***Repetition*** by Kierkegaard as Constantine Constantius

What is repetition? Repetition is the “decisive expression” (p.3) for what recollection was to the Greeks. All knowledge is recollection for them, but for modern philosophy “life itself is a repetition.” (p.3) Constantius distinguishes the two in the following way: “Repetition and recollection are the same movement, just in opposite directions, because what is recollected has already been and is thus repeated backwards, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forwards.” (p.3) So, repetition has an eye towards the future while resting in the “blissful security of the moment.” (p.3) It isn’t something new because one always tires of the new. It is old but nevertheless always makes one happy.

*Repetition* (the book) is essentially a story about a young man in love. Constantius observes however that, although she “was his beloved, the only one he had ever loved, the only one he would ever love. On the other hand, he did not really love her, but only longed for her.” (p.9) What she did was awaken in him the poetic and transformed him into a poet. “This was why he could love only her, never forget her, never wish to love anyone else, and yet still merely long for her. She had permeated every aspect of his being. The thought of her was always fresh. She had been important for him.” (p.9) This is almost exactly the definition of *recollection*; see below. The idea is that “the love of recollection in fact makes a person unhappy.” (p.15)

Over time, precisely because it is “impossible… to translate this poetic relationship into an actual love” (p.13), he became depressed as the relationship became a torment for him and he realised she would never be truly happy in the relationship. Nevertheless, he felt he couldn’t tell her because putting her off “with the explanation that she was not the ideal, [while] comfort[ing] her with the fact that she was one’s muse” (p.12) would be the most despicable thing to do. Instead, he used his poetic talents to amuse and entertain her exclusively, essentially deceiving her that everything is alright. This, he viewed as the less despicable option. Constantius explains it thus: “His fate was sad in that he really loved the girl, but in order actually to love her, he first had to be freed from the poetic confusion into which he had fallen. He could have confessed this to the girl. This is the seemly thing to do when one wants to end a relationship with a girl. He did not want to do this, though. I agreed with him entirely in his view that this would be wrong. He would in this way have deprived her of the opportunity to exist autonomously, and freed himself perhaps from becoming an object of her contempt as well as from a gathering anxiety concerning whether he would ever be able to recover what he had lost.” (pp.15-6)

This man sought help from Constantius, who advised him to spread a rumour that he had become involved with someone else. The ideal would be for the girl to release the man, to give him freedom. “This would save him if she gave it to him, because in this way she would, through her magnanimity, be in the superior position, she would not be wronged!” (p.13) This situation would have produced *repetition* because they would have both been able to bring the other to mind in a way that gave their futures meaning. Constantius arranged everything with a young girl he knew, but just as everything was prepared, the man disappeared.

Here, Constantius talks a little about repetition. Repetition has, he says, “mistakenly been referred to as mediation.” (p.18) As he says, “The dialectic of repetition is easy, because that which is repeated has been, otherwise it could not be repeated; but precisely this, that it has been, makes repetition something new. When the Greeks said that all knowing was recollecting, they were also thus saying that all of existence, everything that is, has been. When one says that life is repetition, one also says that that which has existed now comes to be again. When one lacks the categories of recollection and repetition, all of life is dissolved into an empty, meaningless noise. Recollection is the ethnic view [the indispensable condition] of life, repetition the modern.” (p.19) As an example, he talks about a professor who, while giving a speech, noticed that one of his remarks was not well received. So, “he pounded on the table and said: ‘I repeat.’ That is, he waited until what he had said became accepted through repetition.” (p19) That is, what he had already said, he said again, but in such a way that something was different and produced a different effect in his listeners.

Constantius moves on now to describe his own attempts to produce repetition in his life by re-creating a trip he had once taken to Berlin. However, nothing turned out to be possible to re-create. His old landlord had changed (by getting married) and everything was (unpleasantly) different when he went to the theatre, right down to the location of the seat and the inability of the actor to make him laugh. Nor did the café he went to the next day, and which he had enjoyed the first time around, live up to his expectations. The coffee was bad and the atmosphere oppressive. The only place where repetition occurred was a restaurant which he had “presumably through force of habit… enjoyed myself” (p.37) and even though everything was the same, he didn’t enjoy it. His conclusion was that after “several days’ repetition of this, I became bitter, so tired of repetition that I decided to return home. I made no great discovery, yet it was strange, because I had discovered that there was no such thing as repetition. I became aware of this by having it repeated in every possible way.” (p.38)

In an interesting aside that brings to mind Kierkegaard’s views on suffering, Constantius talks about his belief that since one will “never be completely, absolutely, and in every way content, and it is hardly worth the trouble to be more or less content, so one might as well be thoroughly discontented.” (p.40)

Repetition

Returning to the main story. After some time, Constantius began receiving letters from his young friend. Constantius notes that the man was exceptionally gifted, especially regarding his intellect, and, as such, a love affair was not a good idea for him. “To fall in love with a girl only disturbs him and frustrates his objective, because he can almost play her part as well. This is unpleasant both for her and for himself. On the other hand, he was a very melancholy soul. Just as the former would prevent him from becoming close to a girl” (p.48). It turned out he was having difficulties getting over the relationship. “What has ensnared him is not the girl’s charms, but regret over having wronged her by disturbing her life. He had thoughtlessly got too close to her.” (p.48)

He believed that, “humanly speaking, his love cannot be realized. He has arrived at the border of the miraculous, so if it is to happen it must be by virtue of the absurd.” (p.49) The girl was still immensely significant to him, but “that through which she has significance is not herself, but her relation to him. She is like the limit of his being. But such a relationship is not erotic.” (p.49)

In such a situation, a “Greek would choose to recollect without being troubled by his conscience.” (p.50) Modern philosophy would make no movement at all; “To the extent that it makes a movement, it is always within the sphere of immanence. Repetition, on the other hand, is transcendence.” (p.50)

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What follows next are the letters written by the young man to Constaninius in which he basically talks about the way he didn’t have the strength to go through with the plan, why he left in secret (he wouldn’t have been able to go through with it if his girl had known and tried to stop him), and in general, his thoughts on the whole matter. I will pull out sections of interest to comment on here.

At one point, he says Constantius seems “deranged. Or it is not a kind of mental illness, to have subjected every passion, every movement of the heart, every mood, to the cold discipline of reflection! Is it not a kind of mental illness to be like this, an idea rather than a person.” (p.52) Perhaps this explains why Constantius was unable to achieve repetition in his life. He is too reflective.

The man wonders whether he is guilty over what he did. Hasn’t something happened to him to make him act the way he did? Could he have known this would happen? If it lay hidden in his soul before bursting forth, how could he have then foreseen it? And if he couldn’t have foreseen it, is he not then innocent?

Is he unfaithful? If she continued to love him and only wanted him, she would be called faithful. If he continues to love her and only wants her, is he therefore unfaithful? “We both do the same thing, how is it that I have become a deceiver because I show my fidelity with the deception? Why should she be in the right, and I in the wrong?” (p.61) He insists that he behaved correctly; “My love will not admit of expression in a marriage. If I tried, it would crush her.” (p.61)

He speaks highly of Job because he is so “human”; “Nowhere has the passion of pain found such expression.” (pp.63-4) In addition, he believes that the main point in the story of Job is “that Job, despite everything, is in the right... Every human explanation is simply a misunderstanding to him, and all his distress is to him, in relation to God, a mere sophism that he knows he cannot solve himself, but which he has confidence that God can solve… He claims that he and God are on good terms, that he knows he is innocent and pure in his innermost heart where, in addition, he knows this with God, and yet all of existence seems to refute him. This is what is great in Job, that the passion of freedom in him is not quelled or calmed through a false expression. This passion is often quelled in a person under similar circumstances, in that a faintheartedness or trivial anxiety has allowed him to believe he suffered for the sake of his sins, when he did not do this at all.” (p.65) Job’s friends insist that his misfortune is a punishment and he ought to repent and pray for forgiveness, but Job maintains everything is fine. Importantly, Job didn’t become demonic either, wanting to see God in the right, while believing he was also in the right.

Job’s claims are explained by the fact that “the whole thing is a *test*.” (p.67) However, the test “is neither aesthetic, nor ethical, nor dogmatic; it is completely transcendent. It is primarily knowledge about the category of a test, that something is a test, which would have a place in dogmatics. As soon as such knowledge comes into play, however, then the elasticity of the test is weakened and the category becomes something other than it was. This category is absolutely transcendent and places a person in a purely personal relation of opposition to God” (p.68).

At the end of the story of Job, God gave him twice as much as he had before. The man notes that this is a good example of *repetition*. He then asks when repetition is possible. “No human language can say. When did it happen for Job? When, from a human perspective, the impossibility was conceived as probable, even certain.” (p.68)

In his last letter, he writes that he has discovered the girl has gotten married. She has finally forgotten him and, in doing so, freed him. “The schism in my being has been removed. I am whole again. The anxieties of sympathy, which my pride nourished and supported, no longer force splits and separations.” (p.74) He also considers that repetition has finally happened for him, as it did for Job; “Is repetition not possible? Have I not received everything back, only doubled? Have I not myself again, and in such a way that I have a double appreciation of what this means? And what is a repetition of worldly goods, which have no meaning in relation to spiritual matters, compared to such a repetition?” (pp.74-5)

He finishes by writing about how happy he has become. “I belong to the idea. When it beckons me, I follow. When it summons me, then I wait day and night. No one calls to dinner, no one waits supper on me. When the idea calls, I leave everything, or more correctly, I have nothing to leave. I disappoint no one, distress no one, by being true to it. My spirit is not distressed by having to distress another. When I return home, there is no one to read anything in my face, no one to grill me, no one to worm an account out of me, which I would not be able to give anyone anyway, of whether I am happy or sunk in misery, of whether I have been victorious in life or been vanquished by it.” (p.75)

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The story now shifts back to Constantius who writes a closing passage explicitly directed to the reader in which he offers a few more thoughts about the young man.