

## Free Association and The Fundamental Rule

by Lynn Cunningham, PhD LICSW

Most of us are familiar with how Freud instructed his patients ‘on beginning the treatment’: try to say whatever comes into your mind without inhibition or censorship.<sup>1</sup> He believed that following this directive would open the possibility for the analyst to fathom and apprehend a patient’s inexplicable combining of conscious knowing with not knowing. In a psychoanalysis, he instructs, the patient must proceed differently from ordinary conversation. Despite the general acceptance of this 100-year old proviso, some psychoanalysts wonder whether the fundamental rule reflects the evolving nature of psychoanalysis or is no longer essential to psychoanalytic process. While it’s hard to look at something archetypal and see new meaning, that’s also the appeal of extending considered thought.

In her Scientific Meetings presentation on February 18, 2015, Shierry Nichol森, PhD FIPA reviewed “the sometimes polemical pluralism of the contemporary psychoanalytic landscape” and discovered how different psychoanalysts thought about the patient’s associative activity and the analyst’s evenly hovering attention.”<sup>2</sup> Although Freud didn’t address the role of interpretation per se, he did elaborate on what interfered with the patient’s associative activity, such as transference, resistance, the repetition compulsion, and the death instinct. Understood this way, Fred Busch, for example, points to how the rule emphasizes “the wish to overcome resistances rather than analyze them” and promotes passivity rather than strengthening the ego for future self-analysis. Representing a relational perspective, Irwin Hoffman considers “the transactional aspect” of free association, which requires the patient’s agency in the dynamic process between patient and analyst. Shierry points out that the concept of ‘free’ in free association aroused close reexamination. Reverie, of course, is silent and contradicts the rule that requires the patient to speak everything. Indeed, the patient’s thoughts may roam freely, but the unconscious selects what is spoken and, thus, revealed. And while the analyst’s reverie is experienced as free, an interpretation may be constrained by tact, timing, ambiguity, and not-knowing. From Thomas Ogden’s intersubjective perspective, free association relies on “the dialectical interplay of overlapping, silent but unconsciously communicative reveries of patient and analyst.”

By contrast, French psychoanalysts claim to elaborate Freudian principles and concepts rather than critique. In some cases, as André Green describes, a breaking off of free association is “a psychic functioning itself by a part of an ego threatened with overwhelming traumatic affect.” A conflict arises between “a drive toward representation and the impulse of avoidance.” In the non-neurotic patient, the analyst must become receptive to a more complex network of connections. Emphasizing the here and now of free association, Jean-Luc Donnet states that the fundamental rule is “a safeguard between theory and clinical practice: to ensure that theory does not subordinate what is actually happening in the room; but also to ensure that there is indeed a game that is being played, a game that has rules.” I paraphrase Shierry when she concludes her review,

more extensive than I imply here, by saying that the fundamental rule of psychoanalysis was meant to help us understand and handle the difficulties that analytic patients and the analytic process presents to us.

In his interesting reconsideration of the Fundamental Rule, philosopher and psychoanalyst Jonathan Lear turns to the Greeks who believed that living an active ethical life is a full and happy life.<sup>3</sup> A rich life, he argues, requires a harmonious psyche and, in order to achieve this goal, “the non-rational and rational parts must communicate with each other and speak with the same voice.” By following the rule, psychic integration increases, permitting “a healthy way to listen better to the irrational part of the mind.” Lear reminds us that “We can’t listen to the new if we switch to caricatured stories from the past.” Nobody, he claims, can follow the fundamental rule. “Immediately and constantly something opposes it; it’s as though the mind gets in the way of its own freedom.” Trying to speak freely will inevitably be disrupted by intrusive thoughts, slips of the tongue, gestures, etc. as the unconscious breaks through and offers “an opportunity to listen to the unconscious voice in detail.” But attempting to speak one’s mind by following the Fundamental Rule “is itself a manifestation of our psychic integration.” Lear issues us an invitation to reconsider psychoanalysis as a cure through truthfulness.

The Fundamental Rule, a seemingly straightforward procedure for practicing psychoanalysis, may actually be less direct and more open to reconsideration than Freud imagined or intended.

<sup>1</sup>Freud, S (1913). “Further Recommendations on Technique,” Standard Edition 12 (London: Hogarth Press, 1966) 123-144.

<sup>2</sup>Nicholsen, Shierry (2015). The French and the Sacred Cow, Free Association Reconsidered Across Psychoanalytic Cultures. Presented at the Northwestern Psychoanalytic Society and Institute – Scientific Meeting, February 18, 2015.

<sup>3</sup>Lear, Jonathan (2015). “The Fundamental Rule and The Fundamental Value of Psychoanalysis.” Tape recording made at the meeting of the American Psychoanalytic Association, New York City, 2015 by Hungry Mind Recordings.

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