

Let's Nuke the Transpersonalists
A Response to Albert Ellis

Ken Wilber

One always suspected that Albert ("quit thinking those crazy thoughts") Ellis was just a little too rational, too rigidly empirical, in his approach to psychology and therapy, and that sooner or later some sort of gruesome irrationality would come lurching to the fore. Alas, the time has come, and the poor transpersonalists are the brunt of an emotional tantrum that would be extremely entertaining and amusing were it not for the alarming fact that this man apparently means it. This is chilling. But this tantrum, in addition to being emotionally prejudiced and self-contradictory, as I shall show, also manages to libel the entire Fourth Force of psychology, not to mention virtually all of the world's great philosophers and religious leaders. The thing is, Ellis's article is so preposterous (transcendental sages, such as Plato, Buddha, and Christ, are unceremoniously lumped together with, I kid you not, Genghis Khan, Ivan the Terrible, and Hitler)—so preposterous that it's very hard to work up enough seriousness to respond.

But Albert Ellis is an important voice in psychology, and has been for three decades, and when he makes an apparently major statement such as this, it ought to be studied with care. In this case, the particular statement is so disturbed in its logic and its scholarship that it casts grave suspicions on Ellis's present capacity to rationally judge anything. But I suppose we poor transpersonalists will have no choice but to answer Ellis in some detail, lest, in his confused state, he mistake our silence for the agony of defeat. And since Ellis's piece is really polemic disguised as reason, we have no choice but to answer polemically as well.

To begin with, the most astonishing thing about Ellis's piece, other than its stunning ignorance of transpersonal psychology, is his strong belief that logical positivism alone is capable of saving the world from imminent nuclear holocaust. By "logical positivism" I mean the assumption that empirical data and their rational or logical relations alone are verifiable or falsifiable and therefore scientific (less technically, that the scientific method is the best approach to knowledge). This is clearly what Ellis has in mind in his oft-repeated statements such as "These

people can be...taught to attack [their beliefs] scientifically—with logical and empirical analysis—and thereby to renounce their crooked thinking." That Ellis believes predominantly and even exclusively in the scientific or empiric-analytic method is made obvious in numerous statements (e.g., "In fact, according to RET [Rational Emotive Therapy], if people rigorously use the scientific method and if they think only in terms of preferences and desires instead of...antiscientific thinking, they will...virtually never make themselves seriously neurotic." Although Ellis gives lip service to the notion that science is not the only way ("perhaps not," he says), in effect it is the only "good" way he can think of, which amounts to the same jingoism.

There are three important points we should note about logical positivism. The first is that it is a very reductionistic and narrow worldview, since it explicitly excludes, from the realm of genuine knowledge, the worlds of literature, art, music, poetry, most philosophy and religion, sociology, mythology, introspective psychology, and even history (as A.J. Ayer admitted), since none of these conform to strict empirical verification. This is the arid worldview that Whitehead characterized as "quite unbelievable."

Further, if it wishes to be consistent, logical positivism has to exclude purpose, value, and meaning, since these also are non-empirical. But that has led more than one psychologist to point out that such a worldview is technically insane. "Such a view is crazy," says psychiatrist Karl Stern. "And I do not at all mean crazy in the sense of slangy invective but rather in the technical meaning of psychotic. Indeed, such a view has much in common with certain aspects of schizophrenic thinking." Ellis doesn't succumb to psychosis simply because, as we will see, he doesn't come close to being logically consistent. But my point is that most scholars now agree that, although it has a few very good points, the overall worldview of logical positivism is extremely narrow and limited, and relying predominantly or exclusively on it is a type of philosophical suicide or insanity.

The second point is that, as John Passmore put it, "Logical positivism, then, is dead, or as dead as a philosophical movement ever becomes." The reason—in addition to its insane narrowness—is that, as a comprehensive worldview, it is a formal self-contradiction. It says, as Ellis does, that "Only propositions that can be empirically verified are true." Unfortunately, that proposition itself cannot be empirically verified. Thus, as Huston Smith summarizes it, "The contention that there are no truths save those of science is not itself a scientific truth, and thus in affirming it scientism [logical positivism] contradicts itself."

Logical positivism, then, taken in and by itself, is marginally insane and foundationally unscientific (unverifiable and self-contradictory). And yet Albert Ellis is bold enough to offer it to the world! He might not be much of a philosopher but the guy's got brass balls.

The third and strangest thing about logical positivism, taken as a worldview, is that it is a form of hidden absolutism. It says, in effect, that there absolutely are no absolute truths. As Schuon put it, positivism "sets out to reduce every element of absoluteness to a relativity, while making a quite illogical exception in favor of this reduction itself." Ellis says "Science abjures dogmas, certainties, ultimates, and absolutes. It only has tentative and revisable hypotheses. It never even views 'facts' as incontrovertible." But those statements are not tentative and uncertain. He clearly means that they are always so in his version of science; in other words, he means it absolutely. That is an absolute truth upon which Ellis rests his logical arse. And it is this powerful but hidden absolutism or dogmatism that pumps Ellis with enough certainty and machismo to tell the entire world that if it followed his system of thinking then global salvation will have arrived.

Such grandiose conceit can only be supported by an equally grandiose dogmatism—in this case, the naive but potent belief in scientism. And Ellis's absolutism is all the more pernicious simply because it is hidden or unconscious. He honestly thinks he is more or less free of major irrationalisms, while the whole of his scientism rests squarely a monumental illogic.

Ellis is very right about one important point, however: believers in absolutist systems tend to be fanatics, Ellis himself being no exception. His program for preventing nuclear holocaust involves, as he himself makes very clear, the education of approximately 6 billion people in the tenets of RET (we must, he says, "incorporate therapeutic teachings and bring them to all the masses. Yes, *all* the masses"). He quickly points out that fortunately RET is easily incorporated into mass educational procedures. "If this were not so," he says with straight face, "I would have serious doubts about making effective inroads against human dogma and rigidity." Right. Thanks to mass ed procedures we can reach 6 billion people, most of whom are illiterate, and awaken them with a reasonable pitch for RET. Is this guy even vaguely in touch with practical reality? Does he actually have any idea what that would really entail? To educate the entire planet on RET—this is a fanatical vision the unlikely heights of which are usually reached only by ayatollahs.

And what happens when 99.99% of the world's population declines to learn RET, preferring instead their own absolutisms? Should we then force them to learn it? Ellis's logical argument, if followed consistently, would have to answer "yes." After all, he most definitely tries to show that

following the scientific method of RET is synonymous with sanity, while not following it results eventually but directly in neurosis, psychosis, and nuclear holocaust. In other words—and he intentionally implies this—a person who doesn't follow RET is a potential nuclear threat ("if we work hard enough to reach them we may be able to do so—before they reach out themselves to manufacture and employ the nuclear weapons with which they will eventually be able to destroy all of us"). And since nuclear holocaust is going to happen if we don't do something, it follows that out of self-defense I have a right to force educate that person. If Ellis says we don't have the right to force RET on people, then either he's not being consistent, or some sane part of him doesn't really believe what he's saying (I'd like to think the latter).

It appears, then, as is often the case, that what Ellis so vociferously reacts to in others—illogical or contradictory worldviews, insane narrowness, and absolutist principles—are exactly the elements that he, apparently unconsciously, harbors himself.

So I suppose it's time to turn the tables and educate Ellis a bit, particularly about the meaning of the words "transpersonal," "religion," "transcendental," "absolute," and "libel."

Start with religion in general and mysticism in particular. Ellis approaches religion as if it were a disease to be quickly identified and cured at all costs. This ugly attitude would, as Jung put it, even look at life as a disease because "it lingers for years and ends in death." Ellis ought to know, however, that it is not so easy to determine just what is and what is not "religious." Modern sociologists (such as Bellah) tend to define religion not by its content, as Ellis does, but by its function—religion is that which meaningfully couples or integrates subject and object (or self and other) in a social action system. By this definition, rationalism or scientism is Ellis's religion. And his litany is the same as one of utilitarianism's founders, Jeremy Bentham, which is altogether fitting:

"O Logic!—born gatekeeper to the Temple of Science, victim of capricious destiny!
doomed hitherto to be the drudge of pedants! come to the aid of thy master, Legislation."

This is fine with me; I appreciate a religious man as much as the next guy. But I wish Ellis would quit coming on as if his religion were by and far the best in the entire world, and fit, in fact, to educate the entire world. These types of megalomaniacal fantasies belong in a formaldehyde jar on the shelf, not in a reputable journal on counseling. But, as we've already seen, most pop religions

(and science today is a pop or exoteric religion for millions) tend to be overtly or covertly absolutist and monolithic, so I suppose Ellis should be no exception.

There is, however, one major exception to the common absolutist trend in religion.

Paradoxically, it is mysticism. Precisely because the mystics claim that absolute spirit cannot be put into words, concepts, or doctrines of any sort whatsoever, mysticism has no dogmas, no formalism that is claimed to be the best or only way to describe reality. Quite the contrary, most mystics consistently maintain that reality is greater than any description or method that we might try to use to capture it, and that it is in fact our very compulsion to conceptualize and categorize reality that gets us into difficulties in the first place. One of the worse mistakes we can make, according to Buddhism, is called *drista* in Sanskrit; it means "dogmatic beliefs."

For just that reason, the mystics historically have been the most tolerant of peoples.

Because they saw that "They call Spirit many who is really one," they tended to accept virtually any religious belief, since no particular religion could ever hope to embrace the whole.

Ramakrishna, for example, described the world's great religious traditions as so many fingers on one hand. I think this is why the more esoteric or mystical religions (Buddhism, Taoism, Vedanta, Sufism) tended historically to avoid war, whereas the more dogmatic or exoteric religions (aspects of Christianity, Islam, scientism) have historically been very warlike and aggressive. Buddhism, for example, in its 2500-year history has initiated not one war, a remarkable example considering the provocative atmosphere of its birth.

It is mysticism's "ineffability," then, that has historically saved it from dogmatic wars and worse. In the most popular lay sutra in Asia, when the teacher is asked what absolute reality is, he responds only with silence. The mystics tended to follow Abraham Lincoln's maxim: "Better to remain silent and let people suspect you are a fool, than to open your mouth and remove all doubt." It's a bit late for Ellis to follow that advice, but the mystics by and large do. As Lao Tzu put it, "Those who know don't speak; those who speak don't know."

Another reason that mysticism is notoriously nondogmatic is that it relies for its validation on direct experience. In fact, its methods are, in the strictest sense of the word, experimental. One is not given a set of ready-made beliefs but a set of open-ended instructions. Mysticism is much more like, say, judo, than it is Bible school. I think this is why historically, as Needham pointed out, in both East and West mysticism tended to ally itself with empirical science against scholastic

religion, since both mysticism and science relied on direct experience and evidence instead of dogmatic proclamations.

Ellis wishes to equate mysticism with fanaticism, but I think that's largely because he has no sure understanding of what scholars mean by mysticism; he seems to mean by the term, firstly, anything that isn't RET, and secondly, religious zealotism. I am no fan of zealots, but I would like to remind Ellis that zealots come in all flavors. There are scientific zealots and fanatics (Nazi doctors, for example) just as there are religious fanatics. But historically mystics have rarely been either; as a rule they have so undercut dogmatic conceptualization that there's no doctrine or dogma left to get fanatic about. I heartily agree with Ellis that zealotism of almost any sort is a colossal and catastrophic threat to the modern world, but the only way that threat can even vaguely be equated with genuine mysticism is through a demonstrably disturbed scholarship.

So let me help Ellis out a bit here. The world's great mystics have included not only the obvious religious teachers—Christ, Buddha, Moses, Krishna, Lao Tzu, Padmasambhava, Hui Neng, Milarepa, al Hallaj, Shankara, Lady Tsogyal, St. Teresa, and so on—but also many of the world's greatest philosophers, scientists, psychologists, and artists. Philosophers and psychologists with strong mystical elements include Plato, Socrates, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Schelling, Whitehead, Wittgenstein, Berkeley, Emerson, Thoreau, Eckhart, Husserl, Heidegger, Augustine, Kierkegaard, Carl Jung, Abraham Maslow, and William James—to give the shortest possible list. And scientists that have explicitly defined themselves as having mystical or transcendental concerns include Newton, Kepler, Einstein, Heisenberg, Schroedinger, de Broglie, Planck, Pauli, Eddington—and those are just the physicists!

So let me get this straight. Ellis is actually implying that those people—since they most definitely embrace transpersonal or transcendental views—are necessarily the ones who "promulgate almost exactly the kind of absolutistic ideology that is devoutly held by the religious and political sectarians who may someday atomically annihilate the whole human race"? And that those are the people that "rape, maim, bomb, kill, and even commit mass murder"? And that those are the people who "rabidly insist on death to all those who do not follow them"? I'm sure I speak for all of us when I say we always suspected that of Einstein, Socrates, Albert Schweitzer and the rest.

But what about the Hitlers, the Stalins, the Rasputins, and the Khans? I thought those were the types we had to really look out for. Not to worry—Ellis just unceremoniously dumps them all

into the same category! Since Einstein and company are all transcendentalists or transpersonalists, then by Ellis's own self-proclaimed definitions, they must also be fanatics, just like Hitler et al. And, Ellis continues, "the more transcendental" the person is (like, say, a Christ or a Gandhi), the more likely they will be to blow us all to kingdom come. Well now that makes sense, doesn't it. And they let this guy work with disturbed individuals.

Some mystics—not all—do indeed talk about "One Self," and some mystics—not all—talk about an afterlife, karma, and reincarnation. Ellis thinks that individuals who believe in these types of ideas "easily risk killing and being killed," that they "will do virtually anything, including resorting to rampant violence, to abet their chosen cause," and that if "they have nuclear weapons available, they will resort to them, too."

Even the briefest familiarity with these concepts shows that they are actually the basis of an extremely rigorous system of morality here on earth. For example, Schopenhauer long ago demonstrated that the only real basis for doing good to others was realizing that we all share the same transcendental self or consciousness. That, in other words, the awareness of being alive that you possess is essentially the same in all humans, and that sameness (or selfness) demands that we treat others as we would treat ourselves, since at the deepest level they are one and the same. This is the categorical imperative, from Kant to Christ to Confucius, and it is based, as they all realized, on a transcendental commonality. This is actually the very same ethic that Ellis espouses, though he (and positivism) can come up with no reason why one should believe it.

Karma and reincarnation have the same effect: it means that you will be appropriately rewarded or punished for all your actions, and death does not remove this obligation (if there's an afterlife, or reincarnation, your karma follows you). Most Eastern followers of these ideas don't even like to kill insects, let alone people. (I'll return to examples such as the Ayatollah Khomeini, when we discuss the types of groups that are problematic.) But no matter; Ellis has decided that these beliefs are causally linked to nuclear propensities, and I suppose the facts would just further confuse him.

By far the most entertaining part of Ellis's piece was his vaudeville explanation of transpersonal psychology. Ellis talking about transpersonal psych is like the Pope talking about sex; you just know he has no real idea what he's talking about but you love to watch the show.

Ellis begins by authoritarianly accusing the transpersonalists of authoritarianism: "Those who are somewhat ignorant about what transpersonal psychotherapy really is and who falsely see it

as humanistic and democratic may be surprised to learn that its basic premises and ideologies include the following authoritarian suppositions." He then gives four suppositions that are supposed to define the entire field. Mind you, he doesn't even say that *some* transpersonalists believe these; the implication is that they all do. Never mind that I don't even know a *single* transpersonalist who believes in Ellis's propositions; the point is that he continually uses prejudiced logic of the sort, "All Orientals look alike." And when he does attempt to qualify and remove his prejudicial logic, he quickly reintroduces it ("Well, some Orientals all look alike").

Thus, after giving two really dopey examples of so-called transpersonal therapy (his examples are never taken from mainstream transpersonal theory), he authoritatively proclaims: "This is a small sample of the authoritarian, unrealistic, and dogmatic credos that are the philosophic—and antiscientific—sources of transcendental and transpersonal psychotherapy." He then thinks about it a few seconds, realizes that he can't really get away with that, and so begins the next paragraph with: "I am not saying that all believers in transpersonal psychotherapy endorse these antiscientific and asocial views and actions." That's better, but since he really doesn't want to let a single transpersonalist off the hook, he flops back to his prejudicial logic, and in a very clever way: "But I am saying that to the extent that they religiously follow their own basic philosophies, they often do so." The implication (and this really is clever) is that if a transpersonalist is consistent, then he or she will be a terrorist and "rabidly insist on death to all those who do not follow." And the converse implication is that if you ever find a transpersonalist who isn't a terrorist, it's because that person is inconsistent and logically muddled. I don't know about you folks, but that, really, was my favorite part.

"And I am particularly saying," he authoritatively continues, warming to his topic, "that their fundamentally irrational and antiscientific outlook can easily lead them into almost any kind of antisocial and asocial actions—and it frequently does." Now I'm going to make this easy for everyone: Ellis cannot give so much as a single case of a person describing himself or herself as a transpersonal psychologist who has ever engaged in terrorist or similarly grave antisocial activity. (Now what do you think: is he going to try to cite Gandhi and Thoreau for civil disobedience?)

So what is the nature of this evil transpersonalism? Ellis gives four points which he believes are central:

1. "Absolute reality exists, and when we find the true doctrine that reveals it, we reach absolute, invariant, unchangeable, ineffable truth." Strict transpersonalists, such as Shankara or Nagarjuna or Eckhart, maintain that you cannot say that the absolute either exists or does not exist, since both of those are dualistic or dogmatic conceptualizations, and reality is *shunya* of *drista* ("free of dogma") or *nirguna* ("unqualifiable"). They most certainly do not think reality can be put into any doctrine, no matter how elaborate. As Zen says, all doctrines—including its own—are at best fingers pointing to the moon, and the important point is not to confuse the two.
2. "Afterlife experiences, reincarnation, and immortality of our souls unquestionably exist and have been empirically proven." I don't know anybody who thinks reincarnation has been empirically proven. The well-known and well-respected researcher Ian Stevenson, out of the Univ. of Virginia, has compiled a fascinating study, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, that are indeed suggestive. But he's agnostic on the issue himself. Some transpersonalists do believe in reincarnation. As Voltaire put it, "Is being born twice really any more remarkable than being born once?" But they don't believe it empirically and they won't nuke you to prove it.
3. "All living and inanimate things merge into one fundamental unity." This is a common misunderstanding, especially among those who have studied transpersonal psychology for up to an hour. Things don't "merge" into a common unity, as if they were melted or fused together. All things, while remaining perfectly themselves, are also seen to be part of a larger or fundamental unity, which is often expressed as a "unity-in-diversity." This is a common feature of genuine mystical experience, and its most typical result is a reverence for all life and for all beings, since each expresses wholly the divine. Including you, Albert my boy.
4. "By following transcendental teaching and by ignoring the knowledge of our normal intellect and senses and abandoning the scientific method and the findings of science, we can achieve perfect knowledge, perfect peace, perfect unity with the universe, perfect joy, and perfect physical and mental well-being." Transpersonalists don't want to abandon science, they just don't want to make it into a hidden religion (a là Ellis). In fact, most transpersonalists are extremely sympathetic to science, and wish that the spirit of the scientific enterprise—a certain honesty, integrity, and openness in research—be used as much as possible in transpersonal theory and practice. Ellis then

lists Grof and Mann as references here, which is such a severe misrepresentation of their views that he has clearly moved into a possible libel suit. This could be interesting. As for myself, I can only say that on balance I have not seen such uninformed dribble on mysticism since Franz Alexander's attempt, forty years ago, to categorize Zen as catatonic withdrawal. The difference is that Alexander had actually read two articles on the subject.

There is, however, a very genuine and very important question in the middle of Ellis's presentation, which is: "There definitely are problematic and possibly destructive religious and secular cult movements; how can these be spotted?" Ellis might be interested to know that there actually has been considerable research and theorizing done on this issue, most of it by... transpersonalists. He might begin by reading *Spiritual Choices* (Anthony and Wilber) and my *Eye to Eye*. Suffice it to say that transpersonalists make a distinction between pre-rational states and trans-rational states, and that virtually everything Ellis has said in this paper applies to prerational, not transrational, impulses. Because both prerational and transrational states are nonrational, they appear similar or even identical to the untutored eye and thus are often lumped together and treated as one. This "lumping," of course, is what Ellis has apparently mastered.

But he should know that we transpersonalists are keenly interested in this topic. We are also highly critical of the "flakier" trends in transpersonal psychology. But a bad or flakey transpersonalist is someone who uses Bach flower remedies and cleans your aura with psychic massage. Trust me, Albert, these types are not going to harm a fly, let alone hijack the *Achille Lauro*.

So, what do you think? Can we re-educate Albert Ellis? Can we reach him? Do we have time? He's already talking to himself. "Might a small group of psychotics, assuming they had the ability to do so, become violently incensed and use nuclear weapons to snuff out millions of humans, including themselves? Damned right, they might!.... Have the trepidations of fanatical, power-bent groups been any better in recent years than in the past? Hardly!.... Eventually the day will come when a paltry few individuals can use nuclear weapons to wipe out billions of people and other living creatures. Billions? Yes, billions!.... According to RET, if people rigorously use the scientific method, they will forego their unconditional shoulds and musts and virtually never make themselves seriously neurotic. What? Never? Well, hardly ever!.... Large scale education--in the

schools, in community groups, in religious institutions, and in every mass media format--can better incorporate therapeutic teachings and bring them to all the masses. Yes, *all* the masses."

Reading this reminds me of another great and grandiose human scientist, Auguste Comte (1798-1857), the father of positivism and the scientific study of humans (for which he coined the term "sociology"). Comte began his intellectual career by making a series of important and interesting observations on the developmental epistemology of science. In *Cours de philosophie positive*, he outlined his famous "law of three": human thought develops from theological to metaphysical to scientific, only the latter being "real" or "positive." So excited was he by this discovery that he began to feel that if religion were replaced by science (or "positivism"), an entirely new world order could come into being. Positivism would, he believed, provide the specific knowledge requisite to this task.

The more he thought about it, the more excited and excitable he became. He was soon having visions of an entirely new "religion of humanity"--complete with a new Pope, but this time one of sociology! Comte allowed as he would, of course, be glad to serve. I'm quite serious; he published all this in the "Catechism of Positive Religion." His fantasies became increasingly omnipotent and grandiose, and he died more or less deranged. But, bless his heart, he was going to educate and reach all the masses. All? Yes, all!

Give it up, Albert, it ain't healthy. And anytime you'd like to learn something about transpersonal psychology, please write to Miles Vich, editor of Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, P.O. Box 4437, Stanford, CA 94305, and ask him for the bibliography that he has prepared specially for those new to the field who want to learn more.

Have a nice day.