

The North Texas Church of Freethought BULLETIN

A Fellowship of Unbelievers

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BEHAVING OURSELVES



Often, we unbelievers say "religion" when we mean a theistic or supernaturalistic belief system. But the distinguishing characteristic of religions probably has more to do with the practical application of moral principles.

One might even say that the god(s) and their realms are just the underpinnings of a concern with prescriptive morality. That's usually the first objection that believers raise with unbelievers: that atheism gives no grounds for good behavior. That is wildly untrue. In fact, theological doctrines of arbitrary (because divine) moral authority, of human depravity so that no one can help being evil and that a lifetime of wrongdoing can be canceled by a prayer on one's deathbed are certainly a recipe for a great deal of human misery.

The alternative is that we can well understand that the basis of morality lies in reason and that the practical application of it depends on the context of facts. The only "absolute morality" is in relation to these two things. And this is no more "situational" than what our courts recognize: that, for example, killing someone is a criminal act except when in self-defense, or when the government does it or orders you to do it, and so on and so on.

Seldom - and thankfully! - does it happen that we find ourselves in such life-and-death circumstances. Nor do most ordinary people need to check which commandment(s) might be violated by stealing, cheating on their spouse, or perjuring themselves. Add to this that few Freethinkers suppose that serious moral problems necessarily attach to things like homosexuality or abortion, except for the hatred and violence of believers who do so suppose.

So is behaving ourselves not a concern for unbelievers? Is it all that easy for us to know what's right and do what's right? Far from it, if we consider all the ways that our own happiness, the well-being of others, and the psychological health of people generally and their families, organizations and communities depend on our behavior. Just figuring out where the lines are (or ought to be) that we must respect is a challenge. And gaining control of our beliefs about what happens in our lives turns out to be key to our living happy and healthy lives within reasonable (even if they may seem "unfair") boundaries.

COMING IN APRIL:

"(No?) Laughing Matters"

Yes, humor is serious business! Comedy is an industry and, for some people, a livelihood. But jokes are also a source of contention when laughs are had at the expense of those perceived as vulnerable.

Sigmund Freud thought that humor allows the expression of what society - and the superego - considers forbidden, thereby releasing emotional energy. Others have observed that sometimes one must laugh to keep from crying. It was Ella Wheeler Cox who observed in 1883 that: "Laugh and the world laughs with you; Weep, and you weep alone."

All of these approaches suggest that humor is an important way that we manage the stress of living. How and why is this? And what is this stress business, which isn't funny at all for those of us and our society that are "stressed-out?" What are we really laughing about, anyway?

The NTCOF has for several years taken the opportunity of April 1st, April Fool's Day, to consider - and have a lot of fun with - the subject of humor, jokes and comedy. We'll be doing that again in 2010 at our April 4th service! Join us then for another unique medley of Freethought, fellowship, fun and a big dose of food-for-thought.

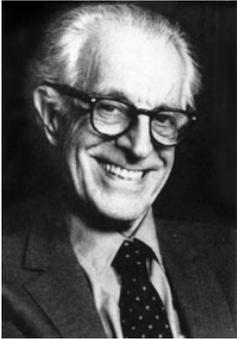
Houston Church of Freethought celebrates 10-Year Anniversary!

All the great things we said last month about NTCOF hitting its 15-year milestone must now be said again about our sister church in Houston, which celebrates its 10-year anniversary in one week! Consider making the trip to Texas' largest city, and the fourth-largest city in the nation, for another take on what atheists have been doing with church at HCOF's March 14th service. Check www.hcof.org for details !!



DFWCOR

Dallas-Fort Worth Coalition of Reason



ALBERT ELLIS

Founder of Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy

Albert Ellis was born in Pittsburgh in 1913. Ellis recalled both his parents as being emotionally (and often physically) unavailable. He wrote that he had assumed much

of the care of his two younger siblings. As a very young child he also had numerous health problems and much of his years between the age of 5 and 7 in the hospital.

After graduating from college with a business degree in 1934, Ellis tried and did not succeed in business or as a fiction writer. He subsequently became interested in human sexuality, wrote on the subject, and became sought-after for his expertise and advice. This motivated him to begin a program of study at Columbia University in clinical psychology as well as a clinical practice as a psychologist since there were in New York no laws requiring licensure at the time. Also prior to receiving his PhD in 1947, Ellis began to write about the lack of scientific validity of various personality tests then in use.

In 1950, Ellis wrote about the problem of the scientific and evidential basis for psychoanalysis, in which he himself had been trained:

“Some analysts, notably Jung, have at times been frankly unscientific, even antiscientific, ... Other analysts ... have offered doughty lip-service to scientific ideals, but have in practice advocated semi-mystical theories ... Most contemporary psychologists and psychiatrists agree, however, that thorough going scientific knowledge is the only valid basis for analytic (and other) therapy, and that rigorous criticism of non-scientific psychological methods is quite justified.”

Ellis continued to study and write about human sexuality and also collaborated in legal cases defending publishers of sexual materials, gays, and others accused of “obscenity” and consensual sexual “crimes.” These latter activities did not come without cost as Ellis was refused teaching positions and had presentations canceled or banned.

But by 1953 Ellis is said to have broken with the psychoanalytic methods in which he had been trained and began calling himself a rational therapist. In

1955 he began calling his approach “Rational-Emotive Therapy,” basing it on the examination and correction of self-defeating beliefs and the behaviors that followed from them. By this time he had also begun teaching he technique to other therapists. In 1959, Ellis founded a non-profit organization, The Institute for Rational-Emotive Therapy, to facilitate this work.

Now known as Rational-Emotive Behavioral Therapy, or REBT, Ellis stated that he derived his approach from his own professional experiences, his reading of classical philosophy and especially the writings of ancient Stoics, and the ideas of Polish-American philosopher and scientist Alfred Korzybski, who developed the theory of General Semantics. There is an anecdote concerning Korzybski’s demonstration of how context and beliefs play into human experience and especially emotional responses:

“One day, Korzybski was giving a lecture to a group of students, and he suddenly interrupted the lesson in order to retrieve a packet of biscuits, wrapped in white paper, from his briefcase. He muttered that he just had to eat something, and he asked the students on the seats in the front row, if they would also like a biscuit. A few students took a biscuit. ‘Nice biscuit, don’t you think,’ said Korzybski, while he took a second one. The students were chewing vigorously. Then he tore the white paper from the biscuits, in order to reveal the original packaging. On it was a big picture of a dog’s head and the words ‘Dog Cookies.’ The students looked at the package, and were shocked. Two of them wanted to throw up, put their hands in front of their mouths, and ran out of the lecture hall to the

The North Texas Church of Freethought A Fellowship of Unbelievers	
Presenters:	David Burgess, Dr. Tim Gorski, Don Lewellyn, Erin Taylor, and Lu Whipple
Music Coordinator:	Jay Purrington
BAND: “FAITHLESS COMPANIONS”	
Videographer:	Edward McGuire, Jay Purrington, Cathy & Kevin Smith, & Scott Williams John Gauthier
Ministers:	Dr. Tim Gorski and Lu Whipple LPC
P.O.Box 202447, Arlington, TX 76006; (214) 347-7590	
Website: www.churchoffreethought.org	
Email: info@churchoffreethought.org	

toilet. 'You see, ladies and gentlemen,' Korzybski remarked, 'I have just demonstrated that people don't just eat food, but also words, and that the taste of the former is often outdone by the taste of the latter.' " [R. Diekstra, Haarlemmer Dagblad, 1993, cited by L. Derks & J. Hollander, *Essenties van NLP* (Utrecht: Servire, 1996), p. 58, quoted in Wikipedia]

According to Ellis, REBT:

" ... is a comprehensive approach to psychological treatment that deals not only with the emotional and behavioral aspects of human disturbance, but places a great deal of stress on its thinking component. Human beings are exceptionally complex, ... Their psychological problems arise from their misperceptions and mistaken cognitions about what they perceive; from their emotional underreactions or overreactions to normal and unusual stimuli; and from their habitually dysfunctional behavior patterns, which enable them to keep repeating nonadjustive responses even when they 'know' that they are behaving poorly."

Ellis was a known atheist and humanist and thought that unbelief was the most emotionally healthy stance. He was recognized by the American Humanist Association as "Humanist of the Year" in 1971. At the same time, Ellis acknowledged that he could not be absolutely certain that no god(s) exist and was also careful to state that REBT did not depend on one's beliefs about religion. In fact, Ellis coauthored a book with a Mormon and a Christian evangelical religious psychologist that integrated REBT with belief systems based on the supernatural.

Although many of Ellis' ideas were criticized from the beginning, REBT proved to be the forerunner of a therapeutic strategy now known as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, or CBT. CBT's are in wide use internationally and have gained significant theoretical and scientific support. In 1982, a survey of American and Canadian psychologists ranked Ellis ahead of Freud in terms of impact on their profession. In the same year, a survey of US psychology journals found that he was the most cited author after 1957.

Ellis' work eventually extended into areas such as business, education and politics. He publicly debated others involved in these subjects including Objectivist Nathaniel Branden and anti-psychiatric

activist Thomas Szasz. And Ellis held many workshops and seminars worldwide for many years and well into his 90's.

Ellis was diagnosed with diabetes in 1953 but this did not prevent his living a long life. Towards the end he was in poor health but remained remarkably active nonetheless. His last book, published after his death on July 24, 2007, combined his theory of personality with biological and evolutionary concepts.

A number of quotes help to shed light on Albert Ellis' key ideas:

"Acceptance is not love. You love a person because he or she has lovable traits, but you accept everybody just because they're alive and human."

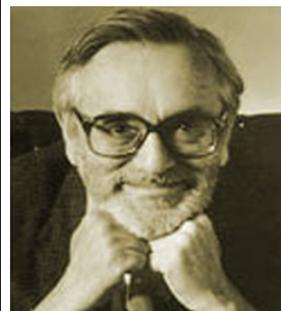
"I wasn't even upset about Hitler. I was willing to go to war to knock him off, but I didn't hate him. I hated what he was doing."

"By not caring too much about what people think, I'm able to think for myself and propagate ideas which are very often unpopular. And I succeed."

"I get people to truly accept themselves unconditionally, whether or not their therapist or anyone loves them."

"I think it's unfair, but they have the right as fallible, screwed-up humans to be unfair; that's the human condition."

Ellis even had something to say about the changes in the medical care system: "In the old days we used to get more referrals, because people had insurance that paid for therapy."



SALVADOR MINUCHIN
Founder of Structural
Family Therapy

Salvador Minuchin was born in the city of San Salvador, in Argentina, in 1921. Like Albert Ellis, he was the eldest of three children and, also like Ellis, the Great Depression beginning in 1929 had a significant adverse impact on his family's finances. Minuchin's family was Jewish and had to survive in an environment of pervasive anti-Semitism in the larger community. During his student years in the 1940's, during which he obtained a medical degree, Minuchin

was jailed for his opposition to the Peron regime.

After graduating from medical school in 1946, Minuchin began training in pediatrics and psychiatry. In 1948, when the new state of Israel was declared and immediately came under attack by its Arab neighbors, Minuchin moved to Israel and served in its army. In 1950, he came to the United States to study child psychiatry, moved back to Israel the following year to work with orphans of the Holocaust, and then returned to the United States again in 1954. At the William Alanson White Institute of Psychoanalysis in New York City, Minuchin studied interpersonal psychoanalysis as developed by psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan and began practicing at a home for troubled boys.

Minuchin came to believe through this work that he could not be effective without engaging a client's family in therapy. He and others began developing an active form of therapy focusing on communication and behavior within the family unit. This work continued through the 1960's and 1970's and became what is now known as Structural Family Therapy. Among the keys to SFT is the concept of boundaries, described as a concept "to describe emotional barriers that protect and enhance the integrity of individuals, subsystems, and families."

"Boundaries" as barriers, walls, fences, or limits placed between people is a useful tool in thinking about interpersonal relations. The concept obviously suggests "thou shalt nots" as well as "lines that should not be crossed." Minuchin and his collaborators identified dysfunctional family/interpersonal dynamics involving the absence or lack of awareness or failure to respect such boundaries, as well as too-rigid boundaries as key sources of psychological distress. The idea that not just social and interpersonal problems but individual psychological distress can be understood as being related to how people learn to regulate their interactions with others is a powerful one. Clearly, it is one that can be generalized to all social processes including the highest levels of international relations.

Salvador Minuchin, now in his late 80's, is Research Professor at New York University Medical. A survey of 2600 practicing psychologists identified Minuchin as one of the top ten most influential therapists of all time. A few quotations illustrate his abiding convictions of the importance of family connections and

interpersonal relations to psychological health:

"In all cultures, the family imprints its members with selfhood. Human experience of identity has two elements; a sense of belonging and a sense of being separate. The laboratory in which these ingredients are mixed and dispensed is the family, the matrix of identity."

"The touchstone for family life is still the legendary 'and so they were married and lived happily ever after.' It is no wonder that any family falls short of this ideal."

"I describe family values as responsibility towards others, increase of tolerance, compromise, support, flexibility. And essentially the things I call the silent song of life – the continuous process of mutual accommodation without which life is impossible."

All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar, or through our page at www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought. Please check these locations regularly, and RSVP through meetup.

Social Luncheon: Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion at the Golden Corral Buffet and Grill in Grapevine, located just across from the Grapevine Mills shopping center, at 2605 E. Grapevine Mills Circle, phone (972) 874-7900. To reach Golden Corral from the Wyndham, take the SOUTH exit from the parking lot (turn your head left as you walk out the main entrance to see it), the drive across Esters Blvd onto John W. Carpenter Freeway (114). From there, just take the first exit to the RIGHT onto International Parkway (121), then take the Grapevine Mills Parkway exit. Turn LEFT on Stars and Stripes Way, and continue on to E. Grapevine Mills Circle.

Game Night: The regular game night crew meets nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Risk, Rummikub, and other fun games!

Secular Singles: Freethinkers have met their life-partners with whom they have begun families through the Secular Singles group. Check the meetup site for the next date, time and location!