

Kierkegaard Studies
Monograph Series

5

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Edited on behalf of the
Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre
by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Hermann Deuser

Monograph Series 5

Edited by
Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Jon Stewart

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Niels Nymann Eriksen

Kierkegaard's Category of Repetition

A Reconstruction

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Abbreviations

(For full references see the Bibliography)

- BT* Martin Heidegger *Being and Time*.
JP Søren Kierkegaard's *Journals and Papers*, vol. 1-7.
KSA Friederich Nietzsche *Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Einzelbänden*.
KW Kierkegaard's *Writings*, vol. I-XXV.
Pap. Søren Kierkegaards *Papirer*, vol. I-XVI.
SKS Søren Kierkegaards *Skrifter*, vol. 1-4.
SV3 Søren Kierkegaards *Samlede værker*, 3rd edition, vol. 1-20.
SZ Martin Heidegger *Sein und Zeit*.

Quotations from Kierkegaard's published works are given with references both to the Danish text and to the English translation in the edition from Princeton University Press (*KW*). For the works before 1845, the Danish text referred to is the new scholarly edition, *Søren Kierkegaard's Skrifter* (*SKS*). References to later works are given to the third Danish edition, *Søren Kierkegaard's Samlede værker* (*SV3*). Quotations from Kierkegaard's journals are given with reference to the standard Danish edition, *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer* (*Pap.*), and to Howard V. and Edna H. Hong's compilation *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers* (*JP*). My English renderings sometimes differ considerably from the standard translation I give reference to. With few exceptions I have also quoted other Danish and German writers in English translation, but usually with reference to the original.

Introduction

In the opening paragraph of *Repetition* Constantin Constantius, the pseudonymous author of that book, predicts that some day when modern thought has escaped the hegemony of Greek philosophy, the category of repetition will form the basis of a new philosophy. 'For', he writes, '*repetition* is the decisive expression for what "recollection" was for the Greeks. Just as they taught that all knowing was a matter of recollecting, so the new philosophy will teach that the entire life is a repetition'.¹ Later, he substantiates this claim:

If one does not have the category of recollection or of repetition, all life dissolves into an empty, meaningless noise. Recollection is the ethnikal [i.e. pagan or Greek] view on life, repetition the modern; repetition is the *interest* [*Interesse*] of metaphysics, and also the interest upon which metaphysics gets stranded. (SKS 4, 25 / KW VI, 149)

Constantius thus distinguishes recollection and repetition as paradigms of thought corresponding to antiquity and modernity. The aim of this study is to analyse and explore Kierkegaard's category of repetition on the basis of this distinction.

The notion of repetition has been taken up at decisive moments in the development of twentieth century thought. Heidegger's conception of historicity in *Being and Time* (1927), for example, involves a notion of repetition that, despite a lack of recognition, seems to owe more to Kierkegaard than to anybody else.² Gilles Deleuze opens his magisterial work *Difference and Repetition* (1968) with an analysis of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche as the two first thinkers to introduce repetition as 'the fundamental category of a philosophy of the future'.³ And in his thought-provoking account of the relationship between Heidegger's hermeneutical project to Derrida's deconstruction,

¹ SKS 4, 9 / KW VI, 131.

² BT, 437f / SZ, 385f.

³ Deleuze, Gilles *Difference and Repetition*, tr. by Paul Patton, The Athlone Press, London 1994, p. 5.

John D. Caputo takes his point of departure in Kierkegaardian repetition as 'the first "post-modern" attempt to come to grips with the flux'.⁴ Not to mention Freud, whose conception of repetition as 'a way of remembering' forms an interesting contrast to Constantius' category, even if it was coined independently of Kierkegaard's thought.⁵

If the category of repetition, first introduced by Constantius in 1843, thus has demonstrated an exceptional vitality in the subsequent development of European thought, it nevertheless remains one of the most obscure elements of the Kierkegaardian corpus. George Steiner expresses the resignation of many Kierkegaard readers in this respect when he calls *Repetition* an 'enigmatic but probably decisive treatise'.⁶ The difficulty is not due to the conceptual complexity of this category, but, on the contrary, to an evident lack of conceptuality. For though *Repetition* contains extraordinary philosophical claims, it is also a teasing literary work that does not easily lend itself to the categories of philosophy and theology. This elusiveness, however, is itself grounded in the nature of the category Constantius introduces. For repetition is not so much a *philosophical doctrine* as it is a *paradigm of thought*, and as such it is something that cannot be grasped as an object for thought. A reader who would want to grasp repetition as a fully developed philosophical doctrine would be like a curious spectator who would investigate in detail the patterns of a 'magic eye' hologram. Not only would he prove unable to see the lacking dimension in that way; his very effort of seeing would engender his blindness.

The task of interpreting *Repetition*, then, is not so much that of providing a systematic account of the original meaning of Constantius' category as to 'reconstruct' this category in light of the subsequent developments both in Kierkegaard's own work and in European thought.

⁴ Caputo, John D. *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1987, p. 12.

⁵ E.g. in his essay 'Recollection, Repetition, and Working Through' (1914) in *Collected Papers*, tr. by Joan Riviere, London 1971, pp. 366-376. Cf. the note on Freud in Chapter One of this study.

⁶ George Steiner 'The Wound of Negativity: Two Kierkegaard Texts' in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, Rée, Jonathan & Chamberlain, Jane (eds.), Oxford 1998, p. 104.

The Twofold Task of Reconstruction

The subtitle, 'a reconstruction', thus implies that the aim of this study is not merely to restate what Constantius and Kierkegaard once wrote about repetition; rather, this category must be constructed anew, partly on the basis of an understanding of the nature of Kierkegaard's work as a whole, and partly in light of the development in European thought since Kierkegaard, especially the thematization of nihilism in Nietzsche and Heidegger.

1. Reconstruction on the Basis of an Understanding of Kierkegaard's Authorship as a Whole

Repetition belongs to the early part of Kierkegaard's production. Three stages of his use of the notion of repetition can be distinguished. (1) In a fragment from 1842 or 1843 entitled *Johannes Climacus or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*, Kierkegaard first proposed repetition as a way out of the crisis of modern philosophy. However, the fragment ends abruptly, and the notion of repetition advanced in it still seems to be modelled on Hegel's notion of mediation.⁷ (2) The

⁷ Part One of *Johannes Climacus or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est* (Pap. IV B 1 / KW VII, suppl., pp. 113-172) tells the tragic story a young man, Johannes, who tries to make the principle of doubt the principle for his life. It soon turns out, however, that it was impossible to 'do what the philosophers said'. Having experienced the fatal consequences of a philosophy grounded on the principle of doubt, Johannes instead, in *Part Two*, seeks 'the ideal possibility of doubt in consciousness' (145 / 166). It is on the last two pages of this fragmentary second part of the work that the notion of repetition is introduced as the necessary condition for the overcoming of doubt. The argument proceeds in three steps.

(1) For consciousness to be capable of doubt, the question of truth must be an issue for it. But truth becomes an issue only through the consciousness of untruth. 'In the question of truth, consciousness is brought into relation with something other, and what makes this relation possible is untruth.' As long as a human being lives in immediacy, actuality is simple reality [*Realitet*], and doubt is impossible. By presupposing simple reality, however, language negates it as something immediate. Language thus negates immediacy by expressing it.

(2) Johannes defines consciousness in terms of this contradiction between ideality (word) and reality, mediacy and immediacy as a *being-between* [*Interesse*]. The ideal possibility of doubt lies in this 'interest'. Its determinations are therefore *trichotomous*, since consciousness not only expresses the contradiction but embodies it, and thus itself becomes the third member. The determinations of reflection, by contrast, are only *dichotomous*; remaining itself without being-between (*interesse*), reflection expresses the conflict without embodying it. All knowledge which belongs to the realm of reflection (e.g. aesthetics and metaphysics) is therefore only

decisive coinage takes place in *Repetition* (1843). Kierkegaard wrote most of this book in Berlin between the 11th and 25th of May 1843 in a state of overpowering inspiration following the break with his fiancée Regine Olsen. It was completed during the months following his return to Copenhagen under impression of Regine's engagement to Frederik Schlegel. (3) From the end of 1843 or the beginning of 1844 a series of lucid journal entries concerning repetition survives, about sixty manuscript pages altogether. They were drafts of a never published 'Public Letter' to Prof. J.L. Heiberg in response to his critique of Constantius' book. We shall later consider some of these texts in detail.

Like many of the central concepts in Kierkegaard's writings, the

the precondition of doubt. Modern philosophy has thus been misled by its ignorance about the nature of doubt to assume that it could overcome doubt objectively by systematic thinking. The ancient sceptics demonstrated a profounder insight when they tried to overcome doubt by turning the interest into apathy (148f / 170).

(3) As long as the individual lives in reflection, his life is carried by the confidence that 'ideality and reality innocently communicate with each other'. Consciousness, rightly so called, only comes into being when ideality and reality collide. This takes place in the phenomenon of repetition. In reality there is not repetition, since it is momentary. 'If the world...were nothing but equally large unvariegated boulders, there would still be no repetition...in every moment, I would see a boulder, but there would be no question as to whether it was the same one I had seen before.' (149 / 171) Similarly, there would be no repetition in ideality alone. Only when ideality and reality touch each other does repetition occur; but this coming together of ideality and reality was exactly the definition of consciousness. This repetition in consciousness is recollection in which something ideal (a past event) is identified with something present. The text ends abruptly after this very concise introduction of the category of repetition.

Jon Stewart has shown that the argument in Part Two of *Johannes Climacus* is structured on the section on 'Sense Certainty' in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The conflict between ideality and reality in this fragment corresponds, he argues, at least in part, to the opposition between universality and particularity in that section. This opposition '*kann als die erkenntnistheoretische Grundlage für den Wiederholungsbegriff angesehen werden, eine Grundlage, die Kierkegaard zum grossen Teil von Hegel übernommen hat*' (Jon Stewart 'Hegel als Quelle für Kierkegaards Wiederholungsbegriff' in *Kierkegaard Studies. Yearbook 1998*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin / New York, pp. 302-317). While Kierkegaard's dependence on Hegel in this particular text has hereby been demonstrated, it does not follow that a similar dependence can be traced in Kierkegaard's subsequent conception. The fact that Kierkegaard in this fragment equates repetition and recollection indicates that this concept of repetition cannot be identified with that of his later, published writings. The defining characteristic of that conception is precisely its opposition to recollection. One cannot help thinking, however, that the abrupt ending of the text marks a critical point in the genesis of the Kierkegaardian concept of repetition.

notion of repetition has a relatively brief life. From 1844 on this notion is overshadowed by other key notions, such as the moment of vision [*Øieblikket*], and the paradox.⁸ The fact that 'repetition' only for a brief period seems to have expressed the essential issue for Kierkegaard can be interpreted in two ways. (1) If Kierkegaard is considered a thinker in Heidegger's sense of the word, that is, a person who represents one essential thought, then the stages of his development must be understood as stages in a process of clarification. Kierkegaard, according to this view, gave up 'repetition' because he came to consider 'the moment' or 'the paradox' to be more fitting categories for his one essential thought.⁹ But there is nothing in Kierkegaard's subsequent writings that necessitates the view that he came to regard the category of repetition as something of the past. It is also far from obvious that the Kierkegaardian corpus fits the pattern of 'a thinker' in this sense; not because there is a lack of essential unity in the authorship, but because the unity is of a different kind. (2) If, instead of considering Kierkegaard a metaphysical thinker, we see him as a religious writer, the development within his work takes on a different meaning. Kierkegaard himself indicates that this is how he wants to be understood when, in *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* (1848, published posthumously), he sums up his project as follows: 'My entire work as an author relates to Christianity, to the problem of becoming a Christian'.¹⁰ The task that unites the Kierkegaardian corpus as a whole is not that of *thinking* one essential thought, but of *becoming* a Christian. This, of course, does not mean that the problem of becoming a Christian is Kierkegaard's essential thought (that would make him a theological thinker). Kierkegaard is not a thinker

⁸ In *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844) the notion of repetition is already relegated to the state of footnotes, though important ones (SKS 4, 324-327 & 393 / KW VIII, 17-19 & 90), and in *Philosophical Fragments* (1844) it is hardly mentioned, even though the project of this book is in some ways similar to that of *Repetition*. The category of repetition is alluded to in a number of passages in Kierkegaard's later writings, even if it never again occupied the decisive place as it did in 1843: *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions* (1845, SKS 5, 432-434 & 302-305 / KW X, 57-59 & 78-81), *Stages on Life's Way* (1845, SV3 8, 203 / KW XI, 402), *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846, SV3 9, 78, 217-224 & 243 / KW XII, 1, 91, 259-267 & 288-289), *Two Ages* (1846, SV3 14, 17-30 / KW XIV, 14-30), *Works of Love* (1847, SV3 12, 366-367 / KW XVI, 385-386).

⁹ This is the view taken by Michael Theunissen in 'ὁ αἰτῶν λαμβάνει. Der Gebetsglaube Jesu und die Zeitlichkeit des Christseins' in *Negative Theologie der Zeit*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1991, pp. 346-352.

¹⁰ SV3 18, 81 / KW XXII, 23.

who is concerned with religious issues, but a writer whose thinking is a religious quest. 'Becoming a Christian' is therefore not the essential *thought*, but the basic *task* embodied in Kierkegaard's writings. Heidegger was right: 'Kierkegaard is not a thinker, but a religious writer, and indeed not just one among others, but the only one in accord with the destining belonging to his age.'¹¹

The unity of the authorship, therefore, is not grounded in the unity of one basic thought, but in its character of response to one persistent calling. From this perspective it becomes clear that his final attack on the church is the culmination of his work and not, as scholars have sometimes indicated, an appendix to it. Kierkegaard's final position is captured in his words: 'I am not a Christian.'¹² 'Anyone who wants to understand my very special task,' Kierkegaard wrote in 1855, 'must concentrate on holding this [statement] firm.' But what is the meaning of this dictum? Is Kierkegaard playing himself out against the self-indulgent state Christianity? Or is he saying that Christianity is not 'true'? No, these words go far deeper than that. Understood in its context, this assertion is, perhaps, the most powerful counter-movement to European nihilism. It captures Kierkegaard's fundamental religious position as succinctly as Nietzsche's position is captured by his dictum 'God is dead'. As in the case of Nietzsche's words, Kierkegaard's statement does not express a simple 'fact', but a self-interpretation in which the truth of his age is revealed. He is not passing judgement on Christianity, but on himself and, by implication, on his age. That his assertion is uniquely connected to the modern Christian world appears from his claim that 'in the eighteen hundred years of Christendom there is nothing comparable, nothing analogous to my task; this is in "Christendom" for the first time'.¹³ Only Socrates' ignorance is analogous to his claim not to be a Christian; for as Socrates' ignorance concerning the nature of his own being implied an elevation of being human over against the intellectualism of the sophists, so for Kierkegaard the claim not to be a Christian is an elevation, a *revaluation* of being a Christian.

This understanding of Kierkegaard as a religious writer must determine our view of the development of his work. Instead of reading the authorship as process in which one basic thought comes into light, we

¹¹ 'The Word of Nietzsche: "God is Dead"' in Martin Heidegger *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, tr. by William Lovitt, New York 1977, p. 94.

¹² E.g. SV3 19, 318-324 / KW XXIII, 340-347.

¹³ SV3 19, 322 / KW XIII, 344.

read it as a progression towards religious self-surrender. The stages of this development are not merely stages in a process of clarification, but they are also stages of a transition from the pursuit of philosophy and aesthetics to religious proclamation. The category of repetition, therefore, cannot be grasped in isolation from Kierkegaard's other writings. Rather it must be qualified by the understanding of Kierkegaard as a religious writer, and in this perspective it must be reconstructed against the background of the corpus as a whole.

2. Reconstruction on the Basis of the Thematization of Nihilism in Nietzsche and Heidegger

But if Kierkegaard is a religious writer rather than a metaphysical thinker, he certainly breaks the boundaries of that tradition of writing. For while most religious writers in the West have tacitly assumed the dichotomies of traditional metaphysics as a basis for their message, this assumption is challenged in Kierkegaard. As a religious writer, he is cut off from his roots by the event of nihilism. However, unlike Nietzsche, the attack on the dichotomies of metaphysics is not turned against Christianity; it rather arises from within Christianity itself. To anticipate: Kierkegaard turns the Christian teaching of the incarnation against metaphysics; the 'historicizing of the eternal'¹⁴ in the incarnation thus becomes a paradigm for post-metaphysical thinking rather than a metaphysical doctrine in a traditional sense.

The event of nihilism, I shall argue, is a fundamental presupposition of Kierkegaard's work, even if it is never clearly thematized as such. In the generation following Kierkegaard, Nietzsche brought nihilism into light as the fundamental characteristic of his age; and in this century Heidegger attempted in his confrontation with Nietzsche 'to point the way toward the place from which it may be possible some day to ask the question concerning the essence of nihilism'.¹⁵ In approaching Kierkegaard we must take this subsequent thematization of nihilism into account.

What, then, is the meaning of nihilism according to Nietzsche and Heidegger? The event of nihilism results from the partition of reality into the sensory and the suprasensory in Platonic metaphysics. This division implies that the value and meaning of the sensory is hereby placed in the realm of the suprasensory. However, the more the su-

¹⁴ Climacus' expression (SKS 4, 263 / KW VII, 61).

¹⁵ Heidegger, op. cit., p. 53.

prasensory is elevated over the sensory, the more distant, inaccessible, *irrelevant*, it becomes. In the end, we can no longer reach the sphere in which we have placed our highest values. The value and meaning of our lives is deposited in a world that turns out to be valueless. And thus, in Nietzsche's phrase, '*the highest values devalue themselves*'.¹⁶

Nihilism is therefore neither a phenomenon of decay nor a danger inherent to metaphysical thinking; it is the very essence of metaphysics and, in Heidegger's phrase, 'the "inner logic" of Western history'.¹⁷ When Nietzsche's madman proclaimed the death of God, he pronounced 'the word that always, within the metaphysically determined history of the West, is already spoken by implication'.¹⁸

By demonstrating nihilism as the essence of metaphysics, Nietzsche turns metaphysics upside down. The realm of the suprasensory which previously assured the value of the sensory is now transformed into an unstable product of the sensory. The truth of the sensory is asserted over against the illusion of the suprasensory. But this inversion of metaphysics is itself nihilistic, for when the value of the sensory is no longer understood from the suprasensory, it loses its meaning as sensory. The attempt to escape the dichotomies of metaphysics by inverting it does not lead to an affirmation of the sensory; rather it culminates in a neither-nor, in a sense of meaninglessness. 'The aim is lacking; "Why?" finds no answer'.¹⁹ The very essence of metaphysics thus comes to light in the nihilistic sentiment of modernity.

It is in the light of this insight we approach Kierkegaard's writings on repetition. The point is not that Kierkegaard introduced repetition in response to a clearly perceived conception of nihilism. Rather, we see Kierkegaard as embodying the nihilistic sentiment of his age, and as responding to it without being in a position to thematize it clearly.²⁰ If for no other reason, this approach would perhaps be justified by the influence his writings have had on existentialism. However, in the case of Kierkegaard's category of repetition there is another, more important, reason why it must be reconstructed on the basis of the thematization of nihilism. For the very *meaning* of repetition presupposes the breakdown of the dualisms of traditional meta-

¹⁶ *The Will to Power*, tr. by Kaufmann & Hollingdale, New York 1968, § 2.

¹⁷ Heidegger, op. cit. p. 67.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 57.

¹⁹ Nietzsche, loc. cit.

²⁰ Cf. Michael Theunissen's interpretation of Kierkegaard's concept of despair against the background of the event of nihilism in *Der Begriff Verzweiflung: Korrekturen an Kierkegaard*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1993, pp. 65-70.