

## **THE "CASE AGAINST" ALBERT ELLIS THE IRRATIONALITY OF "RATIONAL-EMOTIVE BEHAVIOR THERAPY"**

In the midst of a culture steeped in Freudian influences, Albert Ellis has dared to promote a therapy that in many ways challenges these Freudian foundations. In the foreword to *Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy*, a major work authored by Ellis to describe the basics of his approach, Dr. Robert Harper notes that we live in a "psychoanalytically oriented culture," indoctrinated by the *false* assumptions of psychoanalysis (p. xi, R&E).

Ellis informs us at the outset that his therapy is philosophically oriented and seeks to facilitate core philosophical changes in its clients. He says he discovered that:

"To *really* change their disturbed feelings and actions and to *keep* them changed, people had to modify their basic attitudes and core philosophies." (p. xv, R&E)

REBT (Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy) seeks a "*profound philosophic change*" of attitude, in order for you "to change *many* of your self-defeating feelings and behaviors as well as your negative, antiempirical automatic thoughts" (p. 23, R&E). Although originally examining simple declarative self-sentences, REBT "now primarily looks for, and shows clients how to find and uproot their complex, tacit *core philosophies*" (p. 46, R&E).

These are ambitious goals that profoundly impact the life of the individual who seeks REBT counseling! Christians have naively correlated the theories of Ellis with biblical teachings about the renewal of the mind, adopting many of his assumptions and methods.<sup>1</sup> However, discerning believers must raise a large red flag! We must examine the *core philosophy* underlying the procedures of REBT to see if it is truly compatible with the Bible.

### **Presuppositions of REBT**

Ellis notes the roots of REBT in both humanism and existentialism, including the writings of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Buber, Sartre, and Tillich (p. 48, R&E). Additional influences include Greek and Roman philosophers (Epicurus, Epictetus, Aurelius) along with Asian philosophers (Buddha, Confucius, Lao-

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<sup>1</sup> See Discernment Publications' critique, "*Think on These Things*," reviewing *Telling Yourself the Truth*, by William Backus & Marie Chapian, and *The Lies We Believe*, by Chris Thurman (Minirth-Meier Clinic).

Tsu) and the more recent philosophies of Kant, Dewey, and Russell (p. 53, R&E). *This is a dangerous list*, as should be evident to believers who are familiar with these names.

Ellis is insistent, throughout his writings, that core beliefs are the culprit behind disturbances of thought, emotion, and behavior:

"...behind their 'automatic' unrealistic thoughts often were unconscious, deeper *evaluations* that 'really' led to their disturbances and even helped them *create* their disturbed thoughts." (p. xvi, R&E)

**Presupposition: There is no absolute truth!**

Early in his career, Ellis began his rejection of absolute truth and absolute moral standards:

"I clearly (and strongly) began to realize the primacy of people's Jehovian *musts* and saw how they usually *underlay* their other dysfunctional beliefs." (p. xvii, R&E)

He believes that people hold illogical, overgeneralized "absolutistic *musts* and *shoulds*" (p. xvi, R&E). Ellis *absolutely* rejects such absolutes, and repeatedly asserts that we *must* not have *musts*, and we *should* not have *shoulds*! (Does the term *inconsistent* perhaps come to mind here??!!)

Most neurotic feelings and behaviors, according to Ellis, are "accompanied by (explicit or implicit) *musts* and *demands* rather than only by *wishes* and *desires*" (p. 71). Many *questionable* values and preferences, instilled during childhood years, are later converted to absolute "musts." Additional absolutes are actively constructed later in life, and all of these "musts" are continually under reconstruction (p. 71-72, R&E). However, Ellis insists that absolute truth *does not exist*, and therefore, such "musts" are nothing more than a matter of personal taste:

"Absolutistic musts and concepts like 'I am a bad person' are philosophies that depend on language and are often created and maintained by self-talk." (p. 42, R&E)

REBT is fundamentally opposed to all absolute truth!

"REBT opposes inflexible musts about differing individuals and groups and favors, in both cases, multiversity. It encourages clients to have their own views, goals, customs,

and standards--and to respect those of other people." (p. 99, R&E)

This perspective is supposedly based on *science*, which, according to Ellis, "presumably endorses no absolutes (though it does have meanings and values)" (p. 405, R&E). Explaining further:

"REBT agrees with the postmodernists that there is no objective standpoint from which to judge whether something is an absolute truth...we can *temporarily* grant that for practical purposes one knowledge is *probably* 'better' than another knowledge." (p. 406, R&E)

Ellis thus attempts to avoid the *irrationality* that is inherent in his system.

The goals of REBT reflect this highly biased position:

"It especially tries to help such oppressed individuals to be unconditionally self-accepting, assertive rather than hostile, and to undisturbedly and forcefully strive to change conditions that they can change." (p. 99, R&E)

As you continue to read, mark well this pressing question: Can REBT be reconciled with Christianity, biased as it against universal moral absolutes? Are its fundamental goals compatible with the believer's growth in godliness according to God's revealed standards?

Ellis insists that our society has arbitrarily *assumed* that certain values are good, among them monotheistic religion and monogamous marriage! He then notes that several psychologists:

"...have attempted to show how rigid social teachings have been a prime cause of neurosis, and have insisted that nothing but a change in the basic ideational or philosophic outlook of modern men and women will significantly reduce their neurotic trends." (p. 106, R&E)

Ellis tolerates "conditional" or *preferential* "shoulds" while maintaining that absolute standards lead to emotional disturbance (p. 142, R&E). He cites three specific categories of absolutes as the culprits leading to neurosis: demanding perfection from yourself, demanding perfect treatment from others, and demanding perfect conditions of the world around (p. 16, R&E).

The abhorrence of "musts" and "shoulds" is grounded in the presupposition that there is *absolutely no absolute truth*:

"As far we can tell, there is no certainty, perfection, nor absolute truth in the world...we live in a world of probability and chance, and we can be certain of nothing external to ourselves." (p. 129, R&E)

Ellis considers it a "prime REBT hypothesis" that you will be less neurotic if you change your "Jehovian commands" to mere preferences. But it is admittedly *only a hypothesis*, "not a fact!...not written in stone...not absolutely 'true'", but rather a "workable hypothesis" for most people most of the time, yet not everyone all of the time (p. 135, R&E). A similar admission of uncertainty occurs later in the book:

"REBT holds that one essence of basic personality change is people's learning to recognize their irrational, absolutist, musturbatory beliefs and to consciously change these for more flexible, open-minded, alternative-seeking philosophies. Without this kind of outlook, fundamental and lasting personality change is unlikely to occur.... Perhaps so; but not necessarily! Some individuals seem to make significant changes without acquiring new rational philosophies." (p. 170, R&E)

**Neutrality: Promises, promises, promises.** REBT makes promises of compatibility with any value system, claiming to avoid:

"...indoctrinating clients with the therapist's 'rational' beliefs...it helps clients make their own generalizations...shows clients how to dispute the irrationalities of their relatives, friends, and associates." (p. 251, R&E)

REBT claims *neutrality* in the area of values and standards:

REBT "subscribes to no particular rules, values, standards, goals, religions, or ethical codes. It only objects to people's holding their values and rules when

(1) they hold them rigidly, necessitously, absolutistically, and dogmatically; when

(2) they authoritarily and dictatorially refuse to allow other people to hold and practice different views; and when

(3) they hold their standards and rules so rigidly and forcefully that they frequently defeat their own goals and interests and/or sabotage the well-being of the social group in which they choose to live."  
(p. 301, R&E)

The REBT therapist is concerned only with the *rigid* or *absolute* nature of your belief system:

"So REBT doesn't care too much what your (adopted or chosen) goals, values, and creeds are, but it does focus on how rigidly and commandingly you hold them." (p. 300, R&E)

As a result, REBT claims not to attempt to change the values of a client, but rather:

"...they are much more interested in helping people to give up their rigid musts *about* their values than in persuading them to change these values themselves. Moreover, REBT holds that emotional health is significantly correlated with open-mindedness." (p. 296, R&E)

But in correlating emotional health with open-mindedness, REBT is doing precisely what it claims *not to do*. It is subscribing to a *particular* value!

REBT's claim to neutrality is extended to the area of religion:

"It (REBT) does not, as I have shown, oppose religion but is skeptical of what I have called religiosity--the dogmatic insistence that any religion is the *only possible* one, that all people *absolutely* must follow it, and that any other religion and all other creeds must not exist, must be completely annihilated, and all their adherents summarily restricted." (p. 300, R&E)

As we will document exhaustively, this claim is *false*. REBT does oppose religion, specifically *Christian theism*. It is impossible to faithfully hold to the basics of Christian faith and at the same time to reject all claims to exclusive, absolute truth!

Ellis takes his claims to neutrality to rather ridiculous extremes. He cites the example of an REBT therapist who belongs to a fundamentalist Christian group, one that teaches its followers that "they will roast in hell for eternity" for certain sins (such as homosexuality). This therapist attempts to combine Christian morality with the REBT bias against absolutes:

"...he shows some of his sinful clients that even if they do ultimately roast in hell that will not be *awful* or *terrible*, but only highly obnoxious and inconvenient!" (p. 304, R&E)

This is an absurd attempt to combine incompatible worldviews!

**Human reason.** Ellis rejects the belief of rationalism that the intellect (reason), rather than the senses, is the true source of knowledge. He believes that scientific knowledge must be *falsifiable* by empirical data (p. 276, R&E). He admits that human beings and their reasoning abilities are not infallible (p, 277, R&E). However, human reason is nevertheless:

"...one of the best tools to investigate the sources of human disturbance and to help humans overcome their own irrational assumptions and deductions." (p. 278, R&E)

Christians would agree concerning the fallibility of human reason. However, we claim absolute truth in *God's revelation*. God's Word is the ultimate authority, and it is necessarily self-attesting. If some other standard could be used to determine the validity of Scripture, that standard would be a higher one. Although admitting the imperfections of human reason, Ellis cannot appeal to any higher standard for his conclusions. He rejects God's authority and revelation. Human reason, fallible though it may be, is nevertheless the highest court of appeal.

**Presupposition: Atheism = "Mental Health" and Religion = "Mental Illness"**

For Christians, one of the most abhorrent aspects of Ellis' approach is his anti-religious bias. Before naively integrating his theories with Scripture, believers should be informed on this issue. The Institute for Rational-Emotive Therapy, founded and directed by Albert Ellis, has published his paper, "The Case Against Religiosity." The American Atheist Press has offered the same publication under the title, "The Case Against Religion," with a foreword by Jon Murray, son of atheist Madeline Murray O'Hair. The attitude demonstrated in this writing is described in Scripture:

"The wicked, in the haughtiness of his countenance, does not seek Him. All his thoughts are, 'There is no God.'  
(Psalm 10:4)

"The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds; there is no one who does good." (Psalm 14:1)

"The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God,' they are corrupt, and have committed abominable injustice; there is no one who does good." (Psalm 53:1)

Albert Ellis repeatedly displays his hatred for God in no uncertain terms. Consider the stated purpose of "The Case Against Religion":

"This article will try to make a succinct and cogent case for the proposition that unbelief, skepticism, and thoroughgoing atheism not only abet but are practically synonymous with mental health; and that devout belief, dogmatism, and religiosity distinctly contribute to and in some ways are equal to mental or emotional disturbance." (p. 23, CAR)<sup>2</sup>

So much for claims to neutrality! Ellis has elevated his hostility toward religion to the status of psychotherapeutic "truth." He uses his respected position as a psychotherapist to blaspheme God and attack the religious faith of believers.

Statements in *Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy* emphasize further the anti-religious position of Ellis in his therapy, which correlates religious faith with "mental illness" and unhappiness:

"REBT...hypothesizes that devout faith in suprahuman entities and powers frequently leads to poor emotional health and to decreased long-range happiness." (p. 249, R&E)

"REBT...avoids the use of transpersonal, mystical, and religious techniques because, again, these methods may sometimes help some clients to live 'better' with their disturbed thinking but at the same time interfere with the full development of flexible, open, and scientific attitudes—which, according to REBT, are core characteristics of optimum and sustained mental health." (p. 255, R&E)

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<sup>2</sup> Page numbers cited are from the publication distributed by the American Atheist Press.

Religiosity is called "totalistic bigotry" by Ellis. He says that this "bigotry":

"...probably leads to much more human harm than good, and abets what we usually call emotional disturbance."  
(p. 300, R&E)

Scientific status is claimed for the biased stance of Ellis:

"A scientific rather than an unscientific, devoutly religious, or mystical outlook is likely to bring them greater emotional health and satisfaction." (p. 248, R&E)

REBT is claimed to promote an "ethical humanism" wherein its adherents live by rules emphasizing *human* interests, rather than either "the interests of inanimate nature or of any assumed natural order or deity" (p. 248-249, R&E). This is violently opposed to Scripture. The believer lives to love and serve God, not self:

"For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf."  
(2 Corinthians 5:14-15)

**Existence of God.** Ellis lumps together absolute truth, *God*, man's free will, and natural law as "utopian" "overgeneralizations" incapable of being either empirically proved or disproved (p. 111, R&E). It hardly phases him to note that many millions of people fervently continue to believe in God. His lame response:

"That's just the way humans are, I guess. They *do* doggedly hold to groundless beliefs when they haven't got an iota of evidence with which to back up these beliefs. Millions of people, for example, believe wholeheartedly and dogmatically in the existence of God when, as Hume, Kant, Russell, and many other first-rate philosophers have shown, they can't possibly ever prove his existence. But that hardly stops them from fervently believing." (p. 33-34, R&E)

"That's just the way humans are, I guess" -- !! Is this the best explanation Ellis can provide for devout religious faith demonstrated over thousands of years?



Another response, perhaps, is the *false* assumption that it is impossible to prove the existence of God:

"...it can be assumed that God is immanent and that all matter and living things are seen through His eyes...but this is an unprovable and unfalsifiable prejudice that can hardly be used as a 'legitimate' or 'scientific' view of the world."  
(p. 408, R&E)

Elsewhere, Ellis provides a lengthy treatise attempting to show that the God of Scripture cannot be either proven to exist or falsified. "Actually, the *kind* of God described in the Bible *could* exist," Ellis admits, "but many facts of history tend to show that the existence of a Jehovah-like God is improbable" (p. 321-322, R&E). One such "fact" is rampant idolatry, in view of the First Commandment against it:

"How is it that millions of us less powerful humans ignore this heavenly dictum and manage to make ourselves into skeptics, nonbelievers, agnostics, and downright atheists?"  
(p. 322, R&E)

How indeed? The Scriptures have quite another view concerning *proof* that God indeed exists, in addition to a clear explanation of idolatry, and a certainty about God's future judgment of false worship and all other evils:

"The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard. Their sound has gone out through all the earth, and their utterances to the end of the world. In them He has placed a tent for the sun, which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber; it rejoices as a strong man to run his course. Its rising is from one end of the heavens, and its circuit to the other end of them; and there is nothing hidden from its heat." (Psalm 19:1-6)

"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not

honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures." (Romans 1:18-23)

Still another "explanation" of faith is a pressing question Ellis addresses to people who have converted to Christianity:

"Did your experience or your environmental upbringing lead to this feeling and belief? Or did you, for various reasons, invent it? The natural tendency of humans seems to consist of their frequently believing that their profound feelings prove something 'objective' or 'real' about the universe. This largely appears to be an innately based process of illusion." (p. 375, R&E)

An "innately based process of illusion"? This is remarkably similar to the nineteenth century atheist, Feuerbach, who believed God to be simply a "projection" of humanity. Ellis speaks of even more extreme illusions when he discusses "self-actualization":

"I can *believe* and *feel* that I am God, the Center of the Universe, the Devil, an Eternal Force, or what I will. But *am* I truly what I say and feel that I am? Or am I neurotically or psychotically deluded?... I could feel terrified by my believing myself to be God--or Satan!... So mystical 'altered states of conscious' or 'peak experiences' can be anti- instead of self-actualizing." (p. 391, R&E)

The Christian, of course, entertains no illusions that he is any of the above! But he does *know* that the God revealed in Scripture *really exists*. This is no illusion, but a fact so basic that no reality is coherent without such belief. Science cannot even get off the ground without the presupposition that God, the Creator and architect of the universe, has *designed* His creation in an orderly manner. In an atheist universe (which *cannot* exist), there is no rational basis for predication, no grounds for engaging in scientific quests and expecting reasonable results.

**Dependence on God.** Having rejected the very *existence* of God, it is only logical that Ellis also rejects dependence on Him. The result is a destruction of both certainty and hope:

"Your beliefs in supernatural spirits may be harmless, but your pious reliance on them has distinct emotional dangers!" (p. 325, R&E)

"Instead of striving to be dependent on other individuals (or on some hypothetical Higher Power) you can try to stand on your own two feet and to do your own thinking and acting.... Accept the fact that you are and will always be, in some essential respects, alone in this world." (p. 125, R&E)

"Relying on God, or supernatural spirits or forces, or on fanatical cults, may well become an obsessive-compulsive disturbance in its own right and lead to immense harm to other people and to oneself. So there is no certain cure or panacea. No, none!" (p. 137, R&E)

Passages of Scripture refuting this arrogant autonomy are legion. Such presumptuous self-sufficiency is antithetical to Christianity. Ellis uses his *God-given* intellect to attack his Creator.

**Lack of Meaning.** The system developed by Ellis destroys meaning along with its rejection of God. Ellis believes that:

"...the universe seems to be quite uninterested in and impartial to us humans (and probably to anything)...it doesn't care whether we live or die, whether we live 'happily' or 'unhappily.' We, however, do care, because that is our nature." (p. 133, R&E)

To be sure, "it" doesn't care. But God, who is *personal* and not an "it," does in fact care. Our *nature* is that we are created in God's image. We are able to think, reason, will, worship, and care because we bear the image of our Creator. It is patently *irrational* for Ellis to claim that non-created beings, evolving out of nowhere for no reason, are able to care!

Any personal meaning to life, Ellis claims, must be invented by the individual:

"REBT, unlike some of the religious and 'spiritual' therapies, doesn't give any specific meaning to human life or to the universe. For that would make it authoritarian. But it strongly recommends that you construct your own personal meaning." (p. 324, R&E)

But if there *is* no ultimate meaning, and no God, on what basis can any one individual *construct* meaning? How can the very concept of *meaning* have meaning or coherence? *Meaning* is only a meaningful idea on the basis that the personal God of Scripture exists. Otherwise, there is only chaos, chance, and irrationality.

**Psychotherapy and Spirituality.** Ellis has not failed to notice the increasing spirituality associated with psychotherapy in recent years. He attributes this to several factors:

1. Many therapists, such as Victor Frankl, emphasize the importance of a "vital absorbing interest," but go on to suggest the existence of a "cosmic meaning" beyond the individual. (p. 318, R&E)
2. Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step programs, relying on a "higher power," have multiplied in popularity. (p. 318, R&E)
3. Asian philosophies, such as Taoism, Vedantism, Shintoism, and Buddhism, are also increasing. (p. 318, R&E)
4. There are many New Age cults in the United States. (p. 319, R&E)
5. Transpersonal psychology attempts to transcend ordinary physical and mental limitations, in order to achieve "altered states of consciousness." (p. 319, R&E)
6. Certain modern philosophies, such as postmodernism, deconstructionism, relativism, and indeterminism, also contribute. (p. 319, R&E)

*None of the above* are spiritualities consistent with Christian theism, however.<sup>3</sup> The wedding of spirituality and psychotherapy is not one in which the Christian can participate. The above spiritualities are as dangerous and anti-Christian as the aggressive atheism of men like Albert Ellis (and Freud, and Fromm!).

Ellis is highly critical of modern transpersonal psychological approaches, including both "altered states," which

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<sup>3</sup> There are many "Christian" 12-step groups, and many Christians attend secular 12-step groups, but the basic theology of the 12-step program is incompatible with Christianity.

he believes unlikely to surpass normal states of consciousness (p. 388, R&E), and the concept of a "true self":

"REBT is highly skeptical that humans have any 'true' transpersonal, transcendental, or mystical selves, though they are certainly often born and reared with strong propensities to *think* or *experience* that they do have superhuman cores. REBT acknowledges that a *belief* in religion, God, mysticism, Pollyannaism, and irrationality may at times help people. But it also points out that such beliefs often do much more harm than good and block a more fully functioning life."  
(p. 387, R&E)

Christian theism does not acknowledge a "true self" such as proposed by transpersonal psychologies, but Ellis is wrong to lump that belief with *all* religion and with the existence of God.

**The "Scientific" Study of Religion.** Ellis is adamant in his statement that spiritual ideas cannot be either verified (per Immanuel Kant) or falsified (per Karl Popper). Yet he proposes scientific study from another angle:

"What can be scientifically studied is how *beliefs* in religious, transpersonal, mystical, and supernatural 'entities' can beneficially or harmfully affect their believers; and there seems to be a great deal of evidence that they can produce *both* good and bad effects." (p. 319, R&E)

Sometimes, Ellis admits, troubled people *do* appear to be helped by their religious faith:

"...if disturbed people *believe* in this kind of spiritual, religious, or magical help, they will often feel better, act better, and give their natural biological tendencies for improvement a chance to work." (p. 319, R&E)

Some, in fact, may respond *only* to "therapies" of a religious nature:

"Any of these 'spiritual' creeds, formulae, cults, or religions might possibly work, and might, in fact, be almost the only form of 'therapy' that you (or a similar type of client) would *allow* to work." (p. 321, R&E)

But Ellis, true to his dogmatic bias against religious faith, flatly refuses to put his seal of approval on any such approach. Here are his stated reasons:

1. "Even if gods and spirits do exist--which is still highly doubtful--it is most unlikely that they really *make* us less disturbed, less addicted"--etc. (p. 322, R&E)
2. It is the *belief* that helps, according to Ellis, not the actual spiritual entity. (p. 322, R&E)
3. "If you can benefit from these kinds of human and nonsupernatural beliefs (REBT), why should you resort to superhuman and spirit-filled beliefs that are unprovable, unfalsifiable, and very likely false or misleading?" (p. 323, R&E)
4. "Because your devout beliefs in gods or spirits that will concretely help you are most likely false, you run an excellent chance of their *not* doing anything helpful for you, and of your therefore becoming disillusioned in them." (p. 323, R&E)
5. If you believe that "I'm powerless" (like AA step #1) and must have spiritual help: "You then may easily *deny* your own recuperation abilities and actually make yourself weaker." (p. 323, R&E)
6. "One of the easiest things to be obsessive-compulsive about and seriously addicted to *is* religious and spiritual programs like Alcoholics Anonymous.... Cults...have a high percentage of devout followers who are clearly addicted to the 'divine' teachings of their groups and their leaders, and are (therefore?) severely disturbed individuals." (p. 323, R&E)

Ellis is willing to allow spirituality such as that espoused by Paul Tillich and Martin Buber, who hold "dubious hypotheses" such as the God of Scripture, but "hold them in an open-minded, humanistic manner" and "they thereby keep some of the benefits of 'spirituality' and eliminate many of its harmful effects" (p. 324, R&E). But clearly, he *excludes* true Christian theism, which is neither "open-minded" nor "humanistic."

**"The Case Against Religion."** Ellis' "case against religion" is actually his "case against *God*," in view of the fact that

according to his definition of religion, "some concept of a deity" is necessarily included (p. 1, CAR). Basically:

"If religion is defined as man's dependence on a power above and beyond the human, then, as a psychotherapist, I find it to be exceptionally pernicious." (p. 2, CAR)

He also attempts a "case against" *believers*:

"All true believers in any kind of orthodoxy...are distinctly disturbed, since they are obviously rigid, fanatic, and dependent individuals...religion essentially is: childish dependency." (p. 18, CAR)

The REBT therapist, according to Ellis, must "attack his patient's religiosity" (p. 16, CAR), "actively depropagandize" him so as to eradicate his religious beliefs (p. 17, CAR), rather than to accept those beliefs:

"Obviously, the sane and effective psychotherapist should not...go along with the patients' religious orientation and try to help these patients live successfully with their religions, for this is equivalent to trying to help them live successfully with their emotional illness." (p. 15, CAR)

So much for the tolerance and open-mindedness Ellis promotes throughout his writings! In fact, *tolerance* of the beliefs of others is one of the nine qualities of "mental health" that Ellis cites, qualities he believes are hindered by religious faith. Yet he himself refuses to tolerate Christian theism in his own counseling clients, and recommends that other therapists, similarly, actively *attack* the faith of those they counsel.

Let's look at the "goals of mental health" advocated by Ellis, goals he claims are "antithetical to a truly religious viewpoint" (p. 2, CAR). They are, *in a sense*, incompatible with Christianity. But not *exactly*! It is interesting to note that, in spite of the rejection of "shoulds" so heavily promoted by Ellis, every statement about the "mentally healthy" includes an absolute *should*! The irony cannot be missed.

Self-interest heads the list:

"The emotionally healthy individual should primarily be true to himself and not masochistically sacrifice himself for others." (p. 3, CAR)

Ellis understands religion as excluding any real views of one's own (p. 5, CAR), and as necessarily involving the infliction of pain on self:

"...the very essence of most organized religions is the performance of masochistic, guilt-soothing rituals, by which the religious individual gives himself permission to enjoy life. Religiosity, to a large degree, essentially is masochism; and both are forms of mental sickness."  
(p. 6, CAR)

Ellis has no clue about the true essence of Christianity! Yes, life includes pain and suffering. The Scriptures clearly tell us so, and Ellis himself cannot escape that reality. Nor does he claim to! He insists on changing one's thoughts *about* pain, so that it is not so "awful." The believer does not actively seek out suffering for its own sake, or to atone for his own sin (knowing Christ has already done that), but he interprets his suffering in light of God's Word. Far from actively seeking pain, he anticipates an eternity where pain is forever obliterated.

Unlike Ellis (and too many Christian psychologists!), however, Scripture does not exalt self-interest. The believer does willingly lay down his life for the cause of Christ. He joyfully puts others ahead of self, grateful for God's gift of salvation.

A further criticism is raised in the area of service to others. Here is what Ellis says about the believer's social interest:

"Devout deity-inspired religionists tend to sacrifice human love for godly love (agape) and to withdraw into monastic and holy affairs at the expense of intimate interpersonal relationships. They frequently are deficient in social competence." (p. 27, CAR)

This is a *false* portrait of Christianity. Yes, love of *God* supersedes the love of *man*. But love for one's fellow human beings is only possible in the context of God's love. *God is love. God defines love.* The New Testament repeatedly affirms love for one another, even love for one's enemies--of which Ellis knows nothing.

After self-interest comes self-direction. According to Ellis, a "mentally healthy" person ought to be autonomous, running his own life and only occasionally preferring cooperation or help



from others (p. 3, CAR). But "the religious person is by necessity dependent and other-directed rather than independent and self-directed" (p. 6, CAR). "Religion and self-sufficiency are contradictory terms" says Ellis (p. 6, CAR). Indeed they are. Man is not autonomous. He must bow before his *Creator*. It is foolish to think that a finite, sinful creature can be so independent. Even Ellis admits the *fallibility* of human beings. How can he consistently maintain such arrogant independence alongside this admission?

The third quality noted is tolerance, which Ellis clearly violates in his expression of *intolerance* toward religion!

"He should fully give other human beings the right to be wrong; and while disliking or abhorring some of their behavior, still not blame them, as persons, for performing this dislikable behavior." (p. 3, CAR)

But as a therapist, Ellis fails to give his own clients the right to be "wrong" (from his perspective) about religion! He does in fact blame them, and proceeds to attack their faith!

Ellis sees tolerance as incompatible with religion:

"Religion...by setting up absolute, god-given standards, must make you self-depreciating 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 human emotions: anxiety and hostility." (p. 7, CAR)

"Tolerance is anathema to devout divinity-centered religionists, since they believe that their particular god...is absolutely right and that all opposing deities and humans are positively and utterly false and wrong."  
(p. 28, CAR)

It is not religion, however, but *God* who sets absolute standards. People are not "dehumanized" when they err. Humans are created *in the image of God* but are fallen into sin. Because of the image of God, the believer is never to "dehumanize" others. The gospel has the answer for sin, as well as the anxiety and hostility abhorred by Ellis. Humans do sin, but Christians, by God's grace and the work of Christ, are *forgiven*. Ellis fails to take the gospel into account.

Ellis claims that intolerance leads to all sorts of emotional turmoil:

"Born of this kind of piety-inspired intolerance of self and others come some of the most serious of emotional disorders--such as extreme anxiety, depression, self-hatred, and rage."  
(p. 29, CAR)

Based on his own standards, Ellis--piously intolerant of religious faith!--ought to be seriously disturbed!

The next "mental health" quality listed is the acceptance of uncertainty:

"The emotionally mature individual should completely accept the fact that we all 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."  
(p. 3, CAR)

From this *absolute* (!) statement, Ellis concludes that:

"...divinity-oriented religiosity is the unhealthiest state imaginable: since its prime reason for being is to enable the religionist to believe in god-commanded certainty."  
(p. 29, CAR; similar statement on p. 8)

Ellis believes that religious people "invent absolutistic gods" in response to the uncertainty of life, that they "thereby pretend that there is some final, invariant answer to things" (p. 8, CAR).

Yet Ellis evidences extreme *certainty* about the qualities of "mental health" as he has defined them. He makes "absolutistic" statements about the uncertainty of life. But without some kind of certainty, there would be no basis whatsoever for *rationality*. Ellis cannot truthfully call his system "rational" in a universe ruled by probability, chance, and uncertainty. On the basis of his stated presuppositions, he has no basis for rationality or knowledge of any kind. He has no basis for the pursuit of empirically based knowledge, no basis for knowledge grounded in human reason. He has no basis for defining "mental health."

But the Christian, knowing that the personal, eternal God of Scripture does exist, has a basis for knowledge and rationality. He has real certainty in the midst of what seems to be an

uncertain world! Most importantly, he has the certainty of eternal life:

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you." (1 Peter 1:3-4)

Moving right along, Ellis next cites flexibility:

"He should remain intellectually flexible, be open to change at all times, and unbigotedly view the infinitely varied people, ideas, and things in the world around him."  
(p. 4, CAR)

But just how flexible is Ellis himself in his highly biased attitude toward religion? He accuses the religious individual of being inflexible, stating that flexibility is "sabotaged by religious belief," a belief sustained by "a faith unfounded in fact" (p. 8, CAR). But it is rather Ellis who maintains a "faith unfounded in fact." His faith is in his own dogmas, in atheism rather than theism, but it is *faith* nonetheless. Christianity is rooted in verifiable historical facts--facts also *interpreted* by God in His revelation.

The believer is "flexible" in the sense that he remains humbly open to learning more about his Lord and Savior. He acknowledges his own sinfulness in the face of God's infallible, unchanging standards of righteousness. Ellis merely affirms "fallibility" in the face of pure chance and a lack of absolutes. He is *intolerant* and *inflexible* in his contempt for Christian theism, thus failing his own test for "mental health."

The sixth criteria is scientific thinking:

"He should be objective, rational and scientific; and be able to apply the laws of logic and of scientific method not only to external people and events, but to himself and his interpersonal relationships." (p. 4, CAR)

On what basis can Ellis claim that *laws* of logic even exist? Or rationality, if man is not a creature created in the image of a personal, sovereign God? How can science even get off the ground in a fundamentally *irrational* universe ruled by *chance*? It is

Ellis, not the Christian, who is irrational, unscientific, and subjective. Again, *he fails his own test!*

Yet Ellis arrogantly states that:

"...any time...anyone unempirically establishes a god or a set of religious postulates which have a superhuman origin, he can thereafter use no empirical evidence whatever to question the dictates of this god or those postulates, since they are (by definition) beyond scientific validation." (p. 9, CAR)

But Ellis exalts human experience here as the ultimate standard of authority. The existence of *God* is not merely another hypothesis to be tested by some *higher* authority. Ellis reverses the Creator-creature distinction of Scripture. Man takes the place of God in his thinking. But God, being the ultimate authority, is necessarily *self*-attesting. If His existence could be tested according to humanly devised standards, He would no longer be *God*. Ellis suppresses the truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18)!

Yet another quality of "mental health" is commitment:

"He should be vitally absorbed in something outside of himself, whether it be people, things, or ideas." (p. 4, CAR)

(How exactly does this correlate with self-interest, which heads the list?!)

Ellis cannot escape the fact that religion involves deep commitment. This time he dismisses it with the evaluation that:

"...it tends to be obsessive-compulsive...motivated by guilt or hostility...based on falsehoods and illusions...therefore easily can be shattered, thus plunging the previously committed individual into the depths of disillusionment and despair." (p. 10, CAR)

He goes on to call religion "fanaticism" which "masks and provides a bulwark for the underlying insecurity of the obsessed individual" (p. 11, CAR).

But what is the motivation of Ellis for his dogmatic (perhaps "obsessive-compulsive" by his standards!) commitment to atheism? Could it be *hostility* toward his Creator, *guilt* in the face of

this holy, righteous God? Romans 1 leads us to such conclusions. Is it conceivable that Ellis will one day be plunged into despair and disillusionment by the hopelessness and absurdity of his own system? Yes, it is. It is also possible that the Spirit of God may work in his heart to show him his error and lead him to repentance and faith.

Yet another characteristic of "mental health" is the willingness to take risks:

"The emotionally sound person should be able to take risks, to ask himself what he would really like to do in life, and then to try to do this, even though he has to risk defeat or failure." (p. 4, CAR)

Ellis insists that the religious person is "highly determined not to be adventurous," strongly adhering to "unvalidatable assumptions precisely because he does not want to risk following his own preferences" (p. 11, CAR). He "sells his soul, surrenders his own basic urges and pleasures" (p. 11, CAR). He fears failure, "falsely defining his own worth as a person in terms of achievement" (p. 11, CAR). Ellis thus summarizes religion as "needless inhibition" (p. 11, CAR).

But is this an accurate portrait of the Christian? He does, to be sure, place the glory of God above his own pleasures. But he does *not* "define his own worth as a person in terms of achievement." He is confident in the assurance that his own achievements could never procure salvation, so he trusts in the achievement of his Lord on the cross. He is *able to take risks* for the cause of Christ, precisely because of his confidence and trust in the almighty God of Scripture. Ellis foolishly risks his eternal soul in his rejection of God!

Last--but to Ellis, not least--is the quality of self-acceptance:

"He should normally be glad to be alive, and to like himself just because he is alive, because he exists, and because he (as a living being) invariably has some power to enjoy himself, to create happiness and joy." (p. 4, CAR)

Again, Ellis sees "mental health" and religion as polar opposites. He says that "the religious devotee cannot possibly accept himself just because he is alive" (p. 11, CAR):

"Rather, orthodox theists make their self-acceptance quite contingent on their being accepted by the god, the church, the clergy, and the other members of the religious denomination in which they believe." (p. 37, CAR)

Ellis sees religion as involving "self-abasement and self-abnegation" (p. 12, CAR).

It is true that the believer must acknowledge his own sin in the light of God's holy standards, and this cannot lead to the unconditional self-acceptance that Ellis promotes. However, Christian theism *does not* promote seeking the approval of *man* as Ellis believes. The approval or acceptance of *God* is based on the work of Christ. Ellis has no comprehension of the basic gospel message and the glorious *freedom* that accrues to the believer. There is no longer any need to pursue "acceptance" based on works, or worth, or any other human merits!

There is a brief passage in "The Case Against Religion" where Ellis discusses grace, but he concludes that *no theistic creeds* actually do provide grace. He explains that:

"...these theistic religions still require their adherents to believe (1) that a god (or son of god) must exist; (2) that s/he personally gives you unconditional acceptance or grace; and (3) that consequently you must believe in this religion and in its god to receive the 'unconditional' grace.... And these conditions, of course, make your accepting of yourself conditional rather than unconditional...you choose to believe in this religion and you consequently create the grace-giver who 'makes' you self-acceptable." (p. 38, CAR)

Ellis concludes that the believer's system of faith is "actually self-inspired!" (p. 38, CAR). But he utterly fails to understand the biblical concept of grace. The faith required for eternal life is a *gift* of God, *not* of ourselves (Ephesians 2:7-10). The believer has been *chosen by God* before the foundation of the earth according to God's good pleasure (Ephesians 1:4-5), *His* intention (Ephesians 1:11). Salvation is wholly a work of God's grace and purpose, not the will of man. God Himself established the conditions for salvation and ensured the fulfillment of those conditions. Ellis fails to grasp the heart of Christian faith!

The conclusions Ellis reaches reveals his contempt for the God who created him. He sees religion as "neurosis" and states that "if there were a god, it would be necessary to uninvent him" (p. 15, CAR). This is precisely what Ellis would *like* to do:

"uninvent" God (Romans 1:18). He accuses the religious person of exalting himself without cause:

"Devout religiosity particularly foments ego-bolstering and grandiosity...pious ones frequently think of themselves as utterly noble and great because of their religious convictions.... Grandiosity is one of the most common of human disturbed feelings; and it often compensates for underlying feelings of slobhood." (p. 40, CAR)

Once more, Ellis fails his own test! There is nothing more "grandiose" than the rebellious human heart. Ellis arrogantly rejects the knowledge of God and places *his own standards* for "mental health" in the place of God's revealed standards for righteousness. His systematic rejection of religion crumbles under the weight of its own irrationality.

### **The Nature of Man**

Ellis has divorced the study of man (psychology) from the study of God (theology). This is his critical error, an error repeated by the other schools of modern psychology. Since man is the *image of God*, atheism can lead only to gross distortions in the biblical view of human nature. We have already looked at some of those distortions in Ellis' definition of "mental health."

**Language.** Ellis recognizes (but cannot explain) the fact that humans differ radically from other "animals" because of their ability to use language. He noticed that humans are quite different from Pavlov's dogs (p. 10, R&E)! (No kidding!)

"...humans have attributes that none of the other living beings have in any well-developed form: language and the symbol-producing facility that goes with language."  
(p. 10, R&E)

"Their language abilities permit them illegitimately to translate their psychological *desires*--such as the desires for love, approval, success, and leisure--into *definitional needs*." (p. 29, R&E)

The ability to think and to use language is grounded in man's creation in the image of God. The atheist cannot account for language in any meaningful manner. The Christian can! Since the whole system of REBT is based on the use of *language* (via the thoughts), Ellis is working on borrowed capital. His atheist

worldview cannot make sense of the existence of language and rationality.

**Dominion.** God gave man dominion over the rest of His creation. He created man in His image, unlike the animals or other portions of creation. Ellis cannot help but observe man's superiority, but he cannot account for it:

"We, unlike perhaps all other animals on earth, are self-conscious, self-changing, and self-actualizing. Without this inborn tendency, we most probably never would have survived as a species, nor made ourselves the master of almost all other species." (p. 72, R&E)

**Absolutes.** Although Ellis rejects the existence of absolutes, he sees in human beings an innate tendency to create such absolutes:

"Virtually all humans...have an innate tendency to take their *strong* desires and preferences...and to *make* them, *construct* them into absolutistic musts...they therefore have an inborn propensity...to needlessly upset themselves." (p. 14, R&E)

"...almost all humans take their socially imbibed preferences and standards and *create* and *construct* absolutistic, unrealistic shoulds, oughts, musts, and demands *about* these goals." (p. 40, R&E)

Although Ellis cannot account for this tendency toward absolutes, he attempts to do so by *assuming* evolutionary roots:

"...our tendency to create absolutistic musts...may have originally served a different purpose when it first arose, because the environment was then different." (p. 15, R&E)

"...absolutistic thinking may possibly have been necessary for human survival and reproduction--many centuries ago--but creates neurotic havoc today." (p. 73, R&E)

Ellis himself admits this to be a "speculative hypothesis" (p. 73, R&E). Indeed it is. It requires as much *faith* as the devout religious creeds that Ellis abhors because they are "unscientific," not verified by human experience! Evolution is not verified by human experience or by scientific inquiry.

**Gullibility.** Ellis sees people as easily influenced and gullible:



"Virtually all humans...are *born* and *reared* to be highly influenceable, affectable, and emotional." (p. 18, R&E)

People are "*born* gullible and teachable and therefore are *highly influenceable* from the start." (p. 40, R&E)

"Almost all humans seem to be born and reared with strong tendencies to see their world and their life as benign rather than malevolent...to view others as a source of support and happiness rather than a source of insecurity and unhappiness...to see their traits as capable, good, and lovable rather than as incapable, bad, and unlovable."  
(p. 77, R&E)

When reality later proves these beliefs to be false, people may either become frustrated in a "healthy" manner, or they may "neuroticize" themselves with panic (p. 77, R&E).

Aside from the obvious fact that this view glosses over sin, how could Ellis possibly account for *any* sort of *innate* tendency in an atheist universe, ruled by chance and uncertainty? Ellis has no rational basis on which to explain any innate human tendencies.

**Multiple influences.** According to Ellis, people upset themselves largely by their own absolutistic demands, but are also influenced by social upbringing, traumatic events, environmental conditions, and biological tendencies. Therefore, he concludes, "neurotic" or "dysfunctional" symptoms..."are *largely* and *importantly* 'caused' by their irrational beliefs" but "we can more accurately see that the 'causes' of neurotic disturbances are multiple and varied" (p. 20, R&E).

The ability of people to *cause* their own disturbances, primarily by their "irrational" beliefs, is a cornerstone of REBT. But on the basis of atheism, the very concept of causation is incoherent, and the meaning of "irrational" is irrational, because it cannot be contrasted to what is truly *rational*. *God* is the source of rationality!

**Goals.** Ellis presupposes that people tend to construct goals and to experience varying levels of displeasure when those goals are blocked (p. 18, R&E). Furthermore, they construct both rational and irrational beliefs about those negative feelings (p. 19, R&E). REBT "includes the specific existential-humanistic

outlook of some other therapeutic schools" including those of Carl Rogers and Victor Frankl (p. 248, R&E):

"This view sees people as holistic, goal-directed individuals who have importance in the world just because they are human and alive." (p. 248, R&E)

Ellis says that goals may be either "healthy" or "unhealthy." He defines "goals" as follows:

"...purposes, values, standards, and hopes that are often biological propensities...also learned...also practiced and made habitual." (p. 80, R&E)

According to his theory, "humans, biologically and by social learning, are goal-seeking animals" (P. 76, R&E). Certain "fundamental" goals include relative freedom from pain and reasonable satisfaction in life (p. 76, R&E). "Primary goals" concern happiness in relation to self, others, vocation, and economic condition (p. 76, R&E). Major goals of people most likely to survive include: the desire for pleasure rather than pain, the desire to relate well to others, the desire to rate oneself as competent and lovable, and desires to solve problems, use reason/logic, have new experiences, achieve security/stability in work and social life (p. 77, R&E). When experiences confirm these goals, people respond favorably; when they don't, people respond with displeasure (p. 77, R&E).

Once again, in a "chance" atheistic universe, there is no rationale for seeking goals or for assuming that people are born with an innate tendency to pursue goals. Nor is there justification for asserting that certain *particular* goals are desirable rather than others. Ellis has no basis on which to attack the goals of the Christian--to serve and glorify God.

**Irrationality.** Ellis assumes a great deal of *irrationality* in human nature (p. 366-368, R&E). People have many irrational, rigid, outdated customs. They tend to deify or "devil-ify" themselves. They tend to overgeneralize. People are easily addicted and quickly acquire self-defeating habits. They assume that if something "feels" true, it must be true. A large number of irrational beliefs are held in a variety of areas, including prejudice, health, superstition, politics, economics, hostility, harmful excitement, morality, sex, and science. People tend to forget pain rather than learning from it. They strive for immediate pleasures and tend to be defensive about their shortcomings.

Even the exalted psychotherapists are not immune (p. 368, R&E):

- (1) "They...often rigidly overemphasize one single or main approach to therapy."
- (2) "They have their own dire *needs* for their clients' love and approval."
- (3) "They focus on helping clients *feel* better rather than get better."
- (4) "They create therapeutic orthodoxies and excommunicate the therapists who deviate from their dogmas."
- (5) They look for "deep" explanations and ignore those that appear more "superficial."
- (6) "They turn to magic, faith healing, shamanism, and other non-scientific forms of therapy."
- (7) "They promote vaguely defined, utopian goals that may mislead and harm clients."

The dismal summary of all this:

"Dysfunctional behavior is the 'normal' lot of all people much of the time." (p. 369, R&E)

A depressing scenario this is! More seriously, the whole picture overlooks the biblical reality of sin, substituting "irrationality" in its place.

**Contradictions.** Ellis believes there are opposing innate tendencies within man that complicate the issue of effectively bringing about change:

"...people have innate self-changing and self-actualizing tendencies" but also "strong innate self-defeating, masturbatory tendencies." (p. 221, R&E)

"REBT assumes two opposing innate tendencies when you encounter undesirable conditions." These are: (1) to prefer that bad situations not exist, (2) to believe that such situations absolutely must not exist. (p. 14-15, R&E)

Ellis also assumes a "strong biological tendency...to be motivated and impelled to constructively change things for the better" (p. 15, R&E). More specifically, he says that people are:

"...born with constructive self-actualizing tendencies to change their destructive thoughts, feelings, and actions, and to dispute and restructure them." (p. 279, R&E)

Ellis believes that people are both rational and irrational at the same time (p. 53, R&E). He states that "we inherit a predisposition to think unclearly during our childhood" and easily continue such thinking even when it's ridiculous to do so (p. 279, R&E).

But Ellis can offer no explanation for the inner conflict he presumes to exist within man. He fails to consider either *sin* or God's restraint on that sin.

**The "Unconscious."** REBT claims to be *more* concerned with unconscious thought processes than other therapies, but is also quite concerned with *conscious* thoughts and feelings that are self-destructive. Note however, that REBT doesn't believe "that there is an unconscious or that anyone's thoughts and feelings can be scientifically reified into entities called the superego, id, or ego" (p. 284, R&E).

REBT thus differs from Freudian psychoanalysis. Unconscious thought processes are not ignored, but are quickly brought to awareness so that change can be initiated:

"Humans naturally have conscious and unconscious thoughts and processes" but "instead of these irrational beliefs being deeply hidden or repressed (as psychoanalytic theory holds) they are almost always just below the level of consciousness...and can fairly easily be brought to light if one uses REBT theory to look for and reveal them." (p. 204, R&E)

Regarding early traumatic events, Ellis believes that they *may sometimes* be unconsciously repressed, but not so often as psychoanalytic theory holds. REBT is more concerned with "*current* philosophic and behavioral retraumatizing." Digging up repressed memories of early trauma, Ellis holds, may be helpful but also may be harmful (p. 204, R&E). Ellis says REBT will:

"...help repressors to refuse to blame or damn their *self* or *being* for anything, but only to condemn their wrong or stupid *behaviors*." (p. 205, R&E)

We can agree that there is not an "unconscious," as Freud claimed. But both Freud and Ellis are equally incapable of exposing the depths of *sin* in the human heart. Both suppress the truth about God and about man, though their terms and methods may differ.

**Sin!** In a chapter outlining the "limitations of psychotherapy," Ellis lists a number of human tendencies that in biblical reality indicate the presence of sin. These include:

- ...the difficulty of "unlearning" behaviors (p. 334, R&E)
- ...the difficulty of expending the energy to get started (p. 335, R&E)
- ...the tendency toward excessive fear and anxiety, beyond the "existential fear or anxiety" (p. 338, R&E)
- ...the tendency toward extremism (p. 339, R&E)
- ...the tendency toward change and imbalance (p. 340, R&E)
- ...forgetfulness, particularly "neurotic forgetting" involving wishfulness (p. 342, R&E)
- ...the difficulty of remaining organized and focused (p. 344, R&E)
- ...the tendency to give up too easily (p. 345, R&E)
- ...the tendency to become stressed
- ...the difficulty of observing ourselves while we're in action (p. 351, R&E)
- ...the "natural" difficulty of making the ethical discriminations necessary to avoid defeating one's own best interests (p. 352, R&E)
- ...the tendency to overgeneralize, to "awfulize" (p. 353, R&E)
- ...the tendency toward slow learning (p. 354, R&E)
- ...the ease of adjusting to emotional disturbances, to live with them due to familiarity and predictability (p. 357, R&E)
- ...the tendency to dislike frustration and to want your own way (p. 363, R&E)
- ...the time lag between perceptions and responses (p. 355, R&E)
- ...the tendency toward rashness and impulsivity (p. 354, R&E)
- ...the tendency to develop automatic, learned patterns (habits) repeated with little thought (p. 341, R&E)

The human emphasis on injustice is worth mentioning separately:

"Humans probably are not born with a clear-cut sense of unfairness or injustice, but learn what is right and what is wrong and are taught to hate others who are 'wrong.' Nonetheless, history shows that people very easily become moralistic." (p. 346, R&E)

As an atheist, Ellis has no way to account for the presence of moral standards--either his own, or those of others! He *attempts* to account for various human tendencies by assuming *biological roots*:

"Human feelings of envy, jealousy, and hatred are biologically rooted as well as environmentally fostered." (p. 346-347, R&E)

"Excitement seeking is probably built into the biological foundations of most people; and at times it encourages them to engage in self-defeating behavior." (p. 349, R&E)

"Like the tendency to blame others, the propensity to blame oneself (and to feel ashamed or guilty) may also in part be biologically based.... Humans *normally* are blame-accepting animals." (p. 347-348, R&E)

Here we see emotions, excitement, and blame are grounded in some type of *biological, innate* tendency. But without God the Creator, there *could be* no such innate tendencies! Order does not originate in chaos, but in the universe Ellis claims to perceive, there is nothing *but* chaos.

Belief in God is "explained" on the assumption that:

"...most people have an inborn tendency to *expect* a thing to exist because they strongly *want* it to." (p. 343, R&E)

At the same time, Ellis maintains that--contrary to Freud--wishful thinking is *not* an abnormal process. Nevertheless, it crashes into the grim realities of life (p. 343, R&E).

However, he proves absolutely nothing here concerning his atheism. The fact that many people *want* God to exist does not mean that He doesn't! According to Romans 1, it is unbelievers who engage in "wishful thinking," wishing that God did not exist and suppressing the truth in unrighteousness.

Ellis holds down the truth in his rejection of the idea that there are any wicked persons, referring to:

"...the ancient theological doctrine of free will, which assumes that every person has the freedom to act 'right' or 'wrong,' in relation to some absolute standard of truth and justice ordained by 'God' or the 'natural law'; and that if people use their 'free will' to behave 'wrong,' they are wicked 'sinners.'" (p. 111, R&E)

Ellis says that you have "surprisingly little" free will because:

"...you are frequently unaware or unconscious of some of your most powerful motives (such as your achievement drives or hostilities)." (p. 111, R&E)

These statements about the lack of free will are rather amazing in a system that promotes the autonomy of man! Ellis wants to deny God, deny absolute moral standards, exalt man to an independent autonomous position, and yet he denies man the "free will" inherently necessary to such a system. Scripture teaches the total inability of the unregenerate man to will or to do what is pleasing to God, yet fully affirms his responsibility for his sin (Romans 8:7-8). Ellis desires autonomy and at the same time he attempts to create an escape hatch so that he does not have to face God.

Rejecting man's inherent sinfulness, REBT therapy, in relation to its clients, claims that it "realistically assesses and at least temporarily *accepts* the full measure of their highly fallible humanity," thus being more realistic than "positive thinking" methods (p. 364, R&E):

"REBT takes the less romantic view that humans are not 'good' or 'bad' but that they have, innately and environmentally, strong 'good' and 'bad' *tendencies*." (p. 364, R&E)

One tendency considered by Ellis is that of rebellion and grandiosity, of which he presumes there are "normal, human components." However, grandiosity or rebellion becomes "dysfunctional" when people believe the world *absolutely must* revolve around them (p. 339, R&E).

The Bible is more definite, and places man's rebellion within the framework of God's sovereignty and holiness. *All* have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). There is *none* righteous, not even one (Romans 3:10b). Grandiosity and rebellion

are never simply "normal," but rather are part of man's corrupt nature. Sin is pervasive, impacting every aspect of man from his youth (Genesis 6:5, 8:21). Even Ellis cannot consistently escape this truth. He claims that we "have many innate tendencies to defeat and sabotage ourselves, both individually and collectively" (p. 73, R&E). This is a disguised description of *sin*.

**Thoughts and emotions.** Ellis bases his counseling on the assumption that there exists a close relationship between thoughts and emotions. REBT is:

"...based on the assumption that human thinking and emotion are *not* two disparate or different processes, but that they significantly overlap." (p. 55, R&E)

Emotions, according to Ellis, may have causes that are biological, cognitive, or sensorimotor, and may be changed in four main ways: biochemical or electrical, sensorimotor (yoga, breathing exercises), use of existing emotions and prejudices as motivation, self-talk (p. 56, R&E). Emotions "may...simply be evaluations which have a strong bodily component," evaluations that certain things are good or bad (p. 57, R&E). Ellis advocates both brief and sustained emotions in order to survive and live happily (p. 59, R&E). He prefers the terms "healthy" and "unhealthy" to "appropriate" and "inappropriate" because he believes that *all* emotions are in some ways appropriate (p. 61, R&E). Therapists trained in REBT:

"...do not accept an emotion as 'good' merely because it exists, is genuine, and has a certain degree of intensity" but rather "define 'healthy' emotions in terms of the clients' goals and values, and not abstractly in their own right."  
(p. 256, R&E)

REBT, unlike Zen Buddhism, is not opposed to strong desire (p. 70, R&E). REBT includes a process called "rational emotive imagery," helping clients to get in touch with their feelings and then use cognitive means to change them (p. 166, R&E).

The relationship between thoughts, emotions, and behaviors is a crucial foundation to REBT, which holds:

"theoretically, that cognitions affect feelings and behaviors; but that, interactionally, feelings and behaviors also significantly affect cognitions." (p. 411, R&E)



Counseling is grounded in key assumptions about the emotions of those being counseled:

"It begins with the assumption that disturbed people have anxious, depressed, and hostile *feelings*." (p. 266, R&E)

In addition, there is included a hypothesis that *some* feelings are:

"...biologically rooted--that there is a normal *tendency* of humans *easily* to become excessively anxious, depressed, and angry, and that it is most difficult (though not impossible) for them to understand, control, and to some degree change this tendency." (p. 266, R&E)

The Bible has plenty to say about the existence of human emotion, and the righteousness or sinfulness of emotions in specific instances. The believer does not need the speculations of an atheist to learn about either emotions, thoughts, or behaviors--or how these should be conformed to God's standards! Of course these are related, but only the Christian can account for that relationship. In a universe of pure chance, without God, there would *be* no such relationships.

Christians, such as Backus and Thurman, have naively assumed that the system of Ellis can be "Christianized" because the Bible speaks about the renewal of the mind. Unfortunately, borrowing from an atheist creates more problems than it solves. Buying into the assumption of Ellis--that thoughts are primarily responsible for emotions and behavior--bypasses the crucial role of the Spirit in sanctification. There is no room in REBT, grounded as it is in atheism, for either the human spirit or the Holy Spirit.

**Self, self, self, self.** Self is "god" in the world of Albert Ellis. However, he does not accept the "self-worth" and "self-esteem" teachings that flood today's psychological market.

First, he clearly rejects any correlation between self-worth and the evaluations of *others*:

"People have extrinsic value to others and intrinsic value to themselves but they easily confuse the two and *define* themselves as 'good' or 'worthwhile' mainly in terms of their assumed value to others." (p. 188, R&E)

Having rejected all absolutes, "self-worth" reduces to an autonomous declaration of the individual:

"Ideas and feelings about self-worth are largely definitional and are not empirically confirmable or falsifiable. We really *choose* to accept or denigrate our 'selves.'" (p. 188, R&E)

"People can be shown that they are only worthless by definition--because they *think* that they are. Therefore, they'd better *choose* to define themselves as worthwhile because that will lead to much better emotional and behavioral results...people can *unconditionally* accept themselves."  
(p. 189, R&E)

There is no stability or certainty, however, in that declaration:

"People's intrinsic *value* or *worth* cannot really be measured, because their *being* includes their *becoming*." (p. 188, R&E)

Despite the impossibility of either certainty or measurement, Ellis advocates teaching his "unconditional self-acceptance" to our children:

"To help people gain unconditional self-acceptance and think that they *are* okay or *are* good, just because they exist, this idea had better be taught to all children." (p. 189, R&E)

Meanwhile, Ellis warns against correlating one's self-evaluation with either happiness or self-confidence. Happier people aren't necessarily *better* people, and "self-worth is not to be confused with self-*confidence*" (p. 188, R&E).

Ellis traces lack of "self-worth" to--you guessed it--the adherence to absolute standards:

"Taking one's *preferences* for success and approval and making them into *musts* and *demands* often leads to feelings of worthlessness." (p. 189, R&E)

However, because Ellis rejects absolute truth, he is forced to the conclusion that *neither is right* when he compares a person who defines himself as "good" just because he exists, and another person who believes that all humans should be wiped out (p. 190, R&E)! The Scriptures reveal that we are created in God's image. Therefore, as Christians, we have a solid basis for treating other human beings well and not simply wiping them all out!

Ellis concludes that it is best to rate or evaluate only your actions, thoughts, and feelings, but never "your *self*, your *being*, your *essence*, your *totality* at all." He says to "give up your *self*-ratings...and especially give up your *self*-esteem." Such self-esteem:

"...is one of the greatest sicknesses known to humans-- because when you *fail* to do well and you are *not* greatly loved (as is almost inevitable), back to feeling like a worthless, rotten person you will go!" (p. 191, R&E).

The Christian, however, trusts in the completed work of Christ. The righteousness of Christ is credited to his account, and he is counted righteous before God. This glorious gospel truth far surpasses the hopeless scheme of Ellis *and* the man-centered self-esteem teachings running rampant through the church today.

Putting theory into practice, the REBT therapists *may* express empathy and warmth to their clients, but always with caution, so that they do not encourage *conditional* self-acceptance. Rather, they strive to "*teach* clients a philosophy of self-acceptance" (p. 257, R&E). Here is how that "self-acceptance" works:

"More fully functioning people are aware of their own feelings, do not try to repress them, often act upon them, and even when they do not act upon them are able to admit them to awareness." (p. 398, R&E)

Additionally, as we have already seen, Ellis advocates tolerance of differences in others, acceptance of uncertainty, placing self first, and self-direction. Much of this clashes sharply with Christianity. At the same time, the system reduces to absurdity and explodes with internal contradictions. Ellis grounds his theories in pure chance, which can never explain *anything*, and certainly not the nature of man!

### **Morality, Guilt, and Responsibility**

The Bible places man in a covenantal relationship with God, his Creator. Man has broken the covenant and fallen into sin. God holds him morally responsible, but has progressively revealed His plan of redemption, graciously giving eternal salvation to those who trust in the completed work of Christ.

Despite his rejection of God, Ellis claims to be concerned with moral standards in his therapy. "In opposition to the psychoanalytic position" he believes that:

"...psychotherapy had better be largely concerned with clients' sense of morality and wrongdoing. An effective therapist will help clients see that they are acting immorally (destructively) to themselves and to others, that they can correct their unethical behavior in most instances, and that when they cannot or do not correct it they are still not bad or immoral persons." (p. 181, R&E)

Rather, they are persons "who can accept themselves, their essence, their being *whether or not* they act immorally or unethically" (p. 181, R&E).

As an atheist, Ellis has no basis for formulating standards of right and wrong. His flimsy attempt to do so is based solely on human agreement:

"In the final analysis, 'right' and 'wrong' acts in any community are established by some kind of consensus."  
(p. 182, R&E)

According to Ellis, REBT is "sometimes accused of having no morality and of encouraging irresponsible behavior. Not so!" REBT "has no special moral rules but tends to adopt those of the community or culture in which the individual lives" (p. 186, R&E). The only "morality" that REBT adopts is strictly *relative*.

Meanwhile, Ellis continues to express his contempt for God's divinely revealed *absolute* standards for righteousness:

"Although humans are never likely to determine any absolute, final, or God-given standard of morals or ethics, they can fairly easily agree, in any given community, on what is 'right' and what is 'wrong' and can therefore rate or measure their thoughts, feelings, and acts as 'good' or 'bad.'"  
(p. 181, R&E)

A quick glance at any local newspaper, however, shows beyond a doubt that such agreement is anything but "fairly easy"!

According to Ellis, sin is not a *moral* evil. "Wrong" acts are done from ignorance, stupidity, or emotional disturbance. Therefore, Ellis says, you cannot be "damned" for them even though you might cause harm to others. "A 'bad' act does not make a 'bad' person" (p. 112, R&E). In fact, Ellis sees "sin" as simply an routine, anticipated part of human life:

"You are a distinctly *fallible* animal who can realistically be expected to make mistakes and errors." (p. 112, R&E)

The Bible disagrees. Man was created good and upright, without sin. Sin is not a "normal" occurrence when viewed in relationship to God's original creation.

Ellis insists that *blaming*, either self or others, is unproductive. He insists that calling people wicked is "based on the supposition that damnation and severe punishment will usually induce them to stop," but there is "considerable evidence for the opposing thesis" (p. 112, R&E):

"At bottom, severe blame and hostility are often the most essential and serious encouragers of human disturbances." (p. 112, R&E)

"A deep-seated sense of 'sin' and guilt encourages much, but hardly all, human neurosis." (He used to say "all".) (p. 186, R&E)

Nevertheless, Ellis insists that his therapy does not negate personal responsibility:

"So unless individuals are mentally deficient, psychotic, or otherwise incapable of following moral and personal rules, REBT holds them quite responsible for their 'sins.' It nonetheless accepts the 'sinner' but not his or her 'sin.' This still seems to me a quite sensible form of morality!" (p. 186, R&E)

This *unconditional acceptance* is a cornerstone to REBT:

"Try to accept *people* when they act stupidly and to help them when they are ignorant or disturbed. Accept the 'sinner,' but not necessarily the 'sin.' But preferably don't label a person as a 'sinner.'" (p. 113, R&E)

Ellis repeatedly articulates his aversion to the concept of sin. He believes it is "unhealthy" and "self-defeating" to ever call yourself a "sinner" or an "immoral person." His reasons include:

(1) You may initiate a self-fulfilling prophecy; you might "actually *make yourself* continue to act immorally and mistakenly in the future." (p. 182, R&E)

(2) You might conclude that you have little ability to change your behavior. (p. 182, R&E)

(3) You may become obsessed with you past and present wrong actions. (p. 182, R&E)

(4) If you believe you deserve punishment, you might "actually keep acting bad in order to bring about this 'deserved' punishment." (p. 182, R&E)

(5) You might "rationalize about your immoralities and repress knowledge of them." (p. 182, R&E)

(6) You might feel anxious and depressed. (p.183, R&E)

(7) You might not do well in therapy (not respond to therapist's suggestions) because of guilt feelings and related worry. (p. 183, R&E)

Clearly, it is his rejection of God that leads Ellis to so violently attack the notion of *sin*:

"You preferably should not use words like 'sin' and 'sinner,' because they imply absolute, God-given (or devil-given) standards that help to condemn your self, your entire being, for some of your mistaken acts." (p. 183, R&E)

It is specifically *absolute sin* that troubles Ellis:

"'Sin' can merely mean a violation of a rule...we only make this breach a neurotic problem, however, when we insist that the violated rule is *sacred* and that we *absolutely must* not breach it." (p. 183, R&E)

"Shoulds" that are merely *conditional* (and not decreed by God!) rather than *absolute*, find a limited usefulness to this atheist:

"*Conditional* shoulds and musts are all right...there are many legitimate *contingent* shoulds and musts but (as far as we know) no *absolute*, under *all* conditions at *all* times, necessities." Such "absolutistic demands...largely lead to neurosis." (p. 185, R&E)

Interestingly, Ellis quotes clinical psychologist Steven Nielsen (who is also a Mormon elder) as follows:

"...insistence on viewing one's behavior as 'sin' and viewing oneself as a 'sinner' makes little sense unless one also makes room in one's thinking for the concepts of 'repentance' and 'forgiveness,' including forgiving the self for a mistake." (p. 184, R&E)

There is no evidence, however, that Ellis ever embraces the concepts of repentance and forgiveness--*concepts at the core of the Christian faith!* He never "makes room in his thinking" for such concepts.

Finally, Ellis once again makes a *false claim* to neutrality:

"REBT doesn't attack people's value, morals, or rules but only challenges their insistences that these values absolutely *must* be achieved and that anyone who does not follow them is a *no good, damnable person*. So moralizing is okay, but self-righteousness and damnation of people for their immorality is not." (p. 206, R&E)

This is a lie! As we have seen from *The Case Against Religion*, Ellis clearly does attack the absolute moral values of *religious* clients who come to him for counseling. He advises other counselors to follow his example in such highly biased, anti-Christian counseling procedures. In his rejection of moral absolutes, Ellis rejects the God revealed in Scripture. His claims to uphold responsibility do not match the claims of the Bible, wherein man is responsible *before God*, not merely responsible *to himself* or to the society in which he lives.

The concepts of sin, guilt, repentance, and forgiveness are central to Christianity. So are the *absolute* moral standards revealed by God in Scripture, and the eternal consequences of sin for the unbeliever. The view Ellis holds of morality is one which necessarily excludes *Christian* morality.

## **The Goals of REBT**

A complete examination of any counseling system must include a review of its goals. What do REBT therapists hope to accomplish in the lives of the persons they counsel? In general, the goals are similar to those of the client-centered therapy of Carl Rogers (p. 241, R&E):

Decrease in anxiety, improved adaptation to life  
Increase in self-control  
Decrease in self-blame

Increase in acceptance of others  
Decrease in hostility to others

We'll look more closely at the specific goals pursued by REBT therapists and those they counsel.

**Long-range hedonism.** REBT endorses Freud's "pleasure principle" which is "also favored by existential and humanistic theorists" (p. 78, R&E). It encourages clients to seek:

"...greater, deeper, and more lasting enjoyments. Like Epicureanism more than Stoicism, REBT is honestly hedonistic rather than ascetic." (p. 386, R&E)

But the hedonism is *long-range* rather than short-range. Such "long-range hedonism" encourages people to seek pleasure without guilt, but emphasizes that some pleasures and lack of pain may occur at a later time; not all satisfaction occurs immediately (p. 267, R&E).

The Bible teaches believers to patiently endure the trials of earthly life, waiting for their eternal inheritance in heaven. However, this scriptural teaching is far removed from the essentially *self-centered*, pleasure-seeking goals of REBT. The Christian is primarily concerned for God's glory, not his own gratification. The self-focus of REBT is no secret, as we have seen in the specifically anti-Christian values of Ellis. Its claim to work effectively even with psychopaths is based on the assumption that even these people "can often be shown how they are defeating their own best interests" (p. 299, R&E).

**Cognitive Changes.** REBT emphasizes the power of thoughts to change both emotions and behavior. Ellis believes that thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are "integrally and holistically related." But *thoughts* are most efficiently changed, and are the key to effecting other types of changes:

"Because humans are human, because they are more cognitive than other creatures, I hypothesize that certain cognitive methods of therapy will particularly and more elegantly help many (not all!) clients to make faster, greater, more pervasive, more lasting personality changes." (p. 95, R&E)

Emphasis is placed on "self-talk *about* self-talk" or "thinking about thinking." This emphasis is important in the "creation and maintenance of emotional disturbance" (p. 43, R&E). Ellis teaches that you may parrot new "self-talk" but not believe the new



sentence you are saying to yourself. Therefore, he teaches, you need to change your *meaning* (p. 70, R&E).

Ellis believes that people largely *create* their own emotional disturbances, and that they can *choose* to either disturb or "undisturb" themselves using their "free will." In order to change, Ellis teaches, people must actively work at changing their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (p. 248, R&E).

However, Ellis distances his therapy from the "positive thinking" schools, such as taught by Norman Vincent Peale and others. Rather, it is:

"...truly a skeptical school of therapy; and it heartily advocates contradicting the negative rather than merely 'accentuating the positive.'" (p. 285, R&E)

Sometimes, Ellis says, people can "accentuate the positive" while continuing in destructive beliefs about themselves. REBT "...helps you to observe and acknowledge disturbed feelings and actions...and to improve or remove them by working at changing" your events, thoughts, and emotional responses. This is accomplished by "teaching yourself to fairly consistently use a strong *preferential* rather than an *imperative* or *demanding* attitude" (p. 23, R&E). Note, once again, the aversion of Ellis to all moral absolutes. Christians have sufficient *biblical* teachings about the thought processes and renewal of the mind. The techniques of REBT are rooted in an atheistic worldview that denies God's *absolute* truth.

**Acceptance.** The unconditional acceptance of *self* is a primary pillar of REBT:

"One of the main principles of REBT is that the individual is taught that there is *nothing* that he *as a total person* is to feel ashamed of or *self-hating* for." (p. 285, R&E)

The REBT therapist fully accepts the client. He is very permissive and accepting, but "in *addition* to accepting his clients fully, he actively *teaches* them to accept themselves and others without any self-downing" (p. 241, R&E).

In addition, REBT teaches its clients to accept certain ideas, such as these (p. 317, R&E):

1. Almost everyone reacts negatively to poor life histories.
2. Some negative emotions are healthy.

3. Other negative emotions are self-defeating.
4. Certain irrational beliefs accompany and contribute to self-defeating feelings and behaviors.
5. There is some degree of choice, but not total free will.
6. Thoughts, feelings, and goals can be evaluated, but not the self or personhood.
7. People can choose to rate themselves as good just because they are alive.
8. Life's injustices are not totally unbearable.

This amounts to an *acceptance* of the *value system* of REBT, or more specifically, the anti-Christian value system of its founder, Albert Ellis.

**Changing of Circumstances.** It is often objected that REBT clients are taught to adjust to poor or intolerable circumstances rather than to try to change them. Ellis mentions the Stoic philosophy in connection with this objection. Epictetus was a Stoic who advocated attempting to change circumstances, then accepting them if that didn't work. Other Stoics, such as Marcus Aurelius, were more fatalistic in their approach (p. 290). Ellis adheres to the first approach rather than the second.

**Core Philosophic Changes.** REBT is accused of being a superficial "suggestion" approach, focusing only on symptoms rather than real cures, but its aim is to uncover basic philosophic assumptions and change them (p. 280, R&E). In fact, Ellis says that one of the *main goals* of REBT is:

*"...profound philosophic change...to help people comprehend and accept several ideas that are still revolutionary in our culture." (p. 248, R&E)*

Ellis believes that such profound philosophic change is likely to help change emotional and behavioral responses (p. 248, R&E).

Undoubtedly, changes of this magnitude are likely to result in emotional and behavioral alterations. But crucial questions must be raised! *What kind of "profound philosophic change" is advocated?* We have clearly documented that the philosophy of Ellis is one of aggressive atheism. Also, *what kind of emotional and behavioral changes result?* Are these the emotions and behaviors that are pleasing to God? No! The Christian must heed the warning of Scripture concerning his thoughts:

"We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ."  
(2 Corinthians 10:5)

In conclusion, the fundamental goals of REBT are not consistent with the goals of Christian sanctification.

## **Irrational Beliefs**

The concept of irrationality is fundamental to REBT, which seeks to eradicate "irrational" thoughts in order to facilitate changes in emotion and behavior.

Here is how Ellis defines the term "rational":

"...showing reason; not foolish or silly; sensible; leading to efficient results for human happiness; producing desired effects with a minimum of expense, waste, unnecessary effort, or unpleasant side effects.... Rationalizing or excusing one's behavior is the opposite of being rational or reasonable about it." (p. 275, R&E)

In contrast, here is his definition of "irrational" beliefs:

"In general, people's beliefs are said to be irrational when they are unrealistic, illogical, absolutist, and devoutly held even when they are unprovable and unfalsifiable.... People act rationally when they first, aid instead of sabotage themselves; second, adequately get along with other; and third, preferably collaborate with and help members of their social group." (p. 141, R&E)

In addition, Ellis believes that "irrational" beliefs are those that include these two main qualities:

- (1) "rigid, dogmatic, powerful demands and commands"
- (2) "highly unrealistic, overgeneralized inferences and attributions" (p. 78-79, R&E).

Putting together these "irrational" definitions with the hostile opinion Ellis holds of religion, we can easily see that he equates religious faith with irrationality. In fact, one of the "irrational beliefs" people hold, according to Ellis, is to "believe that a personal God will listen to and heed their prayers" (p. 372, R&E)).

Here is how Ellis believes that "irrational" beliefs lead people to become troubled:

"You usually (not always) make yourself neurotic...by first sensibly and rationally *desiring* and *preferring*...and then by additionally and irrationally *demanding* and *insisting* that your strong wants be fulfilled." (p. 21, R&E)

Many such beliefs begin during childhood years, but are continued by choice during adult life:

"You mainly *perpetuate* and *continue* your disturbances by constantly repeating these early messages--and by inventing other irrational beliefs of your own." (p. 26, R&E)

Ellis puts forth his "A-B-C-D-E" model to combat accumulated irrationalities:

A = the event

B = beliefs

C = emotional response

D = disputing of irrational beliefs--by questioning, challenging, and uprooting "must" beliefs and demands, or behaviorally

E = effective new philosophy (p. 79, R&E)

At the second point in this progression, according to Ellis, "the hot irrational cognitions that we encode...often become basic philosophic assumptions" (p. 97, R&E). These "dysfunctional basic philosophic assumptions are reinforced and often become stronger for several reasons," such as:

1. They lead to strong emotions.
2. They are often tautological and cannot be falsified.
3. They are often circular.
4. They often lead to self-fulfilling prophecies.
5. They are "linguistically and semantically misleading and get reinforced by our tendency to use inaccurate language."
6. They are uncritically repeated and acted upon.
7. Most are unconscious. (p. 98, R&E)

Despite its claims to be neutral, and to be compatible with any system of values, REBT strongly endorses and promotes certain particular values. A number of *specific* irrational beliefs are listed:

**#1 Adult humans need approval from every significant person in their community.** This leads to giving up *your* wants and preferences in favor of others, and becoming less self-directing. Ellis advocates seeking approval only for practical reasons..."realize that self-respect never comes from the approval of others." (p. 107-108, R&E)

**#2 One must be totally competent and achieving or he is worthless and inadequate.** (p. 109, R&E) "Giving a great emphasis to the philosophy of achievement confuses your extrinsic value...with your intrinsic value.... When you try to do well, try to do so for your *own* sake." (p. 110, R&E)

**#3 People must act with consideration or fairness; otherwise they are "damnable villains" who should be "made to eternally suffer for their 'sins.'" (p. 111, R&E)**

**#4 It's terrible/awful if things don't turn out the way we want them to be.** (p. 114, R&E) "It is not the frustration itself, but one's subjective and moralistic *attitude* toward this frustration that really 'causes' hostility and aggression." (p. 115, R&E)

**#5 Emotional disturbance is externally caused; people have little ability to change "dysfunctional" feelings/behaviors.** (p. 116, R&E) "It is not the *words* or *gestures* of others that 'hurt' you--but your *attitudes* toward, your *reactions* to these symbols." Ellis believes that we should stop viewing emotions as "spontaneous processes" and see them "as being largely composed of perceptions, thoughts, evaluations, and internalized philosophies." (p. 117, R&E)

**#6 If there is danger, one should be excessively concerned and dwell on the possibility of its occurrence.** (p. 119, R&E)

**#7 It's easier to avoid responsibilities and difficulties than to face them.** (p. 122, R&E) "REBT...shows you how to acquire unconditional *self-acceptance* even when you do *not* perform well" (p. 123, R&E). "Philosophically accept the fact that the more responsible, challenging, and problem-solving your existence is, the more, especially in its long-range aspects, you may truly enjoy it" (p. 124, R&E).

**#8 It's better to be dependent on others rather than to mainly run your own life.** Ellis says it's acceptable to be

"socially cooperative" but not subservient to others (p. 124, R&E). "Don't defensively and rebelliously refuse *all* help from others" (p. 125, R&E).

**#9 The past is all-important and determines present behavior.** The past is often an excuse not to change in the present (p. 125, R&E).

**#10 Other people's disturbances are horrible and you should be upset about them.** (p. 127, R&E)

**#11 There is a perfect, precise, right solution to human problems and it's awful if that solution isn't found.** (p. 129, R&E) Amazingly, Ellis says that "irrational," self-defeating thoughts are not *always* senseless! "Sometimes, and even commonly, they include behaviors that have real advantages, that are an intrinsic part of our 'nature,' and that would render us quite odd, and perhaps nonsurviving, if we completely eliminated them" (p. 133, R&E)

Can we detect a note of *irrationality* in this last statement? Ellis cannot reject absolute truth and at the same time remain *rational*.

On the whole, these statements are a real mixture. We will not take the time to examine each one individually, but it is important to make the observation that REBT is not *value neutral*! What Ellis considers "irrational" is inescapably tied to his rejection of God.

Ellis pits his therapy against the "irrational," yet nevertheless believes that such "irrationality" or "dysfunctional behavior" characterizes all people much of the time. He explains that:

"All the major human irrationalities seems to exist, in one form or another, in virtually all humans." (p. 369, R&E)

These irrationalities also exist "in virtually all social and cultural groups." Standards and rules may vary but..."gullibility, absolutism, dogmas, religiosity, and demandingness *about* these standards remains surprisingly similar" (p. 370, R&E).

Ellis sees "irrational beliefs" as standing firm over time regardless of the strongest oppositions:

"Many of the irrationalities that people profoundly follow go counter to almost all the teachings of their parents, peers, and mass media. Yet they refuse to give them up!"  
(p. 370, R&E)

Ellis notes that "almost universal opposition" doesn't stop people from their irrational beliefs. Irrational beliefs that are "minimally taught," or even "severely discouraged," nevertheless flourish (p. 371, R&E)! Even "highly intelligent, educated, and relatively little disturbed" people believe irrationalities (p. 372, R&E). In fact:

"When bright and generally competent people give up many of their irrationalities, they frequently tend to adopt other inanities or to go to opposite irrational extremes."  
(p. 373, R&E)

"Humans who seem least afflicted by irrational thoughts and behaviors still revert to them." (p. 373, R&E)

Even intimate knowledge about these "irrationalities" fails to counter them:

"Knowledge or insight into one's irrational behavior only partially, if at all, helps one change it." (p. 374, R&E)

Human efforts, too, may well be in vain:

"No matter how hard and how long people work to overcome their irrational thoughts and behaviors, they usually find it exceptionally difficult to overcome or eradicate them; and to some degree they always remain exceptionally fallible in this respect." (p. 374, R&E)

"Irrational" beliefs are not necessarily learned, says Ellis, but are often creatively constructed:

"Certain irrational ideas stem from personal, nonlearned (or even antilearned) experience...we *invent* them in a highly creative manner." (p. 374, R&E)

Ellis, concludes, with some hesitation, as follows:

"I hypothesize that virtually all humans often hold blatant irrational beliefs" and "just about all people...frequently hold several subtle or tricky irrationalities." (p. 380, R&E)

He holds out a dim hope for *biological* interventions:

"Changing their basic biological structure by medication, operations, genetic breeding, or other means might be a possible answer to their neurotic susceptibility! Unfortunately this answer is not, at the moment, very clear or possible." (p. 360, R&E)

In all of this, Ellis omits one very fundamental biblical concept: **SIN**. Even if he defined "irrational" in biblical terms (which he does not!), relating it to the impact of *sin* on the human mind, he fails to see the biblical explanations for the persistence of sin. Without the Spirit and the Word, Ellis cannot possibly probe the depths and depravity of the human heart. Professing to be wise, he has become a fool, "exchanging the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man" (Romans 1:22-23). He can neither explain nor correct the core problems of the heart.

## **REBT Compared With Other Approaches**

Ellis devotes considerable space to a comparison of his therapy with other modern counseling methods.

**Freudian Psychoanalysis.** REBT was largely developed as a revolt against the passive approaches of both Freudian and Rogerian therapies. The insights people gained in these approaches were rarely used by them to make changes in their philosophies and behaviors (p. 240, R&E). Ellis describes how he was trained in psychoanalysis but had reservations about Freud's personality theory..."the man was brilliantly *creating* clinical interpretations to make them fit the procrustean bed of his enormously one-sided oedipal theories" (p. 1, R&E).

Psychoanalytic therapies "assume that your dysfunctional beliefs originate in your childhood" but "this is dubious because you may adopt or create your main irrational beliefs in adolescence or even adulthood" (p. 65, R&E). In opposition to Freud's emphasis on childhood, Ellis claims to have observed that people:

"...not only learned, from their parents and their culture, that certain thoughts, feelings, and behaviors were 'good' and 'advantageous' and that other ideas, emotions, and acts were 'bad' and 'disadvantageous' but also...they frequently agreed with those teachings." (p. 13, R&E)



Ellis describes the profound difference between REBT and the determinism evident in other theories:

"How...does REBT differ from other systems...by holding that the most important (and not the only) 'cause' of neurosis is not the unfortunate activating events that occur in early childhood and later, but mainly dysfunctional and/or irrational beliefs about those events." (p. 21, R&E)

It is not surprising to learn that the techniques of REBT also differ from those of psychoanalysis. REBT rarely uses free association and dream analysis, considering them generally irrelevant (p. 234, R&E). REBT doesn't deliberately create "transference" between therapist and client but rather looks at "the client's emotional transferences from his parents...to his associates and intimates *outside* therapy" (p. 235, R&E). This approach "spends considerable time analyzing and observing the *philosophic basis* of all transference phenomena" (such as believing "I must be loved") (p. 235, R&E).

REBT spends much less time looking into the past, utilizing more teaching, persuasion, homework activity assignments. It is more directive, forcefully disputing "clients' early-acquired destructive philosophies" (p. 236, R&E). Finally, REBT minimizes use of "catharsis" (p. 255, R&E).

Because of the emphasis away from Freud's determinism and destruction of responsibility, Christians may be deceived into buying the procedures of REBT. However, by this point the atheist philosophical underpinnings of REBT have been laid bare!

**Person-Centered Therapy (Carl Rogers).** An entire chapter is devoted to challenging some of the fundamental assumptions of Rogers, mostly concerning the counselor-counselee relationship. A summary of the major points follows:

1. Ellis disagrees that "in order to effect personality change the client must be in psychological contact with a therapist." People often change by others means. (p. 168, R&E)

2. Rogers says a client must be in a state of "incongruence," somewhat vulnerable or anxious. Ellis says people do better when they're not so anxious. (p. 168, R&E)

3. Rogers believes the therapist should be a "genuine integrated person...freely and deeply himself." Ellis says that this is desirable but not essential (p. 168, R&E).

4. Rogers advocates "unconditional positive regard for clients." Ellis again believes this is desirable but not essential (p. 169, R&E).

5. Rogers says the therapist must have "empathetic understanding of the client's awareness of his own experience." Again, Ellis insists that this is desirable but not necessary (p. 169, R&E).

6. Rogers says the client must *perceive* the therapist's empathy. One last time, Ellis believes this to be desirable, not necessary (p. 169, R&E).

None of this, of course, addresses the role of the Holy Spirit in sanctifying the believer.

**Rationalism.** According to Ellis, REBT is often confused with extreme Stoicism and Zen Buddhism, both thought to teach people not to have negative feelings. It is also believed to be philosophically rationalistic, anti-humanistic, and anti-existentialist (p. 173, R&E). However, Ellis makes a clear distinction between his therapy and the philosophy of rationalism:

"Classical rationalists, such as Ayn Rand, are often believers in absolutism, as reason is their prime and absolute authority in determining what is 'true' and what course of action one 'should' indubitably take in life. Although they seem to be objective and atheistic, they are really subjective and often devoutly religious in their own way. REBT is quite opposed to this kind of classical rationalism." (p. 174, R&E)

Once again, note the *assumption* that religion is synonymous with "mental illness," and that atheism is both objective and "healthy." The atheism of Albert Ellis is as devout, "absolutistic," and subjective as any religion.

**Humanism.** REBT is humanistic "but eschews...mystical-minded humanism...and endorses, instead, many of the views of secular humanism" (p. 174, R&E).

A pamphlet published by the Institute for Rational-Emotive Therapy addresses the humanism in REBT.<sup>4</sup> Here, Ellis attempts to define "humanistic psychology." Psychologically, he states, it means "the study of the person, of the individual as a *whole*." But it is his *ethical* definition that raises the most serious concerns for Christians:

"Ethically, it seems to mean the establishment of a set of rules for people to live by characterized by an emphasis on human interests rather than on the interests of some assumed natural order or god." (p. 1)

This ethical definition is endorsed by the American Humanist Association. The psychological definition is one emphasized by the Association for Humanistic Psychology. Ellis believes the two to be compatible. *Notice the clear endorsement of atheism!* A couple of pages later, Ellis places his hatred of God in broad daylight:

"Rational-emotive therapy squarely places humans in the center of the universe and of their own emotional fate; and gives them almost full responsibility for choosing to make or not make themselves seriously disturbed." (p. 3)

The anti-Christian nature of REBT could hardly be more emphatic!

**Existentialism.** Ellis names various existentialist philosophers as foundational to his thinking (Sartre, Kierkegaard, Buber, Tillich, Heidegger). But although REBT is similar in its goals, existentialists:

"...fail to accept the grim reality that most emotionally disturbed individuals...are so strongly indoctrinated and self-propagandized by the time they come for therapy that the best of existential encounters with their therapists is frequently going to be of little help to them.... Because existentialist therapy techniques are somewhat vague and unstructured, they may encourage seriously disturbed persons to become even more disorganized and confused." (p. 242, R&E)

**Logical positivism.** Earlier in his career, Ellis subscribed to the philosophical position of logical positivism, believing science to be "intrinsically empirical," and that scientific

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<sup>4</sup> "Humanism and Psychotherapy: A Revolutionary Approach," 1972 (revised in 1991).

knowledge must be able to be confirmed by human experience. But this has changed:

"Today, I have given up logical positivism and largely subscribe to Karl Popper's critical realism. Instead of mainly emphasizing positive thinking and positive visualization, REBT shows people how to discover and falsify their self-defeating thinking." (p. 175, R&E)

Ellis uses his position to reject Christian theism, believing that it cannot be confirmed by human experience. However, he fails to acknowledge that "human experience," and scientific pursuits, would be *incoherent* apart from the God of Scripture!

**Jung.** Ellis notes some overlap between REBT and Jungian analysis, in that both therapies view clients "holistically rather than only analytically" and believe that the goal of therapy is individual growth and development, rather than mere relief of mental disturbance (p. 236, R&E). However, REBT therapy is not particularly interested in "archetypal" or mythological contents of the client's thinking. Rather:

"They help clients to see what they are dysfunctionally believing today, rather than to dig up archetypal material which may or may not have relevance to their current disturbances." (p. 237, R&E)

**Adler.** There is some agreement between REBT and Adlerian therapy. Ellis focuses on beliefs and attitudes, Adler on a person's "style of life." There is a similarity in their approaches:

"The common factor is that both--beliefs and attitudes, on the one hand, and life goals on the other--are values and philosophies." (p. 238, R&E)

The difference, however, is that REBT emphasizes *self-interest* while Adler emphasizes *social interest*:

"The REBT therapist believes...that self-interest *involves* social interest" in order "to help build the kind of society in which one would best live *oneself*." REBT assumes "that humans *normally* and *naturally* are helpful and loving to others humans, provided that they are not enmeshed in thinking that leads to self-destructive, self-hating behavior."  
(p. 239, R&E)

**Conditioning-Learning Therapy.** There is much agreement here, but REBT therapists are skeptical about deconditioning techniques that only remove symptoms and "do not aim for any basic philosophic restructuring of the client's philosophy and personality." REBT "attempts to put deconditioning techniques within an ideational framework" (p. 243, R&E). REBT attempts to provide:

"...new concepts of resolving *almost any* of their defeating thoughts, feelings, and actions, rather than merely providing them with a means of overcoming their *current* dysfunctionality." (p. 244, R&E)

**Cognitive Behavior Therapy.** REBT and CBT both emphasize cognitive processes, but CBT has no specific philosophic emphasis (p. 247, R&E).

Ellis summarizes the unique and comprehensive nature of his approach as follows:

"All told, REBT is, at one and the same time, highly rational-persuasive-interpretive-philosophical *and* distinctly emotive-directive-active-work-centered." (p. 245, R&E)

The Christian, however, must insist on *God's* interpretation. He is persuaded by God's Spirit working in his heart, not an REBT therapist. He thinks, reasons, acts, and feels within the framework of a covenantal relationship with God that encompasses every aspect of his life and being. REBT is indeed a comprehensive approach, but it must be rejected because of its roots in atheism.

## **How Do People Change?**

Here is a critical question that every counselor must address, particularly as to *who* provides the power necessary for lasting change.

Ellis teaches that people have "several major choices in deneuroticizing themselves" (p. 136, R&E). These include:

- (1) Working with a therapist or friend.
- (2) Learning from one's own pain and experience, and observing others.

(3) Self-help courses, workshops, materials.

(4) "They can adopt a number of other self-helping philosophies and procedures, some of which are magical and unscientific" such as "believing that some god, fairy godmother, or other supernatural force or spirit is at their beck and call and will indubitably help them be healthier and happier." (p. 137, R&E)

Again, we are faced with Ellis' contempt for his Creator.

A specific *interpretive* role is assigned to the REBT therapist:

"The therapist's problem is to determine...what are their 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' negative feelings" along with what particular "rational" or "irrational" thoughts accompany those feelings. (p. 63, R&E)

REBT works with clients to "acknowledge, get in touch with, work on, and change their feelings" (p. 257, R&E).

Some object that REBT is too controlling, even brainwashing. Ellis says that *all* therapies are actually authoritative and controlling, even the ones that seem passive (Rogerian, Freudian), because therapists are seen as experts, older/wiser, and are perceived as parental figures (p. 293, R&E). This is basically true, but it is certainly inconsistent with his portrayal of REBT as compatible with the value systems of all its clients!

Ellis says REBT helps clients to stand on their own two feet, discouraging dependence on therapist. It is *authoritative* rather than *authoritarian*. However:

"While authoritarianism has clear-cut disadvantages in therapy, even authoritativeness may be dangerous, because therapists may strongly present views that may persuade and help some clients and may persuade and hinder others. This particularly occurs when therapists follow one cultural, religious, or ethnic set of values." (p. 295, R&E)

The claim to *neutrality* is certainly deflated here! Because Ellis roots his system so firmly in atheism, Christians ought to run from it. The Scripture is authoritative. It is *God's Word*. Believers may exhort one another *authoritatively* when their exhortations are grounded in that eternal Word. Ellis arrogantly

usurps God's authority when he *authoritatively* attacks the religious faith of those he counsels.

According to Ellis, the REBT therapist doesn't care much what others think about him, *isn't hostile* toward those who disagree with him, and therefore can "be himself" in the therapeutic relationship (p. 271, R&E). This is an astonishing claim in view of the clear *hostility* of Ellis toward religious faith!

The counseling client, along with the therapist, is assigned an active role in REBT. REBT doesn't rely solely on cognitive processes, but rather includes action, work, and nonverbal "homework" assignments. It assumes that emotions are impacted by more than thoughts *alone* (p. 268, R&E).

One of its main procedures is "rational emotive imagery," where:

"...clients are asked to intensely imagine one of the worst possible things that could happen, to let themselves strongly feel anxious, depressed, or enraged, and to directly work on changing these feelings to those of sorrow, disappointment, or annoyance." (p. 257, R&E)

REBT is skeptical about social reinforcement. Instead, it "...consciously tries to help clients acquire a philosophic outlook that makes them partly nondependent and nonconformist" (p. 259, R&E). Rather than *social* reinforcement, REBT relies on *self*-reinforcement as well as self-penalization (p. 260, R&E).

In REBT, the agent for change is evidently divided between the counselor and the person being counseled. Thus it is *man-centered*, in contrast the Scriptures. It is a striving in the flesh, a "repair job" on the "old man" apart from Christ. Change (sanctification) occurs in the Christian through the work of God's Spirit. Yes, the believer is given many specific exhortations in God's Word, but the Spirit effects fundamental changes in his heart. A biblical approach to sanctification is therefore *God-centered*, in contrast to the man-centered therapies that exist today, including REBT.

### **The Limitations(!) of Psychotherapy**

Incredibly, Ellis notes that "even the most successful and efficient forms of psychotherapy...do not have notable records of cures" (p. 330, R&E). In addition, he admits that "most

psychotherapy practitioners are themselves hardly the very best models of healthy behavior" (p. 330, R&E).

The high level of relapse is also noted (p. 330, R&E). Ellis does not offer much hope. According to his research, blame is often laid at the door of those receiving the counseling:

"It has been all too easily assumed that clients, either consciously or unconsciously, *deliberately* and *willfully* resist improvements." (p. 331, R&E)

But this is only *sometimes* true, Ellis insists, in spite of his high emphasis on man's ability to change himself. He concludes that there are innate, biological reasons often involved in the failure to change:

"At bottom, then, their becoming and remaining disturbed is partly a biological as well as a psycho-sociological phenomenon." (p. 333, R&E)

Ellis is even pessimistic about his own therapy:

"REBT, for all of my optimism about its potential efficacy, is still only a stopgap against pandemic human irrationality...far from a panacea against human disturbances." (p. 132, R&E)

So we are left wallowing in the mud of human "irrationality." Or are we?

Thankfully, the believer can ignore the dismal picture painted by this atheist. It is man's *sin against God* that Ellis refuses to acknowledge. Evading the true nature of the *problem*, he is incapable of offering any *solution*. The Bible, however, explains the origin and nature of sin, along with God's plan of redemption. The believer is not left to struggle alone. God has graciously provided for him, freeing him from both the *penalty* and the *power* of sin. It is God who initiates and completes His work in the Christian: first salvation, then progressive sanctification, and finally, glorification!

"For those He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brothers, and those He predestined, He also called, and those He called, He also justified, and those He justified, He also glorified." (Romans 8:29-30)



Ellis, with his *counterfeit* of renewing the mind, cannot hold a candle to this glorious divine promise. Claiming to base his therapy on *truth*, he has actually exchanged the *truth--God's truth* --for a lie.

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