Are We Our Acts? On The Basic Tenet of REBT

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April, 2012

Introduction

My topic is about the methodology of rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT). REBT is a cognitive psychotherapy which has been promoted in 1950s by Albert Ellis in United States. It is supposed to be a scientific psychotherapy which focuses on analyzing clients’ irrational beliefs. There is a basic tenet in the theory called “We are not our acts”. Today, I would like to give some comments on this tenet and its objection in terms of philosophy of action and philosophy of mind.

The contents of my presentation are as follows:

First, I will introduce the basic tenet of REBT. “We are not our acts.” It seems a little bit abstract, even strange when first seeing this sentence. In REBT, it is believed that to equate what we do with what kinds of people we are is illogical. And such equation would lead to people’s emotive-behavioral disturbances. For example, people usually infer like this: he failed to pass an important examination, so he is a failure. This inference would make him self-downing. Therefore, REBT believes that this kind of inference is irrational and to insist on the basic tenet could break down such illogical chain and cure people’s disturbances.

Second, there is an objection towards this tenet. It is said that what essentially characterize life are acts in the stream of time. People literally make themselves known to others by their acts. Their thoughts, emotions and other factors can be revealed by their acts. And those factors are essential parts of human beings which can indicate them on the essence level. Therefore, we are our acts. This view is labeled as philosophical behaviorism, a counterpart of behaviorism in psychology.

In the third part of the presentation, I will give my comments on the tenet and its objection. I endorse the idea that people’s essence cannot be inferred from their acts. But I have to point out that the concept of essence in REBT isn’t used in its philosophical way, but just defined as what personality characters people hold in the actual world. My conclusion is that the tenet is useful in curing people’s disturbances. This does not only mean that our essence couldn’t be logically generalized by our acts, but also that claims about a person’s essence are just people’s conjecture and that people’s tendency of inferring necessity from probability is invalid.

The Basic Tenet of REBT

From REBT’s point of view, there are three factors concerning the process: people act, people rate of the acts and tend to grandiosely generalize from ratings of the acts to ratings of the essence. REBT hypothesizes that people have the propensity to blur the definitions of the three and usually get themselves disturbed by such blurring. Obviously, every human being has a powerful and even automatic tendency to rate their acts and generalize such ratings. They append values, whether good, bad or indifferent, to things they do and to those that happen around them, and accordingly infer their essence. If they fail to make a clearly distinction from their acts and their essence, they would easily get the conclusion that they are just what they do.

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Accordingly, there are three steps of this procedure. First: a person encounters an act. Say, Jim got a score of 59 in his exam. This is what happened objectively without adding any attitude. Second: rate this act in his belief system. Such act is rated as failing. If he confuses these two factors, he would get that the act itself equates with failing. And the lastly: grandiosely generalize from the rating of the particular act to the rating of the person who did it. Jim is a failure, and he will never be a successful boy. According to REBT theory, such rating is on his essence level. From step one to three we could see that an objective act reveals that Jim is a failure. If success is highlighted in Jim’s value, he would have a high probability to get disturbances, such as self-hatred or depression.

However, we could see the chain is a fallacious sequence. Because from Jim getting a score of 59 and this act is failing, we can just say that Jim failed to pass an exam. But we can’t get the conclusion that Jim is always a failure.

Another positive example. Here we have two premises:
1. Jim saved Rose’s life.
2. Saving life is good.
From these two sentences, we could know that Jim did a good thing of saving Rose’s life. But that Jim is good couldn’t be logically inferred from the above premises, because such rating is on his essence level.

So we know, by following the basic tenet, REBT indicates that people wouldn’t fall victims of such an illogical and potentially damaging thinking. The tenet could pragmatically break down the inferring chain from what a person does to what a kind of person he is and prevent people from self-downing themselves, especially when their acts are rated negatively

**Objection to The Tenet**

Here is the objection. Human beings are living things. And those that could characterize their lives are their acts in the stream of time. Or what else could we infer the secret thoughts and essence of a person? Acts are publicly observable. When a person being asked what he is? He may answer: I am a scholar when I’m doing research, and I am a father when I’m taking care of my children. Obviously, what a person does could indicate the person’s identities and the corresponding responsibilities.

What’s more, acts can also show people’s essence. For example, as we just mentioned, Jim saved Rose’s life. This act could be rated as good. Most people would say that Jim is a good guy; at least Jim is a good guy when he is saving Rose’s life. To this extend, Jim’s essence is rated according to his act. The objection believes that it’s one of the reasons why people should respond for what they do. When they intentionally do a certain thing, their purposes, beliefs, emotions and so on are all included in this procedure. These factors together can reveal people on their essence level.

Therefore, as human beings, people cannot live without acts. Although, REBT’s basic tenet could pragmatically prevent people from downing themselves by separating their acts and essence, the fact is that a person cannot be known to the outside world by anything else but his acts. So we are what we do, but not otherwise. Rich life experiences would confirm such proposition. To deny this fact would be scientifically indefensible.

**Comments on The Tenet and Its Objection**
Although such an objection seems plausible, I agree with REBT’s basic tenet that we are not our acts. The reasons are as follows:

First, the objection indicates that a particular act or a set of acts could show that what kind of person someone is (REBT mentioned it as “people’s essence”; I just suspend the concept here and will discuss it later.). Obviously, most people tend to refute the proposition. I call this a strong version of the objection. We could easily imagine that Jim is a person who always does bad things. If he accidentally saves Rose’s life, most of us won’t rate him as good. Such version would violate our common sense.

Second, for the objection indicates that at a particular moment a particular act or a set of acts could show a person’s essence. I call this a weak version of the objection, and then I have to admit that the objection is partly right. I confess that acts might partly or occasionally indicate what kind of person someone is. When Jim saved Rose’s life, some of his characters might be revealed in this act, such as his bravery, his attitude to treasure life. These characters are morally rated as good in our society. Then we probably would say, to be more exact, we would rate that Jim was a good guy when he saved Rose’s life. To this extent, people’s essence could be known by their acts.

But the weak version still has some problems. I would say that all characters revealed in an act or a set of acts come from people’s conjecture according to their common sense, such as their moral codes, social norms and some special cognitive backgrounds. Suppose that Jim is a man who loves money very much and Rose is a rich lady. Jim knows if he saves Rose’s life, he would get a bunch of dollars. In this situation, most people who know the context would not believe that Jim was a brave man who treasured life very much when he saved Rose’s life. Instead, they would think that Jim was a beguiling guy who saves other people’s life only for money. So how could we know what kind of person Jim was when he was saving Rose’s life? How could we be sure that a person who loves money or even greedy wouldn’t be brave enough to save another person for the only purpose of treasuring life at some particular moment?

Based on these questions, someone may wonder how people can be known by others if they cannot be fully revealed by their acts. The answer is that although it might be true that people’s acts would partly or occasionally reveal them, but we will never be sure that when and what kinds of people’s essence would be revealed. We can only guess some possibilities in accordance with our belief system. And these possibilities aren’t necessarily true. When greedy Jim saved rich Rose, we might never know the real characters that Jim held in his act. So although we tend to rate him as bad, it’s just our conjecture. We couldn’t get a doubtless conclusion that Jim was really bad at that time. Therefore, acts couldn’t fully and clearly indicate what people’s essence is.

Aside from the above argument, someone may further ask that if we could fully and clearly understand a person’s acts, which means that we really know the characters, purposes, cognitive processes, and so on, could we then infer the essence from his acts? Suppose we know that Jim was really and only for the purpose of money to save Rose’s life and his greedy was clearly shown, could we then be sure that Jim was bad at that time? Yes, we could. A Person is just what phenomenally presents in front of us. All factors including his acts, belief systems, emotions, social relations, backgrounds, life experiences, together construct him as a whole. A person is just over there presented in some way. His act or series of acts might only be a part of him, which could overtly be perceived. Other tacit factors might not be easy to discover. If people could perceive their tacit factors all from their acts, what are we other than our acts? In such an ideal state, acts could not only partly or occasionally reveal what people are but also show people’s
essence as a whole without any conjecture. But the fact is that such an ideal state doesn’t exist, at least we haven’t found one. Therefore, I still doubt if we could fully understand Jim’s act when he was saving Rose’s life.

With the above regards, I endorse the idea that we are not our acts. Here, the basic tenet of REBT is right to show that people don’t need to disturb themselves by putting negative ratings of their acts onto themselves. Just blame Jim’s act and his characters if you really believe that they were bad according to your belief systems. But don’t blame Jim himself.

Now let me further analyze the concept of essence that is used in the tenet and its objection. REBT holds that people’s essence cannot be inferred from their acts. In the tenet, “we” stands for our essence. Someone may want to know the true meanings of one’s essence. How could it be used in such a way?

From a philosophical stand point of view, the philosophy of human essence seeks to describe the essential qualities that constitute a person's uniqueness or essential being. The concept of essence is defined as an attribute or set of attributes that makes an object or substance what it fundamentally is. It originates in Aristotle’s writings and has often served as a vehicle for doctrines that tend to individuate different forms of existence as well as different identity conditions for objects and properties in the history of western thought. What’s more, such a concept has given a strong theoretical and common-sense basis to logical theories based on the "possible worlds" analogy which was set up by Leibniz and developed in the intensional logic from Carnap to Kripke.

But the subject of essence is such a hard puzzle of philosophy. The questions that whether objects have such an essence and what is essence are still fiercely discussed today. I don’t want to detail those discussions in this presentation, but just figure out that by comparing with its philosophical meaning, we would obviously find that essence is used in a different way in REBT. In the framework of REBT theory, essence is defined as a character or a set of characters which are held by a person for all his life time in the actual world. It indicates what kind of person someone is. If Jim was born essentially a failure, he would fail all the time and couldn’t be successful in doing anything, because failure is his essence. But according to some philosophical interpretation, this character cannot be recognized as his real essence. This is his accidental attribute, because he does not fail in every possible world and he might have been a successful man in some other worlds. That means he just happens to have the attribute of failure in the real world. Unlike essence defined in philosophy, REBT does not care if a character or a set of characters could identify with a person and constitute his uniqueness. It just focuses on whether people would always have such characters. This is the real meaning of essence in REBT.

According to this interpretation, a question can quickly be raised: How could those characters become people’s essence, at least in the actual world? If Jim only failed in one examination, probably failure wouldn’t be his essence. What if he failed in every examination until now? I should say that failure wouldn’t be, either, because he may still have some chance to pass exams in the future. What if people found that he failed in everything in his life after his died? Maybe REBT would consider failure as his essence. But it doesn’t matter then, because from its pragmatic point of view Jim wouldn’t be emotionally or behaviorally disturbed by this essence any more. It is in this sense that the basic tenet functions. Someone would say that this seems to suggest that the essence of a person is not knowable until his entire life has unfolded, when essence is then revealed. If so, how are claims about one’s essence during his life justifiable? I
think Popper’s idea could be applied here as a good answer: Before a person’s whole life unfolded, all claims about his essence would just people’s rational or irrational conjecture and they are not necessarily true propositions.

With all the above regards, my opinion is that people usually use the concept of essence in a vague meaning. From its philosophical aspect, they are convinced that there is really such an essence to make themselves essential beings. Also from their intuition, they believe that such an essence is just some character or a set of characters which could be overtly indicated from their acts. Once such characters are shown, they surmise that the holder would always have them. There is a fallacious inference hidden behind people’s propensity of generalization. It is to infer from possibility to necessity. When we believe a person might have some personality characters from his acts, we tend to get a conclusion that he necessarily has these characters. I think that this tendency is deeper than people’s grandiose generalization. It could be a real reason for causing people’s disturbances, including those caused by equating people’s essence with their acts. This inference is generally applied in human’s life. For example, most people don’t want to die mainly because they think if they keep alive, some good things would happen. Actually, good things just might happen, but not necessarily happen. However, people believing that living is better than dying imply that they totally believe that good things necessarily will happen in the future and dying will deprive them of those good things. So they are afraid of dying and even hate it. Such tendency even influences philosophers’ thoughts. They sometimes believe that the outside worlds might just our illusions and therefore get the conclusion that people are living in illusions and they could know nothing about the outside worlds. Skepticism and pessimism are put forward. This has already pointed out by Austen in his writing.

Therefore, the tenet that we are not our acts is useful in curing people’s disturbances. This doesn’t only mean that our essence cannot be logically inferred from our acts, but also that claims about a person’s essence are just people’s conjecture and that necessity cannot be generalized from probability. I hypothesize that if the concept of essence could be clearly clarified by a person, he wouldn’t negatively rate himself on essence level. He may just criticize his acts and characters and make efforts to improve them which would be consistent with his moral codes, social rules or preferences. So, when Jim failed to pass an exam, he would blame his bad results and haven’t been working harder to get prepared. He rated his act as failing and predicted from it that he would fail again in the future. But it doesn’t mean that he would necessarily fail all the time. He still has some chance to be success if he could make great efforts. Then, he won’t self-down on essence level or make himself emotionally and behaviorally disturbed.

References