

Albert Ellis and Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy

Dr. Albert Ellis is a well-known clinical psychologist who has developed a form of therapy based on the idea that neurotic symptoms and psychological problems spring from an irrational philosophy: irrational beliefs that are the result of “philosophical conditioning.” According to Ellis, our emotions and behaviors are the result of the beliefs and assumptions we have about ourselves, other people, and the world in general. It is what people *believe* about the situations they face—not the situations themselves—that determines how they feel and behave. According to Ellis, this idea was first stated by Epictetus, a Roman stoic philosopher who, in the first century CE, said that people are disturbed not by things but by the views they take of them. To eliminate the disturbance, we need merely change our views. In his book *The Essence of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy* (1994), Ellis states that although many irrational beliefs exist, there are three main ones:

1. “I must do well and get approval, or I am worthless.”
2. “You must treat me reasonably, considerately, and lovingly, or else you’re no good.”
3. “Life must be fair, easy, and hassle-free, or else it’s awful.”

If a person is to be happy, he or she must change these irrational philosophical beliefs, which are the source of anxiety, depression, hopelessness, resentment, hostility, and violence. The person can change these irrational ideas by asking questions: “Is there any evidence for this belief?” “What is the evidence against this belief?” “What is the worst that can happen if I give up this belief?” “What is the best that can happen?” We can be happy only when the irrational beliefs that underlie our neuroses and other psychological problems are replaced by a more rational philosophy.

QUESTIONS

1. Do you agree that a person’s philosophical assumptions can have the significant psychological impacts that Ellis’s theory claims? If Ellis is right, what are the implications for philosophy?
2. Consider Ellis’s three main irrational beliefs and determine whether they belong to the field of epistemology, metaphysics, or ethics.
3. Can you think of any other “philosophical beliefs” that can produce the kinds of psychological problems that Ellis describes?
4. What if Ellis’s three beliefs are true? Could they be true? Why?