

Joe Larios

# Toward an Upbuilding Metapsychology: Kierkegaard, Lacan, and the Infinite Movement

**Abstract:** This paper seeks to consider the similarities between Kierkegaard's life stages and Lacan's orders to demonstrate that we can understand each description in a structurally similar way to the other. Accordingly, a reading of Kierkegaard is developed that uses his life stages to describe a metapsychology, and a reading of Lacan is developed that shows how his orders can be conceived of progressively. All this leads to a further analysis of the different ways in which each stage relates to repetition and a culmination in which the achievement of faith in Kierkegaard is thought together with the analytic cure in Lacan.

Dying forty-five years before the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Søren Kierkegaard did not find himself within an environment in which psychoanalysis yet existed, nevertheless, his writings are suffused with what could be understood as psychoanalytic themes.<sup>1</sup> Of the various pseudonyms that he wrote under, many were dialogically related to other creations in what might be called a therapeutic relationship, and they all seemed to find themselves in positions in which they were striving after something, whether they knew

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**1** Indeed, even Lacan himself called Kierkegaard “the most acute of the questioners of the soul” before Freud (*Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Alan Sheridan, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1998, pp. 60f.). Others have also dealt with this relationship between Kierkegaard and psychoanalysis or, more broadly, psychology, at some length. See, for instance, J. Preston Cole, *The Problematic Self in Kierkegaard and Freud*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1971 or, more recently, Vincent A. McCarthy, *Kierkegaard as Psychologist*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press 2015. For a more specific study looking at Kierkegaard and Lacan in the context of theology, see Marcus Pound, *Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma*, London: SCM Press 2007. For a useful brief overview of Kierkegaard's influence on Lacan, see J.D. Mininger, “Jacques Lacan: Kierkegaard as a Freudian Questioner of the Soul *avant la lettre*,” in *Kierkegaard's Influence on the Social Sciences*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Burlington: Ashgate 2011 (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 13), pp. 195–216.

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**Corresponding author:** Joe Larios, Emory University, Department of Comparative Literature, 201 Dowman Dr, Atlanta, GA 30322, USA, e-mail: joe.m.larios@emory.edu

what it was or not, and whether they could be satisfied by it or not. We thus find, for instance, that in *Repetition*, Constantin Constantius is trying to figure out how to help a young man whom he fears is going mad and in *Either/Or*, we have a series of letters from Judge William to the anonymous young man, A, where he is trying to assist him in improving his life and developing from the esthetic to the ethical. There is always, it seems, a troubled young man in need of help or advice. Even in *Fear and Trembling*, where such a structure is not present, Johannes De Silentio still imaginatively constructs similar scenarios such as the man who takes the priest's sermon too seriously or the man whose only wish is to have been with Abraham on the journey to Mount Moriah. Even De Silentio situates himself as someone who needs help, who wishes he could be different—be better—as when he tells us, “I presumably can describe the movements of faith, but I cannot make them.”<sup>2</sup> He can have insight, but he cannot reach that state to which this insight points; he is inadequate and wants assistance; he wishes he knew someone who could help him, as when he tells us, “if I knew where a knight of faith lived, I would travel on foot to him...I would watch him every minute to see how he made the movements... and would divide my time between watching him and practicing myself.”<sup>3</sup>

All of these dialogical encounters, whether they “really” happen, as in *Either/Or*, or are imaginary contrivances of the “author,” as in *Repetition*, or show up as musings, as in *Fear and Trembling*, stage for us a scene of multiplicity and interrelationality between these different personalities and, also, serve to hide the personality of Kierkegaard whose interiority can only be implied through a combination of the presentation of these pseudonymous writings and those under his own name. This, in itself, is already a performative gesture of his own philosophy insofar as, as Sartre tells us, “Kierkegaard is himself the scandal and the paradox...that a historical being, beyond his abolition, can still communicate as a non-object, as an absolute subject, with the generations that follow his own.”<sup>4</sup> We cannot *know* Kierkegaard as an object of knowledge and this fact is emphasized through the style of his writings where standing behind the young man in *Repetition*, there is his creator, Constantin Constantius who, as we know, is himself a creation of Kierkegaard. All these multiple displacements only serve to emphasize the fact that Kierkegaard, as himself, is not reducible to anything that he has done or produced.

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<sup>2</sup> SKS 4, 132 / FT, 37.

<sup>3</sup> SKS 4, 133 / FT, 38.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, “The Singular Universal,” trans. by Peter Goldberger, in *Kierkegaard: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Josiah Thompson, Garden City: Anchor Books 1972, p. 231.

Accordingly, these writings perform their work in a way different than that of an ordinary philosophical treatise since they do not attempt to present us with knowledge according to an authoritative statement. As Terry Eagleton explains it, “[t]he reader must not be brashly confronted with an absolute truth, which she would only reject; instead, she must be worked upon indirectly...drawing her through fiction, irony and subterfuge towards a moment of decision which in the end can only be hers alone.”<sup>5</sup> Here again, we find an affinity with the work of psychoanalysis since the work of an analysis is that of *interpreting*. The analysand produces a text which is not to be understood according to a superficial, manifest content but must be worked through to try and determine its deeper logic. Here, we also find the singularity of personality since the manifest content can hide any number of latent contents and the only way an analyst knows whether their interpretation is accurate is by the reaction of the analysand to their interpretation; nothing else can give them a clue since there is no necessary relationship between a manifest and a latent content, only the contingency of the personality involved.

To look at Kierkegaard’s texts in this way is also to recognize in them a resistance to reading since, through his displacements, he clarifies for us only one thing: that you will never know precisely what Kierkegaard was thinking at that moment. The text itself then turns into a puzzle piece or witch’s letter<sup>6</sup> that challenges us in our attempt to work through it, and it is different than the difficulty of trying to understand a complex philosophical system like Hegel’s or Heidegger’s; it is the difficulty of trying to find the *sense* beneath the manifest content of these words.<sup>7</sup> In this way, once again, Kierkegaard seems to be

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<sup>5</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Trouble with Strangers: A Study of Ethics*, Malden: Blackwell Publishing 2009, p. 168.

<sup>6</sup> In an appendix to *Return to Freud: Jacques Lacan’s Dislocation of Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991, p. 167), Samuel Weber interestingly notes that, at the end of *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard likens anxiety, fate, and possibility to *Heksebrev* (“witch’s letter”) which, quoting a translator’s note, is “a magic-like set of picture segments of people and animals that recombine when un-folded and turned” (*CA*, Explanatory Notes, p. 254).

<sup>7</sup> Or, perhaps, more properly, to understand the *ab-sense*. That is, as one seeks to discover the sense, one only uncovers that there is no final sense to find. As Alain Badiou tells us, “philosophy forces what is strictly ab-sense into sense” (*Lacan: Anti-Philosophy 3*, trans. by Susan Spitzer, New York: Columbia University Press 2018, p. 139) but the anti-philosopher, of which he counts both Kierkegaard and Lacan, tells us that “the apparatus of knowing, when added to that of the unknowable, is not exhaustive. The real is the remainder of the disjunction between the knowable and the unknowable” (p. 152) and, for Kierkegaard, this remainder beyond the regime of knowledge appears as the act (p. 159). As we will see later, it is perhaps more accurate to characterize Kierkegaard’s method as a way of pressing the reader towards the recognition of an *ab-sense* which can precipitate an act.

performing his philosophy rather than displaying it to us by forcing us to think his text *through ourselves*. For the one who makes sense of the puzzle, where there is no single and authoritative meaning assumed, makes themselves explicit in having to come to grips with their own interpretation of an irreducible text. In a way, one might say, this is the entire point of the text, to force the reader to make themselves explicit in working it through, but that would just be one interpretation.

Besides these particular affinities, yet more arises between Kierkegaard and psychoanalysis, and it is the goal of this paper to make some of these explicit. In particular, I will focus on some of the structural similarities that we find in the work of Jacques Lacan and his topological mapping of the psyche in three different orders or registers.<sup>8</sup> My argument will be that the life stages represented by Kierkegaard can be understood to form the basis of a metapsychology along the same lines as that of Lacan. By understanding them in this way, we can come to clarify that each life stage contains within it the other two in some form which dictates the particular character of that stage. That is, while each life stage contains the others, it contains them in either a positive or a negative form and this forms the basis of the normative organization of the life stages. In other words, the upbuilding that happens from the esthetic to the religious life stage has to do with a movement in which each life stage comes to be received and accepted in its explicitness leading to the culmination of the double movement that happens in faith where everything (including impossibility) is received. This final moment in Kierkegaard can, therefore, be likened to the analytic cure as understood by Lacan since, in the analytic cure, one has gone beyond one's imaginary identifications (the esthetic) and symbolic obligations (the ethical) to achieve an autonomy of self by standing in the groundless site of the real (the religious), while nonetheless being situated within this site from out of the imaginary identifications and symbolic law (concretion). In this way, we can come to understand Kierkegaard's life stages as being psychologically descriptive (as well as normative) and can find that Lacan's metapsychology can be used to describe a normative progression (as well as being psychologically descriptive), thus finding in both an upbuilding metapsychology that, by leading us away from imaginary/esthetic immediacy, dominated by the pressure of the image, would, ultimately, return us to immediacy in a transformed state, described by Kierkegaard by the religious and Lacan by the

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<sup>8</sup> This relationship has been noted before. One can find it discussed in Eagleton (*The Trouble with Strangers*, pp. 161–170) as well as in Slavoj Žižek (*Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, New York: Routledge 2007, pp. 90–96) and in Pound (*Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma*, pp. 101–117).

real; a state released from the pressure of taking up an image where choice and action would be possible.

In the first section I describe how we can think of Kierkegaard's life stages as roughly approximating the three orders found in the Lacanian image of the Borromean knot and how this allows us to see Kierkegaard's stages as being descriptive of a psychological economy before going on, in the second section, to show how the upbuilding "movement" from one stage to another seems to occur in a paradoxical way, without displacement, through Kierkegaard's concept of repetition. Finally, in the last section, I look at the culmination of this movement in faith and how this culmination in Kierkegaard appears similarly to the analytic cure in Lacan.

## I From the Three Stages to the Three Orders

Although Kierkegaard seems to present his life stages as if they were rungs on a ladder requiring a leap from one to the other and organized according to a progressive unfolding from the lower to the higher, there is also a sense in which they are all interconnected. One can say that the reason why it is possible to leap from one stage to another is because the possibility was always already there in the individual. Or, perhaps, better, the possibility of the next stage exists in each previous stage as the result of its reaching a maturity that would require a transformation. In this way, the movement from one stage to another can be represented by the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly, where the previous stage is the chrysalis that must be shed with effort to emerge into the world again. If this is the case, then we can ask the question of *how* the stages that would succeed a given stage appear within the immanence of that stage.

This is where the topological mapping of Lacan can come to our assistance. As a mapping of the structure of the psyche, it necessarily implies a simultaneity of its registers insofar as they interrelate with one another in the present. At the same time, these registers do not quite exist on the same level and their very development, in the life of a person, occurs in a temporal unfolding which seems to track with Kierkegaard's own temporal movement up the stages, but with a difference. While Kierkegaard's picture seems to imply the necessity of moving *up* the ladder to enter into each stage *through choice*, what Lacan can clarify for us is that it is possible to, in a sense, have a stage *in a pathological way*.<sup>9</sup> Thus, if the development of a child to an adult, in Lacan's description,

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<sup>9</sup> No doubt, to have a stage "in a pathological way" would not be to be *within* that stage. The

is, in some ways, similar to the stages of Kierkegaard, it does not, therefore, imply that these stages are achieved or passed through in a way that is supervenient or complete. We can now begin the process of clarifying these similarities by going through Kierkegaard's life stages in the order in which they seem to progressively unfold and which tracks with the Lacanian order of development as well.

## A The Esthetic and the Imaginary

The esthetic stage situates itself at the beginning; it is the person in their immediacy and, as someone within immediacy, it is caught up in images. In other words, the person in the esthetic stage is interested in the superficial appearances of the world (the interesting) and this is what fascinates them and engrosses them. But the image which appears only ever appears in a moment after which it must be replaced by another image and then another one. And this leads to two things that characterize this stage: multiplicity and inaction.

As the one who is paralyzed by the multiplicity of possibilities into inaction, the esthete need not have any identity. In *Either/Or* he is only A, and that is the appropriate name for him for his namelessness is itself a part of his meaning. That is, since the esthete cannot act and cannot choose, the esthete is incapable of becoming anything and, as such, can never fulfill, maintain, or establish an identity. Whatever specificity the esthete may have is absorbed into his own inaction and experienced as necessity by him. As such, the esthete cannot truly live *by choice*, but only *by accident*.

In the aphoristic writing of *Either/Or's* "Diapsalmata" written by A, the book begins with this presentation of a total, fractured multiplicity while, at the same time, each aphorism seems to focus on an experience of the same thing: weariness, boredom, restlessness. He tells us that he does not feel like doing anything at all: "I don't feel like riding—the motion is too powerful; I don't feel like walking—it is too tiring; I don't feel like lying down, for either I would have to stay down, and I don't feel like doing that, or I would have to get up again, and I don't feel like doing that, either."<sup>10</sup> Every option, every possibility seems to be flattened down so that all things are equally wearisome

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point is that, within any given stage, there is a simultaneity of the others which may appear there pathologically or not and, whether they appear there in their pathological aspect or not is itself part of the character of the stage itself.

10 SKS 2, 28 / EO1, 20.

and unwanted. As such, no action can be commenced or committed to and this is made explicit as when he tells us that “I have, I believe, the courage to doubt everything; I have, I believe, the courage to fight against everything; but I do not have the courage to acknowledge anything, the courage to possess, to own, anything.”<sup>11</sup> A can doubt it all or resist it all, but then, the former is the rejection of all action by a retreat into nullity and the latter is a reaction against a situation and so can be reduced to necessity. What A cannot do, however, is that which would require choice and commitment. To possess something is to have it over a duration and not just for a moment; it requires a commitment in time.

In lieu of the ability to choose and commit to something, A experiences himself as propelled forward by necessity into a nothingness that he cannot appropriate for himself, but this is also what gives to time its character of motionlessness for him as the perpetual stasis of being stuck in the doldrums. His position in the world is summed up by his statement that “the only thing I see is emptiness, the only thing I live on is emptiness, the only thing I move in is emptiness...I am dying death...my soul’s poisonous doubt consumes everything.”<sup>12</sup>

We thus get a clear sense of the situation of A and the esthetic. It is that stage in which one is within inaction because one is incapable of choosing from among the multiplicity of images that one is fascinated by and so decides not to choose. One “chooses” to stay in this empty space so that one can possess everything “virtually.” As Eagleton explains it, “the aesthetic subject fills in its own vacuity not by seizing upon the fugitive sensation, but by re-inventing itself *ex nihilo* from one moment to the next, seeking to preserve a sense of unbounded freedom which is in truth sheer self-consuming negativity.”<sup>13</sup> Hence A tells us that he is “as one already dead...[in] an eternity of recollection.”<sup>14</sup> All he can do is recollect images from a site of his own emptiness, in reflectivity. As Judge William tells him, “You love the accidental. A smile from a pretty girl in an interesting situation, a stolen glance, that is what you are hunting for, that is a motif for your aimless fantasy.”<sup>15</sup> A is searching for the perfect moment and yet this moment is nothing more than an alienation from the self which he cannot cohere so that the Judge will also tell him that “I do believe that you are deceiving yourself, that all this that you tell about catching a man in

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11 SKS 2, 32 / EO1, 23.

12 SKS 2, 46 / EO1, 37.

13 Eagleton, *The Trouble with Strangers*, p. 162.

14 SKS 2, 51 / EO1, 42.

15 SKS 3, 17 / EO2, 7.

his happy moment is only your rare mood that you grasp.”<sup>16</sup> And here, we can see how things can bring us into Lacan’s Imaginary order and the mirror stage.

For Lacan, what he calls the Imaginary is that place in which one situates oneself as an image among other (competing) images, that is, among other people who, for me, are understood in their quality as image and reflection. It seems to be the first order which is set up and is described by Lacan, in his essay on the mirror stage, as occurring around six months of age and onwards.<sup>17</sup> This timing is important since the fact that it sets itself up so early on is itself determinative of one of the characteristic properties of this stage and order, that is, that it is *deceptive*. Lacan tells us that “the human child, at an age when he is for a short while...outdone by the chimpanzee in instrumental intelligence, can already recognize his own image as such in a mirror.”<sup>18</sup> The child cannot yet control their own motor functions, and yet, they can recognize themselves in the mirror as an image. What is the nature of this image that they see? For one thing, it is fascinating. While the monkey gets bored with it, the child “playfully experiences the relationship between the movements made in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it duplicates.”<sup>19</sup> This moment in which the self is doubled in the mirror image and reflected back at the child is rapturous.

But what about this moment makes it so pleasurable and inexhaustible for the child? According to Lacan, it has to do with a process of “*identification...* namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image.”<sup>20</sup> The child has found an image that they can assume for themselves, though this image be a deception for, as Lacan clarifies, “this form situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual, or, rather, that will only asymptotically approach the subject’s becoming.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, the child who, as yet, is still an uncontrolled and pulsating mass of partial drives pushing outwards from this underdeveloped and disorganized body now sees themselves as an organized gestalt in the fiction of the unified image reflected back at them from the mirror. Here begins the crack wherein what they are

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<sup>16</sup> SKS 3, 21 / EO2, 11.

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” in *Écrits*, trans. by Bruce Fink, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2007, p. 75.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*



and what they imagine themselves to be no longer concord and forms the fiction which will orient their life forward in a direction which they cannot accomplish. The image, then, as Lacan says is “more constitutive than constituted.”<sup>22</sup>

Here, then, we have the establishment of the self by way of a misrecognition through a gestalt image that I am not. From this beginning in which I situate myself according to an imaginary image, I will come to situate myself socially with others by means of the same so that:

This moment at which the mirror stage comes to an end inaugurates, through identification with the imago of one's semblable and the drama of primordial jealousy...the dialectic that will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations. It is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into being mediated by the other's desire, constitutes its objects in an abstract equivalence due to competition from other people, and turns the *I* into an apparatus to which every instinctual pressure constitutes a danger, even if it corresponds to a natural maturation process.<sup>23</sup>

In other words, though the mirror stage is concerned with the constitution of the self by way of an image that reflects back an imagined gestalt, this is not yet social. I come to enter the social once this image is compared with the image of the other thus leading to identifications that may connect me to others in various ways, as well as competition between myself and others. I take the other's image upon myself as an identification, or I see the other's image in conflict with my own. Thus situated on the social stage, I am now not just with my own image, but within a *multiplicity* of images which, nevertheless, cannot be organized into an order but which appear, each one, in equivalence with one another insofar as each is as good as any other since all of them are within the same abstract position with respect to me.

What is meant to be clarified here is that the Imaginary register that Lacan theorizes thus appears to be structured similarly to Kierkegaard's esthetic stage. Just as the esthetic in Kierkegaard describes for us a situation in which a person is stuck within a site of indecision due to the proliferation of images that they cannot choose between, so too do we find in Lacan a description of a situation in which a person becomes stuck due to the tyranny of a multiplicity of images in abstract equivalence, which includes the self. The misrecognition at the heart of the mirror stage itself guarantees that the subject will feel themselves stuck since they orient themselves outwards towards the world by means of an image that they can never come to inhabit. They may come to search for the image that

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Lacan, “Mirror Stage,” p. 79.

they *can* inhabit only to learn, in time, that a person is not meant to inhabit an image and be lost in despair.

## B The Ethical and the Symbolic

The next life stage to which one can leap according to what we find in Kierkegaard is the ethical. The fact that this is a movement upwards that requires a purification and maturation of the previous life stage is quite clear in the letters of Judge William where you have a direct address from the representative of the ethical to the representative of the esthetic to change his ways with descriptions of how this change occurs through a development within the esthetic to the point of despair.

If the esthetic is the accidental and immediate within a person determining them according to a logic of necessity and inaction, then the ethical becomes the point at which this accidental being becomes transformed through a mediation. This mediation is the advent of the universal which comes to have a determining effect upon the individual who is willing to enter into it. This is because the one who enters the universal is now in a relation of time and futurity since the universal posits a *task* for the individual to complete, even though the task posited is also chosen through a self-positing.

The entrance into the ethical thus seems to occur within a paradoxical moment in which one can only enter the universal through one's specificity. What is meant by this, however, is that one cannot erase one's contingency. One can be *subject* to it as the esthete is and, in this way, experience it as a sort of inescapable fate *or* one can appropriate it for oneself. If one does the latter, then one *chooses* one's own contingency and, in this way, takes responsibility for it and, through this, becomes capable of freedom. As Judge William explains this movement, "the ethical constitutes the choice...it is not so much a matter of choosing between willing good or willing evil as of choosing to will, but that in turn posits good and evil."<sup>24</sup> In other words, in the ethical, what is chosen is the possibility of choice. The leap from the esthetic to the ethical consists in being able to make the choice *to choose*. Seeing as the esthete was typified by his impossibility of taking actions and making choices, this would mark a new development. It would, therefore, perhaps be better to say that the choice, in the esthetic, is "neither/nor" (that is, no choice at all) with the "either/or" only properly arriving in the ethical.

What is important to remember about this process is that it is *both* an appropriation and acceptance of one's own contingency *as well as* a subjection to a universal law. The movement has to do with the continuity and self-constitution of oneself as a choice *by means of* the initial choice to be mediated by the universal. Judge William sets the contrast as "the esthetic in a person is that by which he spontaneously and immediately is what he is; the ethical is that by which he becomes what he becomes."<sup>25</sup> It is this *becoming* which is a choice taken and which is mediated by the universal, but what is paradoxical here is that "becoming what he becomes" does, in a sense, lead to an erasure of his previous specificity *even though* it occurred through a free choice and was that which returned freedom to his being. This is why ethical duty, in Kierkegaard, is *not* exterior, it must arise from within through the free choice, even though this duty is meant to transform you *away* from your specificity to the universal. So, even though duty is not exterior, it orients you towards something which is not present. Judge William summarizes it by telling us that "the ethical is still abstract and cannot be fully actualized because it lies outside the individual. Not until the individual himself is the universal, not until then, can the ethical be actualized"<sup>26</sup> so that he can eventually tell us that "[t]he genuinely extraordinary person is the genuinely ordinary person. The more of the universally human an individual can actualize in his life, the more extraordinary a human being he is. The less of the universal he can assimilate, the more imperfect he is."<sup>27</sup>

In the Lacanian picture, this place of the universal mediation arises in what he calls the Symbolic order since this is where one becomes constituted by language, which forms the model for universality. As opposed to the Imaginary, where what exists is nothing but a multiplicity of images with general substitutability between them, here, what arises is the significance of what has been called the big Other. Through being situated within the field of the big Other, one is no longer related to others only through identification or competition, but one becomes mediated by something external that I did not choose but which, nonetheless, conditions me and produces me. For Lacan, this universality is the language that I speak where the very act and possibility of speaking is itself the opening of this crack between the particular and the universal to the extent that *I*, as an individual, must be mediated by this universal thing, language, and, in so doing, can become myself. As Lacan tells us in "The

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25 SKS 3, 173–174 / EO2, 178.

26 SKS 3, 243–244 / EO2, 255.

27 SKS 3, 309–310 / EO2, 328.

Meaning of the Phallus,” “it is Freud’s discovery that gives to the opposition of signifier to signified the full weight which it should imply: namely, that the signifier has an active function in determining the effects in which the signifiable appears as submitting to its mark, becoming through that passion the signified.”<sup>28</sup> That is, if there is a signifier which signifies a signified through language, and if I am within language, then I must be signified within it by signifiers. However, in order for this to occur, my irreducible and specific, contingent being (which forms the surface of the signifiable) must be reduced in such a way that it can become the signified that the signifier will refer to. In other words, I must be mediated by the universal, and thus delimited in a certain way by it, in order to speak. As Žižek succinctly puts it, “The fundamental ethical gesture is the subject’s *alienation* in the universality of the symbolic pact.”<sup>29</sup> Which is to say that, in seeking concordance with a universality that I can never perfectly accord with, I must become alienated from myself; from a piece of my own contingent being which marks this failure.

It is for these reasons that Lacan will often speak of this order as that which seems to weigh upon me in a variety of metaphorical images such as when he tells us that “[t]he gaze I encounter...is, not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other.”<sup>30</sup> For Lacan, once I am in the Symbolic order, I feel myself caught within this net that I can no longer escape, caught in the field of the Other and their determinations for me.

In this sense, Lacan’s image of the Symbolic is far less positive than what we get from Judge William in the ethical. Although Lacan seems to see language, and the universality it represents, as something of a necessary moment in our development, it is usually depicted tragically. Perhaps this is inevitable for a clinician who sees, after all, pathology day in and day out; for the ethical ideal that Kierkegaard seems to posit of the person who has been able to choose the universal and make duty internal (in a way that duty is what they desire) does not seem to be the usual outcome of the person posited within language by Lacan. But this would seem to be due to the fact that Kierkegaard is describing a *conscious* movement into a self-positing universality, while Lacan is describing a necessary and “unwanted” move into it.

That is, when the child speaks and becomes mediated by language, this does not happen because they have “chosen” themselves, it happens because of their

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**28** Jacques Lacan, “The Meaning of the Phallus,” trans. by Jacqueline Rose, in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne*, ed. by Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1985, p. 78.

**29** Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 90 (my emphasis).

**30** Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p. 84.

parents and culture and, in this way, marks their contingency through an *unchosen* mediation into the universal. Being forced into the universal in this way can, perhaps, be said to explain why it turns out pathologically so often. Žižek explains this process as a paradoxical forced choice. As he puts it, “the subject supposed to choose freely his community (since only a free choice is morally binding) does not exist prior to this choice, he is constituted by means of it” which means that “the ‘social contract,’ is a paradoxical choice where I maintain the freedom of choice only if I ‘make the right choice.’”<sup>31</sup> In this sense, one might say that one has always already made this forced choice, from a Lacanian perspective, insofar as one speaks. However, whether this is then experienced as freedom or oppression would depend on a second movement where this forced choice is repeated as a free choice. Freedom would thus appear in this *second* movement where a contingent situation given to me is appropriated as my own. This, in the end, seems to be what Judge William is advising A to do. Without this second movement, however, one would continue to be stuck in the inaction of the esthetic stage. Even where ethics might be attempted in some fashion, without this second movement, it could only appear as an external determinant. This is why Judge William, when he tells us that “when it [the ethical] is viewed improperly, it makes the individual utterly insecure, and I cannot imagine an unhappier or more tormented life than when a person has his duty outside himself and yet continually wants to carry it out,”<sup>32</sup> can so clearly describe the ordinary state of most obsessive neurotics.<sup>33</sup>

## C The Religious and the Real

After having been mediated by the universal in the ethical, you have the return of immediacy, but of a different type. The ability to leap from the universal onwards

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<sup>31</sup> Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 86.

<sup>32</sup> SKS 3, 243 / EO2, 255.

<sup>33</sup> This way of viewing the ethical improperly that seems to correspond with obsessive neurotic existence would then point to the joint between the esthetic and the ethical inasmuch as the choice to follow the law that has been forced upon me, without also choosing that law as mine, situates itself at the level of a failed exit from the esthetic stage which has not properly entered the ethical one. Indeed, as Judge William goes on to say, “[i]f the ethical is regarded as outside the personality and in an external relation to it, then one has given up everything, then one has despaired. The esthetic as such is despair” (SKS 3, 243 / EO2, 255), and “[a]s soon as the ethical is prescriptive, it already has something of the esthetic” (SKS 3, 243 / EO2, 255).

into this later immediacy is the movement into the religious and the capacity for faith. This is not an easy movement since it requires, in a sense, an undoing of the universal that would not be a regression into the esthetic. Rather than saying that, in fact, the universal does not matter, and I can return to the accidentality of my contingent being and follow its pleasures, it says, instead, the universal *does* matter but, nevertheless, there is something that matters *more*, and this more cannot be mediated by it. It does not dissolve the universal into meaninglessness but recognizes something else beyond the universal that it must answer to. As De Silentio summarizes it for us, “[f]aith is namely this paradox that the single individual is higher than the universal—yet, please note, in such a way that the movement repeats itself, so that after having been in the universal he as the single individual isolates himself as higher than the universal.”<sup>34</sup>

Since the universal is the universal, it is what makes anything understandable or communicable among people through shared categories. As a mediation, it mediates between different entities so that they can become connected according to this shared medium. But this means that if one finds oneself in a situation in which one must leave the universal, one necessarily becomes individualized in an isolation and, as De Silentio makes clear on multiple occasions, loses the possibility of communication. Thus, Abraham, who represents the knight of faith “cannot speak...he speaks no human language...he speaks in a divine language, he speaks in tongues.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, Abraham, even if words come out of his mouth, can no longer be connected to others through the medium of language in its capacity as universality. If he speaks a “divine language” it is only in an oxymoronic way in which this “language” that he speaks occurs through unmediated contact in “an absolute relation to the absolute.”<sup>36</sup>

This is where we get a glimpse of the *more*, for the individuality that has become isolated beyond universality in faith does so because of direct contact with the absolute, with God. It is because of this direct contact that a teleological suspension of the ethical can occur since the command that comes from the lawgiver to break the law is justified by the same being that gives law its legality. In the moment in which God commands me to break his law, he has already told me, by virtue of his command, that this exception is allowed; he grants it, he requires it. The difficulties of cognizing such a situation are articulated by De Silentio when he tells us, as if thinking aloud, as if thinking in circles, that

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34 SKS 4, 149 / FT, 55.

35 SKS 4, 201–202 / FT, 113–114.

36 SKS 4, 207 / FT, 81.

“[t]he ethical is the universal, and as such it is also divine. Thus it is proper to say that every duty is essentially duty to God, but if no more can be said than this, then it is also said that I actually have no duty to God. The duty becomes duty by being traced back to God, but in the duty itself I do not enter into relation to God.”<sup>37</sup>

One might say, therefore, that the difficulty and the confusion of the religious comes from this: after having been stuck within my accidentality in the esthetic, I choose myself through orienting myself towards universality and duty, and in this way shift away from the pleasures of my particularity to a recognition of responsibility. This is, one could say, a movement away from my own egoistic selfishness to a recognition that there is a law from God that I must follow, at which point, it would seem the story would end since I am now edified, and I recognize the necessity of being loyal to God’s law.

But, *no*, as De Silentio points out, by equating my relation to God to my relation to his law, I have replaced God by his law and thus only have a relationship to a medium, to that which separates me from (though it also connects me to) God. In this way, I wind up being faithful to the law, but not necessarily to God, so that what opens up, what must open up, is, at least, the possibility that one can relate to God *directly*, and not simply through the medium of his law. But if one can relate to God directly, and without mediation, then it must happen through a breaking of this very same law given by God, for only then could it not be reabsorbed back into the universal as a simple following of the law. Thus, the direct relation with God would express itself in this way: that God would command an individual to break his own law such as, for instance, commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son.

However, even this does not complete the movement. Since God is the source of the authority for the law as well as for the command to break the law, and since Abraham is faithful to God, he must be faithful to his law *and* to his command, whereupon we have this paradoxical movement of faith where Abraham has, at every moment, to believe “that God would not demand Isaac of him, and yet he [be] willing to sacrifice him if it was demanded.”<sup>38</sup> He must hold contrary beliefs to be true at the same time and this is what it means to have faith “by virtue of the absurd.”<sup>39</sup> Abraham must give it all up completely and, at the same time, believe in its total return. In other words, he must believe

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37 SKS 4, 160 / FT, 68.

38 SKS 4, 131 / FT, 35.

39 SKS 4, 131 / FT, 36.

in God's command and its necessity to break the law while at the same time believing in the universal validity of following God's law.

In this description we can see that the question of universal law and that which gives it its validity is what is at issue here. What is made explicit by the paradoxical experience of faith is, ultimately, the paradox of the law and sovereignty. In other words, law must be constituted by a decision, but if it is constituted by a decision then it cannot be universal since the decision could have been otherwise. Thus, since God is the one who constituted the law through his sovereign decision, he could also (since the law's legality comes from him) have made a different choice, constituted a different law, and this is made explicit by the possibility that he could command someone to break his own law.

It is here that we can connect Kierkegaard's religious stage to the Real in Lacan for the Real occupies, in many ways, the same space as God.<sup>40</sup> For Lacan, it is that which is outside of the Symbolic order and it is that which cannot be figured in an image. Though it is absent, however, it is still referred to in such a way that it can be thought of as that central nullity which is necessary to organize the entire signifying field. It is in this space that he develops his Freudian-derived concept of *das Ding* which is "not nothing, but literally is not. It is characterized by its absence, its strangeness."<sup>41</sup> And yet, though it is absent, it still has significant effects since "as soon as we have to deal with anything in the world appearing in the form of the signifying chain, there is somewhere—though certainly outside of the natural world—which is the beyond of that chain, the *ex nihilo* on which it is founded and articulated as such."<sup>42</sup>

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**40** Indeed, Eagleton, in *The Trouble with Strangers*, directly identifies God with the Real: "The Real to be affirmed is God, the infinite abyss at the core of the self" (p. 165) although it is worth noting that he also tells us that there is "a positive and a negative version of the Real" (*ibid.*) by which he means the despair that would immediately precede the accession to the religious as the crisis within the ethical. Characterizing this as another form of the Real is, however, a bit strange since it implies that the Real comes in types. Rather, the despair is itself a part of the process, which is why, after all, Eagleton will also refer to Kierkegaard's description of despair as "the corridor to faith" (p. 166) thus seeming to imply that, as just said, despair is part of the process and there are not, in fact, two versions of the Real. This negative version of the Real thus appears to just be the possibility that one could fall into despair and never escape it. Since despair arises at the joint between two stages, we might say that this despair Eagleton is referring to is precisely there where the ethical meets the religious.

**41** Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Dennis Porter, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1992, p. 63.

**42** *Ibid.*, p. 212.



We thus have in Lacan the articulation of a universality (language or the signifying chain) which must come to be constituted from the outside of itself on the groundless site of the *ex nihilo*. In other words, Lacan seems to be pointing, by way of his concept of *das Ding*, situated within the field of the Real, towards the same paradox of sovereignty wherein whatever is designated as universal must come to be designated as universal by way of a sovereign choice that must be made and is, therefore, contingent, thus marking the universal as, in fact, particular.

This is a point that he makes especially clear in his reading of *Antigone* where he comes to identify the character of Antigone as being situated precisely in this very site of the Real as *das Ding* and, because of this, becomes intolerable to the rule of Creon since, in her own sovereign choice to not follow his law and bury her brother, though it may lead to her death—which she can only justify by nothing more than her particular connection to her brother—she shows Creon the very arbitrariness of his own decree, and thus lays bare the particularity that lies behind the universal law that he is attempting to cohere. As Joan Copjec summarizes it for us:

That which the individual inherits from her species, her family, her race cannot be located merely in a stateable law or dictate, but includes also...that excess in the law which cannot be articulated within it. Because the law contains this mad excess...the subject can carry out the law...without simply repeating in the present what has already been...dictated by the past. Antigone is not fated by the crime of her incestuous parents to a similarly tragic crime. The criminal being she safeguards is that of the law itself, which contains its own transgression. If Antigone is fated...it is in this paradoxical sense: she *is destined to overturn her fate through her act*.<sup>43</sup>

We can thus see that the figure of Antigone, for Lacan, comes to occupy a similar site as the figure of Abraham does for Kierkegaard. Both, in their own way, become singularized individuals who must break a law in order to stay true to the very condition under which the law became itself which, at the same time, reveals something paradoxical about the law; namely, that it must be constituted by means of a sovereign choice and does not simply exist. The difference here is that, whereas Abraham discovers this by means of the command to break the law given him by the lawgiver, Antigone discovers this by means of her refusal to submit to the law given to her by Creon. Abraham follows what is higher than the universal, God, while Antigone follows what is higher than Creon, the

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<sup>43</sup> Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation*, Cambridge: MIT Press 2004, p. 45.

gods who, in the Greek context, do not form the space of the Symbolic as lawgivers but the space of the Real in which Antigone must be autonomous.<sup>44</sup>

What all these comments are meant to clarify is the way in which the Lacanian orders and the Kierkegaardian stages seem to cross over one another and what implications this may have for each of them. If Kierkegaard's stages are, in some way, progressive, then we can think of the Lacanian orders as also forming something of a progression (beyond just a description of child development) and, if Lacan's orders describe the simultaneity of a psychic economy, then Kierkegaard's stages can also be seen to describe a simultaneity within the psyche in some way.

## II The Upbuilding Movement and the Question of Repetition

If we have been able to demonstrate some of the significant affinities between Kierkegaard's life stages and the orders described by Lacan as forming the topology of the psyche, then we can begin to think how it is that we can rearticulate Kierkegaard's stages to be descriptive of a certain kind of topology as well. If we were to take the image of the Borromean knot, as Lacan uses it, then what we would have is the coming together of three rings that are *all* attached to one another such that, if one ring becomes cut, then all the rings become detached from one another. For Lacan, the point of this image was to show the necessity of a certain interrelationship between the different registers. In the context of Kierkegaard, we might say the same thing so that what his progressive model would show us are the pitfalls that we encounter when we focus on but one or two rings to the exclusion of others such that the full joining of the three rings in their explicitness with respect to one another can only occur in the religious stage. But what this is meant to clarify is that the esthetic and the ethical stage then are still formed according to the same structure with the difference being that the other stages or rings implicit within them are not fully articulated or known by them, thus showing up in negative or pathological ways.

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<sup>44</sup> As Lacan tells us in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, there is "a certain legality which is a consequence of the laws of the gods that are said to be... 'unwritten'... Involved here is an invocation of something that is, in effect, of the order of law, but which is not developed in any signifying chain or in anything else" (p. 278).

In the esthetic life stage, for instance, what we find is, as we described earlier, an obsession with a superficial multiplicity of images that overwhelm the subject into inaction. But here, we can see that, though the subject has been able to exist within a certain kind of contingency, they have not been able to come to appropriate the opening of this empty site to allow for their own self-positing and construction. Within the esthetic we thus find the appearance of this groundless ground in which their sovereign choice could be articulated (on the model of the Real or the religious stage) except that they refuse it and transform it, instead, into a realm of oppressive nothingness and necessity. At the same time, universality *does* exist for the esthete, it is just that it is a negative universality in which everything has been flattened down to being equally weary, equally meaningless. The esthete thus receives the religious, and the autonomy with respect to the universal it represents, as its negative in pure necessity and accidentality and receives the universal as universal negativity. Only one ring comes through with explicitness while the rest appear as negative conditions constraining it.

Once we move beyond, to the ethical stage, we have a progressive movement that has occurred. As Judge William tells us “[i]n choosing itself, the personality chooses itself ethically and absolutely excludes the esthetic; but since he nevertheless chooses himself and does not become another being by choosing himself but becomes himself, all the esthetic returns in its relativity.”<sup>45</sup> The movement thus is both the movement of an overcoming and a retention. Indeed, Judge William makes it seem as if the fullness of the esthetic can, in fact, only be experienced by transcending it into the ethical as when he says that “[i]f only the choice is posited, all the esthetic returns, and you will see that only thereby does existence become beautiful.”<sup>46</sup> And we can, therefore, understand this as the moment in which the Symbolic and the Imaginary have now been posited together in their explicitness.

If the religious, in the esthetic, returned in its negativity as the null-site from which the esthete could not escape, determined as he was within it according to an experience of necessity, here, the religious shows itself in the very problem at the heart of the paradox of choosing yourself by way of a universality. In the language of Judge William, there is only *one* choice, the choice to choose, however, once one makes such a choice then one enters the either/or of good and evil. What does one do then? It seems as if the initial choice of choosing to choose would immediately place one within a field in which a task could

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45 SKS 3, 173 / EO2, 177.

46 SKS 3, 173 / EO2, 178.

be posited for oneself according to universality, but then, if the task that would be placed before oneself is one set by a universality then free choice complicates itself. Furthermore, the implication here is that we all have the same task, which is to work toward becoming universal, and yet, how is this universal even found?

Let us say we truly have a choice between good and evil, but first, we must distinguish between what is good and what is evil. How would we do this? Presumably through universality, but then, which universality shall we choose? Kant's, Hegel's? The possibility of such a choice implies that it is not universality precisely. That is, if there is disagreement over what constitutes universality then how can I be sure that I am making the right choice? It would seem that I would need to refer to universality to make the correct choice as to which universality to choose. Universality is, therefore, presupposed in the choice of universality itself and this paradox, within the ethical, is not made explicit or dealt with. Judge William seems to work with the assumption that there is only one universality and that we need only choose to be or not be within it. And it is here that we see an ignorance of the religious stage that conditions this very entrance into the ethical. Rather than experiencing this as an overwhelming negativity that I cannot escape, as the esthete does, the ethicist merely skirts over this paradoxical difficulty by covering it over with the imagined sense that there is, in fact, only one universality that issues from God, and that it is available to us, and that there is no real disagreement about it; the only choice is whether to follow it or not.

When we finally reach the religious stage, we have the explicitness of all three stages coming together into a final knotting where what has been misunderstood or covered over in the previous stages finally comes together in their explicitness. Just as the ethical development was able to retain the esthetic that preceded it, so does the religious stage retain and overcome the ethical stage. By making the paradox at the heart of the decision for universality explicit in the experience of faith, the religious stage is able to accept and deal with this very groundlessness which it names God, and through this experience, return back to the ethical but, now, no longer viewing it as the ethicist did, as a sort of transcendental universality which we could all discover if only we tried hard enough, but as the contingent formation that I choose to follow coming from the God who could have chosen otherwise. It is this capacity for a return to the life of pure, mundane normalcy from out of this experience of religious paradox that marks the knight of faith as, in a sense, invisible for, after all, what has happened to them has happened to their interior and, therefore, cannot be understood according to universality or the image. As De Silentio tells us, "they [the knights of faith]...are likely to disappoint, for externally they have a striking resemblance to bourgeois philistinism, which infinite resignation, like

faith, deeply disdains”<sup>47</sup> and “if one did not know him, it would be impossible to distinguish him from the rest of the crowd.”<sup>48</sup> After moving from the esthetic, through the ethical, to the religious one finally arrives where one began, but transformed in such a way that, at best, one is only made visible in this difference to others by a slight “wavering.”<sup>49</sup> Each stage then contains all the others as within itself in their negativity or positivity (depending on where it lies in the progression) except for the religious which, as the final stage, becomes the container and synthesizer of all that came before it into itself. In this way, a loop is formed where one returns to a new and changed immediacy, not so different in appearance from the original one (though wholly different in interiority), after having passed through the universal.

This looping back reminds us of *Repetition* whose Danish title, *Gjentagelsen*, literally means “the taking back.”<sup>50</sup> It is a title which, judging by its contents, structure, and temporality is quite appropriate for it was published after *Either/Or* and on the same day as *Fear and Trembling* thus, in a way, enacting a reflection upon the two previous life stages as well as a metapsychological synthesis between all three at the same moment in which a description of the religious dimension, where all of them are completed, was published. The fact that the subtitle to *Repetition* is “A Venture in Experimenting Psychology” does not seem incidental for in the opening pages in which repetition, recollection, and hope are described and contrasted with one another, we can detect a comparative analysis going on between the different life stages.

Constantius begins by telling us that “[r]epetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward.”<sup>51</sup> We thus have an identity with a difference established between repetition and recollection. One orients you towards a past while the other orients you towards a future, and yet, repetition is not the same as hope which is described as “a new garment, stiff and starched and lustrous, but it has never been tried on, and therefore one does not know how becoming it will be or how it will fit.”<sup>52</sup> In the same breath, he tells us that “Recollection is a discarded garment that does not fit, however beautiful it is, for one has outgrown it [and] [r]epetition

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47 SKS 4, 133 / FT, 38.

48 SKS 4, 134 / FT, 39.

49 SKS 4, 135 / FT, 41.

50 Arne Melberg, “Repetition (In the Kierkegaardian Sense of the Term),” *Diacritics*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1990, p. 71.

51 SKS 4, 9 / R, 131.

52 SKS 4, 10 / R, 132.

is an indestructible garment that fits closely and tenderly, neither binds nor sags.”<sup>53</sup> Although he, at first, establishes an identity with a difference in directionality between recollection and repetition, in the imagery he then proceeds to give us, it would seem that, in fact, recollection and hope are the two contraries. This would be because they are both situated at a distance from myself which I cannot reach, but in opposite directions. In recollection, the unattainable object is in the past while, in hope, the imagined—yet unattainable—object is thought to be in the future. Repetition, in contradistinction to these, appears as the only garment that is actually worn. Perhaps, then, what connects repetition to recollection is the wearing. Though recollection is no longer worn, it was worn once, while hope will never be worn. Repetition thus seems to mark the movement of time that orients itself forward through hope and produces recollections.

As Constantius continues with his narrative and describes to us the plight of the young man, we learn yet more about the problems that arise when one is in recollection for “[r]ecollection has the great advantage that it begins with the loss; the reason it is safe and secure is that it has nothing to lose.”<sup>54</sup> In other words, we discover that recollection is the esthetic. It is that space in which one is alone only with one’s own memories and nothing else, fascinated by the images of past occurrences and immobilized because of this. Time cannot pass because one is stuck in the past that can never return. If recollection shows us the quality of the esthetic, then it would seem that hope is what shows us the quality of the ethical. As that distant object in the future to which I am oriented towards and which appears perfect to me, but which I will never reach, Constantius’ description of hope makes it appear like the *task* of becoming universal. I cannot become universal, and yet, I can set becoming universal as my goal and, in this way, orient myself towards an impossible goal that I will try to approach. In both cases, however, one might say, as Constantius does about the man in the unhappy love affair, that “he leaped over life.”<sup>55</sup> In both instances, one either leaps backwards towards an unattainable past or leaps forwards towards an unattainable future, but in neither is one present in the unfolding of time.

It is worth noting, however, that this understanding of the ethical as producing an orientation towards an impossible future in which I would approach the perfection of becoming the universal but, precisely because of

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53 SKS 4, 10 / R, 132.

54 SKS 4, 14 / R, 136.

55 Ibid.

my contingency, cannot quite become identical to it would seem at variance somewhat with Žižek's understanding of the ethical in Kierkegaard. As he tells us, "[i]n the ethical stage, repetition assumes the form of the universal norms of conduct...we rely upon the certitude of repetition. Repetition is a sign of maturity when the subject has learned to avoid the twin traps of impatient hope in the New and of nostalgic memory of the Old: we find satisfaction in the return of the Same."<sup>56</sup> This implies that the ethical stance is one of *apparent* self-identity and security in the present through universality, rather than an orientation based on the hope of eventually becoming identical with the universality I pose. However, as he goes on to say, the religious stage must arise precisely because this ethical repetition *fails*: "The deadlock which pushes Kierkegaard toward the next (religious) stage is of course the experience of how, at this stage, repetition is impossible: the ideal point at which we overcome the futile yearning for the New without falling into a nostalgic backward-directed attitude, is never present as such."<sup>57</sup>

But what is this ideal point? In my reading, this ideal point would be precisely this impossible moment in which my contingent being would become identical with universality; a moment which I work for and yet will never come due to its asymptotic character. The ambiguity present is whether or not this failure described is to be understood as the structurally encoded failure of the ethical stage that opens it towards the religious or the tension of sustaining the ethical which, for the esthete who thought they had chosen the ethical, cannot but be loosened under the continuing seductiveness of the image, thus motivating a regression. Given that Žižek tells us that "the ideal point between hope and memory is *present precisely and only in the mode of hope or memory*,"<sup>58</sup> it would seem that it is the latter for him. The failure of the ethical would then be based on a failure to achieve identity with the universal that would throw one back into the reign of the image. Such a failure would be felt as such precisely because this identity with the universal had *also* appeared as a fantasied image.

However, given our previous discussion, it would seem that the failure of the ethical that pushes one towards the religious would arise, instead, from the eventual recognition that if the law is divine, because it comes from God, then the law is *also* contingent. Since God could always make another law, the law can be broken since the source of the law could command me to break it. Accordingly, such a recognition destabilizes the very setting of this universality which I

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<sup>56</sup> Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 90.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 90–91.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

seek by turning that which I thought had the quality of necessity into yet another contingency, thus precipitating a crisis. Another way to characterize this is by considering that the source of the law, God, is also the source of my own existence, myself. Accordingly, if God is both the source of the law I need to follow as well as the source of the person that I am with my particular inclinations, then why is there a God-established law that is distinct and must be followed as a way of perfecting a God-established self? This question points to the same contingency of the universal law since, in it, the individual becomes that exception to the law that the lawgiver has himself created.<sup>59</sup>

This is all to say that what Žižek seems to describe here would perhaps more properly be situated at the joint between the esthetic and the ethical rather than the ethical and the religious and that this is the source of these different characterizations. After all, as he says elsewhere in that same chapter, “the three moments cannot be ‘synchronized’: we never choose among the three positions simultaneously, we choose either within the first ‘either/or,’ i.e., between the esthetical and the ethical, or within the second ‘either/or,’ i.e., between the ethical and the religious.”<sup>60</sup> What is implied by this is that, once one is truly at the ethical stage, one stays in the ethical or develops toward the religious. However, another possibility is that one’s choice for the ethical from out of the esthetic is tenuous and liable to a reversion backwards into the esthetic, though perhaps this would be better characterized as still being in the esthetic or ethical choice since one has not yet truly chosen the ethical yet. Ultimately, the difference is perhaps one of how time presents itself. The esthetic’s emphasis on images makes the relation to the future or the past roughly homologous since both are typified by fantasied images of what has happened or will have happened, hence the emphasis on immediacy as the domain of collecting images. The crucial difference in the ethical stage is a switch to a linear relation to the future that is organized, not by an image, but by a pact or promise. As noted earlier, the shift that then comes with the religious is the return of immediacy, but in a different form.

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<sup>59</sup> This is meant to clarify how it is that ethical despair can be understood as the despair of “willing to be oneself.” Alastair Hannay explains it well: “[A]ny *striving* after a goal of selfhood at all is despair—any striving to become a ‘better’ self than the self one is—because to strive in this self-improving way is to try to be a self in a way that is *not* that of being a God-established self, and only the latter gives you the condition in which you can be rid of despair” (Alastair Hannay, “Basic Despair,” in his *Kierkegaard and Philosophy: Selected Essays*, New York: Routledge 2003, pp. 79f.).

<sup>60</sup> Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 94.



This is why one can think of repetition as the representation of the religious for, in repetition, one is again within immediacy, just as recollection was, thus establishing a logic to the identity between them, but, with a difference. While recollection was structurally oriented towards the past and hope towards the future, repetition is oriented towards the present as a repetition of the past which is not a reproduction of the past, thus marking it out in its own novelty as a movement forward into a future that is, nevertheless, connected to a past. Repetition, then, is the present moment insofar as it is understood within the unfolding of time and thus stitches together, within itself, both recollection and hope. As Constantius clarifies for us, “[t]he dialectic of repetition is easy, for that which is repeated has been—otherwise it could not be repeated—but the very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new.”<sup>61</sup> But such a statement can be interpreted in many different ways, and herein lies the problem. For what does it mean to repeat what has been? And what does it mean that what is being repeated, in the very repeating of it, becomes new?

As Judge William says, in a way that can help us to clarify the different possibilities for (mis)interpreting repetition, “[f]or the happy individualities, the first love is also the second, the third, the last; here the first love has the qualification of eternity; for the unhappy individualities, the first love is the instant; it acquires the qualification of the temporal...it is, when it is, a past.”<sup>62</sup> In other words, if we try to repeat, on the model of recollection, we will try to repeat *exactly* and will never achieve this; in this case, our repetition has been lost in being overtaken by recollection. Similarly, we might say that if what we are trying to “repeat” is the ideal that we have set for ourselves, then we will also fail since we will be trying to repeat what is a perfected idea in the world of actuality. Repetition must proceed with respect to the opening of a null-site of time appropriated for myself where what is repeated is my existence, my choice, my interconnectivity with others. In other words, it is the religious dimension that must be opened up where I am able to believe in the paradoxical form of the *absolutely new repetition*; the place where I can believe, at once, that everything will be the same and everything will be different.

This is precisely why, although Constantius is able to state the rule, he does not seem to actually have the capacity to live by it; he is not yet a knight of faith. In fact, he still seems to be stuck in the esthetic stage and ruled by the image, the recollection. Hence, when Constantius describes his experimental repeated trip

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61 SKS 4, 25 / R, 149.

62 SKS 3, 48 / EO2, 41.

to Berlin “to ascertain whether a repetition is possible,”<sup>63</sup> he winds up being woefully disappointed. He tells us about the failure of his attempt to rewatch a play: “*Der Talisman* was to be performed...The recollection of it awakened in my soul; everything was as vivid for me as it was the time before. I hurried to the theater. No box was available for me alone...Beckmann could not make me laugh. I endured it for half an hour and then left the theater, thinking: there is no repetition at all.”<sup>64</sup> If there was no repetition, it was because he was not trying to repeat on the model of repetition but, rather, on the model of recollection which, as the failed model that he already described it to us as being, in the image of the garments, was doomed. It would have been more accurate for him to say, “one cannot repeat a recollection at all.” Only in his frustration does he begin to return to the meaning of the repetition he had described to us before as when he says that “[t]he only repetition was the impossibility of a repetition...and [I] had verified it by having it repeated in every possible way.”<sup>65</sup>

In other words, being stuck in the esthetic, he comes to only properly understand repetition through the negative. Or, as Bara Kolenc puts it, “*this stubborn return of the failure of repetition is already repetition itself.*”<sup>66</sup> The positive appearance of repetition will later show up in two places by means of the young man. The first will be through the story of Job where Job’s ability to sustain his commitment to God even while everything seemed to prove to the contrary leads to the young man saying, “Job is blessed and has received everything *double*.—This is called a *repetition*.”<sup>67</sup> The second will be when the young man learns that the girl with whom he had had his unhappy love affair is now married, leading him to exclaim “I am myself again. Here I have repetition; I understand everything, and life seems more beautiful to me than ever...The split that was in my being is healed; I am unified again.”<sup>68</sup> Both point toward this experience of having to give everything up in order to receive it back again; the movement of faith.

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63 SKS 4, 27 / R, 151.

64 SKS 4, 42–43 / R, 168–169.

65 SKS 4, 44–45 / R, 170–171.

66 Bara Kolenc, “The Paradoxes of the Limping Cause in Kierkegaard, Hegel and Lacan,” *S: Journal of the Circle for Lacanian Ideology Critique*, vol. 11, 2018, p. 91. She will go on to explain repetition as what she calls a double paradox: “the paradox of two paradoxes, is therefore the following: *although the repetition of the same is impossible, although difference cannot be eliminated in order to achieve a perfect repetition, the condition of possibility of the emergence of difference is, on the other hand, exactly the perfect repetition of the same*” (pp. 92f.).

67 SKS 4, 79 / R, 212.

68 SKS 4, 87 / R, 220.

We can thus see how *Repetition* seems to allow us to think through how the different life stages can be thought of with respect to the passage of time. Repetition, by both giving up and retaining the future and the past, comes to form the present as mine. It can be seen to enact the very movement and synthesis at the heart of the religious stage itself as opposed to the fractured temporality of a recollection-obsessed esthete or eschatologically-oriented ethicist.

### III Faith and the Analytic Cure

Although much of what has been dealt with so far has been to see how the progressive unfolding of the life stages happens in Kierkegaard, as well as how one can view each life stage as containing within it all the others in some form that would condition it, not much has been said as to how this progressive unfolding of the life stages can influence our view of psychoanalysis. As was stated earlier, the analogy between Kierkegaard's life stages and Lacan's orders of the psyche was one way of thinking through how Kierkegaard's work could be used to describe a sort of metapsychology. But now we can also see how the progressive unfolding of the life stages can also give us a model for, not just a description of how a psyche forms itself from a developmental perspective, but also how the progress of analysis proceeds up to the arrival of the analytic cure.

What we have found is that, in Kierkegaard, the religious stage functions as the highest stage and the one wherein all the other stages are synthesized and also overcome in such a way that one can finally return to one's normal, mundane life, but absolutely changed. This corresponds to a looping back that would allow one to continue to do (repeat) the things that one used to do but now with the realization and acceptance of their total novelty. Accordingly, it would seem that this movement into the religious stage is the place in which one arrives at the freedom and self-possession that would allow one to finally *live as oneself* and not as subject to the universal—though one may follow it—nor the particular—though one may appreciate it.

To be able to finally live as oneself and to construct one's own narrative and make choices, including the groundless choice of choosing one's own universality, can be understood as the ultimate goal of psychoanalysis. From out of the total rigidity of the obsessive or the mercurial and inconstant identifications of the hysteric, one finally comes into a self-possession that would allow one to escape the reign of the Imaginary and the Symbolic so that one can appropriate one's own existential condition and, in this way, return to the Imaginary and the

Symbolic, but with a difference, where they have become one's own rather than determinants of one's existence in a relation of necessity and unfreedom. Hence, Lacan tells us, near the end of *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*:

To have carried an analysis through to its end is no more nor less than to have encountered that limit in which the problematic of desire is raised ... There is no doubt that in the course of this process the subject will encounter much that is good for him...[however] he will only encounter that good if at every moment he eliminates from his wishes the false goods, if he exhausts not only the vanity of his demands, given that they are all no more than regressive demands, but also the vanity of his gifts.<sup>69</sup>

In other words, to finally arrive at the end of analysis is to have finally gone beyond all that which has been felt to be an external determinant of myself, so that I can appropriate this condition for myself. As Lacan tells us, it exhausts the vanity of my demands and my gifts, that is, the esthetic searching for the perfect image or the interest in the accidental quality. It also bypasses all the false goods, those things that I would posit as my determining law (ethical universality). All this happens so that I can arrive at the empty site, the nullity, the absolute, groundless condition named God by Kierkegaard and the real by Lacan, and have what can only be regarded as an absolute relation with this absolute site and, from out of this, finally become myself again, and return to the everyday.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, p. 300.

<sup>70</sup> This connection between faith in Kierkegaard and the analytic cure in Lacan has been remarked upon by others. See, for instance, Eagleton in *The Trouble with Strangers*: "Psychoanalysis is the resurgence in secular, scientific guise of the tragic sense of life. In Lacan's hands, it becomes an atheistic style of religion...The keystone of religion—God—is placed under censure, but the whole elaborate edifice remains remarkably intact. What is the desire of the Real but what Augustine and Kierkegaard knew as faith?" (pp. 152f.).