

## Lecture Two: Kierkegaard, Law and Repetition

### Introduction

Today I want to look at two themes: the law and repetition. Deleuze writes in the preface that, 'the task of modern philosophy is to overcome the alternatives temporal/non-temporal, historical/eternal and particular/universal.' (*DR*, xix) It is the last of these oppositions that I want to deal with today. Law, or generality is one of the central themes of the introduction to *Difference and Repetition*, and the notion of law relies on the distinction between the particular and the universal. We normally see laws as applying to all particular entities that resemble each other in a pertinent way. So the laws of gravitation apply to particular bodies insofar as they have mass, Bernoulli's principle applies to all incompressible fluids moving at low speeds. Likewise, for Kant, universal moral laws govern the behaviour of all beings who share the property of rationality. In all of these cases, it seems to be the case that repetition plays a central role in the formulation of laws. Scientific laws are formulated by repeated experimentation, and Kant's moral law appears, in the form of the categorical imperative, to provide a test of what actions can be repeated.

Deleuze states that 'repetition is not generality' (*DR*, 1), however, as the opening line to *Difference and Repetition*. The question that will occupy us today will be, why is law incapable of providing repetition? And, what is the relation between repetition and law. In terms of *Difference and Repetition*, we will look at pages 1-7 of the introduction. In order to work out why Deleuze is making the claims he is, I want to look at one of his key sources in this section, the work of Kierkegaard. Deleuze looks at both *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition* in these sections, but I want to focus on *Fear and Trembling*, as while the same themes occupy both, they are presented more directly in *Fear and Trembling*. Next week, we will look at some sections of *Repetition* when we look at the notion of the 'theatre of the future and the [new] philosophy' (*DR*, 9), which Deleuze claims overcomes the limitations of representation. This week what will occupy us with *Fear and Trembling* is the figure of Abraham as transcending and, as a consequence, falsifying the notion of a universal moral law. We will then try to extract a concept of repetition from this movement. Deleuze's general strategy in these opening sections is to show that there is a problem with our notion of the law in natural sciences, and then to show how other conceptions of the law are ultimately founded on this one case.

### Science

The first question, therefore, is why is it impossible for science to repeat? Bergson talks about the ideal of mechanism in *Creative Evolution* in the following terms:

"A group of elements which has gone through a state can always find its way back to that state, if not by itself, at least by means of an external cause able to restore everything to its place" (*CE*, 8).

While we might question this precise principle, in particular in relation to mechanics after the advent of thermodynamics and entropy, it does appear as if repetition is in some sense possible within the scientific world. In fact, it appears to be a precondition of the scientific method. It is by recreating the same situation that we are able to develop laws, by showing that bodies always behave the same way; that is, that the law is universal. So why is repetition in actual fact impossible? While the physical world may be full of innumerable resemblances, experiment is not simply a case of observation, but of the constitution of an experimental context. On the one hand, we choose the factors that we want to analyse by excluding other factors. More importantly, the entire notion of a factor presupposes a certain mode of understanding. In order to separate elements of a system, we have to presuppose that they are in some way already determinable discretely. These factors, moreover, are understood in terms that are essentially quantitative. That is, in order to conduct an experiment, we presuppose that the pertinent features of a system can be understood in numerical terms. Once this has been done, 'phenomena necessarily appear as *equal* to a certain quantitative relation between chosen factors.' (DR, 3) Deleuze therefore argues that physics comes to natural phenomena with a mathematical understanding of them which allows for the possibility of different situations being equal.

Even bearing this in mind, Deleuze argues that the notion of repetition emerges only hypothetically. The experiment generates a law of the form, 'given the same circumstances', i.e. a hypothetical law. In this case, repetition is given as an extrapolation from experiments which provide at best similar circumstances. As Deleuze writes, 'repetition can always be "represented" as extreme resemblance or perfect equivalence, but the fact that one can pass by degrees from one thing to another does not prevent their being different in kind.' (DR, 2)

To mention briefly Kierkegaard's *Repetition*, Kierkegaard illustrates the same point through Constantine Constantinus' attempt to 'test the possibility and meaning of repetition' (Rep 20). Constantine's attempt to repeat his previous experience is frustrated by the minor changes that take place. He arrives on the wrong day, takes a different seat in the stagecoach, and discovers that his landlord has married (*hatte sich verändert*). Whilst at first such changes are renounced ('otherwise everything repeated itself [Rep, 20]), it quickly becomes apparent that the absolute repetition of his past experiences is impossible. Repetition is not only physically impossible, but is also philosophically impossible:

A Greek would choose to recollect without being troubled by his conscience. Modern philosophy makes no movement. In general, it merely makes a commotion. To the extent that it makes a movement, it is always within the sphere of immanence. Repetition, on the other hand, is transcendence. (Rep, 50)

Repetition is not possible either through recollection (*metempsychosis*), or, as Constantine later shows, by developing habits. Physical repetition, therefore, seems to be impossible.

### **Kant's Moral Law**

If repetition isn't found in the universality of the laws of nature, perhaps, Deleuze asks, it can be found in the moral realm: 'the wise must be converted into the virtuous; the dream of finding a law

which would make repetition possible passes over into the moral sphere.’ (DR 4) The figure that Deleuze draws on in order to work through this alternative hypothesis is Kant, due to his sharp distinction between natural law and rational law. One of Kant’s key concerns in his moral writings is to account for the autonomy of the moral agent. Moral action is only possible if we act freely. So the question is, what motivates our actions, or, in other words, what laws govern our actions. If we are motivated by something within the world, for example, by happiness, and that which can bring it about, then, Kant argues, we are also *determined* by the empirical world. Our actions are reliant on the particular circumstances which surround us. In this sense, then, rather than being autonomous, we are determined by the particular structures of the empirical world which surround us. The question, therefore is, how are we able to provide a properly autonomous foundation for moral action. Kant’s solution is to claim that to escape from the empirical determination of moral judgements, we need to base our moral actions on principles which are grounded entirely in reason. Kant’s essential idea is that if we are to be autonomous, that is, self-legislating, then given that we are rational creatures, self legislation would involve giving ourselves rational laws which govern our conduct. Furthermore, in order that these laws are to be purely rational, they should not contain any empirical content whatsoever. That is, the primary principles of morals must be purely formal principles. So Kant appears to create a sharp distinction between two realms, and two kinds of laws. On the one hand, empirical laws, which deal with determinate content, and on the other moral laws, which are purely formal and rational. In this realm, therefore, is the possibility that Deleuze considers ‘of successful repetition and of the spirituality of repetition’ (DR 4) actualised?

Kant proposes that if there is to be a formal criterion, then it has to be based on the notion of rational consistency. The only way that we can provide a determination as to what we should do in a given circumstance is negatively. If the act can be performed without contradiction, then it is a moral act. He formulates the key criterion as follows:

‘Act only in accordance with a maxim through which you can at the same time will that it be a universal law.’ (GM)

The central idea behind Kant’s account is therefore that if we could understand an action as hypothetically governed by a maxim that everyone held to, without it producing a contradiction, then that action would be seen as a moral action.

To use one of Kant’s examples (*Groundwork*, 32), supposing that I need some money, and decide to borrow some, knowing full well that I will not be able to pay it back. That is, I make a promise that I know I will not keep. There is nothing inherently self-contradictory in this maxim of action, but if we imagine that it became a maxim which was universally followed, then a contradiction would arise. That is, if everyone made promises that they did not intend to keep, then the very idea of a promise itself would have no meaning: ‘no one would believe what was promised him, but would laugh at all such expressions as vain pretenses.’ (*Groundwork*, 32) Thus, Kant provides a purely formal criterion for determining what the ethical is, based on universal (and universalisable) human reason.

We can see on this basis that the notion of universality seems to function as a test for repetition. If an action could become a universal law, that is, if it could truly be repeated, then it is a moral act. Kant seems therefore to share Deleuze’s recognition the impossibility of repetition within the natural realm; as he writes in the introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

Experience never gives its judgements true or strict but only assumed or comparative universality...Thus if a judgement is thought in strict universality, i.e., in such a way that no exception at all is allowed to be possible, then it is not derived from experience, but is rather valid absolutely *a priori*. (B, 3-4)

In this sense, repetition is not just something that is present within the rational realm, but is even the test or criterion by which we determine if something belongs to the moral realm. Does Kant therefore provide an account of repetition as strict universality?

Deleuze presents the following antinomy in *Difference and Repetition* that:

Conscience suffers from the following ambiguity: it can be conceived only by supposing the moral law to be external, superior and indifferent to the natural law; but the application of the moral law can be conceived only by restoring to conscience itself the image and model of the law of nature. (DR 5)

As it stands, this criticism is quite obscure; the first point is straightforward enough. The moral must be conceived of as separate from the natural. The natural realm is governed by causality, making free action impossible, therefore the moral must be seen as separate from it. Why must it then be seen according to the model of natural law. Deleuze explains this point in more detail in *Kant's Critical Philosophy* that this is an implication of the difference between the two realms:

It is thus in two very different senses that the sensible and the suprasensible each form a nature. Between the two Natures there is merely an 'analogy' (existence under laws). By virtue of its paradoxical character suprasensible nature is never completely realized, since nothing guarantees to a rational being that similar beings will bring their existence together with his, and will form this 'nature' which is possible only through the moral law. This is why it is not sufficient to say that the relation between the two Natures is one of analogy; one must add that the suprasensible can itself be thought of as a nature only by analogy with sensible nature. (KCP, 33)

While we may posit the existence of the free moral realm, we lack any way of conceiving of it, as it differs in kind from the world we find around us. Thus, if we are to represent it to ourselves, we have to rely on an analogy with the world we find around us. We therefore project the model of empirical law onto the noumenal in order to understand the concept of moral law. This is explicit with Kant's third formulation of the categorical imperative:

All maxims from one's own legislation should harmonize into a possible realm of ends, as with a realm of nature.

This is going to be one of the key themes in Deleuze's relationship to Kant: Deleuze will repeatedly argue that Kant opens up the possibility of an enquiry into the nature of repetition (or difference) through his transcendental philosophy, only to close it down by giving it a structure with reiterates that of the empirical.

In this case, Deleuze argues that Kant's central concept of duty is assimilable to habit (or rather, the habit of contracting habits). He argues that our understanding of habit repeats the errors of natural laws. Thus, while habit relies on repetition of the similar, it doesn't provide a criterion by which we

can select the relevant similarities ('everything resembles everything else'). It is only once we have done this that habits are explained, but only on the basis of ignoring the differences between events (equalisation).

## **Kierkegaard**

At this point, I want to turn to Kierkegaard, who, according to Deleuze, along with Nietzsche and Peguy, 'opposes repetition to all forms of generality.' (DR 6) I also want to use Kierkegaard to clarify Deleuze's assertion that there are two forms of repetition, a 'bare repetition (repetition of the Same)' and 'the more profound structures of a hidden repetition.' (DR xviii) It should have become clear by now that what Deleuze means by repetition is very different from the concept that one would find in the sciences (or in the moral realm). While *Fear and Trembling* does not give us precisely this concept of repetition, it does hint at some of the characteristics that repetition must possess.

## **Attunement**

*Fear and Trembling* deals with another test, or temptation, which parallels that which Kant provides. The test in question is God's commandment that he sacrifice his only son on Mount Moriah. In it, Kierkegaard's pseudonym tries to understand the paradox of Abraham, in that he represents the highest model of faith, yet at the same time is incomprehensible within the categories of moral thought. The primary target of this account, as with much of Kierkegaard's writings, is Hegel, but we can see that insofar as it provides an account of the impossibility of repetition, it applies equally to Kant. Indeed, Kant writes of Abraham's willingness to go along with God's commandment that:

Abraham should have replied to this putative divine voice: 'That I may not kill my good son is certain. But that you who appear to me are God is not certain, and cannot become certain, even though the voice were to sound from the very heavens' ... that a voice which one seems to hear *cannot* be divine one can be certain of...in case what is commanded is contrary to the moral law. (Kant, *Conflict of the Faculties*)

In order to demonstrate the incomprehensibility of Abraham from this perspective, silentio begins his study of Abraham with four cases that show an inadequate grasp of Abraham's state. This section of the text is entitled 'Attunement', as it is supposed to give us an insight into the problem of understanding Abraham.

The four ethical Abrahams provide alternative models by which to understand him. Kierkegaard's aim in setting them out is to show us through the inadequacies of each the need to recognise a non-ethical moment in Abraham. In the first case, Abraham claims not to have misled Isaac, but tells him of God's intentions. At the moment of the sacrifice, rather than performing the sacrifice in the name of God, he takes ownership of it in his own name. He turns to Isaac with a wild look and tells him, 'Foolish boy, do you believe I am your father? I am an idolater. Do you believe this is God's command? No, it is my desire.' (FT, 45) His aim in making this claim is to sacrifice himself in order to preserve his son's faith in God. Thus, Isaac renounces his own father, and seeks God's protection. This interpretation of the binding of Isaac is obviously problematic, primarily for two reasons. First, in preserving the innocence of Isaac, Abraham implicitly leads Isaac to a false God. That is, Isaac only

preserves his faith in God by being separated from the true nature of God as the one who gives Abraham the commandment to sacrifice him. Second, Abraham's action here is perfectly comprehensible, whereas silentio has argued that Abraham acts from the absurd.

In the second model, Abraham arrives at the appointed place with Isaac, and makes the sacrifice of the ram in Isaac's place. Rather than being an image of the faith of Abraham, however, in this case, 'Abraham [becomes] old, he could not forget that god had demanded this of him. Isaac thrived as before; but Abraham's eye was darkened, he saw joy no more.' (FT, 46) In this case, therefore, Abraham accords with God's wishes, but in the process is forced to give up his faith in God.

In the third model, Abraham once again is prepared to sacrifice his son. Following this sacrifice, however, he leaves on a journey on his own. This time, however, Abraham is seen as losing faith through the recognition that in being able to sacrifice his son, he has committed a sin against the ethical code laid down by God. Moreover, while recognising that he has sinned in being willing to sacrifice Isaac, he is unable to understand the nature of this sin, given God's commandment. It is this lack of recognition of the reason for his sin that puts him beyond redemption, as without understanding why he is lost, he cannot return to God.

The final analysis sees Abraham go through with the sacrifice, but clench his fist in anguish as he is about to strike with the knife. Isaac sees this moment, and loses his faith as a result, realising that Abraham himself does not have faith. Isaac never discusses what he has seen, however, and so this moment is lost to history.

Each of these accounts makes the story of Abraham comprehensible in its own way. In all of these cases, however, the comprehensibility of the story is premised on denying to Abraham his faith. He either loses faith during the account, or carries out the act itself without faith. Silentio makes clear the inadequacy of this response in his conclusion to the section:

In these and similar ways this man of whom we speak thought about those events. Every time he came home from a journey to the mountain in Moriah he collapsed in weariness, clasped his hands, and said: 'Yet no one is as great as Abraham; who is able to understand him?' (FT, 48)

### **The Knight of Infinite Resignation**

The key moment, therefore, that Abraham possesses, that is lacking in all of these cases is the moment of faith, and it is precisely faith that leads to his moral incomprehensibility. In order to explain faith, silentio posits what he calls a 'double movement' which Abraham makes: the knight of infinite resignation and the knight of faith.

The knight of infinite resignation is the first figure of the double movement of faith. Kierkegaard describes this movement by presenting the example of a young man who is in love with a princess. At first, the young man, the knight of infinite resignation, remains in the sphere of the possible. He believes that he can win the princess by his actions, and lives like the young girl who makes even stones weep. This first moment is an essential part of the development of the knight of infinite resignation, as without a genuine connection, there is nothing for him to resign. The moment of possibility is thus a moment of genuine love for the princess. There comes a point, however, when

he realises the impossibility of his situation. At this point, the movement from finite possibility to infinite resignation takes place.

Infinite resignation does not mean that the knight forgets the princess. Rather, the knight sublimates, or displaces his love of the princess into another domain:

[His love would] be transfigured into a love for the eternal being which, although it denied fulfilment, still reconciled him once more in the eternal consciousness of his love's validity in an eternal form that no reality can take from him. (FT, 72)

That is, rather than directing his love outward, towards the princess, he sees it as a moment, or an expression of the eternal form of love. In doing so, the impossibility of the actual fulfilment in the finite world becomes irrelevant to its true meaning as referring beyond this particular temporal moment. So, rather than see it as a love for *this* particular woman, here and now, he sees his love as an expression of an almost Platonic form of love. What can we say about this movement?

- (1) His resignation is not a moment whereby he forgets the princess. Rather, he maintains his love of the princess as an expression of the eternal form of love. In fact, the memory, and its relation to the eternal, is now more important than the real situation of the princess. As the moment of his love for the princess was actually an expression of the eternal form, the boy is actually embarrassed if through some stroke of luck he later wins the princess as this would show that it was still the finite moment, and not the eternal, which is important.
- (2) Second, and related to this, the knight of infinite resignation is incommensurable with the world. He possesses 'a strangeness and superiority' (FT, 68) in his engagements with the world, which make clear to us that he is no longer at home in the world of finitude.
- (3) Third, this movement is a movement of self-enclosure. The knight of infinite resignation cuts *himself* off from the world, and makes the movement of resignation himself. Not only is he isolated by his incommensurability with the finite, but he also is self-reflexive. That is, in reflecting on his love as a moment of eternal consciousness, the knight of infinite resignation relates to himself.
- (4) Finally, the knight of infinite resignation is comprehensible. More than this, Silentio claims it is a 'philosophical movement' (FT, 77). That is, we can understand how the boy renounces his connection to finitude, given his impossibility of fulfilment there, in favour of entering a higher domain.

How does the figure of the knight of infinite resignation apply to Abraham? If we were to read Abraham as a knight of infinite resignation, we would see his sacrifice of Isaac as beginning with a rejection of the possibility of the salvation of Isaac by God. Silentio has the Abraham of infinite resignation say to himself, 'Now Isaac is lost, I could just as well sacrifice him here at home as journey the long road to Moriah.' (FT, 66) While the sacrifice of Isaac would still be a great moment, and may even 'save many', it would not lead Abraham to the moment of incomprehensible faith in the absurd.

### **The Knight of Faith**

The knight of infinite resignation is a precondition for the knight of faith. The knight of faith makes two movements, the first of which is that described by the knight of infinite resignation. What is the second movement? Silentio describes this moment as follows:

He does exactly the same as the other knight, he infinitely renounces the claim to the love which is the content of his life; he is reconciled in pain; but then comes the marvel, he makes one more movement, more wonderful than anything else, for he says: 'I nevertheless believe that I shall get her, namely on the strength of the absurd, on the strength of the fact that all things are possible.' (FT, 75)

That is, the knight of faith fully accepts that rationally there is no possibility of winning the princess. Yet in spite of this fact, the knight believes, on the strength of the absurd. What are the differences between this case and that of the knight of infinite resignation?

- (1) First, the knight of faith loves the princess not simply as an expression of the eternal, but as herself a finite being. Similarly, this is what makes Abraham great. Despite the impossibility of Isaac being delivered from sacrifice, Abraham still believes that he will be delivered.
- (2) Second, the knight of faith 'belongs altogether to the world.' (FT, 68) There is nothing in his comportment which signals any incommensurability with the finite. So much so that Silentio is unable to recognise the knight of faith at all. The difference from the purely finite individual is entirely in the interior.
- (3) This is a direct result of the third point. The knight of faith is incomprehensible from a philosophical perspective, and this is why Silentio cannot recognise him. In this, Abraham is exceptional, in that he is forced into an action where his faith shows itself. Normally, the knight of faith appears no different from a tax-collector, to use Kierkegaard's example.
- (4) Last, it is not a movement that can be accomplished by the subject itself, but one which requires a relation to an outside.

### **Repetition**

So the case of the lover mirrors that of Abraham. Just as the lover loses the princess, Abraham loses Isaac. Abraham has faith, however, in that despite the impossibility of the salvation of Isaac, he still believes that he will be returned to him. Kierkegaard makes clear the relation of this moment to repetition in his book of the same name through a discussion of Job:

So repetition is possible. But when? No human language can say. When did it happen for Job? When, from a human perspective, the impossibility was *conceived* as probable, even certain. Job gradually loses everything and thus hope also gradually disappears in that actuality, rather than mitigating the accusations, makes increasingly harsh claims against him. Viewed immediately, everything appears to be lost. His friends, especially Bildad, know of only one escape: he must submit to the punishment, daring to hope for a repetition to the point of excess. But Job does not want to do this. Thus the knot, the tangle, is tightened. Only a thunderstorm can loosen it. (Repetition, 69)



Repetition, therefore, is this moment that falls outside of the categories of reason (or human language). It is a repetition that is orientated towards a future which is incommensurate with the past or present. We can see therefore that rather than based on universality, as it is for Kant, for Kierkegaard (and for Deleuze) it will be based on singularity. Next week we will look at how Deleuze takes up this concept of repetition, and some of the criticisms that Deleuze develops of Kierkegaard's formulation of it.