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Repetition Repeated: Reconstructing a Lacanian Subjectivity Through Kierkegaardian Repetition

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Abstract

When Descartes declared “Cogito ergo sum,” he triggered a fundamental shift in the trajectory and scope of the philosophical discourse. Hegel called this the beginning of modern philosophy, but the Cartesian *cogito* elevated human reason, ushered the Enlightenment, and led to scientific and political revolutions. But as Slavoj Zizek has pointed out, almost from the moment Descartes posited the mind-body problem, there was an anxiety about what it meant to be “one who thinks.”1 This anxiety presents itself as a continuous questioning of the ontology of the subject, and ultimately, whether there is a subject at all. By the time post-structuralism trains its eyes on subjectivity, the subject is thoroughly dismantled. Jacques Lacan inaugurates this dismantling by positing a subject rooted in desire and borne out of a constitutive lack, a subject created by a linguistic and symbolic structure that is completely inaccessible to the one who is. In short, Lacan defines the subject for a post-structuralist generation of philosophy that is more interested in dismantling what remains of the Cartesian *cogito*, rather than attempting to rebuild the subject.

For his part, Soren Kierkegaard anticipated this post-structuralist idea of subjectivity, and in a trio of texts written in 1843, he posits the self as a movement of becoming, freedom, and transcendence. Perhaps the most obscure text in his oeuvre, *Repetition*, embodies this idea through what Lacan calls a text that is “…dazzling in its lightness and ironic play…”2 *Repetition* is often considered one of the more difficult texts in Kierkegaard, with the text spawning numerous interpretations about his views on metaphysics, subjectivity, and whether it has a meaning to it at all. However, Lacan read *Repetition* carefully and, aside from mentioning it in his seminars, the themes heavily influence his own writing on repetition. The goal of this project, then, is to revisit the work of Kierkegaard’s trio of 1843 texts—*Repetition, Either/Or*, and the Job Discourse— and situate their importance for Lacanian repetition. By re-reading Lacanian repetition through a Kierkegaardian framework, we can liberate it from a Freudian determinism that situates the subject as only suffering from alienation and lack, and find a post-structuralist subject with agency to make a choice for its own freedom and becoming.

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[1] Slavoj Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject* (New York, Verso Books, 2000), 1-2.

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[2] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis,* ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: WW Norton, 1998), 61.

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Chapter One: Charting the Problem

"Every subject stands at the crossing between a lack of being and a destruction, a repetition and an interruption, a placement and an excess." ~ Alain Badiou[1]

When Descartes declared "Cogito ergo sum," he triggered a fundamental shift in the trajectory and scope of the philosophical discourse. If metaphysics was the dialogue and debate that defined ancient and medieval philosophy, then with a stroke of a quill pen, Descartes upended the discipline entirely and charted a new course.[2] No longer was philosophy a rigorous examination of reality as it was, but now, philosophy squarely began in thought, and the subject was the source and arbiter and *agent* of that thought. What Hegel called the beginnings of modern philosophy, the Cartesian *cogito* elevated human reason, ushered the Enlightenment, and led to revolutions—both scientific *and* political. But as Slavoj Zizek has pointed out, almost from the moment Descartes posited the mind-body problem, there was an anxiety about what it meant to be "one who thinks."[3] What is this "I" who thinks? And to what does one refer to when one mutters "I"? Is it a stable, unified ego who can think the world around them? Is it a subject that

[1] Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* (New York: Continuum Books, 2009), 139.

[2] This is up for some debate. Heidegger denied that this was a new course, and instead saw the Cartesian cogito is merely an extension of the Scholasticism of Duns Scotus and Thomas Aquinas. See Martin Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology,* translated by Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

[3] Slavoj Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject* (New York, Verso Books, 2000), 1-2.

holds a self-referential objectivity? To say it differently, if subjectivity has become the metaphysics of post-Cartesian philosophy, then there has been an equivalent amount written—perhaps moreso—on an *anxiety about* subjectivity.

Our work in this project is to take up this anxiety, to be sure, but the question that lies at the heart of this work is essentially: What does it mean to be human? How do we talk about this unique experience of being-in-the-world? How do we describe our experience of the world "in here" and reconcile that with the world "out there?" There are countless ways philosophy—and religion! —have tried to answer this question. However, our goal here is to sketch one kind of answer by tracing a very specific line of inquiry between Soren Kierkegaard and Jacques Lacan. Ostensibly, these thinkers offer two unique answers to the question of subjectivity—the former finds selfhood situated in the relationship of the self with itself, while the latter's subject is rooted in desire and alienation, and emerges from a fundamental ontological lack. Separated by nearly a century, they inhabit their own intellectual traditions and attempt to answer their own questions. And yet, Lacan read the history of philosophy carefully, and while his references to Kierkegaard throughout his seminars are minimal, he has a clear affinity for Kierkegaard's short text *Repetition*.

Traditionally, Lacanian repetition has been read in light of Freudian repetition; in other words, we repeat because we have a collection of unprocessed (or unremembered) memories that haunt us and keep us chained to a set of behaviors and outcomes. Read from the point of view of one's alienation and lack, this has been one of the primary ways to understand Lacanian repetition specifically, and Lacanian subjectivity more broadly.

The goal of this project, however, is to explore a different interpretation of Lacanian repetition—one that is decidedly more Kierkegaardian in its scope and consequence—in an effort to re-characterize post-structuralist subjectivity. Said another way, by traversing the concept of repetition between Kierkegaard and Lacan, our goal is to use Kierkegaardian repetition for rethinking and rereading a Lacanian subject. By doing so, we can see the self as an interruption of the self, one that can move just beyond the fractured displacement of contemporary subjectivity.

Kierkegaard's *Repetition* is a notoriously difficult text to approach, and in the following chapters, we will attempt to "untangle" the thorniness of the concept of repetition—the text and the concept. If Lacan read—and preferred—this repetition to Freud's, then part of our work is to establish the robust theory of repetition throughout Kierkegaard's writings to more carefully see how the Kierkegaardian self was, in its repetition, an anticipation of post-structuralist subjectivity. Furthermore, by reading one of Kierkegaard's more obscure texts, we can see how Lacan used it as inspiration for his own work on repetition. Rather than relying on Lacanian repetition as a determinism of our repetitive traumas, there are seeds of freedom, creativity, and our own becoming via the breakdown of the symbolic and the irruption of the real. In other words, by re-reading Lacan as more of a Kierkegaardian, we can situate repetition in post-structuralist subjectivity as a way to face our own symbolic structures so that we can actually be freed from them. Read this way, the compulsion to repeat keeps compelling us until we finally stop avoiding and running from the trauma or our attempts to run from that which compels the repetition in the first place. When we do this, we will see that what haunts us

is not necessarily our repressed traumas, but our very own freedom and possibility. By choosing our freedom—rather than re-enacting it or managing it—we can finally be free to finally open ourselves to the "full acceptance" of one's self, which also happens to be genuine Kierkegaardian repetition that returns our self to ourselves, but different.

The Problem: What is Old is New Again

The traditional narrative around theories of the subject usually begins with a unified subject established by Descartes, followed by an aggressive and relentless "chipping away" at that subject, hollowing it until its core lacks any hint of ontology. And yet, there is significant debate on whether the Cartesian *cogito* originally represented the unified subject that the tradition credits him for (which we will explore in more detail below). Simon Critchley also problematizes this reading of Descartes, asking whether the subject is a "fantasy" that was read on to Descartes by Hegel.[4] Nevertheless, the centuries that followed represented a steady deconstruction of the subject, and by the 20th century—in the wake of critiques by Nietzsche, Deleuze, Foucault, and Badiou—the subject was assumed to be little more than an assumption.[5] However as Peter Zima, channeling Theodore Adorno, observes, "In contemporary debates, the 'disappearance of the subject' is about to become a stereotype which merely diverts attention from the fact that nobody is actually able to define what exactly is about to disappear or has

[4] Simon Critchley, *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity* (New York: Verso Books, 2009), 53.

[5] Jacques Lacan, *The Sinthome: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XXIII* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 23.

disappeared."[6] In other words, any 21st century discourse on the subject needs to begin with the assumption that there is no subject to necessarily to write about…unless there is, in which case, it lacks a fundamental ontology; or, when it has once again disappeared after its momentary event.

This "disappearance" is precisely one of the problems that motivates this project. The subject in 20th century thought has been disintegrated and subjugated, and it has been theorized as (among other ideas) a constellation of power or the result of constitutive lack. What we have not yet seen in contemporary philosophical discourse, though, is a proper reclamation of the subject. What is lacking are theories that sketch a subjectivity that is something more than that which is fractured and displaced, but that also does not necessarily fall into the trap of simply trying to resuscitate a self-identical or self-same Cartesian *cogito*. As Allen Wood writes,

> …we are all recovering Cartesians…In the modern counter-movement to Cartesianism…there has been little agreement among philosophers about how Cartesianism is to be avoided. More often it is simply *evaded*; the anti-Cartesian philosophical schools are always more successful at labeling their rivals as 'Cartesian' or 'solipsistic'…than they are at developing a clear and convincing alternative.[7]

Somewhere along the way, the philosophical tradition decided the *cogito* was a problem; we just did not figure out a better solution for it.

Now, I do not write this under the illusion that this project will somehow entirely fill this gap or otherwise "solve" the problem. This project is not necessarily designed to

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[6] Peter Zima, *Subjectivity and Identity* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 2.

[7] Allen Wood, "Fichte's Intersubjective I," *Inquiry* 49(1): 62–71.

blaze a new trail and develop a novel theory of the subject that upends contemporary orthodoxy. However, it is worth thinking through how exactly we arrived at this point, and whether we can chart a path forward that offers a constructive idea of the subject. To paraphrase a writer we will return to a little later, our goal here is embrace the deconstructive critique of the Cartesian subject without collapsing into a framework that results in a totalitarian, metaphysical form of oneness.[8] In a very real sense, Kierkegaard's selfhood—a self bound by activity that relates itself to itself—charts a course through this binary. He offers a self located

> not in the superaddition of a Cartesian ego or immaterial soul to the human animal, but in a relational dynamic whereby a mass of psychological facts and dispositions relates to itself and its environment in an irreducibly first-personal way.[9]

The Kierkegaardian self is a dialectic of motion and activity rooted in and by the infinite. And though it ostensibly stands in opposition to Lacanian repetition, resuscitating Kierkegaard's view in light of Lacan provides gives the subject an agency and a *force*.

An Identity or A Subject?

To write a project on subjectivity—specifically one underpinned by a question of what it means to be human—opens oneself to all manner of interpretations. Which subjectivity? Whose subjectivity? And within which ideology and theoretical or political framework? For instance, our contemporary discourse on the subject is usually

[8] Katerina Kolozova, *Cut of the Real* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 19-20.

[9] Patrick Stokes, *The Naked Self: Kierkegaard and Personal Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 13.

characterized by questions of our individual and social identities. In this view, the individual is defined by the relationships and networks in which it is embedded, a decidedly *social* point of view articulated by Franz Grubauer. He argues that the individual is

> …a particular system of relations and the particularity of behavior patterns, orientations and utterances; considered from within, it is the natural experience of the self, the understanding of one's own position within a social network and…the experience of individuality by the 'I' as a unique individual.[10]

As an individual, I am Tom Ryan—white, male, cisgendered, father, son—and my identity is the product of the linguistic and social connections in which I am embedded. I am defined by the connections I keep.

Of course, these are practical issues! We live in a linguistic and social context; we are privy to all manner of practical questions about who we are and how we interpret the world around us by virtue of our social locatedness. In fact, since the mid-20th century, the opportunity and *expectation* that we define ourselves by our identities has only grown sharper. For instance, during the summer of 2020, protests erupted across the world to protest the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the State. In the United States, the anger and sadness felt by the Black community was equaled only by their sense of exhaustion. For many, the death of Floyd felt like it was another episode in this country's long history of white citizens executing their Black brethren…and facing little consequences as a result. The cultural reckoning with race and racism in the wake of this

[10] F. Grubauer, *Das zerrissene Bewußtsein der gesellschaftlichen Subjektivität* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 1994), 31, quoted in Peter Zima, *Subjectivity and Identity* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 6.

murder was intense (and unfortunately, all too brief), and it underscores the reality that the practical, lived, *bodily* identities and selves we create for us and for others have very real-world consequences. But as persecution often does—whether it is within a cultural, ethnic, or religious community—it led to a rallying around the collective and individual identity of the persecuted community.

This particular experience was undoubtedly traumatic, and it highlights the fragmented, yet *powerful* nature of viewing oneself through the lens of one's identity. As Todd McGowan points out, however, the more we emphasize the uniqueness of this identity, the more those superficial, symbolic traits become conflated with my subjectivity. One's identity "serves as the basic proving ground for the subject's ideological interpellation" and with it, my identity becomes a collection of traits that I must embrace to belong to the social order.[11] In short, the symbolic nature of our identity means we give ourselves over to an Other who places an unconscious demand upon us.[12]

Nick Mansfield echoes this sentiment of a "self" fractured into subsets of identity when he writes,

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[11] Todd McGowan, *Universality and Identity Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 207.

[12] This reduction of subject-as-identity is a fairly recent phenomenon, one that emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries. The "mood" this creates is one of a self-with-agency who can will the world as they see fit. Donald Hall writes that we "are widely left to believe that we have the freedom and ability to create and re-create our 'selves' at will, if we *have* the will, but at the same time are presented with a suspiciously narrow range of options and avenues that will allow us to fit comfortably into society and our particular gendered, regional, ethnic, sexual subset of it." See Donald E. Hall, *Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

> This focus on the self as the centre both of lived experience and of discernible meaning has become one of the—if not the—defining issues of modern and postmodern cultures…Things and events are now understood on the level of the pulsing, breathing, feeling individual self.[13]

Of course, contemporary American politics is an ideal example for this development, as the political discourse fractures voters into hundreds of separate voting blocs arranged by gender, race, class, and age. This, in turn, creates a politics (and policy) that responds to the perceived injustices of a particular bloc or protect the power of a bloc. And while the merits or justice of such a politics is a topic for another dissertation entirely, the point remains that, in this view, one's *identity* is the arbiter of human experience. Emphasizing the *self* as the fundamental seat of experience has led to a self that Mansfield calls "…less confident, more isolated, fragile, and vulnerable than ever."[14] The self is a worthy topic for pursuit, and the politicization of the self in the 19th and 20th century deserves to be explored on its own terms. Highlighting the gendered and racial constructions of the self—and how they themselves are texts to be read and critiqued—is crucial work.

But our interest here is for something different; the purpose of this project is (to borrow a phrase from Kant) to explore the conditions for the possibility of the self. The theoretical question of the self is not (necessarily) an identity to define or a network of relationships to traverse, but something more foundational. As Donald Hall puts it, a theory of the subject sits at the intersection of ontology and epistemology; its site of

[13] Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 2000), 1-2.

[14] Ibid., 2

inquiry is an explanation not just of the nature of the world around us, but how we can actually know that world at all.[15]

While some of our work here necessarily touches on these issues of the self and the individual, the question of the subject is a far more theoretical issue. The subject is, in some ways, pre-individual; it is the theoretical grounds for the possibility of the individual. While the individual may be the social description of who I am and/or the role I play, the subject is a question of the individual's theoretical and ontological position—even (as we will see) in the absence of an ontology. It attempts to address the more theoretical question of my space in the world *viz.* how I am understood in relationship to the objects with which I interact? And further, what are the "grounds" by which I can determine there is a knower at all? Mansfield captures this more theoretical and slippery idea of the subject by defining it as

> …an abstract or general principle that defies our separation into distinct selves and that encourages us to imagine that, or simply helps us to understand why, our interior lives inevitably seem to involve other people, either as objects of need, desire and interest or as necessary sharers of common experience. In this way, the subject is always linked to something outside of it—an idea or principle to the society of other subjects…One is always subject *to* or *of* something.[16]

As that which is subject *to* or *of* something, the subject is operates as both the site of inquiry but also that which underpins all our inquiry. The subject is the subject of philosophy, and also the specter that haunts philosophy.

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[15] Hall, *Subjectivity*, 4

[16] Mansfield, *Subjectivity*, 3.

Peter Zima notes the etymology of the word "subject" is ambiguous (which is a harbinger of the difficulties it faces in philosophy), but that in both Greek and Latin it means, "what is fundamental or underlying (*hypokeimenon, subjectum*) and what is subjugated (*subjectus* = subject in the sense of the king's or emperor's subject or subjects)."[17] It is a helpful, if incomplete, definition, given the difficulties most writers have with offering something clearer. Zima goes on to clarify,

> It is important to know that in philosophy these two aspects [underlying and subjugated] coexist, sometimes in one and the same discourse…Exaggerating slightly, one might argue that the entire philosophical discourse on subjectivity revolves around this ambiguity, which, time and again leads to the old question of human freedom.[18]

There is no question that ambiguity is a hallmark of the literature, with more being written about what the subject *is not* as opposed to what it *is.* In fact, finding a writer within the 19th and 20th century philosophical and literary discourse who can offer a definition of the subject that does not begin by questioning the lack of an ontology is nearly impossible. The ambiguity of the subject has been baked into the discourse of the conversation almost since its Cartesian inception.

In the wake of this ambiguity the subject has been "reduced" or "summed" as the experience of the individual in the world to the fabric of its social or political relationships. This is not a new conversation, of course; Freud was thinking about subjectivity embedded in a social discourse around the turn of the 20th century. But this

[17] Zima, *Subjectivity and Identity,* 2.

[18] Ibid., 2-3.

is indicative of how the discourse of subjectivity has matured away from the "unified consciousness" in Cartesian thought, and toward a more deconstructed self that defined by a nodal network of multiplicities, events, and ontological absence. In other words, the subject has become thoroughly *postmodern*.

The Terms of the Debate: Discontinuity, Subjugation, and *Postmodern*

The result is that any project like this needs to tarry with this ambiguity, as well as the underlying question of whether there is even something to call a "subject" at all. In order to pursue the question of the subject, one must first ask the question of the question of the subject. And the current "question" of the subject is what one could call fragmented, decentered, and disintegrated.

We could point to several 20th century thinkers that adhere to this very *postmodern* notion of the subject—thinkers like, Lacan, Deleuze, Althusser, Lyotard, and Foucault. But none quite capture and frame the debate quite like Alain Badiou. What Badiou sketches in his seminal work *Theory of the Subject* is a subject that breaks free from the Cartesian addiction of reflexivity and charts a course toward a subject that opens up its possibility as a history and an event. As he writes so quotably in his seminal work, *Theory of the Subject*, *"*Every subject stands at the crossing between a lack of being and a destruction, a repetition and an interruption, a placement and an excess."[19] The subject operates wholly from a post-evental stance and emerges in light of this displacement. And since it is only recognizable once the event of the event has receded, one can never

[19] Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 139.

speak of the subject as having any kind of recognizable ontology. For Badiou, the subject cannot be flattened into a substance, but is instead a configuration that exceeds the situation, or a place that hosts the revelation.

The crucial point, though, is that although subjectivity is a demand that impinges on us in order to become a truth, it is generated from nothingness. Badiou continues,

> Destruction is that figure of the subject's grounding in which loss not only turns lack into a cause, but also produces consistency out of excess. Through destruction, the subject latches onto that which, in lack itself, survives the lacking and is not the repetitive closure of the effect to the presence of the cause.[20]

The subject is simply a procedure by which truth is brought to reality. That it originates in nothingness typifies the turn that has come to define poststructural philosophy. What generates any subject is destruction and interruption, displacement and excess. And while Badiou represents a meaningful step in the subject's genealogy in the 20th century, he nonetheless contributes to—and instantiates—a subject that is, at its core, unstable.

On the surface, Badiou's philosophy is novel for the way it sees through just the emptiness of the subject and imagines one in which being is extracted from metaphysics and instead becomes a post-metaphysical reality. It is a subject that breaks the Cartesian circle of reflexivity and opens the possibility of the subject as history and as event. In many ways, his project represents a break from philosophy's "addiction" to the grappling with the *cogito*. Yet despite this ingenuity, the hollow core remains. As he writes,

[20] Ibid., 140.

"…there is only existence, or individuality, but no subject."[21] The subject in Badiou and his contemporaries is a subject without an ontology—one that, taking its cue from Foucault, is viewed more *genealogical* than metaphysical—is the given of our 20th and 21st century discourse.

Of course, a genealogical approach is fine! It is an effort to understand the contours of the discourse and the way those discourses define our culture and what we find meaningful. Yet a genealogist is like a raconteur who tells a good story; the story—not the truth of the story—is the point! As Mansfield points out, "The insight that the genealogist seeks is not the truth that will finally make further discussion redundant, but how the discussion itself defines the way we live and represent ourselves."[22] While it is difficult to escape the overwhelming shadow of the genealogical position, by re-engaging Lacan through a decidedly Kierkegaardian lens, we can hopefully find our way to a subjectivity that is not tied exclusively to the metaphysical project, and yet offers a subject that is more than just a swirl of nothingness at its core. Could there be a subject that embraces this centuries of critique without succumbing to the ontological seduction of Cartesianism? And without settling for the subject as the Lacanian "lost object" of the postmodern/poststructuralist discourse?

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[21] Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy,* trans. Norman Madarasz (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 108.

[22] Mansfield, *Subjectivity,* 6.

An Addiction to Subjugation

Badiou is a helpful referent point for understanding the poststructuralist theories of subjectivity. His is the logical conclusion of the non-unity and non-oneness introduced by Hegel, the split subject of Freud, and the lack of Lacan. In short, the issue of the subject has been at issue since the 16th and 17th centuries, with most of philosophy simply marking this as a given. While Badiou's philosophy is an attempt to break the addiction to metaphysics, it also does not move toward anything other than a continual problematizing of the subject itself. At the risk of utterly oversimplifying three hundred years of philosophical discourse, we can say, if the Cartesian subject represented something of the hypothesis, then philosophy since then seems to have been a continual effort to disprove the hypothesis, rather than offering a more constructive, counter hypothesis in its wake.

Contemporary philosophy defines subjectivity by its mobility, multiplicity, and malleability. Katerina Kolozova argues that the discipline suffers from an addiction to this point of view: "The poststructuralist propagation of the idea and the installation of the reality of the nonunitary subject are inherently related to the insistence…on the subject's radical instability."[23] But as Kolozova also notes, the deconstructive trajectory of the subject has, itself, refused to be the focus of deconstruction; it has avoided a "radical critique insofar as it is a *structure* itself."[24] What Kolozova argues for instead is a

[23] Kolozova, *Cut of the Real*, 17.

[24] Ibid., 21.

subject with “continuity,” one that acknowledges the fractured nature of the postmodern subject but one that also carries with it a bodily “resistance” against the attempts to disintegrate the “I.”

Kolozova's “subject” is sketched within a framework of gender and the body as a means of standing over and against the postmodern fractured subject. She challenges the notion that the “ontological and political all-inclusiveness of poststructuralist discourses”[25] leads us to a more fruitful theory of the subject. In her view, the field has been seduced by its ability to “[transcend] Cartesian philosophical legacy and its language.” But her larger project insightfully speaks to a dissatisfaction with the contemporary philosophical orthodoxy. And it challenges, rightly, the assumption that contemporary theories of the subject need only be considered as non-unitary or non-unified. Somewhere along the way, the absence of a subject has become the very *substratum* of the theory itself.

We have come a long way from the “unified consciousness” of Descartes and the Kantian modern, self-sufficient subject. And while the intent of this project is not meant to drag us back to the Enlightenment, I do share Kolozova’s concern with the trajectory of the discourse. If, in the Badiouin sense, one only realizes one’s subjectivity in the wake of an “event,” then what can be meaningfully said about one’s own subjectivity?

Our way out of this dilemma is, in my view, through Kierkegaardian repetition. Chapter Two will extrapolate more specifically the role and inspiration behind

[25] Ibid., 80.

Kierkegaard's idea of repetition—a text and a concept that unlocks so much of his larger oeuvre. But to understand the locus of Kierkegaard's (and later, Lacan's) theories of selfhood, it is important to see the context in which Kierkegaard (and his pseudonyms) emerge.[26]

The Idealist Shadow

Writing in 19th century Denmark, Kierkegaard was clearly shaped by the Hegelian dialectic and the shadow the "system" cast across intellectual Europe. But the idealism of the 18th century in thinkers like Fichte and Schelling—itself a reaction to the Kantian reduction of the ego to a formal, transcendental property—also played a significant role in the development of the Kierkegaardian selfhood. As a result, Kierkegaard's description of the self is one that we can call thoroughly *anti*-modern and decidedly *post*-modern.

Perhaps Kierkegaard's most salient depiction of what constitutes the self is from the opening passage of *The Sickness Unto Death* where he writes, "The human being is

[26] Within Kierkegaard scholarship there is considerable debate about how to approach his pseudonyms. See Joseph Westfall. *The Kierkegaardian Author: Authorship and Performance in Kierkegaard's Literary and Dramatic Criticism*. There are some who subscribe to the viewpoint that his pseudonyms do not represent Kierkegaard's view, and it is irresponsible to treat them *as* Kierkegaard. I tend to share the view of others in the community who treat them a bit more cohesively. See George Pattison. "Pseudonyms? What Pseudonyms? There were no Pseudonyms." *Kierkegaard studies. Yearbook* 24.1 (2019): 243–266. So while this project will not deal specifically with the consequences of his pseudonymous authorship, it will use each of the pseudonyms in reference to their respective texts. As Kierkegaard himself wrote in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, "My wish, my prayer, is that, if it might occur to anyone to quote a particular saying from the books, he would do me the favor to cite the name of the respective pseudonymous author. From the beginning I perceived very clearly and do still perceive that my personal reality is an embarrassment which the pseudonyms with pathetic self-assertion might wish to be rid of, the sooner the better, or to have reduced to the least possible significance, and yet again with ironic courtesy might wish to have in their company as a repellent contrast." Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 114.

spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which is relating itself to itself."[27] Chapter three will look more carefully at the themes in *Sickness* and their role in selfhood, but it is important to note that this self-in-relation is defined by its activity through an ongoing dialectic between two polarities. It is a self that rejects an ontological substance, and instead embraces the very negativity of the dialectic that defines post-structuralist discourse. It is a self in which repetition is the essential character, but for whom the individual is exactly that—a *radical* individual before God.

The 19th century individualism of thinkers like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Freud are an echo of John Locke's declaration a century earlier that the subject is imbued with reason and rational control. Locke "levels up" the cogito by not just articulating a subject capable of interpreting the world around itself, but one that can be fully perfected. And, as Patrick Stokes observes, perhaps the Lockean individual is even more radical than that. For Locke the identity of the self is "distinct from both the identity of the body or organism *and* the identity of the thinking substance or soul."[28] This identity offers a "sameness of consciousness" across time, an idea that some have interpreted to include our memories; on this account, this also means we live into those very memories. This creates a kind of circular logic that Butler and others have noted means we must have

[27] Soren Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death,* trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 13.

[28] Patrick Stokes, "Locke, Kierkegaard and the Phenomenology of Personal Identity," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 16:5 (2008), 647, https://doi.org/10.1080/09672550802493793.

assumed the personal identity of the past that held the memory.[29] Despite this objection, though, Locke's subject is "the product of an active process of appropriative self-attribution, one driven by 'a Concern for Happiness, the unavoidable Concomitant of Consciousness.'"[30] His is not a self-absorbed subject, but one in which moral responsibility lies as one portion of the subject's very constitution:

> This Personality extends it *self* beyond present Existence to what is past, only by Consciousness, whereby it becomes concerned and accountable, owns and imputes to it *self* past Actions, just upon the same Ground, and for the same Reason that it does the present.[31]

Locke's subject is insular insofar as its responsible for its own perfection, yet there is a deep ethical responsibility at its core—indeed the subject is not a subject without it.

There are a couple of different aspects of Locke's subjectivity that we should tease apart here, and which lay the foundation for the Kierkegaardian self. First, Locke makes a distinction between *humans* and *persons,* with the difference lying in one's ability (or not) to be a "thinking, intelligent Being, that has Reason and Reflection." One is a *person* to the degree they can make judgments about the world around them, and reason accordingly. Those who, for instance, are alive but lack the conscious reasoning ability are merely *human*.[32] The bifurcation of the subject into one who is conscious and one who lacks it is a theme Kierkegaard will pick up in his own writing on the self.

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[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid., 648.

[31] Ibid.

[32] See Stokes, *The Naked Self.* In this view, a parrot could very well be a person but not a human.

Throughout *Sickness*, he develops a selfhood in which consciousness (among other factors) is a necessary condition for selfhood. For example, to grapple with one's despair necessitates it is done within the context of consciousness. Kierkegaard continues:

> Thus, consciousness is decisive. Generally speaking, consciousness—that is, self-consciousness—is decisive with regard to the self. The more consciousness, the more self; the more consciousness, the more will; the more will, the more self. A person who has no will at all is not a self; but the more will he has, the more self-consciousness he has also.[33]

Echoing Locke, the selfhood and consciousness are constitutively bound together.

The other aspect that Kierkegaard picks up from Locke is the notion of memory and recollection. The Lockean self holds the notion that identity endures with the "sameness of consciousness" across time. So regardless of how I may change physically, emotionally, or psychologically, within me, my ability to be a thinking, rational person across time unites—both past and present—into the "same person to whom they both belong."[34] For example, if I recall witnessing the Minnesota Twins win the World Series in 1991, I am the same self now as the 11-year-old self that watched that event unfold. As Stokes notes, this is not a metaphysical claim but instead "a declaration of how identity appears *from the inside*, for living, morally engaged beings such as us."[35] Locke's intersection with Kierkegaard is notable here, because in order to consider one's past in the way Locke suggests requires remembering past events— "extending consciousness"—via *memory*. Memories define the boundaries of the self because they

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[33] Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, 29.

[34] Stokes, "Locke, Kierkegaard and the Phenomenology of Personal Identity," 650.

[35] Stokes, *The Naked Self*, 36.

are "centrally involved in the ways in which we appropriate what *appears to us* to be included within ourselves."[36] Our memories map the territory of ourselves, and but it is not just the fact of the memories themselves, but also the type, kind, and even the way we remember.

Kierkegaard's writings on memory cross texts and pseudonyms, and they are separated into categories of remembering and recollecting. For example, in *Stages on Life's Way,* Kierkegaard calls memory as a passive action, something one simply points to as a "deliverer of information…which do not necessarily have any inherent meaning or interconnection."[37] Memories are only a "vanishing condition" that one loses over the course of their life; indeed, as we age our memories are the first to go. Memory is, in other words, an "immediate response to a stimulus"[38] and functions like an unreflective report of something that happens *to us*—all the more sensible that this recall mechanism fails us as we age. But Kierkegaard contrasts this in *Stages* with recollection. Recollection is something more. Recollection organizes the raw materials of memory into an order from which one can derive meaning. It is not just the events in themselves that interest us, but the impact and legacy those events have on the subject, and more importantly, the meaning of those events on who that subject is *becoming*. As he writes

[36] Ibid., 36.

[37] Soren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way,* trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 9.

[38] Stokes, 38.

later in *Stages,* many people can write the stories of their lives such that they are a collection of memories, but without recollection, the essential meaning is shrouded.[39]

Recollection & Repetition

Kierkegaard picks up two themes from Locke, which is a self that is in charge of its perfection and in which memories tie together a "sameness of consciousness across time." We will deal with repetition—the concept and the text—more carefully in chapter two, but it is important to say something about the intersection of recollection and repetition. In the opening lines of *Repetition*, Kierkegaard's pseudonym, Constantine Constantius, writes,

> Repetition and recollection are the same movement, just in opposite directions, because what is recollected has already been and is thus repeated backwards, whereas genuine repetition is *recollected forwards*. Repetition, if it is possible, thus makes a person happy, while recollection makes him unhappy, assuming, of course, that he actually gives himself time to live and does not, immediately upon the hour of his birth hit upon an excuse, such as that he has forgotten something, to sneak back out of life again.[40]

In *Stages* recollection is privileged over and against memories—it creates the boundaries and the conditions of selfhood. But in the text above*,* repetition is favored over recollection. Writers have struggled to define just *what* repetition means in the context of Kierkegaard's writings, but as Niels Nymann Eriksen notes, repetition is not a

[39] The roots of modern psychoanalysis are often traced not just back to Freud, but even further to Kierkegaard, and his work on anxiety and freedom. But there is something to be said, too, about his work differentiating memories from analysis. On their own, the memories of an analysand's childhood, for example, can be simply facts told in the confines of an office. But it is the analyst's job to move the analysand from mere memory to recollection. The analyst helps the analysand create significance in their memories by shaping the past into a narrative that highlights what is essential.

[40] Soren Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 3. Emphasis mine.

philosophical category so much as it is a *paradigm of thought,* "…and as such it is something that cannot be grasped as an object for thought."[41] So while ostensibly repetition and recollection sit "opposed" to one another, they offer similar re-orientations as one another; recollection is the reflective view of my past and my memories, while repetition is the reflective view *forward*. And in this way, repetition as a paradigm functions quite similarly as recollection does to memories. Recollection and repetition are each situated as modes of thinking.

Locke is not the only influence on the Kierkegaardian self, however. Two shadows loom even larger in his concept of the self: Kant and Hegel. If Locke's individual is defined by its enduring consciousness across time—and the self-possessed capability to strive for its own perfection—Kant's individual is a different beast entirely. In Kant's view, the subject is the basis of the perceptible world order. Everything is either "subject or object," and even time and space do not exist apart from the "subjective condition of our human intuition."[42] The subject is the starting point. And by virtue of *a priori* synthetic judgments, the individual interprets the world around them with autonomy. Of course, the subject is limited in the scope of what it can truly know—never the thing-in-itself—and more crucially, is bound by the commands of practical reason. As Zima notes, "The actions of the human subject are autonomous insofar as they conform to the laws of reason inherent in the subject and recognized by the latter as universally

[41] Niels Nymann Eriksen, *Kierkegaard's Category of Repetition* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), 2.

[42] Zima, *Subjectivity and Identity*, 69.

valid."[43] This "universality" is entirely secular, though, as Kant rejects any heteronomy or grounding in something transcendent.

On one reading of Kierkegaard, Kant is set up as a near perfect foil. Whereas Kant's individual is subject to a moral universal, Kierkegaard's individual is a *single* individual who suspends the ethical to respond to a call from God—and in the process, places himself higher than the universal law. Each thinker sees the individual with a kind of radical autonomy—and even as the central, origin point for philosophical analysis—but the difference, of course, is in their fidelity. Kant's individual is governed by the moral law and one's absolute duty to it. By contrast, the Kierkegaardian "self" is bound by its duty and freedom to the absolute, and as a result, it encounters a kind of reprioritized world. Ethical commitments shatter in the face of this duty—not in the sense that they wither away, but that they might be recast into commitments with entirely different expressions. As Kierkegaard demonstrates, Abraham's ethical duty is to love Isaac and not sacrifice him on Mt. Moriah. But his absolute duty is "an ordeal, a temptation that...is a synthesis of its being for the sake of God and for his own sake."[44] The paradox (or tragedy?) of this orientation of the self is the single individual "simply cannot make himself understandable to anyone." So radical is the singular individual's stance before God that it ushers in a dramatic reinterpretation of the world around the self.

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[43] Ibid., 70.

[44] Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 71.

While Kant would bristle at the individual's fidelity to something other than the individual as an end-in-itself, he shares with Kierkegaard a skepticism in metaphysics and an emphasis on one's will. Their departure, however, is that while Kant is not a moral skeptic, Kierkegaard most definitely is: "The individual, turned from the world to himself, must experience within himself an inability not simply to determine his will in conformity with the law, but to determine what he is required to do."[45] The moral law that lies at the core of the Kantian individual is, for Kierkegaard, a neutering of the absurdity of religion's call. Religion has a primary obligation to God independent of any moral conditions. As Friedman again captures,

> Kierkegaard wants to push aside the modern Kantian archetype of the individual…and replace him with an individual determined to accept and execute what Kierkegaard thinks to be his unique fate—that he should accept the unique demands of his individuality and climb to the infinite, a task for the strong few, who would be knights and heroes.[46]

By embracing one's individuality, Kierkegaard positions his individual as both a reflection of—and an intensifying of—Kant's individual.

The Specter of Hegel

As we have seen, the Kierkegaardian individual emerges not just from the Cartesian ego, but from—in part—the subjects of Locke and Kant. But most Kierkegaard scholarship needs to reckon with the role of Hegel in Kierkegaard's writings. There is some debate about whether Kierkegaard's ongoing critiques of "the system" represent a

[45] D. Z. Philips and Timothy Tessin, *Kant and Kierkegaard on Religion,* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 101.

[46] Ibid., 103.

true critique of it, or whether it is an ironic motif meant to distract readers from the reality that Kierkegaard's philosophy *fulfills* the system. This something Aroosi notes when he writes, "…rather than lodging simplistic attacks, Kierkegaard and Marx represent a mature and sophisticated engagement with Hegel's thought, for which reason they remain profoundly indebted to it."[47] Either way, it is difficult to write an extensive project without first dealing with the haunting specter of Hegel throughout Kierkegaard's writings—specifically with respect to the subject.

Broadly speaking, Hegel's work in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* is to articulate the general assumptions on which the current philosophical theories stood and, in a sense, to ground the possibility of knowledge. By demonstrating the conflicts and limitations in philosophy, he showed that any" system" one hoped to devise begins with fundamental flaws. Any system is bound to feature holes in the attempt to devise a "whole", and it is precisely this built-in set of contradictions from which Hegel's subjectivity arises—when one recognizes that one's being is distinct and separate from other beings like itself. There is not a self-identical subject in Hegel—a legacy from Descartes that he stridently opposes—but rather becoming a "self" is the process by which a subject comes to recognize its reciprocity and mutuality with other subjects, who are themselves "subjects" by the very same process.

[47] Jamie Aroosi, *The Dialectical Self: Kierkegaard, Marx, and the Making of the Modern Subject* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 5.

Hegel articulates this through the language of consciousness becoming conscious of itself through the dialectic; a dance with the negative that fundamentally differentiates consciousness from itself. Hegel writes,

> Consciousness simultaneously *distinguishes* itself from something, and at the same time relates itself to it, or, as it is said, this something exists *for* consciousness; and the determinate aspect of this *relating*, or of the *being-for-another* from being- in-itself; whatever is related to knowledge or knowing is also distinguished from it, and posited as existing outside of this relationship; this being-in-itself is called *truth*.[48]

This dialectical movement is where being both encounters something wholly other while at the same time relating to it, a process whereby the subject emerges in the very act of "tarrying" with the negative. In other words, for something to "be" there needs to be something to "oppose" that "being," and thus, Hegel's subject emerges as both distinct (as a result of consciousness distinguishing itself from itself) and yet deeply relational; the subject *needs* the negative, the not-itself, in order to brought into full consciousness of itself and to have full self-identity. The radical difference of the other is what, ultimately, births the possibility of me conceiving myself.

Hegel demonstrates this in perhaps his most famous passage on the Master/Slave dialectic, a parable designed to show the interdependence of both parties. For while the slave may *need* the master, Hegel shows it is actually the master who fundamentally *needs* the slave and, more importantly, that they crucially need each other. He writes,

> The relation of the two self-conscious individuals is such that they prove themselves and each other through a life- and-death struggle. They must engage in this struggle, for they must raise their certainty of bring *for* themselves to truth,

[48] G.W.F. Hegel, "The Phenomenology of Spirit" in *The Hegel Reader,* ed. Stephen Houlgate, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 75.

> both in the case of the other and in their own case. And it is only through staking one's life that freedom is won; only thus is it proved that for self-consciousness...[49]

So the first thing to draw from this parable is that, as I have mentioned, the master and slave need each other to struggle *against* one another for their own existence, and therefore their own freedom.

Secondly, Hegel points out that the slave is truly being for the other while the master is not being for the other, just treating the object as an other for itself, relating as though "consciousness exists *for itself*." The slave, meanwhile, sacrifices its will for the sake of the master, and that movement of acknowledging the other as a wholly other - a sacrifice of the self for the other - is the first step that makes self-realization possible. Moreover, the master in this dialectic is dependent on the slave, meaning the slave is the only one in the position to become self-actualized. The master really cannot live without the slave, and it is the latter who brings the stage to its fulfillment. In other words, it is the slave who is the catalyst for the force of the dialectic. Ultimately, these two continually sublate one another until they are lifted into a higher and higher unity.

What is profound about Hegel's work is that consciousness takes on several different characteristics and spins out at least three different trajectories: it embodies an *epistemology* of reason and rationality; it is *psychological*, in that it has an awareness and perception and feelings; and it is *ontological*, in that it is the very life of being itself. What Hegel notes throughout his work in the *Phenomenology* is that the central

[49] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* 94.

experience of life is alienation—from myself and from others—thereby experiencing consciousness against itself. But paradoxically, this alienation is also fundamentally relational. As Jamie Aroosi points out,

> Ultimately, at the end of this process, we arrive at authentic rather than alienated selves, because in arriving at a true understanding of ourselves, we reconcile ourselves as both subjects and objects. That is, our 'I' and our 'me' become one and the same, because we have finally recognized ourselves for what we are—self-conscious beings.[50]

The dilemma here with Hegel is that—as Levinas will point out—there is no remainder in Hegel, no excess. Every difference, every contradiction and struggle between master and slave is ultimately drawn up into itself into higher and higher forms of consciousness. Difference qua difference exists only as a process towards a final consummation of Spirit realizing itself in Reason. As Deleuze points out in *Difference and Repetition*, "…Hegelian contradiction appears to push difference to the limit, but this path is a dead end which brings it back to identity, making identity the sufficient condition for difference to exist and be thought."[51] Indeed where Hegel saw the finality and beauty of Spirit fully realizing itself in history and all contradictions being resolved in one final movement, Deleuze sees the very project as a dead-end.

The Kierkegaardian Self

Deleuze's critique echoes Kierkegaard's, who, while perhaps on board with the *what* of Hegel's thought, finds more of an issue with the *form* it takes. While Kierkegaard

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[50] Aroosi, *The Dialectical Self,* 16.

[51] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 263.

similarly equates selfhood with spirit, he redefines the relational nature of the self away from merely the *relation*, and toward the *relation relating itself to itself*. In other words, he *internalizes* a dialectic that Hegel viewed as part of a coherent speculative philosophy. And if there is a point at which Kierkegaard can be called thoroughly *post*modern, this is the moment. Because rather than casting the self as a Kantian individual or Cartesian ego (or even the basis of a speculative philosophy like we see in Hegel), Kierkegaard brings the synthesis of the "system" internally, and the subject only emerges "through an existential act of self-appropriation that many…have come to refer to as the activity of 'self-choice.'"[52] This subject rejects the ontological underpinnings found in so much of German idealism—there is no "substance" of which to speak—and instead defines the self as an active, participant in its own becoming. In short, while he adopts the Hegelian framework, he places an emphasis on individual self-appropriation. Or as Patrick Stokes writes, selfhood is "not in the superaddition of a Cartesian ego or immaterial soul to the human animal, but in a relational dynamic whereby a mass of psychological facts and dispositions relates to itself and its environment in an irreducibly first-personal way."[53]

Selfhood throughout Kierkegaard's oeuvre is layered, and in addition to the self's active choosing, Kierkegaard also enumerates the ways in which despair stands between the self and the self fully becoming. For example, we will see in chapter three that *The Sickness Unto Death*—perhaps one of Kierkegaard's "clearest" writings on the topic of

[52] Aroosi, *The Dialectical Self*, 19.

[53] Stokes, *The Naked Self*, 13.

the self—elaborates on the dialectical tensions inherent within the self. Selfhood relies on balancing between the infinite and finite, the temporal and the eternal, and freedom and necessity. The point, of course, is that we are not passive subjects who exist simply by virtue of our existence ("I think, therefore I am"). Rather, the heart of each of these dialectics is *repetition.* Each individual bares a sense of agency as they live within them. And the failure to "maintain" these leads to the "sickness" lurking as the destabilizing force in any subject: despair. The concept of despair is nearly as important to Kierkegaard's subject as the self-in-relation, because it prevents the self from fully realizing itself. It is a "condition in which the self does not want to be the self that it is and instead tries to will itself away."[54]

For Kierkegaard there are three points of contact for the self to be considered a self: there are the two "polarities" (e.g., infinite vs. finite) and then the act of actively synthesizing those polarities together. The synthesis—the self relating to itself with a positive intentionality—is what comes to form the human self. Any synthesis which is derived by a "negative" unity is what Kierkegaard will say leads us to despair. And the threat of despair is *constant*.

We are told at the outset of *Sickness Unto Death* that despair takes on three forms: 1) being conscious in despair of having a self; 2) not wanting in despair to be oneself; and 3) wanting in despair to be oneself. Despair is a fundamental imbalance in the self's relating of itself to itself; what Kierkegaard notes is a "negative unity" in the dialectical

[54] Ibid., 33.

tension between finite and infinite, temporal and eternal, and freedom and necessity. To be rooted more temporally than eternally (for example) is to propel one's soul into a misrelationship with itself, a dysfunction he calls the "sickness." Kierkegaard is careful to emphasize that despair is rooted in the imbalance of the synthesis, not the synthesis itself. As he says, "the synthesis is just the possibility; or, the possibility of the imbalance lies in the synthesis."[55] Therefore the self is always on the precipice of despair from within and always verging on an impotent self-consumption—a consumption which does not and cannot consume—but simply gnaws at the soul with a persistent and terrifying pain.

That humans have the *ability* to despair demonstrates our advantage over animals, says Kierkegaard, but more importantly despair also demonstrates that we have been made aware of our situatedness as singular individuals. A soul in despair is not that of an aesthete, who does not much care for the development of their selfhood. Rather one of the primary catalysts of despair is the awareness of our subjectivity – a realization that our selfhood contains something deeply eternal. The first layer of despair is this awareness of an eternal "other" to whom my very being stands in relation, not so as to replace my self with another (which would be an altogether different manifestation of despair) but to be aware of one's own impatience with the demands of selfhood. As one might expect, these demands of selfhood in Kierkegaard are demands from the infinite.

[55] Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, 15.

He writes, "...having a self, being a self, is the greatest, the infinite, concession that has been made to man, but also eternity's claim on him."[56]

As one becomes aware of the eternal in the synthesis of self and spirit one also is made aware of this eternal claim on their soul. What is important to note in the scenario, though, is that one does not make a claim on God, for example, as so much of contemporary religion describes; but rather, God is continually and eternally pointing *at us* and in doing so, resting in the transparency of God's self. Indeed, it is this very relationship with God/eternal/spirit that makes despair and anxiety a possibility. The possibility of a despairing self only occurs within the context of a relationship with God as the singular individual.

Of course, the subject as an internal dialectic prone to despair is one layer to this discussion, but as Kierkegaard introduces the concept of repetition, we find that it brings his writings on the self into sharper focus. To be sure, it will become the key by which we can more carefully examine *Sickness* and some of his other texts. In chapter two we will pivot to looking more carefully at how repetition—as a text and a concept—emerges from the force of philosophical history. Chapter three will be devoted to understanding Kierkegaard's notion of selfhood as a self-in-relation and therefore one which lacks a fundamental ontology. By exploring more carefully the *Sickness unto Death* and the *Either/Or,* we will find the self relates to itself and from the infinite power that grounds and sustains it. Rather than articulating a traditionally Cartesian, ontological subject,

[56] Ibid., 21.

Kierkegaard internalizes Hegel's dialectic and makes the movement of the self the very self itself.

Building on this concept of the self, chapter four will outline repetition as a movement of truth, freedom, and transcendence through a "return" and an encounter with the "moment." This will offer a close reading of Kierkegaard's treatment of the Job and Abraham narratives and consider the way each offers a paradoxical way for returning what had been given up. In the repetitive "return" each encounters the "moment" at which the finite and the infinite meet, the moment when we experience what Kierkegaard calls "the fullness of time."

The project will conclude by "returning" once again to the thought of Lacan, and specifically how Kierkegaard's concept is received in the influential Freudian/Lacanian usage of the term. We will then ask whether psychoanalysis arrives at a better sense of the active constitutive subject through its particular configuration of repetition. The key question will be whether Kierkegaard's use of repetition might shed some light on contemporary issues within Lacan's use of repetition vis-à-vis the subject.

Chapter Two: The Genealogy of Repetition

In the opening lines of *Repetition* Kierkegaard writes, "I was occupied for some time, at least on occasion, with the question of repetition—whether or not it is possible, what importance it has, whether something gains or loses in being repeated." A few lines later he describes the effect this musing had on him, "At home I had been practically immobilized by this question."[1] While his language in these lines is intentional and ironic, his "immobilization" could also reasonably describe the experience of the reader; there is, perhaps, no more playful, circuitous, ironic, and opaque text in Kierkegaard's oeuvre. As a result, his pseudonym—Constantine Constantius—takes us on a journey that is a mixture of narration and philosophical essay that both embodies the dilemma of repetition and gives no clear indication of what repetition means.[2] In other words, readers approaching the text with an eye towards a clear or systematic understanding of a concept can expect their own kind of *intellectual* immobilization. And yet, beneath the irony and confusion, Kierkegaard accomplishes a great deal in such a short text. While ostensibly a book that outlines Kierkegaard's romantic advice to a young lover, he also manages to invoke one of the thorniest debates in philosophical history and shows how the concept of

[1] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 131.

[2] Arne Melberg, "Repetition (In the Kierkegaardian Sense of the Term)." *Diacritics* 20, no. 3 (1990): 1. https://doi.org/10.2307/465332.

repetition stands in stark contrast to the Greek notions of *stasis*. With a blend of influences from Greek and Hegelian thought—as well as some clever Danish wordplay—Kierkegaard crafts a book that is considered one of the most difficult and important books in his corpus, and (one could argue) is the hermeneutical key by which every other of his writings must be interpreted. In other words, to misunderstand the movement of repetition is to miss the dynamic movement at the very heart of his oeuvre.

So what is this text? And what is he trying to accomplish? Rife with irony and littered with winks and nods to philosophical and linguistic influences, repetition—both as a concept in his thought and the actual text that bears its name—defies systematization at every turn and, as we will see in the chapters that follow, its meaning largely depends on the character and pseudonym in which it is expressed. Throughout his writings, Kierkegaard carefully embodies his philosophy in narrative structures that read more like works of fiction than traditional philosophical tomes. Scratch beneath the surface, however, and his texts reveal a complexity and sophistication that advances the field as much as it mocks it. *Repetition* is perhaps the finest example of this trope. Early pages introduce the "back and forth" of repetition through the eyes of ancient and "modern" philosophy; segues into Kierkegaard's narration of encountering a "young man" who is "melancholically in love"; then concludes with a correspondence with the young man, who discovers the woman he longed for has married and therefore he has encountered the essence of repetition by receiving "everything double". So while never explicitly offering repetition as a system or ethic, Kierkegaard weaves themes of love, loss, melancholy, and *kinesis* into a tapestry that shows the narrative particularity of repetition.

Given the ostensibly confusing nature of *Repetition*, it is no wonder the text has spawned multiple—often contradictory—interpretations. Some have articulated a clear meaning and intention of the concept while others declare the movement of repetition simply is not possible, and that perhaps *Repetition*—as a work and a concept—is unfinished. Meanwhile, some have called repetition *the* metaphysic in his thought,[3] and yet others define it as the concept which fundamentally *disrupts* metaphysics.[4] Perhaps what each of these interpretations have in common is that *Repetition* is a puzzling little work, one that demonstrates Kierkegaard's style of indirect communication taken to the extreme.[5]

Explaining a labyrinthine concept and text that refuses to be systematized requires a careful exegesis of Kierkegaard's texts; as such, chapters three and four explore a trio of writings from 1843, specifically the Discourse on Job, *Either/Or,* and *Fear and Trembling.* By exploring each text's literary flourishes and emphases—and the various iterations of repetition in each—we can approach, if not a definition, then some clarity around just how essential repetition is in his work. And by extension, how essential it is in his construction of the Kierkegaardian *self*.

Before diving into those books, however, it is important to situate *Repetition* and repetition within its historical context. Kierkegaard does not create the term in a

[3] Edward F. Mooney, "*Repetition:* Getting the world back" in *Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alistair Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 292.

[4] John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 12.

[5] Vincent McCarthy, *Kierkegaard as Psychologist*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 146.

philosophical vacuum, nor is it simply the creative musings of a Kierkegaardian pseudonym. Rather, "repetition" functions as a signifier that points to several linguistic and philosophical influences, as well as some of the thorniest *aporias* in the history of the discipline. Throughout this chapter, we will trace how three particular influences—the philosophy of the Greeks, the "system" of Hegel, and the Danish language itself—shape this signifier and help us more carefully understand the explicit and implicit role it plays in Kierkegaard's 1843 writings.

The "Greeks"

In the opening lines of *Repetition*, Constantine Constantius writes:

> "When the Eleatics denied motion, Diogenes, as everyone knows, came forward in protest, actually came forward, because he did not say a word, but simply walked back and forth a few times, with which gesture he believed he had sufficiently refuted the Eleatic position…Say what you will, this problem is going to play an important role in modern philosophy because repetition is a decisive expression for what 'recollection 'was for the Greeks. Just as they taught that all knowledge is recollection, thus will modern philosophy teach that life itself is a repetition."[6]

To listen to Kierkegaard reflect on the meaning of his own work—and to the degree there is any theme that runs through his oeuvre—he is concerned with the task of *becoming* a Christian, particularly within a Danish culture shaped by a blend of limp Lutheranism and watered-down Hegelianism. Faith is not a static, Platonic *eidos* to be grasped but, as Johannes Climacus writes in a key passage from *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, a truth to which one is in relation.[7] So to begin with passage like this both stakes

[6] Soren Kierkegaard, *Repetition,* trans M.G. Piety (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

[7] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 196.

Kierkegaard's claims and offers a bit of a hermeneutical and interpretive key to where he is headed. To that end, it is worth unpacking just what he is up to in these lines. Because, while it does not seem like it on the surface, this is his attempt at destabilizing metaphysics. Or, to paraphrase the question of Heidegger, what kind of destruction of the history of metaphysics is exercised in these texts?[8]

By opening with this debate on motion, Kierkegaard signals two things. First, as Clare Carlisle observes, he sets up an opposition between idea and movement, and between philosophy and existence. She writes, "…movement seems to triumph here, for Diogenes' 'step forth' encourages us to look at the question of 'the possibility of motion' in a new way."[9] Whereas Greek philosophy is characterized by recollection, which is static and unchanging, Kierkegaard signals his preference for a theory of motion as a guiding metaphysic for his understanding of the self.[10]

Secondly (and relatedly), if the self is characterized by its act of *becoming*, then repetition is the movement—this *kinesis*—that propels a self toward (to paraphrase Nietzsche) becoming what it already is. While philosophy writ large has explore and debated the impact of movement on the cosmos, Kierkegaard internalizes this movement

[8] Eriksen, *Kierkegaard's Categories of Repetition*, 114.

[9] Clare Carlisle, "The Possibility of Motion," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy,* 13(3) 2005, 1.

[10] Eriksen notes the imprecision of this section on the "Greeks," specifically with respect to the impossibility of capturing all of Greek thought in this way. "Kierkegaard's concept of 'the Greeks' is difficult to deal with because it indicates a unity which upon closer inspection evaporates." See Eriksen, *Kierkegaard's Categories of Repetition,* 117.

and creates a "conceptual framework"[11] for religious becoming. In so doing, repetition functions as a signifier that reveals a deep inspiration from the work of Greek metaphysicians—namely, the pre-Socratics, Plato, and Aristotle. While Kierkegaard does not mention these thinkers explicitly by name, any understanding of repetition requires a grounding in the metaphysical tradition that inspires it.

Motion and *Stasis*

Among the debates of early Greek thinkers was whether the world was in constant motion or whether this motion was merely an illusion—an elaborate ruse of the eyes in which the world only *appeared* to move. This aporia is best understood through the ancient conflict between Heraclitus and Parmenides. Triggering one of the primary aporias of Western philosophy, the former saw a world in constant motion— "at once coming into being and passing away"[12]—while the latter argued for a world that was unchanging. And where Heraclitus saw a fundamental unity in opposites (e.g., something can be both the same and not the same over time), Parmenides argued for a world that was undifferentiated, writing, "As yet a single tale of a way/ remains, that it is; and along this path markers are there/ very many, that What Is is ungenerated and deathless / whole and uniform, and still and perfect."[13] For Parmenides, what "is" always has been and always will be; there is no point at which something can simply not be, then be.

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[11] Clare Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 9.

[12] Ibid., 10

[13] Palmer, John, "Parmenides", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/parmenides/>.

As Carlisle notes, this Heraclitean/Parmenidean split provoked one of the greatest problems in Greek thought—and indeed, the entirety of Western philosophy. She explains that ancient dilemma this way: "...although we see things moving around and changing, how are we to conceive of this logically? If something is now one way and then another, is there a moment when it is neither?…If something changes, in what sense is it still the same thing"[14] The result of these questions did not have implications solely for metaphysics; they struck to the heart of epistemology, too. How can we truly *know* a thing if that thing is always in flux? In what sense does our ability to know rely on something's consistency?

The one who would go on to "solve" this debate is also the philosopher who would influence (and haunt) the entire Western tradition that followed him. Part of Plato's genius was his ability to synthesize the movement/stasis debate into a view that acknowledges ostensibly both are important: we live in a physical world in flux while a more permanent, superior, *intelligible* reality exists elsewhere. What one sees in the world is a mere copy—a *representation*—of a more fixed, universal world beyond us. The split is viewed most vividly portrayed in the *Timaeus* where Socrates traces movement to a stable first cause, an external demiurge that compels all things into motion.[15] Indeed for Plato, to the degree he articulates motion in his dialogues, *any* motion is secondary to pure Being and pure Goodness; kinetic movement is inherently of

[14] Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming,* 10.

[15] Thomas Nail, *Being and Motion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 276.

less importance—if accounted for at all—and simply distracts from contemplating on the "higher" ideals of wisdom, truth, and the good.

Indeed much of the philosophical tradition has followed suit; as Thomas Nail observes, being has been the dominant mode of discourse, with very little thought given to being-in-motion.[16] John Caputo also argues that

> [p]hilosophy is scandalized by motion and thus tries either to exclude movement outright from real being (Platonism) or, more subversively, to portray itself as a friend of movement and thus to lure it into the philosophical house of logical categories (Hegelianism).[17]

For Kierkegaard the "scandal" of philosophy was the seduction of metaphysics, a "mummified" discourse (to quote Nietzsche) that refuses to take seriously the ongoing flux of the world. If philosophy has mostly avoided, denied, or attempted to reconcile motion, *Repetition* is Kierkegaard's attempt at dealing with motion on its own terms.[18]

While there is something elegant about the way Plato "solves" the aporia of motion and *stasis*, Aristotle ultimately found Plato's dualism to offer an unsatisfactory account of becoming. He writes, "Above all we might examine the question of what on earth the Forms contribute to sensible things...for they are not the cause of any motion or change in them."[19] In Aristotle's view—later also adopted by Kierkegaard—ideas alone cannot account for a thing's becoming. Ideas do not account for actuality. So instead, Aristotle interrogates motion within the things themselves. Nature "is a cause that

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[16] Ibid., 16.

[17] Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics,* 11-12.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming,* 11.

operates for a purpose," and any stage of movement is embedded within the very thing itself. Contra Plato, Aristotle articulates movement as embedded within the very thing itself—a thing's movement expressed as a potentiality that grants it an ability to change.

Aristotle found much to appreciate in Plato's work, but he wanted to align philosophy to be more consistent with human experience. While the latter argued that motion in the sensory world was the result of the forms moving through a *receptacle*[20], Aristotle accounts for motion within existing things. In this view, motion is not haphazard or accidental, but an inner activity of things governed by a final cause or telos. In other words, just as a seed carries with it the potential for it to be a tree (or bush or plant), so do things possess a *kinesis* within their very construct. Motion is not a distraction from the higher ideas, rather inherent in the thing itself.

The question that hangs over this view of motion, then, is one of identity: does a thing retains its "thingness" as it undergoes change? As something changes, is it something different altogether? Or does it retain something of its original substance? Is there a time when the thing is neither what it was, nor what it is becoming? A time when it is both? Aristotle responded to this problem by recognizing that, in order to have change, one must have both difference and sameness. One needs the telos of the thing to, somehow, be identical to the thing that has undergone the change. Otherwise, we would not have *change*, but the disappearance of one entity and the appearance of another. To state it differently, what motivates a thing to change? And what happens when that thing undergoes change?

[20] See Nail, *Being and Motion*, 409-410.

The way forward for Aristotle was to distinguish between essence and accident, or between opposites and substrata. Change, he says, requires two opposites and a substratum, and is driven internally toward a *telos*. What each things holds is *potentiality* driven by a *kinesis*. Unlike Plato—who views actualities as transcendent, stable forms—Aristotle understood "motion is an incomplete fulfillment of the moveable."

Now, while Kierkegaard does not directly link the motion of repetition to Aristotle within *Repetition*, the idea is implicit in the opening lines of *Repetition,* and explicit within some of Kierkegaard's other writings.[21] By invoking the Greek debate of motion, he positions the argument of the text primarily as a referendum on motion, but more than that: a motion *forward*. Aside from the allusions in the text, we also know that Kierkegaard at one point was deeply interested in Aristotle's notion of *kinesis* as a transition from a state of possibility to a state of actuality.[22] The difference, of course, is that Kierkegaard gives *kinesis* an existential concern. In his view, the Greek category of *kinesis* stands opposed to recollection, which is nothing more than a looking backwards, a view characterized by its stability. His concern is a repetition forward, toward eternity and toward the kind of Christian *becoming* that "makes a person happy."[23] As Caputo writes,

> For the Greeks eternity always already has been; it is a presence which we always already possess but with which we have lost contact. Eternity is a lost actuality.

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[21] In his response to Heiberg, Kierkegaard writes of Aristotle, "Therefore, when Aristotle long ago said that the transition from possibility to actuality is a [motion, change] he was not speaking of logical possibility and actuality but of freedom's, and therefore he properly posits movement." *Repetition*, 310.

[22] Eriksen, *Kierkegaard's Categories of Repetition*, 118.

[23] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 4.

> Thus the point of philosophical speculation is to ease oneself out of time, as one would back out of a dead end, to steal back into eternity.[24]

To recollect is to think on that which has already happened, to think on something that is already finished. Repetition, though, is *action*. When something is repeated it is "reenacted" and "brought into existence"; it is recreated as a reality that brings us into eternity.[25]

The Modern Transition

So one way to read *Repetition* is through this ancient dichotomy between ideas and movement, motion and *stasis.* Indeed, for some who write on this text, the "dramatized conflict" is what brings the text's narrative development its coherence.[26] But if we consider repetition as a kaleidoscope of ideas drawn together into a ragged concept that theoretically underpins Kierkegaard's work, Aristotle's *kinesis* represents one color that inspires this text. There are two other figures that play a role in *Repetition*: Leibniz and Hegel. The former is positioned in the opening paragraph as a figure who understands repetition is possible, "Just as they taught that all knowledge is recollection, thus will modern philosophy teach that life itself is a repetition. The only modern philosopher who has had the least intimation of this is Leibniz."[27]

Kierkegaard carefully studied Leibniz during 1842-43—during the time he wrote *Repetition, Fear and Trembling,* and *Either/Or*—and his journal entries during that time

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[24] Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics,* 14.

[25] Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming*, 71.

[26] Ibid., 69.

[27] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 3.

also indicate a fondness for Leibniz's understanding of transition.[28] Leibniz was a thinker of motion, and in his view, "Substance is pure action, and this pure action is equivalent to God, who is the 'preserver of their original forces or moving powers.'"[29] His metaphysics indicates "there is never any true rest in bodies", and as a result, his is not just a theory of motion, but a motion that strives toward change. Indeed, "The only thing that is real…is relations of force."[30] What compels motion, though, is an inner force; this force provides the "pure continuum through which motion takes place and itself becomes continuous."[31]

Leibniz's metaphysics of force and change provide a modern view on *kinesis*, and hints at why Kierkegaard acknowledges that "modern philosophy [teaches] that life itself is a repetition." But his doctrine of pre-established harmony was also influential. Leibniz argued that monads contain the "entire course of the world"; and while each moment of an individual's life is pre-determined by God, the determination does not limit one's ability to seize upon their own possibilities. In fact, the moment in which "self-expression of the individual coincides with God's determination for that moment" is when an individual can actualize that possibility.[32] For Leibniz, God's creative power also leaves room for one's own freedom; one is not completely at the mercy of their life being pre-ordained. If repetition is the process whereby something new comes into existence, then

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[28] See Eriksen, *Kierkegaard's Categories of Repetition,* 119.

[29] Nail, *Being and Motion*, 369.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

Leibniz provides a metaphysics in which "divine activity is thus repeated in the activity of the monad."[33]

For readers of *Repetition*, Leibniz provides one modern connection to how Kierkegaard is thinking about repetition. Of course, the other is Hegel. Kierkegaard writes,

> It is unbelievable how much Hegelian philosophy brags about mediation, so much foolish nonsense, which under its auspices enjoyed honor and glory. It would be better to think through mediation and to do justice to the Greeks. The Greeks 'development of the doctrine of being and nothing, the development of 'the moment', 'non-being', etc., beats everything in Hegel. 'Mediation 'is a foreign word. 'Repetition 'is a good Danish word, and I congratulate the Danish language for its contribution to philosophical terminology.[34]

There is a lot to unpack in a quote like this, but Hegelian "mediation" represents one of Kierkegaard's issues with the system—it is a concept that only provides the illusion of movement and progression, not the pure movement forward of repetition. And because it lacks any potential of *becoming*, it therefore lacks freedom.

Now, before we proceed much further into Hegel's mediation, we should note that Hegel represents an intriguing dilemma for any Kierkegaard scholar, as nearly every line of Kierkegaard's work is haunted by him. Often, this means Kierkegaard is read as a foil for Hegel, one who sees "the philosopher" and his dialectical "system" as the nemesis of a meaningful, authentic Christianity. However, Kierkegaard's acerbic and biting sarcasm about the "system" also reveals a kind of admiration for it, and another way of reading his work (especially in texts like *Either/Or, Repetition*, and *The Sickness Unto Death*) is

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[33] Eriksen, *Kierkegaard's Categories of Repetition,* 119.

[34] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 18.

the very fulfillment of the philosophy he so relentlessly mocks.[35] But whether he is an admirer or critic (is not it always both?), Kierkegaard cannot escape the specter of Hegel.

In one sense, he cannot escape the specter of Hegel, but also, Kierkegaard struggles to escape the specter of "Hegel." While there is a Hegel that Kierkegaard writes about in his works, the one that emerges is largely a caricature that represents a "dramatized conflict" between speculative philosophy on the one hand, and subjective individuality on the other. What is more likely is that Kierkegaard was also responding to the broader "Hegelian" discourse of his day, some of which probably lacked the sophistication and clarity of the original Hegel. So rather than deal with Kierkegaard's Hegel, it is important to approach Hegel on Hegel's terms to see just how Kierkegaard's project is informed by—and diverges from—Hegel's.

Hegel's Mediation

The Hegelian dialectic is driven by an introduction of the negative or difference. Hegel describes philosophy as the result of the dialectical reconciliation of Spirit and reality, of the *rational* and the *actual.* Throughout his *Science of Logic,* Hegel sketches the space in which this dialectic takes place, arguing that "[t]he Logic is the science of *the pure Idea*, that is, of the Idea in the abstract element of *thinking*."[36] Previously, philosophy had been satisfied with thinking an object by simply observing one's sense experiences *about* the object. What one sees is what one gets. But Hegel wants to push us

[35] For a fuller treatment of the care with which Hegel must be addressed in the context of Kierkegaard's writings, see Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming,* 34.

[36] G.W.F. Hegel, "The Science of Logic," in *The Hegelian Reader*, ed. Stephen Houlgate (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 139.

further and say that our thinking *about* an object is inherently limited because it fails to account for the relationship to *Spirit*, or the Absolute. To think the thing-in-itself by using Critical Philosophy, Empiricism, or even Metaphysics, says Hegel, is to only grasp an *understanding* of the finite nature of things and therefore miss out on the fuller *comprehension* of their essence.

The beauty of the dialectic, however, is that it realizes the inherent finiteness of our thinking and catalyzes the processes beginning. Thinking a *pure Idea* sets the dialectic in motion and it is also where the dialectic begins.[37] It is the match *and* the charcoal, so to speak. Though we may start with thinking the *pure Idea,* however, we will not end there. Thinking consciousness—thinking the *pure Idea*—necessarily leaves that which is thought as a different thing as the "the *true* nature of the *object* comes into consciousness."[38] So as the dialectic is at work within thinking itself, it is changing it and working it over into its opposite.

Contrary to a common assumption of Hegel's system, it is not an external negation or necessarily a contradictory idea that arrives to oppose the *pure Idea*. Rather the negation is already at work within the *pure Idea* itself. What ultimately negates being is already contained within being itself and thereby gives way to a higher form of consciousness. The instability of the starting point (of thinking *itself*) lays the foundation for its own sublation. This dialectic becomes a natural product of thinking itself, or is

[37] Of course, Kierkegaard is critical of the motion in the dialectic here, insisting it is not true motion like repetition.

[38] Hegel, "The Science of Logic," 141.

simply a necessary *condition* of thinking. To think something in and for itself is to participate in a dialectical process that is already ongoing because

> [we] know that, instead of being fixed and ultimate, everything finite is alterable and perishable, and this is nothing but the dialectic of the finite, through which the latter, being implicitly the other of itself, is driven beyond what it immediately is and overturns into its opposite.[39]

The key here is that "everything is finite and alterable." The finitude of the *actual* necessitates a turning itself into its opposite because of its insecurity.

Hegel makes it clear that consciousness of finitude, though perhaps an objective thought, cannot qualify as genuine thinking and therefore is subject to the dialectical process. Since finite truth is really only in and for itself, it cannot access the universal inherent in thinking and which thinking brings forth. Thus true thinking of the universal lends one to a *comprehension* of Spirit, not just mere *understanding* as one would garner through thought-determinations of the finite. True thinking participates with the universal and "as the product of this activity, contains the value of the *matter*, what is *essential, inner, true*."[40] Thinking is in its truest form when it leads to philosophical comprehension by its ability to capture the essential *matter* and usher in the universal. As one interpreter of Hegel put it, "Philosophy, then, is nothing more than the reconstruction and *rational* articulation of the universe of experience by the philosophical sciences."[41]

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[39] Ibid., 172.

[40] Ibid., 141.

[41] Frederick Weiss, ed. *Hegel: The Essential Writings* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1974), 88.

As our thinking progresses through the inevitability of the dialectical process, what is it progressing *from*? And what results from our comprehension of *Spirit*? For Hegel the answer is quite clear: as the dialectic progresses and "finite determinations…[pass] into their opposites," what begins to emerge is the awareness of the immanence of the transcendent.[42] Hegel names this interpenetration of the *rational* with *actual* as the "soul of scientific progression." What Hegel calls science is "truth as pure self-consciousness."[43] It is a science of philosophy, or *Logic.* But once this "progress" is named and the finitude of thinking is overcome, the question that still lingers is one of a "logical articulation of the whole."[44] If the rational and the actual are bound together into some kind of united revelation of the universal; and one can comprehend and overcome such a unity through thinking; and furthermore this kind of comprehension is made possible through a dialectical tension, how does one wrestle with the whole? Said another way, how do we understand philosophy's beginning in light of the ongoing sublation and turning over of the dialectic?

Weiss attempts to answer this question of beginning by sketching the aim of the *Logic*,

> If the totality of the universe were viewed as a vast puzzle of interlocking pieces, Hegel's *Logic* would be its pure form, the essential structure and method governing the articulation of the pieces qua organic parts and in such a way that they constitute that universe not as a puzzle, but as a whole.[45]

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[42] Hegel, "The Science of Logic," 170.

[43] Ibid., 175.

[44] Weiss, *Hegel*, 88.

[45] Ibid., 87.

Hegel's opening shot at constituting a universe as a whole is to start with the concept of pure unadulterated *being*, or immediacy. Whereas Kant argued knowing this pure being was impossible (and thus the need for *a priori* and *synthetic* categories), Hegel counters by saying one starts with *being*…and nothing else. The starting point must be unmediated being which "…*may not presuppose anything*…nor have a ground; rather it is to be itself the ground of the entire science."[46] At this point it is not potentiality or determinateness. Being simply *is*. We start with its is-ness.

Earlier in the *Encyclopedia*, Hegel indicates that negation will always be lurking in the shadows of being. A few pages later he will make precisely this case:

> The beginning is not pure nothing, but a nothing from which something is to proceed; therefore being, too, is already contained in the beginning. The beginning, therefore, contains both, being and nothing, is the unity of being and nothing, or is non-being which is at the same time being, and being which is at the same time non-being.[47]

Just as the negation of the *pure Idea* is contained within the *Idea* itself, so too is being's negation (nothingness) found within it. Being takes on the character of an already/not yet tension, of an impregnated thing filled with potential and pointing to its unrealized fulfillment through it is nothingness, but has yet to commence its development. To begin with anything other than unfulfilled being – to begin with, say, something more concretized or realized – is to defy the very notion of beginnings. The beginning, says Hegel, cannot be "already a first *and* an other," which is to say, it cannot begin with

[46] Hegel, "The Science of Logic," 179.

[47] Ibid., 182.

something that is already been mediated or progressed. Pure being (which is to say also, pure *nothing*) is the content of a pure beginning to philosophy.

Part of the challenge of reading Hegel is reconciling these two apparently contradictory claims. How is being both inherently pure yet patiently awaiting its own negation from nothingness? How is it both the Here; the Now; the Immediate; and simultaneously an impregnated potentiality? Perhaps simply naming it an already/not yet tension (as above) is as close of an explanation as one will get. Nevertheless, out of this tension one begins the task of philosophy because, "To enter into philosophy…calls for no other preparations, no further reflections or points of connection."[48] To truly begin the scientific work of philosophy one begins at this abstract point where pure being is simply that and nothing more. Being and non-being are united in their "undifferentiated unity" as a starting point, a point which is the purest form of the absolute. This paradoxical starting point thus initiates Hegel's earlier hope (via Weiss) of producing a unified system through the wedding "method with the content, the form with the principle."[49]

Of course, to consider Hegel in this conversation one needs to likely put him in the "anti-difference" camp. Which is not to say that he is necessarily "against" difference or somehow in denial of difference as such; rather difference is not an issue to explore but instead one to resolve. Ironically enough, the work of Hegel begins in difference, as Spirit struggles to gain consciousness of itself. This process begins in the *Phenomenology* as consciousness attempts to see itself and express itself universally. For example, we can

[48] Ibid., 181.

[49] Ibid., 177.

make statements about what we see right now at this moment, but they are radically temporal and perspectival; for Hegel consciousness must be something universalizable. So in this struggle to universalize itself, consciousness breaks down and the negative is introduced. Said differently, in order to be something, there must be something to contrast to it, just in the same way there is a negative in my own being in order for me to be. And it is in this tension that self-consciousness attempts to work itself out. But consciousness does not recognize itself at first; when it finally does, however, it understands all difference is held together by a particular thing or essence that is itself. This radical difference of the other is what mediates the possibility of conceiving of myself. And in this sense, everything is relational. Consciousness does not have a sense of itself unless it first encounters itself as other.

The Kierkegaardian Critique

As Kierkegaard watches Hegelianism creep over the intellectual and religious communities of Copenhagen, he opens *Repetition* by signaling his own immobilization. However, this was not because his pseudonym, Constantin, was necessarily confused by the idea of repetition. Rather, he is pointing out the Hegelian notion of movement in the dialectic is nothing more than the illusion of movement. Said differently, the dialectic is not really the movement Hegel describes, but a fundamental impotence, an appearance of movement.

Let us begin where we started, however, with Hegel's assertion that "What is rational, is actual, and what is actual, is rational," as this statement lays something of the foundation for understanding the dialectic. This proposition is, among other things,

Hegel's commentary on the relationship between the universal and the particular. In this case, the *rational* (i.e., the universal) takes the form of God or Spirit, while the particular assumes the role of the *actual*. And as Hegel later writes in the *Science,* "God can only be called spirit inasmuch as he is known inwardly *mediating himself with himself*. Only in this way is he *concrete*, living and spirit; and that is just why the *knowing* of God as spirit contains mediation within it."[50] So in other words, the *rational* (Spirit) is worked out as it relates to itself, and as it relates to itself the *actual* (the real) proceeds forth. For Hegel this result is what he calls *philosophy*, a philosophy which is grounded in the fundamental particularity of our lives. This continual inward mediation of God's self with God's self is what ultimately gives birth to consciousness, or *actuality*. He writes,

> It is equally important, on the other hand, that philosophy should be quite clear about the fact that its content is nothing other than the basic import that is originally produced and produces itself in the domain of the living spirit, the content that is made into the *world*, the outer and inner world of consciousness; in other words, the content of philosophy is *actuality*.[51]

By equating philosophy with the *actual* Hegel is advocating for a method of thinking that, contra to Kant, explains the very development of consciousness; one which dispenses the latter's representative categories of thought and instead articulates a way of thinking that is radically concrete and deeply invested in the here and now. Whereas Kant insisted our thinking could never access the thing-in-itself, Hegel suggests our thinking transcends those boundaries and links up with thing-in-itself, indeed that which is objective, making part of our thinking part of the essence of the rational (or universal).

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[50] Ibid., 167.

[51] Ibid., 135-136.

Later in the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel elaborates his explanation of this *rational/actual* relationship by highlighting the transcendence of the Idea (the *rational*). He has little time for a Platonic/Kantian dualism that privileges abstract ideas untethered from a concrete realism; rather Hegel is seeking to unify the rational and the actual by advocating for their interconnectivity. He writes, "For what matters is to recognize in the semblance of the temporal and transient the substance which is immanent and the eternal which is present."[52] Therefore the *actual* is indeed the *rational*, and the *rational* is understood as the *actual*. By writing about the concepts in this way, Hegel (through his playful proposition) emphasizes that to know something of one's own world is to also know something of *Spirit*. Thus, as Hegel drags the Idea into the realm of the actual, the Idea can only have meaning for *philosophy* when it is incarnated into external existence.

As we said, the issue for Kierkegaard is that Hegel offers only the illusion of movement. Through the system Hegel attempts to construct a philosophy wherein the negative acts as a catalyst for the dialectic; the concepts "reciprocally develop and unfold themselves."[53] And as a result, Hegel (and Hegelianism) articulates a doctrine of mediation in which conceptual oppositions unite. Where Kierkegaard sees one of the primary issues with Hegel (and his "movement") is precisely within mediation. As he writes in one of his journals, "Hegel has never done justice to the category of transition. It

[52] Ibid., 325.

[53] Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming,* 40.

would be significant to compare it with the Aristotelian teaching about *kinesis*."[54] Deleuze highlights the issue with mediation as it being simply an abstract logical movement. Writing of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, he says,

> They want to put metaphysics in motion, in action. They want to make it act, and make it carry out immediate acts. It is not enough, therefore, for them to propose a new representation of movement; representation is already mediation. Rather, it is a question of producing within the work a movement capable of affecting the mind outside of all representation; it is a question of making movement itself a work, without interposition; of substituting direct signs for mediate representations; of inventing vibrations, rotations, whirlings, gravitations, dances or leaps which directly touch the mind.[55]

Mediation lacks this vibrancy of becoming. Though Hegel considers the motion in his dialectic a metaphysical principle, he attempts to ultimately tie motion back into Being, and once again suffers from the same issue as the rest of philosophy. As Derrida will go on to say, "Hegelian mediation wants to arrest the play even as it appears to affirm it."[56] Hegel's philosophy is an attempt to tame the ambitiousness of Christian temporality and mediate any *aporia*—logic and existence, time and becoming—into a grander philosophy. So if there is an overarching theme to *Repetition*, repetition, and indeed the works of Kierkegaard as a whole, it is to embrace a philosophy based on an authentic *becoming* that rejects the traditional view of a metaphysics grounded in permanence and stability.

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[54] Soren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers* (seven volumes). Trans. Hong and Hong. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967–1978), 260.

[55] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 8.

[56] Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 18.

Repetition is a Movement

So with all of this preamble, what precisely *is* repetition? And how are we understand anything from such opaque references in a text which is designed to be similarly opaque? The answer, I think, is threefold. Repetition is at once a *movement*; a *recalling* (or returning); and a commentary on metaphysics.

From the perspective of movement, repetition is a conceptual framework—a way of thinking—that draws from Aristotelian kinesis to emphasize the "happiness" of a metaphysics based in "true movement" and motion that leads one toward freedom. Repetition wades into the centuries-long debate about motion and stasis, and critiques any Hegelian (and "Hegelian") attempts to mediate any motion (or an illusion of it) into a larger system of Being. As Kierkegaard writes, "Modern philosophy makes no movement; as a rule it makes only a commotion, and if it makes any movement at all, it is always within immanence, whereas repetition is and remains a transcendence."[57] Hegelian immanence is precisely this dialectical movement whereby a concept is confronted by its opposite, and taken up into a new concept (that bears marks of the two from whence it came). But Kierkegaard sees this as only a movement in immanence, and one that is wholly an abstract category limited to thought; what repetition tries to solve for is motion that takes into account *transcendence.*

[57] Kierkegaard, *Repetition,* trans Edward Hong and Edna H. Hong*,* 186.

The internal movement of Kierkegaard is an important demarcation point from Hegel and the German idealists.[58] Where Hegelian mediation is concerned with the dialectical becoming of Being, Kierkegaard internalizes this dialectic and grounds it in transcendence. Writing in *The Concept of Anxiety*, his pseudonym argues, "The history of the individual life proceeds in a movement from state to state. Every state is posited by a leap…Nevertheless, every such repetition is not a simple consequence but a new leap."[59] As Jon Stewart notes, any true movement must include the movement of transcendence, which is also a movement that relates to one's freedom.[60] Repetition is "the task of freedom,"[61] the dizzying confrontation that at once provokes our anxiety, and yet also turns that which is merely *possible* into something *actual*. By situating repetition within freedom,

> the development becomes different from the logical development in that the *transition becomes.* In logic, transition is movement's silence, whereas in the sphere of freedom it becomes. Thus, in logic, when possibility, by means of the immanence of thought, has determined itself as actuality, one only disturbs the silent self-inclosure of the logical process by talking about movement and transition. In the sphere of freedom, however, possibility remains and actuality emerges as a transcendence.[62]

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[58] Carlisle channels Deleuze and Heidegger by calling Kierkegaard's repetition a "plane of motion" formed by temporality and subjectivity. In this way, she does not necessarily agree or disagree with Kierkegaard's assessment of Hegelian mediation, but instead as a framework for thinking through where motion is placed within the scope of inquiry. It is not that Hegelian mediation or Aristotelian *kinesis* are any lesser forms of motion, just that they exist on different planes to solve different problems.

[59] Soren Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety,* trans Reader Thomte (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 113.

[60] Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 294.

[61] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 292.

[62] Ibid., 310.

As Kierkegaard draws from Aristotelian *kinesis,* he rejects the Hegelian notion that motion is little more than an idea. Rather, it is a generative movement concerned with freedom and the self's task of actualizing that which is possible.

Repetition is precisely this notion of bringing an idea from possibility to actuality. Furthermore, *divine* repetition is the willing act of bringing into existence what first exists as idea. Kierkegaard writes,

> If God himself had not willed repetition, the world would not have come into existence. Either he would have followed the superficial plans of hope or he would have retracted everything and preserved it in recollection. This he did not do. Therefore, the world continues, and it continues because it is a repetition. Repetition—that is actuality and the earnestness of existence.[63]

What has and what will come into existence *are not merely* static possibilities for God's creativity, nor are they simply an *eidos* on which God can contemplate. Repetition wills these possibilities into existence through a dynamic repetition of these ideas. Without this, the world would never have come into being, nor would the world, having come into existence, continue to exist.

If God had not willed repetition, then he would have recollected about what could have come into existence, but did not, or God would merely ideate about how it could have gone had the world come into existence. Regardless, the world's existence would have remained an object of God's ideating activity. In other words, the world could have simply remained a possibility that has not undergone the actualization of the change of coming into existence. Moreover, if the existence of the world is merely an object of God's intellect, then it remains *immanent to* God's own self-consciousness.

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[63] Ibid., 133

So repetition stands over and against the more impotent motion of Hegelian mediation and is Kierkegaard's attempt to develop a philosophy of motion that embraces our freedom wills that which is merely an idea into existence. But repetition and *Repetition* is more than just a polemic against German idealism. As we said earlier, there is real debate about whether Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms represent a philosophy that breaks from Hegel, or if via the internalization of the dialectic, he offers a brilliant and satirical fulfillment of the system.[64] Either way, *Repetition* offers a vibrant embrace of motion as a core philosophical principle, and again, is the key by which we can understand some of Kierkegaard's most influential texts (a point we will see fleshed out more carefully in chapters three and four). So if repetition represents an actualization of movement within the sphere of freedom and transcendence—Kierkegaard's own *plane of motion*, to borrow Carlisle's phrase—then what precisely is in motion? What are those "things" that are *moving*?

Repetition is a *Return*

To revisit one of Kierkegaard's quotes from earlier in this chapter, he writes, "'Mediation 'is a foreign word. 'Repetition 'is a good Danish word, and I congratulate the Danish language for its contribution to philosophical terminology."[65] In Danish, the word he uses is g*jentagelsen*, which is literally translated, "the taking back." Repetition is not recalling something from the past or "repeating" that which has already happened—

[64] To punctuate this idea, Jon Stewart writes of the concept of repetition, "Thus, Kierkegaard uses one aspect of Hegel's philosophy, develops it, and then uses it to criticize another aspect of that same philosophy." See Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, 283.

[65] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 18.

that is the territory of recollection, memory, and *stasis*. Rather, repetition is the welcoming of the new, if it should arrive. It is the remaining open to the "return"; it allows one to be open to the reception of future meaning and possibility, and open to being given what one lost all over again via this "taking back." Moreover, repetition is this framework—this *way of thinking*—in which we are returned that which we lost, but different. Repetition is the "back and forth" of Diogenes, the "taking back" of that which one already has.

That *Repetition* and *Fear and Trembling* appeared in publication on the same day serves to underscore this broader point. By virtue of God's command to Abraham, the latter is forced to give up the very gift God provided he and Sarah, only to have the gift that was ostensibly taken, returned. And yet that *return* of Isaac is the "taking back" of the very child Abraham already had. In that taking and that return, something new is given. In this case, it is a very different relationship with God[66] but also a reward for Abraham's faithfulness. Abraham receives the thing that belonged to him all along—in this case, a gift—but this gift was delivered again, only differently. The return is the same, but Abraham welcomes the newness of the return.

The story of Abraham is similar to that of Job, a character the letters between Constantine and the Young Man reference frequently throughout *Repetition.* The invocations of Job are notable, though, because Job is not only returned that which he

[66] As if to emphasize the trauma of this story, and Kierkegaard's notion in *Fear and Trembling* that it ought to provoke sleepless nights, there is every indication in the book of Genesis that Abraham and God never speak again. Abraham was stridently obedient to God throughout his life, and God follows through on his promises to Abraham. But after God's command to sacrifice Isaac, the text shifts its emphasis to Abraham's servants and then, finally, the death of Abraham. In short, it is a disturbingly quiet denouement to Abraham's story.

lost, but it is returned double, "Job is blessed and has received everything *double.* This is called a *repetition*."[67] In both the Abraham and Job narratives, each are stripped (or asked to give up) that which is dearest to them. They are also returned that which has been taken, *repeated*, but only after each individual has walked through their very despair, and what was lost was found or returned. Moreover, the restoration is only possible when it is unexpected, "Job does not demand or work to get his world restored...Abraham does not demand or set out to get Isaac back...Both are beneficiaries of repetition, but neither makes the attainment of repetition his explicit project."[68] Only because each continues to trust and praise God that each "gets back" what each gives up. Further, this "return" happens only when one understands it will *never* be returned and one must cease any attempt get it back in any meaningful way. Its return is from a source outside of oneself, outside of the world. As Caputo writes, "The taking away and giving again, which defines repetition, is modeled after Job's famous declaration."[69] If eternity is true repetition, it is because eternity itself repeats itself. There is nothing "new" in the eternal.

To assert this idea of repetition as a "returning" even further, Heidegger's use of repetition in *Being and Time* is instructive for us. He picks up Kierkegaard's idea and uses the German term for repetition, *Wiederholung,* which means to *bring* or *haul* (*holen*) back again (*wieder*). Heidegger argues that what gets hauled or fetched back is what all

[67] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 212.

[68] Edward Mooney, "*Repetition:* Getting the World Back," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 283.

[69] Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 23.

along "has been" at and as the beginning (*Anfang*).[70] This hauling back again is a hauling or fetching (of what has all along been there at the beginning) futurally: it gets hauled or fetched not from the "past" but from the "future." So in Heidegger's view, repetition is this drawing back from the future what has already been, and which one can encounter anew all over again. This is a theme that Deleuze also picks up in *Difference and Repetition,* as that which returns is materially different than our previous encounter, "The subject of the eternal return is not the same but the different, not the similar but the dissimilar, not the one but the many, not necessity but chance. Moreover, repetition in the eternal return implies the destruction of all forms which hinder its operation, all the categories of representation incarnated in the primacy of the Same, the One, the Identical and the Like."[71] So not only is repetition the return of difference and the dissimilar, but it is forward-looking, outside the scope of time, and bound to eternity, something Kierkegaard affirms in the *Concept of Anxiety*, "…the moment is not properly an atom of time but an atom of eternity. It is the first reflection of eternity in time, its first attempt, as it were, at stopping time…Greek culture…did not define [the moment] with a forward direction but with a backward direction."[72]

Repetition is precisely that movement forward, which also calls the past backward. And that which returns is not the same but different. For example, if repetition

[70] Frank Seeburger, "Heidegger," The Late Heidegger (class lecture, University of Denver, Denver, CO, May 5th, 2013).

[71] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 126.

[72] Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety,* 88.

a meaningful movement, then Kierkegaard's trip to Berlin (for example) should allow him to repeat the very experiences he once had. As he writes,

> After several days 'repetition of [my routine], I became bitter, so tired of repetition that I decided to return home. I made no great discovery, yet it was strange because I had discovered that there was no such thing as repetition. I became aware of this by having it repeated in every possible way.[73]

Repetition is paradoxically that which delivers new meaning; in one sense, what was lost is now returned, though that which is returned—and the one to whom it is returned—are wholly different. Furthermore, this movement opens the subject to freedom and possibility, which stands in opposition to the Greek idea of recollection. Whereas the latter offers a kind of "closed" system of gaining knowledge through recalling, repetition allows one to be open to the reception of future meaning and possibility, open to being given what one has lost…all over again. But differently. Edward Mooney writes,

> Approached from the side of a self becoming itself, a task for freedom is a task for self. A self's task is increasing its freedom, increasing its openness toward the possibility of repetition. Being closed off from the world of existential possibilities is to be cast into aesthetic indifference and despair...Repetition signifies freedom's possibilities bequeathed to otherwise despairing individuals. A non-despairing self depends on the resources of repetition to sustain its freedom; and the freedom of a self is expressed in terms of its receptivity to the bestowal of such resources.[74]

It is worth noting that where Mooney sees the self's task of "increasing freedom," repetition is rather the goal of *preserving* freedom—keeping oneself free and open. This freedom requires a continual decision to choose faith, to choose the very becoming of one's self.

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[73] Kierkegaard, *Repetition,* 171.

[74] Mooney "*Repetition:* Getting the World Back," 295.

Repetition is a Challenge to Metaphysics

The final issue at issue within *Repetition* is its relationship to metaphysics. Kierkegaard writes,

> Recollection is the ethical view of life, repetition the modern; repetition is the *interest* of metaphysics, and also the interest upon which metaphysics comes to grief; repetition is the watchword in every ethical view; repetition is the indispensable condition for every issue of dogmatics.[75]

In one sense, the very privileging of motion over *stasis* puts metaphysics at issue in *Repetition.* He sides with becoming over Being, and of existence over the pure though of German idealism. But in another sense—and in Caputo's view—Kierkegaard is one of first thinkers to attempt to "overcome metaphysics," because as traditionally conceived, metaphysics cannot account for "movement, becoming, temporality, genuine novelty, and the attempt to do so results in ludicrous logicizations."[76] In one of his footnotes in the *Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard affirms this interpretation when he says,

> In the realm of the spirit, the task is not to wrest a change from repetition or to find oneself moderately comfortable during the repetition, as if spirit stood only in an external relation to the repetition of spirit (according to which good and evil would alternate like summer and winter), but to transform repetition into something inward, into freedom's own task, into its highest interest, so that while everything else changes, it can actually realize repetition.[77]

The metaphysic of repetition is not an idea, but it is freedom's *becoming.* Repetition is the opportunity for an individual to "forge his personality out of the chaos of events."[78]

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[75] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 115.

[76] Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics,* 18.

[77] Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 18.

[78] Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 21.

And as such, repetition undermines the traditional "substance" of metaphysics. Instead, Kierkegaardian repetition relies on self continually renewing its relationship with itself, rooted in possibility and freedom. The Kierkegaardian metaphysic is defined by its ethics, not its substance or an idea.

We began this chapter by noting the concept of repetition was a signifier pointing to several different signs. *Repetition* begins with the question of whether repetition is possible, and ends with Constantine realizing he cannot will repetition upon his return trip to Berlin. The entire text and test, it would seem, ends in a farce. There are repetitions in the text, repetitions in the pseudonym he uses, and repetitions in Kierkegaard's literary choices. But the reality is that repetition cannot be defined, explained, theorized, philosophized, or otherwise easily described. Repetition is meant to be lived, embodied, and, according to Caputo, *deferred*. In other words, repetition is the movement of possibility and freedom, one that is open, through faith and fidelity, to the return of that which one lost.

Insofar as we can glean something from such an opaque text, repetition offers a rejoinder to classical and "modern" metaphysics. Kierkegaard leans on these traditions, but pushes them further (and inward) by *internalizing* the Hegelian dialectic to articulate his concept of selfhood. In the next chapter, we will explore the contours of this *internalization* of repetition to help us explore just how Kierkegaard thinks about the self. While the self is a self in relation—and a relation that relates itself to itself—we will see why repetition is the key to understanding the self's movement toward itself and toward freedom.

Chapter Three: The Repetitive Self-in-Relation

Most scholars agree that *Repetition* is one of Kierkegaard's most difficult works to read, and perhaps one of the most difficult from which one can draw clear meanings.[1] Indeed, his style throughout his texts rely on the power of *indirect* communication, something he achieves with pseudonymous authorship, wry literary flourishes, and lengthy narratives that attempt to *embody* the very concepts about which he speaks. In fact, while Kierkegaard says very little about *Repetition* and repetition specifically, the texts he wrote around and throughout 1843—specifically, *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling*—are very much under their influence. The concept of repetition functions as the hermeneutical key by which we can understand some of these writings specifically—and Kierkegaardian selfhood more broadly—but these writings also help us understand repetition as a concept. In this way, the writings mutually inform and illuminate each other, revealing what Kierkegaard conceals in his writings.

The previous chapter reviewed the various philosophical and linguistic forces at play behind the term itself, and while it is not a term Kierkegaard develops in a vacuum,

[1] In some of Kierkegaard's miscellaneous papers and writings, he admits that he wrote *Repetition* "so that the heretics would be unable to understand it." And in his response to Professor Melberg, Constantius writes, "But the significance of repetition manifests itself in a more profound sense on this occasion in that what I expressed more obscurely was made lucid by your correction, Professor, because what I had said, already beautiful and appropriate in a way, truly became very beautiful and appropriate through the correction it received in your elaboration." See Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 282-84.

there is a novelty to it. Repetition (and *Repetition*) is an attempt to reclaim motion as a vital category within metaphysics—even as his project attempts to "overcome" metaphysics. Kierkegaard makes the additional move, however, of situating this "plane of motion" internally.[2] Where Hegelian mediation is the result of a dialectical process of ideas continually sublating themselves and being taken up into something higher, Kierkegaard wants to bring motion and the dialectical process of *becoming* to bear on selfhood and the task of religious commitments.

The preface to *Either/Or*, a text published just a few months prior to *Repetition* and *Fear and Trembling*, is one of his first writings to suggest the internal, subjective, and existential nature of motion, and one of the first to really begin to play with repetition. It was one of the first texts Kierkegaard published after his dissertation, and he demonstrated a remarkable clarity around the text's purpose (it came together in just 11 months).[3] The two-volume text is as intricate as it is demanding, and like many of Kierkegaard's other writings, it features several themes layered on top of one another. But the one thing this writing does is, in the very title itself, intimate the contradictions that lie at the heart of Hegelian philosophy, and in specifically a debate about Hegel raging within Denmark. Writing under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, he says,

> *Either/Or*, the title of which is in itself indicative, has the existence-relation between the aesthetic and the ethical materialize into existence in the existing

[2] Carlisle's move of situating motion on different planes is a helpful framework for thinking through the various intensities of motion. Which is to say, it is not that Hegel's concept of motion is necessarily impotent or artificial (which is Kierkegaard's view), but that it is trying to accomplish something different.

[3] Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, 182.

> individuality. This to me is the book's indirect polemic against speculative thought which is indifferent to existence.[4]

As his style, Kierkegaard's cheeky title *Either/Or* alludes to not just the ongoing to debates in Denmark, but also that Kierkegaard—like *Repetition*—has a clear opinion on which side of the debate he lands.

For many at the time, Hegelian mediation played a significant role in philosophical and theological thought. Earlier we saw Kierkegaard pit repetition against mediation, which only offers the illusion of movement. Conversely, Aristotelian *kinesis* represents the "actualization of the possible."[5] The debate at issue, though, was how one treats the issue of opposites. Hegel's critique of Aristotelian contradiction is that two opposites are merely differentiated by their "abstract negativity, expressing a self-relation rather than a relation to a determinate other."[6] Hegel, on the other hand, argued that speculative philosophy was a dialectical relationship between things, one in which the parts reveal something of the whole, while the whole helps us understanding the particularity within a given system. Hegel frequently referred to the shortcomings of Aristotelian logic in the shorthand—calling it "either/or." For instance,

> But in the narrower sense dogmatism consists in adhering to one-sided determinations of the understanding whilst excluding their opposites. This is just the strict 'either/or,' according to which (for instance) the world is *either* finite *or* infinite, but *not both*.[7]

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[4] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 252.

[5] Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments,* trans Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 252.

[6] Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming*, 30.

[7] Hegel, "Encyclopedia of Logic," 32.

Hegel's project was meant to "transcend" the opposites and "transcend" the either/or of Aristotelian logic; speculative philosophy's goal was to highlight that two opposing things are always related to each other through a unifying concept.

This concept—which Hegel called *aufhebung*—is a term he plays with in the *Encyclopedia.* Stewart notes that *aufhebung* has "two or three contradictory meanings" which prevent us from offering a clear English translation. But Hegel notes, "…we understand it to mean 'clear away' or 'cancel'…but the world also means 'to preserve,' and we say in this sense that something is well taken care of."[8] The idea here is that, in the dialectic, a thing simply "cancels" its opposite. But rather, contradictions are negated *and also* preserved, then reformulated ("mediated") into another concept a higher level. As a result, "more sophisticated concepts contain within themselves seemingly contradictory elements that have been mediated or rendered consistent."[9] In short, the speculative philosophy of Hegel and "Hegelians" at the time was not an "either/or" philosophy, but a "both/and" philosophy. The dialectic, as it proceeds, produces a higher and higher form of consciousness, leading to the idea that truth and being emerge precisely from this "movement." So where does Kierkegaard's "polemic against speculative thought" arise? How does *Either/Or* embody this critique?

The Inwardness of the Dialectic

Either/Or (Part One) is ostensibly an exchange of letters between a young aesthete and the more ethical Judge William. The preface, written by the pseudonymous

[8] Ibid.

[9] Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, 188.

editor Victor Erimata,[10] begins, "It may at times have occurred to you, dear reader, to doubt somewhat the accuracy of that familiar philosophical thesis that the outer is the inner and the inner is the outer."[11] In these opening lines, the author introduces the idea of a "hidden inwardness," and invokes a contradiction immediately by positioning inwardness opposed to outwardness, something Carlisle observes as an attempt to "protect and to preserve the interiority of Kierkegaard's plane of motion, and its subjective freedom, from the rationalizing necessity of mediation."[12] Indeed, the move in *Either/Or* is to sketch While Kierkegaard ostensibly sets Hegel as a foil for his philosophy—for example, dismissing the motion inherent in speculative philosophy as mere mirage—*Either/Or* demonstrates just how much Kierkegaard is indebted to the Hegelian dialectic.[13]

The argument in the first part of *Either/Or* plays out as a literary exchange between a young aesthete and the ethical Judge William, what Vincent McCarthy wryly calls a "literary detective story."[14] Not only is this our introduction to a dialectical

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[10] The choice of an "editor" here is notable. Kierkegaard explains, "The preface itself says something about it, but not didactically, for in that case I could know something with certainty, but in the jovial form of jest and hypothesis. The absence of an author is a means of distancing." Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* 252.

[11] Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, trans Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 3.

[12] Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming*, 50.

[13] McCarthy echoes this point when he writes, *Either/Or* is "haunted by its categories even as it tries to turn Hegel's universal character inside out and examine a 'concrete' individual spirit instead of the spirit of the times." See Vincent McCarthy, "Narcissism and Desire in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or, Part One,*" *International Kierkegaard Commentary*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995), 53.

[14] McCarthy, *"*Narcissism and Desire," 53.

inwardness, but it is also our introduction to the category of the aesthete. In one of the more oft-cited passages from this text, A reflects on the meaning of either/or,

> Marry, and you will regret it. Do not marry, and you will also regret it. Marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way. Whether you marry or you do not marry, you will regret it either way. Laugh at the stupidities of the world, and you will regret it; weep over them, and you will also regret it. Laugh at the stupidities of the world or weep over them, you will regret it either way…this, gentlemen, is the quintessence of all the wisdom of life…Many believe they, too, are this when after doing one thing or another they unite or mediate these opposites. But this is a misunderstanding, for the true eternity does not lie behind either, but before it.[15]

There are a few things happening in this excerpt. In one sense, this is the law of non-contradiction turned existential. The aesthete refuses to engage with the contradictory dichotomies of life because nothing matters—you will regret either choice. And as a result, there is a latent nihilism in the refusal to choose. Hegelians also refuse this choice, but only because each contradiction is mediated. By comparing the two, Kierkegaard has signaled that Hegelian mediation is akin to the emptiness that lies at the core of the aesthetic way of life.[16]

This emptiness of the aesthete is precisely because they avoid repetition, as well as the negativity inherent within the System. By refusing to commit to a point of view—marry or do not marry—the aesthete avoids the consequence of Being's destabilization by the negativity of the dialectic. If every contradiction is mediated into a higher and

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[15] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 38-39.

[16] This is a view that Deleuze will co-sign in *Difference and Repetition*, "Furthermore, if repetition concerns the most interior element of the will, this is because everything *changes* around the will, in accordance with the law of nature. According to the law of nature, repetition is impossible. For this reason, Kierkegaard condemns as aesthetic repetition every attempt to obtain repetition from the laws of nature by identifying with the legislative principle, whether in the Epicurean or the Stoic manner." See Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 6.

higher consciousness, the aesthete gets to avoid mediating anything because he never engages the contradiction to begin with. He exists in a sphere "before" the dialectic.

The aesthete's habit of avoidance is the result of a lust for immediacy—for the sake of immediacy—and to avoid the hard work of reflection. In "Diapsalmata" A writes, "One should be an enigma not just to others, but to oneself too. I study myself. When I am tired of that I light a cigar to pass the time and think: God only knows what the good Lord really meant with me, or what He meant to make of me."[17] Repetition is a threat because it affirms existence and makes a move beyond immediacy. The aesthete, on the other hand, is spiritually impotent because in his drive for immediacy, he cannot will himself to be anything more than one who lives life as a series of moments. In "The Immediate Erotic Stages," A says,

> Don Juan, however, is a downright seducer. His love is sensuous, not psychical, and, according to its concept, sensuous love is not faithful but totally faithless; it loves not one but all—that is, it seduces all. It is indeed only in the moment, but considered in its concept, that moment is the sum of moments, and so we have the seducer. Chivalric love is also psychical and therefore, according to its concept, essentially faithful; only the sensuous, according to its concept, is essentially faithless. But its faithlessness manifests itself in another way also: it continually becomes only a repetition.[18]

For the aesthete, these are calculated moments, too. In "Crop Rotation" A describes "boredom" as the "root of all evil."[19] Indeed for an aesthete, it is a grave threat that one

[17] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 47.

[18] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 94.

[19] Ibid., 285.

must keep at bay at all costs because it has the potential to "initiate motion."[20] It "rests upon nothingness" and the more one tries to avoid it, the more one is drawn into it.[21]

The aesthete's challenge, says A, is to play the field—as Don Juan did—hopping from girl to girl and avoiding the trappings of commitment—and therefore the trappings of either/or. In this view, Don Juan is caught in a compulsive repetition in which he denies his past (the "forgetting"), and which are "produced precisely by his unconscious flight from the repetition of these moments in consciousness (recollection) or in actuality (ethical repetition)."[22] Alternatively, as A suggests in "Diary of a Seducer," one can enter a long-term seduction of one girl, which requires courtship of one woman without lapsing into marriage (which would be regrettable) or separation or divorce (which would also be regrettable). This requires one to alternate between "forgetting" and "remembering", which A calls an "art" and which "will then also prevent one's sticking fast in some particular circumstance in life and ensure perfect suspension."[23] This "perfect" suspense prevents one from being thrust into contradiction, and thus into the machinations of the dialectic. But as A also points out, these are not the actions of a pleasure-addict simply looking for the next high, and who wants pleasure simply for pleasure's sake. The motivation is to prevent being captured by the negative—the "abyss" of boredom—and the aesthete is calculated in this prevention, "The whole secret lies in arbitrariness.

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[20] Ibid., 285.

[21] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 232.

[22] Eriksen, *Kierkegaard's Categories of Repetition*, 25.

[23] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 236.

People think it requires no skill to be arbitrary, yet it requires deep study to succeed in being arbitrary without losing oneself in it, to derive satisfaction from it."[24]

"Crop Rotation" is probably the most self-contained explanation of the aesthetic life, and it amounts to A's methodology for ensuring he never has to face boredom or boredom's abyss. Remembering and forgetting, says, A, is the key, and through it, the aesthete displays a remarkable ability live *ascetically,* "The more you limit yourself, the more resourceful you become."[25] But whether it is Don Juan or the seducer, the aesthete simply cannot engage repetition. The idea of repetition—and freedom *through* repetition—is simply a distraction rather than a means of escape.

The limits of the aesthete's view of life are apparent near the conclusion of "The Seducer's Diary" an essay that details a lengthy affair between Cordelia and Johannes. The latter hatches a plan to win Cordelia's heart, and through a series of events, proposes to Cordelia, only to slowly convince her that engagement and marriage constrict an inhibit the freedom of their love. She eventually relents and their engagement ends, but only after Johannes is made to be the victim and the relationship is consummated. Writing in his "Diary" Johannes says,

> Has the interesting always been preserved? Yes, in this secret conversation I dare say it freely and openly. The engagement was interesting precisely in not offering what is ordinarily understood by the interesting. It preserved the interesting through the outward appearance contradiction get dinner life. Had I been secretly bound to her, it would only have been interesting to the first power. This, however, is interesting to the second power, and for that reason interesting for the

[24] Ibid., 239.

[25] Ibid., 233.

> first time for her. The betrothal bursts, but by virtue of the fact that she herself cancels it in order to raise herself to a higher sphere.[26]

While at his core an aesthete ("Has the interesting always been preserved?") Johannes nonetheless functions as a more thoughtful and reflective aesthete. Still, as Caputo points out, from an ethical point of view, the actions of the Seducer are cruel and diabolical. He can retain his aesthetic life because he did not have to make the commitment to reject her—at least, externally but his life lacks *gravitas* and (most importantly) actuality. For one to finally, actually, really make a move of commitment, they would need to embrace repetition, the possibility of repetition, and the freedom of the self offered via repetition. As Judge William writes in the second half of *Either/Or*, the postures of indifference and impotence, and a preoccupation with the past must be replaced by responsibility, decisiveness, freedom, purpose, and an interest in the future.[27]

The Ethical Move

Either/Or begins by inserting itself into a debate around Hegelian mediation in 19th century Denmark, squarely putting itself on the side of Aristotelian *kinesis* and the movement of becoming. On the one hand, the aesthete is Hegelian mediation personified, and in the character of B, or Judge William, who appears in the second part of *Either/Or*, we find one who lives in the ethical sphere of life, forcing our aesthete to make a choice and confront the freedom and truth of repetition. And yet on the other hand, Judge

[26] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Penguin, 369.

[27] Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming,* 58.

William represents something of Hegelian antithesis; he is the contradiction to the aesthete, the one who embraces the possibility and freedom. As William writes,

> The aesthetic, it was said, is that in a person whereby he immediately is the person he is; the ethical is that whereby a person becomes what he becomes. This by no means says that the person who lives aesthetically does not develop, but he develops with necessity, not in freedom; no metamorphosis takes place in him, no infinite internal movement by which he comes to the point from which he becomes the person he becomes.[28]

The aesthete's life lacks the potency to *become*, to will itself toward freedom.

The other issue, however, is that the aesthete is miserable. *Either/Or* begins with a dichotomy between inward and outward, and from a psychoanalytic point of view, A is acting from a place of misplaced desire—a lack—that he attempts to act out externally. As McCarthy observes of Johannes,

> For Cordelia is never the libidinal object for Johannes. His conquest of Cordelia is part of the fulfillment of his own ego-ideal as the reflective seducer. The essence of his conquest is that he has managed to become loved and desired without himself loving or desiring Cordelia.[29]

The figures of A and Johannes suffer from deep melancholia[30], and in the case of A, his withdrawal into himself leaves him wildly dissatisfied, "My sorrow is my baronial castle, which lies like an eagle's nest high up on the mountain peak among the clouds. No one can take it by storm."[31] And further, "My depression is the most faithful mistress I have

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[28] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 225.

[29] McCarthy, *International Kierkegaard Commentary*, 69.

[30] The word Kierkegaard uses here is *Tungsind,* which the Hongs have translated as "depression." McCarthy indicates Freud's use of "melancholia" in his writings may be closer in spirit to what Kierkegaard had in mind with this term.

[31] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 21

known—no wonder, then, that I return the love."[32] The depression A and Johannes feel is matched only by their narcissism. Each have attempted to live a life that wards off boredom, keeps passion and commitment at bay, and seeks an incoherent series of moments by which they can live. In short, A's avoidance of commitment—of choice—is an avoidance of the self, and thus, prevents themselves from truly becoming a self. The only way out of this terrible misery is to pursue an ethical way of life, one espoused by A's interlocutor, Judge William.

The prescription for this malaise of paralysis, says William is *choice*:

> There comes a moment in a person's life when immediacy is ripe, so to speak, and when the spirit requires a higher form, when it wants to lay hold of itself as spirit. As immediate spirit, a person is bound up with all the earthly life, and now spirit wants to gather itself together out of this dispersion, so to speak, and to transfigure itself in itself; the personality wants to become conscious in its eternal validity. If this does not happen, if the movement is halted, if it is repressed, then depression sets in.[33]

The lack of movement—the impotence—in the aesthete is what allows the melancholy to creep in. But to live in the ethical sphere is to choose, and by choosing one invokes an inward movement that opens one to possibility and to the future, and to the forward momentum of repetition. The aesthete lives in a denial of the future, and like the Greeks (and Hegelianism), is preoccupied with recollection and the past. Any development—to the degree that they develop—is by necessity, not in freedom.[34] This act of choosing is a deliberate opening of the self to the future and is a deliberate act of *becoming*, where

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[32] Ibid., 28.

[33] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 188-189.

[34] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 525.

consciousness "consolidates" itself through the very act of choosing. Judge William makes this clear when he writes, "The aesthetic, we said, is that in which a person is immediately what he is; the ethical is that whereby a person becomes what he becomes."[35] The becoming here is a "metamorphosis" that features an "infinite internal movement."[36] And when one chooses absolutely, they find the self "is not an abstraction or a tautology…"[37] In other words, this is not consciousness becoming more aware of itself—abstractly—but an awareness unfolding on the inside.

By making a choice, the self can actualize their own becoming. They willfully open themselves to freedom and possibility through repetition, becoming a self that has "chosen themselves infinitely."[38] The movement of repetition as a result of our determination to *choose* is essential for this task of becoming, something Deleuze echoes,

> Make something new of repetition itself: connect it with a test, with a selection or selective test; make it the supreme object of the will and of freedom. Kierkegaard specifies that it is not a matter of drawing something new from repetition, of extracting something new from it. Only contemplation or the mind which contemplates from without 'extracts'. It is rather a matter of acting, of making repetition as such a novelty; that is, a freedom and a task of freedom.[39]

So the way out of the melancholy and despair of the aesthetic life is to *choose*, and by virtue of this choosing, one is not bailed out of the choice by mediating the *aporia*. You choose and recognize a meaningful difference inherent in the choice. The either/or at

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[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid., 523.

[38] Ibid., 527.

[39] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 6.

issue in the text is presented for the reader as much as the aesthete: you can choose the aesthetic life *or* the ethical life. But you cannot, like a disinterested aesthete, choose (or not choose) both. By choosing, you are setting in motion a *movement* that does not solely rely on negation or self-diremption, but opens one to the possibility of repetition as a result of an affirmative, "I choose," and which leads to an actualization within the person. The refusal to make that choice—or to hold both in an attempt at mediation—is to limit one's possibilities, which therefore leads aesthetic indifference and despair. As Judge William writes, "…every aesthetic view of life is despair, and that everyone who lives aesthetically is in despair whether he knows it or not. But if one does know it, and you do indeed, then a higher form of existence is an inescapable requirement…"[40]

The Self's Synthesis

The ethical view of life opens one to freedom, and freedom's work is, to paraphrase Nietzsche, to become what we already are. One pursues this freedom by affirming and reaffirming one's choices. The absence of this choice—and therefore the absence of the self—is what provokes anxiety. But if the freedom to choose was easy, one would not find the *ability* to make choices that difficult. Which is to say, though the aesthete lives a miserable, melancholic, despairing existence, their continued denial of choice and selfhood prevents them from opening up to—and receiving—repetition. The issue, of course, is that we are weighed down by the *possibility* of freedom—or the possibility of the possibility of freedom. Vigilius Haufniensis writes, "Anxiety is neither a category of necessity nor a category of freedom; it is entangled freedom, where

[40] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 502.

freedom is not free in itself but entangled, not by necessity, but in itself."[41] For freedom to be free, it must be actualized through the renunciation of anxiety.[42] Anxiety is freedom's "disquietness" about itself, an anxiousness about its own freedom and the uncertainty of infinite possibility. But at its core, anxiety is about nothing, and one who lives in the ethical sphere must make the move from the nothingness of pure possibility into actuality. One must avoid the "dizziness" of freedom and the potential to "sin" through a continual renewal and repetition of one's freedom.

Of course, the reason we slip into despair is because, faced with the freedom to choose, we are ridden with anxiety. But as we confront our anxiety and our despair, we take the first steps toward actualizing ourselves. This coming-to-be—a notion that represents the inwardness of Aristotelian *kinesis*—is where Kierkegaard departs from Hegel. Where Hegel's mediation is illusory, the *becoming* of the Kierkegaardian self—from the position of the aesthete to the ethical sphere, for instance—is true movement. But there is another wrinkle to our selfhood, something Kierkegaard introduces near the end of *Either/Or* and elaborates more fully in his later writing of *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Sickness Unto Death*; that is, that human beings are a synthesis of body and soul. But what is a human? A human is spirit and a spirit is the self. The idea of a synthesis between body and soul is not new, of course, but Kierkegaard was one of the first to suggest there was a "third" that unites the two together, and further, relates the self to

[41] Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 49.

[42] Gordon Marino, "Anxiety in *The Concept of Anxiety*," Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 318.

itself.[43] In fact, Haufniensis declares this "…synthesis is unthinkable if the two are not united in a third. This third is spirit."[44] So to draw a finer point on the matter, the Kierkegaardian self is one that embraces movement via choice, but also one that maintains a synthesis of mind, body, and spirit.[45]

Either/Or is remarkable for how it introduces the self-as-becoming through these stages of the aesthete and the ethical, but it is only part of the story. The self *is* precisely *because* it makes the choice to be. And in fact, it is not just one choice, but it is the repetition of choice; one's choice must be repeatedly renewed, otherwise the self falls into non-being. However, if this was all repetition needed to be—the individual heroically and passionately choosing—we would be right back with the Greek notion of recollection. Rather, what true repetition requires is God, and God's "co-terminous" repetition that gives us back ourselves.[46] And the self that emerges in the latter stages of *Either/Or* reflects precisely this reliance upon transcendence. Judge William, writing to A, says,

> …since the choice has been made with all the inwardness of his personality, his inner being is purified and he himself is brought into an immediate relationship with the eternal power that omnipresently pervades all existence. The person who chooses only aesthetically never reaches this transfiguration, this higher dedication.[47]

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[43] Marino, "Anxiety in the *Concept of Anxiety,*" 315.

[44] Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety,* 43.

[45] As we have mentioned in a few spots already, the idea that a human being would be a "synthesis" calls to mind Hegel and the System. It is yet another example of Kierkegaard's internalizing of the dialectic, and another reminder that Kierkegaard was more Hegelian than he liked to admit.

[46] See Marcus Pound, "Lacan, Kierkegaard, and Repetition," *Quodlibet Journal,* Volume 7 Number 2, April - June 2005.

[47] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 167.

The receiving of one's self—grounded in transcendence—and receiving one's self from a divine source are what set Kierkegaardian repetition apart from mere recollection and, especially, Hegelian mediation. As Edward Mooney notes, "These grounds are independent ideals that *call* or *bear* on a self. In self-reception, value flows *to,* rather than exclusively *from,* the self." So repetition is precisely this movement on the part of the individual, but simultaneously a "return" from God who gives us back ourselves, but differently.

In Constantine's response to Heiberg, he affirms repetition is "the sphere of individual freedom," and "not merely for contemplation, but…is the task of freedom…It signifies freedom itself."[48] But further, repetition is a movement of freedom that is directed toward the future but considered inwardly. "When repetition is defined in that way, it is transcendent, a religious movement by virtue of the absurd—when the borderline of the wondrous is reached, eternity is the true repetition."[49] So even while *Repetition* is not forthcoming about its groundedness in something transparent, Constantine makes that relationship clear in his later letters.

The religious dimension is also poignantly demonstrated by the stories of Abraham and Job, narratives that we will deal with a bit more carefully in chapter four. But the idea of the transcendent is crucial to highlight here, as one cannot properly

[48] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 312-313.

[49] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 305.

discuss the Kierkegaardian self without grappling with his reliance on a transcendent power, particularly as it relates to the self's proclivity to despair.

The Despairing Self

The 1843 texts offer implicit ideas about subjectivity and selfhood, as Kierkegaard's pseudonyms rely on narratives of the self's *becoming*—from an aesthete to the ethical, for example—rather than building a systematic philosophy. His ostensible rejection of the "System" of Hegel leads him to use a narrative-driven style that requires his readers to infer his thinking. And while the end of *Either/Or* hints at a transcendent that grounds the subject, to gain a better sense for just how that is, we need to look closer at a text he wrote several years later in 1849, *The Sickness Unto Death*.

Writing under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus, the book offers a more "direct" window into the self specifically, and Kierkegaard's views on the subject more broadly. The interpreter M.G. Piety suggests *Repetition* is a text that is "preoccupied with the question of whether we are built with sufficient resources to expel despair on our own—or instead, are radically insufficient to the task." If this is true, then *Sickness* is Kierkegaard's more "direct" attempt to articulate this "disease" of despair that prevents us from fully embracing our selfhood. Despite the variations of despair and the polarities this text outlines, however, despair is just one thing: a refusal to be who and what one really is. And the cure? One must be actively attuned to the inner workings of one's life and any sickness that results from wanting to be one's self or not wanting to be one's self. The self is, first and foremost, a relation that relates itself to itself. The self is, as Mark Taylor points out, decidedly *not* the relation. Where Hegel sees spirit as self-referential

negativity that binds together two opposites, Taylor observes that Kierkegaard "denies that contraries are identical in their difference, or that opposites are related in such a way that each in itself is at the same time its other."[50] So Anti-Climacus is careful to point out that the self is more than the relation—he rejects the negative unity of the Hegelian mediation—and instead posits his anthropology as precisely the self relating itself *to* itself.

Of course, as we saw in chapter one, this relationship takes some work to balance the polarities, and it is constantly at risk of falling into misrelationship with itself, falling into despair. Anti-Climacus points out that, unlike traditional medicine, curing the sickness of despair means one does not search for the "cure" through prescription pills, but rather by careful attention to one's relationship with one's self. As McCarthy points out, the existential dilemma at the heart of *Sickness* really comes down to "a divided self whose will and willpower have been compromised and are not up to the task of restoring themselves."[51] While a "compromised" selfhood is something Saint Paul and Augustine wrestled with centuries ago, Anti-Climacus puts the problem squarely in the sphere of one's will (as opposed to knowledge), and problematizes the confident ethicist we find in the character of Judge William.

Indeed, one certainly gets the sense near the end of *Either/Or* that, if only we could will ourselves to overcome our sickness (the way we willfully choose the ethical

[50] Mark C. Taylor, *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel & Kierkegaard* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 170.

[51] McCarthy, *Kierkegaard as Psychologist,* 146.

sphere), we would then fully live into our selfhood. In fact, Judge William writes that when we choose, we are "…aware of this self as this definite individual, with these aptitudes, these tendencies, these instincts, these passions, influenced by these definite surroundings, as this definite product of a definite outside world."[52] So one way to think about despair, according to William and Anti-Climacus, is that it occurs when one shrinks in the face of a higher calling. In fact, Alistair Hannay notes that the same terms are used to define the self in *Either/Or* and *Sickness,* but the latter deviates from the former by highlighting the range of facades we use to hide ourselves and, in the process, we refuse the to meet the higher demands of selfhood.[53]

What both texts share, however, is that despair is wanting to rid one's self of one's self— "the formula for all despair."[54]—and *Sickness* is nothing if not thorough in its analysis of despair. The text outlines three forms of despair: "…being unconscious in despair of having a self (inauthentic despair), not wanting in despair to be oneself, and wanting in despair to be oneself."[55] The first kind of despair—the inauthentic despair—is precisely that refusal to be. It is a rejection of the "something eternal" in the self and the refusal to be anything more than the self one currently finds one's self to be. This is the aesthete who refuses to will themselves into a decision—marry or do not marry, you will

[52] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 542.

[53] Alastair Hannay, "Kierkegaard and the Variety of Despair," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 336.

[54] Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death,* trans Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 50.

[55] Ibid., 51.

regret both—or the stunted maturity of a Peter Pan-like character who simply cannot grow up to meet the demands of being an adult. But this is also the terrain of one who lives in the ethical sphere and refuses the religious demand, too. In either case, inauthentic despair is the stubborn refusal to engage with the demands of selfhood, or further, a rejection of the notion that there *could* be a more constructive self at all. In short, one lives with the illusion that they are already and complete and unified self, and it takes a constant effort to keep one's despair from rising up and overtaking us. As Theunissen observes

> We are alienated from our own human being when we yearn to be absorbed in the collective or want to be submerged in another. In effect we yearn for an inhuman existence. But not willing to be who we are is always *primarily* a rejection of who we are and only *secondarily* a desire to be what we are not.[56]

Despite our refusal to become, we are told, "…that power is the stronger, and it compels him to be the self he does not want to be."[57] The infinite is always beckoning us, calling us to be that which we are.

Another kind of despair stems from not wanting (in despair) to be one's self. This is triggered by the "weakness" of refusing to adopt our singularity. This may be either the result of simply being unaware of our singularity, or by attempting to (defiantly) escape the demands. In our response, we can either will ourselves to be something other than what we are to be, or will ourselves to create a self borne out of fantasy. Either way, we live in what Sartre would later call "bad faith," when we have deceived ourselves about

[56] McCarthy, *Kierkegaard as Psychologist*, 143.

[57] Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, 50.

ourselves and our true state, but still insist we are living authentically. This is also echoed a century later in the writings of Lacan, who explores the power of the Big Other in our lives. Given our constitutive lack, says Lacan, the construction of our desire is tuned to the desire of the other so deeply that we desire what and *in the same way* they desire it. In other words, when Lacan says, "Man's desire is the Other's desire," he has precisely this kind of dependence in mind, a desire that is "structured exactly like the Other's. Man learns to desire *as an other*, as if he were some other person."[58] This is, to bring it back to Kierkegaard, a form of despair that, when faced with the possibility of actualizing our own desires, in despair we actualize the desire of the other convinced that it is our own.

So what is our hope? What is the path out of this morass of despair? Anti-Climacus says that, paradoxically, the way out of this despair is by going *through* this despair. Our task is to will to be oneself while simultaneously giving up the idea that we alone can will ourselves to be authentic. That only occurs when we rest in the "grounding power" of God. In other words, one must experience the strain and the existential "disjunction" of our divided selves and resolve to work through that disjunction while we reconcile it with our inability to do it alone. Despair, then, originates in the very nature of the self, which is a synthesis, "…despair lies in the person himself. But if he were not a synthesis there would be no question of his despairing; nor could he despair unless the synthesis were originally in the right relationship from the hand of God."[59] If the

[58] Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 41.

[59] Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, 46.

synthesis of the self relies on a balance between the dialectical tensions of finite and infinite, temporal and eternal, and freedom and necessity, then being too rooted in either, for example, throws us into despair. In other words, one way to think about despair is it creeps in at the moment of a disjunctive synthesis; when we cannot balance the dialectical tensions, we suffer from despair.

While *Sickness* outlines the various ways we may suffer from despair, the heart of that despair is the disjunction and disunity with ourselves and with God. Anti-Climacus writes,

> So much is spoken about wasting one's life. But the only life wasted is the life of one who so lived it, deceived by life's pleasures or sorrows, that he never became decisively, eternally, conscious of himself as spirit, as self, or, what is the same, he never became aware—and gained in the deepest sense the impression—that there is a God there and that 'he', himself, his self, exists before this God, which infinite gain is never come by except through despair.[60]

Sickness is precisely about the anxiety of one's freedom and of one's subjective despair. But it is also a text that establishes God as the "third" in the synthesis of the self, and roots the cause of our despair in not just a misrelationship with ourselves, but a misrelationship to the ground that establishes the synthesis. *Sickness* brings to bear the eternal on the finite, and makes it clear that we do not "correct" the misrelationship with ourselves without first "correcting" it with God. In fact, doing the work of going *through* despair such that we can fully unite this is the core task of faith: "Faith is: that the self in being itself and in wanting to be itself is grounded transparently in God."[61] We gain a

[60] Ibid., 57.

[61] Ibid., 114.

sense from Anti-Climacus (and echoed elsewhere in Kierkegaard's writings) that faith is not something to be analyzed philosophically or systematically, nor is it a dialectic that needs to be resolved. Rather, faith—and the task of the Christian—is to live in the constant, existential stance of forthcoming, which puts us on the path of authentic selfhood.

Anti-Climacus suggests the self is guided by a *telos,* a "standard" by which one measures their progression of selfhood.[62] And this is reinforced by the idea that the self is not static—there is not a substance (ala traditional metaphysics) that underlies the subject. Rather, selfhood is inward movement bound up with—and indeed, constituted by—the eternal. Though we may long for a stable ground on which we can rely, this is only given to us by God. And despair risks breaking this process, thrusting the self into sin.

Returning to the Infinite

So what is the "self" for Anti-Climacus (and Kierkegaard)? Having diagnosed that which keeps us from fully "selfing" and the self-alienation that we may or may not be fully aware of, we can return again to the infinite that underlies the synthesis. The catalyst for the synthesis is precisely the ability to tarry with God and hold in tension the paradox of the infinite and the finite. When Anti-Climacus writes that "The self is a conscious synthesis of infinitude and finitude…"[63] he very much rejects the notion that these opposites are somehow mediated into sameness. Rather, he upholds the *aporia* of

[62] Ibid., 111.

[63] Ibid., 59.

their opposition, and they are reconciled—synthesized—via our free self-conscious activity. As Taylor affirms, "Authentic spirit presupposes obedient acknowledgement of the transcendent power upon which the self is ontologically dependent."[64]

And here is where repetition once again acts as an interpretive key. As we saw with the aesthete in Either/Or, one actualizes oneself when one repeatedly chooses—over and over again. By making a choice, one opens oneself to receiving themselves anew through repetition, and in the process, preserves (or increases) one's freedom. As Taylor suggests, "For Kierkegaard, realization of spirit does not involve the recognition or recollection of antecedent actuality but requires the volitional enactment or repetition of conceived possibility."[65] Repetition is the "bringing forward" this possibility, and through actualization, one embodies real movement, and in the view of Constantine, real movement is transcendence. Writing in the supplement to *Repetition,* Kierkegaard reiterates this point:

> When movement is allowed in relation to repetition in the sphere of freedom, then the development becomes different from the logical development in that the transition becomes. In logic, transition is movement's silence, whereas in the sphere of freedom it becomes. Thus, in logic, when possibility, by means of the immanence of thought, has determined itself as actuality, one only disturbs the silent self-inclosure of the logical process by talking about movement and transition. In the sphere of freedom, however, possibility remains and actuality emerges as a transcendence.[66]

While *Sickness* was written several years after *Repetition* and *Either/Or*, the idea that the self is grounded in transcendence—the transcendence of repetition and of the infinite—is

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[64] Taylor, *Journeys to Selfhood,* 172.

[65] Ibid., 133.

[66] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 309.

a theme running through both texts. That in our finiteness we are constituted by the infinite is a paradox that Kierkegaard says is the true repetition.

Repetition, Transcendence, and The Religious

Throughout this chapter we have explored the topology of Kierkegaardian selfhood by looking at the characters of *Either/Or* and how, from very early in his writings, Kierkegaard positioned selfhood as true movement (over and against the illusory movement of mediation). The self is not just one who makes a definitive, existential choice (continually, repeatedly), but one who is also constituted by a transcendent power who is also continually repeating. And *Sickness* helps us see that we frequently find ourselves getting in our own way, preventing us from listening the call to be more than what we are, or living out the fantasy of who we *think* we ought to be.

Throughout this *project*—thus far—we have tried to situate the concept of repetition within the scope and trajectory of philosophy. But there is another crucial layer to repetition that we have yet to fully explore, and that is the *religious significance* of repetition. Vigilius Haufniensis makes this point in *The Concept of Anxiety* when he says, "Constantin mentions several times that repetition is a religious category, too transcendent for him, that it is the movement by virtue of the absurd, and on p. 142 it is further stated that eternity is the true repetition."[67] Repetition is precisely the task of freedom and as it signifies freedom, it gives the self an "opportunity to become what one is by repeating in one's action one's true nature as determined by God."[68] As Stewart

[67] Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 18.

[68] Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered,* 300.

notes, transcendence is the object of faith and, contrary to Hegel, faith is higher than any intellectual reflection. But repetition is also a "movement by virtue of the absurd." Which means that Kierkegaard sees repetition as dealing with the paradox of faith, namely that the infinite became finite.

The concept of repetition (and *Repetition*) are relatively early works in Kierkegaard's oeuvre, and though he comments on them in footnotes in later texts, repetition itself undergoes its own repetition. Stewart notes that "[t]his religious dimension of the concept of repetition shows most clearly its relation to other well-known Kierkegaardian concepts such as the paradox, the absurd, and the moment."[69] These terms eventually come to replace the references to repetition altogether, but religious aspect of repetition requires a more careful consideration. For Kierkegaard, the religious sphere—the *knight of faith*—represents the highest achievement of selfhood one can attain; it is the *telos* by which every other sphere is measured. When we make the leap into the religious sphere, we encounter paradox and the absurdity, but repetition also gives us the "moment." And like many of Kierkegaard's writings, we can best understand the shape of repetition narratively. In the following chapter, we will look at how Job and Abraham lost everything, but through repetition—which is faith—had everything returned. In the process, each found themselves situated at the point where, paradoxically, time and eternity meet.

[69] Ibid., 301.

Chapter Four: The Return

Some of what sets Kierkegaard apart from other philosophers is the way his ideas and concepts are situated narratively. As we have seen with *Repetition* and *Either/Or*, to understand a move from the aesthetic life to the ethical life, for instance, is not just a matter of making abstract choices or ascending to an ideal of the ethical life, but it is making choices to actualize that becoming *concretely*. And, in order for a thing to endure—for a self to be itself—it must continually *repeat* its actualization. One's failure to repeat risks them collapsing into non-being, into not "selfing." As such, Kierkegaard demonstrates this through narratives with characters that refuse to make choices—A, Johannes, and, to some degree, the Young Man in *Repetition*—while characters like Judge William represent the ethical life. To emphasize the concrete actualization and *becoming* of the individual, Kierkegaard pairs his philosophy with this style meant to call his own readers into question. What do we do at the moment of choice? Do we embrace our existential ability to choose? And do we have the courage to make the choices *repeatedly?*

Another reason we see Kierkegaard's philosophy written this way is because, as Climacus writes, "truth is subjective."[1] Repetition is not an objective principle one can explore—or even comprehend—by creating a systematic philosophy or a systematic

[1] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 190.

theology; rather, repetition is in inward, lived, existential experience. One's relation to the truth stands over and above truth as a concept, and one experiences the freedom of repetition's movements by living *into* them, by choosing and *willing* them. But repetition is also a return of that which one gives up or that which one has taken away. And there are two figures that represent repetition's truth, freedom, and transcendence in their stories; two figures that Kierkegaard holds as paradigmatic for selfhood: Abraham and Job. These biblical characters represent the one of the most important concepts of repetition. In having everything taken away from them, they receive back everything they once had, again but new. As we will see, both characters demonstrate the reversal of the "System." Hegelianism viewed faith is a nascent stage of one's intellectual development; through the rationalism of the dialectical system, one should overcome faith. But for Kierkegaard, faith is the highest ideal, and Job and Abraham, by virtue of losing everything, receive everything back again (but differently) and in the process—and perhaps most importantly—they encounter the paradox of the infinite. Where Hegel sees Abraham as merely a player in the development of "world history," Kierkegaard elevates him to be a pinnacle of faith and selfhood.

Given the stratification's one finds in the different "stages" of these texts—namely that the ethical is positioned "higher" than the aesthete throughout *Either/Or*, and that faith is held up as this highest ideal in *Fear and Trembling*—it is easy to position the religious spheres of Job and Abraham as the very *telos* of existence. But Taylor observes that these "stages" in Kierkegaard are not just a path toward self-realization, rather the

narratives themselves are meant to be like mirrors held before the reader. In fact, these different spheres

> …represent distinct forms of life that can be realized only if they are willed by the individual. Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writings lead the reader to the brink of decision by presenting idealities to be actualized by the individual through decisive repetition.[2]

One's repetition is the result of the ongoing, active willing of one's self despite the lack of a clear telos, but compelled by the grounding power that sustains it. One does not naturally progress through these stages and "mature" the way a child might grow into an adult—which is to say, the stages do not represent a developmental ego-psychology where one can simply "grow out of" a stage. To achieve the religious sphere requires placing oneself above the universal—a decidedly anti-Kantian move—and through willing oneself toward freedom, answer a direct call from God.

What *Fear and Trembling* and the Discourse on Job provide readers is a narrativized window into what it takes to will oneself to the religious sphere. In the face of universal and ethical laws, what would lead one to suspend those in favor of something "higher"? Is there a possibility of something that, indeed, transcends these ethics? In the process of these narratives, they tell us something about how the "taking back" of repetition opens one to the infinite while, simultaneously, returning that which one lost, but differently. In this chapter we will look carefully at what each narrative can tell us about repetition, and explore how repetition is precisely this a moment—where the

[2] Taylor, *Journeys to Selfhood,* 103.

infinite touches the finite. We will also explore how repetition is, by virtue of the "taking back," a difference that makes all the difference.

Fear and Trembling

Fear and Trembling is another one of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous texts—written under the pen name Johannes di Silentio—and it appeared in publication on the same day as *Repetition* in October 1843. It is worth noting that the subtitle to *Fear and Trembling*, "Dialectical Lyric", is a fitting description that speaks to the timbre of its Hegelian influence. And as Carlisle notes, in a draft title page to *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard initially uses a different pseudonym— "Simon Stylita, Solo Dancer and Private Individual"—and subtitles the text, "Movements and Positions." This, she writes, is a literary flourish that foreshadows the very leaps and movements that characterize the religious task.[3] As Deleuze observes, too, in Kierkegaard's objections to Hegel, he is after movement that is *itself* a work "…of substituting direct signs for mediate representations; of inventing vibrations, rotations, whirling, gravitations, dances or leaps which directly touch the mind."[4]

Taken together, *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition* both tackle themes of subjective truth and an opposition to Hegelian mediation, instead privileging the inward existential movements and (in the case of *Fear and Trembling*) the leaps into faith. In fact, one could read *Repetition* as almost a preamble to *Fear and Trembling;* the former signifies the inward turn and the kinetic movement to actualize or will themselves,

[3] Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming,* 91.

[4] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 8.

whereas the latter sees Abraham become an exemplary fulfillment of this idea. Multiple commentators, however, note the directional difference between the two texts.[5] *Repetition* is concerned with the dichotomy between past and future, recollection and repetition. Recollection brings the past forward and repetition is the future brought to bear on the present. In this view—and to co-opt a Deleuzian concept—*Repetition* places repetition and the self on a "horizontal" plane, firmly dealing with issues of time.

For its part, *Fear and Trembling* is more concerned with selfhood as it relates to a "vertical" plane—the plane of eternity, so to speak. Faith is something to which one "ascends." The religious sphere is "higher" than the ethical and, in that way, Abraham represents the transcendent movement of a single individual who stands before God. He is a paradigm for "true" religious commitment, as Johannes brings the reader face-to-face with the sheer trauma of what Abraham's been asked to endure, and the "full terror" of Abraham's encounter with this command.[6] Though *Repetition* and *Fear and Trembling* both deal with loss and one's attempt to regain that which they have lost, Abraham is considered existentially "higher" than the Young Man because of his relationship to God. And the work of Johannes throughout this text is to outline the conditions and requirements for ascending to this form of consciousness. Contrary to the way Hegel's philosophy positions faith, the cost of faith for Johannes is enormous. As one repeatedly

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[5] Carlisle writes that "Johannes looks down upon Hegel, and looks up at Abraham," *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming,* 96. Johannes also notes in *Fear and Trembling*, "The knights of infinity are ballet dancers and have elevation. They make the upward movement and come down again, and this, too, is not an unhappy diversion and is not unlovely to see," *Fear and Trembling,* 41. Finally, see Stewart, "'Developing' Fear and Trembling."

[6] Ronald M. Green, "'Developing' *Fear and Trembling*" in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 258.

wills one's self, they come to establish themselves as single individuals before the absolute and reside at a decidedly "higher" level of existence. But how does one arrive at this point? And what does it take to actually will oneself to this religious stage? Beyond the surface, *Fear and Trembling* offers more than pious reflections on the *Akedah* and an ongoing broadside against the weakness of Hegelianism. Johannes offers readers a multivalent philosophical feast, with several themes that need to be unpacked to understand just how and why Abraham is held as a knight of faith and the *telos* for Kierkegaardian selfhood.

The Specter of Hegel

One of the primary ways *Fear and Trembling* functions is as a response to the limp Hegelian Christianity of his time. Johannes begins by comparing religious faith to the clearance sales one finds in the shops of Copenhagen, "Not only in the business world but also in the world of ideas, our age stages a real sale. Everything can be had at such a bargain price that it becomes a question whether there is finally anyone who will make a bid."[7] Situating faith as this "bargain" is echoed a couple of pages later when he writes, "In our age, everyone is unwilling to stop with faith but goes further. It perhaps would be rash to ask where they are going….since otherwise it certainly would be odd to speak of going further."[8] The issue, of course, is that his contemporaries—and here, Jon Stewart notes Kierkegaard's likely target are Hegel, Martensen, Heiberg, and Nielsen—reach conclusions of faith and doubt without undergoing any of the substantial demands that

[7] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling; Repetition,* 5.

[8] Ibid., 7.

faith require. They develop a faith that is defined by its immediacy and embedded in a system "on the way" to "higher" intellectual reflections. In fact, Johannes quite wryly says at the end of his Preface, "The present author…has not understood the system, whether there is one, whether it is completed."[9] The intimation, of course, is that what one is about to read is neither a system nor something to incorporate *into* a system. Rather, Johannes wants to "shock" his readers; he wants to bring them into the drama and the anxiety of Abraham's trek up Mt. Moriah, and in the process, offer a kind of "dialectical corrective" that valorizes the absurdity of faith.[10]

As Johannes painstakingly walks readers through the Abraham story—indeed, there numerous repetitions of the story itself—he re-introduces readers to the "anxiety, the distress, the paradox" of this event.[11] The problem is that, because this is a story ostensibly everyone knows, the power of the event has been lost. As he writes, "There were countless generations who knew the story of Abraham by heart, word for word, but how many did it render sleepless?"[12] Abraham is paradigmatic here precisely because the faith he embodies is absurd; one cannot intellectualize the narrative or mediate it into set of principles or dogmas. Indeed, the story is horrifying and an offense to reason and rationality, but also a story of one who obeys the commands of God. Johannes continually praises Abraham throughout the text, and in the process, adopts a kind of

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid., 30.

[11] Ibid., 63.

[12] Ibid., 28.

Kantian position that shows the difference between what something appears to be, and what actually is.[13] In other words, while is certainly *appears* that Abraham is about to murder Isaac—and violate an ethical law—Johannes's praise forces us to look more carefully at Abraham's actions. There is, he suggests, a gap between what one sees on the surface, and what is actual reality. And as Green notes, what Abraham demonstrates throughout this narrative is that faith *is a way of life,* one that is "not as the content of a concept but as a form of the will."[14]

We have a choice, says Johannes, about how we can see Abraham's actions, and one's view of Abraham depends on the sphere in which we stand:

> The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he meant to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he meant to sacrifice Isaac—but precisely in this contradiction is the anxiety that can make a person sleepless, and yet without this anxiety Abraham is not who he is.[15]

If viewed from the ethical lens, Abraham is of course a murderer. But it "is only by faith that one achieves any semblance to Abraham, not by murder."[16] To achieve the religious perspective of Abraham requires one to make continual, willful, *inward* movements of repetition

Abraham's inwardness—making repeated "leaps" of faith at every moment along his way up Mt. Moriah—is a marker for a kind of faith that is *lived*. So while Johannes is, on the one hand, responding to the chorus of Hegelian philosophers who subordinate faith

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[13] Aroosi, *The Dialectical Self,* 53.

[14] Green, "'Developing' *Fear and Trembling*," 259.

[15] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 30.

[16] Ibid., 31.

and elevate reason, he is also offering up Abraham as a symbol of a faith that is lived—repeatedly. He is someone for whom faith must be taken up moment after moment, the cost of which can only be understood through this story of sacrifice. In fact, near the end of *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes bookends the text by (again) referencing Dutch commerce, this time, the merchants who intentionally sank their ships to drive up the price of spices. This kind of sacrifice, says Johannes, is what is needed in the life of the spirit. And what Abraham demonstrates is a costly faith that one cannot intellectualize or systematize.

The Religious Sphere

Kierkegaard was frequently aware of his audiences as he wrote, and this text is no exception. So at one level, we can read *Fear and Trembling* is as Kierkegaard's riposte to Hegelian philosophy and the idea that a life of faith is, in their system, too easy to attain. While intellectual reflection may be all the rage in 19th century Denmark, mediation (as the Hegelians understand it) simply cannot make any movements toward existential truth. Faith is a costly, sacrificial commitment defined by the repetition of movement—actual and existential.

Another level at which to read this text, however (another hermeneutic one can use, so to speak) is what it tells us about the contours of what constitutes religious living. Having established the lack of movement in mediation, Johannes says religiousness requires a "double movement" of faith. He writes, "Faith is preceded by a movement of infinity; only then does faith commence [unexpectedly] by virtue of the absurd."[17] These

[17] Ibid., 69.

are inward movements, "quiet and difficult" movements of the spirit that are subjective.[18] As such, they are not movements that can be explained to others, nor movements that can be understood in the context of ethics. As Stewart notes, Abraham's calling "puts all the other external moral commands and duties into abeyance."[19] The obedience and faith Abraham shows supersedes any demands of the state and any ethical responsibilities; as a knight of faith, Abraham's duty—as a single individual standing before God—to God alone.

Still, this "double movement" first requires Abraham to renounce his desire. He becomes a knight of "infinite resignation" by giving up any claim to Isaac, the child that God once promised him. This knight is one who suffers as he renounces earthly happiness—like the happiness that may come from the love and commitment of another human. Johannes writes,

> In infinite resignation there is peace and rest; every person who wills it, who has not debased himself by self-disdain—which is still more dreadful than being too proud—can discipline himself to make this movement, which in its pain reconciles one to existence.[20]

As Abraham makes his ascent up Mt. Moriah, he does so in full resignation to the agony of giving up Isaac. And just as Abraham reconciles himself to his grief, so must one reconcile oneself to the pain and suffering of daily existence, as it becomes a prerequisite for entering a "higher" stage of faith. This suffering is preserved within the movement of faith, yet the ascension to faith is only attained after an intense struggle with the traumas

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[18] Green, "'Developing' *Fear and Trembling*," 261.

[19] Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered,* 312.

[20] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 45.

of the finite world. In the same way one must go *through* despair to overcome despair, so is faith attained by resigning oneself to pain and suffering, so that one may go *through* (or rather, rise *above*) that suffering to faith.

Johannes points out that infinite resignation is not a posture of passivity, in which one nihilistically resigns to losing everything because nothing ultimately matters. He writes in a footnote that this movement of resignation "…requires passion. Every movement of infinity is carried out through passion, and no reflection can produce a movement."[21] Resigning infinitely takes enormous will and strength…and suffering. It is a movement of the spirit, one who makes the "impossible possible by expressing it spiritually, but he expresses it spiritually by renouncing it."[22] This knight trains as though a dancer would, strengthening their muscles to make this inward movement, and to make the movement with intense concentration and focus and courage.[23] And as a result, they make the greatest possible movements within immanence. Whereas the ethical (and Hegelian) view of life would have the individual be subject to the universal (to the exterior), faith is precisely the paradox that the interior of the knight of infinite resignation is incompatible with the exterior. When he has "emptied himself in the infinite," made peace with himself and the world around him, he has reached a point where faith can begin. Or, as Carlisle succinctly puts it, "…the movement of infinite

[21] Ibid., 42.

[22] Ibid., 44.

[23] Ibid., 43.

resignation precedes faith, grounds it and is preserved within it, providing the elevating momentum to the spiritual height—or depth—from which faith operates."[24]

Of course, as Johannes is so keen to highlight in his text, we know how Abraham's story ends. We know that God stays Abraham's hand and provides a ram for him to sacrifice instead. But he makes the double movement—in this case, infinite resignation *on his way* to an ascent to the knight of faith—because he believes that God will not demand Isaac, and that Isaac will be returned. Abraham's knighthood of faith emerges precisely because of his belief and faithful trust in God's infinite love and wisdom:

> He does exactly the same as the other knight did: he infinitely renounces the love that is the substance of his life, he is reconciled in pain. But then the marvel happens; he makes one more movement even more wonderful than all the others, for he says: Nevertheless, I have faith that I will get her—that is, by the virtue of absurd, by virtue of the fact that for God all things are possible.[25]

The movement of infinity requires a giving up of everything temporal, making peace with the idea that there is nothing to which we can legitimately make a claim for. As Mooney articulates, the knight of faith embodies a "selfless care" for things in the finite, for which "he has given up all proprietary claim."[26] This is an idea echoed by Jampol-Petzinger who says the knight of faith is one who invests their well-being and identity "*in* the object whose loss is inevitable, and therefore can only be retained 'by virtue of the absurd' and

[24] Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming*, 100.

[25] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 46.

[26] Mooney, "*Repetition:* Getting the World Back," 262.

contrary to every conceivable possibility."[27] In this view, there is a sense in which the knight of faith is so totally devoted to their loss that any return must be initiated by God because it *can only be initiated by the infinite.*

As Johannes highlights, the knight of faith is indistinguishable from any "normal" human who walks the street, but what signifies one's "knighthood"—the inward movement of faith—is that one responds to the demands of absolute duty by holding steadfast belief in the return of that which one is resigning to give up. This knight has faith in the eschatological promises of God. While Abraham faced the loss of not just the son that God promised, but also the *generations* he promised, he had faith through obedience—by virtue of the absurd and with fear and trembling—that God would restore or return that which he was being asked to sacrifice. The knight of faith is precisely this pinnacle of the Kierkegaardian self who, standing above language, ethics, and reason, responds to the grounding power who sustains it.

An exploration of Johannes's essay "The Teleological Suspension of the Ethical" is a bit outside the lane of this project, and plenty of writers have offered insightful exegeses of that essay. But it is worth highlighting that the main question of the essay is a salient summary of the knight of faith, and the Kierkegaardian self. Namely, that in obeying God's command to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham's absolute duty to God is precisely the paradox that the "individual is higher than the universal."[28] This faith and obedience

[27] Andrew Jampol-Petzinger, "Faith and Repetition in Kierkegaard and Deleuze," *Philosophy Today,* Volume 63, Issue 2 (Spring 2019), 392.

[28] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling,* 55.

is not rational in the Hegelian way, and it contradicts the logical ethics of Kant. In short, it transgresses those ethical constraints altogether because of its relation to the universal:

> How did Abraham exist? He had faith. This is the paradox by which he remains at the apex, the paradox that he cannot explain to anyone else, for the paradox is that he as the single individual places himself in an absolute relation to the absolute. Is he justified? Again, his justification is the paradoxical, for if he is, then he is justified not by virtue of being something universal but by virtue of being the single individual.[29]

The single individual stands before the infinite and is, indeed, posited by the infinite; they are set apart as they stand before God. And in doing so, they stand higher than any ethical concerns. Indeed, in a playful Hegelian way, they do not stop at ethics. They *go further*.

The Conditions for a Return

When one wills themselves into the religious sphere, one makes the double movement of faith—the movement of resignation then the movement of faith that what is lost will be restored. But what Johannes points out in the "Exordium" is that "Abraham withstood the temptation, kept the faith, and, contrary to expectation, got a son a second time."[30] Abraham first received Isaac as a long-awaited gift from God, the promised heir through which many nations would be built. But upon God's command to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham obeyed and was resigned to Isaac's loss (as a knight of infinite resignation). But through faith he believed Isaac would be restored, and when God stayed the knife on Mt. Moriah, Isaac was indeed given a second time. Isaac's return amounted to a repetition of

[29] Ibid., 62.

[30] Ibid., 9.

Isaac, and what returned was the same but clearly, also very different.[31] So here we can add a third texture to repetition: repetition is the task of freedom, it is a movement toward infinity, and now also, a receiving back—with a faithful trust—a restoration of what one has lost. And what is important to note is that what is returned—indeed, what is "taken back" or given—is wholly and qualitatively different.

As we have seen, the theme of repetition is woven throughout Kierkegaard's 1843 texts, both implicitly and explicitly. As each character and pseudonym wrestle with their existence, what becomes clear is the task of repetition, the task of remaining open to freedom (indeed, *preserving* our freedom), requires an inward intention and will. One must *labor* to remain open to freedom and repetition and, ultimately, to receiving that which they have had taken away. But, as Edward Mooney points out, there is a reciprocity to this posture. As one labors and wills their freedom and repetition, they must also be open to *receiving* it:

> …the job of freedom is sustaining receptivity. A non-despairing self is ready at every instant both to resign the world (as target of one's interventions) and get it back again (as a gift). The world one gets is in part a function of the self one is: a self tempered, alert, and open; and the self one gets is in part a function of the world one has: a world stocked with worth that calls on and stills the business of mobile selves. Self and world become reciprocally articulate.[32]

And here is where repetition also touches on the importance of despair that we see in *Sickness*. To be free of despair is to be open to receiving through repetition "the world."

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[31] One can imagine that Isaac likely viewed his father much differently after this event. And indeed, Abraham seemed to sever his relationship with God after this, too. The biblical text offers no record of conversations between Abraham and God after this event.

[32] Mooney, "*Repetition:* Getting the World Back," 294.

One does not actively try to "achieve" this returning by pursuing it; rather one, free of despair, must stay "alert and open." The "givenness" of the world (to borrow a Heideggerian turn of phrase) is delivered to those who are open, and those who are open are in a position to receive. It is, as Mooney states, a reciprocal articulation.

Of course, Abraham is the paradigm of this reciprocation. By being open and holding (with faithful anticipation) repetition, he has Isaac returned. Abraham is able to receive repetition because of his inward belief that Isaac will be restored, and this despair-free belief makes it possible. Kierkegaard rightly points out that what is missing from the way we usually tell the story is Abraham's anxiety, because it is a well-worn story in which we think we know the ending. But Abraham's repetition is the result of faith and obedience, and a resignation to lose everything, so that it can be gained. And his openness to having a restored Isaac *in spite of his resignation* signals a true belief in repetition's meaning.

Of course, the repetition of Abraham stands in stark contrast to Constantin. The author of *Repetition* tries to explore whether repetition is possible by visiting Berlin, but he does it as a curiosity; it is an exercise in empirical studies. He chases repetition as a "childish whimsy" and fails to find repetition precisely because he looks for it. As Constantin writes, his whole rationale for even returning to Berlin is "to ascertain whether repetition is possible."[33] But his failure is because he approaches repetition as a philosophical concept to interrogate, rather than as an inward movement of becoming. By attempting to repeat his earlier journey there—visiting previous hotels and cafes—he

[33] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 151.

tries to learn whether the repetition is possible by virtue of making a general case, "subject to a law that exemplifies the possibility of repetition."[34] By the end of his trip, Constantin concludes repetition simply is not possible and that it does not exist. For a text that begins with such bold declarations about the importance and primacy of repetition, that Constantin cannot will repetition is both a bit jarring but also instructive. Though he longs for repetition he is not yet the knight of faith of Abraham; he fails to encounter repetition, like Abraham, as a single individual standing before God. In the end, all Constantin has really accomplished through his travels is "theater."

The Relationship To That Which Is Returned

Another reason that Constantin and Abraham are instructive case studies in repetition is that they differ in their relationship to that which is being repeated. For Constantin, it is clear he does not *need* Berlin to be the same, nor is he all that concerned with what finds. He arrives to Berlin, finds things are different, then makes the assumption repetition is false. In fact, Constantin is so quickly distracted from his initial pursuit of repetition that it is tempting for readers to conclude that they, too, should not take it seriously. There are no stakes with respect to repetition's existence, nothing to risk or lose. Constantin is a disinterested observer and, like a hunter on safari, merely interested in chasing repetition for sport. Abraham, however, is open to receive repetition from a well of deep desire. And, most importantly, his movement is *inward*. Unlike Constantin, who is trying to reckon with whether repetition is "true" according to empirical knowledge, Abraham is inwardly resigned to his loss while simultaneously

[34] Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming,* 79.

(and inwardly) having faith in a return. It is precisely his ability to give up control over Isaac that results in the return of Isaac.

Of course, one of the nagging hermeneutics of *Fear and Trembling*—and indeed much of Kierkegaard's corpus—is his broken engagement with Regine Olsen. Kierkegaard ended his engagement as he was in the thick of writing his trio of 1843 texts, and in a May 1843 journal entry, he laments, "…if I had had faith, I would have stayed together with Regine."[35] It is clear that in the story of a father who gave up everything and had it returned, as well as a young lover trying to reconnect with his unrequited love, Kierkegaard finds some affinity and hope. In fact, the second half of *Repetition* creates a thin veil of his own narrative, where letters between Constantin and a young fiancé trace the story of someone who is desperately trying to gain back their lost love. The Young Man in these letters even likens himself to Job, whose narrative he cannot help but identify with,

> If I did not have Job! It is impossible to describe all the shades of meaning and how manifold the meaning is that he has for me. I do not read him as one reads another book, with the eyes, but I lay the book, as it were, on my heart and read it with the eyes of the heart, in a *clairvoyance* interpreting the specific points in the most diverse ways.[36]

As the Young Man and Constantin continue their letter exchange, it is clear the former longs for his beloved, and longs for repetition in a way that is deeper than Constantin. But his longing for repetition stems from his realization that he could not marry his beloved in the first place; that his engagement became a "torment to him" that he could no longer

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[35] Clare Carlisle, *Kierkegaard: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2006), 12.

[36] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 204.

sustain with integrity. In short, the young man changes his mind, and his broken engagement serves as the catalyst for his own sense of renewal and becoming, "Was it not fortunate that I did not go through with your ingenious, admirable plan. Humanly speaking, it may have been cowardliness on my part, but perhaps now Governance can all the more easily help me. My only regret is that I did not ask the girl to give me my freedom."[37]

In his affirmation of Job, he also sees in him a hopeful figure for which he was returned double that which he lost. And like Job, he feels tormented by what was lost, and he will also go further than Constantin and affirm that repetition does exist. But unlike Abraham, the young man is focused on the return. He has not yet resigned himself to the loss of his beloved; while his inward movement certainly allows him to be more free, he cannot make the next movement in faith. As Mooney notes, "Both Constantin and his friend lack the moral-religious seriousness requisite for the sort of religious repetition we find in Job or Abraham."[38] While each has a sense for what repetition *could* be, neither makes the inward movements necessary for true repetition.

What makes Job and Abraham paradigmatic figures of repetition is their faithful trust in God to restore that which has been lost. As we have seen, Job plays an important role in *Repetition* as a foil to the hollow religiousness of the young man. But in the same year as *Repetition*, Kierkegaard publishes *Four Upbuilding Discourses*, and one, "The Lord Gave, the Lord Took Away," explores how Job's repetition was the result of a

[37] Kierkegaard, *Repetition,* 213.

[38] Mooney, "*Repetition:* Getting the World Back,", 292.

theological reframing of his circumstances. While the young man is not shy about comparing his trials to Job's, he has neither the resolve nor the desire to *stay resolved* to receive repetition. In fact, he suffers from the same aesthetic inability to will oneself; while he longs for his beloved, he also seems content to be free of his responsibility to marry. Job, by contrast, stays open to repetition in the midst of his ongoing losses. Rather than considering them as *losses,* though, Job is able to see his world as, foremost, a gift from God. Kierkegaard writes,

> But Job! The moment the Lord took everything away, he did not first say, 'The Lord took away,' but first of all he said, 'The Lord gave.' The statement is brief, but in its brevity it effectually points out what it is supposed to point out, that Job's soul was not squeezed into silent subjection to the sorrow, but that his heart first expanded in thankfulness, that the first thing the loss of everything did was to make him thankful to the Lord that he had given him all the blessings that he now took away from him.[39]

Job's openness (inwardly) is what, in part, makes him a candidate for repetition. His suffering is acute, to be sure, but he waits with patient expectation. What Eriksen notes, too, is that in this moment, Job translates his personal economy of "gaining" or losing" into God's "giving" and taking." By situating this narrative in terms of God's act, Job can "see his past as complete" and, as a result, look towards the future with freedom and openness to repetition.[40]

Again, what we have seen with Job is that he is able to receive repetition precisely because he does not demand to have his world returned to him, nor does he set out (like

[39] Soren Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, trans Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 115-116.

[40] Eriksen, 44.

Constantin) to chase repetition. Instead, Job asks for the reasons for his suffering (an answer his friends are all too willing to provide) and wants to know why he has had everything taken from him.[41] In this case, it is Job's patient expectation and trust in God's faithfulness that results in him getting his world back double.

The Return Itself

If repetition is, in part, a return of that which one has lost (or had taken away), then what the Abraham and Job narratives help us see is that what is returned is not simply the same. As Carlisle notes, "Constantin is incapable of repetition because he seeks to establish the constancy of sameness in his everyday life; because, by confining himself to ideality, he tries to avoid the difference that is inherent in becoming." We can certainly *infer* that the Isaac returned to Abraham must be (at least) psychologically different than the one who trekked up Mt. Moriah. And of course, Job is given his world back—doubly so—with increased wealth and several children once again. But one would be hard-pressed to call that a true repeat of what Job had before. Job and Abraham stay faithful to God and God's promises, but they leave these encounters with God irrevocably changed and, one might even say, scarred by the trauma of their experiences. In many ways, repetition is not just the returning of what one lost, but it also requires—and catalyzes—a fundamental change on the part of the individual. For an individual who is—at the time of writing these 1843 texts—trying to make sense of his own grief and broken engagement, it gives the reciprocity of repetition's force a bit more clarity.

[41] Mooney, 300.

Part of the issue at issue with repetition is the assumption of its name. To "repeat" (in English) stems from the Old French *repeter* which means "to say or do again" or, alternatively, to "get back" or "demand the return of." Of course, as we have seen with Kierkegaard, the Danish word he uses—*gjentagelsen*—has similar connotations. It is about taking back something that was once ours, re-taking our possession. In both the English and Danish etymologies of the word, there is a sense of "sameness" to what is repeated. As in, I give you a book and you return the same book to me. But repetition in Kierkegaard is defined by its motion, by an individual's *becoming* and willing one's self. So as a result, what is returned in repetition is the single individual. Repetition is renewal *and* recollection, and what turns out to be reported in repetition is also that which is *new*. The contours of what is returned is something Deleuze tackles on the way to his own theories of repetition and difference. He writes,

> Finally, to return to nominal concepts: is it the identity of the nominal concept which explains the repetition of a word? Take the example of rhyme: it is indeed verbal repetition, but repetition which includes the difference between two words and inscribes that difference at the heart of a poetic Idea, in a space which it determines.[42]

In his text *Difference and Repetition*, what Gilles Deleuze highlights with repetition is precisely the difference that gets returned; the difference qua difference. And yet for Deleuze to speak of difference is to imply repetition; they are such close kins that one simply cannot speak of one without the other. Taking his cue from both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Deleuze offers repetition as that which is "freed from being repetition of

[42] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 21.

an original self-identical thing so that it can be the repetition of difference."[43] In Kierkegaard, repetition (or the eternal return, for Nietzsche) is not the repeating of the same thing over; it is, in fact, the repetition of that which is altogether different—of that which is decidedly *dis*similar. The non-identical repetition in Deleuze is what gives rise to difference. He writes, "Difference itself is therefore *between* two repetitions: between the superficial repetition of the identical and instantaneous external elements that it contracts, and the profound repetition of the internal totalities of an always variable past…"[44] Delueze will go on to say that repetition is that in which nothing takes place and in which everything takes place. Difference occurs precisely within this repetitive moment, when non-identity returns onto itself. As a result, difference is not drawn *from* repetition but rather the in-between. It is like a "skin which unravels, the external husk of a kernel of difference and more complicated internal repetitions."[45]

What is interesting to note about repetition, however, is that what is essentially "returned" is not a negative differential, but "positive differential multiplicity."[46] Traditionally, philosophy thought of repetition as difference without a concept; that what was returned was both generated by an external force and placed difference "outside the identical concept, and the identical concept outside itself."[47] One gets the sense that

[43] Smith and Protevi, "Deleuze".

[44] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition,* 287.

[45] Ibid., 76.

[46] Ibid., 288.

[47] Ibid.

traditional repetition offered a movement that was itself content-less and that was driven more or less by quantifying the difference external to the movement. What is different in Deleuze's notion is that repetition is *itself* differential. We are not talking here of an identity comparing/contrasting itself to another identity, where difference is again subordinated to identity. Rather a Deleuzian repetition is filled with excess, divergence, and disparity aimed at decentering a system and rupturing "the framework of conceptual representation."[48] Said another way, repetition is intrinsic to the Idea and intrinsic to difference. They are the "combined object, the 'simultaneous' of the Idea."

Further along in Deleuze's work on repetition he invokes Nietzsche's "eternal return of the same" more explicitly, and begins to spin out the ways what "returns" is affirmation. For instance, in *Zarathustra* it is not the identical that returns, nor "the Same and the Similar, the analogous and the Opposed." All would be concepts of identity relating from their negativity. Rather, what returns is itself excessive and indicative of the very world itself. Deleuze writes,

> For 'one' repeats eternally, but 'one' now refers to the world of impersonal individualities and pre-individual singularities. The eternal return is not the effect of the Identical upon a world become similar, it is not an external order imposed upon the chaos of the world; on the contrary, the eternal return is the internal identity of the world and of chaos, the Chaosmos.[49]

If we are to see Deleuze's project as the articulation of—in some ways—an anti-Kantian or anti-Platonic transcendentalism, then this is where the "difference" becomes striking. Metaphysics traditionally clings to a world of order and structure, of representation, and

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid., 299.

understands difference as a relation between two (or more) identities. But Deleuze will disrupt this genealogy, replacing order with chaos, centering with de-centering, identity with difference, and the negative with the affirmative. Difference simply *is*. We are oriented to the radically immanent by virtue of difference in itself, and by virtue of a repetition which has no prior identity and no internal resemblance. In the Deleuzian transcendentalism, the simulacra is the system by which "different relates to difference *by means of* difference itself," and its effects extend to our unconscious, to language, and to history.[50] In short, repetition and difference are the methods by which nothing really changes, and yet everything fundamentally changes.

For both Kierkegaard and Deleuze, repetition is defined by its becoming, and by an individual's willing affirmation of that becoming. Deleuze is, of course, a thinker of radical immanence, such that the idea of a Christian God who wills repetition stands in direct opposition to his more Nietzschean leanings. But Deleuze's read of Kierkegaardian repetition offers us a helpful window into repetition's role in metaphysics, which is to say, repetition for both—and what *changes in repetition*—is the very essence of existence. As Eriksen writes, "In recollection becoming is traced back to being, in repetition being arises from becoming; in recollection being precedes becoming while in repetition becoming precedes being."[51] To paraphrase Kant, repetition creates the conditions for the possibilities of metaphysics.

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[50] Ibid.

[51] Eriksen, *Kierkegaard's Category of Repetition,* 113

One of Deleuze's early critiques of Kierkegaardian repetition is the latter's insistence that ascending to the religious stage represents a kind of "settling" of identity after an object's return. But it is a critique Deleuze revises in *Cinema I* when he says that Kierkegaardian repetition is "for all times," a concept that Deleuze associates with the dispersal of identity. In other words, what Deleuze and Kierkegaard emphasize is repetition's ongoing renewal of the self, a move that an individual must will to actualize their own self-transformation.

The Paradox of Faith

For Kierkegaard, this self-transformation via repetition is not simply the individual deciding to muster their will to repeat. As we have seen throughout, willing repetition is willing an encounter with God. And to will repetition is to will a paradox. Near the end of *Repetition* Constantin writes,

> If one wishes to illustrate that the meaning of repetition in the world of the individuality is different from its meaning in the world of nature and in a simple repetition, I do not think one can do it more definitely. When repetition is defined in that way, it is transcendent, a religious movement by virtue of the absurd—when the borderline of the wondrous is reached, eternity is the true repetition.[52]

For a writer that mostly eschews salient points so they can be embedded a bit more opaquely in narrative form, this gets to the heart of repetition. Repetition is a movement of freedom and transcendence, yes, but it is also a movement that opens the individual to a *moment* in which the paradox of faith is revealed: the infinite becomes finite; eternal becomes temporal; and against all odds and possibilities, what one has resigned to lose has been restored by virtue of a movement of absurdity.

[52] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 305.

When Kierkegaard says, “eternity is the true repetition,” he is trying to highlight precisely this paradox. Mooney writes, “One gets the world, the finite and familiar, back again, repeated, but now under the aegis of infinite value, limitless importance.” (297) Repetition flows from eternity, and therefore to be open to repetition is to be open to eternity. When, like Abraham and Job, one touches the power of the absolute, one has returned everything but different and now, in light of a profound encounter with God.

Chapter Five: On the Possibility of Transcendence in the Lacanian Subject

The selfhood offered throughout Kierkegaard's trio of 1843 texts and (later) the *Sickness Unto Death* stitch together a subject that internalizes the Hegelian dialectic and makes personal and existential movements to receive—with openness and via repetition—one's world back again. Of course, as we have discussed, the concept of repetition is perhaps one of Kierkegaard's most difficult concepts to untangle in his writing, but given how central repetition is within his most influential texts, one can reasonably hold repetition as a hermeneutical key for the rest of his work. And as we saw in chapter two, repetition is itself a concept that draws from a philosophical well of thinkers that privilege motion over and against the philosophical bias for *stasis*. At its core, repetition is concept that weaves together individual freedom, transcendence, and, most importantly, the idea that becoming is this inward movement.

Kierkegaardian repetition also sits at an interesting pivot in philosophy's history. It is *backward-looking* in the sense that draws directly from the Aristotelian concept of *kinesis*, and it is situated as a response to an emerging Hegelian discourse that only gives us the *illusion* of motion, rather than actual motion. But it is also *forward-looking* in the sense that it sets the table for later writers like Heidegger, Adorno, Deleuze, and Derrida to all engage themes of repetition in their work. Meanwhile Kierkegaard's contemporary, Nietzsche, also deals with a version of repetition when he writes about the eternal return of the same. But for most of these writers, though, repetition is a philosophical category

to interrogate or, in the case of Nietzsche, a radically *immanent* movement, not an existential category linked to transcendence. Of course, the way Kierkegaard and Nietzsche frame repetition is very similar. For both, repetition invites novelty and transformation; and each characterize repetition as being outside natural and ethical laws. They also see repetition as opposed to any memory or habit, but rather, repetition is that which looks to the future. And yet, where Nietzsche's project ends in the death of God and the dissolution of the self, Kierkegaard's repetition concludes with a leap of faith and a self grounded in a transcendent power.

Meanwhile, Freud never mentions Kierkegaard in his writings, but he picks up the theme of repetition and takes it in a very different direction than one which leads to a sense of becoming and change. For Freud, repetition is established as a symptom which cannot be resolved in our memories and haunts us despite our inability to trace its source. In other words, it is not just that we repeat something—a behavior as the result of a trauma, for instance—but that we are compelled to repeat it because we have fully repressed it. He writes, "He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he *repeats* it, without of course, knowing that he repeats it."[1] This repression does not mean we have forgotten, necessarily, but through analysis, we can come to properly remember the past as a way of preventing repetition. This relationship between repression and repetition is

[1] Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* ed by James Strachey. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 150.

something Deleuze will pithily deride decades later in *Difference and Repetition* when he summarizes it thusly, "I do not repeat because I repress, I repress because I repeat…"[2]

We will explore Freudian repetition a bit more carefully below, especially as Lacan filters it through his own "return to Freud." However, the goal of this final chapter is, admittedly, a speculative one. We began this project by establishing the post-Lacanian subject as one characterized by constitutive lack. The predominant philosophical discourse has, rightly, taken up the dis-integration of the Cartesian cogito, but rather then generating new theories around the subject, it simply defaulted to an "addiction" to theories of the subject's absence. Yet, throughout the previous chapters, we have seen how Kierkegaardian selfhood offered a similar subject-without-ontology, but grounded the self in both God and a sense of *becoming*. It is a subject that relies on repetition to catalyze a sense of change, but that also is itself a repetition. For this final chapter, however, I want to ask whether Kierkegaardian repetition is a helpful rejoinder to this post-structural addiction to absence. If the subject offered by Lacan is the result of one's alienation and lack, can we find a way through Lacanian subjectivity that provides the subject with more continuity and, therefore, an openness to transcendence? In other words, can a subject characterized by traumatic lack be capable of any move outside of its own constitution? And if so, what might transcendence be in the context of a subject without much of a "there" there at all?

The Lacanian subject is a difficult topic to write about in the oeuvre of an already difficult thinker. But leaning on our work from chapters two through four, our goal is to

[2] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition,* 16.

pursue a "reclamation" of the subject through our understanding of repetition, using it as a lens to re-read Lacan's writings on repetition. Of course, at first glance, Lacan ostensibly has more in common with Freud than Kierkegaard, and as we will see, many writers (rightly) see Lacanian repetition indebted to the Freudian notion that we repeat because of a repressed trauma. But Lacan mentions Kierkegaard's *Repetition* in several spots in his seminars, including Seminar II and *The Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis*, where he calls the text "…dazzling in its lightness and ironic play…"[3] And he affirms in the following paragraph that, indeed, "Repetition demands the new."[4] So throughout this chapter our goal is to construct a version of Lacanian repetition that shows its indebtedness to Kierkegaard, and that can offer more than just a re-enactment of repressed memories.

Lacan's Return to Freud

Lacan's project was famously a "return to Freud," but of course, this "return" was also an "advance" of Freud, and as a result, he can be a notoriously difficult writer to approach. Part of this difficulty stems from the reality that his books and seminars reflect a variety of influences that, in addition to Freud, include phenomenology, structuralism, existentialism, Ferdinand Saussure, and Claude Levi-Strauss.[5] Yet, in the same way Derrida's discursive writings were a way of inscribing new meaning into a text, Lacan's "return" to Freud was both a resuscitation of his methods, and a launching point for

[3] Lacan, *The Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis*, 61.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, xvi.

Lacan's own theories. Foucault observes that Lacan's reading of Freud is, like Derrida, one that marks the "empty spaces that have been masked by omission or concealed in a false and misleading plenitude."[6] And indeed, Lacan felt a certain confidence in his reading of Freud, admitting he was one of the only thinkers to truly understand his work, "This is precisely why the unconscious, which tells the truth about truth, is structured like a language, and why I, in so teaching, tell the truth about Freud who knew how to let the truth—going by the name of the unconscious—speak."[7] Lacan would even develop his own registers to mirror Freud's structure of id, ego, and super-ego; the Lacanian trio of the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real loosely map onto Freud's categories, and they will go on to form the foundation of Lacan's work in the decades to follow.

In addition to Lacan acting as a fulcrum of several different philosophical and theoretical streams, Lacan's own positions are ever-evolving, and many commentators note that any discussion of Lacan should highlight an "early" Lacan and a "later" Lacan.[8] For instance, the early Lacan is marked by an emphasis on a reworking Freud's theories using frameworks such as structural linguistics, philosophy, and even mathematics. These early seminars introduce some of Lacan's foundational concepts, including those of the imaginary, symbolic, and the real; the mirror stage; *objet a;* the structure of the Other; and jouissance. The later Lacan, however, will build on these concepts while also altering them. And through his later seminars—notably 11-27—he will work more on areas of

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[6] Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1977), 135.

[7] Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits,* trans Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 737.

[8] See Pound and Fink.

trauma, sex, love, the unconscious, and the four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis (unconscious and subject, drive, repetition, and transference). In short, Lacan's oeuvre was enigmatic: he both returned to Freud but "deconstructed" Freud; he can be called both a structuralist and a post-structuralist; and some of his concepts can be difficult to speak about with confidence.

One of the hardest concepts to extrapolate from his writings, however, is some version of the subject. Lacan will discuss subjectivity at various stages in his writings, but as Bruce Fink points out, he relentlessly destabilizes the subject from its moorings in Western thought. And, like a good post-structuralist, his writings also try to expose the structures of subjectivity upon which psychoanalysis and literature rely.[9] So the result is that Lacan both assumes and denies the presence of the subject simultaneously, something he affirms in Seminar XXIII when he writes, "The subject is never more than supposed."[10] However, Lacan's inability to coalesce around some idea of the subject does not prevent Lacan from supposing one in his own writings. As Fink points out, the subject seems to be a "necessary assumption…a construct without which psychoanalytic experience cannot be accounted for."[11] So while the subject is an issue for Lacan, it takes on a variety of different meanings and forms throughout his oeuvre.[12] For our purposes, however—and to understand the meaning of repetition within the subject—we need to

[9] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject,* 35.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] In my view, Fink does an excellent job of threading the various interpolations of the subject throughout his text, specifically see chapter 4.

establish a brief idea of the Lacanian subject and, specifically, the inspiration he drew from Freud.

The Early Lacan

The Freudian subject represents a departure from the autonomous and sovereign subject first outlined by Descartes (of course, as we will see below, Lacan sees the Freudian subject as starting from the same place as Descartes). Where Descartes's *cogito* constructed the world around him, the psychoanalytic turn led by Freud in the late 19th century emphasized a maturing ego that, through the process of analysis, can become a solid ego capable of adapting to social norms and values. In this view, the ego is brought to full maturity by interrogating the raw, sensuous impulses of our id, those dark places of our subconscious that drive and orient our desires and neuroses. The overall trajectory here is a progressive one of maturation; the more one examines their instinctual drives and their associated taboos the more one is able to shed the oppressiveness of the infantile stages which trap their subconscious.[13] Only when one has learned to master those subconscious urges of the id can they establish a fuller, more mature ego. Importantly, however, this ego is never "finished" or "complete" in any meaningful sense, ala a Cartesian subject. Rather it remains as an ongoing project in the work of the individual with (perhaps) assistance from the analyst.

Now, this is (admittedly) a limited summary of Freud's subject, but at the very least, there is an assumption of a "there" there, a recognition that there is something uniquely deterministic at the source of our behavior and instincts. Lacan's own read of

[13] Paul Fry, "Lacan" (Class Lecture, Yale University, February 24, 2009).

Freud in his early seminars talks of this ego-id relationship as a "breach," a moment when the unconscious "'surges forth'…at a particular conjuncture"[14] only to recede as quickly as it appears. Because so much is made in Freud's psychology of "slips" or "interruptions" of the unconscious into normal discourse, we are led to believe that it is "thus quite natural that we attribute some sort of intentionality, agency, or even subjectivity to it."[15] So in Lacan's view, the Freudian subject is deeply embedded in the unconscious and breaks forth in rather intrusive and unpredictable ways, forcing us to confront those recessed, libidinal desires and their impact(s) on our fragile, evolving egos. The role of the analyst, then, is to assist the analysand in further discovery of a "true" or "correct" image of themselves.

Lacan, however, abhors this kind of Freudian subjectivity because, as Paul Fry notes, "the emergence of a stable and mature ego is presupposed by the idea that there is such a thing as stable human subjectivity…that there is such a thing as consciousness from which our communicative and linguistic and other sorts of systems derive."[16] And indeed, Lacan's own point of view is that the Freudian subject starts from the same place as Descartes's: in certainty.[17] For Lacan the subject is not any kind of independent agent

[14] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject,* 42.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Fry, Yale Lecture.

[17] Lacan observes "Freud's method is Cartesian—in the sense that he sets out from the basis of the subject of certainty. The question is—of what can one be certain? With this aim, the first thing to be done is to overcome that which connotes anything to do with the content of the unconscious —especially when it is a question of extracting it from the experience of the dream—to overcome that which floats everywhere, that which marks, stains, spots, the text of any dream communication—I am not sure, I doubt." See Lacan, *Four Fundamentals*, 35.

that "qualifies as a seat of agency or activity" but is rather "the seat of fixation and narcissistic attachment" that is "by its very nature a distortion, an error, a repository of misunderstanding."[18] Writing in his essay on the "Mirror Stage," he will describe the development of the infant's Ideal-I as a that which "situates the agency known as the ego…in a fictional direction that will remain irreducible for any single individual or, rather, that will asymptotically approach the subject's becoming…"[19] In other words, though one typically understands the constellation of impressions the infant receives as the beginnings of an outline to a coherent sense of self, Lacan says that it is impossible to undergo a process for which one can have an "irreducible" sense of self, and any attempts are doomed to only be asymptotical. Thus by inverting (collapsing?) this traditional Freudian thinking of the ego-as-self, Lacan situates the ego as an object rather than a subject and nullifies any leftover claims of the subject as a distinctive, active, autonomous being. The "I" or "self" is now impossible, as the ego is indistinct from the subject, a "fixed bundle of objectified coordinates, a libidinally invested and reified entity…[which] speaks through the ego while remaining irreducibly distinct from it."[20] As Fink states, what Lacan achieves here is a resituating of "I" as the subject in a sentence—"I think that I am…"—to merely nothing more than the subject of the statement in question.

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[18] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 37.

[19] Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits,* 76.

[20] Adrian Johnston, "Jacques Lacan," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/lacan/>

So if we strip subjectivity of the ego—or the ego of subjectivity—we are left with an inert unconscious that, Lacan adds, is nothing but pure language and symbols of thought. Rather than being a site of libidinal impulse, Lacan articulates the unconscious as a "thinking" unconscious which, similar to Freud, has the power to seep through our daily use of language. As Bruce Fink points out,

> Certain words or expressions present themselves to us while we are speaking or writing—not always the ones we want—sometimes so persistently that we are virtually forced to speak or write them before being able to move on to others. A certain image or metaphor may come to mind without our having sought it out or in any way attempted to construct it and thrust itself upon us so forcibly that we can but reproduce it and only then try to tease out its meaning.[21]

Lacan describes this as a parallel process in which our speaking and "unconscious thought" move with one another. But how do we account for these parapraxal slips? What do they tell us about either our natures or the work of our unconscious?

Fink points out that language for Lacan takes on a life of its own and comes instantiated with its own codes, ethics, systems, rules, and big Other. As such, language operates independently of us and with its own system of referents and structures. So when we look to this language and symbolic-filled unconscious for meaning, we will be massively disappointed (it is here, it should be pointed out, that Lacan is his most structural in his work, attempting to "decode" the linguistic structures at work within the unconscious). Where Freud looks to these unconscious "interruptions" or "breaches" as wedges into what is giving shape to the ego (and thus offer some kind of meaning or explanation for one's behavior), Lacan refuses to assign meaning to them, instead seeing

[21] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject,* 15.

the unconscious as "quasi-mathematical inscriptions…[that] *don't mean anything*."[22] The work of the analyst, then, is to uncover ("decipher") the linguistic and mathematical structure at work in one's unconscious and lead the analysand to "truth", which is wholly different than meaning. As Fink indicates,

> The unconscious is not something one knows, but rather something that is known. What is unconscious is known *unbeknownst* to the "person" in question: it is not something one "actively," consciously grasps, but rather something which is "passively" registered, inscribed, or counted. And this unknown knowledge is locked into the connection between signifiers; it consists in this very connection. *This kind of knowledge has no subject, nor does it need one.*[23]

If the ego were any "thing" at all, then we might be tempted to look for meaning in some substantial way. But given that we have already established the ego as little more than objectified coordinates in some kind of relationship with a linguistically and symbolically structured unconscious, the search for meaning is doomed before it almost even begins. Which is to say, what interests Lacan in this structural analysis is not the substance or result of the connections between signifiers, but the very connections themselves. And as we pivot towards Lacan's post-structural rendering of the subject, those signifiers will become significant attributes to the subject's construction.

The Later Lacan

While it is nearly impossible to say what the subject necessarily "is" in Lacan's thought, we can broadly sketch the contours of a subject which is wholly de-centered, something Lacan was keen to do in the 1950's and 60's. But if we are to grant this

[22] Ibid., 21.

[23] Ibid., 23.

premise of something/one de-centered, then once again we must ask the question, what does it mean to say "I"? Is the "I" just a set of coded functions that require structural analysis, and the corresponding subject is then necessarily diffuse? Or is there something more important at work here?

Language (unconscious thought) operates parallel to our speaking, breaking in at various intervals to tell us something about what is going on beneath the surface. However, for Lacan, we are not meant to interrogate these "break-ins" for any meaningful meaning. Rather, this kind of break-in or "breach" into our speaking tells Lacan that we are a split subject: split between "ego and unconscious, between conscious and unconscious, between an ineluctably false sense of self and the automatic functioning of language (the signifying chain) in the unconscious."[24] And the very "split" nature of our subject is the subject itself; these two "halves" of the subject share no common ground—no overlap in a psychoanalytic Venn diagram. If Freud thought these two "halves" interact and constitute one another, then for Lacan they constitute each other only by virtue of their complete separation.

Zizek's read of Lacan on this score is helpful, as he articulates how this split subject is rendered in relationship to traditional Freudian views. He writes,

> [Lacan's] point….is much more unsettling: I am deprived of even my most intimate subjective experience, the way things 'really seem to me', deprived of the fundamental fantasy that constitutes and guarantees the core of my being, since I can never consciously experience it and assume it.[25]

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[24] Ibid., 45.

[25] Slavoj Zizek, *How to Read Lacan* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2006), 53.

What is at the metaphorical heart of Lacan's subject is the inability for us to access that part of ourselves which (we think) makes us who we are because the subject is simply a trail of signifiers. Traditionally speaking, says Zizek, we consider ourselves a conscious subject the moment we can say, "Here's my view and feeling of the world and no one can take that from me, because it is uniquely and wholly mine." But the Lacanian analyst's job is to precisely deprive the analysand of that "fundamental fantasy that regulates the universe of his (self-)experience."[26]

What constitutes the subject is this gap between the fantasies it holds and the very inaccessibility of those fantasies by the subject. In other words, the subject is "empty" of any its ability to access those phenomena that characterize our inner state. For Lacan,

> psychoanalysis allows us to formulate a paradoxical phenomenology without a subject—phenomena arise that are not phenomena *of* a subject, appearing *to* a subject. This does not mean that the subject is not involved here—it is but precisely in the mode of *exclusion,* as divided, as the agency that is not able to assume the very core of his or her inner experience.[27]

The subject takes on this subversive tone, contrary to the Freudian subject that directly experiences his/her unconscious, as there is a relationship between the non-phenomenal subject and the phenomena that is *inaccessible* to the subject in the first place.

When viewed this way the subject's "being" is nothing other than the breach of the split *within* discourse, having been replaced by the flash of the signifier only to pass away once it is been expressed. As Fink adds, "Temporally speaking, the subject appears only as a pulsation, an occasional impulse or interruption that immediate dies away or is

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[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid., 54.

extinguished, 'expressing itself,' as it does, by means of the signifier."[28] If there is anything to be said for certain about the Lacanian subject at this point, it is that the grounds for the possibility of subjectivity begin with these momentary flashes of signification, and the acceptance of responsibility for that which interrupts.

Lacanian Desire

It is impossible to talk about this later Lacanian subject, though, without exploring issues of desire and lack, and specifically, how these are triggered in the subject by the desire for the (big) Other. This desire begins early for each of us, as we look to our m(O)ther to fulfill our basic wants and needs. As Lacan outlines in his essay on the Mirror Stage, the mother is the very completion of the infant's incomplete self and as such, and finds it sheer terror when the mother is away for any significant amount of time. At some point, however, the mother can no longer provide for the infant's every needs, if only because she needs to provide for her own and has other priorities that take her away from becoming fused with her child. What the child experiences in this moment is the alienation of the mother's absence, a lack, which "gives rise to the pure possibility of being" precisely because of the awareness of the absence.[29] As Lacan writes, "The function of the mirror stage thus turns out, in my view, to be a particular case of the function of imagos, which is to establish a relationship between an organism and its reality…"[30] Quite rightly, this encounter with "reality" is troubling for the child, who

[28] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject,* 41.

[29] Ibid., 52.

[30] Lacan, *Ecrits*, 78.

spends considerable amounts of time attempting to make up for and fill in the absence of her presence, so much so that the child will align "themselves with her every whim and fancy. Her wish is their command, her desire their demand."[31] As a result, the child's orientation and construction of their desire is tuned to the desire of their mother so deeply that they desire what and *in the same way* she desires it. In other words, when Lacan writes, "Man's desire is the Other's desire,"[32] he has precisely this kind of dependence in mind, a desire that is "structured exactly like the Other's. Man learns to desire *as an other*, as if he were some other person."[33]

Woven into this desire are complex themes of alienation, lack, separation, and psychosis, but desire, and specifically, desire for the other, lies at the heart of Lacanian subjectivity. For Lacan the Other is written into the triad of the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real. At the Symbolic level, the Other acts as "society's unwritten constitution [and] is the second nature of every speaking being: it is here, directing and controlling my acts; it is the sea I swim in, yet it remains ultimately impenetrable."[34] We spoke earlier of language coming with its own sets of rules and guidelines, but also it is own Other. And indeed, at the Symbolic level the Other acts as that which "watches" my every move and sets the conditions for how and why I act, whether I acknowledge the Other's presence or not. As Zizek points out, it is virtually impossible to recognize its influence, if only

[31] Ibid., 54.

[32] Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 38.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Zizek, *How to Read Lacan*, 8.

because it is the very sea in which I swim and is impossible to codify into a set of explicit and identifiable codes and/or constructs. And yet it is subversive and powerful enough to dictate the very ways in which I choose (or not) to act.

And yet, paradoxically, the Other's existence is also enormously tenuous because it is wholly a subjective proposition. Zizek continues, "It exists only insofar as the subjects *act if it exists*…It is the substance of the individuals who recognize themselves in it, the ground of their whole existence…[but] this substance is actual only in so far as individuals believe in it and act accordingly."[35] In other words, the Other has a co-creative relationship with the subject, as it seems to be the product of a mutual constitution: it dictates my desire and my actions, but it is also there only because the subject instantiates it in the first place, giving over one's power to it. In the case of the child's relationship to its mother, she as the mOther is the very point of orientation for the child's desire. The child relates to the split, indecipherable subject in the mOther, asking myriad of questions only because the child needs to know where they fit in, what place they hold, to "secure a place, to try to be the object of their parents' desire—to occupy that between-the-lines 'space' where desire shows its face, words being used in the attempt to express desire, and yet ever failing to do so."[36] In other words, it is the split and indecipherable subject of the mother that becomes the Other for the child, and to whom the child responds and attempts to construct themselves to and for.

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[35] Ibid., 10.

[36] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject,* 54.

If Other represents this subtle and dictatorial presence that (in some important ways) constitutes the subject, then we need to give careful attention to the second part of Lacan's formulation of the relationship between the subject and desire. To return to a quote above, Lacan famously declared that, "Man's desire is the desire of the Other."[37] As Fink notes, this phrase exposes the Other's desire *as* object *a*.[38] In other words, a child wants his/her Mother's full attention and desire but the Mother's desire almost always extends beyond the child. As such, her desire for independence creates a rift between mother and child, a rift which leads to the advent of the object *a*. This is the "remainder" produced when the unity the child longs for—a hypothetical unity from the start—breaks down and they become separated. By holding tightly to this "remainder," however, "the split subject…can sustain the illusion of wholeness; by clinging to the object *a,* the subject is able to ignore his or her division."[39] Because our desire for the Other is a desire for (in the case of a mother) an incomplete, indecipherable, and split subject—as well as one who holds desires for more than just us—we are bound to be left with the residue or the "trace" of how we want to be fully desired. In the alienation of not being fully desired, we cling to those remainders to give us the illusion of being desired fully, to "sustain the illusion of wholeness" and keep the pain of the division of our subject at bay as long as possible.

[37] Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 38.

[38] Ibid., 59.

[39] Ibid.

Desire and Repetition

If the Lacanian subject is "never more than an assumption," then at the very least, the subject's awareness arises by virtue of realizing what it is not—i.e. I am not my mother; she is not me. This subject arises from the negativity of the mirror stage, a moment of self-diremption that establishes the I. It is, as we have seen throughout this project, a far cry from the self-same or self-identical subject found in Descartes. And it is easy to see the radically immanent nature of this subject; this is a subject created by the awareness of one's own lack, and this lack haunts the one for who this *is* a lack. Its constitution is rooted (such as it is) in the break of the relationship between a mother and her child, and not, by contrast, in a sustaining power like God or anything else that could be considered transcendent. Contrary to the self in Kierkegaard, which is actively choosing and willing itself toward its own becoming, the subject articulated here is, in a sense, "trapped" by this (unconscious) desire.

This desire creates a linguistic and symbolic structure completely inaccessible to the one who is, further defining the absence at the heart of our subjectivity. And as a result, we act out this structure despite our best attempts to escape it. Mari Ruti points out that a way to think about this is through repetition compulsion, an idea Lacan "returns" to in Freud. Our unconscious desires manifest through a deterministic trajectory in which, like a train on its tracks, we are "aimed at a designated destination, even if it has already reached it a thousand times or (and this may be even more exasperating) even if this destination keeps receding indefinitely."[40] In this view, we are haunted by our desires and

[40] Mari Ruti, *The Singularity of Being* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 14.

doomed to compulsively repeat the traumatic structures in an effort to "fill" our set of unmet desires. Ruti continues,

> The repetition compulsion translates desire into a mechanical, fully automatic force that eludes our efforts to redirect it. It responds neither to rational argumentation nor to emotional persuasion, sweet-talking, coaxing, or blackmail. It holds its course through the various changes we undergo in our lives, persisting beneath the densities of our loves, losses, families, friendships, careers, triumphs, hardships, and fleeting moments of delight. When we least expect it—when we believe that we have finally outrun it—it catches up with us, emerging from a dark tunnel or from behind a sharp curve.[41]

The paradox of this determinism is that we both cannot escape it despite our best efforts, but that we also rely on it as an organizing principle for the chaos of our lives. Our compulsion to repeat offers a protective, though symptomatic shield without which our lives would nearly too difficult to handle. And as Lacan will point out, since the repetition compulsion acts as an articulation of unexpressed desire, the determinism gives structure to our jouissance so that our compulsion to repeat becomes more manageable. In this sense, the Zizekian idea that we "enjoy our symptoms" becomes a recommendation to simply submit to who we already are, or in the Nietzschean sense, become who we already are. In other words, we are wholly absorbed and entangled by our unfulfilled, unattained, and (often) unrecognized desires, so much so that this repetition structures the subject by giving us a kind of consistency despite our frustration. While repetition gives structure to the subject's *jouissance* so we might be able to cope, it also offers the subject an organizing principle around which we can manage (or "enjoy") the symptoms that plague us.

[41] Ibid., 15.

For Kierkegaard repetition is the return of that which one has resigned to lose; one is given anew what one has willingly resigned to sacrifice. Kierkegaard is clear that repetition stands opposed to memory and recollection; repetition is the future, a remembering forward that "makes one happy." But for Freud, repetition is precisely the opposite. To repeat in Freud is to explore the force and cadence of a psychoanalytic symptom; we repeat because we cannot remember, and repetition is what irrupts into this gap of memory. The goal of analysis, then, is to help remember the past in order to avoid it from haunting us, to fill in those gaps of signifiers that we have repressed. As Dolar writes,

> If we repeat something, this means that we cannot take a distance to it, it does not leave us in peace, we cannot draw a clear line between past and present, as one can in memory, which is based on such a line. Repetition pertains to a past which forces its way into the present, a past which refuses to be past and be laid to rest.[42]

For Freud and Kierkegaard, repetition stands at this moment between past and present, and the former uses analysis to look backward to fill those gaps. When we submit to analysis, we attempt to return to those memories so we can heal and attempt to cease our symptomatic behaviors. In other words, repetition is a behavior one must attempt to bring under control through exploring one's self in analysis, and to re-integrate our subjectivity within the symbolic.

Of course, Kierkegaard lived shortly before Freud (his birth and the former's death are less than a decade apart), but nonetheless, Kierkegaard was critical of any notion of "looking back." From the start of *Repetition*, he positioned the Greek idea of

[42] Mladen Dolar, "Which Repetition?" (unpublished manuscript, January 17, 2017).

recollection (which we can infer is similar to Freudian repetition) as a "discarded garment that does not fit, however beautiful it is, for one has outgrown it."[43] And yet, critical as he was of recollection, repetition (in his work) similarly stands at this moment of past and present. The difference is that Kierkegaard's repetition is a looking forward, a task of freedom and a task *for* freedom. So we have two very different ideas of a similar philosophical concept. In the view of Freud, we have repetition as a haunting of repressed memory that needs to be encountered and sorted; and in Kierkegaard, repetition is a forward-looking posture of openness and freedom. But Freudian repetition suffers from the worst of classical metaphysics in which there is precisely nothing new. Unlike Kierkegaard, it is neither a movement of generativity or novelty. Nothing is given, nothing is gained. Only more of the same for the sake of the same.

Lacan read both of these writers, of course, and many commentators have read Lacanian repetition as a tacit resuscitation of Freud's. As we saw with Ruti above, Lacanian repetition situates the subject on track to repeat "…symptomatic fixations…such as Anxiety, Depression, Disenchantment, Weariness, Sorrow, Bitterness, and Misery."[44] The point, of course, is that we are doomed to "repeat" our original desires despite our attempts (or precisely *because* we attempt) to repress them. Regardless of how much we try to outrun those desires or work through their causes, they will continue to haunt us…and we love it. Ruti goes on to say,

> We tend to compulsively return to the same nexus of (largely unfulfillable) desires, the same messy tangle of existential aporias. This can be annoying, to

[43] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 132.

[44] Ruti, *The Singularity of Being,*15.

> say the least. But there is also a 'functional' side to it, for it is precisely this compulsion that introduces a modicum of consistency to our lives—that, over time, allows us to attain a sense of continuity.[45]

Again, Lacanian repetition is unavoidable and deterministic; it provides a structure to our jouissance, to our mess of unmet desires, and prevents us from collapsing into an abyss of existential unpredictability. In short, repetition is both a curse and a shield that makes our life bearable.

This is view of repetition is echoed by Adrian Johnston, who interprets Lacanian desire as an attempt to recover the Freudian lost object. Any attempts to reach some kind of *telos* within this desire are Sisyphean, at best:

> Whereas Lacanian drive is the enjoyment of veering off teleological course, Lacanian desire does not enjoy this, instead remaining fixated upon its ever-receding *teloi* past and future. Like intrinsically failed instincts always operating 'beyond the pleasure principle', desires are dissatisfied and dissatisfying stucknesses in impossible, doomed teleologies.[46]

Lacan was sympathetic to the Freudian notion of the lost object, to be sure, and specifically as it relates to its role within our desire. For Freud, though, an object was never lost in any absolute sense; only a deliberate finding and then *re*-finding of any object. Lacan, however, shows us we desire for a thing we never really had to begin with. So, as we engage in vain attempts to secure the thing, we are left dissatisfied and ornery because it refuses to fill that desire. As Fink points out,

> If the object was never found, strictly speaking, that is perhaps because it is essentially phantasmatic in nature, not corresponding to a *remembered*

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[45] Ibid.

[46] Adrian Johnston, "Repetition and Difference: Žižek, Deleuze and Lacanian Drives" in *Lacan and Deleuze: A Disjunctive Synthesis* ed. Boštjan Nedoh and Andreja Zevnik (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 191.

> experience of satisfaction. There never was such an object in the first place: the 'lost object 'never *was*; it was only constituted as lost after the fact, in that the subject is unable to find it anywhere other than in fantasy or dream life. Using Freud's text as a springboard, the object can be viewed as always already lost.[47]

An important distinction between Freudian and Lacanian repetition, though, is that the latter situates it in the symbolic order. As he writes in *Écrits*, "...it turns out that the symbol's order can no longer be conceived there as constituted by man but must rather be conceived of as constituting him." Just as we saw earlier with the subject being generated by a "constitutive lack," we can also add that the subject is constituted by symbolic repetition borne from desire, a language that originates in a language-filled unconscious but stands as unintelligible and inaccessible to us. So once again we have a subject in Lacan that, though it is constituted by repetition, originates in a space of negativity and absence.

Zizek offers a helpful wrinkle here. Writing in the context of a cultural analysis that tells us we are "free" to enjoy whatever we "desire," Zizek tells us that even those desires become culturally and patriarchally conditioned, such that "what we desire" is equally inaccessible to us because of its unconscious nature, yes, but also because we are fundamentally alienated from our desires, divided (as it were) by language. Therefore, desire is never borne from clear motivations, but rather bound up with the systemic Other in which we live. He writes that instead we must "accept fully this inconsistency of our desire, to accept fully that it is desire itself that sabotages its own liberation…"[48] So if

[47] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 94.

[48] Zizek, *How to Read Lacan*, 39.

Lacan's subject is one generated from lack and desire, then we have here a subject whose desire is outside their control and who is always constituted by that which they do not know, cannot access, and cannot really articulate.

Repetition Without Symbolization

So far, our consideration of repetition as an extension of our latent desire stands quite opposed to the Kierkegaardian repetition we explored in chapters 2-4. Where Kierkegaard saw repetition as the task of freedom, transcendence, and becoming, Lacanian repetition (so far considered) is a framework of determinism that structures our jouissance and keeps us tethered to a certain set of behaviors and outcomes. And from that desire and lack stems a complex matrix of tangled up aporias that emerge as we try to return or "find" that which eludes us. How anti-Kierkegaardian! And indeed, when one wants to compare Kierkegaardian and Lacanian repetition, the consensus of most writers is that, though one may find common themes that each explore (i.e., desire, anxiety, etc.), repetition most certainly is not a theme they are likely to share. And yet, there is a different reading of repetition in Lacan, one that has more in common with Kierkegaard than Freud, and that ultimately liberates the subject from the prison of their (unmet) desires. This is a view of Lacanian repetition that opens the subject toward a renewal and transformation via the work of therapy.

Dolar suggests that Lacan frequently returned to *Repetition* and, if Freud and Kierkegaardian repetition stand opposed to one another, Lacan frequently sided with Kierkegaard's interpretation. In *Seminar II* Lacan writes,

> The man finds his way not on the way of reminiscence, but on the way of repetition. It is here that Kierkegaard paves the way of our Freudian institutions

> by his small book on repetition…Freud distinguishes two entirely different structurations of our human experience—the one which I have named, with Kierkegaard, the way of Antiquity, reminiscence, which presupposes an accord, a harmony between the man and the world of his objects, which makes that he recognizes them because in a way he has always known them—and, as opposed to that, the conquest, the structuration of the world through the effort of work, by way of repetition.[49]

Here we get a sense of Lacan's preference for a Kierkegaardian repetition that has the potential for transformation. As Dolar suggests, one does not "fall ill" because one forgets or because one has repressed their memory; and conversely, one is not healed by reconstruction the particulars of one's past. Rather, Kierkegaardian repetition "has the capacity to transform the past and produce the new, which is the ultimate aim of therapy."[50]

Perhaps the most salient argument around Lacan's preference for a Kierkegaardian read of repetition, however, is from Marcus Pound, who argues that Lacan does not necessarily depart from Freud as much as he is a repeats Freud, and in the repetition, opens up new meanings and possibilities in Freud.[51] By asking his students to only read the first part of *Repetition*, he indicates the distinction Lacan draws between Kierkegaardian and Freudian repetition is to avoid circumscribing Kierkegaardian repetition into the symbolic.[52] The symbolic relies on the repetition of its signs, and signs are interpreted as such only because they have a consistency in repetition. Yet what

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[49] Dolar, "Which Repetition?" 22.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Marcus Pound, *Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma* (London: SCM Press, 2007), 70.

[52] Pound, *Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma,* 71.

Lacan points out is that what is repeated—what is given back or returned in a Kierkegaardian sense—escapes symbolization. Dolar indicates that, in the unsymbolization of the sign,

> One encounters something in repetition that cannot be captured by symbols and signs, it cannot be pinned down by a signifier, and this is what ultimately lies at the core of repetition. Symbolizing it, inscribing it in the realm of the symbolic, pinning it to a signifier, would re-inscribe it into the realm of memory, make it available, assign it a place, fill in the lacuna, but the point is precisely to keep it as the unsymbolizable, as a gap that derails the symbolic, a negativity that cannot be recuperated, something that does not quite exist, but insists through the repetition of the symbols.[53]

For Kierkegaard repetition is a return of that which one has willingly given up (or had taken away). As we saw with Abraham, God's demand for Isaac meant that it required a teleological suspension of the ethical, or in Lacanian terms, an action that lies outside the symbolic. It transcends the symbolic precisely because of its horror, and Kierkegaard's efforts in *Fear and Trembling* embody this attempt to remove the Abraham story from the narrow, cultural Christian symbolism. In other words, Lacanian repetition—by virtue of it "derailing" the symbolic—opens one to something new.

Dolar emphasizes this Lacanian view when he writes,

> …repetition itself produces something that cannot be repeated, but which insists, so what is being repeated is the very impossibility of being repeated…There is an 'almost nothing 'which inhabits the gap, and one can put this as an adage: the gap is never just the gap.[54]

[53] Dolar, "Which Repetition?" 23.

[54] Mladen Dolar, "Tyche, Clinamen, Den," *Continental Philosophy Review* 46, no. 2 (2013): pp. 223-239, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11007-013-9254-0, 228.

Repetition produces something new, yes, but this "newness" is outside the scope of the symbolic structure—it is a repetition that cannot be brought into that order. As the repeatable repeats itself, it emerges in the gap to paradoxically repeat what was never there to begin with. For Lacan, this is also a repetition in and of the Real, that which "resists symbolization absolutely."

Of course, as we see throughout Lacan's writings, the Real is not a "thing" that can show up; it has no ontology or metaphysical status. But, just as repetition in Kierkegaard opens one to eternity, so does repetition in Lacan open one to the haunting specter of the Real. The Real is that which, though it may exist alongside the symbolic, has no symbolic representation. Since it precedes language, it is, as Fink suggests, "…best understood as that which has not yet been symbolized, remains to be symbolized, or even resists symbolization."[55] So once again, repetition sits at this juncture of time and not-time; existence and eternity. And Kierkegaard offers this compelling interpretation of repetition's "newness" that we can read back into Lacan. In the gaps of symbolization—particularly of speech—we can interrogate the "not yet" of our subjectivity, the places where the "moment" of repetition returns the subject all over again.

So, we have seen that there is a way to understand repetition as liberated from the Freudian determinism. That, rather than subjects doomed to repetition of trauma, the Real irrupts into our lives and push us to find or see or embrace something new. Or as Badiou might say, the truth-event breaks in to make the invisible visible. However, one final way to think about the Lacanian subject's posture toward a Kierkegaardian framework of

[55] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 25.

repetition is through the notion of freedom and transcendence, specifically, a restlessness for something more in our subjectivity. As we saw with Kierkegaard, repetition is the willing of one's self to become; a willing of one's self to push past the aesthetic life, for instance, into the ethical one. However, one of the stark differences between the subjectivities is the subject's telos. For Kierkegaard, the goal of any self is to ascend to the religious sphere, to become a knight of faith. Lacanian analysis notoriously rejects a telos, so as to avoid placing any kind of framework of expectation on the subject. Doubly so for transcendence, as Lacan would reject any attempts at interpreting his work through classical concepts of religion and God. And yet, there is, despite one's lack, a gnawing sense of our own finitude and incompleteness that confronts us in the Real.

One of the key movements in Kierkegaard's repetition is its opening of the self to its sustaining power, or God. The "singular individual" is precisely this individual who stands before God and who is constituted by God. Repetition (being given the same thing all over again anew) is a gift that can only be given at infinity; it can never be just finally, totally "given" as "present" (and therefore itself over and done with). It is a gift repeatedly given. Clearly there is not this kind of objective otherness of a God for Lacan. But the Real does play a disruptive, earth-shattering role that pushes the subject to think about itself outside of itself. As Alenka Zupančič writes, "The Real happens to us (we encounter it) *as impossible,* as the 'impossible thing' that turns our symbolic universe upside down and leads to the reconfiguration of this universe."[56] When the symbolic and imaginary structures have been disrupted or dissolved, what remains are these echoes of

[56] As quoted in Ruti, *The Singularity of Being,* 85.

disruption that provoke us to look beyond ourselves. But importantly, not necessarily toward something like God.

Zupančič argues that in Lacanian subjectivity we carry a "stain of infinity," a stain caused by the parasitic movement of *jouissance* which captures us from within, "infinitizing the finite so that instead of us pursuing the infinite, the infinite pursues us, introducing a lamella-like undeadness to our being."[57] She continues,

> The answer to the religious promise of immortality is not the pathos of the finite; the basis of ethics cannot be an imperative which commands us to endorse our finitude and renounce all 'higher', 'impossible' aspirations…The end of the promise of a life after death (i.e., of an infinite outside this world) does not imply that we are henceforth 'enclosed', confined within a finite world. It implies, on the contrary, that the infinite ceaselessly 'parasitizes' the finite. The absence of the beyond, the lack of any exception to the finite, 'infinitizes' the finite…The problem of the infinite is not how to attain it but, rather, how to get rid of its stain, a stain that ceaselessly pursues us. The Lacanian name for this parasitism is enjoyment [*jouissance*].[58]

In other words, it is this persistent and "gnawing" sense that we are not fully self-realized, that we carry a lack in our very constitution, and this lack is what propels us to grasp for the transcendent. "One could say," Ruti writes, "that it is when the lack caused by the signifier meets the (earlier, more originary) lack of the real that the spark of infinity gets ignited."[59] This is a kind of transcendence provoked by and residing within the Lacanian real, a move of being captured *by* the infinite first spurred on by our lack.

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[57] Mari Ruti, "The Singularity of Being: Lacan and the Immortal Within." *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 58 (6), 1124.

[58] Zupančič as quoted in Ruti, *The Singularity of Being*, 23.

[59] Ruti, *The Singularity of Being*, 24.

One of the unique features of Kierkegaard's subjectivity is the ease (and difficulty) with which it considers infinite and transcendent concerns. The infinite is at once always lurking within one's attempts at subjective synthesis, but nearly impossible to attain in any meaningful way. In this sense, Abraham's Knight of Faith is both an exemplar but also wholly otherworldly. It is a kind of gesture towards God that, for Kierkegaard, few have conquered. While Lacan would wholly dismiss that kind of feature to his psychoanalysis, Ruti makes the case that there is a kind of immanent transcendence, a kind of Levinasian atheism that opens one to theism, latent in his thought. She writes,

> The integrity of both self and world [in Lacanian theory] is destabilized, yet this destabilization is also what enables us to experience the acuteness of both... transcendence is no longer a matter of escaping the world, but rather of finding a way to enter more completely into its folds...The more we remain enthralled by the fantasy of an otherworldly sanctuary, the less capable we are of transcendence; our very dreams of transcendence keep us from accessing it.[60]

And perhaps here is where a Lacanian read touches his Kierkegaardian roots most thoroughly. Kierkegaard notes that any attempt to secure with confidence the infinite throws the self into despair; that a self pre-occupied with the "fantasy of an otherworldly sanctuary" is already suffering from the sickness unto death. In our efforts to attain repetition objectively we end up denying repetition. So, for Lacan, the "transcendence" here is not a lust for something otherworldly, but of allowing repetition to break the symbolic and, through those gaps, allow space for the Real to break-in so we can encounter ourselves again, but differently.

[60] Ibid., 27-28.

Final Thoughts

I began this project by situating it within the landscape of post-structuralist subjectivity which, taking its cue from Lacanian alienation, desire, and lack, is more concerned with the ongoing deconstruction of the Cartesian cogito. I argued that Lacan inaugurates this post-structuralist subject and, for many thinkers who come after him, their issue with a metaphysics of subjectivity led them to absence-as-metaphysics; as a result, the subject's ongoing subjugation became simply another substratum on which to base their thinking. I attempted to address this ongoing deconstruction of the subject by highlighting a different read of Lacanian repetition. Many interpreters of Lacan read his writing on the repetition compulsion and assume he picks up the Freudian legacy of the repetition compulsion, i.e., that we repeat because we repress. Given that Lacan's project is dubbed a "return to Freud," I pointed out that Lacan's return is also a repetition that leverages a Derridean-like re-reading to tease out new meanings and interpretations. In the process, I noted that Lacan read *Repetition*, a text that very few readers of Kierkegaard can understand with much clarity, and quite preferred Kierkegaard's concept of repetition to Freud's. Given this reality, I attempted to use repetition as a frame for understanding Lacanian subjectivity anew.

Of course, *Repetition* is a complicated—and often overlooked—text in Kierkegaard's oeuvre. Because of its complexity, my goal was to cut through the numerous (and sometimes competing) interpretations to provide a proper interpretation within the context of Kierkegaard's other works. While Constantine Constantius playfully called the idea of repetition pure speculation, I argued that repetition was the

hermeneutical key for really understanding so much of Kierkegaard's writings. The density is only an issue because Kierkegaard wants to embody so much of his theory—truth is subjective, after all—and, read alongside his other 1843 texts, I argued that one can then see how repetition leads to the self's becoming and, ultimately, their ascension to a knight of faith.

By untangling repetition, I went on to argue that if Lacan read—and preferred—this repetition to Freud's, then the Kierkegaardian self was, in its repetition, an anticipation of post-structuralist subjectivity. In other words, by relying on the determinism of our repetitive traumas, I pointed out that in Lacanian subjectivity there are seeds of freedom, creativity, and our own becoming via the breakdown of the symbolic and the irruption of the real. The idea here is that by re-reading Lacan with more of a Kierkegaardian, we can situate repetition in post-structuralist subjectivity as a way to face our own symbolic structures so that we can actually be freed from them. Read this way, the compulsion to repeat keeps compelling us until we finally stop avoiding and running from the trauma or our attempts to run from that which compels the repetition in the first place. When we do so, we see that what haunted us was not necessarily our repressed traumas, but our very own freedom and possibility. By choosing our freedom—rather than re-enacting it or managing it—we can finally be free to finally open ourselves to the "full acceptance" of one's self, which also happens to be genuine Kierkegaardian repetition that returns our self to ourselves, but different.

I argued at the outset that post-structuralism is addicted to the idea of the subject as dis-integrated; that it is more interested in what the subject *is not* rather than engaging

what the subject could become in light of its destruction. My hope is that by offering a different read of Lacanian repetition, specifically a Kierkegaardian interpretation, we can begin to see the subject as that which interrupts our subjectivity, confronting us with our lack, but triggering in us the haunting to choose our freedom in spite of the anxiety of freedom.

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