

The Fundamental Rule Of Psychoanalysis

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Psychoanalysis is both a collection of ideas and a method, based upon those ideas, whose goal is the right way to live. Hence, psychoanalysis is an “ethic” in the sense that it concerns the manner by which individuals conduct themselves. Derived from the Greek *ethike tekhnē*, meaning “the moral art,” *ethike* is in turn derived from the Greek *ethos*, meaning “character.” Both the character of a person who aspires to behave ethically and the customs of a people by which one's standards are measured, derive from the concept. Morality, a subsidiary of ethics, pertains to distinctions between right and wrong and good and bad, whereas ethics, according to the Greeks, concerns the pursuit of happiness, the nature of which produces a state of equanimity by conferring freedom from mental anguish.

If psychoanalysis is an ethical system whose goal is liberation from psychic conflict, then the nature of that conflict must have something to do with the way one lives, thinks, and behaves. While the character of an individual is no doubt decisive in the outcome of a person's treatment, the psychoanalytic experience essentially revolves around a kind of work that is performed and accomplished, the outcome of which succeeds or fails. By analyzing the customs of a given patient—the manner by which that individual lives—he or she is in a better position to change what needs to be changed and discover a better life. If psychoanalysis is an ethic, then what kind of ethic does it foster? What are the rules by which its ethic is administered and what is the basis of its method?

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Almost forty years ago, Philip Rieff, in *Freud: The Mind of the Moralist* (1959), argued that the basis of Freud's conception of psychoanalysis rested on what he characterized, for lack of a better term, an “ethic of honesty.” Rieff went on to say that “psychoanalysis.... demands a special capacity for candor which not only distinguishes it as a healing movement but also connects it with the drive toward disenchantment characteristic of modern literature and of life among the intellectuals” (p. 315). Freud's prescription for society's overzealous efforts at controlling its members' irrepressible impulses was psychoanalysis. It served to give the neurotic a second chance for a more satisfying existence by replacing his customary repressions with a more honest means of coping with life's inevitable disappointments. As Rieff points out, “We first meet the ethic of honesty in characteristic Freudian guise—as merely a therapeutic rule:.... the patient must promise ‘absolute honesty’” (p. 315).

The capacity for candor to which Rieff refers is the basis for Freud's analytic technique, the so-called “fundamental rule” of psychoanalysis. But what, exactly, is the fundamental rule comprised of? What, in turn, is its relation to free association? Are they, in fact, one and the same, or is there a relationship between them that distinguishes the one from the other, that makes them related but separate concepts? Although many analysts assume they are identical, I want to draw a sharp distinction between them—a distinction, I believe, that Freud himself employed.

Simply, the fundamental rule is an agreement that each patient is asked to accept at the beginning of analysis. Freud called it a pledge or a promise. In other words, when patients agree to free associate, they essentially *promise* to do so. On the other hand, free association itself is not a pledge but an uncommon form of conversation that patients are invited to employ during the course of treatment. When patients free associate they simply confide to their analyst whatever comes to mind. If we equate the agreement to free associate with the act of free associating, the significance of the pledge, which regulates the degree of compliance with which one consents to free associate, is lost.

I hope to show why this distinction is vital to the way psychoanalysis was originally conceived and its dependence on the ethic of honesty that Rieff situated at the foundation of Freud's technique.

Further, I will show that Freud conceived analysis as an ethic, and that its reliance on psychology, while important, is greatly exaggerated.

First, what is “free association,” exactly? In fact, the term does not refer to *associations* as such. For example, the word-association test, in which one is asked to respond to a word with the first thing that comes to mind, was not what Freud intended by this term. The English term, “free association,” was Strachey's mistranslation of the German *freier Einfall*, which combines the words “free” and “irruption.” In the original German it simply denotes a thought that spontaneously comes to mind as it erupts into consciousness. The English word “association” conveys an entirely different connotation, which lends to the mistaken impression that patients are being asked to connect an idea with the first thing it reminds them of. This connotation transforms the original sense of *freier Einfall* into a willful use of the mind instead of one that entails the exact opposite, that is, the virtual suspension of conscious control.

To free associate in the manner that Freud intended is simply an admonition to be candid during each therapy session. Free association is an invitation to speak spontaneously and unreservedly, as one sometimes does when not the least self-conscious about what is being disclosed to another person.

Freud's conception of free association would not make much sense unless one appreciates the degree to which we ordinarily conceal most of what spontaneously comes to mind in the course of conversation. Seen from this angle, the fundamental rule—wherein I *consent* to reveal the thoughts that occur to me—is a precondition for understanding the purpose for which free association was employed in the first place.

Free association is less a psychological “process” than a form of *verbal meditation* that requires considerable discipline to perform. It entails speaking unreservedly while simultaneously paying attention to what we disclose—something we do not ordinarily do. Most of us either speak impulsively, without awareness of what we said, or think through everything we are about to say in order to censor what we disclose.

Neurotics are incapable of speaking unreservedly because they have so much to hide. In analysis, they discover that they

are predisposed against spontaneously verbalizing their thoughts. They often deny what they said when repeated back to them and hesitate to disclose objectionable ideas when they occur. It requires relentless prodding on the part of the analyst to remind patients when they have wandered off into the sanctum of their secret and inaccessible worlds. Once we discover the frequency with which we ordinarily resist disclosing things about ourselves we are able to appreciate why compliance to this rule is so crucial to the work that analysis entails. Our *capacity* to free associate effectively hinges on our *willingness to comply* with this rule.

With this brief introduction in mind, I shall now review some examples of how the “fundamental rule” and “free association” are typically depicted in the literature and then contrast and compare them with Freud's conception of these terms.

Laplanche and Pontalis (1973), in *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, depict the fundamental rule as the “rule which structures the analytic situation: the analysand is asked to say what he thinks and feels, selecting nothing and omitting nothing, from what comes into his mind, even where this seems to him unpleasant to have to communicate, ridiculous, devoid of interest or irrelevant” (p. 178).

This is a fairly apt definition of what the fundamental rule is typically taken to mean. This definition effectively equates the fundamental rule with the rule of free association. The view that the fundamental rule entails an ethical imperative or invokes a moral conflict, as noted by Rieff, is not mentioned. Instead, **Laplanche and Pontalis (1973)** conceive the fundamental rule on psychological grounds alone:

Thus, in “Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis,” published in 1910, Freud enumerates three possible ways of reaching the unconscious and seems to look upon them as of equal status. These ways are the working out of ideas of the person who performs the main rule, the interpretation of dreams, and the interpretation of para-praxes. (p. 178)

According to this description, the so-called “main rule” of free association—along with dream interpretation and slips of the tongue—is simply a means of gaining access to unconscious material. In other words, “The rule seems to be conceived of here as intended to assist the emergence of products of the unconscious

by eliciting one type of meaningful material among others” (pp. 178-179).

Laplanche and Pontalis's (1973) conception of the fundamental rule reduces it to a process whereby one is simply able to *access* the unconscious. There is virtually no mention of the rule's ethical imperative or the crisis of conscience that compliance with this rule invariably engenders. Instead, they emphasize the purely linguistic dimension to the rule and its power to transform patients from individuals who can only communicate through symptoms into agents who are finally able to utter the language of their desire. While this view acknowledges the critical role of self-disclosure, it is an impoverished form of disclosure that completely ignores the *moral dilemma* that Freud intended this rule to foster.

Separately, when Laplanche and Pontalis turn their attention to free association—presumably in order to distinguish it from the fundamental rule—they depict it as “a method according to which voice must be given to all thoughts without exception, which enter the mind, whether such thoughts are based upon a specific element...or produced spontaneously” (p. 169). In fact, this definition simply repeats what they already said about the fundamental rule. They even insist that “the procedure of free association is fundamental to psychoanalytic technique” (p. 169). In other words, it is the “procedure” of speaking that they construe as fundamental, not its ethical imperative. The two rules are conceived as one and the same, so that “the rule of free association is identical with the fundamental rule” (p. 170). In effect, Laplanche and Pontalis offer no way of distinguishing between the two terms, even while employing two articles to depict the two concepts. This is typical of how the two terms are customarily depicted.

Another example of the same confusion can be found in *Psychoanalytic Terms and Concepts*, published by the American Psychoanalytic Association under the editorship of **Moore and Fine (1990)**. Although the fundamental rule is included in the glossary of this publication, the reader is referred to “free association” in order to see what it means. Whereas Laplanche and Pontalis list the terms—if not the concepts—separately, **Moore and Fine (1990)**

offer no hint of a distinction between the two. They characterize free association (as the fundamental rule) as follows:

The patient in psychoanalytic treatment is asked to express in words all thoughts, feelings, wishes, sensations, images, and memories, without reservation, as they spontaneously occur. This requirement is called the fundamental rule of psychoanalysis. In following the rule, the patient must often overcome conscious feelings of embarrassment, fear, shame, and guilt. His or her cooperation is motivated in part by knowledge of the purpose for which he or she is in analysis—to deal with conflicts and overcome problems. (p. 78)

What can one conclude from this definition? First, that Moore and Fine also overlook the ethical component to the rule and emphasize instead its “requirement” because the rule is simply “imposed” on the patient, and, second, that patients are motivated to comply with this rule solely for utilitarian gain. Moore and Fine suggest that the reason patients comply is to “deal with conflicts and overcome problems” (p. 78). In other words, its efficacy is reduced to a *task* that either is or is not accomplished. Finally, there is no mention of the intrinsic need, in principle, to unburden oneself, of the quest to know oneself, or the wish to become more intimate with others by confiding to them. There is virtually no reference to self-revelation for its own sake as an irrepressible human impulse.

The next example I have chosen is from *A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* by **Charles Rycroft (1968)**, the British analyst. Rycroft characterizes the fundamental rule as “the injunction that [the patient] do his best to tell the analyst whatever comes to mind without reservation” (p. 11). Rycroft emphasizes the historical context in which the concept was originally conceived, when Freud introduced free association as an alternative to hypnosis. Before Freud formulated the free associative process, access to the unconscious was obtained through hypnotic trance. Subsequently, free association made it possible to gain access to the patient's repressions by his simply speaking unreservedly to another person. However, when Rycroft turns to “free association” in another section of his book, he confines his discussion to its technical aspects alone:

Free association technique relies on three assumptions: a) that all lines of thought tend to lead to what is significant; b) that the patient's therapeutic needs and knowledge that he is in treatment will lead his associations towards what is significant except insofar as resistance operates; and c) that resistance is minimized by relaxation and maximized by concentration. (p. 54)

As with the other definitions we examined, the sense one derives from Rycroft is that free association is essentially a tool for gaining access to unconscious material. In effect, his conclusions are identical to those of Moore and Fine and Laplanche and Pontalis.

Now I shall turn to the American analyst **Ralph Greenson (1967)**, the author of *The Technique and Practice of Psychoanalysis* (Vol. 1). Greenson was one of the most influential teaching analysts in America; his handbook on technique is on the curriculum of virtually every psychoanalytic institute in this country. Yet, the term “fundamental rule” appears nowhere in his book—not even in the section that is devoted to free association. Even more surprising is the relative brevity with which Greenson treats free association and its role in the analytic process. He states:

In classical psychoanalysis the predominant means of communicating clinical material is for the patient to attempt free association. Usually this is begun after the preliminary interviews have been concluded. In the preliminary interviews the analyst has arrived at an assessment of the patient's capacity to work in the psychoanalytic situation. Part of that evaluation consisted of determining whether the patient had the resilience in his ego functions to oscillate between the more regressive ego functions as they are needed in free association and the more advanced ego functions required for understanding the analytic interventions, answering direct questions, and resuming everyday life at the end of the hour....

However, free association may be misused in the service of resistance.... It may also occur that a patient cannot stop free-associating because of a breakdown of ego functions.... The analyst's task then would be to attempt to re-establish the ego's logical, secondary-process thinking. (p. 33)

Hence, Greenson depicts free association as a “function” of the mind. There is no hint of an interpersonal relationship between the person who imposes the rule and the one who is asked to-

comply with it. There is virtually no reference to self-disclosure. The circumstances accounting for the inherent difficulty—indeed, impossibility—of *complying* with this rule are completely ignored.

On the other hand, Greenson pays considerable attention to the danger of “breaking down” under the weight of anxieties that free association entails, creating what he calls an emergency situation. Many of these situations—for example, what the patient can stand and cannot and whether or not analysis is a suitable form of treatment—are determined by a given patient's analyzability. Yet what are the preconditions for analyzability as **Greenson (1967)** conceives them?

The patient is asked: a) to regress but also to progress; b) to be passive and to be active; c) to give up control and to maintain control; and d) to renounce reality testing and to retain reality testing. In order to accomplish this, the analytic patient must have resilient and flexible ego functions...Despite the neurosis, the treatable patient does retain the capacity to function effectively in the relatively conflict-free spheres. (p. 361)

In other words, Greenson believes that the free associative process pulls analytic patients in two directions at once. On the one hand, they are asked to “regress,” to be *more* pathological, yet while they are becoming more ill and pathological they are expected to split themselves in two and allow the healthy part of themselves to observe precisely *how* they have become crazier and more regressed. The capacity to perform this function, to effectively split themselves in half, is characterized by **Greenson (1967)** as a skill that one can learn to perfect:

Psychoanalytic therapy requires that the neurotic patient have an ego with sufficient resilience to shift between his opposing ego functions and to blend them, taking into account the limitations that his neurotic conflicts impose.... In order to approximate free association, the patient must be able to give up his contact with reality partially and temporarily. Yet he must be able to give accurate information, to remember, and to be comprehensible.... He must have enough ego resilience so that he has the mobility to regress and the ability to rebound from it.... To put it succinctly, he must develop the ability to shift between the working alliance and the transference neurosis.... [Finally] we ask the patient to let himself be carried away by his emotions in the analytic hour

so that he can feel the experience as genuine. But we do not wish him to become unintelligible or disoriented. (p. 362)

Greenson depicts what amounts to an amazing feat of mental gymnastics, approximating the mechanism of splitting, *as the essence of free association*. No less disconcerting is how free association—essentially, a means of *suspending* conscious volition—is virtually turned on its head in Greenson's characterization of it.

What we have gleaned from Laplanche and Pontalis, Moore and Fine, Rycroft, and Greenson about the fundamental rule of analysis and the rule of free association may be summarized as follows:

1. All the authors cited equate the two rules as identical.
2. In so doing, they completely ignore the ethical precept on which the fundamental rule is founded.
3. Hence, they reduce analytic treatment to a psychological process that is characterized by the act of free association.
4. The authors cited hold that free association is nothing more than a means of *obtaining information about the patient's unconscious*.
5. In turn, free association is conceived as merely one means among others (e.g., dream interpretation and interpretation of parapraxes) of gaining access to the patient's unconscious motives and ideation. Yet, this definition of free association— aptly summarized by Greenson—virtually equates it with the passive and inherently *regressive* state that is induced by hypnotic trance.
6. Finally, the importance of candor—so vital to the interpersonal dimension of the treatment situation—is virtually ignored by all of the author's characterizations of the fundamental rule.

Now I shall compare Freud's characterization of the fundamental rule to the ones we have just examined. Freud introduced the fundamental rule (*Grundregel*, in German) for the first time in the second of his six technical papers, “The Dynamics of Transference” (1912). This was after his analyses of Dora (c. 1905) and the Rat Man (c. 1909), his most famous analytic patients. This collection of six technical papers, published between 1911 and 1915, comprised his most exhaustive statement on analytic procedure, Freud's so-called “classical technique.”¹

While Freud was rather slow in formalizing the rationale behind the efficacy of this rule, he eventually realized that such a rule not only was useful, but that the need for it was inherent in the analytic experience. Noncompliance exemplified transference resistance. Earlier—in the lectures Freud delivered at Clark University in 1911—he hinted at the need for such a rule, obliquely referring to it then as the “main rule” of analysis. Strachey claimed that the rule was invoked earlier still, in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1900), though, like so many of Freud's early formulations of his technical principles (e.g., neutrality and abstinence), it had yet to become a bona fide technical term. Strachey suggests that the idea for such a rule was nonetheless alluded to “in a passage where Freud urges the patient to overcome his ‘internal criticisms’ while reporting the content of his dreams” (in Freud, 1912, p. 107n.). Strachey believed this was the first time Freud explicitly invoked the fundamental rule, albeit in the context of dream analysis. Yet he overlooks the fact that Freud made no mention on this occasion of the requisite *pledge* to disclose one's associations. The reference cited by Strachey only pertains to free associations as such in the limited context of dream analysis. In other words, Strachey also equates free association with the fundamental rule. He failed to grasp that neither the act of speaking unreservedly (i.e., free association) nor the pledge to do so (i.e., the fundamental rule) had crystallized in Freud's mind as early as 1900. Although Freud did *admonish* his patients to verbalize their thoughts once he abandoned hypnosis, even as late as 1900 he had yet to *insist* that his patients do so, hence compelling them to speak unreservedly. I believe it is the actual *promise* to bare all which is essential to the fundamental rule, not the simple *act* of doing so.

The first time Freud finally brought the two concepts together—the fundamental rule and free association—was in the fourth of his technical papers, “On Beginning the Treatment” (1913). There, Freud proposed how analysts should undertake to introduce their patients to the fundamental rule and the free association method. This brief recommendation comprises the most thorough description Freud (1913) ever offered on the technique of free association *and its relation to the fundamental rule*.

What the material is with which one starts the treatment is on the whole a matter of indifference—whether it is the patient's life history or the history of his illness or his recollections of childhood. But in any case, the patient must be left to do the talking and must be free to choose at what point he shall begin....

The only exception to this is in regard to the fundamental rule of psychoanalytic technique which the patient has to observe. This must be imparted to him at the very beginning: Ordinarily you rightly try to keep a connecting thread running through your remarks and you exclude any intrusive ideas when they occur to you and any side issues so as not to wander too far from the point. But in this case you must proceed differently. You will notice that as you relate things various thoughts will occur to you which you would like to put aside on the ground of certain criticisms and objections. You will be tempted to say to yourself that this or that is irrelevant here or that it's quite unimportant or nonsensical so that there's no need to say it. You must never give in to these criticisms, but must say it in spite of them—indeed, you must say it precisely because you feel an aversion to doing so. Later on you will find out and learn to understand the reason for this injunction, which is really the only one you have to follow. So say whatever goes through your mind.” (pp. 134-135)

At this juncture **Freud (1913)** explicitly invokes the *free association* method: “Act as though, for instance, you were a traveller sitting next to the window of a railway carriage and describing to someone inside the carriage the changing views which you see outside” (p. 135). Then, in the very next sentence, Freud invokes the *fundamental rule*: “Finally, never forget that you have *promised to be absolutely honest* and never leave anything out because for some reason or other it is unpleasant to tell it” (p. 135, emphasis added). The last sentence brings the fundamental rule into play by drawing a categorical distinction between the promise to comply and the act of free association. In a footnote following this paragraph, **Freud (1913)** readily acknowledged the inherent difficulty that submitting to the fundamental rule entails:

Much might be said about our experiences with the fundamental rule of psychoanalysis.... It is indispensable and also advantageous to lay down the rule in the first stages of the treatment. Later, under the dominance of resistances, obedience to it weakens, and there comes a time in every analysis when the patient disregards it. We must remember from our own self-analysis how irresistible

the temptation is to yield to these pretexts put forward by critical judgment rejecting certain ideas. (p. 135n).

I believe that the point Freud is taking such pains to labor is categorically different from the examples of this rule we just examined. Freud is not merely invoking a psychological “process,” but a special kind of commitment, *a pledge to be honest in relation to an other*. In so doing, he makes a case for the ubiquitous importance of honesty, a feature of the fundamental rule that is consistently omitted from customary characterizations of this rule, as we saw.

By invoking the pledge to be truthful, Freud crystallized the specific feature of free association that distinguishes it from conventional forms of self-reflection: the pledge to hold nothing back. Whatever we are tempted to conceal, by the very incidence of our temptation to, we are compelled because of this rule to direct our attention to the things we instinctively suppress.

Although this was a novel idea when Freud finally introduced it, the reason for doing so was a logical extension of Freud's thesis, formulated fifteen years earlier, explaining the etiology of neurosis: that harboring secrets creates a breach in our perception of reality that inaugurates psychological conflict. In Freud's analysis of Dora, the central theme that ran through his report of the case concerned the prevalence of secrecy in the genesis of psychopathology. When life presents us with disappointments too painful to bear we instinctively repress our experience of those disappointments by momentarily forgetting them. In Dora's case, **Freud (1905a)** attributed her hysterical symptoms to somatic displacements of forbidden desires. He concluded that the only hope she had for relief from her symptoms lay in “the revelation of those intimacies and the betrayal of those secrets” (p. 8).²

Psychoanalysis aspires to undo the effect of such secrets by directing patients to bare them to someone who will not condemn them for harboring them. Although patients in analysis do not really “know” what they're harboring, the act of spontaneously uttering whatever comes to mind eventually uncovers secrets that, in turn, are related to what patients do know and gradually prompts them to the surface as well.

When Freud analyzed Dora in 1900 he had only recently conceived the method he had substituted for hypnosis, that is,

the so-called “talking cure.” But he did not realize then that only someone who is already uncommonly honest will be willing to spontaneously disclose the contents of her mind. Dora resisted her analysis bitterly and was probably convinced throughout her brief treatment that Freud was an agent of her father. She never relented in her opposition to what she construed as efforts to bend her to his will. Freud was still a decade away from acknowledging the need to augment the free association method with a second rule that would bind his patients to him personally in common cause, by taking him into their confidence. He soon realized that unless patients agree to self-disclosure in principle they will ultimately lack the motivation to work through their inevitable resistance to the treatment.

The failure of Dora's analysis taught Freud another important lesson that also found its way into his technical recommendations—the problem of analyzability. Not only is self-disclosure critical to the success of analysis; patients also need to *actively embrace* the efficacy of being candid. Although she was never explicitly invited to abide by such a pledge, it is doubtful that Dora possessed the self-discipline she would have needed—at her young and difficult age—to comply with it if she had been.

When Freud finally realized the need for such a rule in 1912, the pledge to honesty officially introduced an ethical dimension to psychoanalytic technique that had heretofore only been implicit. It became so central to Freud's conception of analysis that he even deemed it “fundamental.” Why? Not because it was the only rule that proved essential. Although it was the only rule he imposed on patients, there were other, equally indispensable, rules that Freud believed analysts should follow, including, but not limited to, neutrality, abstinence, therapeutic ambition, confidentiality, and so on.

Freud designated the rule fundamental because honesty epitomizes the curative aspirations of analytic treatment. By inviting his patients to be honest and enlisting their pledge to do so, Freud transformed the patient at the beginning of analysis from a person who merely told stories into a moral agent whose task was to determine the truth by *saying* it. It is significant, for example, that only the patient is in a position to determine what the truth is. Unlike a court of law in which a witness's testimony can

be challenged so that the jury must decide what is so,³ Freud advised analysts against the practice of confirming what patients say by questioning their family or their friends. In other words, the *patient's word* is the highest authority for what the truth is at a given time.⁴ It was from this principle that the fundamental rule was derived.

The pledge to honesty—that is, the fundamental rule—has farreaching implications concerning the specific *kind* of truth that psychoanalysis seeks to obtain. The form of honesty it entails cannot be reduced to simple virtue, such as that a person can rightfully claim for never telling a lie or never stealing, for example. Instead, analysis promotes a form of honesty that is rooted in the quest to determine the patient's *personal truth*. Once the pledge is verbalized to another person, it becomes more than a personal vow; it determines the individual's capacity to be *true to one's word*. This is why analytic truth cannot be measured by empirical standards of validity which reduce it to a matter of “veracity,” as if the truth one is seeking could ever be confirmed by an other. It is a truth that can only be measured by the degree of *fidelity* employed in one's relationship with others. Analytic patients have to resign themselves to finally serving as both judge and jury to how successful their endeavor has been; there is no court of appeals, no higher authority, that can determine the outcome for them. This is the single factor that typically delays the termination of treatment.

Freud recognized that no one could be expected to embrace the rule consistently due to the unbearable anxiety that self-disclosure evokes. But his insistence that patients make their peace with the rule regardless assumes that none of us can ultimately escape the moral obligation to adopt a standard of truth we will live by—and can live *with*. In effect, Freud held a mirror to our face and forced us to decide where we stand: whether to disclose what we are about or conceal it. The weight of this injunction is so great it prods patients to bring the treatment experience toward some form of resolution.

Yet, because it is so basic, the fundamental rule permits analysts a measure of elasticity in the employment of all the other rules in their arsenal. That is because *every* analytic rule, at the end of the day, is in the service of honesty. The failure to grasp

this crucial point explains how **Greenson (1967)**, for example, could reduce free association to a psychological “process” that patients are more or less subjected to, as in hypnosis. While under its spell, Greenson believed that patients suffer a lapse of rationality, succumb to regression, and risk becoming psychotic. The notion that analysts are merely trying to create conditions whereby the participants speak as candidly as they can is omitted from his conception of the treatment.

When one rereads Freud's technical recommendations in this light, the sense one derives from them is refreshingly simple, yet uncommonly radical, even by contemporary standards. Today, Freud's technical papers read like meditations on truth-telling and the relentless obstacles we put in its path. This was why **Freud (1905b)** could insist that “patients who do not possess a...fairly reliable character should be refused” analysis (p. 263). He even went so far as to suggest that “it is a bad sign if one's patient has to confess that while he was listening to the fundamental rule of analysis he made a mental reservation that he would nevertheless keep this or that to himself” (**1913**, p. 138). The ethical imperative by which Freud came to view psychoanalysis was so fundamental that in his paper “On Psychotherapy” (**1905b**)—published the same year that Dora's analysis went to press—he even equated the psyche (or “mind”) *with morality*.

I would remind you of the well-established fact that certain diseases, in particular the psychoneuroses, are far more readily accessible to mental influences than to any other form of medication.... I am well aware that you favor the view which Vischer, the professor of aesthetics expressed so well in his parody of Faust: “I know that the physical often influences the moral.” But would it not be more to the point to say—and is it not more often the case—moral (that is, mental) means can influence a man's moral side? (p. 259)

This moral injunction by which the fundamental rule was inserted into the treatment situation served to enlist each patient's active participation in the analysis. Once obliged to be candid, patients realize that now they must wrestle with *their own* conscience, not the analyst's. Finally, the resolve to be honest serves as a foil against the chronic secrecy that lies at the base of one's conflicts, because it engenders a crisis of conscience that can only

finally be resolved by unburdening oneself of one's secrets. In effect, only people who suffer a guilty conscience can be analyzed!

And what is the basis of this guilt? What terrible secret accounts for it? Simply, that neurotics are unwilling to pay the price for the pleasure they wish to obtain. Instead, they would rather hold their ambitions in check than to suffer the sacrifice that the pursuit of pleasure entails. This observation prompted **Philip Rieff (1959)** to conclude that “neurosis is the penalty for ambition unprepared for sacrifice” (p. 308). Rieff noted that as early as 1885, during his long engagement to Martha, Freud had discovered the key to the neurotic personality, brought about and refined by a society that wants nothing less than to restrict its citizens to those gratifications it deems socially “appropriate.” Quoting from a letter Freud wrote to his fiancée:

We [neurotics] economize with our health, our capacity for enjoyment, our forces: we save up for something, not knowing ourselves for what. And this habit of constant suppression of natural instinct gives us the character of refinement.... Why do we not get drunk? Because the discomfort and shame of the hangover gives us more “unpleasure” than the pleasure of getting drunk gives us. Why don't we fall in love over again every month? Because with every parting something of our heart is torn away.... Thus our striving is more concerned with avoiding pain than with creating enjoyment. (quoted in Rieff, 1959, pp. 309-310)

Hence, the pledge to be honest about all those aspirations one secretly harbors but dare not admit is the key to overcoming the guilt we have accrued while suppressing them. That is why the kind of guilt Freud was specifically concerned with is not caused by the failure to conform to society's dictates, but rather the “existential” guilt that is a consequence of *denying one's self*. Therefore, paraphrasing Freud, **Rieff (1959)** could say, “What makes neurotics talk is ‘the pressure of a secret which is burning to be disclosed.’ Neurotics carry their secret concealed in their talk—‘which, despite all temptation, they never reveal’” (pp. 316-317).

The analyst's task is to mention the unmentionable and to elicit what is obvious but obstinately remains unsaid. Although ostensibly designed to disclose unconscious repressions, such a rule is also an indictment of the disingenuous society to which

every neurotic belongs. This disturbing observation was finally brought home in a paper wherein **Freud (1910)** confessed his pessimism about the prospects psychoanalysis could expect from a society that is inherently predisposed against it.

Suppose a number of ladies and gentlemen in good society have planned to have a picnic one day at an inn in the country. The ladies have arranged among themselves that if one of them wants to relieve a natural need she will announce that she is going to pick flowers. Some malicious person, however, has got wind of this secret and has had printed on the programme which is sent round to the whole party: "Ladies who wish to retire are requested to announce that they are going to pick flowers." After this, of course, no lady will think of availing herself of this flowery pretext, and, in the same way, other similar formulas, which may be freshly agreed upon, will be seriously compromised. What will be the result? The ladies will admit their natural needs without shame and none of the men will object. (p. 149)

Rieff suggests that the analyst is the "malicious person" in Freud's analogy, just as the ladies represent culture. The moral to the story, **Rieff (1959)** concludes, is that "we must accept our "natural needs," in the face of a culture which has censored open declarations of [them]. In championing a refreshing openness, Freud disclosed the censoring of nature, thus to ease the strain that had told upon our cultural capacities" (p. 316).

What, then, can the neurotic hope to obtain from analysis if it proves to be remotely successful? According to **Freud (1910)**:

A certain number of people, faced in their lives by conflicts which they have found too difficult to solve, have taken flight into neurosis and in this way won an unmistakable, although in the long run too costly, gain from illness. What will these people have to do if their flight into illness is barred by the indiscreet revelations of psycho-analysis? They will have to be honest, confess to the instincts that are at work in them, face the conflict, fight for what they want, or go without it. (pp. 149-150)

By insisting that candor is the precondition of every analytic treatment, Freud established an undeniable interdependence between the act of free association and the fundamental rule on which it relies. Nevertheless, there is an undeniable risk, **Rieff (1959)** admits,

in the ethic of honesty of which Freud [was] aware. Some lives are so pent-up that a neurosis may be “the least of the evils possible in the circumstances.” Some of those “who now take flight into illness” would find the inner conflict exposed by candor insupportable, and “would rapidly succumb or would cause a mischief greater than their own neurotic illness.” Honesty is not an ethic for weaklings; it will save no one (p. 322)

Perhaps this explains why psychoanalysts today seem uncomfortable with the characterization of psychoanalysis as a moral enterprise whose essential aim is to further honesty. What do we stand to gain by becoming more honest, anyway? Does it make us better people, more generous and committed to the community where we live? Not necessarily. In fact, **Rieff (1959)** warns that “psychoanalysis prudently refrains from urging men to become what they really are,” in part because analysts fear “the honest criminal lurking behind the pious neurotic” (p. 322).

Despite its dangers, Freud believed that honesty, though costly, is less expensive in the long run than its alternative: a society of morons whose ultimate glory is to bow to social convention, and be “rewarded” for it. After all, this is the same society Freud held accountable for making us neurotic in the first place, by compelling us to conceal the views, inclinations, and aspirations every society opposes.

Like the existentialists, Freud believed that being true to one's convictions should always take precedence over blindly complying with society's standards of behavior. Indeed, **Rieff (1959)** noted the similarity between Freud's views and Sartre's existentialism, comparing Freud's ethic of honesty with the latter's concept of authenticity (p. 321). The view that the individual and society are essentially opposed is a key to understanding Freud's conception of analysis and the specific form of alienation it is limited to relieving. At bottom, it is a kind of alienation that is an inescapable consequence of living. Nietzsche, Sartre, and Heidegger all shared with Freud a characterization of contemporary culture in which the individual is a perpetual outsider, a romantic in a postmodernist world who must learn to bear the burden of his convictions and to make what peace he is able with the relentless forces of convention. From this perspective, psychoanalysis is unremittingly subversive. Its only goal is to uncover the latent truth about ourselves by disclosing it. Whatever we do with that truth, and whatever

effect we permit it to have on our future destiny, is ultimately between ourselves and our conscience.

Notes

1 See my book *The Truth about Freud's Technique* for an exhaustive study of Freud's technical papers (Thompson, 1994).

2 See my detailed treatment of Freud's analysis of Dora (Thompson, 1994, pp. 93-132).

3 My thanks to **Ver Eecke (1995)** on this point.

4 See my *The Truth about Freud's Technique* (Thompson, 1994, pp. 101-109) for an example of this in Freud's analysis of Dora, where her version of events was unreservedly accepted in favor of her father's.

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