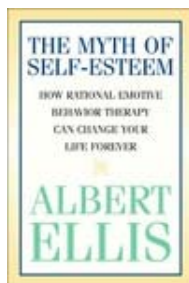


## Albert Ellis on Everything

A review of



### **The Myth of Self-Esteem: How Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy Can Change Your Life Forever**

by Albert Ellis

New York: Prometheus Books, 2005. 344 pp. ISBN 1-59102-354-8. \$18.00, paperback

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Reviewed by  
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☰ In the early to mid-1970s, while I was a graduate student, long before I was familiar with the icons of cognitive therapy—for example, Beck, Meichenbaum, and Barlow—I was reading and influenced by Ellis's similar approach, rational emotive therapy (which he now calls rational emotive behavior therapy). I recall that I was then working in the college counseling center where I had an assistantship, and I was focusing on the patients' irrational cognitions and giving them Ellis and Harper's (1961) *A Guide to Rational Living* to read for homework. I've often wondered why Ellis has had such limited influence among academics. Perhaps it is his lack of academic affiliation. Perhaps it results from his relative lack of empirical focus, as he is not known for outcome studies. Perhaps it is his provocative personal style. In any event, although his influence in academic programs may be limited, his influence on practitioners is broad.

☰ The title of this book, *The Myth of Self-Esteem*, is somewhat misleading. Although Ellis does deal with self-esteem in many chapters, distinguishing it from unconditional self-acceptance, many of the chapters contain his views on various secular and religious philosophers. In fact, this book could be retitled *Ellis on Everything and Everyone*. He has chapters on Jean-Paul Sartre, on Martin Heidegger, on Martin Buber, on D. T. Suzuki and Zen Buddhism, and on Stephen Hayes and acceptance and commitment therapy, among others. His discussions of these matters are sometimes enlightening, as in his analysis of acceptance and commitment therapy, and sometimes obscure, as with his reviews of the existentialists. Although he sometimes compares these philosophers' views on self-esteem to his own views, the connections are not always easy to grasp, and at times, his discussions of these philosophers are as opaque as the philosophers' own writings. I have always found Heidegger and Sartre impenetrable, and I find Ellis's discussion of these philosophers no more understandable. Take the following quotation from Heidegger and the analysis of it by Ellis:

"Being-in-the-world stands for a unitary phenomenon. This primary datum must be seen as a whole." [Heidegger] Why? Why can't Being exist in heaven or hell? Or even in itself? If my ghost or soul exists, must it have a world to exist in? Since it is disembodied, why does it need a world? If it exists in heaven, that is its world, but is it truly a world? [Ellis] (p. 143)

At the least, these are not the kinds of considerations that can generate testable hypotheses.

☰ Mixed in with these philosophical chapters, however, are a number of chapters that lay out Ellis's basic approach to life and psychotherapy, both conceptually and practically. He distinguishes between contingent self-esteem—rating oneself for one's good and bad deeds—and unconditional self-acceptance—rating one's actions as good or bad, but accepting oneself as beyond rating. He also proposes an unconditional acceptance of other people and an unconditional life acceptance along the same lines. That is, other people or life can be frustrating and one can dislike aspects of either, but both should be beyond global rating and just accepted. He contends that lack of acceptance (of oneself, of others, and of life) is the core of many mental health problems.

☰ Ellis also discusses many of his treatment methods. These will be familiar to most readers who have read any of his previous works. Although he does not break any new ground regarding treatment methods in this book, he does provide a nice review. He emphasizes that his approach does not just deal with thoughts—as cognitive therapy is frequently cast—but emphasizes evoking emotions, even (or perhaps especially) strong emotions that are tied to irrational thoughts. It is through actions that evoke these emotions—shame, intense anger, anxiety, and the like—that Ellis believes that one can face and correct the irrational beliefs that cause these maladaptive emotions. In this sense, Ellis has been a longtime proponent of what is now called exposure therapy.

☰ In summary, those not familiar with Ellis's approach will find this book to be a comprehensive overview that focuses on philosophical underpinnings, descriptions of important therapeutic constructs, and practical methods. Those already familiar with his approach will find a review of these topics and an interesting (if sometimes obscure) discussion of modern philosophers.

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## Reference

Ellis, A., & Harper, R. A. (1961). *A guide to rational living*. North Hollywood, CA: Wilshire Books.