Ferenczi's Turn in Psychoanalysis

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Asymmetry and Mutuality in the Analytic Relationship: Contemporary Lessons from the Freud-Ferenczi Dialogue

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In this paper I shall view the historical disagreements and tensions between Sigmund Freud and Sándor Ferenczi as metaphors for the conflicts, dilemmas, and tensions experienced by contemporary psychoanalysts in each analytic hour. I shall focus on the third of three areas of disagreement between them. The first area, and probably the best known, finds Freud on the side of abstinence and frustration and Ferenczi on the side of gratification and indulgence. In the second area, Freud’s orientation is more toward the head and intellect while Ferenczi’s is clearly toward the heart and feelings. Finally, the third area reveals Freud to be more inclined to an authoritarian, asymmetrical analytic relationship; Ferenczi, by contrast, passionately seeks a mutual and equal relationship with Freud, his former analyst.

I want to suggest that we analysts constantly experience an inevitable, necessary tension between these analytic—indeed human—polarities. We are riding with our analysand on a bicycle built for two. We must always move the handlebars first in one direction, then in the other. Should we move too far in either direction, or become paralyzed into rigid immobility, we will fall off the path. We must deal with that tension by oscillating (Fenichel 1941; quoted by Gardner 1991, 851). How each of us deals with that necessary tension—how we oscillate—determines what kind of
analysts we are, what paths we follow, and whether we fall into the ditch. My aim is to become better acquainted with the Freud and Ferenczi within each of us. My question is: "How—and why—is a psychoanalytic relationship different from other relationships?" An examination of asymmetry and mutuality will help us to answer those questions.

Ferenczi's *Clinical Diary* (1932) and the extensive Freud-Ferenczi correspondence now becoming available to us together reveal that Ferenczi's third and final challenge to Freud reaches to the heart of the psychoanalytic relationship. I shall now examine the implications for our practice of that challenge—namely, Ferenczi's passionate insistence on an egalitarian rather than an authoritarian analytic relationship, culminating in his experiments with "mutual analysis." From the perspective of a study of the fascinating twenty-five-year personal, professional, and analytic relationship of Freud and Ferenczi, I shall show how the opposing tendencies toward asymmetry and mutuality create an inevitable tension in the analytic relationship. Finally, I shall elucidate how an analyst's self-awareness can help to maintain a level of tension necessary for optimal therapeutic benefit.

A brief historical review begins with Freud's fundamental principle of abstinence summarized in his highly influential papers on technique, which even now remain the standard against which modifications are judged. Freud states:

Analytic technique requires of the physician that he should deny to the patient who is craving for love that satisfaction she demands. The treatment must be carried out in abstinence. By this I do not mean physical abstinence alone, nor yet the deprivation of everything that the patient desires, for perhaps no sick person could tolerate this. Instead, I shall state it as a fundamental principle that the patient's need and longing should be allowed to persist in her, in order that they may serve as forces impelling her to do work and make changes, and that we must beware of appeasing those forces by means of surrogates. And what we could offer would never by anything else than a surrogate, for the patient's condition is such that, until her repressions are removed, she is incapable of real satisfaction. (1914, 165)

Elsewhere Freud emphasizes:

You will remember that it was a frustration that made the patient ill... Cruel though it may sound, we must see to it that the patient's suffering... does not come to an end prematurely. If... his suffering becomes mitigated, we must re-instate it elsewhere in the form of some appreciable privation: otherwise we run the
danger of never achieving any improvements except quite insignificant and transitory ones. (1919, 162)

Freud’s advocacy of abstinence and frustration (in an implicitly asymmetrical authoritarian relationship) contrasts with Ferenczi’s description of “mutual analysis” where the emphasis is on safety and symmetry. Initially, in the early 1920s, Ferenczi wholeheartedly embraced Freud’s technical principle of abstinence. Indeed, Ferenczi is well known for his “active technique,” which consisted of tension-heightening demands and prohibitions that he imposed on patients in stalemated analyses. After renouncing his “active technique” in the mid-1920s, however, Ferenczi went to the opposite extreme by adopting what he called the “relaxation technique” (1930). With this approach—less often discussed than his “active technique”—Ferenczi tried to gratify the patient’s longings while minimizing his own demands. He tried to create a “safe” atmosphere in which the patient felt totally accepted and trusting, hoping thereby to enable the patient to reexperience the emotions originating in traumatic childhood experiences. Ferenczi’s technique of “relaxation” contained an implicit reenactment of his conception of the idealized early mother-infant bond, characterized by an ambience of total acceptance and indulgence of the help-seeking, traumatized child-within-the-analysand (Hofffer 1991).

Because of its relevance to our inquiry into asymmetry and mutuality, I shall now consider the problem of whether feelings in the analytic relationship—for example, transference and countertransference feelings of love—are real. The questions to ponder include: How is a psychoanalytic relationship different from an ordinary relationship? Is an ordinary relationship real and an analytic relationship—with its analysis of transference feelings—unreal? Are transference feelings unreal? In contrast to transference feelings, are feelings in the therapeutic alliance, like those in an ordinary relationship, real?

In the last decade, psychoanalysts have asked: “Whose reality is it?” (Modell 1991; Schwaber 1992). They have thereby placed a renewed emphasis on understanding the patient’s psychic reality and on the construction of reality during the therapeutic process by the analyst as well as by the analysand. A brief review of the shifts in psychoanalytic theory and technique will put our questions about asymmetry and mutuality into sharper
focus. As we identify recent shifts in psychoanalytic practice, we recognize that they also correspond to broader shifts in Western societies away from authoritarianism and certainty toward egalitarianism and relativity. I shall illustrate these shifts by comparing Ralph Greenson's analytic attitude in the 1960s first with that of Ferenczi in the 1930s and then with contemporary practice (Hoffer 1985).

According to Greenson, "Transference reactions are always inappropriate. They may be so in the quality, quantity or duration of the reaction." He continues by offering the following clinical example:

A young woman patient reacts to my keeping her waiting for two or three minutes by becoming tearful and angry, fantasizing that I must be giving extra time to my favorite woman patient. This is an inappropriate reaction in a thirty-five-year-old intelligent and cultured woman, but her associations lead to a past situation where this set of feelings and fantasies fit. She recalls her reactions as a child of five waiting for her father to come to her room to kiss her goodnight. She always had to wait a few minutes because he made it a rule to kiss her younger sister goodnight first. Then she reacted by tears, anger and jealousy fantasies—precisely what she is now experiencing with me. Her reactions are appropriate for a five-year-old girl, but obviously not fitting for a thirty-five-year-old woman. The key to understanding this behavior is recognizing that it is a repetition of the past, i.e., a transference reaction. (1967, 152-53)

I can agree with part of what Greenson says here, specifically with the usefulness of pursuing the patient's associations to the analyst's lateness to deepen understanding of the psychic reality of the past. But Greenson's description of the "inappropriateness" of the transference reaction brings to mind Ferenczi's objections to the analyst's condescending attitudes. It is difficult enough, it seems to me, to be an analytic patient without having to bear the potential humiliation of the analyst's judging which of her reactions to him are "childish and inappropriate" and which are "reasonable." Furthermore, such judgments as to whether or not a particular response to him is unrealistic, childish, and inappropriate—and hence transferential—distract the analyst from wholeheartedly attending to the analysand's psychic reality. I am, therefore, in sympathy with Ferenczi, who, as early as 1931, expressed his commitment to a focused exploration of the patient's psychic reality:
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It is advantageous to consider for a time every one, even the most improbable, of the communications as is some way possible, even to accept an obvious delusion. Two reasons for this: thus, by leaving aside the “reality” question, one can feel one’s way more completely into the patient’s mental life. (Here something should be said about the disadvantages of contrasting “reality” and “unreality.” The latter must be taken equally seriously as a psychic reality; hence above all one must become fully absorbed in all that the patient says and feels.) (1931, 235)

Since analytic attention is again being focused on psychic reality, I want to suggest that transference and countertransference—the latter defined by James McLaughlin (1981) as the analyst’s transference to the patient—are as real and genuine as any other feelings. Furthermore, the analyst’s efforts to distinguish between “real” and “transferential,” “appropriate” and “inappropriate,” or “childish” and “mature” feelings are distractions from and resistances to deepening our understanding of where the analyst and the analysand live—namely, in the latter’s psychic reality.

I want to proceed now from the discussion of psychic reality and the reality of transferential feelings—for example, love—to two conditions that distinguish such feelings from their counterparts in ordinary relationships: inequality and asymmetry. I have already touched on the issue of inequality that arises when the analyst views himself as the judge, arbiter of reality, or one who knows. In the following vignette, Greenson’s comment calls our attention to the asymmetry created by traditional analytic anonymity (non-self-disclosure) and nonreciprocity. This analytic example highlights how self-disclosure and reciprocity are natural ingredients of an ordinary relationship that is equal and mutual:

A young woman, shy and timid, begins in the third month of her analysis to evince unmistakable signs of believing she had fallen in love with me. Finally, after some days of struggling with her feelings, she tearfully confesses her love. Then she begs me not to treat this state of affairs in the same cold, analytic way I had treated her other emotions. She pleads with me not to remain silent and aloof. I should please say something, anything—it is so humiliating for her to be in such a position. She weeps and sobs and becomes silent. After a while I say, “I know this is very hard for you, but it is important for us that you express exactly how you feel.” The patient is silent a moment and then says pleadingly and angrily: “It’s not fair, you can hide behind the analytic couch, and I have to expose all. I know you don’t love me, but at least tell me if you like me; admit you care a little, tell me I’m not just a number to you—the eleven o’clock patient.” She weeps and sobs and is silent again. I too
keep silent for a time and then say: "It's true, it is not fair; the analytic situation is not an equal one; it is your task to let your feelings come out and it is my job to understand you, to analyze what comes up. Yes, it's not fair." (Greenson 1967, 226–27)

In analyzing this patient, in my view, it would be more useful to explore the ways in which she experienced the analyst as unfair than to comment on the truth or falsity of her perception. Specifically, I might continue to investigate the analysand's psychic reality of the experience of "unfairness" (Hoffer 1993).

For purposes of this discussion, however, Greenson gives us a vivid (although otherwise unremarkable) example of the one-sidedness and asymmetry in the analytic relationship. If we look at the psychic reality not only of the analysand but also of the analyst, what do we find? Are the analyst's feelings less "real" than the analysand's? To judge the feelings in an analytic relationship as less "real" than those in an ordinary relationship poses, in my view, a false dichotomy. The thesis of this paper is that the analytic situation creates a pull—exemplified by this paradigmatic vignette—away from the asymmetry inherent in the analytic relationship and toward mutuality. This pull in turn generates an inevitable tension with which every analyst must come to terms. Freud recommended to Jung in 1909 that he develop a "thick skin" to protect against countertransference sexual behavior with analysands (McGuire 1974, 230). Ferenczi, by contrast, devoted himself to removing any emotional wall that separated him from his analysands, which led to the extreme decision to reverse roles in his experiment with "mutual analysis." Can one be an effective analyst with a thin skin? With a thick skin? How thick should the good analyst's skin be?

Having discussed Ferenczi's challenge to Freud's principle of abstinence, the renewed emphasis on psychic reality, and the asymmetry inherent in the analytic relationship and the tension this creates in the analyst, I turn now to the topic of mutuality. I shall begin by reviewing the history of the relationship between Freud and Ferenczi and highlighting the polarity of asymmetry and mutuality, which is often referred to as that of authoritarianism and egalitarianism.

As late as 1930, Freud expressed dismay at Ferenczi's effort to push him into resuming Ferenczi's analysis in order to complete it. Freud had no
interest in trying to make up for what had been missed in the past, urging that it be left to Ferenczi's self-analysis. Ferenczi's response in February 1930 conveys the flavor of their dialogue:

The analytically open exchange in no way means that I want to push you into the role of analyst again and thereby give you up as a tried-and-tested, proven friend. My hope—which I believe is not unjustified—is that an analytically free exchange is also possible between reliable friends. I must confess that I would no longer feel right in the one-sided role of analysand. Do you think that such a mutual openness would be impossible?¹

Indeed, as Judith Dupont points out (1994; see also Hoffer 1994), Ferenczi offered to analyze Freud in 1926, but Freud declined.

I want here to question Ferenczi's hope that an analytically free exchange is also possible between reliable friends. In my view, whereas a mutual openness is certainly desirable and possible between friends, true analytic openness requires a professional relationship that is necessarily asymmetrical because both parties must be committed to the analysis of the analysand. To attempt in a relationship to be simultaneously the analyst and analysand compromises both roles. When we come to consider Ferenczi's description of mutual analysis, we must wonder whether this represents an actual deep analytic process on his part or a countertransferential confession—a very different phenomenon. I seriously doubt whether truly free associations are possible in a mutual analysis (Rizzuto 1992) and submit that an authentic analysis requires an asymmetrical focus on the analysand.

Thus, although an analytic relationship can be similar to an ordinary relationship in the genuineness of the feelings as well as in its intimacy and uniqueness, it differs from the latter in its overriding purpose. Hence, what I consider to be the analysand's "real" relationship with the analyst promotes his or her self-inquiry and self-understanding. The inherent asymmetry follows from the raison d'etre of the relationship, which exists for the analysand's benefit. However, that inherent asymmetry stimulates within the analyst a countervailing inclination toward a more symmetrical, more mutual relationship.

As noted above, the inclination of the analyst toward a mutual relationship with the analysand is taken to its logical extreme in Ferenczi's Clinical Diary (Hoffer 1990). In one notable case, he was pressed by a severely
traumatized patient (who is referred to by the initials R.N., but was in fact Elizabeth Severn; Fortune 1993) in a stalemated analysis openly to acknowledge to her his unresolved countertransferential difficulties. Ferenczi was aware of his hidden hatred toward her. R.N. insisted that the only honest way to free the analysis from their impasse would be for Ferenczi to agree to be analyzed by her. With his characteristic candor and egalitarian tendencies, along with a willingness to experiment and take personal risks—and out of desperation—Ferenczi consented to reverse roles and positions. For a period of several months, he and R.N. took turns sitting behind the couch in a procedure that Ferenczi dubbed "mutual analysis." If we recall Freud's (1914) statement about the analyst's obligation to see to it that the patient's suffering not come to an end prematurely, we may contrast the following passage from Ferenczi's Diary:

Certain phases of mutual analysis represent the complete renunciation of all compulsion and of all authority on both sides: they give the impression of two equally terrified children who compare their experiences, and because of their common fate understand each other completely and instinctively try to comfort each other. Awareness of this shared fate allows the partner to appear as completely harmless, therefore as someone whom one can trust with confidence. (1932, 56)

The pull to mutuality that Ferenczi describes is familiar to all clinicians. In fact, his description of mutual analysis reminds me of the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel with its two terrified children, bad witch, and eliminated parents. Ferenczi feels that such mutuality may be required to create a feeling of safety in the analysand. The sincerity of his efforts and the candor with which he reports them deserve our respect. In my opinion, however, a countertransference problem is one for which the analyst must take responsibility while attending to its impact on the patient. It is not a shared problem, and the purpose of analysis is not to provide mutual comfort; furthermore, I am convinced that the patient does not require this type of mutuality to feel safe with the analyst.

But if we step back and view Ferenczi's pull toward mutual analysis as a metaphor, we can acknowledge our wishes to comfort our patients and to be comforted by them by sharing the painful and frightening feelings that have arisen from parallel experiences. To recognize that pull while choosing not to act on it creates tension within the analyst. It is important that the analyst be aware of that tension and its sources.
Having considered the pull on the analyst to turn the asymmetrical analytic relationship into a mutual one, we can now pursue further the comparison between the nature of the “reality” in analytic and ordinary relationships. In “Observations on Transference Love,” Freud declares: “It is therefore just as disastrous for the analysis if the patient’s craving for love is gratified as if its suppressed. The course the analyst must pursue is neither of these; it is one for which there is no model in real life” (1914, 166). Freud here distinguishes the analytic relationship from all others; furthermore, he holds that it is so unprecedented that no model exists for it in real life. A strong statement! Could it be true? It is ironic that whereas the analyst is experienced in the transference as though he were a number of people—and hence models—in the patient’s life, there is no model for what the analyst does. But Freud’s statement is convincing because by being many people for the patient, the analyst is also none of them. He remains only the analyst in real life. And here again lies the source of the tension within the analyst. He is real, in a real relationship with the analysand, and yet there is no prototype for him in real life.

It is puzzling that Freud, after asserting that the love in the transference is indisputably genuine and real, advises the analyst to “keep firm hold of the transference love, but treat it as something unreal” (1914, 166). What does it mean to keep firm hold on something real, yet treat it as unreal? These contradictory statements reveal to us Freud’s struggle with an unsolved—and perhaps unresolvable—paradox (Modell 1990). Is the analytic relationship real?

It is my thesis that in analysis the feelings and the relationship are as real as in an ordinary relationship. To pass judgments on what are “real” and “unreal” or transference and nontransference feelings distracts the analyst (and consequently the analysand) from the primary analytic goal of fully exploring the analysand’s psychic reality. Such judgments may easily serve to create unwitting resistances to the analysis. To reiterate, what defines the analytic relationship is its unique purpose. The analytic relationship has an inherently unidirectional therapeutic aim that is lost if it becomes equal and mutual—that is, if it becomes “ordinary.”

I am in essential agreement with the position advanced by Modell: “The psychoanalytic setting is designed to maximize the analysand’s communication to the analyst but not the reverse. The analyst’s emotional position vis-
à-vis the analysand follows this asymmetry of communication in that the analyst reveals to the analysand only what is judged to be in the best interests of the analysis" (1990, 39). Modell elaborates:

Although this experiment [with mutual analysis] now strikes us as naive and imprudent, Ferenczi was struggling with therapeutic dilemmas which are still very much with us. For example, Ferenczi was confronted with the problem that it was hypocritical to withhold information regarding a negative countertransference; psychoanalysts had not yet discovered how a negative countertransference could be placed at the service of the patient's treatment. One of the patients with whom he experimented was someone whom he disliked but who, at the same time, had the transference illusion that Ferenczi was in love with her. By means of this mutual analysis Ferenczi was able to reveal to this patient certain antipathetic countertransference attitudes that were hindering the progress of treatment, and following his confession, the treatment did in fact move forward. (143)

Modell's conclusion recognizes the contemporary relevance of Ferenczi's struggles:

The matter of equality between analyst and analysand is still a current therapeutic issue. . . . This dilemma reflects the presence of two different levels of reality: the necessary inequality within the frame, which coexists with the equality outside of the frame. Echoes of Ferenczi's egalitarian concerns can be heard in Kohut's advice that the analyst acknowledge his own empathic failures, and Gill's objection to the concept that transference distorts, which assumes that it is the analyst who is the judge of what is real. (143)

Thus, the universal tendency to symmetry and mutuality within the analytic frame poses a continual temptation to the analyst to transform the analytic relationship into an ordinary relationship such as exists outside the frame. On a broader theoretical level, some schools of analytic thought that in my view advocate excessive self-disclosure attenuate the unique analytic relationship by turning it into a more ordinary one, which (while it may be mutually gratifying) lacks the therapeutic power of an asymmetrical analytic relationship. That power is most available when both participants can freely attend, with all the resources available, to a full exploration of the analysand's psychic reality.

In conclusion, the analysand's free association and the analyst's evenly hovering or "free" attention (Gardner 1991, 865) create a genuine, intimate, real, and unique relationship—one that is inherently asymmetrical because
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it is primarily for the benefit of only one of the participants. Judging whether transferential and countertransference feelings are real or distorted distracts the analyst from helping the analysand to explore fully his or her psychic reality. My thesis is that there is a natural—indeed universal—pull toward symmetry and mutuality in the intimacy of the analytic relationship just as there is in all other relationships. Awareness of the tension that that pull creates alerts the analyst to the temptation to convert the analytic relationship into an ordinary relationship.

Unwittingly, the analyst may relieve that necessary and normal tension in the analytic relationship in two contrasting ways: (1) by increasing the asymmetry and distance through a withdrawal into a state of intellectualized detachment; or (2) by eliminating the asymmetry by making the relationship a mutual, ordinary one. I believe, however, that, like a rider on a bicycle built for two, the analyst should lean first in one direction, then in the other, to maintain the equilibrium necessary to keep the therapeutic process moving forward. Awareness of the therapeutic value of this tension helps the analyst first to tolerate it, then to take notice of it, and ultimately to wonder self-analytically about it—especially if it should suddenly disappear. The absence of that predictable tension thus serves as a signal that the analyst has moved too far in one direction or another. My advice to analysts may then be a disheartening one—stay tense (but neither too much nor too little)!

In historical retrospect, the long-standing tension in the Freud-Ferenczi relationship can be seen to have arisen out of Ferenczi's struggle against its inherent asymmetry. Freud, on the authoritarian side, continuously maintained his seniority and authority as the father of psychoanalysis. On the egalitarian side, Ferenczi, in his wish to analyze Freud and in his experiments with mutual analysis, carried to an extreme the wish—present in both the analyst and analysand—to form a symmetrical relationship. If taken too far, however, both the positions of Freud and Ferenczi eliminate the tension necessary to propel the analytic process.

Recognition of the tension in the Freud-Ferenczi relationship, which I have elaborated as a metaphor for the inevitable tension in every analytic relationship, heightens the contemporary analyst's awareness of the dilemmas he or she confronts in each analytic hour. The analyst must be prepared
to contain that level of tension internally in order to provide the analysand with an optimally therapeutic analytic experience. Because the analytic relationship is unique in its method, purpose, and ambience, we need self-awareness to avoid falling in the ditches of either intellectualized detachment or emotional overinvolvement.

NOTES

1. Quoted by permission of Dr. Judith Dupont. My translation.
2. To answer the question of who steers and who supplies the power would require another chapter.

REFERENCES

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