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The Revolutionary Axiology and Nongeneralizable Ontology of Kierkegaard's Concept of Repetition

Kierkegaard's concept of repetition is fraught. Walter Lowrie highlights the difficulties associated with an identification of the concept when he notes that of all the topics of Kierkegaard's analyses, "none is so baffling" as that of repetition.¹ Part of the problem posed by Kierkegaard's elucidation of repetition is that his analyses move between the domains of ethics, phenomenological metaphysics, and epistemology. Multiple aspects of repetition are demonstrated in Kierkegaard's explicit identification of the concept with "earnestness"²—an axiologically loaded term, if ever there were one—an object of understanding and belief, namely, an intentional object (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 136), and a phenomenon of "metaphysical interest." Kierkegaard writes: "Recollection is the ethical [*ethniskel*] view of life, repetition the modern; repetition is the interest [*Interesse*] of metaphysics, and also the

1. Walter Lowrie, *Kierkegaard* (London: Oxford UP, 1938), 630.

2. Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983), 133. Hereafter cited as Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*. Lowrie is hardly a voice alone in the wilderness without critical and textual support. Steven Crites characterizes *Repetition* as a "teasing sort of book" in which the author leads the reader on "a merry chase, bobbing, hovering, backtracking through colourful meadows and dark thickets and down many blind alleys." Steven Crites, "The Blissful Security of the Moment': Recollection, Repetition, and Eternal Recurrence," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 1993), 225–47, 225. Robert L. Perkins refers to *Repetition* as "Kierkegaard's obscure little book." Robert L. Perkins, Introduction to *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 1993), 195–200, 195. This judgement is echoed by Constantin Constantius, the pseudonymous author of *Repetition*, who characterizes his elaborations as "obscurely pertaining" to the failed love affair of an unnamed young man. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 228.

interest upon which metaphysics comes to grief; repetition is the watchword [*Løsnet*] in every ethical view; repetition is *conditio sine qua non* [the indispensable condition] for every issue of dogmatics" (*Fear and Trembling*, 149). Elsewhere, Kierkegaard suggests that what is repeated is not quantitatively the same. In his elaboration of the biblical tale of the trials and tribulations of Job, Kierkegaard explicitly notes that Job endures repetitions in his sufferings at the hands of a putatively merciful and just God (*Fear and Trembling*, 212). In this biblical story of immiseration, it is noted that the figure of Job received back double what had been taken from him. The implication is that the entities that are repeated—the contents of repetition—do *not* enjoy quantitative identity. The observation here is that there are forms of repetition that do not require that the repeated content be quantitatively identical. Repeated entities may be qualitatively identical—that is, they can share the same qualities. Were a series of entities that shared the same quality or qualities to recur at temporally disparate moments, this recurrence would be a repetition—a qualitative repetition. I suggest that Kierkegaard's concept of repetition involves qualitative repetition. I further claim that repetition involves a return or instantiation of entities that enjoy the qualities of uniqueness and axiological valence. In this sense, what is shared among these repeated entities—what allows for these entities to be considered as entities that are genuinely repeated—are the qualities of newness and having value. What is comes back as new—namely, what repeats is the form of the new and has the quality of newness—and is laden with axiology—namely, that which repeats has the quality of having value and is associated with positive or negative values in some sense. Because what recurs at temporally discrete moments shares qualities with what was already realized at a temporally prior moment, this entity enjoys repetition, even if the quantity of particular entities varies.

Kierkegaard's complex formulation of the concept of qualitative repetition has invited a great deal of critical vexation. This is reflected in the lack of critical consensus about the meaning of the term. Perhaps inspired by the explicitly religious themes present in Kierkegaard's works—for example, the analysis of the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac in *Fear and Trembling* and the elaboration the story of Job in *Repetition*—Brita K. Stendahl characterizes repetition as akin to "a burning bush that is not consumed."³ Paul S. Minear reports the odd conclusions of a lax ontology and suggests that repetition is the synthesis of incommensurables—temporality and nontemporal eternity—that yields a kind

3. Brita K. Stendahl, *Soren Kierkegaard* (Boston: Twayne, 1976), 210.

of “divine madness” in which one “gives thanks, always.”⁴ John W. Elrod suggests that the term has existential importance in the sense that repetition is involved with a person’s quest to exist authentically as a psycho-social being.⁵ Elaborating on this suggestion, David J. Kangas briefly considers the possibility that Kierkegaard regards repetition as an existential category, which is oddly identified as a type of “relation . . . that freedom has with itself.”⁶ There are at least two problems with this elaboration of an existential category: (1) although relation might be a type of category, at least in the Aristotelian sense, it seems oddly specific to assert that freedom’s relation of self-identity is a category, and (2) there is some problem with the elaboration of the category as an existential category. Although the claim that repetition is categorical enjoys textual support, it is also observed that were this category to exist, it would be “absolutely transcendent” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 210). That a category might enjoy the status of a transcendent entity is not outside the realm of ontological possibility. Any of the categories that apply to ideal entities—that is, mathematical objects, Husserlian ideal-meaning units, and the like—would be strictly transcendent in that they might not apply to materially instantiated entities. That an absolutely transcendent category still might be said to be an existential category is an ontological bridge too far in the sense that, at minimum, existential categories must involve the immanent conditions—the lived experiences—of psycho-social entities. These various critical suggestions have been adduced to support the claim that there is little critical consensus on the nature of Kierkegaard’s concept of repetition. One of the implications of this lack of critical consensus is that the only clarity enjoyed by Kierkegaard’s concept of repetition is that it is clearly vague.

The aim of the present article is to elaborate on the mercurial nature of repetition. I suggest that Kierkegaard conceives of repetition as a particular ontological entity, namely, a process or phenomenon, that involves axiological aspects. I claim that the temporal process of repetition involves axiological value in an essential sense. This is demonstrated with the observation that were one to try to excise value from repetition, the concept of repetition would be unfairly restricted. With Deleuze’s

4. Paul S. Minear, “Thanksgiving as a Synthesis of the Temporal and the Eternal,” in *A Kierkegaard Critique: An International Selection of Essays Interpreting Kierkegaard*, ed. Howard A. Johnson and Niels Thulstrup (New York: Harper, 1962), 226–28, 226.

5. Elrod writes: “The existing individual, in the act of repetition, becomes what he is, i.e., becomes himself.” John W. Elrod, *Being and Existence in Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Works* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975), 229.

6. David J. Kangas, *Kierkegaard’s Instant: On Beginnings* (Indianapolis: U of Indiana P, 2007), 103.

elaboration of Kierkegaard, I identify repetition as the sort of phenomenon that tends to resist generalization. Taken together, these analyses yield the conclusion that repetition is an axiologically valent entity that enjoys the ontological status of a particular.

First, I identify a similarity between Kierkegaard's characterizations of repetition and those specified by Marx in the first chapter of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. I observe that Kierkegaard tends to emphasize the axiological aspects of repetition in the report of pseudonymous Constantin Constantius. Here, repetition is elaborated in explicitly axiological terms—a worthwhile trip to Berlin, an upheaval, a comedic farce, and such. For both Kierkegaard and Marx, repetition is axiologically valent in the sense that values such as good, bad, tragic, comic, and so on are involved with the recurrence of circumstances. A return trip to a city, the reemergence of the revolutionary conditions of 1789 in the political situation of France in 1848–52—these temporal repetitions have axiological significance.

Second, I suggest that Kierkegaard's concept of repetition prefigures that which is elaborated by Gilles Deleuze. For both Kierkegaard and Deleuze, the temporal repetition involves the emergence of difference—what is repeated is the circumstance that yields the creation of nonidentical entities. Though Deleuze explicitly cites Kierkegaard in his elaboration of the nature of repetition, Deleuze's indebtedness to Kierkegaard on the subject of temporality has—for the most part—been ignored in that the critical literature addressing Kierkegaard's influence on Deleuze tends to focus on other aspects of Deleuze's thought. In an admirable recent article, Arjen Kleinherenbrink identifies Kierkegaard as influential to Deleuze's ethics of immanence through reference to the knight of faith and Deleuze's critique of normative ethical systems in both volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.⁷ Marc Katz has written a recent piece that elaborates Kierkegaard's influence on Deleuze's and Guattari's thought on the nature of a conceptual limit but does not analyze what the implications of this are for temporal repetition.⁸ This is a missed opportunity in the sense that both Kierkegaard and Deleuze sometimes refer to repetition as a limit (i.e., *caesura*) to the progression of linear time. Though Lisa Trahair has recently written a detailed elaboration of the nature of Kierkegaard's knight of faith through reference to what

7. Arjen Kleinherenbrink, "Art as Authentic Life—Deleuze after Kierkegaard," *Kritike* 8.2 (2014): 98–118.

8. Marc Katz, "Rendezvous in Berlin: Benjamin and Kierkegaard on the Architecture of Repetition," *German Quarterly* 71.1 (1998): 1–13.

Deleuze refers to as the “belief in this world,”⁹ the temporal aspects of cinema—in particular, the detailed analyses of temporal repetition in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*—are quickly passed over.¹⁰ Sophie Wennerscheid follows a similar track in her elaboration of Deleuze’s and Kierkegaard’s similar thoughts on artistic creation.¹¹ Though temporal repetitions certainly involve a type of ontological creation, it is overly restrictive to characterize these merely in terms of artistic creation. I suggest that the creation of a unique circumstance—that is, a temporal moment that is discrete from all other temporal moments—is reflected in Kierkegaard’s and Deleuze’s identification of repetition as a phenomenon that tends to resist generalization in multiple senses.

Kierkegaard and Marx: The Axiological Aspect of Repetition

For Kierkegaard, time is experienced as though it progresses linearly through a unified continuum of temporal instances (t_1, t_2, \dots, t_n). Perhaps what is most interesting is the supposition that from the temporal moment of the present that one can either move forward through time toward the future or backward through time to the remembered past. Kierkegaard explicitly identifies recollection and repetition as similar temporal movements, though in obverse temporal directions. Kierkegaard writes: “Repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 210). The claim here is that recollections are just like repetitions, save for the fact that repetitions actualize an undisclosed future, although recollections actualize a previously actualized temporal event. Though Roger Poole starkly dismisses Kierkegaard’s concept of repetition, that is, recollection forward, as incoherent with his summary remark that “one cannot, of course, recollect forward,”¹² this seems altogether too quick in that it does not adequately reflect the psychological reality of one who attempts to discern the meaning of present temporal events or future contingencies through reference to the past. Kierkegaard carefully notes that his concept of recollection is borrowed from

9. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989), 172.

10. Lisa Trahair, “Belief in this World: The Dardenne brothers’ *The Son* and Soren Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*,” *SubStance* 45.3 (2016): 98–119.

11. Sophie Wennerscheid, “Poetics of Repetition: Nonlinearity and Queer Futurity in Philosophy and Literature of Memory,” *Orbis litterarum* 73 (2018): 383–94.

12. Roger Poole, *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1993), 63.

the Greeks. The Kierkegaardian concept of recollection is informed by Plato's claim that the way to make sense of the present events—such as the impending execution of Socrates in *Phaedo*—involves a recollection of events that had occurred on a previous day, namely, the day that the Athenians put garlands on the ship that set sail to Delos.¹³ *Phaedo*'s remarks are of a temporally prior event, which is adduced to specify that they are the content of memory. *Phaedo*'s recollections are used to convey the diegetic meaning of the dialogue from the present of its telling until its future conclusion that, at least for the dialogue's participants, comes many hours later, which demonstrates how a retelling (i.e., repetition) of remembered events may be characterized as recollections forward—toward a narrative future.¹⁴

Kierkegaard hints at the axiological aspects of repetition when he elucidates comedy as involving temporality. Kierkegaard writes: "The comic is a category that belongs specifically to the temporal" (*Fear and Trembling*, 327). The suggestion here is that comedy is an aspect of temporal progression. Stated in starker terms, were there no such thing as temporal progression, namely, the repetition of discrete temporal instants, then comedy would be nonexistent. Kierkegaard elaborates on the dependency relation through reference to the possibility of contradiction: "The comic always lies in contradiction [*Widerspruch*]. But in eternity all contradictions are canceled, and the comic is consequently excluded" (*Fear and Trembling*, 327).

Kierkegaard's inferential progression is quite subtle. (1) It is stipulated that comic phenomena are dependent on contradictory situations, that is, on situations in which the expected outcomes are not realized. (2) The enthymematic observation embedded in this stipulation is that temporal progression is the necessary ontological precondition for the emergence of contradiction—in the Kierkegaardian sense. (3) Kierkegaard observes that comedy would not obtain in any nontemporal—that is, eternal—circumstance. The ontological dependency relation of comedy to temporality is established as the positive correlate of the third claim.

13. Plato, *Phaedo*, 58b, in *Plato: The Complete Works*, ed. John M Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 50.

14. Edward F. Mooney, makes a similar point against Poole with his suggestion that "forward facing recollections" (in Plato and Kierkegaard) involve a "reception of meaning that is radiating not from one's past but from one's future." Edward F. Mooney, "Repetition: Getting the World Back," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon G. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), 282–307, 288. The crucial difference here is that Mooney seems to imply that the future is already existent—as that from which meanings can radiate. This claim seems to be without textual support in either Plato or Kierkegaard.

Perhaps it should be noted that Kierkegaard tends to use the term “contradiction” in a slightly different sense than that demanded by Aristotelian logic—that is, a contradiction obtains when a property (or attribute) is asserted both to belong and not to belong to an existent.¹⁵ Kierkegaard often refers to the opposition of social forces or the tendency of existents to be contrary to one another—that is, to be in dialectical contradiction—as contradictories. It could be objected that even with this modified notion of contradiction, there is something a bit off about Kierkegaard’s suggestion that dialectical contradiction yields comedy. It seems that the expression of a dialectical contradiction could yield any number of different outcomes, to which any number of value predicates could apply. That is, one could imagine that a tension of contraries—such as those elaborated in the biblical story of Job, those evident in the harrowing tales of children taken from their families at the United States’ southern border, and so on—might not prove to be a source of comic amusement. In this sense, Kierkegaard’s concept of comedy seems more akin to Aristotle’s concept of a reversal of fortune (*περιπέτεια*) in which a person’s fate is dramatically reversed.¹⁶ Kierkegaard alleviates this critical concern by cautiously noting that the dialectical contradictions made possible by temporal progression could yield tragic or comic outcomes. He notes this ambiguity as he elaborates on the development of human personality over time: “As yet the personality is not discerned, and its energy is betokened only in the passion of possibility, for the same thing happens in the spiritual life as with many plants—the main shoot comes last. But this shadow-existence also demands satisfaction, and it is never beneficial to a person if this does not have time to live out its life, whereas on the other hand it is tragic or comic if the individual makes the mistake of living out his life in it” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 327). Kierkegaard generalizes the observation that repetition produces contradictions that yield tragic or comic outcomes to a claim about repetition’s nature: repetition involves an axiological aspect.

The axiological aspects of Kierkegaard’s concept of repetition are demonstrated in similarities among the thematic content of Constantius’s narrative and that of Kierkegaard’s essay “The Unhappiest One.”¹⁷ In

15. Aristotle identifies contradiction: “It is, that the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject in the same respect.” Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 100b518–20, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991), 489.

16. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1452a22, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991), 1460.

17. Crites elaborates on this comparison when he notes that “*Repetition* appears to be an ex-

the essay, Kierkegaard identifies unhappiness as involving a sense of temporal dislocation from the present. Constantius suggests that temporal repetition partially alleviates this sense of unhappiness. A brief exegesis of the salient points of the essay illustrates the nature of the peculiar type of unhappiness that Kierkegaard has in mind.

The essay is written from the perspective of an immiserated individual who has been cast out of society. The narrative voice of the essay explicitly identifies himself as being among “we who live ἀφορισμένοι and *segregate*,” that is, cut off or removed from society.¹⁸ Kierkegaard posits various possible causes for unhappiness. Among them is immortality. He rejects the suggestion that “the unhappiest one was the person who could not die, who could not slip down into a grave” (*Either/Or*, 182). Another is languishing in the strange state of having a bifurcated, self-destructive ego. Kierkegaard identifies this as the Hegelian unhappy consciousness: “The unhappy one is the person who in one way or another has his ideal, the substance of his life, the plenitude of his consciousness, his essential nature, outside himself. The unhappy one is the person who is always absent from himself, never present to himself” (*Either/Or*, 184). Also among the causes is the social and religious exclusion endured by an anathematized person. Kierkegaard observes that the unhappiest one might be thought of as akin to a “wandering Jew” (*Either/Or*, 182). He elucidates the most profound unhappiness as the feeling of being separated from the temporal domain of the present: “So, then, the unhappy one is absent. But one is absent when one is in either past or future time” (*Either/Or*, 184). In this sense, the most immiserated individuals are those for whom it is impossible to find fulfilment in the temporal present.

Though the kind of happiness brought on by the sense of being displaced from the present is devastating, Kierkegaard suggests that it is not comprehensive in that one may find a diminished measure of happiness in the experience of repetition. This is the principle outcome of Constantius's observation that repetition is analytically distinct from the feeling of hope. Kierkegaard illustrates a threefold distinction among hope, recollection, and repetition through a metaphor: “Hope is a new garment, stiff and starched and lustrous, but it has never been tried on,

tended illustration of a predicament sketched in a little essay in volume 1 of *Either/Or*, “The Unhappiest.” Crites, “Blissful Security,” 229.

18. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Part I*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987), 182. Hereafter cited as Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*. The Latin term *segregati* is identified as a translation of the Greek ἀφορισμένοι, which is identified as meaning “social exclusion.” Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, ft. 5, 521.

and therefore one does not know how becoming it will be or how it will fit. Recollection is a discarded garment that does not fit, however beautiful it is, for one has outgrown it. Repetition is an indestructible garment that fits closely and tenderly, neither binds nor sags” (*Fear and Trembling*, 132). The key difference between hope and repetition is an analogue to the difference between actual and potential. Hope is identified as enjoying a potential mode of existence that never becomes realized. The claim here is that one never receives what one hopes for. That is, hope is characterized “as the maiden that slips away through one’s figures” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 132). Repetitions, however, enjoy an actual mode of existence in that they are realized. That is, recollections are characterized as the “beloved wife of whom one never wearies” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 132). The axiological implication of the distinction is that repetition partially alleviates the unhappiness of those who have lost a sense of inhabiting the present; because it is actualized, repetition brings a modicum of happiness to those miserable people who feel no relation to their present circumstance.

An analogue to Kierkegaard’s ambivalence about the particular axiological value of a repetition—an ambivalence that is based on the existence of axiological aspects of repetition in general—is found in Marx’s elaboration of the revolutionary tumult that swept through France from 1848 to 1852. A clue to the importance of axiological aspects of repetition—elaborated in terms of the recurrence of revolutionary conditions—is found in Marx’s observation that history repeats itself “the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.”¹⁹ Derrida elaborates on the connection of value and repetition, observing that Marx derives joy from “taking the pulse” of the rhythmic repetitions of history.²⁰ This is not to say that Marx saw the revolutionary tumult of his age through rose-colored lenses. Marx explicitly notes the negative axiological values of the recollections of the past glories of the 1789 revolt in his characterization of these as the “tradition of all the dead generations that weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living” (Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, 10). In a particularly rhetorically loaded passage, Marx cautiously warns against the dangers of celebrating the memory of an overly romanticized vision of the “defunct epoch” of a revolutionary past.

19. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Moscow: Progress, 1972), 15. Hereafter cited as Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*. Marx seems to be referring to Hegel’s remarks on the numerous political revolutions of ancient Rome: “By repetition that which at first appeared merely a matter of chance and contingency becomes a real and ratified existence.” G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Kitchener, Ont.: Batoche, 2001), 342.

20. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kaufm (New York: Routledge, 1994), 139–40.

An entire people, which had imagined that by means of a revolution it had imparted to itself an accelerated power of motion, suddenly finds itself set back into a defunct epoch and, in order that no doubt as to the relapse may be possible, the old dates arise again, the old chronology, the old names, the old edicts, which had long become a subject of antiquarian erudition, and the old minions of the law, who had seemed long decayed. The nation feels like that mad Englishman in Bedlam who fancies that he lives in the times of the ancient Pharaohs and daily bemoans the hard labour that he must perform in the Ethiopian mines as a gold digger, immured in this subterranean prison, a dimly burning lamp fastened to his head, the overseer of the slaves behind him with a long whip, and at the exits a confused welter of barbarian mercenaries, who understand neither the forced labourers in the mines nor one another, since they speak no common language. (Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, 12)

Marx identifies two problems involved with the recollection of past revolutionary glories: the tendency to give rise to both (1) an unwarranted sense of revolutionary hope, that is, to an “imagined acceleration of motion,” and (2) a mass sense of confused temporal dislocation, namely, the lived experience of the population of a “nation [that] feels like that mad Englishman in Bedlam who fancies that he lives in the times of the ancient Pharaohs” (Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, 12). Marx’s ambivalence to the revolutionary potential heralded by temporal revolution is implied in the enticing observation that repetitions can be temporal reinstantiations of the “poetry of the past” (Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, 12). Despite the failures of past revolutions, these are the dialectical preconditions necessary to liberate the French peasantry from their immiserating social conditions. Marx writes: “But the parody of the empire . . . was necessary to free the mass of the French nation from the weight of tradition and to work out in pure form the opposition between the state power and society. With the progressive undermining of smallholding property, the state structure erected upon it collapses” (*Eighteenth Brumaire*, 112). This is the expression of a revolutionary hope. William Lyon McBride identifies Marx’s expression of feeling of the immanent possibility of positive social and political change as one of the most substantive indicators of Marx’s optimistic comportment to the future of Europe.²¹ This is further observed in Engels’ characterization of Marx as a “revolutionist” who—well aware of the immanent possibility of the repetition of negative values—was always firmly on

21. William Lyon McBride, *The Philosophy of Marx* (New York: St. Martin’s P, 1977), 116.

the side of the poor made miserable by capitalism.²² This is the expression of a revolutionary hope for the possibility of a successful revolution. Such a hope can only operate when one grants that repetitions involve axiological aspects.

Kierkegaard and Deleuze: The Ontology of Repetition

“Repetition is not generality.”²³ With this enticing first line to *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze hints at the kinship of his concept of repetition with that elaborated by Kierkegaard. Though Kierkegaard’s explicit claim that repetition is not “ideality” (i.e., generality) provides textual support to demonstrate the connection between Kierkegaard and Deleuze, the content of the claim invites question. Kierkegaard writes: “In ideality alone there is no repetition, for the idea is and remains the same and as such cannot be repeated. When ideality and reality touch each other, then repetition occurs. When, for example, I see something in the moment, ideality enters in and will explain that it is a repetition” (*Fear and Trembling*, 275). Although the logical operation of negation is easily understandable, the suggestion that repetition is not generality demands clarification.

Deleuze tends to elucidate “generality” as involving an appeal to various transcendent criteria. This includes, for example, the generality of a natural law, which is comprehensible to any psycho-social entity, the generality of a moral law that could serve as normative constraint, and the generality of a habit evidenced by a group of people. Repetition involves oppositions to all these. Deleuze’s claim is that repetition does not involve an appeal to a natural law, an appeal to a moral law, or an appeal to habit. He specifies that repetition is analytically discrete from generality if it fulfils three conditions. (1) The phenomenon of repetition must involve a “selective test” (i.e., an instant in which a selective determination is made). Deleuze writes: “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” (*Difference*, 6). (2) Repetition is characterized as nonidentifiable with any of the “laws of nature” or “moral laws” (Deleuze, *Difference*, 6). (3) Repetition is nonreducible to the generality of habit. Deleuze writes: “Oppose repetition not only to

22. Friedrich Engels, *Speech at the Graveside of Marx*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 681–82, 682.

23. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, (London: Continuum, 2001), 1. Hereafter cited as Deleuze, *Difference*.

the generalities of habit but also to the particularities of memory" (*Difference*, 6). The mercurial nature of each of these conditions invites clarification.

For Deleuze, a selective test is the selection of the new, that is, the unique or that which is without ontological precedent or correlate. At key moments in *Repetition* and *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard illustrates the selective nature of repetition. It is hinted at in the subtitle of *Repetition*, which identifies the text as a young man's "psychological experiment" to determine whether repetition is possible. The young man discovers that his attempts to create a temporal repetition are for naught in that—despite his best efforts—an exact recreation of his previous trip to Berlin is impossible.²⁴ The details of his most recent trip to Berlin differ considerably from those of his previous trip, so the experiment produces a unique trip, not a repetition of a previous journey. Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of a selective test is found in Kierkegaard's elucidation of the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. Kierkegaard cautiously notes that the story is illustrative of two distinct conceptual "movements": the resignation illustrated by Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, and the acceptance of the "absurd" hypothesis that God will give him a new Isaac. Kierkegaard writes: "Abraham makes two movements. He makes the infinite movement of resignation and gives up Isaac, which no one can understand because it is a private venture; but next, at every moment, he makes the movement of faith. This is his consolation. In other words, he is saying: But it will not happen, or if it does, the Lord will give me a new Isaac, that is, by virtue of the absurd" (*Fear and Trembling*, 115). Taken together, these two movements constitute a selective test that aims at the perhaps false belief in the creation of an ontologically unique entity, namely, the new, unsacrificed son. Both the young man's psychological experiment and Abraham's choice to attempt to murder his son illustrate the claim that repetition resists generality in that the selective test involved in each functions as the ontic precondition of the emergence of a nongeneralizable entity (i.e., a singularity).

In his elaboration of Deleuze's analysis of Kierkegaard's discussion of the tribulations of Job, Henry Somers-Hall observes that natural and moral laws must fulfil a minimal condition of intelligibility.²⁵ The claim

24. Kierkegaard's unnamed young man arrives at this conclusion after discovering that the landlord of his lodging house had got married: "But here, alas, again no repetition was possible. My landlord, the druggist . . . had married." Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 152.

25. Henry Somers-Hall, *Deleuze's Difference and Repetition: An Edinburgh Philosophical Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2013), 12.

here is that for an entity to be considered a law, it must be comprehended by the category of the thinkable. That is, a natural law must figure in the domain of scientific discourse as a subject of analysis, an object to be analyzed, a regulative principle, a limit condition, and so on; a moral law must figure in a normative discourse in analogous ways. Kierkegaard suggests that repetition does not meet this condition in the narrow sense that repetition seems to involve an ineffable relation with the divine. Kierkegaard hints at the necessarily vague quality of repetition when he observes that Job's repeated immiserations are "hard to say in any human language." Though Kierkegaard cautiously notes that repetition—characterized as the recurring "rebuke of God"—is an existent phenomena, he also observes that repetitions only occur "when every *thinkable* human certainty and probability were impossible" (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 212). The ontological implication is staggering: repetition involves an ineffable aspect that resists generalization into natural or moral law.

The identification of the ineffable aspects of repetition has important implications for Deleuze's observation that repetition need not be generalized as habit. In his elaboration of the misadventures of Job, Kierkegaard tends to characterize repetition in apocalyptic terms—that is, as involving any spiritual, psychological, or physical destruction. John D. Caputo observes that Job may be classified as the "teacher of repetition"²⁶ in that his repeated immiserations serve as an ominous warning of the negative effect of the repetitive succession of temporal instants. Kierkegaard elaborates on the calamitous nature of repetition by referencing the metaphor of thunderstorm that leaves one shattered, in multiple senses: "I am waiting for the thunderstorm—and for repetition. And yet I would be happy and indescribably blessed if the thunderstorm would only come, even if my sentence were that no repetition is possible. . . . What will be the effect of this thunderstorm? . . . It will shatter my whole personality—I am prepared. It will render me almost unrecognizable to myself" (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 214). The characterizations of repetition as involving a radical break imply that habit—typically identified as a type of repetition, namely, as habitual action, any of the unconscious ticks, twitches, spasms, and so on that tend to affect material entities recurrently—is in fact analytically distinct from repetition. Kierkegaard explicitly draws this distinction when he specifies that repetition, identified with the character trait of earnestness,

26. John D. Caputo, "Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and the Foundering of Metaphysics," in *Fear and Trembling* and "Repetition," vol. 6 of *International Kierkegaard Commentary*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 1993), 201–25, 216.

is ontologically primary to habit (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 327). The implication here is that repetition enjoys a relative autonomy in that it is independent of habit—that is, habit depends on repetition, not the other way around.

When we take the above observations about the nature of repetition together, a striking ontological picture emerges. Repetition is identified as an ontologically primordial process of selection—a test—that seems to resist formalization into general moral or natural law inasmuch as there is an ineffable—namely, a nonlinguistic, nonconceptualizable—aspect to the repetitions. In this sense, repetition is a break in the strictly linear concept of temporal flow expressed in the habitual actions of material entities. In every instance, the phenomenon of repetition tends to be characterized as the ontologically particular process that is analytically distinct from generality.

Concluding Remarks

In his final letter to Constantius, the nameless young man elaborates on the nature of repetition through reference to Ilithyia, the Greek goddess of childbirth. The reference is apt in that the text of the metaphorically rich passage illustrates the axiological and ontological significance of repetition. The axiological aspects of repetition are highlighted when the narrative voice characterizes his experience of repetition as akin to that of a skiff adrift on tumultuous seas that “spume with elemental fury” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 221). The ontological particularity of the process of repetition—that is, its capacities to produce the new, the object without precedent—is elaborated in the identification of repetition as a liberation of temporally prior circumstances.

I here have adduced the existence of the axiological aspect of repetition through reference to Kierkegaard and Marx. Value—comedy, tragedy, and such—is involved with the repetition of temporal moments. Any attempt to excise axiological qualities from temporal repetition—that is, to treat it as something discrete—implies a diminishment of the concept. The intimate relation of repetition and value is illustrated by Marx's explicit characterizations of the repetition of revolutionary circumstances as involving value.

Deleuze's observation that repetition tends to enjoy a nongeneral ontological status adduces the ontological particularity of repetition. He carefully identifies a series of conditions that an existent must meet in order to be considered as nongeneralizable: the existent must involve a selective test, it tends to be resistant to formalization as a moral or natural

law, and it enjoys an ontological status that is different from that of the generality of habit. Kierkegaard's nuanced elaboration of repetition demonstrates that repetition tends to satisfy these. The substantive claim is that repetition enjoys an ontological status as a radically particular process that involves the value-laden creation of the new.

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