KARL POPPER AND ALBERT ELLIS: THEIR IDEAS ON PSYCHOLOGY AND RATIONALITY COMPARED

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ABSTRACT: This paper considers leading ideas of Albert Ellis on psychological theory and therapy in relation to ideas of the celebrated philosopher, Karl Popper. The aim is to indicate striking similarities in their views on learning, the genesis of emotional disturbance and, in particular, rationality. Discussion commences with Popper's early, and little studied, work on psychology. His philosophy of science is then surveyed along with the theory of rationality that he analogically extends from it. After tracing the evolution of Ellis' thought, we note the central roles he assigns to irrational thinking in explaining emotional disturbance and to rational thinking in its treatment. Different senses of 'rationality' are distinguished in his work, one of them associated with criticism, which provides a most important similarity to Popper's view of rationality.

It is still not widely appreciated that Sir Karl Popper's initial interest was psychology, not philosophy. Popper's own writings have mostly ignored this phase and may have misled readers to regard him as averse to psychology. His treatment of Freud and Adler is, after all, far from sympathetic; he wages war against subjectivism in epistemology, and his avowed metascientific interest is logic of theory-evaluation, not psychology of discovery.

I commence this paper with some details on the somewhat neglected psychological phase of Popper’s career. I then branch out and compare...
aspects of Popper's thought with the influential rational emotive psychology propounded by Dr. Albert Ellis and his school. Although developed independently of each another, these two systems have a surprising amount in common, and detailed comparison will indicate that Popper's philosophical insights support the ideas of Ellis.

POPPER'S PSYCHOLOGICAL PHASE

It seems probable that Popper's interest in psychology was kindled at least as early as 1919, part of which he spent working at Alfred Adler's child guidance clinics in Vienna. He attended lectures in psychology at The University of Vienna during 1920 and five years later, after another short stint helping underprivileged children, Popper enrolled at the Pedagogic Institute, then only recently founded as part of a programme to reform Vienna's primary and secondary schools. Some of his subjects were actually taken at The University of Vienna, including psychology, the professor of which was Karl Buhler, well known for his study, The Mental Development of the Child (Popper, 1974, pp. 57-58).

Since 1922 Popper had been privately studying human learning from a psychological perspective. The view he eventually formed was that 'Most (or perhaps all) learning processes consist in theory formation; that is the formation of expectations' (Popper, 1974, p. 35). There is always a dogmatic stage in which a theory or expectation is produced 'under the stimulus of... observation' (Popper, 1974, p. 34) to solve a problem. Sometimes there may follow a stage of criticism when 'disappointed expectations or refutations' (Popper, 1974, p. 35) lead to a theory being relinquished, and to consideration of alternatives. Learning, Popper decided, was a non-random process of trial and error.

Associated with the hypothesis above, Popper offered a specific suggestion concerning the character of neurosis, which is not unlike the view sponsored by our other subject-thinker, Albert Ellis. Dogmas, said Popper, 'may become so strongly entrenched' as to be unshakeable, in which case they represent 'a kind of neurotic aberration' (Popper, 1974, p.35). Some years later, in a paper titled "Science: Conjectures and Refutations" (1953), Popper wrote more generally

I am inclined to suggest that most neuroses may be due to a partially arrested development of the critical attitude;... to resis-