

REBT PRINCIPLES AND CAPTAIN AHAB

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Abstract

Albert Ellis' Rational-Emotive-Behavior Therapy (REBT) is examined and explained. In REBT, focus is put on the individual's belief system and how an irrational belief system can lead to unhealthy emotions resulting in self-defeating behavior. Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick* is then analyzed through its protagonist Captain Ahab. The principles of REBT are related to Ahab's character, showing how Ahab could have benefitted from establishing a rational belief system. In the end, it is Ahab's irrational belief system that leads to his tragic death.

Keywords: Albert Ellis, REBT, Herman Melville, Moby Dick, Captain Ahab, American History X

Dr. Bob Sweeney: There was a moment, when I used to blame everything and everyone for all the pain and suffering and vile things that happened to me, that I saw happen to my people. Used to blame everybody. Blamed white people, blamed society, blamed God. I didn't get no answers 'cause I was asking the wrong questions. You have to ask the right questions.

Derek Vinyard: Like what?

Dr. Bob Sweeney: Has anything you've done made your life better? (*American History X*)

Derek Vinyard, while on the verge of tears, simply responds by shaking his head "no." This is a watershed moment in his life: he has hit rock bottom; he is a neo-Nazi, imprisoned for the ruthless murder of two African-Americans. His former teacher Dr. Bob Sweeney, an African American, visits him in the infirmary and challenges him on his belief system and behavior.

This scene from the film *American History X* marks a turning point in Derek's life. He goes from being a racist, swastika-tattooed skinhead to quite a different man: a man who reforms, grows his hair out, befriends African-Americans; a man now determined to stop his younger brother from going down the same destructive path he once did.

"Has anything you've done made your life better?" Dr. Sweeney asks, challenging Derek's belief system. The answer is no. Here, Dr. Sweeney acts as Derek's therapist, seeking to transition Derek from an irrational life to a rational one.

It can be argued that Dr. Sweeney, in this scene, is using the principles of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) in his relationship with Derek, either knowingly or unknowingly. REBT's foundation rests on the idea that it is the belief system of the individual that causes their emotions and behaviour. In the following, the core principles of REBT will be examined initially. Later, these principles will be examined in relation to the literary character Captain Ahab found in Herman Melville's 1851 novel *Moby Dick*.

REBT PRINCIPLES

Albert Ellis, founder of REBT, began as a psychoanalyst, but eventually abandoned this school of psychotherapy when he realized that within psychoanalysis "no matter how much insight his clients gained or how well they seemed to understand events from their early childhood, they rarely lost their symptoms and still retained tendencies to create new ones" (Ellis 192).

Working with patients, Ellis saw that they had been infused with a belief of their own worthlessness when young. This, in turn, led them to put unrealistic demands on themselves, others and the world that they kept re-telling and re-teaching themselves (Ellis 192). When Ellis tried to have his patients change these irrational beliefs, they surprisingly opposed doing so. Ellis' patients asserted, "that they must do well and win others' approval, that other people must act considerately and fairly, and that environmental conditions must be gratifying and free of frustration" (Ellis 192). As a result of these experiences, Ellis began to develop REBT.

REBT "holds that when a highly charged emotional consequence (C) follows a significant activating event (A), event A may seem to, but actually does not, cause C. Instead, emotional consequences are large created by B – the individual's belief system" (Ellis 187). This theory rejects the simplistic cause and effect theory of human behaviour. One stimulus may cause multiple people to act in a multitude of ways; rain may cause one person to hibernate indoors for the day, while causing another to rush outside to play. It is by focusing on the belief system wherein the premise for REBT lies. By examining and changing their belief system, REBT hopes to alleviate an individual's disturbances.

Unhealthy negative feelings and negative behaviours are the emotional consequences that often follow A and B. An individual's belief system causes such disturbances due to their belief system being irrational, rather than rational. However, through REBT, these beliefs can be disputed (at point D), "by challenging them rationally and behaviorally" (Ellis 187). As a result, these negative consequences can be lessened significantly.

Ellis believed that human beings were neither morally black nor white, but instead grey. People are born with the potential to behave, feel and act in different, sometimes contradictory ways. They can be rational and irrational, self-preserving and self-destructive. They can learn from their mistakes, but can also repeat the same mistakes. They are open-minded and creative, yet can be intolerant, lazy and superstitious as well. Humans can accept limitations, yet be simultaneously perfectionistic or grandiose; they can actualize their life or avoid doing so. Simply put, humans are contradictory beings (Ellis 188).

By realistically understanding the personality of human beings, REBT seeks to increase the rational side while decreasing the irrationality is concerned with holistic treatment that seeks to change the person's philosophy. Through this change, the person will achieve a new realization and new emotions about the world, others and self (Ellis 190).

REBT INSIGHTS

REBT provides three insights for the patient/client. First, it is important for them to understand the A-B-C of REBT: namely, the causal chain of A (adversity), B (belief system), and C (disturbed consequences) that we have already discussed. Insight number two involves understanding that one cannot blame their present disruptions on the past. Surely, the past has helped shape the individual's beliefs, but it is what the individual is presently thinking that is causing their present behaviour.

For example, imagine that an individual's past failed relationship created the belief: "I'm imperfect and can't be loved by anyone." That belief now negatively affects the person's present search for a new partner. Humans do not simply automatically react to an adversity. As Ellis argues: "No! People still, here and now, actively reinforce (their beliefs) and their present active self-propagandizations...(they) keep those constructed beliefs alive" (189). An individual must take responsibility that they are continuously propagating their own irrational beliefs. Without this, an individual will not be able to change them.

Insight number three uses the knowledge gained from insights one and two, and puts that knowledge into action. Continuous hard work is the only way irrational beliefs will change. An individual must repeatedly rethink and reshape their irrational beliefs until they are minimized or eventually eliminated entirely. One cannot think they will change passively; no, an individual must be active in order for any change to occur at all. This insight shows Ellis' disenchantment with psychoanalysis: knowledge doesn't simply change the individual; it is knowledge plus action that will evoke the desired change (Ellis 189).

IRRATIONAL BELIEFS

At point B, the individual has "dogmatic, irrational, unexamined beliefs" (Ellis 189) that cause them to "overreact or underreact to adversities" (Ellis 189). What exactly do these beliefs consist of? At the base of all of them rests a demand of some sort: a must. Ellis called them "*mustabatory*" (2008) beliefs. These "musts" involve three areas: one's self, other people, and the world.

Regarding the self, the irrational belief would be as follows: "I must do well and win the approval of others for my performance or else I am no good" (Ross). Holding this belief often leads to guilt, shame, depression and anxiety. Regarding other people, the irrational belief would be as follows: "Other people must treat me considerately, fairly and kindly, and in exactly the way I want them to treat me. If they don't, they are no good and they deserve to be condemned and punished" (Ross). Holding this belief often leads to passive-aggressiveness, rage and violence. Regarding the world, the irrational belief would be as follows: "I must get what I want, when I want it; and I must not get what I don't want. It's terrible if I don't get what I want, and I can't stand it" (Ross). Holding this belief often leads to self-pity and procrastination.

In REBT, the patient learns to dispute these irrational beliefs. Simple declarative sentences such as "this is awful, I can't stand it!" or "this must not be happening" tend to lead to unhealthy negative emotions. Being demanding or "awful-izing" of an adversity creates unhealthy emotions or behaviours. When disputing irrational beliefs, one must focus on changing the language. While a situation may be bad, it is certainly not *awful*. One may prefer that a situation were not happening, but they can certainly stand it. Other irrational beliefs include rating people instead of their actions ("I'm terrible" or "he's a jerk"), as well as overgeneralizing ("I'll never get what I want").

As Ellis states:

By contending that they are worthless persons because they have not been able to ward off unfortunate events, people hold that they should be able to control the universe and that because they are not succeeding in doing what they cannot do, they are obviously worthless (What drive!!). (196)

One must ask the appropriate questions to dispute beliefs. For instance: Why must I feel, think or do this? Can I rationally support this belief? Is it really awful? How does a bad act make me a bad person? Where is it written that others must act in a certain way towards me? I may prefer something, but does that mean I must have it? These questions will assist an individual in restructuring their irrational beliefs, because, as Ellis states, if "these beliefs are unrealistic, they will not withstand rational scrutiny ... they tend to wane when empirically checked, logically disputed, and shown to be impractical" (189).

A rational and an irrational belief system can both lead to negative emotions. REBT doesn't wish to eliminate all negativity within an individual; REBT identifies a difference between *healthy* negative emotions and *unhealthy* negative emotions. Healthy negative emotions include concern, sadness, annoyance, remorse, disappointment, and regret, while unhealthy negative emotions include anxiety, depression, anger, guilt, hurt, jealousy, and shame. Unhealthy negative emotions tend to lead to *self-defeating* behavior, whereas healthy negative emotions tend to lead to *self-preserving* behavior. For instance, sadness can lead to self-preservation whereby an individual wishes to stop being sad and will take the appropriate actions to do so; on the other hand, depression can lead to self-defeat whereby one may become passive and not have any motivation to change.

At times, reality can certainly be "highly unfortunate and unpleasant" (Ross). Nevertheless, an individual must be able to accept this fact in order to be emotionally healthy. In many ways, adults still act as children who don't get their way. As the series *A Song of Ice and Fire* has so simply and perfectly stated: "Winter is Coming" (Martin 9). Tough, difficult times will most certainly occur in one's life; it is vital that individuals, when faced with adversity, hold beliefs that will lead to healthy emotions and self-preserving behavior.

REBT presumes "that if people learn to only strongly prefer, instead of grandiosely insisting that their desires be fulfilled, they can make themselves remarkably less disturbed and less disturbable" (Ellis 202). To do this, one must be less demanding and awful-izing, and more flexible and accepting. An individual must work towards developing three unconditional acceptances: unconditional *self*-acceptance, unconditional *other*-acceptance, and unconditional *life*-acceptance.

Regarding unconditional self-acceptance, one should hold the beliefs that:

I am a fallible human being. I have my good points and my bad points. There is no reason why I must not have flaws.
Despite my good points and my bad points, I am no more worthy and no less worthy than any other human being. (Ross)

As for unconditional other-acceptance, one should hold the beliefs that:

other people will treat me unfairly from time to time. There is no reason why they must treat me fairly. The people who treat me unfairly are no more worthy and no less worthy than any other human being. (Ross)

Regarding unconditional life-acceptance, one should hold the beliefs that:

life doesn't always work out the way that I'd like it to. There is no reason why life must go the way I want it to. Life is not necessarily pleasant, but it is never awful and it is nearly always bearable. (Ross)

Overall, healthy emotions and self-preserving behavior will result from changing negative internal beliefs to positive ones.

ROLE OF THE THERAPIST

The role of the therapist in REBT is that of an active, directed and challenging guide in order to weaken irrational beliefs. Otherwise, if the therapist is passive or non-directive, no change will occur because beliefs usually have a firm hold upon individuals (Ellis 193). These therapists:

often employ a rapid-fire active-directive-persuasive-philosophical methodology. In most instances, they quickly pin clients down to a few basic dysfunctional beliefs. They challenge them to try to defend these ideas (and) show that they contain illogical premises that cannot be substantiated logically." (Ellis 203)

Having now gone over the general principles of REBT, an examination will now be carried out on Melville's character Captain Ahab, a character that most surely would have benefited by applying these principles to his own life.

LITERARY CHARACTER: CAPTAIN AHAB FROM *MOBY DICK*

Stories of characters who follow an obvious irrational belief system can be superb models for audiences and readers of how adopting a more rational belief system can be beneficial. Characters following immoral, unethical or even evil belief systems that learn to change these beliefs into more rational ones can be an incredible learning experience for readers and the audience, who could in turn apply such principles to their own lives. Our opening example of *American History X*'s character Derek Vinyard falls into this category. We will, nevertheless, examine an opposite, yet still instructive case here: the inevitable failure of the irrational belief system of Captain Ahab in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*.

REBT's focus on the irrational belief of one individual believing others should always treat him fairly is no better exemplified than in the character of Captain Ahab. Captain Ahab certainly feels that others must treat him fairly and if they do not then they are bad and need to be punished. Holding this belief leads Ahab to fury and violent acts of revenge. There is also an aspect of the irrational belief about the world in Ahab's character. Ahab believes that values of fairness, goodness and justice must prevail in the universe and if they do not, then the universe is awful and he cannot stand it.

Some time before the novel opens, Ahab encountered the mythical white whale dubbed Moby Dick. Trying to harpoon the whale, Ahab had his leg torn off in the whale's jaws. He was laid up for months fuming over this slight, vowing revenge: "Ahab and anguish lay stretched together in one hammock ... his torn body and gashed soul bled into one another; and so interfusing, made him mad" (Melville 165).

As the story progresses, the narrator learns that Ahab's only goal as Captain of the Pequod is to destroy what he views to be his nemesis: Moby Dick. As Ahab himself states:

Aye, aye! It was that accursed white whale that razed me; made a poor pegging lubber of me for ever and a day! ... And I'll chase him round Good Hope, and round the Horn, and round the Norway Maelstrom, and round perdition's flames before I give him up. And this is what ye have shipped for, men! To chase that white whale on both sides of land, and over all sides of earth, till he spouts black blood. (Melville 144)

Melville describes Ahab as being "monomaniacally" obsessed with destroying Moby Dick. This is certainly showcased in the above quote. Ahab feels that a wrong has been done to him: a wrong that must be corrected; Moby Dick deserves to be punished because it tore off Ahab's leg. This is quite an unrealistic and inflexible goal of Ahab's. Did this whale intentionally seek to harm Ahab?

Certainly not. It could even be argued that Moby Dick was in the right, acting in self-defense, since Ahab was seeking to harpoon him.

To make matters worse, Ahab expands his hatred of Moby Dick to that of the natural world and the universe. The whale becomes the embodiment to Ahab of all that is evil in existence. Ahab believes that the universe should be a hospitable place full of justice and fairness. Here, the narrator connects Moby Dick, in Ahab's mind, to all that is evil:

All that most maddens and torments; ... all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby-Dick. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon . (Melville 164-65)

There is certainly a tremendous rage felt by Ahab towards the whale. Ahab even feels it is his fate to be the agent to destroy this evil for all of mankind: a delusion not empirically supported by anything in reality. Because he views it as his fate, Ahab cannot escape from it; therefore, he is inflexible in this goal. To Ahab's mind, this whale *must* be destroyed.

The narrator describes Ahab's inner turmoil, how his irrational belief system has affected his life: "God help thee, old man, thy thoughts have created a creature in thee... a vulture feeds upon that heart forever; that vulture the very creature he creates" (Melville 181). The vulture here is the inner "creature" that Ahab's thoughts have created, a creature that will inevitably consume and destroy; it is a scavenger feeding off the decay of Ahab's irrational beliefs.

Ahab is both an admirable man and a mad one; he is admirable because he struggles as a tragic hero towards his inevitable destruction, and we, as readers, sympathize because an outside force inflicted this physical and psychological damage upon Ahab. We can understand Ahab's motives while not necessarily agreeing with them. On the other hand, Ahab is mad because his values have little grounding in reality; his revenge has warped him psychologically, leaving him obsessed, tormented, delusional and inflexible. Ahab will accept nothing less than the complete destruction of Moby Dick.

Furthermore, Ahab in many ways views himself as a god. Ahab states, "I'd strike the sun if it insulted me" (Melville 145). Ahab is described as being "grand, un-godly, godlike" (Melville 71). This is an interesting contradiction: Ahab is un-godly because he rejects the notion of serving any higher authority outside of himself; he is godlike because he is a domineering, awe-inducing individual with an unmistakable god complex.

Albert Ellis comments on similar irrational beliefs:

By holding that the unfortunate happenings in their lives absolutely should not exist, people really imply that they have godly power and that whatever they want not to exist, must not. This hypothesis is, to say the least, highly dubious!" (196)

Using REBT, Ellis would have sought to show Ahab how unfounded his beliefs were. Following REBT principles, the ABC's of Ahab's irrational beliefs and behaviour are as follows: the Adversity (A) is the pain and anguish caused by the white whale's removal of Ahab's leg; the Irrational Belief System (B) involves a demand by Ahab that other beings and the world must treat him fairly; and the Consequences (C) involve the unhealthy negative emotion of rage and the unhealthy behaviour of obsessively desiring the complete destruction of the whale.

Ahab certainly believes his condition is awful and intolerable. He rates Moby Dick as evil, instead of just a whale committing a violent act, and then over-generalizes by describing Moby Dick as evil itself personified.

The Consequences (C) involve the unhealthy negative emotion of rage and the unhealthy behaviour of obsessively desiring the complete destruction of the whale.

It is certainly an understatement – and perhaps a bit flippant – to suggest that Ahab could benefit from a good therapist. None of the other characters seek to dispute Ahab's beliefs, except one: his first mate Starbuck. Starbuck sees the mission to destroy Moby Dick as senseless from the start, telling Ahab that Moby Dick is simply a "dumb brute ... that simply smote thee from blindest

instinct" (Melville 145). Starbuck continues to dispute Ahab by stating, "I came here to hunt whales, not my commander's vengeance" (Melville 145). However, whenever he tries to sway Ahab's resolve, Starbuck feels that "Ahab drilled deep down, and blasted all my reason out of me!" (Melville 149).

Later, on the day before the final encounter with Moby Dick, Ahab experiences a private, quiet and serene moment where he questions his belief system and where it has brought him. Ahab begins to see the futility of his beliefs and behaviors at a moment of rare peace:

The lovely aromas in that enchanted air did at last seem to dispel, for a moment, the cankerous thing in his soul ... The step-mother world, so long cruel -forbidding- now threw affectionate arms round his stubborn neck, and did seem to joyously sob over him, as if over one, that however wilful and erring, she could yet find it in her heart to save and to bless. From beneath his slouched hat Ahab dropped a tear into the sea. (Melville 478-479)

Ahab feels he has not experienced enough love from the world and universe. Here, in this scene, Ahab feels a positive connection to the world and his resolve to kill Moby Dick begins to wane. This may seem positive, but it is again irrational. Ahab believes that he must only receive positivity from the world. His calm feelings here are temporary because irrational beliefs dictate them. When he begins to feel that the world is hostile again, not loving, Ahab will slip right back into his obsession.

Philosophically, an argument could be made that Ahab's rage is directed at God. Ahab feels that this higher authority has mistreated him; as a result, he seeks vengeance. To Ahab, God is evil, and Moby Dick is God's instrument. This is certainly a doomed enterprise if this is the case. Following REBT principles, religion is still possible; one can believe in a higher power as long as they don't expect that their every desire will be met. Certainly, Ahab would have benefited from learning unconditional other-acceptance and life-acceptance: that other beings will not treat him fairly and there is no reason why they should. Additionally, he should have accepted that life is not always good, but it is hardly ever unbearable (Ross). Rational beliefs such as these would have benefited Ahab greatly.

If Ahab had been able to dispute his beliefs, he may have been led to healthy negative feelings (e.g., example) and new self-helping behaviours. Ahab would have surely still have felt disappointment, sadness, annoyance and regret, but these are natural and healthy negative emotions to feel after losing one's leg. These feelings may have then led Ahab on to new self-helping behaviours; for instance, giving up the whaling business and spending a life with the wife he had spent so little time with: "Wife? Rather a widow with her husband alive! Aye, I widowed that poor girl when I married her, Starbuck; ... What a forty years' fool has old Ahab been!" (Melville 479).

In this same conversation with Starbuck, Ahab shows that he regrets large areas of his life. Ahab is talking now to Starbuck as a fellow human being to another, not as a revenge-obsessed captain. Ahab continues here in his monologue, which shows a rational aspect of his personality attempting to break through:

When I think of this life I have led; the desolation of solitude it has been... How the richer or better is Ahab now? ... Stand close to me, Starbuck; let me look into a human eye; it is better than to gaze into sea or sky; better than to gaze upon God. (Melville 479-480)

Starbuck, ever loyal to his captain, sees a different side of his captain speaking here and seeks to encourage this rational side: "Oh, My Captain! ... Noble soul! Grand old heart, after all! Why should any one give chase to the hated fish! Away with me! Let us fly these deadly waters! Let us home!" (Melville 480).

Unfortunately, the redemptive moment is lost. Starbuck's attempt to change Ahab's irrational belief system is unsuccessful because Ahab's eyes suddenly fall upon Fedallah, which the text describes as Ahab's "dark shadow" that many of the crew suspects is either a fire-worshipper or the devil himself. It is Fedallah's appearance that reminds Ahab of his initial purpose. As a result, Ahab moves away from the rational conversation with Starbuck and begins to re-fixate on the point that killing Moby Dick is his destiny.

In his response to Starbuck at this point, Ahab talks as if he had no free will whatsoever, as though his desires govern him, like an animal or a child. Ahab's irrational beliefs seem to control him, and, instead of attempting to dispute or change them, Ahab passively

accepts them as his fate, unwilling to take action to make the change:

What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural heart, I durst not so much as dare? (Melville 481)

At this point, Starbuck knows he cannot convince his captain of the irrationality of his beliefs and gives up. As Ahab's "therapist," Starbuck certainly fails. Starbuck is indeed not active or vigorous enough to cause any real change in Ahab: he does not employ directive methods; he does not show how Ahab's beliefs will "inevitably lead to more disturbance" (Ellis 203); he does not reduce Ahab's ideas to absurdity; he does not show Ahab how his ideas "contain illogical premises that cannot be substantiated logically" (Ellis 203).

Ahab follows his desire for vengeance right up to the bitter end. The following day, Moby Dick is spotted and the chase begins. Ahab's irrational beliefs cause not only his own destruction, but also the complete annihilation of his ship and all his crew, including Fedallah and Starbuck. Even at the end, when Ahab realizes he will be destroyed, he still stubbornly pushes on. Ahab's last lines are: "Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee" (Melville 507). Ahab heaves the harpoon and is pulled down to his death with the whale.

Ahab may be an extreme example, but it is this extremity that makes his predicament clear: One can destroy oneself as well as the people around them. Examining the principles of REBT through the character of Captain Ahab in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* shows the consequences of adhering to a negative belief system. Ahab may be an extreme example, but it is this extremity that makes his predicament clear. If Ahab had only disputed and changed his irrational beliefs, what fate would have awaited him and his crew? Surely, a better end than this.

What can readers take away from this novel? The tragic hero of Ahab can certainly be looked at with pity and as a lesson. The character of Ahab shows readers the inevitable conclusion of following a negative belief system. Readers undoubtedly have felt such irrational beliefs before in their lives, and through studying the principles of REBT in relation to characters like Ahab can certainly take to heart the idea that it is not events that disturb us, but the views and beliefs which we take of them.

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