Rational-Emotive Theory:
I. An Integrated Psychological and Philosophical Basis

Leonard G. Rorer
Miami University

Rational-emotive theory (RET) is reformulated on an epistemological basis (comprehensively critical rationalism [CCR] instead of logical empiricism) consistent with current mainstream philosophy and with the practice of rational-emotive therapy. The irrational beliefs that lead to dysphoric emotions can be defined logically and independently of their consequences. They are of two kinds: (a) grandiose beliefs that some object, state, or event in the world should be other than it is, because one wants it to be, and (b) beliefs that evaluations such as good, bad, right, wrong, wonderful, and awful are factual (inherent in the object of the evaluation) rather than definitional. Evaluations are arbitrary designations that we add to the value of a measure of some characteristic of an object or event. Dysphoric emotions (anger, anxiety, depression, guilt, jealousy, and shame) result from evaluative attributions that individuals believe to be inherently true, rather than definitional.

KEY WORDS: RET; rational-emotive theory; comprehensively critical rationalism; evaluation.

In this paper I will briefly summarize rational-emotive theory, concentrating on previous attempts to define irrational beliefs, which play a crucial role in the theory. I will argue that these attempts have all been unsatisfactory.

---

1This project was supported, in part, by Grant MH-39077 from the National Institute of Mental Health. William Chaplin, Raymond DiGiuseppe, Timothy G. Dowd, Albert Ellis, Lewis R. Goldberg, Laury Goolsby, Sarah E. Hampson, William H. Henricks, Bobbie G. Hopes, Oliver P. John, Dean Peabody, Tina K. Rosolack, William B. Stiles, Denise M. Town, Ronald W. Thebargae, and an anonymous reviewer all made many helpful suggestions in response to earlier versions of this manuscript.

2Address all correspondence to Leonard G. Rorer, Psychology Department, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio 45056.
I will also argue that logical empiricism, on which rational-emotive theory was originally based, is no longer a tenable epistemology. After discussing recent developments in epistemology, I will develop the concept of rationality within a more modern framework. I will argue that irrational beliefs can be defined logically so that the theory is not circular, except in the sense that all theories are circular (e.g., all words in the dictionary are defined in terms of other words in the dictionary). Because the theory concerns etiology and not cognitive change, I will not discuss the conduct of rational-emotive therapy, except incidentally for the purpose of explicating the theory.

RATIONAL-EMOTIVE THEORY

Ellis (1984a), the originator and leading exponent of rational-emotive theory and therapy, both referred to as RET, presents the basic theory in terms of his ABC model, as follows:

“A” stands for Activating events of experiences; or for stimuli impinging on humans.
“B” stands for Beliefs—that is, ideas, inferences, and evaluations about A's. “C” stands for cognitive, emotive, and behavioral Consequences of A times B. (p. 20)

In defining the A, Ellis assumed an ontological realism; the A refers to an event, not the perception of the event. Wessler and Wessler (1980) expanded the ABC model to differentiate between the event and the perception of the event. In either case, the event may be an experience, such as anxiety. The theory then states that, contrary to popular belief, Cs are caused, not by As, but by Bs. Ellis emphasizes that the idea was not invented by him, and he often cites Epictetus, who taught during the first century A.D.: “People are disturbed not by things, but by the views they take of them” (e.g., Oldfather, 1966, whose translation is slightly different from the one I have given).

The Bs and Cs can each be of two kinds. The Bs can be rational or irrational; the Cs can be appropriate or inappropriate. Consider the Cs first. Although Ellis's definition of C includes cognitive, behavioral, and emotional components, it is the emotional components on which the theory has always focused, because the cognitive and behavioral consequences can be seen as a result of the emotional consequences. For example, one may avoid doing something (behavioral consequence) because doing it would lead to anxiety, and may think about it as unpleasant (cognitive consequence) because thoughts of it are associated with anxiety (emotional consequence).

I want to distinguish two classes of consequences. In the case of behavioral consequences the classes can be designated as appropriate and inappropriate and the distinction can be explicated as the extent to which reasonable people would agree that the actions seem likely to achieve the