Kierkegaard’s *Repetition*: Negotiating the Boundaries of Faith

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Constantin Constantius, the pseudonymous author of Kierkegaard’s *Repetition* introduces his work with a statement on the importance of his topic:

Say what you will, this question will play a very important role in modern philosophy, for *repetition* is a crucial expression for what “recollection” was to the Greeks. Just as they taught that all knowing is a recollecting, modern philosophy will teach that all life is a repetition.¹

In introducing his chapter on *Repetition* Roger Poole,² refers to it as a “brilliant short book” and then proceeds to note that “the term repetition itself, as it is disseminated over the first few pages, is given so many definitions, counterdefinitions, and paradoxical redefinitions that any chance of defining the concept of repetition is made deliberately impossible from the start.”³ Actually, what Constantin provides are not complete definitions but metaphors, phrases, and characteristics that point toward a definition. Some of these seem fairly clear and straightforward (e.g., re-enacting a previous activity), while others are ultimately unfalsifiable (e.g., “all life is a repetition”). Others are ambiguous (and even, in one case at least, apparently oxymoronic) and need their own additional interpretation before they can be applied (e.g., Repetition is the same movement as recollection, only it “recollects” forward). Still others speak to the results of repetition, which, even if they could be verified, would, at best, be tautologous (e.g. the person who wills repetition is mature in earnestness). That the meaning of the term, as intended by Kierkegaard or by Constantin, the pseudonymous author, is ambiguous and confusing is verified by the various interpretations that various scholars have given the
book. Nevertheless, to say that it is hard to determine Constantin’s (or Kierkegaard’s) preferred meaning is not to say that no central meaning exists.

Since the meaning of “repetition” is not given directly and has spawned various interpretations, it may be useful to consider Constantin’s ramblings in the first few pages of the book as the first step in a quasi-scientific experiment (called “a venture in experimenting psychology” by Constantin himself) that lays out the various alternative definitions and characteristics of the concept to be explored in the pages that follow. That no clear definition emerges from the exploration does not mean that there is not a definition that Kierkegaard himself envisioned. According to Kierkegaard the obscurity of this definition was not accidental. At about the time that *Repetition* was going to the printer, he wrote in his journal: “Since I wrote that little book ‘so heretics couldn’t understand it,’ offering any enlightenment would be out of character.”

As with so much of what Kierkegaard wanted to communicate to his reader, it seems likely that he felt that what he wanted to communicate could not be communicated directly in explicit terms but must be presented in a puzzle that the reader could only fully grasp if he worked it out for himself. In an 1843 journal entry he describes the relationship that he has shaped for communicating deep understandings to other people:

> My destiny seems to be to discourse on truth as far as I can discover it but in such a way as at the same time to demolish all possible authority on my own part. Since I then become incompetent and to the highest degree unreliable in men’s eyes, I speak the truth and thus place them in the contradiction from which they can be rescued only by appropriating the truth for themselves. It is only the personality that can absorb truth and make it his own that is mature, no
matter whether it is Balaam’s ass talking, or a guffawing crosspatch, or an apostle, or an angel.\textsuperscript{5}

In \textit{Point of View},\textsuperscript{6} Kierkegaard explains why this indirect communication is necessary in speaking to the citizens of Denmark, who are under the delusion that their membership in the Danish national church and their passive cognitive acceptance of its central doctrines is sufficient to guarantee their eternal salvation. He believes that, given this delusion, direct communication is useless and only indirect communication can compel them to become aware of the insufficiency of their present status and lead them toward an inwardness that speaks to a true relationship with Christ. This indirect communication, he believes, has been the central strategy in all of his work, which is directed to “the task of becoming a Christian.”\textsuperscript{7} This strategy of indirect communication affords a key to understanding his message in \textit{Repetition}. I would like in this article to couple Kierkegaard’s strategy of indirect communication with his overall religious message (and the Scripture and church doctrines on which that message was based) to offer an interpretation that I feel reflects what Kierkegaard intended.

\textit{The Quest of Constantin Constantius}

As sometimes happens when people test alternatives, Constantin begins his inquiry on repetition by testing those items and events that may most easily and objectively be tested. He begins with what he calls “an investigative journey I made to test the possibility and meaning of repetition.”\textsuperscript{8} His initial hypothesis focuses on whether a previous trip to Berlin, that he had found highly enjoyable, could be replicated and provide the same pleasure he had experienced earlier. The test fails on every count. His former bachelor innkeeper is married, his visit to the Königstädtener Theater fails him completely, a harmless velvet armchair in his room prevents him from sleeping, and the coffee at his favorite café is unsatisfactory. He acknowledges that even
though his experience was a repetition in some respects, it was “a repetition of the wrong kind.” Failing to find repetition on his trip he returns to Denmark expecting to recover himself in the friendly surroundings of his own home—only to find that his servant has totally rearranged his belongings. He concludes that there is no repetition.

Constantin goes further as he ponders his inability to obtain repetition in his activities and concludes that it is impossible for a person to be satisfied in every conceivable way. He thinks back to a time when he had a supreme sense of well-being, only to have the whole experience shattered by an unexpected encounter with an irritated eye. As true repetition is impossible, Constantin determines that absolute satisfaction is impossible. Since there is no repetition, he considers the magnificence of a coach horn, which, with its infinite possibilities “can never be guilty of repetition.” A despondent Constantin acknowledges that his initial venture to experience repetition had failed. He has wasted his time. The journey was “not worth the trouble, for one need not stir from the spot to be convinced that there is no repetition.

Some time after Constantin had returned home and had resumed the comfort of his monotonous routine, he receives a letter from a young man he had introduced to the reader prior to his narrative about his unsuccessful visit to Berlin. The young man seems to be fervently in love, so fervently that it has resulted in extreme melancholy. He seeks a confidant with whom he can share his situation and Constantin willingly fulfills this role. However, while the young man still loves the girl deeply, he decides that he cannot go ahead with the relationship and seeks to break it (a situation like Kierkegaard’s own relationship with Regine Olsen, which was undoubtedly his inspiration for it). But he can’t forget her and he can’t bring himself to make her aware of the alteration in his intent. He still broods over her and his depression increases.
Time passes and yet the young man cannot confess the truth to the girl. Constantin’s advice is for the young man to make himself contemptible in the girl’s eyes and then, with Constantin’s cooperation, make her think that he is having an affair with another woman. Then the girl will want to get rid of him and will break the affair off and, in so doing, will not be destroyed because the decision to end the relationship has been hers. But while the young man likes the plan at first, he decides he cannot go through with it. He breaks off the relationship with Constantin, and Constantin sees him no more. Constantin concludes that the young man doesn’t understand repetition. He writes that “if the young man had believed in repetition, what great things might have come from him, what inwardness might he have achieved in this life!”

Constantin as Confidant and Puppeteer

But now Constantin receives a letter from the young man, which turns out to be the first of a series of letters, spaced about a month apart. But the young man wants no reply from Constantin and withholds an address at which he might be reached. He simply wants, in Constantin’s words, “to pour himself out” to his confidant. He remains in his melancholy and has done nothing overt to change the situation with the girl. All he asks of Constantin is silence.

Constantin is frustrated by the situation and freely admits that he doesn’t know what to do. He thinks that if the young man had been capable of repetition, he would have been able to overcome his melancholy and come to a satisfying solution. But Constantin admits that he himself has abandoned his own theory and couldn’t really help the young man even if he wanted to. He has come to recognize that repetition is always a transcendence, and that as such he cannot appropriate it. He notes that “repetition is too transcendent for me.”
Constantin provides his reader with the letters written by the young man between August 15 and February 17. Although Constantin is frustrated by them, the reader may discern progression in the young man from an unsatisfactory reliance on his own powers (which produces his own frustration) to a recognition of Job’s response to God-directed adversity that provides an example for him. In sustained crescendo he moves from his melancholy and despair to an appreciation for Job’s willingness to accept what God has brought to his life, to recognizing in Job a champion who is able to state his case forthrightly to God, and finally to a potential reconciliation with the infinite God who has brought suffering into his temporal life.

In considering the young man’s letters, Constantin is clearly frustrated over the course his friend has followed. He is upset that the young man has not only rejected his “ingenious” plan but rejoices in having done so. He ridicules the “thunderstorm” that the young man has said he’s expecting. He is convinced that the young man has only bought more grief for himself. He arrogantly asserts: “If he only had my sagacity.” However, after about three and a half months, Constantin receives a final letter from the young man that seems to indicate that he has made a remarkable recovery and now seems quite happy and confident.

Constantin concludes the book with a personal letter to “My dear Reader.” He reveals to his reader that the young man was his creation, brought into being in order to demonstrate the meaning of repetition. He has chosen to create a poet because a poet “constitutes the transition to the truly aristocratic exceptions, to the religious exceptions.” The poet he has created gains a religious mood that produces his outburst of exhilaration in his last letter, “a religious mood as a secret he cannot explain, while at the same time this secret helps him poetically to explain actuality.” Constantin attempts to further clarify what he means by “repetition” by noting that the young man he has created “explains the universal as repetition, and yet he himself
understands repetition in another way, for although actuality becomes the repetition, for him the repetition is the raising of consciousness to the second power.”\textsuperscript{18}

“Raising of consciousness to the second power!" Constantin does not explain exactly what he means by this phrase; but it seems that, in terms of what Kierkegaard has written through him and what Kierkegaard has written elsewhere, it involves bringing the temporal consciousness into relation with the eternal through inwardness. Regarding the young man he has created, Constantin further notes:

If he had had a deeper religious background, he would not have become a poet….Then he would have acted with an entirely different iron consistency and imperturbability, then he would have won a fact of consciousness to which he could constantly hold, one that would never become ambivalent for him but would be pure—because it was established by him on the basis of a God-relationship.\textsuperscript{19}

Repetition raises consciousness to the second power, bringing it to the boundary between the temporal and the eternal, a boundary bridged only by faith.

\textit{Negotiating the Boundaries of Faith}

In his letter of December 14 Constantin’s young man makes the following statement:

Job’s greatness, then, is not even that he said: The Lord gave, and the Lord took away—something he in fact said at the beginning and did not repeat later. Rather, Job’s significance is that the disputes at the boundaries of faith are fought out in him, that the colossal revolt of the wild and aggressive powers of passion is presented here.\textsuperscript{20}
“Negotiating boundaries” has become a term that has become increasingly prevalent in the anthropological literature. It denotes a person or group who is able to bridge the gap that lies between culturally different groups—racially, linguistically, socio-economically, or other. A person who negotiates boundaries brings together two different world-views by his knowing and understanding the language, customs and underlying assumptions of both. Job, a man of flesh and blood, arose spiritually by faith to apprehend the eternal and unite it with the temporal.

This recognition of Job as a boundary negotiator does not happen to the young man all at once. In his first letter to Constantin, dated August 13, he is still focused on his own problems of self-control. He readily admits his weakness. He imagines that the girl is destroying herself—a situation that Constantin knows is not true. He describes his own situation as “walking in my sleep during the day and lying awake at night.”

In his next letter, dated September 19, he begins to recognize Job as a man whose trials provide a parallel for the young man’s own trial. He writes: “Job! Job! O Job! Is that really all you said, those beautiful words: the Lord gave, and the Lord took away; blessed be the name of the Lord?” Job, the comforter and strength of the oppressed, now is suffering oppression—and at the hands of almighty God. And though he recognizes that the suffering is from God, he speaks up in his own defense before God. The young man considers Job his own champion before God. His writing pleads: “Speak up then, unforgettable Job, repeat everything you said, you powerful spokesman who, fearless as a roaring lion, appears before the tribunal of the most high.” He continues:

I need you, a man who knows how to complain so loudly that he is heard in heaven, where God confers with Satan on drawing up plans against a
man. Complain—the Lord is not afraid, he can certainly defend himself. But how is he to defend himself when no one dares to complain as befits a man. Speak up, raise your voice, speak loudly. To be sure, God can speak louder—after all, he has the thunder—but that, too, is a response, an explanation, trustworthy, faithful, original, a reply from God himself, which, even if it crushes a man, is more glorious than the gossip and rumors about the righteousness of Governance that are invented by human wisdom and spread by old women and fractional men. 23

Thus, with the help of Job, the young man has already accepted that God is the source of his suffering. In his 1843 discourse on Job, “The Lord Gave and the Lord Took Away: Blessed Be the Name of the Lord,” 24 Kierkegaard refutes any other cause for human suffering and loss than God himself. He dismisses the common attributions for suffering that are made by people: an unfortunate accident; deceitful, cunning, wicked people; natural disasters; or even one’s own mistakes and failings. God is in charge, and he is the one who must be addressed if a person has a complaint. From the young man’s perspective, Job does this wonderfully. He exclaims: “My unforgettable benefactor, tormented Job!” 25

The young man continues to follow Job’s pattern of development, and in his third letter, dated October 11, he still maintains that he is in the right. He states: “Even if the whole world rose up against me, even if all the scholastics argued with me, even if it were a matter of life and death—I am still in the right.” 26 On the basis of this position, a few paragraphs later in the letter, he adds: “I demand my rights—that is my honor.” 27

His letter of November 15 describes his growing dependence on Job as he goes through an agonizing period of doubt, anxiety, and confusion. He begins the letter:
If I did not have Job! It is impossible to describe all the shades of meaning and how manifold the meaning is that he has for me. I do not read him as one reads another book, with the eyes, but I lay the book, as it were, on my heart and read it with the eyes of the heart, in a clairvoyance interpreting the specific points in the most diverse ways.\textsuperscript{28}  

He presents this question and direction to his reader: “Have you read Job? Read him, read him again and again.”\textsuperscript{29}  

December’s letter reveals a marked progression in the young man’s understanding of his situation. He begins his letter by stating that “the rage of fever is over, and I am like a convalescent.”\textsuperscript{30}  He is still with Job in his insistence on his right, but his understanding of what is actually happening grows more sophisticated. It is in this letter that he recognizes that Job’s dispute with God is operating at the “boundaries of faith.” Job, the man whom God has praised before Satan has entered into a “purely personal relationship of opposition to God, in a relationship such that he cannot allow himself to be satisfied with any explanation at second hand.”\textsuperscript{31}  Job knows that almighty God can give him an answer and is confident that God can and will give him one. The answer can be apprehended only by faith. The temporal and the eternal must come into direct contact.  

The young man begins his January 13 letter:  

The storms have spent their fury—the thunderstorm is over—Job has been censured before the face of humankind—the Lord and Job have come to an understanding, they are reconciled, “the confidence of the Lord dwells again in the tents of Job as in former days”—men have come to understand Job. Now they come to him and eat bread with him and are sorry for him and console him;
his brothers and sisters, each one of them give him a farthing and a gold ring—

Job is blessed and has received everything `double`, —This is called a repetition.\textsuperscript{32}

How was this reconciliation achieved? In chapters 38-41 of the book of Job, the almighty God of the universe speaks to Job out of the storm. He addresses Job: “Who is this that darkens my counsel without words of knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me.” (Job 38:2-3) He then proceeds with a dazzling revelation of the universe he has created and the personal care and consideration that has gone into every part. He speaks of his laying the earth’s foundation; of his setting sun, moon, and stars in place; of his setting boundaries for the sea and land. He orders the seasons, sends or withholds rain as needed, and sends lightning bolts on their way. He describes the birds and animals he has created and the way in which he tenderly cares for each of them.

God pauses to turn to Job again: “Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!” (Job 40:2)

Job meekly replies: “I am unworthy—I am unworthy—how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer—twice, but I will say no more.” (Job 40:4-5)

But Job doesn’t get off this easily and God speaks to him again: “Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me.” (Job 40:7)

Then God goes further and asks Job to consider the strength and fearsome nature of two creatures which God has created and sustains: Behemoth and Leviathan. Job is made painfully aware of how short his puny state falls of the infinite power of God and of his own microscopic place in the universe. And yet this is a God who cares personally for him, just he cares for all of the creatures in the universe he has created. In awe Job replies:
I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.

You asked, “Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?”

Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.

You said, “Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you and you will answer me.”

My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.

Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes. (Job 42:2-6)

Constantin’s young friend evaluates Job’s experience:

Was Job proved to be in the wrong? Yes, eternally, for there is no higher court than the one that judged him. Was Job proved to be in the right? Yes, eternally, by being proved to be in the wrong before God. 33

The young man closes his letter with a personal note for Constantin: “Was it not fortunate that I did not go through with your ingenious admirable plan. Humanly speaking, it may have been cowardliness on my part, but perhaps now Governance can all the more easily help me.” 34

A seventh letter is sent to Constantin on February 17. The young man, who has been rejoicing in Job’s re-established relationship with God, is still waiting for his own thunderstorm. Though he has been greatly encouraged by Job, he has not been able to appropriate Job’s example for himself. He makes plans for what he will do if the thunderstorm never comes. Life has again become oppressive for him. Then, for three and a half months, he sends no more letters.

After Constantin has made his rather negative appraisal of the first seven letters and of the prospects for the young man, a final letter, dated May 31, arrives. Surprisingly, the young
man is upbeat. The girl has married someone else, and he is free. This is the thunderstorm he was waiting for, and it has freed him. He has his own unified self back again and is no longer in a state of disruption and disintegration. He sees this as a repetition, not too dissimilar from what Job himself had experienced. Life is good. He can rejoice in whatever happens: “I am myself again.”

_Retention Revisited_

We begin this analysis with two questions: (1) What is repetition? (2) Is repetition possible? There is no clear evidence that Constantin answered the first question for himself. Nor is it clear that he accepts the young man’s understanding of repetition as evidence of a satisfactory answer to the second question. But a more important question may be: Did Kierkegaard try to present the reader with answers to these questions? Or perhaps more appropriately stated: Did Kierkegaard seek to provide the reader with the basic materials for answering these questions for himself? I would answer in the affirmative to the latter question.

However, as we have noted earlier, Kierkegaard made an entry in his journal which suggests that not everyone would be able to use these basic materials to interpret what he had written. In that journal entry, as we have seen, he indicated that he had written _Repetition_ so that “heretics couldn’t understand it.” This comment raises another question: Whom did Kierkegaard consider to be heretics? Certainly, non-Christians would be included among those who couldn’t understand it, though, strictly speaking, they would not be heretics. Given Kierkegaard’s overall purpose in his writings, this comment about heretics was probably aimed more specifically at people in Christendom who held orthodox beliefs but had no experiential knowledge of Christianity. In other words, Kierkegaard’s “heretics” were not necessarily the people who directly rejected Christian doctrines, but, more likely, those persons who, though
they professed Christianity, were not disturbed that it was making no experiential difference in their lives—those who failed to follow God through intense inwardness.

Søren Kierkegaard was a man who felt himself on a God-directed mission. It’s not likely that he would have dealt with such a topic so centrally tied to his own beliefs about God’s governance of the universe in a light hearted whimsical fashion. Furthermore, in posing these questions and then, in answering them, it seems certain that he would have used the general interpretive framework provided by his own religious beliefs, stated clearly in his discourses, in his other pseudonymous and religious works, and in his journals. Before we attempt to answer our initial questions regarding the meaning of repetition and its possibility, it will be useful to further examine what we have learned thus far.

We would go back first to a position presented by Kierkegaard in his 1843 discourse on Job, which we referenced earlier: Job never doubted that God sent his suffering and calamity. Job believed in an infinite God who was both omnipotent and omniscient. To attribute it to any other source was unthinkable. Even Satan, in the first chapter of Job, had to ask for God’s permission in order to inflict suffering on Job. To argue that God merely “allows” suffering is a sham. If God is omniscient (i.e., he knows in advance what is going to happen) and omnipotent (i.e., he can prevent it from happening) and then chooses not to intervene, to choose to allow suffering is essentially no different from choosing to make suffering happen.

But Job’s question is not “Who caused my suffering?” Instead it is “Why did God bring this suffering into my life?” Does God have the right to do this? Yes, absolutely; he is God. But why isn’t God playing by his own rules? Job has devoted his entire life to serving and honoring God; he is widely recognized by his contemporaries as a man whose whole life is devoted to God. Job can handle the suffering, but he feels he has the right to know why he is
suffering. In Job 13:15, he says: “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him, but I will maintain mine own ways before him!” He, in effect, is saying: “God, you can do with me what you want. As your devoted servant I will accept whatever you give me. But as your devoted servant I have the right to state my case before you and to receive your answer. I deserve my day in court!” This is why the young man calls Job his “unforgettable benefactor” and shouts, “I need you, a man who knows how to complain so loudly that he is heard in heaven.” It is this Job that inspires the young man to press forward in spite of his own suffering.

As we have seen, God answers Job, not with a direct, logical answer but with an awesome display of his glory and power in his role as creator and administrator of the universe. His long, four chapter answer to Job is enigmatic at best. What does creating and running the universe, sensational as it is, have to do with Job’s complaint. God’s works are great; Job will readily admit that. But how is that an answer to Job’s question: “Why did you bring such great suffering into my life?” At first blush it seems to be an enormous non-answer. But, remarkably, Job is overwhelmed by it and, as we saw earlier, he “repents in dust and ashes.” Why?

In his lengthy presentation to Job, God reveals a side of himself that Job had not fully considered. He is not only omniscient and omnipotent; he is also all-loving. He hasn’t just created the world, but he cares for it and the creatures in it with a loving compassion and concern. He cares for the young lion, but he also cares for the animal that will become the lion’s prey. He looks out for the dim-witted ostrich, who deposits her eggs in the sand where they could easily be trampled by humans and other animals. He cares for does and mountain goats and brings them through the pain of bearing their young. Even his control of the universe’s physical forces is manifested in a personal way: he “unleashes” the lightning and sets
limits on the sea. The message is clear: God intimately cares for and manages the universe he has created, and he personally cares for every bit of his creation.

Job is stunned. He knew of the omniscience and omnipotence of God; but now he realizes his loving compassion. Yes, he already knew that God was responsible for his suffering. Now he realizes that it was intended for something good, a “pearl of great price” (Matthew 13:45-46), a relationship with God that he had sought his whole life: the opportunity to know God at a deeper level than he had ever known him before. As he says in the fifth verse of the forty-second chapter of the book of Job: “My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you.” He realizes that he had, until that point in his life, completely missed a significant part of God’s glory in his previous understanding, and he “repents in dust and ashes.” He has negotiated the boundaries of faith and has truly approached the marvelous. He is joyfully swimming out on 70,000 fathoms of water with nothing but faith to support him. At the boundaries of faith he finds God in a new and exhilarating way.

This is the high point of Job’s story. He has appeared before the high court of the universe, and the divine Judge has declared him without legal standing. He wanted to present his case; but when he was invited to speak, he realized he had nothing credible to say. As the young man noted in his January 13 letter, Job was proved eternally to be in the wrong. But by being proved to be in the wrong before God, he was proved eternally to be in the right. God is infinite and absolute; mortal man is finite. This was the identical message that Kierkegaard communicated through the letter of the Jutland priest at the end of Either/Or. Kierkegaard clearly affirms what was written by the apostle Paul: that man, by his best efforts, will always “fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23) But the promise of the Christian message that Kierkegaard attempted to proclaim through his writings is that by recognizing this truth about
our status in regard to God we can approach God through faith and be brought into his favor and his fellowship.

By comparison with this touch with the marvelous, recognized by Job in Job 42:1-6, the remainder of the chapter, in which Job receives all his possessions back double and his ten children replaced, is anticlimactic. Constantin’s young friend also sees his own situation in a similar way:

Did I not get everything double? Did I not get myself again and precisely in such a way that I might have a double sense of its meaning? Compared with such a repetition, what is a repetition of worldly possessions, which is indifferent toward the qualification of the spirit?38

Theodocies generally fall short. How can a God be omniscient, omnipotent, and all-loving—and yet allow suffering? Why not just abolish suffering? Suffering may be seen as a means to a greater good; but in many cases, such as Job’s, what is the greater good? The apostle James wrote: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.” (James 1:2) And I can see how difficulties of various sorts may make me a stronger person. But there’s a lot of suffering which seems to bring about no good at all. Nevertheless, Paul said that “all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

The reason that theodicies fall short is that they are essentially anthropocentric. The true good for Job was not that he got double his possessions back, but that he was brought by faith to a deeper relationship with the God he worshipped: a uniting of the temporal with the eternal at the border of the marvelous. Job never, in all of his suffering, thought of that
possibility, but his suffering made it possible for him to see it. The Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, proclaimed: “’My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways,’ declares the Lord. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.’” (Isaiah 55:8-9) Job saw God in a way that literally stopped his mouth—but that brought him closer to sharing the mind of God (I Corinthians 2:16), a greater prize than he had ever imagined. Moving away from an anthropocentric definition of “good” significantly changes the expectations for the outcomes that will be considered “good.” It also may change the possibilities for repetition.

We return now to our two questions. To answer the question, “What is repetition?” we will examine first the partial definitions that Constantin provided at the beginning of the book. We begin with the one that he tested in his trip to Berlin and his return from it: Can repeating a sequence of events one experienced earlier produce repetition? Constantin decided clearly that this was not the case. He also suggested that “all life is a repetition,” but he never experienced this and seems to have given up on it. Nevertheless, since this definition is untestable by the means that Constantin was ready to apply, it still could be true, though Constantin, because of the self-imposed empirical limitations he placed on it, couldn’t recognize it. In a similar fashion Constantin initially believed that repetition makes a person happy, but his limited definition of “good” seemed to give him a limited definition of “happiness” and blinded him to other possibilities.

Poole concludes that “the very last thing Constantine Constantius wants to do is to define repetition. Its whole usefulness consists in its infinite redeployability as he comes to live with his pain and his hope.” 39 This Poole sees as a reflection of Kierkegaard’s own hope that there might be reconciliation with Regine Olsen. Poole alludes to the fact that, upon hearing of
Regine’s engagement to Fritz Schlegel, Kierkegaard went to the printers and tore out the concluding pages and substituted a more appropriate conclusion to the book. Poole concludes: “That is why the book cannot, finally, be interpreted coherently, since the original design was destroyed by the writer himself.”

I am not convinced that Poole’s conclusion based on Kierkegaard’s actions is valid. If there was one thing that Kierkegaard was more serious about than his relation (past, present, or future) with Regine, it was his God-given mandate to write. As careful as he was with all his writing, often going through multiple drafts before he allowed a piece to be published, it seems hard to imagine that the conclusion he substituted was anything less than what he believed was a powerful and appropriate ending for the story he had put together. It seems likely that Kierkegaard would have preferred to throw the whole piece into the trash rather than allow an ultimately incoherent manuscript to be published. We totally disagree with Poole’s statement that Kierkegaard “inserted some new, falsely veridical or truly mendacious pages, to end the work in a fashion that he hoped would save it, even at this late moment, from wreck.”

We go back to the position we stated at the beginning of this paper: Kierkegaard, the master craftsman, believes that he can only communicate a spiritual meaning indirectly, allowing the reader to use the information he has furnished to discern the meaning for himself and thereby claim its truth for himself. Given the nature of repetition, Kierkegaard wants the reader to define it for himself.

Poole apparently believes that the final letter of the young man, written on May 31, is part of what he calls the “false ending.” Yet what is written, though it seems like an unlikely happy ending to the story, appears in several ways to tie it up in a manner that provides us with
a coherent and valuable definition for “repetition” and perhaps fulfills Kierkegaard’s intention.

At one point Constantin states:

If God himself had not willed repetition, the world would not have come into existence. Either he would have followed the superficial plans of hope or he would have retracted everything and preserved it in recollection. This he did not do. Therefore, the world continues, and it continues because it is a repetition.

Repetition—that is actuality and earnestness of existence. The person who wills repetition is mature in earnestness.43

Constantin never directly tests this aspect of the definition, but Job does in his impassioned pleas to be heard, in his awe at the marvelous display of God’s power, and in his repentance in dust and ashes. To a lesser degree, so did the young man who enthusiastically exclaims: “I am myself again! Here I have repetition; I understand everything, and life seems more beautiful to me than ever.”44 The young man concludes his final letter with a burst of enthusiasm:

The beaker of inebriation is again offered to me, and already I am inhaling its fragrance, already I am aware of its bubbling music—but first a libation to her who saved a soul who sat in the solitude of despair: Praised be feminine generosity! Three cheers for the flight of thought, three cheers for the perils of a life in service to the idea, three cheers for the hardships of battle, three cheers for the festive jubilation of victory, three cheers for the dance in the vortex of the infinite, three cheers for the cresting waves that hide me in the abyss, three cheers for the cresting waves that fling me above the stars!45
An unlikely ending? Perhaps, but faith is never a likely experience, and no one recognized this more fully than Kierkegaard. A weak ending? Hardly! If the young man had been happily re-united with the girl and had commenced on a happy marriage of many years, would this have been an improved ending to the story? Would any scenario have been better? He had himself back, and he saw this as a divine gift. As the young man noted regarding the aftermath of Job’s trial: “Compared with such a repetition, what is a repetition of worldly possessions, which is indifferent toward the qualification of the spirit?” It is hard to imagine a better ending. As we noted earlier, the climax in Job’s story happened before he received his worldly possessions back. One could protest that the young man’s “ordeal” was very minor compared to what Job had gone through, and it would be hard to argue against that protest. But for a person who has experienced such an emotion-draining romance, as the young man (and Kierkegaard) did, its pain, terror, and self-destruction are probably familiar.

The young man’s ebullience, as he shouts “three cheers” for a variety of things he had experienced in his version of Job’s “ordeal,” is as sincere as anything Job may have expressed, even though the terrors confronting Job seem so much greater. This rejoicing in a faith relationship with God in the face of both positive and negative circumstances is essentially the pattern provided by the apostle Paul throughout his epistles. In this regard we might note, for example, what he wrote in Romans 5:3 ("we also rejoice in our sufferings") and Philippians 2:17 ("even if I am being poured out like a drink offering..., I am glad and rejoice").

This theme is echoed in a somewhat different manner in Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling. This volume, published at the same time as Repetition, focuses on the nature of
faith as displayed by Abraham. The “knight of faith,” as exemplified by Abraham and described by Johannes de Silentio, rejoices in whatever circumstances he finds himself:

He delights in everything he sees, in the thronging humanity, the new omnibuses, the Sound -- to run across him on Strandveien you would think he was a shopkeeper having his fling, such is his way of taking pleasure; for he is not a poet and I have sought in vain to prise out of him the secret of any poetic incommensurability …. As it happens he hasn’t a penny and yet he firmly believes his wife has that delicacy waiting for him. If she has, to see him eat it would be a sight for superior people to envy and for plain folk to be inspired by, for his appetite is greater than Esau’s. If his wife doesn’t have the dish, curiously enough he is exactly the same…. And yet, and yet the whole earthly form he presents is a new creation on the strength of the absurd. He resigned everything infinitely, and then took everything back on the strength of the absurd….to express the sublime in the pedestrian absolutely -- that is something only the knight of faith can do -- and it is the one and only marvel.46

In the year following the publication of Repetition Kierkegaard published a discourse, Patience in Expectancy,47 which used the text from Luke 2:33-40 to explore the life of the prophetess Anna. Anna had been widowed after only seven years of marriage and had spent the next 60 years in the temple at Jerusalem, never leaving the temple but fasting and praying and looking forward to Israel’s redemption through the Messiah. When the baby Jesus was presented to the Lord in the temple, Anna gave public thanks to God and announced to all present that he was the redeemer for whom Israel had been waiting. She had been waiting in
faith, and, as her prayers were answered, she in faith received a repetition that united sixty years of worship and expectancy: past events were recollected forward to the fulfillment in Jesus of God’s promise to his people. Repetition, as Edward F. Mooney has noted, “is radiating not from one’s past but from one’s future—toward one’s present, offering to receptive agents open fields of possibility.” Thus it appears that Constantin’s seemingly oxymoronic definition, given at the beginning of this paper (i.e., “repetition is the same movement as recollection, only it ‘recollects’ forward”), actually makes sense. Traditional temporal relationships and experiences take on expanded dimensions when by faith they are brought into contact with the eternal.

The lives and testimonies of Job, Constantin’s young man, the apostle Paul, the knight of faith, and Anna the prophetess also cast light on other fragments of a definition for “repetition” that Constantin had originally given and which may be part of an emerging definition that Kierkegaard would have endorsed. From these lives and testimonies we gain new insight into Constantin’s apparently tautological statement that “the person who wills repetition is mature in earnestness.” In some of these lives (e.g., Anna’s, Paul’s, or Abraham’s) we may see an extension that justifies Constantin’s contention the “all life is a repetition.”

Constantin had also stated that repetition is something which has been that “now comes into existence.” In these same lives we also get a glimpse of how this can work. Throughout Kierkegaard’s writings, his emphasis on existence focuses on the concrete experience of the present, a present which we see now as the focal point in the daily experience of the person who walks by faith. All things are seen as blessed gifts from God because they are seen through the eyes of faith. Faith brings the past and the future into a
glorious present focus. In experiencing this we encounter consciousness “raised to the second power.” Instead of seeing a “false ending,” as Poole did, we see an ending that is better than could have been imagined.

In Kierkegaard’s Either/Or, A, the aesthete, wrote in his Diapsalmata: “If you marry, you will regret it; if you do not marry, you will also regret it,…, Laugh at the world’s follies, you will regret it; weep over them, you will also regret it….‖ 50 By contrast we have seen that the young man shouted “three cheers” for the roller coaster experiences he had. The apostle Paul prefaced his review of his hardships and blessings with the statement that “I rejoice greatly in the Lord….” It seems that either of them would have rewritten A’s words to say: “Whether I marry or not, I will rejoice! Whether I laugh or weep over the world’s follies, I will rejoice!” The life of faith is not always an easy one; but it is a blessed one. The faith relationship with God is the one thing that provides repetition. The fragments of Constantin’s definition of repetition can be united into a unified whole, but existentially only by faith.

Faith gives substance to the metaphoric definition provided near the beginning of the book by Constantin:

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. Hope is a lovely maiden who slips away between one’s fingers; recollection is a beautiful old woman with whom one is never satisfied at the moment; repetition is a beloved wife of whom one never wearies for one becomes weary only of what is new. One never grows weary of the old, and when one has that, one is happy. He alone is truly happy who is not deluded into thinking that the repetition should be something new, for then one
grows weary of it. It takes youthfulness to hope, youthfulness to recollect, but it takes courage to will repetition.\textsuperscript{51}

Faith leads to a relationship with God that is comfortable like Constantin’s indestructible garment that fits closely and tenderly and provides a sense of well-being and confidence in good times and bad. This is not a confidence based on a superficial belief that temporal expectations will be satisfied, but that God’s will prevails and that by eternal measures it will be good. It is a relationship built upon love that is renewed and expands as time passes. It is the interaction of the temporal and the eternal. This is repetition.

Repetition is not a quiet stoic acceptance of one’s external circumstances. Constantin’s young man shouted: “Three cheers!” Job’s transformation recorded in the first six verses of Job 42 may have been inward, but it was also dynamically renewing and Kierkegaard’s most powerful example of “repetition.” The apostle Paul spoke of “always rejoicing.” A touch with the eternal at the border of the marvelous is an exhilarating, active experience. But it can be experienced only by faith. Heretics cannot grasp it. The story of redemption is the story of the renewal of this experience (i.e., repetition) on an ongoing basis, forgetting always what is behind and pressing toward what is ahead. (Philippians 3:13) Repetition does, indeed, as Constantin noted, look forward. Faith is “the gift that keeps on giving.”

About the time that Kierkegaard’s Repetition was being printed he examined in his journal the relationship between freedom, repetition, and atonement. He notes that:

The disturbance which is supplied by freedom itself is sin. If it is allowed to take charge, then freedom despairs of itself yet never forgets repetition, and
freedom takes on a religious expression through which repetition takes the form of atonement….\textsuperscript{52}

This statement suggests that repetition must be defined within a religious context. In it we see the familiar Kierkegaardian cycle of freedom leading to sin, which leads to despair, which is the wake-up call that can lead to renewal on the basis of the atonement, as shown throughout his writings. Succinctly stated (a process which Kierkegaard would strongly oppose), we might construct Kierkegaard’s definition of “repetition” as:

The ongoing process, made possible by Christ’s atonement, which through faith a Christian is brought from “glory to glory” \textit{(2 Corinthians 3:18)} in a recurring renewal process in which the consciousness of the individual, in a present existence that unites future and past, is brought increasingly in accord with the mind of God and the will of the individual is brought in accord with the will of God.

In answering our first question about the definition of “repetition,” it seems we have also answered our second question. In another journal entry written at about the time that \textit{Repetition} was being published, Kierkegaard raises this question: \textit{Is repetition possible?}\textsuperscript{53} In proceeding to answer it within the freedom-despair-religious context described in the previous quotation from his journal, he makes clear his belief that repetition is possible. The testimonies of Job, Paul, and Anna and the lives of many others of God’s saints affirm it.
NOTES


3 Poole, *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, p. 63.


7 Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, p. 55.

8 Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, p. 150.


28 Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, p. 204.

29 Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, p. 204.


34 Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, p. 213.

35 Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, p. 221.


40 Poole, *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, p. 62.

41 Poole, *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, p. 79.

42 Poole, *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, p. 79.

43 Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, p. 133.


45 Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, pp. 221-222.

46 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, pp. 69-70.


49 Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, p. 149.

50 Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, p. 54.

