que el conflicto forma parte de la condición relacional del ser humano y, por lo tanto, no puede ser simplemente eliminado de la vida social, aunque pueda ser orientado de manera no violenta. Mediante una investigación bibliográfica de enfoque cualitativo y carácter teórico-conceptual, el texto examina cómo la dinámica del deseo imitativo y de la reciprocidad hostil contribuye a la formación de rivalidades, así como a la estabilización de formas de enemistad que degradan el vínculo con el otro. Sobre esta base, se argumenta que la no violencia no equivale a pasividad, sino que constituye una práctica ética y racional de resistencia a la violencia que se niega a reproducirla. El estudio propone, finalmente, comprender la amistad como un horizonte ético de convivencia, capaz de preservar el disenso sin convertir al otro en enemigo y de ofrecer un marco normativo orientado por la responsabilidad y el reconocimiento mutuo.

**Palabras clave:** Convivencia. Deseo Imitativo. Ética Relacional. Paz. Responsabilidad.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Human existence takes place within social relations. As a relational being, the individual is constituted in the interaction with others, in bonds that both enable cooperation and recognition and produce tensions, disputes and antagonisms. From this perspective, conflict should not be understood as an accidental element of life in society, but as a constitutive dimension of human experience and of the dynamics of society itself.

Based on this assumption, this article investigates, in a philosophical key, how conflict, although inherent to interpersonal relationships, can be conducted without becoming violence. The central hypothesis is that violence does not stem from conflict as such, but from the capture of conflict by mimetic rivalry and hostile reciprocity.

On the other hand, it is argued that nonviolence constitutes a rational and ethical practice of interrupting this circuit, making friendship thinkable not as private affection or simple cordiality, but as a normative form of relationship capable of preserving dissent without degrading the other into an enemy.

To develop this hypothesis, the article is structured in three moments. In the first, conflict is examined as a component of social relations, based mainly on the contributions of Jean-Marie Muller and Georg Simmel, highlighting its constitutive character for human coexistence. Then, it is analyzed how conflict can become rivalry and violence when crossed by mimetic desire and reciprocity, in dialogue with René Girard's theory.

Finally, nonviolence is discussed as a practice of resistance to hostility and as a possibility of ethical reorientation of relationships, with friendship as a normative horizon, with the support of Muller, José Maria da Silva Rosa, Leo Tolstoy, Zygmunt Bauman and Norberto Bobbio.

Methodologically, this is a bibliographic research, with a qualitative approach and a theoretical-conceptual character. The analysis articulates contributions from philosophy, social theory, and the anthropology of violence to defend a precise thesis: the decisive philosophical problem is not to eliminate conflict, but to prevent it from stabilizing in the form of violent rivalry. In this framework, friendship ceases to appear as a moral ideal external to the conflict and is understood as an ethical effect of the refusal of bad reciprocity.

## 2 RIVALRY

### 2.1 IN THE BEGINNING, THE CONFLICT

In Jean-Marie Muller's studies on violence and non-violence, the human condition is understood from the point of view of the relationship. The individual is not self-sufficient: he is formed in the encounter with other people, in experiences of proximity, dependence,

divergence and cooperation. For this reason, coexistence is not a peripheral datum of existence, but the space in which humanity itself is concretized.

It is precisely in this relational terrain that the conflict appears. The presence of the other can arouse adherence, but also friction, dispute and resistance. Competing interests, incompatible expectations, and divergent projects make conflict a recurrent feature of collective life, which is why Muller treats it as a structural element of human relations, and not as an occasional anomaly.

The reading of Georg Simmel reinforces this understanding by associating society with the intertwining of reciprocal interactions. For the sociologist, the social emerges both from movements of approximation and from impulses of opposition; collaboration, competition, agreement and antagonism coexist in the same relational fabric. Society, therefore, is not formed in spite of these tensions, but also through them:

> Just as the universe needs 'love and hate', that is, forces of attraction and forces of repulsion, in order to have any form, so society, in order to achieve a certain configuration, needs proportional amounts of harmony and disharmony, association and competition, favorable and unfavorable tendencies (SIMMEL, 1983, p. 124).

The successive actions and reactions between individuals shape the concrete form of social life. The way in which subjects intervene in each other — whether in the key of defense, attack, cooperation, competition or search for prestige — conditions the type of bond that is established. From this point of view, society is not the result of homogeneous relations, but of varied compositions, often crossed by tensions:

> Society exists wherever various individuals interact. […] make man find himself in a state of coexistence with other men, with actions in favor of them, together with them, against them, in correlation of circumstances with them (SIMMEL, 1983, p. 59).

In Simmel, conflict is not just a symptom of rupture; it can also operate as a modality of sociation. This ambivalence prevents treating it as an exclusively negative reality. At the same time that it expresses dissociation, conflict is part of the field of interpersonal relationships and participates in social cohesion itself, albeit in a paradoxical way.

This formulation makes it clearer that human coexistence includes clashes between individual purposes. When desires, pretensions and interests collide, a dispute is established in which each agent starts to directly affect the other. It is at this moment that reciprocity thickens and the conflict ceases to be a simple divergence to take the form of relational opposition.

Among the factors that intensify this dynamic, desire occupies a decisive position. When the relationship is crossed by impulses of appropriation and comparison, the conflict can degenerate into rivalry, inaugurating a circuit of hostility. It is at this point that René Girard's reflection becomes central to understanding the passage from dissent to violent antagonism.

## 2.2 RECIPROCITY AND VIOLENCE: THE PERPETUAL DOUBLE IMITATION

Girard starts from the idea that human desire is neither spontaneous nor entirely autonomous. It is desired from a mediator, from a model whose will begins to guide the will of the subject. Mimicry, in this sense, is not a simple external imitation of behavior, but a deep structure of desire, and it is precisely for this reason that rivalry always becomes possible:

> Man desires intensely, but he does not know exactly what, for it is the being he desires, a being of which he feels deprived and of which some other seems to him to be endowed. The subject expects this other to tell him what it is necessary to desire in order to acquire this being. […] it is through its own desire that the model assigns to the subject the supremely desirable object (GIRARD, 1990, p. 184).

The mimetic model can be an admired person, a social group or any reference invested with prestige. Without this mediation, desire does not acquire precise direction. The problem arises when the same figure who guides the aspiration starts to block his satisfaction, becoming a reference into an obstacle and, later, a rival.

By stating that society transforms into a model what it honors, Girard draws attention to the heteronomous character of desire. The subject believes he desires freely, but his will is crossed by socially shared values and hierarchies. In this logic, the object matters less for its intrinsic qualities than for the value conferred by others.

When two wills converge mimetically, interpersonal conflict gains intensity. The other ceases to be just a distinct presence and starts to represent concrete resistance to the subject's project. Opposition, then, is no longer limited to the plane of ideas: it affects the very constitution of the relation.

Envy plays a decisive role in this process. The good possessed by the other comes to be perceived as a sign of one's own lack, and greed shifts the object's attention to the position occupied by the rival. Desire, therefore, takes on a competitive form and feeds new possibilities of conflict.

It is not only the disputed object that gives rise to rivalry. What ignites the antagonism is the fact that he has been invested with value by the other. The rival becomes an obstacle

precisely because he confirms, with his own desire, the importance of what he intends to achieve.

In the mimetic climb, imitator and model enter into reciprocal mirroring. Each one starts to react to the other, and the initial convergence of desires becomes a mutual barrier. At this stage, the relationship becomes autonomous in relation to the object and tends to revolve around the opposition itself:

> Imitation reappears from the one who strives to deny it. When one of the two partners drops the torch of mimicry, in short, the other takes it not to renew the bond that is being broken, but to finish the rupture by reduplicating it mimetically (GIRARD, 2012, p. 55).

In a similar key, Hobbes identifies competition as one of the sources of human conflict. The search for goods, security and recognition produces distrust and confrontation, especially when agents perceive themselves to be threatened in their interests. The result can be open enmity and a willingness to war.

When this occurs, the adversaries progressively stop aiming at the object in dispute and concentrate on each other. The rival becomes the true center of the relationship, and mimesis no longer organizes only desire, but also violence itself. The opposition is fueled by an increasingly hostile reciprocity:

> It is imagined that at first there is the object, then the desires that converge independently to this object, and finally violence, a fortuitous, accidental consequence of this convergence. […] Violence becomes more and more manifest: it is no longer the intrinsic value of the object that provokes conflict, exciting rival greed, but it is violence itself that values the objects, inventing pretexts to unleash itself more easily (GIRARD, 1990, p. 182).

The mimetic theory thus allows us to locate the genesis of violence in the relational dynamics of desire. Violence does not appear as an accident external to the human bond, but as a possible unfolding of competitive imitation, when reciprocity closes in on itself and transforms the other into a threat.

Poor reciprocity translates precisely this passage. Small gestures of hostility can trigger equivalent responses, establishing a logic of aggressive mirroring. As the boundary between ordinary interaction and violent escalation is narrow, conflict can be quickly contaminated by the reproduction of aggression.

It is in this horizon that Girard mobilizes the anthropological sense of scandal as an obstacle and trap. Scandal fixes the subject on the rival, captures his attention and imprisons him in the mimetic relationship. Instead of dissolving conflict, it intensifies and reproduces it.

The reading of João Cezar de Castro Rocha helps to make this mechanism explicit by showing that the scandalous hurts the other precisely because he exhibits success, superiority or prestige. Provocation does not only act on the moral plane; it reorganizes the perception of the subject and reinforces the centrality of the rival in the economy of desire.

When society naturalizes counterviolence as a legitimate response, it becomes more difficult to perceive how much this reaction only renews the destructive spiral. The social legitimization of retaliation conceals the mimetic character of violence and contributes to perpetuating it.

If conflict structurally accompanies life in common, the decisive question is to prevent it from becoming the predominant form of bond. Recognizing its inevitability is not equivalent to naturalizing violence. On the contrary: precisely because conflict is constitutive, it becomes philosophically necessary to distinguish between opposition, rivalry and destruction, so that common life is not organized under the empire of counterviolence.

Therefore, the peaceful relationship does not depend on the elimination of the other as a potential adversary, but on the effort not to turn him into an enemy. In the face of opposition, the ethical requirement is to contain hostility and reject the logic of fear, threat and revenge.

Girard's contribution, at this point, is to demonstrate that rivalry is not born only from objective differences of interest, but from the way in which subjects learn to desire one from the other. By revealing the imitative dimension of conflict, his theory helps to understand why violence can spread so quickly in human relationships.

## 3 NONVIOLENCE

Moved by desire and inscribed in mimetic relationships, human beings can become antagonists of one another. The similarity of claims and interests, far from ensuring harmony, often intensifies competition. It is in this context that it becomes necessary to think about how conflict can be faced without reproducing violence.

For Jean-Marie Muller, an effectively human coexistence is not achieved only by abstract tolerance of differences. It requires ethical work on one's own relationship, including the tendency to look to the other for a competitive mirror. Nonviolence is born, in this context, as a practice of rupture with hostile reciprocity.

Human coexistence may aspire to peace, but it is still conflictive. Muller's observation is decisive because it dispels two symmetrical illusions: that it would be possible to abolish conflict and that all tension inevitably leads to violence. Between these extremes, nonviolence presents itself as a way of governing dissent.

When the subject responds to aggression by reproducing it, he prolongs the violence suffered and helps to stabilize his circuit. The retaliatory gesture, even when it presents itself as a justified reaction, re-inscribes the individual in the same logic that it intends to combat and amplifies the imbalance of the relationship:

> Any violence is a process of homicide, of annihilation. Perhaps the process will not go all the way, but the desire to eliminate the adversary, to drive him away, to exclude him, to reduce him to silence, to suppress him, will become stronger than the will to come to terms with him. From insult to humiliation, from torture to homicide, there are multiple forms of violence and multiple forms of death (MULLER, 2007, p. 30).

René Girard states that "the violence of the nonviolent, which we all believe to be, is never the work of particularly 'aggressive' individuals, nor is it the result of an instinct of aggression"; it is rather the desire to return the violence of the other, the desire to avenge the hostile attitude of another. The French author also points out that even the most violent beings believe that they are only returning a violent action, or reacting to the violence of another person (GIRARD, 2012, p. 54).

From this perspective, Muller distinguishes between aggressiveness and violence. Aggressiveness corresponds to an energy of affirmation and resistance that is characteristic of the human condition; Violence, on the contrary, consists in its destructive deformation. Nonviolence does not suppress the power of action, but seeks to orient it towards forms of confrontation that do not annihilate the other:

> Passivity is a much more widespread attitude than violence. Men's capacity for resignation is considerably greater than their capacity for revolt. […] it is necessary to point out that nonviolence is in greater opposition to passivity and resignation than to violence (MULLER, 2007, p. 23).

Therefore, conflict can take on a constructive or destructive aspect. Nonviolent practice presupposes a willingness to face tension, and not to run away from it. Being nonviolent is not equivalent to submitting to the power of the adversary, but to sustaining the firmness of the confrontation without adhering to its violent grammar.

In Muller, nonviolence also appears as a rational choice and an exercise in self-control. Interrupting the chain of violence requires self-examination, containment of the impulses of revenge and awareness of the way in which the subject can become an agent of propagation of the evil he denounces.

Hence the importance of limiting one's own desires. By recognizing that rivalry feeds on the unlimited expansion of individual pretensions, the subject makes room for another

relational economy, less oriented by dispute and more attentive to the ethical effects of his actions on others.

José Maria da Silva Rosa, when addressing non-violence as a horizon of coexistence, also emphasizes the need to refuse violence as the ordinary language of human relations. For the author, peace does not result from the mere absence of confrontation, but from the construction of modes of bonding capable of interrupting violent excess:

> José Maria da Silva Rosa argues, in similar terms, that the urgency of nonviolence stems less from its abstract value as an ideal than from the constant, manifest or latent presence of forms of violence that cross human coexistence and feed the temptation to respond to evil through the logic of retaliation (ROSA, 2001, p. 12).

Breaking bad reciprocity implies, therefore, disobeying the call for violence. It is a matter of cutting the imitative chain before it becomes contagious, refusing to return the aggression received to the other. This refusal does not eliminate the conflict, but modifies its trajectory.

When the individual decides not to reproduce the violence of his rival, he prevents the cruelty of others from fully determining his own conduct. The refusal of violent imitation thus functions as a gesture of ethical freedom and as a condition for reconfiguring the relationship:

> The strategy of nonviolent action aims to break the mimicry by which each of the two rivals imitates the violence of the other, returning aggression for aggression, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The very principle of nonviolent action consists of refusing to let oneself be carried away by this spiral of endless violence (MULLER, 2007, p. 148).

In *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, Tolstoy argues that violence cannot be justified even under the argument of self-defense, because the violent response, even when presented as protection, reaffirms the same logic that it intends to condemn. His radical critique reinforces the demand not to return evil in the form of new evil.

Commenting on Gandhi, Muller observes that human truth is realized in the bond with the other and that violence corrupts precisely this bond. For this reason, nonviolent action is not a simple denial of force, but a defense of the relationship in its proper dignity. In this key, resorting to violence means degrading humanity itself. The recovery of the human thus passes through a practice of resistance that preserves the otherness of the other and prevents the conflict from becoming reciprocal annulment.

> In commenting on Gandhi, Muller argues that truth, love, and nonviolence should not be thought of as independent values or combinable only occasionally; for him, there is

> a deep ethical unity between these terms, incompatible with any attempt to legitimize violence in the name of love or truth (MULLER, 2007, p. 201).

Together, these formulations allow us to understand nonviolence as an active posture of responsibility, self-restraint and recognition. More than an abstract ideal, it operates as an ethical technique for deactivating rivalry: it disallows aggressive symmetry, interrupts the circulation of retaliation, and restores to conflict a regime in which the other can still be faced without being annulled.

## 4 FRIENDSHIP

When the individual disposes himself for the good of the other, he assumes responsibility for the relationship and starts to act, in Muller's terms, as a true artisan of peace. Friendship, in this context, is not reduced to private affection; it designates a form of ethical presence that sustains and reorients human bonds.

Reading Simmel, Zygmunt Bauman observes that friendship and enmity function as poles of the same relational matrix. Between these extremes, the other forms of social interaction are distributed. The quality of bonds, therefore, depends on the practices by which the subjects build cooperation or nurture antagonism.

If the rivalry exacerbates the conflict and pushes it into the impasse of violence, the decision not to respond to the adversary in the same terms opens up another possibility of relationship. Friendship arises, then, not as naïve sentimentality, but as an ethical orientation contrary to the fabrication of enemies.

Girard helps to perceive the procedural character of this degradation. Relationships do not break down all at once; They deteriorate by small displacements, repeated offenses and symmetrical responses, until no one recognizes himself as responsible for the wear and tear produced.

When the subjects are exempt from being responsible for coexistence, the rivalitarian machinery gains strength. Enmity does not appear spontaneously: it is constructed by practices of confrontation, by dispositions of suspicion and by a pragmatics of struggle that organizes the other as a threat.

In the opposite direction, friendship is produced by a pragmatics of cooperation. It requires responsibility, ethical initiative and care with the bond, without depending on the certainty of equivalent return. Therefore, friendship is less an affective reward than a relational practice:

> While the expectation of friendship is not necessary to make friends, the expectation of enmity is indispensable to make enemies. Thus the opposition between friends and enemies is between doing and suffering, between being the subject or object of action. It is an opposition between advancing and retreating, between initiative and vigilance, between dominating and being dominated, between acting and reacting (BAUMAN, 1999, p. 63).

Norberto Bobbio, when reflecting on serenity, also approaches this ethic of nonviolence. Serenity, for him, is not indifference or weakness, but a willingness to refuse revenge and to contain the temptation to respond to evil with another evil.

The serene subject is, in this sense, the one who resists violence without making it an instrument of personal affirmation. Their attitude is not guided by competition or by the need to prevail over the other, but by the preservation of the relationship on non-destructive bases:

> The serene is, on the contrary, the one who 'lets the other be what he is', even when the other is the arrogant, the insolent, the arrogant. He does not contact others for the purpose of competing, of creating conflict, and ultimately of winning. It is completely out of the spirit of competition, competition, rivalry, and therefore, also victory (BOBBIO, 2002, p. 40).

Opting for non-violence and cultivating serenity is, therefore, an ethical response to the rivalry and violence that permeate social relations. In the midst of the fragility and instability of contemporary bonds, this choice preserves the possibility of reciprocal recognition. Friendship can thus be understood as a practical horizon of a coexistence in which conflict does not disappear, but ceases to be organized by the logic of hostility.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The path developed in this article allows us to affirm that conflict belongs to the very fabric of social life and, for this reason, cannot be abolished without also erasing something of the human relational condition. The philosophical task, therefore, does not consist in imagining a frictionless coexistence, but in thinking about the conditions under which dissent can fail to converge towards destruction.

The analysis showed that the critical point of the transition from conflict to violence is found in mimetic rivalry and hostile reciprocity. When the subjects start to desire from the rival and respond to him according to the logic of aggressive mirroring, the other ceases to be an interlocutor or circumstantial adversary and starts to occupy the position of an obstacle to be neutralized. It is in this displacement that the conflict loses its own ambivalence and becomes fixed in the form of violence.

Against this mechanism, nonviolence was understood as an active practice of ethical and political regulation of conflict. Its meaning is not that of passivity, accommodation or refusal to act; rather, it is a deliberate intervention on the logic of destructive reciprocity. By refusing retaliation and limiting the mimetic expansion of desire, nonviolence preserves the possibility of confrontation without consenting to the symbolic or material annihilation of the other.

In this framework, friendship appears less as a spontaneous feeling than as a normative horizon of coexistence. It does not eliminate difference, dissent, or asymmetry, but it prevents such elements from being immediately translated into enmity. Thought of in this way, friendship designates a form of relationship in which otherness is sustained without surrender to hostility, and in which peace does not mean the absence of conflict, but the refusal of the violent degradation of the bond.

The central contribution of the article is to show that conflict, rivalry, non-violence and friendship make up interdependent moments of the same relational dynamic. Distinguishing conflict from violence and friendship from mere concord allows us to formulate a more precise philosophical thesis: peace only becomes intelligible when it ceases to be understood as the suppression of tensions and starts to be thought of as an ethical practice of containing bad reciprocity.

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