

Lacan, Kierkegaard, and Repetition

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Summary:

This paper explores the role of Kierkegaard in Lacan's semiotic mediation of Freudian repetition. I argue that while Lacan explicitly draws upon Kierkegaard's distinction between recollection and repetition, he misreads repetition. This has the effect of closing down what could be a potentially beneficial dialogue between theology and psychoanalysis. By attending to this point I hope to open up a space for that dialogue.

When Lacan introduces the Freudian concept of repetition he generally invokes the name of Kierkegaard as well. This raises the question of the precise relation between Lacan and Kierkegaard's concept of repetition. What are their respective understandings of this term? In what way does Kierkegaard help mediate Freudian repetition? Does Lacan do justice to Kierkegaard's concept? What are the wider implications of this engagement between theology and psychoanalysis? This essay attempts to respond to those questions. My argument is quite simple. Kierkegaard's distinction between repetition and recollection provides Lacan with a useful set of conceptual tools to help Lacan communicate and establish his own distinction between the imaginary and the symbolic within the wider philosophical/theological tradition. In doing so Lacan provides a psychoanalytic justification for Kierkegaard's distinction. However, Lacan does not always do justice to Kierkegaard, misreading him in the manner that Freud misread religion. I suggest that this has consequences for both Lacan's critique of religion and the ensuing dialogue between theology and psychoanalysis.

In discussing Kierkegaard, Lacan and repetition, it is not my intention to treat Lacan's concept of repetition in its entirety, just those points where Lacan specifically relates repetition to Kierkegaard. To treat repetition in its entirety is worthy of an extended piece and this paper should be viewed as a contribution to that task, a work in progress. I begin by explaining Kierkegaard's concept of repetition. I then consider Lacan's semiotic mediation of Kierkegaard. Finally I consider the implications of that reading in the light of Lacan's critique of religion.

Kierkegaard and Repetition

The Kierkegaardian concept of repetition arises in the context of self-development. Repetition concerns the 'earnestness of existence' (Kierkegaard, 1983, p. 131). In particular, it tries to resolve the dilemma of selfhood: how does one reconcile the fact that the self changes over time, yet maintains its apparent unity? As Kierkegaard says, in Greek terms this is 'the relation between the Eleatics and Heraclitus' (Kierkegaard, 1983, p. 148). Plato's response was the doctrine of recollection (Plato, 1981, p. 104): the soul is immortal; over the course of its life it has traversed the cosmos and hence knows everything. Therefore truth is a matter of recollection, finding out what we already know. In the doctrine of recollection the changing self is anchored in the eternal which can be immanently recollected.

Kierkegaard's contention with recollection is twofold. First, it amounts to an avoidance of time. In recollection one sneaks back out of life into the eternal and thus recollection refuses to acknowledge our temporality as an essential constitutive of being. Second, as a Christian, Kierkegaard contests any immanent anchoring of the self in recollected truth due to sin: sin introduces a break between God and man and so the truth is obscured, hence the Christian must rely on revelation in the form of the incarnation in which God becomes man and reveals the truth. To intuit the truth within is a Pagan idea.

How then does repetition solve the problem of the contingent yet enduring sense of selfhood? In Kierkegaard's book *Repetition* Constantin Constantius undertakes an experiment to see whether

repetition is possible by trying to repeat a previous holiday had in Berlin. Unfortunately he finds himself thwarted at every turn. For example, he is unable to secure the same seats he had before in the theatre. Later he is disappointed by the same company previously held. His initial conclusion is that repetition is impossible. However, Constantius is able to radicalise this conclusion a little later on in his remark that 'the only repetition was the impossibility of repetition' (Kierkegaard, 1983, p. 170). In other words while one cannot go back or forward in time and re-live an experience verbatim, one can repeat the impossibility of repetition. In an earlier work this paradox is expressed precisely in terms of language: it is only through the repetition of a word that meaning is established yet paradoxically repetition also undermines meaning because of meaning's complicity in time (Kierkegaard, 1985, p. 171). For example, when Freud describes himself as 'sensible' (SE, 21, p. 51) he means rational, not given over to the whim of his sense as the word initially implied. Freud can use the word 'sensible' because repetition has established the meaningfulness of it, yet that same repetition had changed the meaning of word such that it has come to signify the very opposite of its original intent. And herein lies the paradox of repetition: one can repeat things but only through change, only through its difference. This is the basis of Lacan's reading of Freud. Lacan does not repeat Freud verbatim, it is only on the basis of articulating a difference that he establishes continuity; and this holds true for the self: we can maintain our identity but only by introducing something new (rather like Madonna who reinvents herself as a means to maintain her status).

Because repetition is constituted on the basis of creating a difference, unlike recollection which avoids time, repetition becomes an existential task in which the subject is engaged in his or her contingent striving. However, repetition is not simply a task undertaken by the subject; after all, if repetition (i.e., the existential task of self-development) were won solely on one's own merit there would be no need for God and we would be back with the Pagan category of recollection. For this reason Kierkegaard argues that one's repetition must co-terminously involve a repetition from the side of God, i.e., God must give us back ourselves (hence the Christian is born again, the Christian repeats their birth albeit with a difference). For Kierkegaard the paradigmatic figure of repetition is Job who having lost everything is given it all back by God, albeit in a different form.

In summary Kierkegaard opposes the Pagan doctrine of recollection to the Christian doctrine of repetition. The former implies an immanent relation to the eternal, the latter a relation that relies on God breaking into time. In the former, our contingent identity is subordinated to our unchanging and eternal nature; in the latter our unchanging nature depends precisely upon our ability to entertain change. With this in mind we can now turn to Lacan.

Lacan and Repetition

I examine here those aspects of Lacan's reworking of Freudian repetition where specific mention is made of Kierkegaard. I turn initially to Lacan's reworking of the '*L'automatisme de repetition* [*Wiederholungszwang*]' (Lacan, 1966, p. 43 and Lacan 1991, p. 89).

The basis for Lacan's re-reading of the repetition compulsion is language. The repetition compulsion refers to the way the subject is forced to repeat various position or roles given in advance by the signifying chain. That is to say, the subject's position is preordained, determined by the route the signifier takes. This was the thesis of "The Purloined Letter" but was elegantly set out the year before in *Seminar II*:

This discourse of the other is not the discourse of the abstract other, [...] it is the discourse of the circuit in which I am integrated. I am one of its links. It is the discourse of my father for instance, in so far as my father made mistakes which I am absolutely condemned to reproduce – that's what we call the *super-ego*. I am condemned to reproduce them because I am obliged to pick up again the discourse he bequeathed to me [...] because one can't stop the chain of discourse (Lacan 1991, p. 89).

In *Seminar XI* Lacan returns to this account of repetition compulsion and in engagement with Kierkegaard provides a contemporary reading of the doctrine of hereditary sin: 'the inheritance of the father is that which Kierkegaard designates for us, namely his sin' (Lacan 1981, p. 34). In Augustinian terms we sin because of original sin, inherited from Adam. For Lacan, we sin because we are condemned to do so by the concatenation of signifiers which are largely determinative of our behaviour.

Lacan undoubtedly gives novel and contemporary expression to the doctrine of hereditary sin; however, two issues must be raised here. First, this account of sin can only be attributed to the young Kierkegaard (1835) for whom a 'great earthquake occurred' (Kierkegaard, 1958, p. 39). Kierkegaard had learnt of some news concerning his father which caused him to subsequently interpret the various family misfortunes (Kierkegaard lost his mother and five of his brothers and sisters by the time he reached university) as a form of divine punishment: 'there must be a guilt upon the whole family' (Kierkegaard, 1958, p. 39). This young Kierkegaard was resigned to fatalism and despair and, encouraged no doubt by his Lutheran upbringing, felt destined to pay the price for his father's sins. By contrast, the later Kierkegaard adopts a very different attitude. When it comes to the question of why we sin, he chooses the language of psychology over the language of dogmatics to avoid precisely the determinative element of hereditary sin.^[1] Hereditary sin undercuts the question of human responsibility by saying: we sin because Adam sinned. The older Kierkegaard wants us to take responsibility for both our sin and our freewill. How does the language of psychology help in this respect? Kierkegaard's starting point is anxiety. Anxiety he says arises out of 'freedom's possibilities' (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 155). Anxiety is a response to the limitless possibilities that are open to us in our freedom. In the task of becoming we can become anything, and that responsibility and choice is dizzying. As for sin, within that range of possibilities we can choose to sin or not. And if we choose to sin it is not because we are ordained to, but simply because we can, because the choice is there. In other words a prohibition invites its own transgression for no other reason than the possibility itself. This is the meaning of Kierkegaard's enigmatic claim that anxiety is '*a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy*' (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 42).

Second, as Gillian Rose remarks, Lacan's account of sin (Rose, 1992, p. 46) resituates the subject in those determinative structures that Kierkegaard avoided. I would add that this is all the more remarkable given that Lacan's work also contains a strong existential element. For example, the end of the session forces a '*moments de conclure* [moment of conclusion]' (Lacan, 1966, p. 257), i.e., a point at which the analysand takes responsibility for the way she or he interprets the signifiers upon which identity is hinged. Alternatively, one could cite Lacan's dictum concerning the ethics of analysis: 'Have you acted in conformity with the desire that is in you?' (Lacan, 1992, p. 314). Here, the outcome of analysis is construed in terms of the relation between action and desire: 'it is a question of the relationship between action and desire, and of the former's fundamental failure to catch up with latter' (Lacan, 1992, p. 313). Perhaps Lacan, like Kierkegaard, found himself faced with an overbearing sense of determinism (in his case as a result of his meditations on language), and subsequently developed an existential bent as a corrective measure?

In *Seminar II* Lacan invokes Kierkegaard's distinction between repetition and recollection to provide a nuanced reading of Freud's concept of repetition (Lacan, 1991, pp. 87-89). Here Lacan has in mind Freud's account of repetition from *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895). In this text Freud describes repetition in economic terms: repetition has its basis in the lack of identity that arises between a wish and the perception of the object that fulfils the wish. For example, suppose as Freud suggests, a child wishes for an image of the mother's breast that exposes the nipple. When the mind is in a wishful state there is a rise in tension and a discharge is sought in order to regain the sense of pleasure. The child's first perception turns out to be a side view of the breast only, the nipple being out from view. However, the child's memory dictates that, a particular head movement brings about the sought after image of the breast. Eventually the initial tension is dispelled in the identity of the wishful cathexis (the desire for the nipple), and the perceptual cathexis (the image of the nipple). Repetition is the labour by which the child goes back, retracing the neural networks in the attempt to bring about an identity of memory and perception (SE, 1, p. 329).

For Lacan it is possible to give this text one of two emphases: imaginary or symbolic, which correspond to Kierkegaard's distinction between recollection and repetition. One can either read Freud in terms of the imaginary (recollection) or the symbolic (repetition). With regard to recollection (the imaginary) the emphasis in the reading is placed on the identity of the wishful cathexis and the perceptual cathexis: the child's perception, in presuming the relation between the desire and the object constitutes a form of recollection. This is to be associated with the imaginary because like recollection it involves a dyadic relation of correspondence:

Kierkegaard [...] discussed the difference between the Pagan world and the world of grace, which Christianity introduces. [In recollection] Something of the ability to recognise his natural object, so apparent in animals, is present in man. There is being captured by form, being seized by play, being gripped by the mirage of life. That is what [...] Platonic thought refers itself to, and it isn't an accident that Plato places reminiscence at the centre of his entire theory of knowledge. The natural object, the harmonic correspondent of the living being, is recognisable because its outline has already been sketched. And for it to have been sketched, it must have already been within [...]. Plato's entire theory of knowledge [...] is dyadic (Lacan, 1991, p. 87).

With regard to repetition:

But for certain specific reasons, a change occurred. Sin is from then on present as the third term, and it is by no longer following the path of reminiscence, but rather in following that of repetition, that man finds his way [...] so you can see the meaning of man's need for repetition. It's all to do with the intrusion of the symbolic register (Lacan, 1991, pp. 87-88).^[2]

The symbolic introduces a 'third term' into the dyad: the Other, which disrupts the unity of imaginary relations. Thereafter repetition becomes the search for '*l'objet foncièrement perdu*' [the fundamental lost object]' (Lacan, 1966, p. 45). Thus, just as Constinius cannot repeat the past success of his holiday in Berlin, nor can the subject retrieve the lost object (Lacan 1991, p. 87). In this reading the emphasis is on repetition as the 'effort of labour' (Lacan 1991, p. 100) by which the child seeks an object, yet will never attain it because the of break sin/Other has been introduced.^[3]

However, again, two points need to be raised here. First, for Kierkegaard repetition means precisely to receive everything back albeit in a different form, yet for Lacan repetition remains the search for the fundamental lost object, a backward movement that, as Rose points out, has more in common with recollection than repetition (Rose 1992, pp. 102-103). For example, I have already suggested that Lacan's reading of Freud constitutes a repetition in the Kierkegaardian sense; one does not read Lacan as a substitute for Freud, or to recapture the lost essence of Freud; one reads Lacan precisely to experience Freud as new. In this connection Lacan's admonition to his students to read only the first half of Kierkegaard's *Repetition* (Lacan 1991, p. 87) takes on a great importance, because it is only in the second half of *Repetition* that repetition is reconfigured in theological terms as receiving everything back anew. Second, once repetition is associated with the symbolic, it is a short step to reducing it to '*L'automatisme de repetition*' and curtailing the creativity of repetition. Lacan seems to implicitly recognise this when he says 'since this repetition is a symbolic repetition, the fact becomes established as a result that the order of the symbol can no longer be conceived as constituted by man, but rather as constituting him' (Lacan 1968, p. 141).

In both case of repetition, (repetition compulsion and repetition) Lacan manages to stand Kierkegaard on his head. Where Kierkegaard makes repetition a creative opening to transcendence, Lacan closes it in on itself, making it a form of recollection or reintroduces determinism. In other words, Lacan manages to reintroduce the form of theological determinism that Kierkegaard tried so hard to refute; yet at the same time Lacan provides a valuable psychoanalytic justification for Kierkegaard's distinction: Christian faith is predicated upon the acceptance of a loss associated with the symbolic.

Repetition and Religion

In this final section I want to suggest that the failings in Lacan's reading of Kierkegaard suggest failings in his critique of religion. For Lacan 'religion in all its forms' (Lacan 1992, p. 130) consists in various strategies to avoid the central void (*Das Ding*) around which language is spun. In this sense he offers little advance on Freud's thesis that religion is a form of obsessive neurosis. Religion arises out of a need to defend ourselves against the anxiety of the real. The question I ask is how much of his critique of religion is dependant upon a refusal to acknowledge the existential or creative element to religion that is offered by Kierkegaard?

In 'Some Considerations on Repetition and Repetition Compulsion' Hans Loewald compares Freud's repetition compulsion with Kierkegaard's (Loewald 1971, pp. 59-65). Loewald is quick to point out that Kierkegaard's repetition 'affirms the prototypical importance of the past, but here a prototype exists to be creatively transformed in the act of repetition' (Loewald 1971, p. 64). Loewald draws similarities to the therapeutic process as a whole. He goes on to suggest that Freud's bias against religion may have arisen because he saw religion in terms of a repetition compulsion that ignored the creative transformation implied by Kierkegaard. Does not Lacan commit this same mistake? Lacan reduces the creative element in Kierkegaard to a compulsion to repeat which then allows him to make the claim in *Seminar VII* that religion is only ever a stop gap for anxiety, a form of neurosis for which Lacanian therapy is presumably the cure? Yet as we saw, for Kierkegaard anxiety was a creative element tied to freedom and responsibility in the light of possibility. Is this not also the aim of analysis?

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