

“AS THE HISTORY OF THE RACE MOVES ON,
THE INDIVIDUAL BEGINS CONSTANTLY ANEW”.
The Relevance of Kierkegaard’s Concept of the Single Individual
for Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy

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Abstract

When we strip Kierkegaard’s concept of the “single individual” of its religious connotations we get the most radical and at the same time the most truthful explanation of what it means to be human. This article explains first why the thesis of an “existential solipsism” (Heidegger) is immune to all objections made from an intersubjective perspective. Then it unfolds the subject by explaining: (a) why everyone has “constantly to begin anew”, (b) why this existential truth is disclosed in “anxiety”, and c) why we generally are in “despair” about this truth and try to escape it. In the second part Freud’s hermeneutic concept of neurotic suffering as a “suffering from reminiscences” is introduced and related to Kierkegaard’s theory of despair. From Kierkegaard’s viewpoint “suffering from reminiscences” can be interpreted as a form of being in despair about how the own life has begun and of struggling incessantly to change what cannot be changed anymore, namely the own childhood history. However the Oedipus complex – for Freud the “nucleus” of all neurosis – can be understood as a metaphor for becoming “this single individual” who has to choose how to live his own life, becoming inevitably guilty through this choice.

Keywords: This single existing individual, existential solipsism, anxiety, forms of despair, psychoanalysis, suffering from reminiscences, hermeneutics, guilt.

“The single individual” – from a religious
to a philosophical concept

The concept of the single individual (in German: *dieser Einzelne*) belongs to Kierkegaard’s religious thinking. For Kierkegaard the single individual is a human being related to God or better: before God. As a religious, respectively Christian, category “the individual” is the opposite of “the crowd” and of “the Church” as the official Christian community. Kierkegaard was deeply con-

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vinced that the Christian God is not related to the masses or to institutions like the Church, but is only related to each single existing individual. God looks only for the single individual, he speaks only to him.

The sentence I have chosen as the title of my lecture: “As the history of the [human] race moves on, the individual begins constantly anew”, is situated in a religious context, where Kierkegaard speaks about the Christian dogma of hereditary sin in the first chapter of “The Concept of Anxiety”. There he argues as follows: If a man were to inherit sinfulness, he would be a sinner before committing an actual sin himself, he would be identical with the human race, respectively with the history of the human race. But because every man is an individual, and as an individual “is both, the race and himself”², every single man becomes a sinner by committing his own first sin. So even when it is true that for the first time sin came into the world through Adam because he was the first man, “in the same way it is true of every subsequent man’s first sin that through it sin comes into the world”³. So it is not Adam’s first sin which determines the following generations and determines every subsequent individual, but every single individual becomes a sinner through his own first sin. In this context we find the sentence, that “as the history of the race moves on, the individual begins constantly anew”⁴. Evidently Kierkegaard wants to make clear that no one can avoid becoming a sinner by committing a sin himself. But this does not yet explain why the individual does not just begin once by committing his own first sin, but begins constantly anew.

Before I pursue this problem, I would like to make clear that I consider the concept of the single individual as a piece of modern philosophy more than of theology. Whereas Kierkegaard asks the theological question why no one can avoid becoming a sinner, I prefer the philosophical equivalent why no one can avoid becoming guilty. Doing so I take the term “this single individual” as a philosophical-anthropological term, following in this respect Heidegger and Sartre, and later on Michael Theunissen⁵. Like them I consider the concept of the single individual as the answer Kierkegaard gives to the fundamental philosophical question of what it means to be human. Seen as a philosophical concept its message is even more radical, because now being this single individual is just a contingent fact and as such the last groundless ground which has to be taken over by each individual him- or herself and has to be lived as his or her fate. And whereas sin may not be avoidable, but can be forgiven by God under the condition that the single individual truly repents his sins, being ontologically (or: existentially) guilty is a burden on the shoulders of every single individual without any prospect of relief.

² S. Kierkegaard: *The Concept of Anxiety. A Simple Psychologically Deliberation On the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, ed. and transl. R. Thomte and A.B. Anderson, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1980, 28.

³ Ibid., 31.

⁴ Ibid., 29.

⁵ M. Theunissen: *Kierkegaard's Concept of Despair*, transl. B. Harshav and H. Illbruck, Princeton University Press 2005, 3 f.

Even these short remarks reveal that in a philosophical view the single individual is the most radical and at the same time the most concrete concept of subjectivity. Being a subject now means being this single existing individual who begins constantly anew under the given human condition.

In the “Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments”, which Kierkegaard published in 1846, two years after “The Concept of Anxiety”, he again speaks about “the individual” and “the human race”, but now more specifically as a battle with Hegel and speculative idealism. He refers to Hegel’s theory of the development of the human race, respectively of the human spirit, which, according to Hegel, has now reached its highest and final stage of pure spirit and has left earlier stages behind.⁶ Now Kierkegaard mockingly asks what happens with all the individuals born in the 19th century: “But then in our day a generation of individuals is born who have neither imagination nor feeling – is born to begin with § 14 in the system?” And then he gives the following warning directed against the dominant Hegelianism of his time: “Above all, let us not confuse the world-historical development of the human spirit with the particular individuals.”⁷

“A spirit existing for himself”

Why is it so important to take into account that the single individual is not just part of the human race, but is also himself? Here Kierkegaard’s term “existence” is central: “In existence, there are only individual human beings”⁸. Because all human beings “exist”, they are individuals and not just part of the race. This is even true for thinking, which is traditionally taken as an abstract thing, but is in fact something the single individual “exists”: “...the abstraction of thinking is a phantom that disappears before the actuality of existence”, and: “With respect to existence, thinking is not at all superior to imagination and feeling but is coordinate.”⁹

Kierkegaard is often called the father of existential philosophy, because he has introduced the term *existence* into philosophy. This was a real innovation because until then philosophy was concerned only with the *essence* of things, and not with their existing or not existing in reality. There was only one exception on behalf of God’s existence, because it was so important to bring forward proofs of it. But when Kierkegaard defines the human being as this single individual, he has to step out of this kind of “essentialism”, because “the single individual” is either “this *existing* single individual” or it is not. Therefore to exist is now the central point of the essence of any individual.

⁶ S. Kierkegaard: *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and transl. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1992, 343 (§ 3).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 345.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 346.

⁹ *Ibid.*

In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* Kierkegaard maintains again and again:

“That the knowing spirit is an existing spirit, and that every human being is such a spirit existing for himself, I cannot repeat often enough.”¹⁰

Of himself Kierkegaard says not without pride: “I am indeed a poor existing spirit like all other human beings” and “I would rather remain what I am, a poor existing individual human being”, because this is the only “legitimate and honest way” to be. He makes fun of Hegel when he calls him “the exalted wisdom” which “has again been absentminded enough to forget that it was an *existing* spirit who asked about truth.”¹¹

When Kierkegaard speaks of “the spirit” as “existing for himself”, he makes clear that he gives the term “existing” a new and more specific meaning: “to exist” means now “to be for oneself” and this self-relatedness is crucial for being a single existing individual. Because the single existing individual is always already related to himself, he is more than just an example of the race, but a subject who has constantly to begin anew. Animals are not individual subjects, but just examples of their race, because they do not “exist for themselves”.

Heidegger who has certainly borrowed more from Kierkegaard than he was willing to admit, says with quite simple words what it actually means “to exist”, when he equates in “Being and Time” “existing” with “having to be” instead of simply being “objectively present” (*Vorhandensein*). The human being is never simply objectively present but *has to be* in the sense that he has to take over his life as “always my own.”¹² But it would be a misunderstanding to regard “having to be” as a given duty we can either fulfil or not fulfil. “Having to be” belongs to the human condition and is therefore a task everybody always already assumes in some way or other, and we do so even if we do not take life in our own hands but live entirely non-autonomously, allowing ourselves to be led by others or even to drift aimlessly along.

An existential concept of individuality

Kierkegaard’s existential concept of individuality is quite different from the traditional one. Usually being an individual refers to the specific features and attributes someone has, including his individual capacities and deficiencies, his individual space and time, his individual origin, his individual bodily appearance (traits) and so forth. Therefore it is all this together which makes every individual unique and therefore different from all the other human beings who ever have been and ever will be. *Existentially* being a single individual refers first of all to the mere fact of *having to be “for” respectively “by himself”*. In this new sense every human being is always already an individual because only

¹⁰ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, op. cit., 189.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹² M. Heidegger: *Being and Time*, transl. J. Stambough, State University of New York Press 1996, 39.

the single individual can take over the task of living his own life and exist it constantly anew under the given conditions. For the existential concept of individuality it is crucial that there is no possibility of either delegating the task of taking over and living his own life to other human beings or fulfilling this task collectively instead of individually, together with others instead of alone. Having no choice other than to exist “for (or by) himself” makes every human being a single individual.

Now we understand a little better why in Kierkegaard’s view the individual has to begin *constantly* anew. The individual does not begin to live once at a certain time and then leaves his beginning behind, but he is constantly anew at the point to *exist* his beginning as long as he lives. Therefore to begin life is never done once and for ever, but remains a never-ending task one has to fulfil again and again “anew”.

However again it is important not to misunderstand this. In the usual traditional sense when we speak of “beginning anew” we mean to leave behind what has been, to cut off old ties, commitments and dependencies and to start a new life totally different from the old one. Of course this is not what Kierkegaard means. Not only is every individual born in a certain time and space and in this respect part of the history of the race, but is also born with inherited features which will be his own as long as he lives, and is born as the child of these and no other parents – a fact he cannot change by his own will. He cannot get rid of either his genetic make-up or his concrete beginning as the child of these particular parents, even when he tries to change his life with great effort.

So “beginning constantly *anew*” has another, an *existential* meaning: it does not mean to be in a constant process of self-creation becoming constantly a new person inwardly and outwardly, but to *exist* what we have been in the past, to exist our own history, to exist our own beginning. To begin constantly anew means to take over our own past as a never-ending act of existing it anew. To take over the own past is a task every individual has to fulfil constantly anew, be it in the form of *remembering* it or of *forgetting*, respectively repressing, the memories of it, be it in constantly wrestling with it, or in slowly or suddenly changing his mind about it.

Why Martin Buber’s objection falls short

Although we have now reached the subject of the subtitle of my lecture “The relevance of Kierkegaard’s concept of the single individual for psychoanalytic psychotherapy”, I would prefer first to present and discuss an objection made to Kierkegaard’s concept of the single individual. It stems from *Martin Buber* and is to be found in his essay about *I and Thou*.¹³ The discussion of Buber’s thesis will help us to gain a clearer understanding of why the pure fact of being this single individual is a *final given* and as such inescapable.

For Buber human relations are defined by two word pairs: “I-Thou” and “I-It”. But this alone would not be worth mentioning. Buber was

¹³ M. Buber: *I and Thou*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons 1937.

convinced that the three primary words “I”, “You” and “It” are in truth not isolated, but combined words, always already bound together in two basic “*word pairs*”: the word pair “I-Thou” and the word pair “I-It”.¹⁴ This alleged “discovery”, which made Buber famous, was meant as an attack on Kierkegaard’s concept of the single individual, respectively as an overcoming of the error of a solipsistic “I”. When the word “I” belongs always already to a word partner, as Buber maintains, the concept of the human being as this single individual is revealed as an undue separation and therefore reduction of what every individual always already is: being *with* others and only existing in this togetherness with either “you” or “it”.

Ludwig Binswanger, the Swiss psychiatrist, disciple and friend of Freud and founder of Dasein-analysis, was deeply impressed by Buber’s work about *I and Thou*. He developed a theory of togetherness based on Buber with the purpose of overcoming Heidegger’s concept of Dasein as “always being-mine” respectively as “always being my own”.¹⁵ Binswanger is quite right when he sees in Heidegger the faithful disciple of Kierkegaard. So when he states against Heidegger that it is a fundamental error to conceive Dasein (the human being) as “always being-mine” (because it makes an ontological truth out of what is in fact just a deficient form of being), this is also said against Kierkegaard and his concept of the single individual. According to Binswanger Dasein in its essence is by no means “being-mine”, but is “being-ours”. Therefore whenever someone experiences himself as a single individual who feels that he is not able or not willing to overcome his singleness, this is the result of his being incapable of experiencing love and loving togetherness with a “Thou”. Binswanger concludes that because of such an incapability or unwillingness a person does not only miss the essence of being human, but he is a psychopathological case, in short a neurotic. It appears from this that when Kierkegaard defines a human being as a single individual, he unjustly universalizes a neurotic state of existence.

Let us now ask if Kierkegaard’s concept of the single individual is really disproved by the argument of Buber. I do not think so, even when Buber of course is right with his thesis that the “I” is not a self-contained, isolated subject-thing, but exists always already in relation to something or someone other. I find the decisive argument against Buber in Kierkegaard’s definition of the self. Kierkegaard gives this definition at the beginning of his essay *The Sickness unto Death*: “The human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates to itself.” And because Kierkegaard knows how quickly the essential core of his statement can be overheard he says the

¹⁴ Buber, op. cit., 3.

¹⁵ L. Binswanger: *Grundformen und Erkenntnis menschlichen Daseins*, Ausgew. Werke Bd. 2, Asanger Verlag Heidelberg 1993; A. Holzhey-Kunz: Ludwig Binswanger: Psychiatry Based on the Foundation of Philosophical Anthropology, in: E. Wolpert, K. Maurer, A. Hind Rifai, E.U. Vorbach, M. Hambrecht (eds) *Images in Psychiatry. German Speaking Countries*, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter 2006, 271–288.

same once more: “The self is not the relation but the relation’s relating to itself.”¹⁶

Instead of dealing with how Kierkegaard unfolds the meaning of selfhood as a relation between “the infinite and the finite”, “the temporal and the eternal”, and “freedom and necessity”, I transport his definition of the self as the *relations relating to itself* into the 20th century discussion of subjectivity and inter-subjectivity. In this context the first part of his definition of the self (the self as a relation) means that it is no isolated subject-thing but has its being always already in the relationship to himself and to others. So Buber’s thesis that the “I” belongs either to the word pair “I-Thou” or the word pair “I-It” does in fact not go beyond this relational understanding of the self by Kierkegaard. It just adds the distinction between two fundamental forms of the self which depend on either being related to a “Thou” or to an “It”.

I would like to show now in more detail why the position of Kierkegaard cannot be disproved by either the position of Buber or any other intersubjective position. The latter has certainly a strong argument against any concept of traditional solipsism, but not against what Heidegger calls in *Being and Time* an “existential ‘solipsism’”¹⁷. This “solipsism” is founded in Kierkegaard’s discovery that the self is not a simple relation, but “a relation that relates to itself”. Because of this *twofold relation of the self* Kierkegaard’s theory of “this single existing individual” stays intact even when it is true that the self is always already related to others. Let us take an example for a better understanding of what Kierkegaard means when he defines the self as “the relation’s relating to itself”.

When I am related to someone in love, then, according to Buber, I stay in an I-Thou-relationship with this other person. Now we can learn from Kierkegaard that this is not all, because additionally to this I relate myself to my being in love with a thou. This additional relation to my being related to a loved person appears in the form of emotions and/or judgements: I can feel grateful for this love or I can regret this love because I think it makes me unfree, dependent, lose my autonomy; I can be proud or ashamed of this my love and so forth. In our days the American philosopher *Harry Frankfurt* has spoken of “secondary volitions” or “higher volitions” (or “desires”), and this was widely welcomed as a new discovery.¹⁸ But is it more than just a reception of Kierkegaard’s definition of the self as a twofold relation? Already for Kierkegaard being a self implied having always already this secondary or higher relation to its own being related to the world and to itself.

¹⁶ S. Kierkegaard: *The Sickness unto Death. A Christian Psychological Exposition for Edification and Awakening*, Penguin Books 2004, 43.

¹⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, op. cit., 176.

¹⁸ H. Frankfurt: Freedom of the Will and the Concept of Person, in: *Journal of Philosophy*, 1971, 68(1): 5–20.

Why the single individual has to begin constantly anew

It is because of this secondary or higher relation to our being that always already related to ourselves and others which makes each human being a single individual who has to begin constantly anew. To begin constantly anew means in the case of a love relationship, that our love has not begun at a certain time and then goes on as long as we are bound together in love, but each of us begins this togetherness with the loved one constantly anew by actively consenting to it day by day, by actively choosing the other anew as the one still worth loving anew. This choosing the other, respectively choosing the relationship with him, constantly anew is nothing we can do together or one of us can do for the other one, but each of us can only do on his own and only for himself or herself – as this single existing individual.

In short we can hold on to Kierkegaard because his existential concept of radical subjectivity cannot be disproved by any intersubjective arguments. Because we cannot do otherwise than additionally relate ourselves to all our relationships to others, each of us is inevitably this single individual as long as he does not lose consciousness. Singleness and a final solitude are not just psychological phenomena depending on individual or social terms but belong to the human condition. Therefore also Binswanger is wrong with his diagnosis of the concept of the single individual as taken from neurosis.

Despair as a form of negating the own singleness

For some time I was in two minds as whether to speak at this conference about Kierkegaard's concept of the single individual or about his concept of anxiety. Anxiety is, as Kierkegaard puts it, "totally different from fear", because its object is "a nothing".¹⁹ Although it is not possible here to give justice to what Kierkegaard means when he defines the object of anxiety "a nothing", it may be important to make clear that for Kierkegaard "anxiety" is by no means without any object, as is often heard. In fact the object of anxiety is just "a nothing" compared with the specific objects of fear. Whereas fear is related to all the possible dangers which can threaten my life or the life of others, anxiety by contrast is only related to the existential fact of my being this single existing individual. Anxiety discloses nothing else than just this pure, naked fact. – This leads me to the incidental remark that if Buber and the intersubjectivists were right about their objection to Kierkegaard's concept of the single individual, then there would not be any "anxiety" in the world but just "fear". – There is another important difference between fear and anxiety. Whereas fear is often not related to real dangers but to unreal ones, anxiety can never be just a result of paranoid fantasies, but unveils always the truth. Anxiety is the existential-ontological experience of being inevitably an existing individual which cannot escape its

¹⁹ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, op. cit., 42.

singleness and, coupled with it, its final solitude, because both belong to the human condition.

When Kierkegaard states that “whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate”²⁰, he advises each of us to learn it. This advice would not make any sense if he did not think each of us at least in principle *able* to learn it. But between being able and *being willing* there is a wide gap. Kierkegaard’s essay about *The Sickness unto Death* analyzes the different forms of *denying* one’s own singleness. We cannot escape being single individuals, but we always take a stand on it in *choosing* either to accept or to deny it.

Kierkegaard calls the different forms of denying the own singleness “forms of despair” and he distinguishes between two forms of authentic despair: “not wanting to be oneself” (in the sense of: “wanting to be rid of oneself”) on the one hand, and “wanting in despair to be oneself” on the other hand.²¹

In the following I will try to interpret Sigmund Freud’s concept of neurosis as a specific form of despair, in which both forms of “authentic despair” so neatly separated by Kierkegaard always go together.

“Suffering from reminiscences” as suffering from the own beginning

When I speak now about psychoanalysis it is highly important to keep in mind that psychoanalytic psychotherapy is not just one form of psychotherapy among others, because it is – unlike all other psychotherapies – not just a tool or a set of therapeutic strategies and techniques you can use and eventually combine with other techniques in an eclectic way. Whatever the psychoanalyst says, however he intervenes, follows from his very specific theoretical approach to neurotic suffering. Only Freud contradicted – and psychoanalysis still contradicts – the medical-psychiatric view of mental suffering as suffering from a “*mental illness*” respectively from a “*mental disorder*”. Against this still dominant view Freud set the understanding of neurotic and even psychotic suffering as a “*suffering from reminiscences*”²².

I will dwell a little on the expression “suffering from reminiscences”. “Reminiscences” in the Freudian sense are repressed childhood memories which are now unconscious. So we can say that Freud discovered neurotic suffering as an *unconscious suffering from the own beginning*. Whoever suffers from reminiscences suffers from how his life began. Freud links neurotic suffering to the past because he is deeply convinced that what happens then and there at the beginning is decisive for how every single individual will live his life later on, be this life disturbed by neurotic symptoms or not.

But when it comes to neurotic suffering from “how the own life has begun”, we find in Freud a deep ambivalence about the role of the in-

²⁰ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, op. cit., 155.

²¹ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, op. cit., 43.

²² S. Freud: *Studies on Hysteria*, Deutsch: Ges. Werke Bd. I, 75–312; 86.

dividual self in this suffering. Although we can say that for Freud “suffering” is a kind of being related as this individual self to the own beginning, we find two contradictory definitions of this relationship: an *objective-deterministic* one and a *subjective-hermeneutic* one. The deterministic definition belongs to his understanding of psychoanalysis as a *natural science* of the human psyche. Here the neurotic individual is dependent and determined by how it has begun, because, as a result of the repression of early memories, the subject is subjugated under the laws of the unconscious. Instead of following his own intentions the subject is now determined by what Freud calls the “repetition compulsion”. He has lost the possibility of beginning constantly anew, and cannot do anything other than pointlessly and uselessly repeat again and again the old repressed memories.

In the other, hermeneutic version, “suffering from reminiscences” means something quite different, namely a constant new rebellion of the adult individual against how it has begun for him, a rebellion with the illusionary purpose to change what cannot be changed anymore: namely how it has begun. Freud gives a small example I will quote here. It concerns a typical transference situation in therapy:

“The patient does not remember that he used to be defiant and critical towards his parents’ authority, instead he behaves in that way to the doctor”²³.

This example can be interpreted in both ways. In the deterministic way the patient is forced to behave in this way to his analyst by the repetition compulsion, albeit this early rebellion has long since lost being meaningful for the patient. In the hermeneutic way however this “transference” from what happened then and there with his father to his analyst here and now is not determined by unconscious forces, but has a hidden purpose and the patient is still not willing to stop revolting against the analyst because of this purpose. It is of course an illusionary purpose, namely to finally defeat his father and by defeating him change his own beginning. The patient needs to insist on making his purpose real because how it has begun then and there seems unbearable for him – more exactly: It seems unbearable for him to take over his own life under the given conditions of having been defeated by the father and by having been forced to abandon his most important desire.

I will come back to the meaning of this desire. But beforehand let us acknowledge how much Kierkegaard’s concept of the single individual coincides with the hermeneutic version of “suffering from reminiscences”. As soon as we hold on to Kierkegaard’s notion of the single individual, neurotic suffering has to be understood as a form of *active negation of how it has begun*. Any deterministic version is not compatible with Kierkegaard, be it the version of Freud himself or the version

²³ S. Freud: *Remembering, repeating and working-through*. S. E., 12; 150.

the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has proposed in his book *Knowledge and Human Interests*²⁴.

“Suffering from reminiscences” as a revolt against being this single individual with this unchangeable own beginning

Let us now take a closer look at what Kierkegaard’s concept of the single individual and Freud’s concept of neurotic suffering have in common. When a neurotic person constantly struggles with his past he does so despairing about the truth that everybody has to take over his own past into his own present and future. Because the neurotic is realistic enough to know that what is true for everybody is also true for him, he feels so desperate about it. His neurotic suffering is *his* form of being in despair. For Kierkegaard being in despair means either “not wanting to be oneself” or “wanting desperately to be oneself”. When we reformulate both versions of despair in relation to our own beginning, then “not wanting to be oneself” reads as “not wanting to be oneself under the given conditions of how it has begun then and there”; and “wanting desperately to be oneself” reads then as “wanting desperately to be oneself with another, a new beginning, a beginning one has chosen oneself”.

When we apply the first reformulated version to Freud’s patient, who is defiant towards his analyst, then we can say that “this adult man *does not want to be himself under the given conditions* of having been defeated by his father as a young boy and having been forced to abandon his most important desire to fight back and win”. But we see at once that we can apply the second reformulated version as well, and say that “this adult man *is wanting desperately to be himself under conditions* which are changed for the better, namely of not having been defeated by his father but having been able to resist and defeat him”. So what for Kierkegaard seems to be an “either – or” of two different forms of despair: either “not wanting to be oneself” or “wanting desperately to be oneself”, fall together in neurotic suffering. The neurotic does not just reject “how” it has begun with him, but he tries desperately to change this “how” with the aim of becoming the self he desperately wants to be, which is the same as to create his history anew “on his own, all on his own”.²⁵

The double meaning of “suffering from how it has begun”

But to realize that in “suffering from reminiscences” the two forms of despair are in fact one and the same form is only one thing. The other thing is to realize that this one and the same form of despair is not always *about* the same, because when we speak of “how it has begun” the “how” has a double meaning we have ignored until now. “How it has begun” can either mean “how it has begun with me *as this individual person*”, or it can mean “how it has begun with me as a human being”. I think that the majority of psychoanalysts today take mainly the first

²⁴ J. Habermas: *Erkenntnis und Interesse*, Frankfurt/M., Suhrkamp 1968, 312, 330.

²⁵ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, op. cit., 44.

“how” into consideration: how a patient as this individual person was cared for or not cared for at his beginning, which individual traumas of either losses or abuses he or she had to endure during early childhood. But Freud and many other important psychoanalysts were more interested in the general “how” of fundamental difficulties in early childhood. Otto Rank, a disciple of Freud, found out the fact of having to endure birth as *traumatic* for every little human being; and likewise all later losses the baby cannot be protected from: the end of breastfeeding, the birth of a sibling and rival for the love of the parents, and last but not least the phase of the so called “Oedipus complex” which Freud marked as the “nucleus of neurosis”.

I think that Kierkegaard helps not only to dismiss any deterministic explanation of suffering from reminiscences, but also to understand why one can suffer from the own beginning even when the individual conditions of the beginning have been mostly good. I said already that the psychoanalytic mainstream tends to link all mental suffering to bad personal conditions at the beginning and therefore understands “suffering from reminiscences” as a suffering from concrete traumatic experiences at the own beginning then and there. Kierkegaard by contrast supports the seemingly antiquated theory of the so-called Oedipus complex as the nucleus of neurosis. According to Freud the Oedipus complex is a set of experiences every child has to go through in one way or the other. And these experiences are *in principle* the same, independent of the family and social situation of early childhood.

The Freudian Oedipus complex as a metaphor for being inevitably this single individual

When we take a look at the essence of the oedipal experiences, we will see very soon how near they are to what Kierkegaard describes as the experience of being this single existing individual who has to begin constantly anew.

Everybody knows the constitutive elements of the Oedipus complex in the case of being a boy: being in love with the own mother, rivalry with the own father and castration anxiety. But more fundamentally the oedipal phase heralds for both, the boy and the girl, one basic experience. It all begins with the discovery that the mother is a *whole person*, with her own interests and wishes that she also directs towards other people, mostly the father of the child, and that normally the father and the mother *share a sexual love-relationship that excludes the child*. This experience is in every case highly threatening, since it demonstrates to the child that it is expelled from what father and mother mysteriously and exclusively share with each other. This is like a second birth – the birth of the child as this single individual. Although from birth onwards the mother is only intermittently available, the child can still hold on to the illusion of an inseparable togetherness with his or her mother, however imperfect this togetherness may be. Only in the oedipal phase does the fundamental belonging prove to be an illusion, which triggers

anxiety (not fear!). The oedipal desire arises in response to this threat. In the oedipal wish to win back the mother for himself and exclude the father, the boy seeks to deny the existential-ontological fact of his becoming a single person of his own. So we understand now the context of Freud's patient being so defiant to the analyst. He is desperately trying to deny the undeniable truth of having to live separated from his mother by struggling against the dominance of the father/analyst who wants him to become what he has to be: this single existing individual.

**Is “Suffering from reminiscences”
a form of trying to postpone the dreaded task
of beginning the own life on one's own?**

To conclude I would like to put once more the aspect of “beginning constantly anew” in the foreground. We have already made clear that Kierkegaard does not mean that the individual creates himself constantly anew, but that he has to assume the task to exist his own life constantly anew under the given natural and historical conditions. But nevertheless whenever we begin something this beginning is directed to the temporal dimension of the *future*. Neurotic suffering however, understood as a “suffering from reminiscences”, is primarily directed to the temporal dimension of the *past*. Freud was obsessed by the idea that neurotic suffering is always and only a suffering from one's own past. The opposite possibility of a neurotic suffering, namely from what will come in the future, from a possible failure of the own beginning, from the basic uncertainty waiting in the future including the own death, was not in his mind. This one-sidedness becomes especially clear when he proposes in 1920 the so-called “death drive”, which he understands as the one of two basic drives which forces us all back to that primal beginning from which all life emerges. Here again Kierkegaard's understanding of the single individual which has to begin “constantly anew” can act as a counterbalance.

So let me just ask some questions which are inspired by Kierkegaard and which transcend the psychoanalytic perspective:

Could it be that the neurotic person is much more sensitive to the fact of his own singleness than mentally healthy people are? Could it be that mentally healthy people can suppress this uncanny truth and therefore are to a lesser extent forced to evade the dimension of the future?

Is the neurotic in contrast to mentally healthy people so interested in struggling with the own beginning because the dimension of the future is too threatening for him? Could it be that always being concerned with “how it has begun” has the function of making the future unreal, and what could await us there seem irrelevant?

Could it be that suffering from reminiscences has the hidden purpose of desperately postponing the dreaded day of really beginning one's own life as this single individual and facing uncertainty and death?

Guilty or not?

How can we understand why the neurotic should be so anxious about *accepting* his life which he has to take over as his very own and begin constantly anew? Again Kierkegaard can help us to find an answer. You all know his famous words about “anxiety as the dizziness of freedom”. Kierkegaard describes here what happens when the individual really begins to live his own life as his very own: “in that very moment everything is changed, and freedom, when it again rises, sees that it is guilty”.²⁶ Sartre reformulates this insight when he states that “the peculiar character of human-reality is that it is without excuse.”²⁷

At the beginning of my lecture I mentioned that Kierkegaard’s concept of the single individual belongs to the theological context of “hereditary sin”. But when we understand what Kierkegaard says about being guilty philosophically instead of theologically we can at least assume that the neurotic is especially sensitive for the truth of existential guilt which is by no means avoidable. This assumption coincides with my experience as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist. In my practice I encounter again and again individuals who feel guilty all the time, but in fact they feel guilty not because they have done something morally bad or at least morally questionable, but because they insist on a life in total innocence. They want an excuse not only for everything they do, but also for the pure fact of living instead of not living at all.

Suffering from reminiscences often has the purpose of denying the fact of always being already guilty as this living individual. Suffering from reminiscences enables the neurotic to live backwards instead of forwards, being absorbed by what has been instead of shaping the own future in taking own decisions, remaining bound to infantile behavior instead of becoming an independent (adult) individual. These patients would not prefer to stay in a neurotic position if they were not so extremely sensitive for the truth that shaping the own future makes everyone inevitably guilty. They shrink back from every decision because they are so sensitive for the unavoidable guilt which is implied in every decision. But there is still another reason to shrink back from taking over one’s own life as this single individual – an even more fundamental reason. Because of their special sensitivity for the human condition neurotics do not find a “legitimate and honest way” (Kierkegaard) to begin their own life on their own. They know that there is no entitlement from anywhere to begin their own life and occupy a place in this world which no other person can claim at the same time. So they do not feel authorized for their own beginning but do not dare what is inevitable, namely just to usurp the right for themselves to exist as these single individuals. In other words: neurotics shrink back from the act of self-authorisation which is demanded from them. For them this would be an act of hubris which they try to avoid in living backwards instead of forwards.

²⁶ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, op. cit., 61.

²⁷ J.-P. Sartre: *Being and Nothingness. An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, transl. H. Barnes, London: Routledge 2008, 575.

The existential meaning of the Freudian rule of free association

Finally I would like to take a short look at the Freudian *rule of free association*. You may guess why. Freud wanted this rule to be the fundamental rule of psychoanalytic therapy.²⁸ As you know this rule applies to the patient and advises him to say everything that comes spontaneously into his mind. What an unusual rule! What is its purpose? The patient, who tries what he is told to do, namely saying everything that comes to his mind without any restriction, cannot do other than realize that he is this single individual who has to begin constantly anew. In an analytic session not the analyst but the patient always speaks first; and not just at the beginning of the session, but again and again by telling spontaneously what comes into his mind. The patient is by no means happy about this rule. Freud describes how it provokes the patient's resistance.²⁹ He insists that nothing comes to his mind any more and keeps silent, or he begs the analyst to ask him questions he is able to answer, or he tries to remember the end of the last session so he can take it up again – in other words: he desperately tries to escape the experience of being exposed as this single individual to the analyst as the other in his pure otherness.

For Freud psychoanalysis as therapy is “educating himself to truth about himself”³⁰ Whatever comes into the patient's mind – just trying to follow the rule of free association is certainly the best education in becoming this single existing individual which has to begin constantly anew in living his own life.

²⁸ S. Freud: *On beginning the treatment*. *S. E.*, 12, 134.

²⁹ S. Freud: *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*. *S. E.*, 15–16, 288.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 434.