

Awfulize To the Core No More

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Abstract: This paper demonstrates how philosophical works can be utilized in order to combat irrational rules of reasoning, namely *Demanding Perfection* and *Awfulizing*, associated with real-life thoughts and experiences of the author as a student.

Philosophical practice serves a purpose of tailoring individuals into becoming more rational beings especially in dealing with adversities and overcoming any barriers to human happiness throughout their lives. It holds true that irrational reasoning acts as that “hole” causing the problems, and therefore should be examined and “fixed.” Philosophical practice also pieces together a variety of philosophers and their corresponding theories to offer valuable insights into effective methods of thinking and reasoning, one of which is the construction of philosophical antidotes.

Philosophical antidotes stand as “patches” to specific cardinal fallacies, which are essentially the “holes” undermining a person’s happiness. In his book, *The New Rational Therapy*,¹ Elliot D. Cohen states:

Fallacies hide rational alternates to problems behind a cloud of false or unrealistic absolutes. As you’ll also see, once you clear the air of these fallacies—identify and refute them—at your disposal is an abundant, diversified stock of philosophical wisdom for helping you define and attain your own profound sense of human happiness (8).

¹ All references in this paper are to this book.

In other words, these philosophical antidotes are utilized to refute and eventually “repair” the fallacies in exchange for more rational and fruitful ways of thinking.

Furthermore, Cohen (11) explains that an “antidote can be strengthened by examining its more profound, *philosophical* significance.” This is where the works of philosophers, or philosophy in general, come to play. Philosophical contributions, some even dating back to ancient times, provide a strong foundation one could incorporate in forming his or her antidotes. Cohen also points out that thinking carefully like philosophers, that is “to accept things unquestioningly, cultivating a philosophical habit of looking carefully at your own premises before acting on them,” can pave the way to our salvation (10). It is important to note that here lies that flexibility in terms of figuring out what “fits” one best, meaning to say that there are multiple philosophers and theories from which one can pull from depending on what applies to that particular person or situation.

Personally, the cardinal fallacy I feel mostly affected by is *Awfulizing*. According to this irrational rule:

If something shitty happens or might happen to you or to a significant other, then it’s totally terrible, horrible, and awful—by far the worst and shittiest thing that could possibly ever happen” (50).

Cohen adds:

In yielding to this rule, you can send yourself into a tailspin of self-destructive emotions. In following this rule, when something perceivably shitty happens or might happen, you overreact to just *how* shitty it really is. *In your mind*, it is catapulted to the absolute worst thing in the universe (50).

A lot of times, I brand specific events in my life as “dangers” or “misfortunes” that would seriously harm me; then I overestimate the event by thinking of a chain reaction until every negativity in my head consumes and drains the hope out of me. For example, I brand getting a “C” on an exam as a “danger” because I think I have lost my chances of excelling (getting an “A”); then I further awfulize by thinking this one grade will bring my entire GPA down causing me to lose scholarships, lose opportunities to transfer to other universities, have a bad reputation in college, and so on.

Over time, awfulizing has become habitual, almost instinctual, for me in terms of my academic performance. And I have realized that this behavior is rooting from another cardinal fallacy, which is *demanding perfection*. Cohen describes this fallacy as “a psychological addiction, a perceived (and misconceived) *need* for the absolute” and formulates it as follows:

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” (27).

I think of the worst of things because I have set impossible standards for the world and myself. In fact, I have set this irrational rule in my head: If I get a grade any less than an “A,” I am screwed for good so there is no point in trying anymore. From there, I (figuratively) beat myself up for even considering settling as a screw-up until I reach the point where I just become so emotionally sore. The crazy thing is that I make an enemy out of my own self and standards. Evidently, this irrational method of reasoning will never yield positive results for me. By awfulizing and demanding perfection, I only degrade my self-confidence and crush my determination to keep moving forward.

Thankfully, enlightenment still awaits me at the end of this long, dark, tunnel of negativities. For me, a great source of light can come from an understanding of the views of renowned philosophers such as Epictetus, Friedrich Nietzsche, William James, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Aristotle. As presented in *The New Rational Therapy*, I have been impressed most by the antidotes associated with these specific philosophers, including:

Compare what seems awful to you to much worse things and contend yourself with how much worse things could truly have been (Epictetus) (60).

Paradoxically, awfulizing, and especially what I currently awfulizing about, can be beneficial. Not only does this bolster creativity to come up with worse scenarios, but also a sense of gratefulness within me as I discover that I am not the most unfortunate, no matter how badly I want to believe it.

- Instead of whining about your misfortune, triumph over it by turning your suffering into something positive (Nietzsche) (52).
- Drop the practically absurd demand for a perfect universe and accept instead the possibility of a better one (James) (40).
- Accept your fallible human nature and therewith the endless challenge of becoming more and more self-actualized; instead of ruminating about what is negative in your life, recognize also what is positive and good and seek to attain more of the same (Aquinas) (28).

Nietzsche, James, and Aquinas taught me that I can get back up because I fell; I can heal because I bled; and I can smile because I survived. My sufferings, whether they fall inside or outside academics, are critical points for growth and learning. For as long as I live as a human being in

this fallible universe, I will encounter trials here and there. But I fear not, because every trial is an opportunity to yield a stronger, bolder, and wiser version of myself.

And last but definitely not the least,

Love yourself as your own best friend; assess your accomplishments rationally and wish yourself well (Aristotle) (78).

I truly believe that “love of self” is key to unlocking my greater potential. To me, this kind of love does not only recognize and appreciate the physical aspects, but rather the whole being. Loving myself means being confident in my capabilities and worth in spite of my recurrent failures. Of course, it is so much easier said than done. Personally, I am not yet there. I still struggle daily with the overwhelming amount of weaknesses I have. Nevertheless, the more I dwell within the rational realm of both my victories and downfalls, the more I triumph over the fallacies of awfulizing and demanding perfection.

Every single one of these views or antidotes is far-reaching in relation to the *transcendent virtues*. These virtues are what define the higher potentials a person can achieve. The two virtues that correspond to the fallacies of *demanding perfection* and *awfulizing* are *Metaphysical Security* and *Courage* respectively. According to Cohen,

[T]he metaphysically secure person [is someone who] accepts his *human* fallibility and limitations as well as those of others and does not expect the world to be perfect. He remains hopeful about realistic possibilities, is humble in the face of the uncertainty of the universe, and has a strong desire for knowledge but is not frustrated by his inability to know all” and “the courageous person [is someone who] perceives evil as a *relative* concept according to which things could always be worse and never *absolutely* bad (the

worst thing in the world). Such a person tends to learn from and derive positive value from his misfortunes and is willing to take reasonable risks in order to live well (17).

In my case, I can become metaphysically secure by being less demanding and more encouraging of myself. I can become my own cheerleader in a way. Academically, I will redefine “success” as not merely “getting an ‘A’” but as “getting ‘A’ better grip of my imperfect yet improvable learning skills.” Additionally, I can become courageous by perceiving challenging events in my life as having positive aspects to them that would allow myself to blossom. In the case of getting a “C” on my exam, I would interpret this as an opportunity to make some effective changes in my studying habits so I can perform better on the following exams. In order to effectively transcend *awfulizing* and *demanding perfection*, I will think of any hurdle in my life as a mere bump on the road rather than a “dead end.” Then, I will be able to move forward, accept and conquer any challenges along the way, and enjoy the ride.

Above all, the real question is how willing and dedicated I am to practice these philosophies on a regular basis. Dr. Cohen emphasizes that “philosophy alone will not change your life unless you make the necessary effort to *apply* it to your life” (Cohen, 13). As of now, I am honestly at the point where I have explored enough about my own life principles, and in the process have gathered enough confidence to take it all on. Aristotle’s take on personal accomplishments and wishing the self well heavily influenced me to rationally assess and affirm myself more. From now on, I will be defined by the decisions and choices I make to keep going and reach my happiness, and not by the circumstances that challenge them.

Reference

Cohen, E. (2007). *The New Rational Therapy: Thinking Your Way To Serenity, Success, and
Profound Happiness*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield.