

2321 Theory & Practice 2: Lecture 13

Christians in Critical Dialogue with REBT

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Synopsis

Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) has provided inspiration for some Christian forms of counselling. Although Albert Ellis¹ views on various topics are inimical to the Christian faith, some Christians believe, along with Ellis, that his therapy can be used despite his commitment to atheism. In the first section of this lecture, some of the more obvious differences between Ellis and Christianity are provided, which provide a backdrop for the second section, where I will argue that the fashioning of therapies according to Ellis' basic rational framework are fraught with elemental difficulties because Ellis' REBT is a reflection of a religious belief. His religious belief can be described as probabilistic rationalism because he regards this type of rationality² as 'divine', as being 'unconditionally nondependent' (Clouser). His rationality is expressed in a therapy dominated by living in accord with rational judgement, guided by an ethic of self-interest³, supported by a scientific methodology for achieving one's individual goals. Ellis' rationalist belief should alert Christians to the dangers in using Ellis' work without radical modification, an outline of which is suggested in conclusion.

[A] Differences between Christianity and REBT philosophy

1. Revelation and reason

In the following summary of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) by Froggatt, an important exponent of REBT, significant characteristics of the philosophy of the therapy come to the fore:

REBT tends to be humanistic, anti-moralistic, and scientific. Human beings are seen as the arbiters of what is right or wrong for them. Behaviour is viewed as functional or dysfunctional, rather than as good or evil. REBT is based on research and the principles of logic and empiricism, and encourages scientific rather than 'magical' ways of thinking (1990-2001: n. p.).

¹ During my preparation of this lecture, Albert Ellis died on the 24th July 2007, at 93 years of age, due apparently to kidney and heart failure.

² This hypothesis is one among many that I have examined and remains provisional.

³ Rather than one of personal virtue as with the Stoics.

The core of this synopsis is the man-centredness of REBT, with humans deciding what is right and wrong for them and using their scientific ability rather than any appeal to revelational 'magic' to determine what will get them what they want rather than what is good or evil. With this understanding, Walen, DiGuiseppe, and Wessler (1980: 6) agree by emphasising the essential difference between the Christian faith and REBT to be, 'the reasoning individual is the source of wisdom not the almighty God' (p. 10). What these authors do not explain is why anyone should accept the reasoning individual as the ultimate source of wisdom. Their question to clients is "'Where is the evidence that what you believe is true?'" But, this same question may also be raised with these authors as well. 'Where is your evidence that reason is the 'ultimate source of wisdom?'' They cannot establish this proposition using reason because they are seeking to demonstrate reason's credentials to be wisdom's 'ultimate source'. Hence, they appear to require a non-reasoned source of proof. However, resort to this avenue destroys their effort to establish human reason as the 'ultimate source of wisdom'.

According to Wallen et al. the 'ethical humanism' (1980: 10) of REBT contrasts starkly with approaches dependent on 'revelation' (p. 6). One imagines that revelation is rejected for a number of reasons, the chief being that revelation implies human dependency on something other than ourselves and suggests that we are responsible to something/one other than ourselves. The Christian accepts the understanding of St Paul in Romans 1 (v. 18-22), which clearly says that God is revealed in all that he has made but that that revealed knowledge is suppressed. The issue of the innate sense of God within every person and the various ways it can be stifled is too big a topic to develop in this context but the apparent standoff between revelation, reason and religious experience⁴ points to a critical issue further discussed extensively by Clouser (1999).

⁴ In 2004, Ellis even agreed in an interview that he had had a 'revelation of sorts' about the non-existence of God. **G [interviewer]**: Returning to your adolescence, you describe in

2. God-interest and self-interest

Ellis criticises religion because 'first of all, [it] is not self-interest; it is god-interest' (Ellis, n. d.-a: n. p.). Of course, he is right to assert that *self*-interest cannot be foremost for religion (at least not for the orthodox monotheistic religions like Christianity) and that self-interest is the humanist preference. But, where does that get us other than being informed about his preference? Somehow, he seems to believe that to associate religion with something other than self-interest as its *summum bonum*⁵ establishes his case beyond argument.

a) Self interest and health

The reason he is eager to associate religion with god-interest is that that damns the Christian religion because Ellis is a utilitarian. Christianity is unhealthy because it lacks utility, it lacks practicality, and it prevents us getting our goals achieved. In short, religion is bad for one's mental health because it thwarts our desires to live creative lives in this life, the only life we have.

Ellis develops this criticism further by listing a number of healthy 'personality traits'⁶ that the non-religionist wants to encourage which are headed by self-interest. His strategy is to argue that religion is unhealthy because it does not promote the kind of health-producing values that he has listed. As a strategy this will have less than spectacular success because his values are fashioned in the light of self-interest. That is, he has already assumed what he is in fact required to demonstrate. For example, perhaps self-interest is

your book that around the age of 12, while preparing for your Bar Mitzvah, you had a revelation of sorts about the absence of God and the inadequacy of religion.

A[ibert Ellis]: Right. I became a probabilistic atheist [sic], meaning that in all probability there is no God, no Allah, no Zeus. They simply don't exist, which is an idea I got mainly from reading the literature, Bertrand Russell, H G Wells and others. If God does exist, then he's not going to be a sadist and cut my balls off for not believing in him. So I will assume that he doesn't exist and go about my business (Halasz, 2004).

⁵ Supreme or greatest good.

⁶ Namely, self interest, self-direction, tolerance, acceptance of uncertainty, flexibility, scientific thinking, commitment, risk-taking, and self acceptance. He claims that religion 'in most respects . . . seriously sabotages mental health' (Ellis, n. d.-a: n. p.).

not in fact healthy at all or psychological health is not the main prize but subordinate to other greater and grander designs for human life.

The religious person must, by virtual definition, be so concerned with whether or not his hypothesized god loves him, and whether he is doing the right thing to continue to be in this god's good graces, that he must, at very best, put himself self [sic] second and must sacrifice some of his most cherished interests to appease this god. If, moreover, he is a member of any organized religion, then he must choose his god's precepts first, those of this church and it's [sic] clergy second, and his own views and preferences third (Ellis, n. d.-a: n. p.).

Leaving aside the fact that Ellis gives a description of a religious person that would not fit many Christian⁷ believers and exposes him as someone who has very little understanding of the largest religion in the world, Ellis has rightly identified the significant difference between a humanist worldview and a Christian one. In the former, the humanist has seized autonomy for himself and placed humanity's interests at the centre. But, all Ellis has done is to produce a list of ideal traits that the humanist appears to strive for and a jaundiced view of 'religionists' and declared the former to be superior. However, no argument has been produced. Contrasts like this prove nothing except to seriously misrepresent one's opponents' position.

b) Self interest and absolutes

Ellis implicitly believes that neurotic people are infected with absolutes but further castigates religion for doing this pernicious work because absolutes necessarily breed intolerance.⁸

Tolerance again, is a trait that the firm religionist cannot possibly possess. "I am the Lord thy God and thou shalt have no other gods before me", saith Jehovah. Which means in plain English, that

⁷ In fact, Ellis first three ideas of concern about God's love, doing the right thing to remain in God's good graces and appeasement do not fit the Christian religion.

⁸ Tolerance is listed among a number of desired personality traits: self interest, self-direction, tolerance, acceptance of uncertainty, flexibility, scientific thinking, commitment, risk-taking, and self acceptance (Ellis, n. d.-a: n. p.).

whatever any given god and his clergy⁹ believe must be absolutely, positively true; and whatever any other person or group believes must be absolutely, positive [sic] false (Ellis, n. d.-a: n. p.).

Ellis has an implicit definition of tolerance that is created in the image of his probabilism. Because Ellis believes *absolutely* in a probabilistic universe, he construes tolerance in terms of probabilism. However, his position begs the question of probabilism, which remains an article of faith. How can one possibly establish probabilism using probabilistic premises? We could only say that probabilism has a probability of being true. But, how can we establish that probability?

Moreover, Christianity and some other religions do not hold that they have all the truth and other faiths have no insights into the truth. Ellis clearly knows little about these faiths to be enunciating what is manifestly incorrect. Additionally, Ellis further demonstrates an inaccurate grasp of the relation between divine revelation and the human interpretation/interpreters of that revelation. The former is a direct expression of God's nature but the human interpretation of the revelation is viewed by Christians, at any rate, far more cautiously because we know that any human interpretation will be limited and subject to fallibility.

c) Self interest and hedonism

Ellis' self-interested focus is linked with his belief that we are on this earth to enjoy ourselves, to learn to be happy and have fun. Walen, DiGuiseppe, and Wessler (1980: 9) say that REBT is 'frankly hedonistic' and that 'a main goal in life' 'along with survival' is 'enjoyment' (p. 9). This hedonism they say is both 'guided and individualistic' (p. 9). Moderation¹⁰ plays a key part in determining whether the 'pleasure we experience today is likely to backfire tomorrow' (Walen et al., 1980: 9-10).

⁹ Christianity and other religions do not all hold that humans, clergy or otherwise, are infallible, quite the contrary.

¹⁰ The Stoics would recognise moderation as 'temperance'.

[H]umans are basically hedonistic: pleasure and/or happiness is their ultimate goal. Practitioners of Rational-Emotive Behaviour Therapy therefore encourage the pursuit of "responsible hedonism" seeking a balance between short- and long-term personally meaningful goals (Correctional Service of Canada, 2006: n. p.).

However, the Christian religion with its absolute standards leads to dehumanisation, the very opposite of pleasure.

Religion, then, by setting up absolute, god-given standards, must make you self-deprecating and dehumanized when you err; and must lead you to despise and dehumanize others when they act badly. This kind of absolutistic, perfectionistic thinking is the prime creator of the two most corroding of human emotions: anxiety and hostility.

Ellis' diatribe is premised on the understanding that hedonism, that is, pleasure is the goal of life; even if what he were saying were true – and evidence suggests that Christian believers are perhaps more healthy psychologically than non-Christian believers¹¹ -- then so what? His argument only seems persuasive if one accepts his overriding concern for health and pleasure.

Religion, with its definitional absolutes, can never rest with the concept of an individual's wrong-doing or making mistakes, but must inevitably all [sic] to this the notion of his sinning and of his deserving to be punished for his sins (Ellis, n. d.-a).

Christian belief is that failures of love God and neighbour as one's self are sins. That is true. However, Ellis has certainly not studied Christianity if he is able to imply that it teaches simple punishment for sins. Although we deserve to face the consequences for our sins, God's love is such that we are forgiven now in Jesus Christ. To equate a failure in love towards one's neighbour as a simple mistake is to ignore the gravity of the act of rebellion against God's law. The Christian and the REBTER comprehend sin and redemption in radically different ways and it is foolish for Christians to minimise or brush over these differences.

¹¹ A controversial finding (e. g., Jones, 2004: n. p.) but it has opponents (see Bayne, 2002).

But is [sic] it is [a] god-given, absolute law that you shall not, must not do a wrong act, and actually do it, you are then a mean, miserable sinner, a worthless being, and must severely punish yourself (perhaps eternally, in hell) for being a wrongdoer, being a fallible human (Ellis, n. d.-a).

The idea of self-punishment is solely in Ellis' creative portrayal of his warped understanding of religion. The Christian religion is against the idea of self-punishment (e. g., Narramore, 1984: 27-29).

[B] Exposing the Religious Background of REBT

Ellis makes the boast that neither he nor by implication his therapy is soiled by religious belief. However, this section will show that by some definitions, even one he cites himself, he could be classed as a religionist. His religiosity revolves around his commitment to probabilistic rationality, as a given, as being 'just there', as 'unconditionally nondependent' (Clouser, 1999: 21) and in this regard he can be understood to hold a religious belief. This probabilistic understanding of the world is expressed with regard to Ellis' atheism. Ellis does *not* say that God does not exist. He believes though that the probability of his existence is very low,¹² so low that his existence is not worth investigation ('Albert Ellis', 2007: n. p.).

Albert Ellis calls himself a probabilistic atheist, meaning thereby that it is impossible to be 100% certain that there is no God, but he thinks that the probability of existence of God is so small that it is undeserving of his attention. However, Ellis makes it clear that REBT is independent of his probabilistic atheism (Albert-Ellis-Friends.Net, n. d.: n. p.).

However, this opinion of Ellis' is problematic because it will become evident that REBT is made in the image of its maker and his probabilistic atheism.

¹² "OK, I'll admit that there is a .00000000000000005% chance that God does exist but if he does what makes you think he gives a sh__ about you".

1. Ellis' inadequate definition of religious belief

Ellis seeks to define religion but lacks sophisticated knowledge of the area. For example, he simplistically claims that religion 'must include some concept of a deity' (Ellis, n. d.-a: n. p.) and 'religionists' are just those who have 'some kind of faith unfounded on fact, or dependency on some assumed superhuman entities' (Ellis, n. d.-a: n. p.). But this definition is inadequate. Based on this reckoning, one would exclude Theravada Buddhism – which most people would consider a religion – because Buddhism does not require belief in a deity (Cianciosi, 2004: n. p.). Nor do some forms of Hinduism either (Cline, 2007: n. p.)¹³, which generally believes in the Atman, Being itself. Furthermore, in 2005, a US federal court of appeals ruled that *atheism was a religion* even though it denied belief in a supreme God (WorldNetDaily, 2005: n. p.)!

Ellis is keen to avoid any connection between his own views and that of religion by assuming that religion¹⁴ must involve a higher power of some description on whom one is dependent. He says that:

When the term [religion] is used merely to denote a system of beliefs, practices, or ethical values which are not connected with any assumed higher power, then I believe it is used loosely and confusingly; since such a nonsupernatural system of beliefs can more accurately be described as a philosophy of life or a code of ethics, and it is misleading to confuse a believer in this general kind of philosophy or ethical code with a true religionist (n. d.-a: n. p.).

Again, an 'assumed higher power' is not a necessary or sufficient part of the definition of religion and hence, Ellis has been unable by his own definitions to positively exclude his own position from even those religions, like Buddhism, that are generally accepted to be true religions.

¹³ Cline, an atheist, even claims that atheism can be existent in certain forms of Jainism, Taoism, Confucianism, even Judaism and Christianity!

¹⁴ Ellis begins disingenuously with three definitions without mentioning that defining religion is notoriously difficult, a fact stated by many students of the field (e. g., Clouser, 1999: 13-14; ReligionFacts, 2004-2007: n. p.).

2. Probabilistic rationality as religious belief

In a nuanced and dialogic exposition of religious experience and religious belief, Clouser (1999: 16-18) examined four other commonly accepted definitions of religious belief (i. e., worship, rituals, ethical code and supreme value) and found them all deficient. He finally defined a belief as religious:

provided that it is (1) a belief in something as divine or (2) a belief about how to stand in proper relation to the divine, where (3) something is believed to be divine provided it is held to be unconditionally nondependent (1999: 24).

I am sure that Ellis would strenuously claim on principle that this definition of religion could not apply to him. However, let us look at his theory and therapy more carefully to see whether his denial of its application would be correct.

a) In what type of world does Ellis live?

We live in a world, which has its own nature, character, processes or happenings that lie outside our power to control. Wisdom consists in knowing this fact and living in the light of it. What Ellis reminds his listeners and readers of time and again is the distinction between one's inner judgements (whether rational or irrational) and the outer nature of the world, what we can change and what we cannot change (e. g., Ellis, 1962: 52). Only by understanding this Stoic distinction (Robertson, 2005: n. p.) between our inner potentially rational judgements and the nature of the outside world can we live in reasonable harmony.

Ellis' worldview is very well captured by the Serenity prayer, which he states he would use for its philosophy but not as a prayer (Ellis, 1992: n. p.). The words express this distinction well between the things within me that I can change – my judgements -- and the things that exist as events in the world that I cannot change and therefore should not distress myself about. Ellis makes the stunning point in an interview in referring to the words 'horrible, awful and terrible' by saying that 'Yes, but horrible, awful and terrible means it's so bad that it should not exist, and whatever exists, exists'. His point

being that we cannot do anything about the holocaust of WW2. It happened and is very bad but not 'horrible, awful and terrible' because to use such words we might be implying that 'it should not exist' and to imply that is to think irrationally because it does exist.

b) What is the character of our cognitive acts in this world?

Ellis reflected his tough stand against absolutes in his reply to an interviewer who had said to him, 'It sounds as if you're really absolutely in touch with what Albert Ellis wants to do and that's it', with the acerbic retort: 'Don't use "absolutely". That's a human sickness. There are no absolutes' (Psychotherapy.net, 2001: n. p.)!¹⁵ His dogmatism on this point implies various questions as to why he is so inflexible but I think one of his reasons is his adherence to probabilism. On numerous occasions, even in his basic formulations about the causal connection between cognitions and emotions, he has said such things as 'REBT is based on the assumption that what we

God grant me the
Serenity to
accept the things **I** cannot
change...
Courage to change the
things **I** can
and **Wisdom** to know
the difference...

mental health he opined that:

The emotionally mature individual should completely accept the fact that we live in a world of probability and chance, where there are not, nor probably ever will be, any absolute certainties, and should realize that it is not at all horrible, indeed—such a probabilistic, uncertain world (Ellis, n. d.-a: n. p.).

label our "emotional" reactions are *largely caused by* our conscious and unconscious evaluations, interpretations, and philosophies' (Ellis, n. d.-b: n. p., italics mine). The expression *largely caused by* is an attempt to avoid being absolute about the causal relationship. In an important address he gave on the subject of the relationship between religion and

¹⁵ That is, Ellis appears not to understand the contradiction between dogmatically requiring the interviewer to adopt this absolute¹⁵ and simultaneously denying the existence of any absolutes!

However, notice that Ellis reveals two problems in this short paragraph: first, he uses the words 'should completely accept the fact', which sounds like an absolute! Second, he seems to be certain that presently no absolute certainties exist but what is the basis for such certitude? Would it not be better to say that presently certainties may exist because we live in a probabilistic world? Wilber, a mystic, is quite scathing¹⁶ of what he calls Ellis' absolutistic views:

Ellis's absolutism is all the more pernicious simply because it is hidden or unconscious. He honestly thinks he is more or less free of major irrationalisms, while the whole of his scientism rests squarely a [sic] monumental illogic (1989: n. p.).

c) Rationality rules ok?

Ellis first labelled his work *rational* therapy, which Ellis claims was misunderstood¹⁷ because he was not a rationalist but his opinion on this point is contestable.¹⁸ Certainly, he is not a rationalist after the innatist tradition of Rene Descartes but he *is* a rationalist in the 'blank slatist' tradition of John Locke.

His notion of the form of the rational has tended to be expressed in different ways but his adherence to the rational as a religious belief has not changed. Ellis once had a commitment to logical positivism (Wilber, 1989: n. p.) as the philosophical expression of his religious belief. His espousal of scientific method is well captured in the comment he wrote in 1950 while still within the neo-psychoanalytical school:

With advocates of unscientific psychoanalysis there can be essentially no argument—as long as they frankly admit that science is not their goal, and that faith, religion, mental healing, or some other non-scientific object is in all frankness, to espouse some other kinds of

¹⁶ An animus perhaps created by Ellis' hostility towards all sorts of mysticism.

¹⁷ However, I don't think that the prominence of the rational in Ellis' therapy can possibly be overrated. His ABC model implies the high probability that most emotional disturbance is caused by irrationality of some kind.

¹⁸ Ellis claimed to have an 'empirical' attitude to life, which conventionally is understood as opposed to rationalism (Ellis, 1962: 123-124).

analytic viewpoints, that is their democratic right—as long as they do not call their views scientific¹⁹ ... Most contemporary psychologists and psychiatrists agree, however, that *thorough going scientific knowledge is the only valid basis for analytic (and other) therapy*, and that rigorous criticism of non-scientific psychological methods is quite justified (Ellis, Abrams & Abrams, 2005: n. p., italics mine).

However, logical positivism and its 'verification principle' that meaning is defined in terms of what can be empirically determined was found to be incoherent and collapsed.²⁰ Ellis believed he had moved on to postmodernism²¹ although more questioning is occurring as to whether this transition has occurred (Shawer, 1998: n. p.). According to Raskin (2002: n. p.), even though Ellis has claimed to be constructivist himself in publications in 1997 and 1998, REBT would be better classed as resting on 'limited realism' because it questions the distortions people make of an objective reality. Whatever the case, Ellis is firmly wedded to the idea that scientific rationality gives one privileged access to reality.

Consequently, Ellis changed the title of his therapy to rational-*emotive* therapy (RET) (Ellis, 1962: 122).²² He claimed this term best described his therapy because the name focussed on its double-orientation. As to its rational orientation, RET emphasised:

the cognitive-persuasive-didactic-reasoning method of showing a patient what his basic irrational philosophies are, and then of demonstrating how these illogical or groundless or [simply] definitional premises must lead to emotionally disturbed behaviour and must be concertedly attacked and changed if this behaviour is to be improved (Ellis, 1962: 122).

¹⁹ We note in passing the dogmatism of Ellis' pronouncement. He apparently has decided what is and is not scientific.

²⁰ The principle was unable to satisfy its own terms of meaningfulness; no empirical evidence could be adduced in support of the principle itself.

²¹ According to Shawer (1998: n. p.), Ellis has been cited as saying that, 'Although I was formerly in the logical positivist camp, I now consider myself largely a postmodernist and constructionist'.

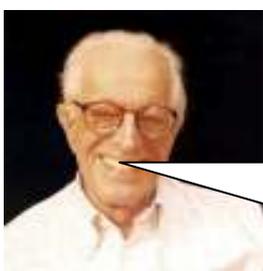
²² In 1993, he changed the title again to REBT commenting that a better name would be Cognitive Emotive Behaviour Therapy (The International Institute for the Advanced Studies of Psychotherapy and Applied Mental Health, 2001: n. p.).

However, Ellis also pointed to an important second orientation:

the primary aim of [Ellis'] therapy is to change the patient's most intensely and deeply held emotions as well as, and along with, his thoughts. In fact, the term [rational-emotive] implies that rational-emotive psychotherapy holds, that human emotion and human thinking *are* in some of their essences, *the same thing* [my italics], and that by changing the former one *does* change the latter (Ellis, 1962: 122, italics Ellis', unless designated mine).

I hope you notice that Ellis has virtually collapsed the categories of feeling and thinking into one. This conflation is central for his therapy. For him:

human thinking and emotion are *not* two disparate or different processes, but that they significantly overlap and are in some respects, for all practical purposes, essentially *the same thing* [my italics] (Ellis, 1962: 38, italics Ellis' unless otherwise designated).



THE RT APPROACH ESPECIALLY EMPHASIZES . . . THAT HUMAN EMOTION DOES NOT EXIST AS A THING IN ITSELF . . . [AND] CANNOT FOR THE MOST PART BE CLEARLY DIFFERENTIATED FROM IDEATION, AND IS LARGELY CONTROLLABLE BY THINKING PROCESSES (ELLIS, 1962: 125)

Ellis will even allege that emotions are 'largely a form of thinking or result from thinking' (Ellis, 1962: 53). But, Ellis goes further in quoting with approval Rokeach's notion that the phrases, 'I believe', 'I think' and 'I feel' are interchangeable in everyday speech and 'all say pretty much the same thing' (Rokeach, cited in Ellis, 1962: 42). In this way Ellis, not only ignores the differences that might occur between 'I think' and the other two, but also the differences implied between 'I believe' and the other two.

Ellis' conflating of cognition and emotion is hardly a surprise. When rational cognition is understood to be the defining characteristic of man then one can

find it difficult being able to discern important distinctions in human functioning. Ellis ignores an important distinction in merging the meanings of emotion and cognition which does not stand up to close analysis. No one disputes that these two functions are always (often) found together but that is no proof that they are synonymous or even similar. This feature in REBT, despite Ellis' protests about holism, betrays his complete commitment to the pre-eminence of rationality over other forms of human functioning.

[C] Judgements and emotions

1. Tyranny of the should²³

According to Dryden (2007: 355), Ellis believes that 'humans have two biological tendencies'. Firstly, they have a tendency towards irrationality, which leads them to disturb themselves. However, fortunately, humans also have tendencies, Ellis believes, 'to think rationally' (Corey, 1996: 321). To reduce disturbed feelings and behaviours is to find the illogical premises and combat them with logical thoughts (Ridgway, 2006: n. p.).²⁴ What makes us disturbed? Ellis believes that 'all people have strong tendencies to escalate . . . desires and preferences into dogmatic, *absolutist* "shoulds", "musts", "oughts", demands and commands' (Ellis, cited in Corey, 1996: 321). We move from the rational – 'I don't like that' – to the irrational, -- 'It ought not, should not, absolutely must not be so'. In an interview Ellis succinctly puts his therapeutic position in these words:

I discovered after years of doing Rational-Emotive Therapy, RET, that there only are a few differences [between inappropriate philosophies, which disturb people and appropriate philosophies]. And one main difference, and it's crucial, is taking a preference, a desire, a goal, a value, practically all of which are legitimate, and

²³ Phrase and idea come from Karen Horney.

²⁴ The common-sense view of the cause of human feeling and behaviour is that the latter are caused by events. For example, if I were to fail an important assignment, or not reach an important goal then my resultant determination to do better next time, is caused by the failure episode. Hence, commonsensically, we would say, 'I'm down because I did not do well at my exam but tomorrow is a new day'.

escalating it again, transmuting it into a demand, a should, an ought, a must, an absolute (The Intuition Network, 1999: n. p.).

According to Ellis, we live in a probabilistic rational world and no absolutes exist. So, to create them is to move towards neurosis.

2. An illustrative critique

Rational emotive behaviour therapy (REBT) champions the belief and to illustrate its accuracy might cite an example like the following. Imagine a husband coming home to find his wife packing her belongings and informing him that she is leaving to go and live with someone else.

The question is raised: how does the husband feel? Suggestions given by the questioner are depression, anger and even happiness. In the first case, the husband might be thinking that he has lost a good wife and he will never get another person like her. In the second case, he might be thinking that he has done a lot for her and that she has no right to treat him this way. In the last case, he might be thinking that it is good she is leaving because now I do not have to leave her and am free to find someone better than she was. And, why do these differences exist at all? 'The obvious reason', says the REBT practitioner elatedly, 'is that different judgments²⁵ are what create the different emotional responses not the actual situation because in each case the situation is the same!' However, things are not as straightforward as that.

The first issue that arises in the exposition above is that somehow *judgements* have been introduced into the discussion from seemingly nowhere. *Judgement* is arbitrarily raised as an item of interest but why judgements when an easier explanation lies close at hand. The analysis above is bedevilled by its behaviouristic heritage, which is unable to recognise the individual person who acts within a relationship bond. True, different

²⁵ Note: colloquially we often use the word *perception* when more strictly we mean 'evaluation' or 'judgment'.

judgements and emotions arise within marriages in the light of particular circumstances, but the REBT analysis seems unable to recognise that each of these marital unions is different. We do not in fact have the same situation: we have three different types of marriages in which the wife is leaving. Hence, each of the reactions of the husband is different. Hence, we do not need to artificially create a cause for the different responses of the husbands. The different reactions are not at all in need of explanation given the understanding that we are dealing with three different marriages.

Secondly, within REBT, judgements are only of therapeutic interest when they have been made into absolutist musts or 'awfulsied'.²⁶ REBT practitioners *infer*²⁷ from disordered emotions that awfuling or dogmatic musts *must*²⁸ be present. Their reasoning would be: if the depressed husband above were merely saying that he preferred his wife to stay with him but he was not going to *demand* that be the case or say that it was 'awful' and 'horrible' if she did not stay then he would not get depressed. (He might feel sad but not depressed.) However, REBT is 'begging the question' in this example. REBT must show that extreme judgements like these ones do in fact cause depression not just assume it to be true and then identify these musts as proof for REBTs as yet unproven premises.

Thirdly, we cannot tell if *judgements* actually led to the feelings and emotions or whether the latter prompted the judgements or whether something other than judgements caused the emotions. In any case, humans do far more than make judgements or evaluate. They also distinguish logically, create culture, symbolise, socialise, economise, aesthetically harmonise, care self-givingly, and entrust²⁹ to something believed to be unconditionally ultimate. These various ways of functioning point up the inadequacy of believing that

²⁶ An REBT term

²⁷ Infer means conclude from evidence or experience. (Imply means to suggest. The two words should *not* be used interchangeably.)

²⁸ Irony

²⁹ I have tried to put this facet as neutrally as possible.

humans principally function in the three ways that Ellis is prepared to accept: rational, emotion and behaviour. The Appendix in lecture 14 sets out 15 ways 'in which our presence is made known, ways in which we present our selves' (Runner, 2007: n. p.), ways in which all creation makes itself known.³⁰

We might say in answer to the question heading this section that judgement may be an important part of the picture but that what is *critical* in all our actions is the religious power to which we have entrusted ourselves. Some actions may be almost completely the result of genetic inheritance and we must remind ourselves of that fact. Not everything can be solved in this age by our own actions, which may be strongly affected by hereditary factors over which we may have little control.

But, our judgements and indeed all our acts are governed by where our hearts are anchored. Not that any of our hearts is completely unitary in its commitment. Perhaps we are all polytheists in some sense. Even to be a follower of Jesus Christ does not prevent an examination of whether the idols of our age are affecting the way we act (1 Jn 5: 21) because we can still be 'conformed to this world' (Rom 12: 2).

3. A Re-formulation

Ellis makes much of the therapeutic difference between preferences and absolute shoulds or demands.³¹ He does not seem to consider the possibility that non-absolute shoulds can exist. For him, in this world, only preferences exist.³²

But, to stand Ellis' view on its head for a minute: what if the world were a world in which obligation, responsibility and duty addressed us in the

³⁰ How does a rock present itself economically or aesthetically? Rocks have 'object functions' that can be 'opened up', discerned, appreciated and developed by humanity.

³¹ Shoulds and demands are not strictly speaking the same thing.

³² Nevertheless, his whole view rests on the need for some shoulds to exist because he is implicitly requiring that we *should* follow our preferences rather than our demands.

neighbour? Normative behaviour ('Normative', 2007: n. p.), the behaviour that responds to oughts and shoulds, although out of favour today, is godly behaviour if we have correctly heard what God is asking of us.

Ellis is correct I think to say that we must be careful not to make the specific obligations revealed to us into absolute demands. Certainly, he is correct to say that transforming our preferences or likes into absolutes is probably going to distress us. However, he misses the fact that such transmuting is morally not just psychologically wrong. Ellis is too focussed on behaviour in terms of its effects on our well-being: rationality is really defined in terms of whether it serves our therapeutic health rather than whether it is morally right.

Demanding that 'my day' goes well is selfish and childish (even though I continue to do it!) as well as being hard on us emotionally. Demandingness reminds us that the *sin* of self-importance is still alive.

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