Elliot D. Cohen on the Metaphysics of Logic-Based Therapy

Samuel Zinaich, Jr., Ph.D.

Samuel Zinaich, Jr. *is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Purdue University Calumet in Hammond, IN. Professor Zinaich has published articles on John Locke's (1632-1704) moral theory, abortion, virtue theory, professional ethics, philosophical counseling, and he is co-editor of* Ethics for the Professions *from Wadsworth/Thomas Learning, 2003. His new book,* John Locke's Moral Revolution: from Nature Law to Moral Relativism, *was published by University Press of America in 2006.* E-mail Address: Zinaich@calumet.purdue.edu

Abstract: In this essay I consider the question of whether Elliot D. Cohen has justified sufficiently the metaphysical basis for his Logic-Based Therapy as presented in his paper on "The Metaphysics of Logic-Based Therapy (IJPP, this issue). Although Cohen discusses four different foundations of his cognitive theory, I focus only on one. It is the most important basis of his theory, viz., that human beings logically deduce the cognitive-behavior components of their emotions from premises. First, I question Cohen's analysis of the emotion rules we use to deduce evaluations of actions from. Second, I challenge Cohen's view that we deduce our evaluations from emotion rules. Although I do not think my challenges completely undermine Cohen's theory, they do raise serious concerns for a theory faced with a preponderance of causal therapies.

In this essay, I will be concerned to discuss Elliot D. Cohen's article "The Metaphysics of Logic-Based Therapy." I will proceed by offering a very brief description of his paper. I will then focus more in detail on the first section of his paper. Finally, I will set out critical comments about some of the details in the first section.

In a long anticipate article, Professor Cohen spells out the metaphysical foundations of his Logic-Based Therapy (LBT). As Cohen makes clear, "LBT holds that human beings largely create their own emotional and behavioral problems by deducing self-defeating and destructive behavioral and emotional conclusions from irrational premises."[1] To defend his theory, Cohen brings forward four assumptions: "1. Human beings logically deduce the cognitive-behavioral components of their emotions from premises. 2. Human beings are inherently fallible and the premises of their behavior and emotional reasoning tend to contain fallacies. 3. Behavioral and emotional problems tend to stem from absolutistic, perfectionist constructs of reality. 4. Human

[1] Cohen, "The Metaphysics of Logic-Based Therapy," 1.

beings have an inherent power of will that can be used to overcome fallacious behavioral and emotional reasoning."[2] Each point Cohen discusses is needed to establish that his theory is firmly rooted in a reasonable outlook of reality. Although I am interested in all aspects of his theory, for of the sake of time, I will only focus my comments on his first point.

In the first part of his paper, Cohen argues that human beings logically deduce the cognitive-behavior components of their emotions from premises. His argument proceeds in two steps: first, Cohen demonstrates the logical structure of emotional reasoning. After that, he demonstrates that the same sort of structure applies to behavioral reasoning. The following argument represents the conclusion of those steps with the addition of the first premise to make the argument valid:

> 1. If emotional reasoning can be constructed out of an emotion's intentional object and rating and if behavioral reasoning can supervene on emotional reasoning, then human beings logically deduce the cognitive-behavior components of their emotions from premises.
>
> 2. Emotional reasoning can be constructed out of an emotion's intentional object and rating.
>
> 3. Behavioral reasoning can supervene on emotional reasoning.
>
> *Therefore*,
>
> 4. Human beings logically deduce the cognitive-behavior components of their emotions from premises.

I call Cohen's first line the "can-able principle."[3] The idea is this: from the fact that something can be done, e.g., paint can be scrubbed, it follows that it is scrubbable. Or from the fact that a book can be read, it is readable. In our case, Cohen's first premise follows the same

[2] Ibid.

[3] Fred Feldman, *Introduction to Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1978), 43.

idea because he argues that since emotional reasoning *can* be constructed out of an emotion's intentional object and the same structure applies to behavior reason, human beings actually act this way when it comes to deducing their emotions and behavior from beliefs. Although the application of the can-able principle may not apply to every example that follows its form,[4] Cohen's principle appears to apply, and therefore, premise 1 seems to be true.

At first glance, the second premise also appears to be true as well. The reason rests squarely upon Cohen's understanding of an emotion's intentional object and rating. There are three points to underscore about this claim. First, emotions have intentional objects, which means that an emotion is always directed at some object, whether that object exists or not.[5] The reason is that, as Cohen explains, emotions are one of the species of consciousness, and "Consciousness is always conscious of something."[6]

Second, emotions rate the object that the emotion is directed at. For example, suppose I am driving on I-94 toward Chicago, IL, and someone unjustifiably cuts me off and I nearly collide with him. On the occasion that I get angry, I immediately rate his action as one that I disapprove of or condemn. In other words, I give his action a negative rating.[7]

The third point is crucial for Cohen's analysis of LBT. The reason is that Cohen argues that emotional reasoning can be pieced together, so to speak, out of an emotion's intentional object and rating. But why is this so? Cohen makes clear that one's emotional reaction to an event, i.e., the object of the emotion and the subsequent evaluation of the same object, can be represented by modus ponens. As a rule, modus ponens states that a statement, Q, can be

[4] For example, does it follow that just because someone can desire something, it follows that it is desirable? Clearly not because there are many things that can be desired, e.g., rape or murder, that are not desirable.

[5] Cohen, "The Metaphysics of Logic-Based Therapy," 2.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid., 3.

logically derived from the conditional statement, if P, then Q, as long as we can first affirm P. Thus, where (O) is the intentional object of an emotion and (R) is the rating of the emotion, we construct the following inference:

(i). If O, then R.

(ii). O.

Therefore,

(iii). R.

There is one more thing to add. Part of LBT's analysis of the inference just mentioned is that lines 1 and 2 function in a specific way, viz., line 1 is called the Rule and line 2 is called the Report. The premise stating the Rule indicates how an individual has logically linked together an intentional object and the rating. But before the individual will feel a certain way, he must first be confronted with the states of affairs spelled out, in a sense, by the intentional object. So what does this mean? Let's go back to I-94 for a minute. Suppose I am driving down the interstate, and I am cutoff by another fanatical driver. On the assumption that I have the logical Rule that when someone cuts me off, I will condemn them (line i), and on the occasion such an event takes place and I perceive it as such (line ii), I will condemn the driver that just cut me off (line iii).

The plausibility of the third line derives its plausibility from line 2. The reason is that the same sort of reasoning that applies to emotional reasoning also applies behavioral reasoning.[8] Thus, where (R) is the rating of an emotion mentioned earlier and (B) is a behavioral "ought" or "should," we can construct the following inference:

(iv). If R, then B.

Therefore,

(v). B. (MP iii, iv)

[8] Ibid., 5.

The point of this inference is that, just as individuals deduce their evaluations about an intentional object, individuals also deduce what behavior is appropriate from the rule spelled out in line iv. That is, as Cohen instructs us, not only do we create rules that dictate how we will feel in certain situations, we also create rules for what we will do when we rate an action. Here is what I mean.

Let's go back to interstate I-94. Again, let's suppose that I am cutoff by a senseless driver, and I nearly lose control of my car. Because of the emotional rule I have for being cutoff, I promptly condemn the driver who cut me off. Unfortunately, as is the case for many drivers on I-94, the story does not stop here because not only do I have a rule that tells me how to feel in this case (line i), I also may have a rule—a rule following the form described in line iv—that dictates what I will do when I am in this situation. Of course, the behavior rule I have may vary depending upon the way I have habituated myself. For example, if the driver deserves my condemnation, I may try to calm myself by counting to ten, or I may pound my dashboard and express my disapproval with a few choice words and gestures. Or, as I have seen myself on numerous occasions, I may become irrational and engage in some sort of road rage. Whatever my response is, like the deduction I make for the way I evaluate an action, I logically deduce a behavior from the behavior rule I have generated for myself (line v).

Thus, with the plausibility of line 3 in place, Cohen's argument appears to be sound and his conclusion is worthy of belief. Although with this recognition and with the tied of victory in favor of Cohen's analysis of emotional and behavioral reasoning, it is not altogether an unwise thing to bring some critical remarks to the discussion. Such remarks, even if they turn out to be clumsy or off the mark, may show that Cohen's thesis is one that would dare hell-heat or artic cold.

One possible line of response to Cohen's argument involves challenging premise 2. The reason is that the whole argument appears to rest upon whether Cohen can plausibly demonstrate that there is a logical relationship between the intentional object and the rating. I imagine that some may argue that line 1 should also be the focus for critical assessment. But I don't think so. Line 1 is not an issue because the can-ability principle appears to apply to the kind of reasoning Cohen is using here. This is not to say that every line of reasoning will work with the can-ability principle. Like the principle of transitivity, some concepts will work others will not. Finally, the third premise does not appear to be at issue either because, as Cohen indicates, line three piggybacks on the second line. Thus, it will rise or fall with the second premise.[9]

So, what issues can plausibly be raised against line 2? I think that there are two worth exploring. First, I want to question Cohen's analysis of the emotion rules we use to deduce evaluations of actions from. Second, I want to bring a challenge to Cohen's view that we deduce our evaluations from emotion rules. Both points I take to be related to the understanding of line 2, and both points I take to be the heart of Cohen's LBT.

The emotional rules that Cohen discusses in emotional reasoning, e.g., statements like "if O, then R," play a crucial role in LBT. Again, as Cohen explains, it is from these rules that we deduce the evaluations of actions from. But what is the status of these rules? I have one point to underscore.

Because Cohen's LBT is a cognitive psychological theory, it is concerned with the truth conditions of beliefs that client's use to make decisions about themselves and others. Many of the truth-conditions of those beliefs appear to be linked to some version of psychological idealism. On this view, the truth-conditions of psychological statements, statements like the rules

[9] Ibid.

LBT speak about, are in virtue of someone or other's mind: yours, mine, or even God's. Additionally, we may speak of two versions of psychological idealism: subjectivism and intersubjectivism.[10] Subjectivism, on this account, is roughly the view that psychological statements are true or false relative to the desires, preferences or goals of a judger. One example that's consistent with LBT is this:

If I can't pass this course, then I will not have any worth as a person.

I take this to be one version of the emotional rule called damnation.[11]

Intersubjectivism is slightly different. Roughly speaking, it is the view that psychological claims are true or false relative to the conventions and practices in force in some relevant society. On example that may be consistent with LBT is this:

If the President says war is justified, then we should not be critical of his decision.

I take this to be an example of jumping on the bandwagon because it points to a blind or parrot-like conformity.[12]

With these positions in place, I want to point out one virtue and one drawback. First, one virtue of psychological idealism is that it will allow the practitioners of LBT to correctly point out that many of the rules or premises we use are false or irrational, and then to find a suitable antidote to them.[13] But there is also a possible drawback. LBT, as I understand it, is also committed to the position that some rules are true. In fact, in his paper, Cohen brings this point forward in his discussion about the transcendent virtues. As Cohen points out, LBT does not

[10] Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, "Introduction: The Many Moral Realisms," in Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (ed.) *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), 14-19.

[11] Cohen, "The Metaphysics of Logic-Based Therapy," 6. I take it that many of the other emotional rules Cohen's speaks of will have such truth conditions.

[12] Ibid., 6.

[13] Ibid., 4

merely attempt to overcome fallacies, as classical Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy has tended to concentrate on. Rather, LBT also attempts to provide a "positive set of values to which to aspire in overcoming fallacies."[14] But here's the rub: Cohen's commitment to *transcendent* values points to very different truth conditions, conditions that make no reference and need not make reference to anyone's subjective states or conventions, i.e., his reference to transcendent values points to objectivism.

Let me try to illustrate this point. Earlier I gave two examples of rules that have different sorts of truth conditions. Although both are versions of psychological idealism, the first has subjective truth conditions:

If I can't pass this course, then I will not have any worth as a person.

The second one has intersubjective truth conditions:

If the President says war is justified, then we should not be critical of his decision.

What will LBT suggest as proper replacements? Although I am not sure, the former will be replaced with the transcendent virtue rule:

If I can't pass this course, I am still a being that deserves respect.

The latter may be replaced with the transcendent virtue rule:

If the President says war is justified, we should expect his decision to hold up to a just war theory of warfare.

Again, what is interesting to note is that the replacement rules appear to rely upon truth conditions that have a deeper foundation than the desires or conventions of our society. But why is the problematic? The reason is that LBT is no longer merely a *psychological* theory that is designed to help a client to think, choose, and act for himself, i.e., to function autonomously. It is

[14] Ibid., 8-9.

now a theory that is wedded to a theory of moral virtues that has cross-cultural and trans-historical significance. But what may not be apparent are the consequences such a complex theory will have for the potential LBT practitioners and consequences for LBT clients.

First, it would appear that a LBT practitioner must not only accept the highly intuitive psychological theory Cohen has created, but also a controversial theory of moral values. How will potential practitioners greet such a theory? It may have limited appeal especially if the virtues are inconsistent with the practitioner's own set of values.

Additionally, what are the consequences for LBT clients? LBT appears to be committed to not just helping individuals make choices for themselves—certainly a proper role for therapists—but it doesn't stop there. LBT's commitment to transcendent virtues also appears to have implications for the client's set of values or what some authors call second-order autonomy.[15] Second-order autonomy is the ability to reflect critically on the values and commitments which underlie the choices we make for ourselves.[16] Recommending a transcendent virtue could impact a client in two significant ways. First, how will the client be able to critically analyze the transcendent virtue? If they can't, it may cause unanticipated psychological problems for the client. Second, what will happen if the transcendent virtue is inconsistent with one or more of the values the client holds? Again, such an inconsistency may lead to further psychological issues the client may not be able to deal adequately with. Because of these problems and others that I haven't mentioned, some scholars plausibly argue that

[15] Joseph Kupfer and Luann Klatt, "Client Empowerment and Counselor Integrity," in John Rowan and Samuel Zinaich, Jr. eds., *Ethics for the Professions* (Wadsworth/Thomas Learning, 2003).

[16] Ibid., 313.

counseling should be limited to an analysis of the client's choices or to their first-order autonomy.[17]

I will now turn to my final remarks about premise 2. Underlying premise 2 is the view that we deduce our evaluations from emotional rules. This comes out pretty clearly in his discussion.[18] How does Cohen argue this point? As far as I can tell, the closest thing that Cohen says about this point is that it *can* be done. But I think Cohen's point is stronger than that. Besides, as cognitive theories go, that may not be that interesting. Personally, I think Cohen has something like this in mind: *Human beings logically deduce the ratings of intentional objects.* If that is true (and I maybe wrong), then how can he argue this point? Because of the nature of this discussion, a discussion that attempts to explain the way we act by hypothesizing what we are thinking, I think the following argument may suffice:

vi. Logical deduction can explain how humans derive their ratings of intentional objects.

vii. Logical deduction is the best explanation of how humans derive the ratings of intentional objects.

Therefore,

viii. Human beings logically deduce the ratings of intentional objects.

I have chosen to represent Cohen's view as a form of inference to the best explanation.[19] Represented in this way, line vi states Cohen's hypothesis. He plausibly argues that logical deduction can explain how humans derive their ratings by showing that emotional reason can be

[17] Ibid., 312-314.

[18] Cohen, "The Metaphysics of Logic-Based Therapy," 4.

[19] My understanding of inference to the best explanation is based on the article: Gilbert H. Harman, "The Inference to Best Explanation," *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965).

represented by modus ponens.[20] Line vii is what some scholars call the intermediate lemma.[21] It is a crucial premise because it connects line vi and the conclusion. It states not merely that humans can act this way. In fact, it states that deduction is the *proper* account of how humans reason. Thus, from lines vi and vii we get the very plausible conclusion that human beings logically deduce the rating of intentional objects.

Of course, my challenge will focus on line vii. Once more, line vi is not the issue because emotional reason can be represented by modus ponens. Thus, Cohen's theory has the arduous task of explaining why other competing methods of accounting of emotional reason are not the best explanations. For example, Cohen will have to show why Ellis' REBT causal account of emotional reason is not the best account. Unfortunately, this topic is not brought up in Cohen's essay. This is, naturally, understandable because such a task would be too complex for one article. But such an account is necessary to make Cohen's case, and until Cohen gives us reasons to accept the truth of line 2, its epistemic status is unknown.

There is one more comment. I wonder whether such a comprehensive account will ever be forthcoming. Of course, it's not fair to say such an explanation can't be created. My point is that such a story appears to be extremely daunting. Here's why. Cohen has a very specific way of analyzing an emotion. He points out that an emotion can be identified in terms of its distinct intentional object and rating. But there's more. In his analysis of the emotional rules we use to deduce our ratings from, Cohen spells them out as logical conditionals. In the light of the preponderance of causal and evolutionary theories, how will Cohen prove that the relationship is logical and not causal? Unfortunately, at this time, I can't offer any advice about how to proceed.

[20] Cohen, "The Metaphysics of Logic-Based Therapy," 4.

[21] Harman, "The Inference to Best Explanation," 94.

In this paper I offered a partial critique of the Cohen's metaphysical foundations of Logic-Based Therapy. I concentrated on the first part of this account. I did so because of my own agenda about this issue, but it is also, as I understand it, the heart of Cohen's theory. I brought forward two challenges. First, I questioned Cohen's analysis of the emotion rules we use to deduce evaluations of actions from. Second, I brought a challenge to Cohen's view that we deduce our evaluations from emotion rules. In the end, I don't think my challenges significantly undermine Cohen's theory. That was not my purpose of my paper because I think his theory is correct. Rather, the purpose of my critical remarks is to strengthen his view and to meet such objections when and if ever they might arise.