Repetition and Recurrence:

Freedom and Power in Nietzsche and Kierkegaard

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Sartre attempted a definition of existentialism in his essay *L’existentialisme et l’Humanisme*, outlining several tenants he found to be essential parts of existentialism. However, neither Heidegger, nor Kierkegaard, nor any other Christian so-called existentialists, such as Jaspers and Marcel, would agree with Sartre’s first premise of existentialism, viz. that existence precedes essence (Sartre, 2007). In fact, only Sartre himself strictly matches his own definition of existentialism, but this hardly makes him the only existentialist. Two possibilities remain open to us: either one should not count these thinkers as existentialists, or in order to accommodate them, a more fitting definition is required than the one provided by Sartre. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to critique Sartre’s work, or to attempt a thorough definition of existentialism for all the thinkers who are supposedly existentialists. In this paper I am merely going to take two authors who are considered to be existentialists, whom disagree on Sartre’s first premise of existentialism, and see why we might group them together in what is called “existentialism.” I will look at Nietzsche’s concept of the eternal return, and Kierkegaard’s concept of repetition, and show how both of these concepts focus on existence and freedom, dragged through despair and crisis, only to lead to a new found power and happiness. This, I will argue, is what makes these thinkers existentialists.

In his book *Repetition*, Kierkegaard, under the pseudonym Constantin Constantinus, follows the story of a young man in love, and engages the question of repetition. The question is whether something gains or loses in being repeated. He curiously starts out the book already with an interest in repetition, in finding out what it is, and whether it is possible. He describes what it is, or ought to be if it exists, as a forward-oriented version of the backward Greek notion of recollection that all knowledge is remembering. He begins with odd statements such as that all life is repetition, that one only lives in willing repetition, and that, “one who has not circumnavigated life before beginning to live will never live” (Kierkegaard, 1983, pp. 131-2). He even says that God created the world in repetition. If He had created in hope, the world would still be planned; if He had created in recollection, the world would be preserved; but in repetition,
he says, the world is continually the actuality of existence. We will now examine this concept and see if we can understand these assumptions about repetition.

His quest for an answer to the question of repetition begins with a man in love. In the beginning the young man would pace back and forth in his chambers chanting over and over a verse of love from Poul Møller. He was engaged in a hopeful repetition. But as strongly as he was in love, only a few days later he could already recollect his love as though it were past. The young man took such a tremendous leap in his love that he leapt entirely over it, and was already finished with the relationship. If the girl had died then, it would make no difference to him, for his love was no longer present; it was already merely recollected (Ibid. p. 136). This recollection was safe in that it could give him no loss, for it began in loss, at the end of the relationship. His love was gone, it was only remembered now, but she was still present. The memory of his love as past coupled with her as present tormented him, and awakened a poet in the young man. He used his poetics to make her life charming, writing of his love for her. But he grew to curse the tormented memories of his love, his life and the world. His recollected love had only sadness, and the young man did not yet understand repetition (Ibid. pp. 138-145).

Constantin could not bear to see the young man so tormented, and thought to turn him into a contemptible person who would end the relationship, in order to save him from the memory of his love. This way the young man could be happy again. But Constantin had not the strength to do this to the charming young man. His lack of a solution to the problem troubled him deeply (Ibid. pp. 145-148).

Constantin was absorbed by the question of repetition and sought to find repetition where it might be possible. He returned to Berlin where he had been once before, and visited the same places, hoping for a repetition. But he only found habit, a mere ‘again’ with no real repetition. Constantin became sickened of the habit, the wrong kind of repetition. His life was vapid and still, and the only recurrence was the impossibility of repetition, the same sameness. He concluded that there is no repetition and returned to his life with a lack of answers (Ibid. pp. 150-176).

For the young man, the girl had such an enormous importance, not in herself, but only in her relation to him. She was the border of his very being. She was what defined him, that against
which he defined himself for it was only in relation to her that he was the poet that he was. Tormented and depressed the young man left her (Ibid. pp. 184-187). Much time passed, and he began writing Constantin again, declaring that he had become absorbed in the story of Job and his repetition. Over and over again he reads the passages aloud. As the Lord gave, and the Lord took away from Job, so has He done with the young man. Long after Job is accused and punished, he maintains his faith and he is blessed and rewarded. The thunderstorm has passed, and he receives everything double. This is a true repetition, gained only when everything is lost, and all hope has vanished. The young man is at the end of his rope and nauseated by life. By now he knows repetition, and seeks to find it in waiting for the storm to pass. But it does not pass. There is no repetition for the young man and he gives up hope for a repetition and for himself (Ibid. pp. 197-219).

After a time, the young man writes Constantin with good news: “She is married!” he exclaims. In giving herself to another, she had given him back to himself. He has finally gained a repetition. His self as a poet, that was only in her, was given back to him. His being was wrapped up in hers, and now he is whole again. He received himself doubly. He has even realized that Job’s repetition was not in the material world, where his family and children could never be returned to him, but in the spiritual where he would be truly blessed (Ibid. pp. 220-222). In repetition one stakes one’s life, each moment losing it and gaining it back. The young man experienced a form of religious resonance in being absolved by life in the moment in which he wants to destroy himself. Repetition is the raising of consciousness to the second power, it expresses freedom forwards. It is freedom in three distinct stages which are found in the story of the young man and which are found elsewhere in Kierkegaard.

First it is the aesthetic in the realm of desire. The young man was pacing back and forth repeating the poet’s words in his first moment of love. Freedom here fears repetition as a captive power, it fears the staleness of something no longer new and desirous. But repetition appears regardless, and freedom in desire despairs. The young man here is already recollecting his love as something past, something already lost. Then repetition appears as something to be understood, as the ethical or rational. Constantin tries to find repetition in Berlin, in visiting the theatre to see the same show again, but he finds only habit. The young man reads Job over and over, trying to find the answer to the question of repetition. But this is only a repetition of the
same sameness. This stage he refers to elsewhere as the rotation of crops; it is only superficial difference. The understanding is powerless to find repetition and despairs in its impossibility. Finally repetition appears in relation to itself as freedom, as the religious. Freedom itself is the repetition, and its only and supreme interest is to bring itself about. It is supra-rational and cannot be scientifically achieved. It must be found within the individual, not for example, in Berlin. It is a spiritual transcendence of self, rather that the circumnavigating of self which occurs in recollection. Repetition is a religious movement by virtue of the absurd, it is a subjective inwardness on the border of the wondrous.

Repetition is a movement in the sphere of freedom where possibility remains, and actuality emerges as transcendence. In the individual repetition appears as a task for freedom. The task is to lose oneself in such a way that, “freedom is taken up entirely in life’s fractions with no remainder” (Ibid. p. 315). Dragged through the storm of despair, freedom for freedom’s sake leads repetition to a profound depth in happiness and grants absolution. It is not by desire or reason that one can find repetition. It is only in freely choosing freedom that one can experience it. It is only after despair, beyond the giving up that this is possible. True happiness, the self gained doubly, can only occur after repetition. Repetition never occurs in nature, where things always become other than they are. Any seeming recurrence is no repetition. Repetition is only possible for the self, as we see in Job, it is not the material world which he gains back. Repetition is spiritual. But what does this mean? What is a raising of the spirit to the second level?

Repetition, as the name suggests, does not concern a change of the self. In repetition, I do not become other than I am, nor do I merely remain who I am, rather I become more intensely who I already am. Repetition is not a remembering of the past as past, but a reliving of past moments as present. In The Concept of Dread, Kierkegaard examines the dogma of sin and brings it into accordance with the freedom of repetition. As something we did not choose original sin would constitute a past moment that was never present. And so for Kierkegaard, the idea of an original sin is impossible. Man is not born in sinfulness, but in freedom and he freely leaps into sin. “That every individual becomes guilty only by his own act is nevertheless perfectly certain,” (Kierkegaard, 1957, p. 48). It cannot be in human nature to sin, because Adam, who is human, freely chose to eat the apple. He felt anxiety about the possibility of sin, but God punished Adam, not the snake: it was his choice to sin. Adam leapt at this possibility and became
guilty. But all of us are born innocent and without a concept of self. The first time that one sins one gets to know who one is; guilt is the finger by whose pointing one gains a sense of individuality. Through sin and guilt, one comes to know who one is by accepting the responsibility, and the guilt for one’s freely chosen actions. One knows what one is, viz. purely free, when one accepts the guilt for his freely chosen action (Ibid. p. 96). This creates a fundamental change in the state of oneself. Every subsequent time one sins, one changes who one is. One moves along a line, leaping every time one sins and landing in a new state. One must not become other than one is, one must not sin and land in a new state. One could continue sinning and changing, rotating crops in despair, or one could do nothing and not sin, or one can turn inwards and become who one already is. One needs to become who one already is, become more oneself and stop changing into something that could not possibly be more like who one already is. This is the task of repetition.

In inwardness one remains the same yet more the same. One can never fully achieve this self-becoming precisely because what we are is becoming. When we complete a task, we destroy a possibility. But we cannot destroy the possibility of ourselves, because we are pure possibility, pure freedom. We need a lifelong task that intensifies the self rather than changes it and that task is realized through repetition. That task is our lives. Our personal history moves in a spiral constantly inwards, not in a line, with objective backwards and forwards, with a past and future dead and determined. With an infinitely tight spiral as a timeline, the past is brought into the present, but not as memory, not as recollected, but as lived again in repetition. All time is made present in repetition, “The present and future contend with each other to find an eternal expression, and this recollecting is indeed eternity’s flowing back into the present” (Ibid. 1983, p.137).

Repetition leads to something new. Through the despair the young man was finally able to get himself back, but he got more back than he had lost. Just as in the story of Job, there was something new that came about. “That which is repeated has been, but the very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new. When the Greeks said that all knowing was recollecting, they said that all existence which is, has been, when one says that life is a repetition one says: actuality, which has been, now comes into existence” (Ibid. p.189). There is a newness that emerges after repetition. Something is indeed gained in the mind that contemplates it. I
become subjective, intensified, more myself than I could have been. I gain a happiness that is pure, different and new.

**Nietzsche’s Eternal Recurrence**

Nietzsche is even less thorough in explaining his eternal return than Kierkegaard is in demonstrating his repetition. Nietzsche first mentions the recurrence in Book III of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in the section “Of the Vision and the Riddle”, and it is briefly mentioned shortly after in the section “The Convalescent”. In the vision where it first appears, Zarathustra is climbing a mountain path, and his feet carry him upward though the spirit of gravity is dragging him down to the abyss pouring leaden thought into his brain: “Oh Zarathustra”, the dwarf says, “you have thrown yourself high, but every stone that is thrown must fall!” (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 177). This thought oppresses him and when he can bear it no longer, he turns to the half-dwarf half-mole and says, “Stop dwarf! I! Or You! But I am the stronger of us two. You do not know my abysmal thought! That thought - you could not endure!” (*Ibid.* p. 178) Zarathustra then shows him the gateway that appears before him. “Behold this gateway dwarf! It has two aspects, two paths come together here;” (*Ibid.* ) the paths lead to this gateway with the word ‘Moment’ inscribed above it. These two paths extend for an eternity before them and behind them in either direction. Before Zarathustra can continue, the dwarf anticipates this, jumps off his shoulder, and says that all that is straight lies, and that time itself is a circle. Nietzsche says that that is too easy for the dwarf; everything returns, but eternally. Time is not quite a circle. He tells the dwarf that if that path that extends behind them is infinitely long, then everything that is possible would have to have already taken place there: “[Zarathustra asks] And if all things have been here before: what do you think of this very moment, dwarf? Must we not return and run down that other lane before us, down that long, terrible lane, must we not return eternally?” (*Ibid.* ). Every possible moment would already have occurred, not once or twice, but infinitely many times. And so with the path that extends in front of them. On an infinitely long timeline, all that is possible will have occurred infinitely many times. This present moment has already been and will come again eternally (*Ibid.* p. 179).
Suddenly, the dwarf and the gateway vanish, and Zarathustra finds a man lying on the ground writhing and choking on a big black snake, which had crawled into his mouth and bitten fast. Zarathustra cries to him “Bite! Bite!”, and the man did as he Zarathustra bade. He bit down, spat away the snake’s black head, and sprang up. But the man that stood before him was no longer the shepherd that had been laying there, no longer even a man. He was transformed into a being surrounded by light and laughing, richly. Nietzsche says that, “never yet on earth had any man laughed as he laughed,” (Ibid. p. 180) because it was no human laughter that came from him; it was something richer, something altogether beyond laughter. It was only after the heaviest and blackest had crawled into his mouth that it could be spat out and that laughter could be heard (Ibid.)

The eternal return sanctions a new kind of eternity. It is not merely that everything returns, as the Greeks thought, but that everything is returning eternally. Everything, every moment is thus elevated and transcended by eternity. Life said to him, “I am that which must overcome itself, again and again.” Thus no matter how horrible, tedious and burdensome life is, it calls for eternal affirmation. In realizing that the present has already been an infinite number of times, and will recur “in the same series and sequence” (Nietzsche, 1974, §340), the present and the future can be seen to be determined. But this was the Greek conception. What is really the case is not that the present and future are past as recollection, but rather that the past and future are present in repetition. Equating all time to presence, grants the possibility of affirming even what was once considered past. The Greeks knew only of circular return, not of spiralling eternal return. Even Socrates suffered from life and saw his death as a healing for which he would owe Asklepios a cock (Ibid. §341). And so we must surpass even their wisdom. On this eternally recurring conception, time itself is opened up to a presence, to a power of the will. All of time as present eternity is begging for eternal affirmation; it is not dead and gone as something to be merely remembered in recollection.

With no God, the eternal return takes the place of the metaphysical truth and moral imperative, bringing with it a wave of the newest and happiest souls. For he who is strong enough to realize that there is no other truth than personal truth will find only joy in the eternal return. This knowledge of life itself is the starting point of the philosophical quest as Nietzsche sees it. If God is dead then nihilism stands at the door as “the most unwelcome guest”. This idea
is echoed in Dostoevsky, and in Sartre among others, that without God, there is no objective truth, no objective values and from this everything is permitted.

Nietzsche saw in Hegel’s theodicy the final attempt to restore Christianity. After him, Feuerbach reduced the divine being to the divinity in man, and Kierkegaard demonstrated the absurdity of true religion. Nietzsche had no reservations or illusions about the truth of the matter, and boldly claimed that God is dead. With this truth we are in a valueless existence in a valueless world, and both stand in dire need of a revaluing. Only in this way can nihilism and the despair of abandonment generate a “super-abundance of life”. It is only in the wake of God that the self-responsible, self-creating man arises. The power of creation is now in the hands of man. The new super-human creator takes up the place of God, and the traditional ‘thou shalt’ becomes ‘I will’. Nihilism is overcome in the eternal recurrence; it saves man from the despair and weak, passive quietism of nihilism: “The path to one’s own heaven leads always through the voluptuousness of one’s own hell,” (Ibid. §338). It is only after and through nihilism that one can truly be happy. It is only after God has lived and died that we can truly become value-creators.

In §341, “The Heaviest Burden”, Nietzsche asks how one would respond to being told of the eternal recurrence. Is it a blessing or a curse to be forced to live one’s life exactly as it is, not once or twice, but infinitely many times? This burden grants power and responsibility; the burden of creating value, creating self, and willing that all of one’s actions return eternally. There is a power and a profound happiness in the freedom of a world without God. As he says, “the sea, is our sea, it lies again open before us, perhaps never before has such an open sea existed” (Ibid. §340). This shows the difference between the Godlessness before God and the one after Him; Our sea is not merely open again, but open in a new way. He famously declares that “God is dead”, but it is not the case that God never existed, because then we would be the same as before. Both repetition and the eternal return, after nihilism, have changed us, we are no different, but we are more human, more ourselves than ever before. The self-transcended man has emerged from nihilism, he is a soul raised to a power. He is still man, but he is more man than he ever could have been with or before the existence of God.

After nihilism man is able to be as free as he really is, to be the self-creator he is. He is only different in being more the same. This super-human has experienced a repetition. He has lost all hope of God, of knowing value, of being objective. He despairs in the nothingness of
nihilism and mourns the death of God. It is only after he has lost everything that he is able to gain everything back double. He is not only happy again, but has found a new happiness, something different and more authentic than anything he has experienced before. The philosophy of the eternal return truly is the joyful science. Man has not only gained his self back, but has gained his self as he willed it, as he eternally wills it, as his own creation, a product of his own free construction. Unlike in Dostoëvsky where everything would be the same if God did or did not exist, for Kierkegaard as well as Nietzsche, there is a difference in the man transcended, in the man beyond nihilism.

Time as a circle would find all dead and finished as a recurrence of the same sameness. For these thinkers, time is rather more akin to a spiral or a helix, where everything recurs infinitely, where each moment is not only the same, but more the same. Each moment is amplified and multiplied by eternity. Traditional eternity has either time as linear and forever different, or circular and forever the same. Here we find that it is not the same sameness that returns, but a new sameness. It is a repetition of difference. What is gained in repetition or recurrence is not in the thing repeated, but in the mind that contemplates its repetition. The second occurrence of a moment is different simply in virtue of being second. There is an ordinal difference, a relational un-sameness of the same. The very difference that displaces the self, or the moment, turns upon itself and causes it to return eternally. It is a constantly eternal differencing that constitutes the nature of the return, of the repetition.

The self before, and the self after the repetition or recurrence, is not merely a receiving back of the same, but a receiving double. There is something unique in emerging from despair and nihilism that transforms and transcends the self and the moment. It creates a power that was never there before. It allows the creation of self and the power to will willing itself. It is freedom for freedom’s sake. This is the heart of these two thinker’s philosophies. It is the power of the freedom that comes from facing the facts of existence. The courage that destroys nihilism, and kills the spirit of gravity leads to a wonderful new realm of freedom and happiness, unlike anything before. This is the only doctrine of existentialism, if any such thing exists. It truly is the philosophy of freedom, the philosophy of happiness. Existentialism is the Gay Science.

**Works Cited:**


