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# Kierkegaard's 'Repetition' and Pilgrimage

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In 1843, the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard wondered whether it was possible to repeat an experience. He attempted to relive experiences he once had in Berlin by revisiting haunts of his earlier self. After several days, he concluded that his repetition of experience was unsuccessful. Many people make similar attempts at repetition when they make, for example, the pilgrimage to Camino de Santiago multiple times. What could a person hope to gain by this repetition?

What prevents successful repetition, suggests Kierkegaard, is beginning with the end in mind rather than traveling merely to collect random impressions. Repetition fails, argues Kierkegaard, when it is tried as some kind of experiment rather than a commitment, and this failure of immersion makes us a passive observer of ourselves.

An authentic repetition, he argues, can only happen after one surrenders control of events. One must give something up to get anything back. To experience Berlin again, or to repeat a pilgrimage, one must give up expectations and surrender to whatever unfolds. In this way, the repeat traveler would surrender the objective stance of someone comparing events with earlier ones. Instead, they would be actively engaged, and thus able to actually re-experience something like what happened before. In contrast to passively 'recollecting' past events, Kierkegaard advises that a successful 'repetition' is to live with a repeatedly renewed commitment to living in the present. Repetition is, paradoxically, not about the past but, rather, about 'the earnestness of existence.'

Pilgrims, however, often try on identities and roles in attempts to experience what they have heard of in other pilgrim's stories. It may be that some repeat pilgrims are not so much nostalgically reliving their previous experiences, as trying to experience what others have experienced, and that they themselves did not experience the first time. It will be argued that this imitation of life can never be fully engaged in, and thus, it will always be disappointing because it necessarily involves self-consciously observing oneself in the role.

**Key Words:** Kierkegaard, repetition, pilgrimage, authenticity, repeatable pleasures, exhaustible pleasures, Camino de Santiago

## A Personal Camino Story

*I climbed up the ladder to the top bunk and prepared for my first night on the Camino de Santiago. After squirming into my sleeping bag, I rolled a couple of bright orange, foamy earplugs between my fingers, and inserted them gently. As they expanded, the rustling sounds of my fellow travelers slowly faded until I was alone in muffled silence. I lay on my back and noticed for the first time the impressive lighting fixtures suspended overhead which supplied an inescapable spiritual image. There were dozens of very large halos hanging down from the towering ceiling and illuminating all the sleeping pilgrims.*

*When the travel writer Pico Iyer first visited the paradisiacal island of Bali, Indonesia, he mistook the toxic, chemical smoke of mosquito*

*coils for holy incense; and mistakenly attributed a whiff of clove cigarette smoke to the fragrance of flowers (Iyer, 1989). He supposed, however, that these false associations were the result of the truly magical context that Bali provides. I wondered whether magic awaited me if I simply learned to expect it. In Roncesvalles, as the halos of light above my bunk were slowly dimmed, I wondered what associations I would be making down the road.*

*The pilgrimage did indeed cast its spell on me that year. The magic wasn't there, however, when I returned four years later to repeat the experience. I took the same bus ride from Pamplona to Roncesvalles, the streets were similarly slick with rain, I was served virtually the same meal of pasta, trout and fries, and I slept in the same cavernous old monastery brimming with bunk beds. A couple of days*

*later I walked back into Pamplona and tried hard to repeat other experiences and, similarly, failed to recapture their essence. I dined again in the Café Iruna frequented by Hemmingway, and made famous in his account of drunken debauchery The Sun Also Rises. I sat on the same bench and sketched the same bell-tower I had sketched years before. The second time around for these experiences was just not as inspiring. The exoticness of my first café con leche, or the thrill of my first tapas bar can only be experienced with fresh eyes. After completing the walk of 800 km I arrived in Santiago de Compostella - but not for the first time, and the second time around cannot compare.*

### Introduction

With the entire world to discover, tourists regularly return to the same familiar places. According to one survey, 80% of Canadians:

*are likely to return to the same place over and over again for a holiday. And eat the same dishes. At the same restaurants* (Byers, 2013: T6).

Many people make similar attempts at repetition when they make, for example, the pilgrimage to Camino de Santiago multiple times. What could a person hope to gain by this repetition?

In 1843, the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wondered what could be gained or lost in repetitive experience (Kierkegaard, 1983). He attempted to relive experiences he once had in Berlin by revisiting haunts that he remembered with fondness. After several days, he concluded that his attempt at repetition of experience was unsuccessful. He was unable to re-experience the same joys and pleasures of his earlier self.

What prevents successful repetition, suggests Kierkegaard, is beginning with the end in mind rather than travelling merely to collect random impressions. Repetition fails, argues Kierkegaard, when we become passive observers of ourselves instead of fully immersed in present experience. When one makes comparisons with earlier experiences, one adopts a passive, objective stance, and our experience becomes a kind of experiment rather than a commitment.

An authentic repetition, he argues, can only happen after one surrenders control of events. One must give something up to get anything back. To experience

Berlin again, or to repeat a pilgrimage, one must give up expectations and surrender to whatever unfolds. In this way, the repeat traveller would surrender the objective stance of someone comparing events with earlier ones. Instead, they would be actively engaged, and thus able to actually re-experience something like what happened before. In contrast to passively 'recollecting' past events, Kierkegaard advises that a successful 'repetition' is to live with a repeatedly renewed commitment to living in the present. Repetition is, paradoxically, not about the past but, rather, about 'the earnestness of existence.'

Pilgrimages are largely defined in terms of their target destination, and thus it seems, by definition, begin with the end in mind. There is always a special destination, such as Santiago de Compostella, or Lourdes. Thus, according to Kierkegaard's criterion, it might be thought that there would be nothing to gain from repeating the experience. However, if one's motivation for the pilgrimage is to transform oneself through voluntary hardship, or some other process of inner transformation, then this process is not diminished with repetition.

Pilgrims, however, often exacerbate the problem of repetition by trying on identities and roles in attempts to experience what they have heard of in the stories of other pilgrims. It may be that some repeat pilgrims are not merely nostalgically reliving their previous experiences, as trying to experience what others have experienced, and that they themselves may not have experienced the first time. It will be argued that this imitation of life can never be fully engaged in, and thus, it will always be disappointing because it necessarily involves self-consciously observing oneself in the role.

### Kierkegaard's Attempt at Repetition

Kierkegaard also wondered whether it was possible to repeat an experience, and whether there might be 'anything gained or lost' in the process. (Kierkegaard, 1983: 131) So, he decided to conduct a psychological experiment and attempted to re-live some pleasant experiences he once had in Berlin. The results are described as

*an investigative journey . . . to test the possibility and meaning of repetition* (Kierkegaard, 1983: 150).

Constantin Constantius, the pseudonym used by Kierkegaard in this story, has fond memories of experiencing Berlin churches by moonlight. He can still visualize the act of climbing the stairs to his old flat, which he has ascended countless times again in his memory, towards the gas-lit entry. He yearns to actually repeat these experiences, and so he returns to Berlin, rents the same apartment with the same furniture from the same landlord, and visits the same haunts of his earlier self. He arrives excited to find things pretty much the same - a glass door, a writing table, an armchair upholstered in red velvet - and enthused about his likely success. It doesn't take long, however, for him to discover that not all things in Berlin are as static as his old furniture. Taking coffee in the local café doesn't make his spirits soar as it used to. His landlord is not as much fun to talk to because, instead of rakishly singing the praises of his bachelorhood, he now congratulates himself on his sedate married life. After several days of visiting theatres, sitting in the same seats, and returning to restaurants that he had frequented daily in his earlier life, he concludes that a repetition of his experience is impossible, and wearily returns home.

### Three Reasons for Repetition: Emphasis, Ritual, Imitation

So why do travellers repeat journeys they have made before? With our limited life, is it not better to escape routine, and to take risks that come with being open to new experiences, rather than repeating things a second time?

#### 1) Emphasis

Kierkegaard suggests that the act of repetition can produce emphasis, such as when a speaker repeats the same phrases in order to signify their importance, or bangs their hand on the table over and over again. (Kierkegaard, 1983) Perhaps, similarly, the tourist wishes to emphasize fading memories by rehearsing them over again anew in order to deepen the impressions. For example, Andre Gidé writes of his protagonist Michel in *The Immoralist*, that by returning to Spain he was hoping to:

*rediscover [his memories of] a purer sky, of sharper shadows, of . . . laughter and song*  
(Gidé, 1970: 12).

José Saramago discusses the act of repetition in one of his notebooks on travel, and implies that repetition is

required to fill in gaps of a past experience:

*The end of one journey is simply the start of another. You have to see what you missed the first time, see again what you already saw, see in springtime what you saw in summer, in daylight what you saw by night, see the sun shining where you saw the rain falling, see the crops greening, the fruit ripening, the stone moved from one place to another, the shadow that was not there before. You have to retrace your footsteps, either to tread them again, or to plant fresh ones alongside them. You have to start the journey over. Always* (Saramago, 2000: 443).

Thus, repetition improves understanding. Each time we re-read a book, or view a film twice, our grasp of the content deepens. It might even be true that one must read a book twice before one can really know it. When a musician plays the same tune repeatedly on a violin, they gain a deeper understanding of it, in the sense that they start to feel it and play it intuitively, rather than thinking consciously about what they are doing. Similarly, one might need to experience places twice in order to know them better. The first time one visits London or Paris, one is impressed by every little detail, simply because they are unfamiliar. A second visit might allow one's focus to move beyond novel details, and reveal a deeper, structural, understanding of the bare bones of the place. Pilgrims walking the same pilgrim trail repetitively will gain a deeper appreciation of local history, flowers and birds, and the philosophical insights specific to walking.

By returning to a place, and finding familiarity in the stores, restaurants and walks, one can make the new place feel like home. One feels less like a tourist when one recognizes the landscape and does not need directions. This increased understanding comes at a cost however. By making the exotic more familiar, one must give up the magic of newness.

#### 2) Ritual

Repetition can be devotional. The film critic Roger Ebert wrote in his memoirs that he was always seeking to repeat experiences on his travels, and he likened it to a sacred ritual:

*I've been back to the café several times again, always hoping for the same seat at the same table. Such returns are an important ritual to me* (Ebert, 2011: 135).

Much of religious experience is expressed through repetition. The repetition of phrases over and over again, or the repetition of steps on a pilgrimage, can mimic cyclical and eternal natural rhythms such as the cycles of morning, day and night, of the work day, of the seasons, of life and death, of breathing, and heart rate. This 'repetition,' writes Luc Ferry:

*guarantees that they cannot be forgotten . . . [and this] . . . achieves a kind of 'immortality'* (Ferry, 2011: 35).

### 3) Imitation

Repetition, by its very nature, is second-hand, and this can have negative connotations. Rebecca Solnit, in *Wanderlust*, notes that sacred pilgrimages are defined by repetition and imitation of those who came before:

*To follow a route, [she writes] is to accept an interpretation, or to stalk your predecessors . . . To walk the same way is to reiterate something deep, to move through the same space the same way is a means of becoming the same person, thinking the same thoughts* (Solnit, 2001: 68).

This can be a good thing, as following in the footsteps of others can be a way of emulating admirable role models in the hopes of forging the same virtues in oneself. The Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle famously emphasized this benefit of repetition. He argued that one's character is shaped by what one repeatedly does. Virtue, he notes, is created by repetitive habit, not particular actions. So, by repeating the same behaviour we reinforce our characters and change them into something desirable. (Adler, 1997)

However, imitation of others is also famously derided by existentialist philosophers as being inauthentic. Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1885), admonishes those who follow the 'herd' (Scruton *et al.*, 2010). Kierkegaard advises that authenticity requires making one's own decisions rather than following the same path as others (Collins, 1968). Sartre claims that it is 'bad faith' to adopt the ways and accepted beliefs of others rather than fearlessly facing one's radical freedom. (Detmer, 2008). Thus, there is a danger of counterfeit mimicry in repetition of experience.

Repeat pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago run the risk of being trapped in such inauthenticity. They might not be attempting to nostalgically re-live their previous experiences, as desperately trying to experience what they expected to the first time around, but failed. A compulsion to do things twice might sometimes be an

attempt to experience what they failed to experience the first time. This is especially true on the Camino de Santiago, where one hears many hyperbolic stories about aligning yourself with the stars, being at one with the universe, finding the extraordinary in the ordinary, and learning 'lessons' on life. One can feel cheated, or inadequate if these experiences are not actually manifested. This lack can be felt in any tourist experience, of say, Paris' Left Bank where impossibly romantic expectations are built up. If the pilgrim cannot become the transformed person they have heard about, there is a strong temptation to fake it simply by mimicking the motions and imitating those who came before.

What has gone wrong, suggests Kierkegaard, is that they have begun with the end in mind. It is rather like what happens to the traveller who travels merely 'to smell what everybody else has smelled' (Kierkegaard, 1983: 153). Such people see only the iconic sights, and follow a guide book rigidly in order to experience approved activities. They have routine itineraries, and prescribed responses to experiences. He similarly criticizes theatre goers who only attend a performance if they know in advance what will happen, and if it has been pre-approved by the opinions of others.

To illustrate his point, Kierkegaard uses an analogy of a young lover whose 'mistake was that he stood at the end instead of at the beginning' (Kierkegaard, 1983: 137). Because of this mistake, the role of the actual woman with whom he was in love was, in fact, superfluous. She was merely the proxy used to awaken in him poetic feelings of love that he wanted. He wanted to be in love, but with whom he was in love did not seem to really matter. His love fails because is merely a pretence. Analogously, if a pilgrim begins a journey with the specific aim of imitating others, they will never reach that target.

Tourists often try on identities and roles. In attempts to behave the way they think movie stars behave, they indulge in luxury, conspicuous consumption, and status seeking. For a time, they pretend that luxury hotels and trendy locations are their natural habitat. This unnecessary link between luxury and tourism is fixed in the minds of many. People who live frugally in their day to day lives often feel compelled to spend lavishly when they visit Paris. Cruises are sold on their image of romanticism and luxury from a previous era. Paul Fussell notes that the motive of much tourism:

*between the wars . . . [was] . . . to derive secret pleasure from posing momentarily as a member of a social class superior to one's own, to play the role* (Fussell 1980).

We often travel in order to play a role, to adopt an alternate identity, and enter a fantasy world ‘*en Provence*,’ or on the ‘Italian Riviera.’ This imitation of life, however, can never be fully engaged in. It will always be disappointing because it necessarily involves self-consciously observing oneself in the role. Kierkegaard describes such behaviour as a mere ‘jest’ and trying to ‘be somebody’ (Kierkegaard, 1983: 133).

Instead of beginning with a pre-decided goal, Kierkegaard advises, one should adopt the way of the ‘careless wanderer’ who travels merely to collect random impressions (Kierkegaard, 1983:153). ‘The whole thing,’ he writes, ‘is achieved by accidental concretion’ (Kierkegaard, 1983) which can only happen after one surrenders control of events.

### **Authentic Repetition**

The essential thing involved in an authentic repetition, argues Kierkegaard, is that one must stop trying so hard to achieve it. Kierkegaard’s attempt at repetition fails, concludes editor Robert Bretall, ‘because it is an *attempt* and because it is *pursued*’ (Bretall, 1946:136). A main theme in Kierkegaard’s philosophy, is that you have to give something up to get it back. He illustrates this concept, famously in *Fear and Trembling*, with an analogy to the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac (Kierkegaard, 1983). When God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his only son Isaac, the only way to absorb this request was to give up searching for a rational explanation for this highest of demands. However, and precisely because of this surrender, everything was returned to Abraham, and the sacrifice was made unnecessary by God’s intervention. Similarly, argues Kierkegaard, one must pursue all life with such a commitment to accepting whatever happens. To love, one must be prepared to give it up. Analogously, one could argue, to enjoy a film, one must suspend their disbelief. At one level, the viewer knows that a cinematic experience is unreal, with written dialogue, sets, and actors. However, if the viewer is able to successfully surrender themselves to the movie, then they will get something back in the form of a richer involvement.

For Kierkegaard to experience Berlin again, he needed to give up expectations and surrender himself to

whatever unfolds. In this way, he would need to surrender his objective stance of a passive viewer and ‘reporter’ of events, which was needed for comparisons with earlier experiences. Instead, he would be actively engaged, and thus able to actually re-experience something like what happened before. One must experience things directly, through active decision making, in contrast to passively ‘recollecting’ past events, which leads to frustration, since experiences cannot actually be duplicated. Kierkegaard advises that a ‘repetition’ is not a temporary experiment but, rather, is a renewed commitment to live repeatedly in the present. So, repetition is, paradoxically, not about the past but about ‘the earnestness of existence’ (Kierkegaard, 1983: 133).

The English author and essayist Julian Barnes uses this very language when describing Edith Wharton’s attitude towards tourism while motoring around France in 1907. For Wharton, tourism is not ‘like some version of wine tasting,’ nor a ‘mere aesthetic diversion.’ (Barnes, 2002: 65) As Barnes writes:

*She is, indeed, that rare and oxymoronic thing, the wise tourist . . . Tourism for her is . . . not passive but constructive, re-creative* (Barnes, 2002: 65).

It is the re-creation that makes repetition possible. Repetition fails, argues Kierkegaard, when it is tried as some kind of experiment rather than a commitment. We cannot half-heartedly ‘try it out’ to see how it works because this failure of immersion makes us a passive observer of ourselves. A committed attempt would actually re-create a similar experience. A true repetition cannot be observed but only engaged in.

Sartre also emphasizes the importance of constant re-creation. In his explanation of radical freedom, he makes use of an example involving a gambler that has acknowledged his addiction, and has formed the intention to never gamble again. The gambler soon finds out, however, that he cannot rely on his previous resolution. Each moment, the reformed gambler has the freedom to backslide on his commitment. To be authentic, he must constantly recommit to the goal, by rehearsing his fear of the undesirable consequences of his behaviour (Detmer, 2008).

### **Repeatable vs. Self-Exhausting Pleasures**

It is helpful here to make use of a distinction between what John Martin Fischer calls ‘repeatable pleasures’ and ‘self-exhausting pleasures.’ (Fischer, 1993) In an

argument defending the idea that immortality might not be as boring as some have suggested, he points out that many pleasures bear repeating. Admittedly, eating lobster every day, he suggests, might get tiresome. And many 'bucket-list' type of activities, like climbing a mountain just to prove that you can do it, or to check it off your list, are 'self-exhausting.' They are worth doing, but not worth repeating after they are banked. Repeatable pleasures, on the other hand, are not diminished by their duplication. Such pleasures include eating when we are hungry; drinking wine; listening to music; exercising one's body; and seeing great art in person.

We could add to the list of repeatable pleasures those pleasures appropriate to pilgrimage; namely, the ritual of prayer and meditation of walking. However, the completion of the goal upon arriving at a pilgrimage destination would be 'self-exhausting'. It is true that one cannot arrive at the cathedral in Santiago de Compostella for the first time, twice. The first time is an achievement, but subsequent pilgrimages should be focused on the repeatable pleasures described above.

The goal of a pilgrimage should not be narrowly focused on its completion, or on imitating the experiences of others. Rather, the aim should be to be a good pilgrim. In *After Virtue*, Alisdair MacIntyre (2007) distinguishes between internal goods and external goods. External goods are those external to a practice. For example, he suggests, one can gain 'prestige, status and money' by playing chess. However, these goods are external to the practice of playing chess itself, and can be acquired by cheating at the game, or in other ways than through chess playing. Internal goods, by contrast, are those goods that can be had only internal to a practice such as chess playing. To play the game well and exercise the required skills of strategy, etc., is a good internal to the practice, and can be acquired in no other way.

The external goods of pilgrimage are the attainment of certificates of completion, bragging rights, and bucket list checking. Repetition of these achievements will be pointless. Internal goods of pilgrimage are repeatable. To travel well, as Kierkegaard suggests, will be to free oneself from pre-conceived goals. If one plays the game of pilgrimage well, the experience will not be diminished by repetition. The aim will not be to get to the end, and thus, one is potentially able to achieve the goods available only internally to the practice; namely, self-discovery and transformation of character through the experience of voluntary hardship.

\* \* \*

*In Pamplona, a small town on the Camino trail, one will find many people in the café bar Iruna - which Hemmingway made famous in The Sun Also Rises. On the walls are many amazing photos of him at this very bar, but as long as we are content to look passively at the photos, we will never repeat the experiences depicted in the photos. The trick is to somehow get inside the photo, and actively participate in the experience of drinking at the bar. You must be spontaneous rather than deliberate.*

*Back on the Camino trail, the season may be different - along with the weather, the itinerary, and the people you meet. Importantly, the walker him / herself will be different. The theme of William Boyd's Any Human Heart, is the interesting observation that our past selves are so different from the way we are now, that we might as well be different people (Boyd, 2002). Perhaps we return to places to recover the connecting thread between these selves. The rhythm of walking renews a sense of calm and joyous appreciation of the day. The attitude of voluntary simplicity returns as one gets used to owning nothing but what can be carried on your back. The routine acts of washing socks, unrolling the sleeping bag and re-organizing the pack are all repeated ceremoniously. As one settles in for the night, one is again surrounded by bruised and aching bodies in all states of undress, and one is thankful for a simple bed and a bottom bunk.*

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