

Lecture Three: Kierkegaard, Repetition and the Theatre

Introduction

In this lecture, I want to carry on looking at Kierkegaard, in particular looking at Kierkegaard's account of theatre in *Repetition*. One of the key claims that Deleuze makes in regard to both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche is that 'they no longer reflect on the theatre in the Hegelian manner. Neither do they set up a philosophical theatre. They invent an incredible equivalent of theatre within philosophy, thereby founding simultaneously the theatre of the future and a new philosophy.' (DR 9) Repetition focuses on the farce, as opposed to the more classical forms of tragedy and comedy, and I want to look at how Kierkegaard characterises this. As Deleuze notes, in both cases, a new understanding of theatre is conjoined with a new form of philosophy, and so I want to look at what the implications of this understanding of theatre are for philosophy, and in particular, the notion of essence.

Having looked at theatre, I want to look at the four points Deleuze highlights as coincidences between Nietzsche and Kierkegaard that provide the outline or criteria a philosophy capable of understanding repetition must fulfil. To conclude I want to look at the implicit critique of Kierkegaard which runs throughout Deleuze's discussion of him.

Theatre

Kierkegaard opens his discussion of the theatre by noting that in Berlin, there are three theatres. He distinguishes between the Berlin Opera where performances 'must be instructive, must educate' (Rep 23) and the Königstädter theatre, where they show farces. The distinction is drawn further with his later assertion that, 'in theatre, a character must be presented either as the absolutely perfect incarnation of some ideal, or as completely contingent.' (Rep 30) The first of accounts of character is that which Hegel provides, and the second is the alternative which will be central to Deleuze's account.

Hegel's theory of aesthetics posits a close connection between art and philosophy, and for Hegel, art in general is 'the sensuous appearance of the Idea.'¹ This notion of appearance is to be taken in two senses. On the one hand, art is the manifestation of philosophical truth in the sensible world, and as such it is the form in which such ideas are made manifest within the world. In this sense, art has a valid claim to inform us about the world, and in fact, Spirit manifests itself in the form of art prior to its integration into philosophy ('the owl of Minerva flies at dusk'). On the other hand, art is merely appearance – it is the empirical representation of something that is fundamentally not commensurate with empirical representation. In a sense therefore, art is an imperfect copy of philosophy. The focus of art is not, therefore, the representation of the empirical world around us (if this were the case, we would be better off simply going out into the world itself), but rather the representation of the essence of the world. Art therefore focuses on facets of the world such as its unity or harmony.

Turning from art in general to theatre, Hegel distinguishes three principle forms of theatre: tragedy, comedy, and 'drama', which is a play which takes elements from both of the preceding categories. Tragedy for Hegel requires two elements: the divine or ethical substance which is shared by the characters, and 'the subject, the individual himself in his unfettered self-determination and freedom.' (Hegel 1975, 1194) The divine is for Hegel the universal ethical nature of the Greek *polis*; that which allows the *polis* to exist as a community. Tragedy emerges due to the fact that this universal nature needs to express itself in particular individuals and principles within the community.

There are a variety of ‘substantive and independently justified powers which influence the human will,’ (Hegel 1975, 1194) such as familial relations, political life, religious commitments, each of which form a part of the ethical structure of the *polis*. Tragedy emerges when the will of the characters become aligned with one of the powers that make up the ethical, to the exclusion of the others. The essence of tragedy is thus the relationship between the universal ethical values and the particular figures who instantiate them. As each of the characters embodies a fundamental ethical principle, each character is justified in their actions. Further, as their characters’ wills are entirely determined by the particular principle, their actions follow freely from their character. Their actions flow from their essence. Thus, they are justified in their actions, but also responsible. While there are a variety of different ethical principles available, the single-mindedness of the ethical hero leads inevitably to the conversion of this difference to opposition, through their failure to countenance alternative grounds for ethical action. The ethical is split between characters within the tragedy, each character thereby gaining justification for his actions, but at the same time, as his actions cut across those of the other characters, becoming guilty of the transgression of ethical values. The ethical, when called into the world, loses its inner harmony, its difference becoming contradiction, a state which cannot be tolerated, thus leading to the necessary final conclusion, through which the contradiction is annulled, usually through the deaths of the principle characters.

The negation of the contradiction is thus a return to truth through the rejection of the anomaly, and what is true in each is maintained. Hegel cites *Antigone* as an archetype of this account of tragedy.¹ Here, the conflict occurs between the rights of the family, represented by Antigone’s desire to bury her brother, Polyneices, and the rights of the state, represented by King Creon’s desire to punish Polyneices as a traitor. While both characters are in fact also governed by the principle of the other (Antigone is the daughter of a king, and Creon is a father and husband), they choose to act solely according to one determining principle. Difference is thus turned into opposition, and the dissolution of this one-sidedness can only be achieved by the tragic death of Antigone and Creon’s loss of his wife and son.

While comedy does not appear to share this structure, it still ‘has to submit to the obligation of using its presentation to bring the absolutely rational into appearance.’ (Hegel, 1975, 1202) It does this by showing how characters who do not represent the ethical destroy themselves precisely through the contradictions between their aims and the ethical substance. Thus, the transience of the characters in a comedy is for Hegel an affirmation of the true ethical substance.

The key features of Hegel’s account of theatre are, therefore, as follows:

- 1) Theatre is rational, that is, it is essentially philosophical or proto-philosophical. This has several implications. First, as theatre represents the Idea, we can expect to find a correspondence between the categories of aesthetics and the categories of philosophy. For instance, the *polis*, which provides the ethical grounds for drama, is the sensuous parallel of the universal. In both cases they are determined and determine the individual. Second, just as the dialectic shows the emergence and overcoming of immanently emerging contradictions within concepts, theatre will show the development of necessary collisions between its characters. That is, drama will have a dialectical structure.
- 2) Theatre relies on recognition. What makes a play relevant is that the audience recognises themselves, and their own ethical principles, in the conflict taking place on stage. In this sense, theatre is the affirmation of the community, either in the narrow sense of the *polis* (or the audience), or in the broader sense of the recognition of a fellow subject, as we find in

¹ Hegel discusses the case of Antigone in the *Aesthetics* (pp. 1217-8). Hegel also notes that many tragedies, such as *Oedipus*, rest on the collision between the right of a man to take responsibility for the actions that he is conscious of, and what he has been fated to do by the gods (1214).

modern drama. While this recognition requires a connection between the audience and the actors, it also requires a moment of distance (recognition requires that the subjects remain separate in order for there to be two subjects to recognise one another).

- 3) Third, and following from this, drama can be educative. It provides access to philosophical truth to the public at large, rather than just to those who are in a position to become philosophers. In this way, its role is similar to religion.

So this is what Deleuze calls the 'false theatre, ... false drama, ... false movement' (DR 9) of Hegel's philosophy. So what is the alternative that Kierkegaard puts forward? The first point to note is that the kind of play offered at the Königstädtter theatre is not comedy. Kierkegaard is very clear (Rep 26) that farce is not equivalent to comedy. It is precisely because of the perfection of tragedy and comedy that Kierkegaard chooses farce. While tragedy and comedy deal with the Idea, or the ethical substance, farce instead deals with possibility, and with it the notion of contingency. It brings in the importance of the singular mood of each subject viewing the farce, which both gives multiplies its richness infinitely and prevents any straightforward relationship between the subject and the universal. As such, it presents a radical alternative to Hegelian theatre. We can draw out these alternative features by comparing it to the list I have just given.

- 1) Theatre and rationality. Farce escapes from the categories of aesthetics, precisely because it does not deal with the dialectical progression. Instead, the emphasis is on the contingent, or on that which escapes from representation. Whereas the dialectical structure of Hegelian theatre means that it is fundamentally determined, farce is always open:

[The theatre-going public] want, as soon as they have read the poster, to be able to know in advance how the evening will go. Such prescience is impossible with farce, because the same farce can leave two very different impressions, and what is strange is that it can be least effective when it is best performed. (Rep 28)

- 2) The reason why 'every aesthetic category fails when it comes to the farce' is because it is 'in no way able to bring about a uniform mood on the part of the audience.' (Rep 28) Recognition requires two moments. On the one hand, we have to see the other as the same as us (as another instance of *Geist* or spirit within the world), and on the other hand, we need a moment of difference. While Hegelian theatre relies on the recognition that the subject is a part of the ethical substance of the *polis*, farce relies on the audience presented in their singularity ('There is an infinitely nuanced variety of laughter even here, and in a completely different sense from what one would have with the performance of a first-class comedy.' [Rep 28]). Second, while distance is necessary (as farce is a performance), the audience 'would like to be down in the street or wherever the scene happens to take place.' (Rep 28)
- 3) As a consequence of this, farce cannot be seen as educative in the way that Hegelian theatre is, precisely because it falls outside of the categories of the Idea.

It should be clear that this notion of farce has parallels with Kierkegaard's account of the two knights in *Fear and Trembling*. Just as the knight of infinite resignation is incommensurate with the categories of actuality, and thus withdraws from it, so farce maintains a relation of incommensurability to the aesthetic categories. In both cases, therefore, Kierkegaard is proposing ways in which the subject falls outside of the law. The key difference is, of course, that Abraham goes beyond resignation for Deleuze to faith, where repetition actually takes place, through having his son returned to him. Farce presents what at first appears to be the opposite moment. In that one

cannot know in advance how the evening will go it seems to escape from any possibility of repetition. In fact, however, this is the rejection of what Deleuze's calls 'bare' or 'mechanical' repetition paves the way for an understanding of the deeper repetition, the return of Isaac, which relies on belief on the strength of the absurd.

Concrete Universals

If farce represents a different kind of theatre that escapes from the paradigm of law, then what are the implications of this for philosophy? Deleuze's linkage of 'a theatre of the future and a new philosophy' (DR 9) presents the possibility of developing a philosophy which centres on the notion of contingency, rather than the essential. We will come back to the notion of essence in a few weeks when we look at Aristotle and the question of difference, but for now, it is worth looking at what it is exactly that is represented within theatre for Hegel. For Hegel, what defines an individual is his relation to a natural kind. That is, the individual is an instance of a universal. In the case of man, Hegel defines this relationship as follows:

The universal is the ground and foundation, the root and substance of the individual. If e.g. we take Caius, Titus, Sempronius, and the other inhabitants of a town or country, the fact that all of them are men is not merely something which they have in common, but their universal or kind, without which these individuals would not be at all. The case is very different with that superficial generality falsely so called, which really means only what attaches, or is common, to all the individuals . . . The individual man is what he is in particular, only in so far as he is before all things a man as man and in general. And that generality is not merely external to, or something in addition to, other abstract qualities, or to mere features discovered by reflection. It is what permeates and includes in it everything particular. (*EL*, § 175, Add.)

The natural kind therefore represents what is essential about the individual, it is the true generality under which the individual is subsumed. What is essential about the individual is thus how he expresses this essential nature. For Hegel, this process of determination is in fact reciprocal, so that the universal is also determined by the particular individuals which fall under it, rather than remaining an abstract element, and the universal determined by this reciprocal process is called by Hegel the concrete universal. What is important to note is that the universal does not simply categorise man; it is not just a taxonomic framework, but it is also determinative of man's nature. Drama thus becomes the sensuous expression of these essential features, and thus becomes the 'philosophical theatre' that Deleuze decries. Farce escapes from the Hegelian theory of aesthetics precisely because it does not deal with the essential features of human existence. The fact that there are such features means, however, that the analysis in terms of the concrete universal is not exhaustive in terms of the features of the individual. In other words, the universal is not determinative of the individual. If this is the case, then the Hegelian dialectic has failed to give a complete metaphysical account of existence, as there are features which by necessity fall outside of the universal, i.e. the contingent. Thus, for Kierkegaard, the Hegelian account is incomplete. Not only is it incomplete, however, but it is difficult to deduce exactly which traits we are to take as essentially determinative of the concept of a man:

Too often, however, it is considered enough if an actor is a good-looking fellow, well built, with a face appropriate to the theatre and a good voice. This rarely satisfies me because his performance *eo ipso* awakens the critic in me and as soon as this is aroused it becomes difficult to determine what is required to be a human being, and equally difficult to fulfil the requirement. (Rep 31)

This leads us directly to an alternative project. If the notion of essence does not allow us to come up with a complete account of the individual, then what is the alternative?

It has been said that one can divide humanity into officers, serving-girls and chimney sweeps. This remark is, I believe, not merely witty, but also profound. One would have to be a great speculative talent to come up with a better division. When categories do not ideally exhaust their objects, then the contingent is in all respects preferable because it gets the imagination going. (Rep 30)

So the failure of the notion of the universal to exhaust its object means that we should replace such a category, with its concomitant notion of essence, by the concept of the contingent. Focusing on the contingent would represent a radical break with the philosophical tradition, as the discovery of the essence, or the universal under which something falls, has traditionally been seen as central (Plato's question, what is the Good?). This move away from the essential to the accidental is taken up by Deleuze in his own characterisation of the Idea:

The events and singularities of the Idea do not allow any positing of an essence as "what the thing is". No doubt, if one insists, the word "essence" might be preserved, but only on condition of saying the essence is precisely the accident, the event, the sense... (DR 31)

This move will have a number of consequences for our understanding of philosophy, which we will see played out in *Difference and Repetition*:

First, this concept of accidental essence will not be something which abstracted from the situation in which the entity finds itself. It is not an abstraction, but something which is grounded in the specific situation of the event or entity. Kierkegaard therefore claims that 'one comes no further than to actuality. One should come no further.' (Rep 31) Deleuze makes this point in relation to Nietzsche's empiricism as follows: "If, on the contrary, the will to power is a good principle, if it reconciles empiricism with principles, if it constitutes a superior empiricism, this is because it is an essentially *plastic* principle that is no wider than what it conditions, that changes itself with the conditioned and determines itself in each case along with what it determines." (NP, 50)

Second, it will not be hierarchical. Essence leads to a hierarchical distribution of universals as the individual is progressively determined. Man is a being, a living being, a living animal being, a rational living animal being. Thus we have a hierarchy from the most general to the particular, each time dividing the essential characteristic into two sub-characteristics. Accidents, but their nature, are non-essential, and so cannot be incorporated into such a hierarchy – they all exist on the same level.

Third, it will not be based on identity. Essence provides a central point around which the entity is determined, and with this, we arrive at an essential core, or a central identity. If we move from the ideal to the contingent, or the essential to the accidental, then there is no longer any central, essential property around which an identity can form, but rather a field of different properties. Kierkegaard's theatre of the contingent thus opens out onto a philosophy of difference.

The Four Criteria

So how does Deleuze sum up these features of Kierkegaard's philosophy?

First, we need to make a test of repetition. In this sense, Kant's categorical imperative was supposed to be a text that allowed repetition to take place by selecting acts with had their origin in the noumenal nature of the self. Kierkegaard provides an alternative test in the form of the commandment given to Abraham. Such a test once again selects - not those acts which are in accordance with the law, but those acts which fall outside of the law, and hence imply a true

repetition. In Deleuzian terms, implicit in this is the recognition that true repetition is not a feature of actuality, but of the second power of the virtual which is the domain of 'hidden repetitions.'

Second, true repetition is opposed to physical repetition. This is clear, both in Constantine Constantius' inability to perform a physical repetition, particularly in his return to Berlin, and in the case of Abraham's repetition. While the return of Isaac is an actual event, what is repeated is not itself a physical event but a symbolic event. This is even clearer in the case of Job. When Job passes God's trial, he is given back what he had lost twice over. This repetition cannot be understood in the quantitative terms of a physical repetition (what is given back is not equal to what is lost), but it is nonetheless still a return.

Third, as we have seen, true repetition is opposed to moral repetition. Abraham suspends the moral law, moving outside of the ethical, in order to follow the law of God.

Fourth, and a corollary of these points, repetition is neither recollection (physical repetition) nor habit (moral, or psychic repetition).

Deleuze's Critique of Kierkegaard

I want to conclude by looking at a couple of comments that Deleuze makes about Abraham that seem at odds with Kierkegaard's characterisation of him. Deleuze describes Abraham as a knight of infinite resignation (DR 8), and as a humorist ('Abraham submits humorously to the law, but finds in that submission precisely the singularity of his own son whom the law commanded him to sacrifice' [DR 8]). Both of these descriptions differ from Kierkegaard's own description of Abraham as a knight of faith. Talking of faith, Kierkegaard writes:

Therefore I know that these two passions [irony and humour] differ essentially from the passion of faith. Irony and humour reflect also upon themselves and so belong in the sphere of infinite resignation, they owe their resilience to the individual's incommensurability with reality. (FT 80)

This account seems to suggest that Abraham's position differs from both humour and irony. In fact, when Kierkegaard does talk about these categories in relation to Abraham (and his answer to Isaac on Mount Moriah), he describes him as ironic. This seems to fit better with Deleuze's categories of humour and irony, as Abraham challenges the ethics of universality as secondary and derived. He does not seem to show the absurdity of them by tracing out the consequences of them, as we would find with humour.

The root of these assertions is an attempt by Deleuze to remove God from Kierkegaard's interpretation of repetition. Kierkegaard's text operates on three levels. First we have the ethical, in which one is commensurate with the world. Second, we have the aesthetic moment of infinite resignation, where one maintains a distance from the world and revels in the incommensurability of self and world. Finally, we have the religious moment of faith, where the self is brought back into the world through an immediate relationship between the self and God (Abraham's relationship to God is shown to be immediate by the fact that it is inexpressible through the categories of representation). Deleuze's implicit criticism is that this relationship between self and God, in which man is reconciled with the world on the strength of the absurd, is still too closely tied to the concept of identity and essence, albeit an essence that falls outside of the law.

For Deleuze, therefore, God represents a unity much like the unity of the universal moral law. God cannot therefore be seen as a second power behind the moral law, but is Himself a part of the same structure. If this is the case, then Abraham cannot be an ironist, as God is not that which is behind the law, but is himself an expression of it. Therefore, when Abraham follows god's law, he is instead acting humorously, in that he is tracing out the absurdity of its implications. In this sense, the double

movement which Kierkegaard proposes is impossible, as there is no longer a transcendent God to allow the possibility of a repetition on the basis of faith. This presents a problems for Deleuze's reading of Kierkegaard, as it is not the case that he simply rejects Kierkegaard's reading on the basis of the presence of God, but instead attempts to provide a reading itself that keeps the concept of repetition while rejecting the concept of God.

¹ Houlgate, *An Introduction to Hegel*, 213