

Absolute Nonsense:
The Irrationality of Perfectionistic Thinking

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Abstract: This paper shows how Logic-Based Therapy can constructively employ philosophical theories (such as those of Augustine, Aquinas, Spinoza, Hume, and Epictetus) as potent antidotes to the fallacy of Demanding Perfection.

Logic-Based Therapy (LBT), the modality of philosophical counseling I founded in the mid eighties, has its roots in cognitive-behavior psychotherapy, in particular, Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT). But there are several crucial distinctions between LBT and REBT. While both theories take philosophy seriously, LBT is the only psychotherapeutic modality that orders belief systems in terms of premises and conclusions instead of activating events, beliefs, and behavioral and emotional consequences. It is the only modality that systematically catalogs and applies the full range of informal logic (fallacies) to psychotherapy; and it is the only modality that systematically applies substantive philosophical theories to overcoming this extensive repertoire of self-destructive, fallacious thinking. What is more, whereas classical REBT has concentrated primarily on identifying and correcting irrational thinking, LBT also emphasizes the more aspirational dimensions of mental health—so-called, “positive psychology”—by providing an advanced set of philosophical antidotes gleaned from philosophies of antiquity.

Broadly speaking, there are three principle steps in the method of LBT. First, identifying the irrational premise (which is either a prescriptive rule or an empirical report); second, providing a refutation of this premise; and third, finding an antidote to the fallacy. An antidote is a prescriptive rule or “should” that counters the irrational “should” (or “must”) by providing new, forward moving directions for clients in overcoming their irrational reasoning. LBT emphasizes building willpower in order to overcome the cognitive dissonance typically occurring between clients’ irrational cognitions and their rational, antidotal thinking. While the theory of LBT makes no commitment about the deep metaphysical status of willpower, it pragmatically conceives willpower on the model of a muscle that requires behavioral and cognitive “flexing” in order to strengthen it.

In this paper I will demonstrate how substantive philosophical theories can provide such progressive antidotes to one of the most virulent forms of irrational behavioral and emotional rules.¹ This is the fallacious rule known in LBT as *Demanding Perfection*. In classical REBT, this fallacy (variously named Demandingness, Musturbation, among others) has been deemed to be the source of most emotional and behavioral disturbances in humans.² My own clinical research and studies has confirmed that this fallacy is, in fact, *the* most frequently occurring fallacy of rules, and also perhaps the most fundamental.³

This rule can be formulated more explicitly as follows:

Demanding Perfection:

If the world fails to conform to some state of ideality, perfection or near perfection, then the world is not the way it absolutely, unconditionally *must* be, and you cannot and must not ever have it any other way.

The most salient feature of this rule is its use of the term “must” to indicate a demand, and not just a wish, that the world conform to some absolutistic ideal. It is this “mustabatory” aspect of the rule that leads its adherents (who are many) to deduce extreme frustration ranging from depression to rage when the world fails to conform to the ideal. Since the world cannot ordinarily, realistically, be expected to be perfect, the probabilities of failure are extremely high and so, by subscribing to this rule, one almost invariably sets oneself up for failure.

Some common forms of this fallacy occur when you demand that others approve of you; you not make a mistakes; things go the way you want them to go; others treat you fairly; bad things don’t happen to you or to your significant others; you maintain control over the events in your life; you get what you want; you succeed at what you try; and that your body is free of perceived flaws or imperfections.

Clearly, as people go through life, they will encounter adversity. Things do not always turn out the way we want; others from whom we seek approval, may scoff at us; people whom we trust may betray us; freakish accidents may take away someone or something we cherish; the natural lottery may not always yield a desired outcome. So, the refutation of this rule is really quite straightforward:

Refutation of the Demand for Perfection:

The assumption that ideality, perfection or even near perfection is humanly possible in this earthly universe is false to fact.

Being ready to confront the vicissitudes of an imperfect universe can, therefore, prove to be of substantial value. In fact, philosophers throughout the ages have given the fallacy of Demanding Perfection careful consideration, and have provided a fund of insights that afford useful antidotes to this fallacy.

The ancient pre-Socratic Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, was the first to emphasize change as the basic feature of the world. Things, he thought, were in a state of constant change such that one could never “step into the same river twice.” The idea of an absolute unchangeable reality was absent from this worldview. Even Plato, in his quest for perfection could not find this on earth. Accepting Heraclitus’ idea that the world existing in space and time was one of “becoming” rather than of “Being,” he turned to a “heaven of Ideals,” apart from the world of particular things, in order to satisfy his desire for perfection. In short, the idea that human earthly existence is an imperfect one is woven into the fabric of ancient philosophy, and this theme has persisted in Western philosophy ever since.

Since only God is perfect, let yourself be human.

Plato’s famous distinction between the realm of *Being*, which is a perfect place, and that of *becoming*, which is an imperfect place, provided metaphysical fodder for much of Christian theology that followed, including St. Augustine’s famous distinction between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Earth. According to the latter distinction, as residents of Earth, it is sheer arrogance for human beings to assume that they can live a perfect existence. Indeed, such an existence is reserved for God, not for God’s creatures. So stated Augustine,

This I know, that the nature of God can never and nowhere be deficient in anything, while things made out of nothing can be deficient.⁴

The human demand for perfection is accordingly confused. As humans we are inherently deficient. This does not mean that we can't try to be more like God by seeking to overcome many of our deficiencies. As St. Thomas Aquinas said, "The last end of things is to become like unto God"⁵ "although they are able to attain this likeness in a most imperfect manner."⁶ Clearly, there is a fundamental difference between "shooting for the stars" as a method of improvement and *demanding* that you land on them.⁷

Stop scrutinizing your body, looking for defects, degrading it according to subjective, cultural ideals.

Human *imperfection* also includes the human *body*. According Plato, all physical beings (things that take up physical space) are by their nature imperfect copies of ideal forms. They are in a constant state of change and all deteriorate with age. Accordingly, if we demand *physical* perfection (of ourselves or others), we are not going to find it, at least in this mortal existence of ours. The more flaws we fix, the more we are likely to find. And as we continue to age, we will find many. But that doesn't mean we should not take pride in our bodies.

From Augustine's perspective, one's *body* does not have to be perfect to be good or beautiful. "All natures," said Augustine, "are good simply because they exist and, therefore, have each its own measure of being, its own beauty, even in a way, its own peace."⁸ And Plato contends that the beauty and goodness of any living creature is in its conformity to the use for which it is designed by nature.⁹ What of being overweight,

having an exceptionally large nose, having brown eyes instead of blue, or other physical condition you would personally prefer to change? Augustine answers: No “blemish” in a thing should be “blamed” unless it interferes with its specific function. “For example, when we say that blindness is a defect of the eyes, we imply that it is the very nature of the eyes to see, and when we say that deafness is a malady of the ears, we are supposing that it is their nature to hear.”¹⁰

Unfortunately many human beings devote a large portion of their lives and resources trying to fix or cover up “blemishes” that do not compromise the functional integrity of the body. For example, the size of our noses does not prevent us from breathing well; a woman’s breast size does not affect lactation or orgasmic abilities; the state of our stomachs does not prevent us from properly digesting food; and the color of our eyes does not affect vision. Thus, for the physical malcontent who scrutinizes her body looking for defects to repair, Augustine had this admonition: Instead of looking for defects, rejoice in the goodness and beauty of the natural, functional integrity of the body.

Of course, not everyone would accept the premise that nature is ripe with purpose and function, from which its goodness and beauty derives. For example, David Hume thought that judgments about beauty were variable and subjective. So wrote Hume:

Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty; and every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others. To seek the real beauty, or real deformity, is as fruitless an enquiry, as to pretend to ascertain the real sweet or real bitter...¹¹

Should one be taller or shorter, thinner or fatter, have more hair or less?

According to Hume, the answer to such questions cannot be found in nature. Nor must

one's judgment be constrained by a common idea of beauty like one promoted in a fashion magazine. We are, in this way, autonomous measures and purveyors of beauty.

In Hume's view, it is *nowhere* written that one aesthetic judgment is any less valid than that of another. And, as Voltaire remarked, "the beautiful is often quite relative, so that what is decent in Japan is indecent in Rome, and what is fashionable in Paris is not so in Peking."¹²

The point is that one can be beautiful so long as *one* permits it. From this Humean perspective it is therefore misguided to scrutinize one's body, looking for defects, and degrading it according to subjective, cultural ideals.

Change your absolutistic, unrealistic, *musts* and *shoulds* to preferences (Spinoza).

In Hume's aesthetic subjectivism is the rejection of a perfect, objective form of Beauty existing as Plato saw it, in a "heaven of ideals." More generally, Hume conceived the idea of perfection itself to be relative and subjective.¹³ In fact, Hume did not believe that *any* abstract ideas, including that of God, could be demonstrated to exist outside the mind.

But Humean skepticism is not the only route to rejecting the demand for perfection. According to Spinoza, such a demand arises from a prejudicial, self-imposed preference rather than from objective, absolute necessity.

Metaphysically, Spinoza, like Hume, rejected the Platonic dualism inherent in Christianity, but unlike Hume, embraced a pantheistic perspective instead. All reality, thought Spinoza, follows necessarily from one universal substance none other than God. There are no separate Kingdoms of God and of Earth, of heaven and earth, of soul and body, of Being and becoming. It is not that there is nature here and God there, but

instead Nature is just one way of looking at one solitary unitary God. This is an impersonal deity, not one that answers prayers or works miracles. In bringing the curtain down on heaven apart from earth, Spinoza also abandoned the idea of a realm of perfect reality that provides ultimate ends or purposes to which to strive. God or Nature is not purposive at all; nor is it perfect. In fact, the idea of perfection is a human artifact arising as a result of turning preferences into demands. Spinoza explains:

[A]fter men began to form universal ideas, and devise models of houses, buildings, towers, and the like, and to *prefer* some models of things to others, it came about that each one called perfect what he saw agreed with the universal idea he had formed of this kind of thing, and imperfect, what he saw agreed less with the model he had conceived... Nor does there seem to be any other reason why men also commonly call perfect or imperfect natural things, which have not been made by human hands...when they see something happen in Nature which does not agree with the model they have conceived of this kind of thing, they believe that nature itself has failed or sinned, and left the thing imperfect. We see, therefore, that men are accustomed to call natural things perfect or imperfect more from prejudice than from true knowledge of those things.¹⁴

For Spinoza, perfectionistic demands simply mask the fact that perfection is not inherent in Nature itself but instead in the mind of the person seeking it. This is a clear reminder to see through the thin veneer of perfectionistic language of “musts” and “needs” and to realize instead one’s own role in imposing these demands on oneself. For example, the demand for the approval of others is based on one’s desire for such approval and does not exist in the mind of God, in the universal order of Nature, or in some supreme first principle of human relating. It is nowhere written in eternal reality, but consists rather in one’s own subjective preference for such relatedness. Changing this “must” to the preference that it really is can thereby help one to avoid unnecessary, self-imposed stress. Since gaining the approval of others is not within our own power to control, it is irrational to demand it.

Don't sweat the things you can't directly control. Expend your efforts instead on what you *can* control.

This idea that one can avoid substantial emotional distress by appreciating the limits of human control is a key aspect of ancient Stoic philosophy, notably that of Epictetus. He advises,

Some things are under our control, while others are not under our control. Under our control are conception, choice, desire, aversion, and in a word, everything that is our own doing; not under our control are our body, our property, reputation, office and, in a word, everything that is not our own doing.... Remember, therefore, that if what is naturally slavish you think to be free, and what is not your own to be your own, you will be hampered, will grieve, will be in turmoil, and will blame both gods and men; while if you think only what is your own, to be your own, and what is not your own to be, as it really is, not your own, then no one will ever be able to exert compulsion upon you, no one will hinder you, you will blame no one, will find fault with no one, will do absolutely nothing against your will, you will have no personal enemies, no one will harm you, for neither is there any harm that can touch you.¹⁵

Simply stated, by trying to exert control over things that are not directly conformable to one's will, one is setting oneself up for considerable emotional stress. On the other hand, by tending instead to what can directly be controlled, namely our own "conception, choice, desire, and aversion," we can avoid considerable emotional stress.

On this view, anxiety arises from our desire to control the external world rather than to control what directly conforms to our will, for "we are anxious about this paltry body or estate of ours, or about what Caesar thinks, and not at all about anything internal..."¹⁶ For Example, a musician, Epictetus says, "feels no anxiety while he is singing by himself; but when he appears upon the stage he does, even if his voice be ever so good, or he plays ever so well. For what he wishes is not only to sing well, but likewise to gain applause. But this is not in his own power."¹⁷

So long as the musician does not *demand* that he sing perfectly, he can avoid considerable anxiety by focusing his energies on singing well, and not on getting the approval of the audience; for it is the former, not the latter, that is within his direct control.¹⁸ More generally, by not sweating those (external) things that are outside one's direct control, and by concentrating on those (internal) things that are largely conformable to the will, one can avoid considerable emotional stress.

I would add this qualification, however. We are not likely to avoid emotional stress by *demanding* that we think, feel and act rationally. Even things that are directly subject to willful control are not so *controllable* that one can demand perfection about them. We are still likely to experience considerable stress if we demand that we never have irrational emotions, desire only rational things, and only make wise choices. As imperfect beings, it is irrational for us to demand perfection even in the sphere of willful things no less than in things outside our direct control.

Conclusion

As illustrated in this paper, by applying the philosophical wisdom of the ages in the form of antidotes to faulty thinking, Logic-Based philosophical counselors can provide helpful guidance to their clients. Thus, not only can such an approach help clients avoid irrational and self-destructive thinking; it can also help them to advance, grow and flourish through life according to the profound, perennial insights of philosophy.

Some philosophical counselors have attempted to distinguish between philosophical counseling and psychotherapy by claiming that the primary purpose of philosophical counseling is philosophical enlightenment. This they have claimed is itself

a value of intrinsic worth sufficient to justify philosophical practice. LBT couldn't agree more that philosophical enlightenment is a good worth pursuing for its own sake.

But this view is shortsighted as to the import and value of philosophy for psychotherapy. According to LBT, inherent in the history of philosophy is a wealth of antidotes for overcoming destructive, commonplace fallacies and for attaining greater inner peace and prosperity. This paper has demonstrated this with regard to one especially virulent form of irrational rule. Hail the philosophers who so righteously speak in unison: Demanding perfection in this imperfect universe is absolute nonsense!

Endnotes

¹ This paper includes parts of the more comprehensive, detailed analysis in Chapter 2 of Elliot D. Cohen, *The New Rational Therapy: Thinking Your Way to Serenity, Success, and Profound Happiness* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

² "...REBT theorizes that most clients have somewhat similar Irrational Beliefs (IBs), especially the three major absolutistic musts that frequently plague the human race: (a) "I must achieve outstandingly well in one or more important respects or I am an inadequate person!" (b) "Other people must treat me fairly and well or they are bad people!" (c) "Conditions must be favorable or else my life is rotten and I can't stand it!" When one, two, or three of these are strongly and consistently held, people tend to make themselves emotionally and behaviorally disturbed." Albert Ellis, *Overcoming Destructive Beliefs, Feelings, and Behavior* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2001), p. 61.

³ Research results have been drawn from hundreds of personal essays as analyzed by Belief-Scan, an artificial intelligence program I have invented, which scans text for fallacies.

⁴ St. Augustine, *City of God*, bk. 12, chap. 8, in *From Plato to Derrida*, 4th ed., ed. Forrest E. Baird and Walter Kaufmann (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2003), 313.

⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, in *Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1948), chap. 19.

⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, chap. 25

⁷ Kevin FitzMaurice, cited in Albert Ellis, *Feeling Better, Getting Better, Staying Better* (Atascadero, Calif.: Impact Publishers, 2001), 105.

⁸ St. Augustine, *City of God*, bk. 12, chap. 5, in Baird and Kaufmann, *From Plato to Derrida*, 310.

⁹ Plato, *The Republic*, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), bk. 10.

¹⁰ St. Augustine, *City of God*, bk. 12, chap. 1, 307.

¹¹ David Hume, *Of the Standard of Taste*, sec. 7, retrieved November 10, 2007 from <http://www.csulb.edu/~jvancamp/361r15.html>.

¹² Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*, in *Voltaire Selections*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 128.

¹³ Hume, *Of the Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature*

¹⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics*, pt. 4, *Of Human Bondage or the Power of the Affects*, in

A Spinoza Reader, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 198.

¹⁵ Epictetus, *Encheiridion*, in Baird and Kaufmann, *From Plato to Derrida*, 259.

¹⁶ Epictetus, *Discourses*, Book 2 cited in William Ferraiolo, "Stoic Counsel for Interpersonal Relations," *International Journal of Philosophical Practice* 2, no. 1 (spring 2004): 7, available at <http://www.aspcp.org/ijpp/html/vol2no1.html>

¹⁷ Cited in Ferraiolo, Stoic Counsel for Interpersonal Relations, 7–8.

¹⁸ Strictly speaking, it is the expending of an *effort* to sing well that is in a person's power, not the actual outcome of this effort.