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## The Accidental Practitioner: Principles of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy in the Works of Kurt Vonnegut

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The Accidental Practitioner: Principles of Rational Emotive  
Behavior Therapy in the Works of Kurt Vonnegut

by

Joseph J. Ward

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of English  
College of Arts and Sciences  
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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Jen, my amazing wife whose support and understanding enabled me to attend countless night classes after lengthy workdays, semester after semester after semester. Throughout the process, she faced long work days of her own, yet somehow managed to hold down the fort with one, then two, then three little Indians running amok at home. I will always appreciate the sacrifices she made so that this thesis could be possible.

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**ABSTRACT**

Just as psychology and philosophy have influenced the field of literary studies, literature provides insight about the theories and practices of its sister disciplines. The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate how literary works of Kurt Vonnegut illuminate principles of the influential branch of psychotherapy known as Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT).

This thesis traces the similar philosophies and shared beliefs of Vonnegut and REBT's founder, Albert Ellis, and details how Ellis's REBT is illustrated in selected works of Vonnegut, specifically, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Breakfast of Champions*, *Galapagos*, and *Timequake*. The thesis concludes by suggesting that Vonnegut's works -- and the principles of REBT that they illuminate -- provide a much needed guide for living in an irrational, often absurd world.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### INTRODUCTION

“The brain is the organ that sets us apart from any other species. It is not the strength of our muscles or of our bones that makes us different, it is our brain” (Gazzaniga 7).<sup>1</sup>

“Men ought to know that from the brain, and from the brain only, arise our pleasures, joy, laughter and jests, as well as our sorrows, pains, griefs, and tears” (Hippocrates, c. 440 B.C.).<sup>2</sup>

“Thanks a lot, big brain” (Leon Trout, *Galapagos* 19).

Though deemed to be distinct disciplines, literature, philosophy, and psychology flow from the same wellspring of the mind, surging at times in seemingly disparate directions, but frequently running together to form an interdisciplinary pool of ideas.<sup>3</sup> As philosophy and psychology interact with and influence literature, literature in turn provides insight into the theories and practices of its sister disciplines. Indeed, some of the earliest and most profound works of literature sprang from the minds of ancient philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, while distinguished psychologists such as Freud and Jung have made contributions to the field of literary studies of arguably equal importance. Cast within this interactive framework, it is the contention of this thesis that Kurt Vonnegut’s literary works elucidate essential principles of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), an important branch of psychotherapy aimed at ameliorating the disturbed brain by alleviating self-defeating beliefs and self-destructive behaviors.<sup>4</sup>

Literature and REBT share an ability to “shape attitudes” and provide a “healing experience” (Bokey 393) through the “imagination of alternative possibilities” (Scheurich 310).<sup>5</sup> Like literature, which “propose[s] alternatives to the currently real” (Scheurich 313), REBT advocates an alternate interpretation of reality achievable by conscious control of the brain’s thinking processes. Paralleling the underlying point of Vonnegut’s writings, the humanistic psychology of REBT seeks to enable individuals to live “happier, more self-actualizing” lives, emphasizing their ability to “give meaning to their lives” (Krieger 26) and “create and direct their own destinies” (*Humanistic* 3). Engaged by the “vital tension – between life as it is and life as it should be or could be” (Shem 62), Vonnegut’s literary works and REBT pursue a shared goal of *revealing* and *healing* by showing the “true situation of people and society . . . [and] ways to cure them” (Shem 64).<sup>6</sup> In this thesis, I will show how four of Vonnegut’s novels -- *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Breakfast of Champions*, *Galapagos*, and *Timequake* – reveal and heal in such a fashion, illuminating principles of REBT while prescribing a remedy of self-awareness, balanced by a prudent acceptance of the unalterable irrationalities of reality, as the most effective antidote to the absurdity of the human condition.<sup>7</sup>

## CHAPTER TWO:

### DEALING WITH DEPRESSION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF VONNEGUT'S PSYCHOLOGICAL STRUGGLES

"I am a monopolar depressive descended from monopolar depressives" (*Timequake* 89).

It is no secret that Vonnegut experienced numerous adverse events and endured considerable personal tragedy during his adult life. Chief among these were: (a) his mother's suicide in 1944 on Mother's Day; (b) the mental breakdown of his son, Mark; (c) the horrific events he witnessed and participated in as a prisoner of war during the firebombing of Dresden; (d) the death of his beloved sister, Alice, due to cancer (and her husband's tragic death a few days earlier in a freak train accident); and (e) his own apparent suicide attempt in 1984.<sup>8</sup> These events undoubtedly left their mark on his psyche and contributed to forging his philosophy of life.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Vonnegut admitted that because of his experiences he repeatedly faced the temptation of committing suicide, explaining that the "child of a suicide will naturally think of death . . . as a logical solution to any problem" (*Palm Sunday* 278). Moreover, in referring to himself as a novelist, Vonnegut noted that "[o]verwhelmingly, we are depressed, and are descended from those who, psychologically speaking, spent more time than anyone in his or her right mind would want to spend in gloom" (*Palm Sunday* 116).

Given the considerable stress and emotional trauma he endured, it should come as no surprise that Vonnegut's works often directly reference or allude to

the psychological issues he faced throughout his life, including his treatment by a mental health practitioner that included “talking to her about depression, [and] trying to understand its nature” (*Wampeters* 252).<sup>10</sup> Although he described the work of such practitioners as an attempt to “make healthy people happier in cultures and societies which have gone insane” (*Fates* 32), upon nearing his fiftieth birthday, he revealed:

I have imagined during most of that half century that I was responding to life around me as a just and sensitive man, blowing my cork with good reason from time to time. Only recently, with the help of a physician, have I realized that I have blown my cork every twenty days, no matter what is really going on.

(*Wampeters* 213). In acknowledging his condition, Vonnegut conceptualized himself “as a paranoid, as an overreactor, and a person who makes a questionable living with his mental diseases” (*Wampeters* 92). Although he intermittently experienced episodes of being “very down” (*Wampeters* 253) while repeatedly “losing and regaining [his] equilibrium” (*Wampeters* xxi), Vonnegut learned how to keep his depression at bay by “getting help from intelligent people who aren’t Freudians” (*Wampeters* 253).<sup>11</sup>

Considering all of the psychological curve balls that life threw at him, it is reasonable to conclude that Vonnegut’s own anxiety and depression manifests in his literary creations.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, many of his stress-ridden characters – Kilgore Trout, Eliot Rosewater, Billy Pilgrim, and Dwayne Hoover, to name a few – exhibit anxiety, depression, and other mental health disturbances.<sup>13</sup> As Lawrence Broer observes: “Probably no characters in contemporary fiction are more traumatized and emotionally damaged than those of Kurt Vonnegut” (*Sanity*

*Plea* 3).<sup>14</sup> Although Vonnegut claims that his stories never depict an “event or another person driv[ing] a character crazy” (*Fates* 33), the same cannot be said with respect to causing a character anxiety, stress, depression, or other mental ailments. In a telling response to the question of why so many of his literary creations suffer from “abnormal psychology,” Vonnegut simply but insightfully responded: “[b]ecause that in fact is the human experience” (Abadi-Nagy 28).<sup>15</sup>

Vonnegut’s background and experience made him particularly attune to the fact that our “participation in Western society tends to foster a variety of personal beliefs which, in turn, generate fears, or anxieties, that promote [self-destructive] behavior” (Price 117). However, he also believed that writing has beneficial “physiological and psychological effects on a human being” (*Bagombo* 5), and he acknowledged using writing as a form of therapy, observing that “[w]riters get a nice break in one way, at least: They can treat their mental illnesses every day” (*Wampeters* 283).<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, Vonnegut used his work as an “autobiographical psychodrama – a career-long process of cleansing and renewal” (*Sanity Plea* 152). Indeed, his novels “attempt[ ] to come to terms with or even to dispel the more worrisome aspects of his own psyche . . . [and] personal anxieties” (*Lonesome* 120).<sup>17</sup>

While Vonnegut found medication helpful for treating his psychological problems (describing in *Wampeters* how Ritalin helped his symptoms of depression (252)), he recognized that there is no magic pill for permanently alleviating mental disturbances. Instead, Vonnegut understood that the “only way” human beings can “rescue themselves” is by “enthusiastic intimacy with

works of their own imaginations” (*Wampeters* xxvii). Such works of imagination draw upon the same power of the mind invoked by REBT to shape one’s mental or emotional state, allowing one to “rescue” oneself by recognizing self-defeating thoughts and beliefs and transforming them into rational ones.<sup>18</sup> It is this powerful cognitive capability that “distinguish[es] human beings from other creatures” (*Effect* 96), giving rise to Vonnegut’s humanistic belief that the meaning of life is that which we give to it, a belief wholly consistent with essential principles of REBT. Though engaged in a continual battle with depression in a dispiriting world, Vonnegut fundamentally understood that “as far as improving the human condition goes, our minds are certainly up to that. That’s what they were designed to do” (*Wampeters* 239).<sup>19</sup> Viewing Vonnegut’s writings through the lens of REBT reveals the essence of his ideas, while affirming his role as a dispenser of principles of REBT aimed at “improving the human condition”.

## CHAPTER THREE: HISTORY AND PRINCIPLES OF REBT – PSYCHOTHERAPY FOR MITIGATING THE HUMAN CONDITION

“To one degree or another we all want essentially the same things out of life: love, respect, happiness, a sense of fairness and justice, a sense of well-being, a sense of purpose and value, and the feeling of being connected to something substantial, lasting, and secure. And as certain as it is that none of us will get what we perceive to be our rightful share of these things all the time, it is just as certain that we all balk at accepting this fact. It’s called the human condition” (Stringer 222-23).

As a formal system of psychotherapy, REBT originated in 1955 with the work of Albert Ellis (*Overcoming* 13).<sup>20</sup> However, one of the first thinkers to frame the basic principle underlying REBT was the Greek philosopher, Epictetus, who reportedly said some 2,000 years ago: “People are disturbed not by things, but by the *views* they take of them” (*Overcoming* 249).<sup>21</sup> Ellis identifies other contributors to what would become REBT as Confucius, Buddha, Cicero, and Marcus Aurelius (Bernard 21), as well as the existentialist philosophers Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre, who maintained that “humans [have] some choice in making themselves disturbed and undisturbed” (*Overcoming* 249).<sup>22</sup> Today, REBT is a widely used form of psychotherapy that decreases or eliminates psychological disturbances such as generalized anxiety disorder, panic attacks, post traumatic stress disorder, and depression by helping individuals come to terms with the reality that the world we live in is a place of randomness, uncertainty, and frequent absurdity.<sup>23</sup>

REBT begins with the simple premise that human beings “subjectively and idiosyncratically view or experience events in light of [our] beliefs, expectations, and evaluations” (Bernard 23).<sup>24</sup> In other words, REBT is “based on the assumption that cognition, emotion, and behavior are not disparate human functions but are, instead, intrinsically integrated and holistic” (*Therapist 3*).<sup>25</sup> Ellis explains the dynamic relationship of thoughts, emotions, and actions as follows:

Probably, no such thing as ‘pure’ or ‘absolute’ thought, feeling or action exists. Thoughts or evaluations (‘I see this as a good chess move and I like it’) are almost invariably accompanied by and interact with feelings (happiness or elation at considering or having made this ‘good’ move) and are also accompanied by and interact with actions (making a particular chess move). Similarly, feelings . . . lead to thoughts . . . and to actions. And actions . . . lead to thoughts . . . and to feelings.

(Bernard 21-22).<sup>26</sup> REBT operates within this interconnected relationship through the formula of  $A \times B = C$ , consisting of an activating event (A), which triggers an irrational belief (B), which in turn causes a self-defeating emotional or behavioral consequence (C), such that  $A \times B = C$ . The consequence (C) consists of emotional disturbances such as “rage, depression, or anxiety . . . [or] a psychosomatic reaction, like high blood pressure or ulcers [and] can also stand for a behavioral consequence” (Bernard 24).

REBT addresses a frustrating and fundamental paradox of the brain: while its ingenuity and resourcefulness enables us to overcome considerable obstacles, it has a tendency to create cognitive phantoms in response to external experiences. While this perplexing propensity of the brain frequently confuses or

deludes us, REBT teaches that “rather than being passive victims of life’s insults, through our cognitive appraisals we can profoundly influence our mental and physical reactions to these experiences” (Alloy 132).<sup>27</sup> As a classic self-improvement manual puts it: “Everybody in the world is seeking happiness – and there is one sure way to find it. That is by controlling your thoughts. Happiness doesn’t depend on outward conditions. It depends on inner conditions” (Carnegie 70).<sup>28</sup>

Far from taking a head-in-the-sand approach to psychological disturbances, REBT recognizes that “[r]eality often stinks. People don’t act the way we would like them to act. This isn’t the best of all possible worlds” (*Rational Living* 197). Rather than retreating from this reality, REBT emphasizes the “*meanings and interpretations* people give to events and to results rather than the events and results in themselves” (*Overcoming* 92). REBT posits that, despite the invariable absurdity of the human condition, the profoundly negative effects such a condition causes to one’s psychological state are not irreversible. Since it is ultimately an individual’s “self-defeating” thoughts and beliefs (*Therapist* 19) that produce the “core of all emotional difficulties be they feelings of rage, depression, anxiety, guilt, or extreme jealousy” (Bernard 26),<sup>29</sup> REBT seeks to alter an individual’s “basic patterns of dysfunctional thinking” (*Overcoming* 93) by disputing irrational beliefs and showing that they are “unrealistic and illogical” (*Overcoming* 26).<sup>30</sup> Although human beings habitually engage in patterns of irrational thinking, REBT asserts that the unconditional acceptance of self, others, and the exasperating but unalterable realities of life

enables one to reduce the frequency and degree of self-defeating beliefs and behaviors. REBT promotes “self-helping” rational thinking (*Therapist* 19) by encouraging the “requisite pragmatism to negotiate the inconsistencies of an imperfect world” (Stringer 222),<sup>31</sup> empowering individuals to:

disturb themselves less emotionally . . . enabl[ing] them to lead happier and more fulfilling lives. When people seriously disturb themselves – that is, make themselves severely panicking, depressing, and raging – and when they function poorly – that is, unduly inhibit themselves, withdraw, or act compulsively – they live less happily. [REBT] tries to reduce clients’ disturbing but also teaches them the skills of leading a more fulfilling, self-actualizing existence.

(*Overcoming* 17).<sup>32</sup>

Consistent with its focus on the brain’s internal reaction to external events, REBT concentrates on certain irrational beliefs that recurrently overshadow the rational self, leading an individual to become mentally disturbed and distressed. These include the beliefs that (a) “it is awful and catastrophic when things are not the way one would like them to be”; (b) “human unhappiness is externally caused and . . . people have little or no ability to control their terrors and disturbances”; and (c) “it is a dire necessity for an adult human to be loved or approved by virtually every significant other person in his life” (*Humanistic* 37). Within the context of these irrational beliefs, REBT attempts to weed out three unrealistic expectations that are particularly self-defeating:

“I *must* do greatly, gloriously, grandly, outstandingly . . . or else it’s *awful*, I *can’t* stand it, I’m no good and I’ll never do anything well.” This leads to feelings of depression, anxiety, despair, and worthlessness.

“Others *must* treat me nobly and kindly and considerately and put me in the center of their attention. And isn’t it *horrible* if they don’t – those lousy bastards!” This idea creates feelings of anger, rage, resentment, fury, and warlikeness.

“Conditions *must* be easy and nice and give me everything I want on a silver platter without my doing a goddamned thing to get it!” . . . This leads to low frustration tolerance, goofing and avoidance, and to addiction.

(Bernard 47).<sup>33</sup> Such self-defeating “musturbation” results from an individual’s elevation of healthy desires and expectations to absolute generalizations of “musts, shoulds, demands, and necessities” (*Overcoming* 20).<sup>34</sup> As Ellis pointedly proclaims, “[t]he road to hell . . . is paved with unrealistic expectations!” (*Rational Living* 4).

Throughout the course of REBT’s development, it has had a significant impact on the practice of psychotherapy. Representative of REBT’s impact, a recent text on the treatment of anxiety explains that “[w]e strongly influence treatment outcome when we help people utilize the higher function of the brain . . . to notice how their anxiety is flaring without reason” (*Anxious Brain* 7).<sup>35</sup> Moreover, contemporary psychiatrists widely subscribe to the REBT notion that the brain “creates our mental state” (*Anxious Brain* 37) and that “we can intentionally *use* our brains to change our brains” (*Anxious Brain* 9).<sup>36</sup> Indeed, a modern brain scientist specializing in obsessive-compulsive disorder contends that the “act of the brain observing itself – the force of attention to one’s own thoughts and feelings – [can] alter brain circuitry at the molecular level” (Sweeney 217). As Ellis puts it, human beings have the unique “power to think,

and to think about their thinking, and to think about thinking about their thinking,” powers which provide individuals a profound “ability to change themselves” (Reason 76). REBT encourages a more self-aware consciousness by holding up a mirror to our thoughts and acts so that we may reflect on the rationality of our emotions and behaviors. Cognizant of the absurdity of the human condition, but insistent on the shaping power of the mind, REBT counsels that although “[y]ou cannot prevent the birds of sorrow from flying over your head . . . you can prevent them from building nests in your hair” (Grieger).

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### A NOVEL PSYCHOLOGIST AND A PSYCHOLOGICAL NOVELIST: THE SHARED BELIEFS OF ALBERT ELLIS AND KURT VONNEGUT

“Man is made by his belief. As he believes, so he is.”  
(*Bhagavad Gita*, 500 B.C.)<sup>37</sup>

Similarities in the personal philosophies and beliefs of Albert Ellis and Kurt Vonnegut are striking.<sup>38</sup> As a self-proclaimed canary in a coalmine, Vonnegut seeks to alert us to unhealthy conditions both within and without, urging us to take positive steps to better ourselves and our world before it is too late. Ellis similarly cautions against continuing down self-destructive paths, counseling us to mend our misdirected minds, and advocating for us to “try to change [our] environment, to try to make it a little less crummy than it now is” (Bernard 78). Vonnegut sums up the dehumanizing state of the modern era as one in which “so many Americans find the human condition meaningless that they are surrendering their will and their common sense to quacks and racketeers and charismatic lunatics” (*Fates* 158). In Ellis’s description of the state of modern society we hear echoes of Vonnegut’s own bemused viewpoint:

[Y]ou could hardly conceive of a more irrational world than our present society. In spite of the enormous advances in technical knowledge made during the last century, and the theoretical possibility that all of us could live in peace and prosperity, we actually hang on to the brink of local strife, world war, economic insecurity, political skullduggery, organized crime, pollution, ecological bankruptcy . . . and other manifestations of idiocy and inhumanity.

...

Modern life, instead of seeming just a bowl of cherries, often more closely resembles a barrel of prune pits.

(*New Guide* 196).<sup>39</sup>

Along with their shared view of contemporary conditions in an irrational world, Ellis and Vonnegut were both members of the American Humanist Association (AHA), and humanistic philosophy guided both men's work.<sup>40</sup> Just as Vonnegut incorporated humanistic beliefs in his writing, Ellis "followed a secular humanist model" in founding REBT (*Overcoming* 91), which he referred to as "one of the most humanistic therapies" (*Rational Living* 122).<sup>41</sup> Both Ellis and Vonnegut are signatories to the "Humanist Manifesto III," which elucidates essential beliefs of the AHA (many of which parallel those of REBT), including that humans should be "guided by reason," should "accept our life . . . distinguishing things as they are from things as we might wish or imagine them to be," and that we should be guided by the awareness that the "responsibility for our lives and the kind of world in which we live is ours and ours alone" (*Manifesto*).<sup>42</sup> Much like Vonnegut, Ellis and other humanistic psychologists assume that "modern man has become too . . . technologized, and unemotional, hence alienated and dehumanized" (*Humanistic* 3).<sup>43</sup>

Again sounding like Vonnegut, Ellis contends that human beings have a biological tendency to "misperceive reality, reason illogically, become dogmatic and devout, and stick ragingly to misleading perceptions, overgeneralizations, and conclusions" that are "self-defeating and socially sabotaging" (*Overcoming*

101-02).<sup>44</sup> While Ellis believes that “humans are innately problem solvers,” he also feels that they are “innately predisposed . . . to fail to make . . . distinctions between functional and dysfunctional behaving” (*Overcoming* 18).<sup>45</sup> Like Vonnegut, Ellis recognizes that “most of us adopt a belief system about the world which strongly influences our reactions, and . . . we rarely question these beliefs even though they may be impractical, unrealistic, and illogical” (*Therapist* 59). In describing our self-defeating cognitive tendencies, Ellis’s words might well be mistaken for those of Vonnegut:

I think that practically the whole human race is out of its goddamned mind and could use therapy . . . . All humans are somewhat nutty because they refuse pigheadedly to accept reality and, therefore, make themselves depressed, anxious, and enraged. Because they won’t accept the reality that things *should* be exactly the way they are right now because that’s the way they are.

. . . .

But if you’re pretty crazy then you’re in very good company, because the human race as a whole is really out of its goddam head. Now all of you, of course, know this about others – about your mother and father and sister and brothers and friends and wives and husbands. You know how nutty *they* are. Now the problem is to get you to admit this about yourself and then to *do* something about it.

(Bernard 7, 14-15) (quoting Ellis). Ellis contends that we are all “fallable, f\*\*\*ed-up humans” (*Living*) predisposed to fall on our face, but like Vonnegut, he retains an inner optimism and holds to the belief that we can be better.

Though cognizant of the absurdity of the human condition, both men understand the psychological importance of humor.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the use of humor

in “handling reality” is a “given” in Vonnegut’s writing (*Effect* 67), which “speaks of life itself as a dirty joke” (*Fates* 194). Vonnegut’s wit, like Ellis’s “therapeutic brand of humor” (Bernard 68-69), “points toward mental health, toward life, and away from insanity and morbidity” (Lundquist 22).<sup>47</sup> Vonnegut’s works employ humor to convey irrationality, just as REBT uses the “humorous techniques of taking clients’ nutty ideas to ridiculous extremes, [and] reducing them to absurdity” (Krieger 26) in order to demonstrate the self-defeating nature of such irrational beliefs.<sup>48</sup> Like Vonnegut, Ellis believes that “humor is a key to helping people since emotional problems frequently come from people taking themselves, others, and the world too seriously” (Bernard 9). Vonnegut and Ellis recognize the empowering affect of humor because they understand that:

If you make yourself . . . terribly upset and depressed about your frustrations, you will almost invariably block yourself from effectively removing them. The more time and energy you expend in lamenting your sorry fate, ranting against your frustrators, and gnashing your teeth in despair, the less effective action you will tend to take to counteract your handicaps and deal with those who may frustrate you.

(*New Guide* 125).<sup>49</sup> As Ellis advises (and Vonnegut implicitly instructs): “Lighten up! Take the major stressors of your life seriously but not too seriously” (*Overcoming* 35).

Addressing the human tendency to fall into patterns of irrational thinking, Vonnegut posits a question and then promptly provides an Ellis-like answer: “So what can you do? You can change your *mind*” (*Wampeters* 251). Paralleling Vonnegut’s pronouncement, Ellis contends that “man can think more rationally, even though he rarely does” because “he can teach himself and fairly

consistently stick with the logico-empirical method of confronting not only the external world but also himself and his own functioning” (*Humanistic* 25). Vonnegut’s belief in the ability to change one’s mental state by cultivating rational thinking is evident in his response to his parents’ apparently perpetual unhappiness:

I’ll be damned if I’ll pass their useless sadness on to my children . . . I think my wind is still good enough for me to go chasing after happiness, something I’ve never really tried . . . . After I’m gone, I don’t want my children to have to say about me what I have to say about my father: ‘He made wonderful jokes, but he was such an unhappy man.

(*Wampeters* 284-85). Vonnegut’s beliefs in this regard trace back to those of his great-grandfather, Clemens Vonnegut, who he deeply admired, and whose self-written funeral address includes the advice: “Be aware of this truth that the people on this earth could be joyous, if only they would live *rationaly*” (*Palm Sunday* 176) (emphasis supplied).<sup>50</sup>

Resembling Vonnegut’s repeated call that we be kind to one another by emulating the Sermon on the Mount, Ellis’s REBT exhorts us to “unconditionally accept people with their mistakes and idiocies” (Bernard 68) and to improve those things that we can improve for ourselves and others.<sup>51</sup> Reconciling self and social interest, REBT echoes Vonnegut’s thinking in reasoning that “when you possess rational self-interest . . . you normally find pleasure in helping and caring for some other humans” (*New Guide* 200).<sup>52</sup> Addressing the reality that human beings “frequently act unfairly, unkindly, inconsiderately and irrationally towards each other” (Bernard 3), REBT promotes kindness toward others in

order to “create the kind of a world in which the rights of others, as well as [our] own, are not needlessly curtailed” (Grieger 14).

Similar to Vonnegut’s literary works, Ellis’s REBT is “against absolute musts and shoulds, and therefore opposed to the notion of absolute truth” (*Therapist* 14).<sup>53</sup> Emphasizing that how an individual chooses to interpret and react to external events constructs the individual’s subjective reality (including his or her beliefs and behaviors), REBT follows the postmodern notion of self-determination of meaning.<sup>54</sup> In much the same way, Vonnegut’s novels “defamiliarize traditional ways of seeing and knowing,” reflecting that “we largely invent our being . . . by what (and how) we know,” mirroring REBT by locating the “generation of meaning and reality primarily in human consciousness” (*Quantum* 51).<sup>55</sup> Like the guiding principles of REBT, Vonnegut’s universe “makes every individual responsible for his own fate and puts him under an obligation to construct his existence in a meaningful way” (Freese 162), reflecting Vonnegut’s belief that “with a little imagination and heart” we can override our “self-imprisoning machinery and become whatever we choose to become” (*Pilgrim* 146). In this way, the ideas of Vonnegut and Ellis anticipate a new paradigm of brain science holding that human beings can transcend seemingly predetermined thought processes of the brain by “choosing from . . . [quantum] possibilities the one facet [of reality] that becomes the actuality of . . . experience” (Dispenza xvi).

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### PRINCIPLES OF REBT IN VONNEGUT'S NOVELS: THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE ABSURD

"[T]here's nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so"  
(*Hamlet* Act II, Scene 2).

Critics of Vonnegut's writings have devoted considerable attention to an issue occupying a central position in his works: how we, as thinking entities cognizant of ourselves and our surroundings, deal with existing in an often nonsensical world set within a universe of apparent purposelessness. This is also the underlying issue of REBT, which seeks to empower us to think and act in a self-actualizing manner despite the absurdity of a human condition that places rational beings in an irrational world.<sup>56</sup>

Vonnegut understands literature's ability to engage in what he calls "practical joking: . . . making people respond emotionally to things which aren't really happening" (*Essential*). Practitioners of REBT should recognize literature's capacity in this respect as resembling how "practical jokers" of the mind (a/k/a irrational thoughts) fool otherwise reasonable individuals into pursuing self-defeating behaviors in response to inconsequential happenings or fleetingly inconvenient events, which the irrational mind misperceives as all-encompassing, utterly debilitating, and catastrophic.<sup>57</sup> Viewed through such a lens, one can see that Vonnegut's literary works attempt to change the beliefs and behaviors of his readers in much the same way that practitioners of REBT seek to transform their

patients' irrational beliefs and behaviors into rational ones.<sup>58</sup> Rather than “suggest[ing] the hopelessness of the human condition” (Harris 139), Vonnegut’s writings evidence a belief in the ability to change our often reflexive response to this absurd, frequently antagonistic situation into which “[w]e never asked to be born in the first place” (*Timequake* 218).<sup>59</sup> In grappling with the reality that we live in an irrational world that is often indifferent to our plight, Vonnegut’s writings illuminate how principles of REBT can help us to “get through this thing, whatever it is” (*Retrospect* 30).<sup>60</sup>

Beginning with *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut began to “talk about things that actually concern me” (*Conversations* 46). The issues of acceptance, self-awareness, irrational thinking, and free will that Vonnegut “talks about” in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Breakfast of Champions*, *Galapagos*, and *Timequake* occupy positions of similar concern to REBT. Indeed, Vonnegut’s literary works illuminate some of the most essential principles of REBT, including that: (1) as thinking things endowed with self-awareness, human beings can “largely control their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors” (*Rational Guide* 249); (2) individuals should not be dependent on the approval of others for happiness or self-value; and (3) to attain optimal mental health, individuals should acknowledge that human beings are inherently flawed, unconditionally accept themselves and others, and likewise accept unalterable reality, regardless of its inherent absurdity or irrationality.<sup>61</sup> In line with such principles, Vonnegut’s novels reflect his belief that since “[d]efeat is the ordinary human experience,” we should “expect it, be prepared for it,” and learn to “accept it somehow” (Abadi-Nagy

30).<sup>62</sup> By the same token, his works demonstrate that, although we might not be able to alter external events or prevent misfortunes, we do have the ability to control our inner state, how we perceive exterior events, and how we respond to those events.<sup>63</sup> In other words, Vonnegut's writings evidence a deep-seeded concern about the "illusions man finds to live by . . . which make human existence unnecessarily miserable" (Lundquist 29).<sup>64</sup> The irrational beliefs that REBT seeks to dispute -- such as the belief that life must always be "fair" -- fall squarely within the realm of such illusions.<sup>65</sup>

Vonnegut's novels often depict human beings being knocked about by external forces, randomly victimized by chance occurrences and circumstances beyond their control. Despite this repeating theme, he does not dismiss the notion of self-determination or abandon the idea of free will as a means for lessening the disturbances arising from an often calamitous human condition.<sup>66</sup> Although Vonnegut sometimes probes the limits of free will in works such as *Slaughterhouse Five*, *Breakfast of Champions*, *Galapagos*, and *Timequake*, he does not dismiss it or fatalistically condemn his characters to a predetermined existence.<sup>67</sup> While their paths are not lined with rose petals, and they often find it "hard to think and act rationally in an irrational world" (*Living* 94), a number of Vonnegut's characters successfully exert free will and exercise rational thinking in ways similar to that espoused by REBT. As will be seen in the analysis of the individual novels that follows, Vonnegut's novels underscore the conclusion that, without self-awareness, the ability to control irrational thinking, and the rational

exercise of free will, human beings are condemned to constant psychological manipulation by external events.<sup>68</sup>

In *Forever Pursing Genesis*, Leonard Mustazza argues that Vonnegut's protagonists attempt to act against upsetting events inherent to the human condition by retreating to "states of mind that are associated with the Edenic place and its attendant state of mind, the state of innocence" (22). I agree with the general proposition of Mustazza's interpretation and its focus on the state of mind of Vonnegut's characters, but rather than reclaiming a *naive* innocence of Eden, I see an attempt to achieve a degree of serenity through awareness, acceptance, and reliance on rational thinking. My agreement with Mustazza continues in his contention that Vonnegut's protagonists are "often engaged in reinventing reality to suit themselves" (*Genesis* 28), and his approval of Robert Uphaus's assertion that "what we see in Vonnegut's fiction is a continuum of imagined, alternatives – a spectrum of people self-actualizing" (*Genesis* 29).<sup>69</sup> Mustazza categorizes these efforts at reinvention and self-actualizing as "coping mechanisms" (*Genesis* 29). I see such "coping mechanisms" as another name for self-actualizing techniques for negotiating the maze of an irrational world, techniques that form the crux of what REBT aims to accomplish. Moreover, Mustazza's argument that Bokonon (from Vonnegut's novel *Cat's Cradle*) evidences that the "possibility of happiness exists in [t]his world if only we give life the 'right' meanings" (*Genesis* 86), supports an interpretation of Vonnegut's works consistent with a reading that reveals their relation to principles of REBT. Indeed, REBT aims to empower us to dispute our irrational beliefs and behaviors

so that we may animate the “right meanings” and thereby achieve happiness along with optimal mental, emotional, and physical health.

As his long-time friend and critic Loree Rackstraw explains, Vonnegut was “quite serious about creating fiction that reveals strategies capable of transforming life’s tragedy into something . . . actually useful” (*Kurt* 64).<sup>70</sup> I suggest that such “strategies” can be thought of in terms of principles of REBT, with Vonnegut’s writings prodding us to see the truth of our situation, elucidating the actuality of our reality, beckoning us to attempt to improve that which is improvable in the human condition.<sup>71</sup> Like REBT, Vonnegut’s works suggest that in the face of a senseless reality, humanity’s appropriately measured response to the unalterable aspects of that reality consists of “simply accept[ing] the absurdity of [our] condition, neither affirming nor denying it and never asking the most meaningless of questions. Why?” (Harris 135).<sup>72</sup>

Taken as a whole, Vonnegut’s works support a reading that, despite his sarcastic shell, Vonnegut retains a belief that the “sane and rational thing to do in the face of the horrors of the 20th and 21st century is to have hope . . . to try to be better” (Lain).<sup>73</sup> As Peter Freese contends, Vonnegut argues that in the midst of the absurdity surrounding him, man must “attempt to discover meaning in himself . . . [and] must accept the conditions of his life and attempt to fulfill his obligations to himself and his fellow beings” (Freese 162).<sup>74</sup> The challenge of finding meaning within oneself and accepting the absurdity of the human situation as an unalterable condition of life, while still attempting to change what

we can for the better, is a major concern of REBT and one which Vonnegut explores in perhaps his most famous novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

### *Slaughterhouse-Five – Seeking Happiness Through Acceptance*

“Happiness can exist only in acceptance” (George Orwell).

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut illuminates issues embedded in the principles of REBT calling for acknowledgement of the human condition and acceptance of unalterable reality.<sup>75</sup> The centerpiece of the novel in this respect is the framed prayer that hangs on protagonist Billy Pilgrim’s office wall “express[ing] his method for keeping going” (58). Highly reminiscent of REBT’s call for a flexible frame of mind, the so-called Serenity Prayer states: “GOD GRANT ME THE SERENITY TO ACCEPT THE THINGS I CANNOT CHANGE, COURAGE TO CHANGE THE THINGS I CAN, AND WISDOM ALWAYS TO TELL THE DIFFERENCE” (58).<sup>76</sup> Attempting to emulate the teaching of the prayer allows Billy to overcome the self-defeating belief that “life [is] meaningless” (96), and empowers him to “re-invent” himself (96).<sup>77</sup> Expressing a core concept of REBT, the prayer resurrects Billy from a state of being “[d]ead to the world” (100), providing a vehicle for transcending the absurdity of his existence in an irrational reality.<sup>78</sup>

Billy has been beset by irrational anxiety as early as his childhood, evident when he “wet his pants” out of fear that he would fall into the Grand Canyon and when he prayed to get out of Carlsbad Caverns “before the ceiling fell in” (85). In addition to the psychological red flags of his adolescence, Billy’s adult life has more than its share of absurdities and psychological pitfalls: his father is shot and killed in a hunting accident; he suffers a “mild nervous collapse” (23); he marries

obese, “ugly Valencia” because he is “going crazy” (102); he is severely injured (perhaps brain damaged) and all of his optometrist colleagues die in a plane crash on top of a mountain (24); and his wife dies “accidentally of carbon-monoxide poisoning” (24) after racing to visit him at the hospital. Of course, Billy’s ridiculous experiences as a POW in Germany reinforce the invalidity of his existence. Amidst the irrationality of actuality, Billy has “problems relating to life and finding meaning in it” (*Effect* 93).

Stumbling through the ruins of an irrational world, Billy finds it difficult to construct and maintain a healthy state of mind. Suffering from some form of mental malaise,<sup>79</sup> he finds relief in a principle of the Serenity Prayer that is strikingly similar to REBT’s philosophy of “forg[ing] the courage and effort to change what I can change, the serenity to accept what I cannot change, and the wisdom to know the difference” (*Living* 146). Billy adopts the REBT creed that “I have little choice over . . . many of the things that happen to me during my lifetime. I can influence but rarely control others. But I can . . . largely control my own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors” (*Living* 249).<sup>80</sup> The peace of mind that Billy finds in this shared philosophy of the Serenity Prayer so alters his beliefs and reactions to external events that he no longer fears even death.<sup>81</sup> In this respect, he achieves a “major treatment goal” of REBT: “[b]ecoming calm and accepting of the things over which we have no control” (*Anxious Brain* 133). Although his life has been dominated by a “series of accidents” (*Lundquist* 54), Billy fulfills the REBT principle calling for individuals to “unconditionally accept . . .

themselves, other people, and world frustrations, no matter what occurs in life” (*Overcoming* 31).<sup>82</sup>

Despite the cerebral and emotional benefits of Billy’s new mindset, some critics read his attempted adherence to the Serenity Prayer and his adoption of Tralfamadorian deterministic philosophy as a renouncement of “whatever vestige of free will he has left” (*Pilgrim* 145).<sup>83</sup> Due to the self-defeating nature of Billy’s ultimate psychological state, I reach a similar interpretation in the context of his application of REBT. Though Billy acts in accordance with REBT and the Serenity Prayer by unconditionally accepting events that happen to him and others, he does not stop there. Instead of accepting reality as it is and learning to lead a healthy life within that reality, Billy goes too far. Inventing (and retreating into) his own “reality,” he flees from the unpleasantness of life into a self-imposed state of pacification: the cognitive illusion of a Trafalmagorian zoo habitat complete with an erotic mate and legions of admirers.

Several critics interpret the Tralfamadorians’ philosophy as representing Vonnegut’s “own sense of the futility of the human condition,” arguing that Vonnegut and Billy must adopt such deterministic thinking in order to “adjust to their traumatic memories of Dresden” (*Sanity Plea* 7). However, Broer persuasively contends that the all-encompassing acceptance that Billy ultimately adopts is the “very antithesis of Vonnegut’s position that artists should be treasured as alarm systems . . . and as biological agents of change” (*Sanity Plea* 8).<sup>84</sup> Similarly, and far from promoting the “philosophy of submission or resignation” that Billy comes to embrace, REBT “counsels that you accept the

inevitable only when it really is inevitable – and not when you can change things” (*Living* 145-46). Billy fails to grasp this fundamental concept. Rather than accepting the reality of his condition while remaining conscious of its alterable aspects, Billy allows irrational thinking to overcome his awareness, erasing the boundary between reality and self-deluding fantasy. Billy falls into the trap of irrational belief by blindly and unquestionably accepting that “[e]verything is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does” (189).

Rather than acting effectively against disturbing events, Billy becomes psychologically inert. As Broer notes, “[c]ontrasts between the world as rational and humane and the world as a slaughterhouse of ongoing violence and cruelty become too unbalancing for Billy Pilgrim to endure” (*Heroes* 194). Fleeing from a “constant state of stage fright” (22) induced by a harsh and indifferent world, Billy seeks solace in an illusory existence that indicts the state of his mental health. Instead of constructing a “self-actualizing existence” in accordance with the teachings of REBT, he “withdraws” (*Overcoming* 17) into a false world manufactured by his irrational brain. Though he “holds the key to the locked doors of bedlam inside his own mind” (*Sanity Plea* 7), he chooses not to use it. Billy gains a pseudo-serenity, but fails to achieve wisdom and courage, and thus fails to maintain the rational “awareness” promoted by REBT, which Vonnegut explores further in *Breakfast of Champions*.<sup>85</sup> Happily, the same cannot be said of Vonnegut himself, who, by undertaking his “dance with death” (19), finds the courage to work through his “anxiety” (2), fear,<sup>86</sup> and depression to write his “war

book” (20), gaining the wisdom to enjoy the present and welcome the future, rather than “look[ing] back” (20) to find unhappiness in the past.<sup>87</sup>

Despite Billy’s psychological failure, the promise of fulfilling REBT’s goal is not diminished.<sup>88</sup> As Tony Tanner observes, by adopting the Serenity Prayer, which Vonnegut considers to be the “best advice . . . for just about anybody anytime” (*Fates* 110), Billy “abandons the worried . . . point of view of Western man” (Tanner 128), achieving a healthier, more relaxed state of being.<sup>89</sup> He is able to relieve himself of the intellectual and emotional burden of continually asking the pointless and unanswerable question: “Why me?” (73).<sup>90</sup> Although Billy falls short of fully attaining the REBT principle espoused by the Serenity Prayer, Vonnegut nonetheless depicts his effort with an optimistic undertone that upholds the prudence of accepting reality to the extent we are unable to alter it.<sup>91</sup> Vonnegut’s own words support this contention when he acknowledges attempting to follow the Serenity Prayer as his “own philosophy of life,” applauding that it “recogniz[es] limitations . . . [and] recommends . . . accepting restraint with good humor” (Abadi-Nagy 16). Vonnegut shows his “good humor” on the matter when he steps inside his literary creation. Perhaps symbolic of his efforts to purge himself of the irrational thinking contributing to his depression, Vonnegut appears in the novel at the German POW camp’s latrine: “An American near Billy wailed that he had excreted everything but his brains. Moments later he said, ‘There they go, there they go.’ He meant his brains. That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book” (119-20).

Looking beyond Billy, other characters in the novel shed light on principles of REBT as well. The bullying, blubbering Roland Weary illustrates the REBT notion that one should not deal in absolutes or have an unequivocal need for acceptance or approval from others. Weary's absolutist views center on the self-defeating belief that "[o]thers *must* treat [him] nobly and kindly and considerately and put [him] in the center of their attention" (Bernard 47). Weary's psychological flaws compel him to cling to the absolutist belief that he and the two infantry scouts must pal around and look out for each other like "The Three Musketeers" (40). He fails to unconditionally accept himself or others, demanding of himself (and Billy) that the two scouts must approve of and like him. Weary's self-defeating beliefs irrationally make Billy the bane of his existence, creating "feelings of anger, rage, [and] resentment" (Bernard 47), ultimately casting Weary in a cowardly light and propelling him to a fate of dying in fear and misery from gangrene infection. The passive-aggressive Paul Lazzaro is similarly deranged, psychologically decayed by a virulent need for absolute revenge. Billy's wife, Valencia, is also engulfed by irrationality, allowing self-defeating panic to overtake her as she races to see Billy at the hospital, accidentally killing herself in the process.<sup>92</sup>

The pointless execution of the brave and noble Edgar Derby, summarily shot for pocketing a tea pot in the midst of a dehumanizing war perpetrating far greater crimes on a much larger scale, highlights the senselessness of modern existence. Meanwhile, the seemingly benevolent British prisoners of war reflect the maddening irrationality of reality, having transformed their space of the POW

camp into a “fairyland that denies the war’s reality” (*Effect 96*), stockpiling a smorgasbord of supplies accidentally provided to them due to a clerical error, “blithely unaware” (*Effect 97*) that neighboring Russian POWs are silently starving nearby in the cold.

The unnamed hobo on the train carrying Billy and the other POWs is a bit of an enigma. Despite the crowded, unsanitary, and otherwise miserable conditions that the train’s passengers find themselves in, the hobo repeatedly asserts that things could be worse. Notwithstanding his positive frame of mind, the hobo dies nine days into the trip just before the train reaches its destination, his last words reiterating his conviction: “You think this is bad? This ain’t bad” (76). The hobo could be interpreted as delusional or blind to the cruel reality that ultimately kills him, in which case it might be said that Vonnegut includes him merely as a tool for ironic effect. Or, he could be seen as illustrating the REBT principle of accepting unalterable reality and choosing to maintain an optimistic attitude, regardless of the circumstances. The reasonableness of this interpretation finds merit in the fact that, even if the hobo had taken the mindset that everything was horrible and absolutely should not be that way (and as a result had fallen into anger or despair or panic or a host of other unhealthy emotions), he would have died just the same. By accepting the reality of his situation, the hobo thinks and acts rationally in making the best of dire circumstances, determining what meaning to ascribe to events through a cognitive process of self-construction. He is, in a sense, a master practitioner of REBT, able to rationally direct his thoughts on a level that few are able to

achieve.<sup>93</sup> Maintaining his dignity in an undignified situation, he gains a degree of serenity during his final days of life until he passes away peacefully in his sleep. Given the choice between spending one's last days engulfed by an irremediable despair, or experiencing some form of peace through the calm acceptance of circumstances utterly beyond one's control, most rational beings are likely to choose the latter. Viewed from this perspective, perhaps Vonnegut intended for this seemingly insignificant character to communicate a greater message than a cursory consideration typically conveys.

*Slaughterhouse-Five's* illumination of principles of REBT through the fictional lives of its characters provides insight into the application of such principles in our own lives. While the story of Billy Pilgrim illustrates "our limitations in comprehending an absurd universe," it also suggests the benefits of consciously accepting the ambiguity and uncertainty of unalterable reality, all the while reminding us to "keep trying to expand our awareness" of the human condition (*Quantum* 61), an issue that Vonnegut develops further in his next novel, *Breakfast of Champions*.<sup>94</sup>

### Breakfast of Champions – The Importance of Awareness

“The first step toward change is awareness” (Branden).

By choosing as the epigraph to *Breakfast of Champions* a quote from the Book of Job (“When he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold”), Vonnegut suggests that this novel will involve the passing of a test he deems comparable in difficulty to that of Job’s: a test assessing Vonnegut’s “suspicion . . . that human beings are robots” (3). As stated in an interview given while he was writing *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut “think[s] everybody’s programmed, and can’t help what they do” (*Conversations* 22). Vonnegut has written this novel, he tells us, to clear out the things in his head that “are often useless and ugly . . . [and] out of proportion with life as it really is outside [his] head” (5).<sup>95</sup> He seeks a way to restore a “humane harmony in [his] brains” (5) amidst the “complex, tragic, and laughable” (231) reality he inhabits. Attempting to “clear [his] head of all the junk in there” (5), Vonnegut examines the “temptation . . . to say that [man] is what he is because of faulty wiring, or because of microscopic amounts of chemicals which he ate or failed to eat on that particular day” (4). In doing so, Vonnegut explores whether human beings have the free will necessary to control their cognitive states by choosing how to respond to events acting upon them.

Vonnegut sets the scene for his story early on in the novel, acquainting the reader with the utter irrationality of reality in modern America by providing several examples, including a quotation of the national anthem, which he dismisses as “pure balderdash” (7), and a discussion of the arcane symbols that appear on the national currency, symbols so perplexingly meaningless that not even the President “knew what that was all about” (9). Representative of the

absurdity of the times, a fourteen-year-old boy shoots his parents “because he didn’t want to show them the bad report card he had brought home” (50), and then he enters a plea of “temporary insanity” (50) at trial to avoid responsibility for his actions. To sum up the senselessness of the reality of life in modern America – a “society dominated by superstitions, by pure baloney” (*Fates* 163) -- Vonnegut observes that “[i]t was as though the country were saying to its citizens, ‘In nonsense is strength’” (9).

Merging fact and fiction, Vonnegut injects himself into the novel by appearing “incognito” in a cocktail lounge at the Midland City Holiday Inn, wearing mirrored sunglasses in the sunless lounge in a “world of [his] own invention” (198) in order to “watch a confrontation between two human beings [he] had created: Dwayne Hoover and Kilgore Trout” (197). Troubled by the irrationality of reality (revealing that upon nearing his most recent birthday, he had become “more and more enraged and mystified by the idiot decisions made by my countrymen” (215)), and disturbed by the degraded state of the human condition (as reflected in individuals feeling “so ignored and cheated and insulted that they thought . . . that some terrible mistake had been made” (9)), Vonnegut confesses to himself that he fears suicide by an overdose of medication: “You’re afraid you’ll kill yourself the way your mother did” (198).<sup>96</sup> Later, from his vantage point as narrator after-the-fact, Vonnegut acknowledges that he “was really sick for a while” (199) and admits that he had made himself “hideously uncomfortable” (198) by adhering to the belief that “there was nothing sacred about myself or

about any human being, that we were all machines, doomed to collide and collide and collide” (225).

After hearing Rabo Karabekian’s inspirational explanation about the essence of what seems to be a simple painting that any five-year-old could create, Vonnegut is “reborn” (225), enlightened by an underlying principle of REBT, one that he reveals “made me the serene Earthling which I am this day” (225). In that moment of revelation, Karabekian conveys that the only thing in life that “truly matters” is our “awareness,” which endures “unwavering and pure, no matter what preposterous adventure may befall us” (226). Karabekian’s revelation of human awareness sparks Vonnegut’s realization that human beings are not hollow machines since awareness allows us to recognize our condition, giving rise to the motivation and ability to change it.<sup>97</sup> It is this awareness that REBT shapes to enable individuals to “look at the meanings and interpretations they give to events and results and, especially, to their own possibilities of creating new meanings and interpretations” (*Overcoming* 92). Karabekian’s revelation conveys Vonnegut’s rejection of the “claim of materialist determination that humans are essentially nothing more than fleshy computers spitting out the behavioral results of some inescapable neurogenetic program” (Schwartz 374).

Modern neuroscience describes human awareness as a “conditional readiness to act” (Ramachandran 249), and REBT draws upon this readiness to bring about a change in an individual’s fundamental ways of thinking. Signifying a state of consciousness corresponding to the goal of the Serenity Prayer and the principles advocated by REBT, awareness consists of the ability to be

cognizant of ourselves and our place in reality (our ability to think rationally and self-reflect in a process of cognitive introspection), an ability that distinguishes us as human beings and provides us the capacity to use free will to guide our beliefs and behaviors. In other words, human awareness equates to the ability “to think, and to think about [our] thinking, and to think about thinking about [our] thinking” (*Reason* 76), yet with that awareness and self-consciousness comes an anxiety attendant to the human condition, an anxiety that manifests in Vonnegut both in his suspicion that human beings are essentially robots and in his fear of a self-inflicted death by suicide.

After his life is “renewed” (229) by Karabekian’s unexpected revelation, Vonnegut realizes that no matter how “complex, tragic, and laughable” one’s situation becomes, the “sacred part of him, his awareness, remain[s] an unwavering band of light” (231). In understanding awareness to be that which is “alive and maybe sacred in any of us” (226), Vonnegut realizes that, far from following predetermined paths as unthinking automatons, our awareness constitutes a “unique ability of *Homo sapiens*” interchangeably referred to as consciousness, mind, or soul, an ability that enables us to “be aware of being aware” (Sweeney 2-3), or in the language of REBT, the unique ability “to think and think about our thinking”. This awareness of awareness brings with it an understanding of the ability to make choices; to consciously choose what we will do next. Consistent with REBT, Vonnegut recognizes that awareness allows us to change ourselves simply by changing our thoughts, providing the ability to overcome a mechanical subservience to irrational thinking, an ability that Broer

describes as an “imaginative faculty capable of resisting subversion by dehumanizing machinery within and without” (*Sanity Plea* 161).<sup>98</sup> It is Vonnegut’s affirmation of awareness that enables him to overcome his self-defeating suspicion that human beings are robots, allowing him to assert that he is “better now” (199). With his new understanding of the uniqueness of human awareness, Vonnegut attains an appreciation of our ability to “adapt ourselves to the requirements of chaos” (215), insisting that while “[i]t is hard to adapt to chaos. . . it can be done. I am living proof of that: it can be done” (215).<sup>99</sup>

*Breakfast of Champions* reflects Vonnegut’s “recognition that he possesses an imaginative faculty capable of resisting” (*Goodbye* 75) the negative influences of an irrational world, and confirms the “existential possibilities of authoring one’s own identity in life” by exercising awareness to think rationally and realistically (*Goodbye* 75).<sup>100</sup> Broer sees the importance Vonnegut ascribes to awareness as well, emphasizing in his reading of Vonnegut the “efforts of a healthier, yearning, creative self to brave the life struggle, to develop the awareness and courage to act against self-imprisoning cat’s cradles and to determine its own identity” (*Sanity Plea* 10). This is the same self-awareness of thinking, feeling, and behaving advocated by REBT as the foundation for a balanced life, the key to self-actualization, and the means to achieve what Sartre referred to as a “magical transformation of the world.”<sup>101</sup> Describing Vonnegut’s “faith in the inviolability of awareness” (*Pilgrim* 155) and his “optimistic faith that human beings can be anything we want to be” (*Pilgrim* 156),<sup>102</sup> Broer deems the Karabekian awareness scene of *Breakfast of Champions* to be the “essential

drama of this book and perhaps of all Vonnegut's work, his spiritual rebirth, in which he determines to repudiate his former pessimism" (*Sanity Plea* 105).<sup>103</sup>

While Vonnegut's experiences with his own psychological problems (as well as those of his son, Mark) may have caused him to "question human free will" (*Genesis* 126), the awareness that Vonnegut discovers along the way brings with it the "potential for creativity and free choice" (*Quantum* 59) that REBT calls upon to eliminate irrational thinking and behavior. Vonnegut's perception of human beings' awareness of their awareness provides the ability to identify his "own irrational ideas and appreciat[e] the role they play" in spawning self-defeating beliefs or behaviors, leading in turn to the recognition that we are not "helpless victims of outside forces . . . [but] actually have control over them" in the sense that they need not dictate our emotional state (Krieger 85). As Ellis writes:

[H]uman beings are "born with (and can escalate) a trait that other creatures rarely possess: the ability to think about our thinking . . . we can philosophize about our philosophy, [and] reason about our reasoning . . . which gives us *some* degree of self-determination or free will.

. . . .

The more we choose to use our self-awareness and to think about our goals and desires, the more we create – yes, create – free will or self-determination.

(*Refuse* 7). As Mustazza puts it, this awareness provides a "freedom" and "control that . . . makes us gods of sorts" (*Genesis* 129).<sup>104</sup>

In addition to Vonnegut's personal epiphany regarding the REBT-like power of awareness, his literary creations in *Breakfast of Champions* further

illuminate notions of REBT. Kilgore Trout manages a partial attainment of principles of REBT, while at first falling short of its goals. Like Billy Pilgrim, he lacks the wisdom to recognize when things can be changed, or the courage to make such changes, automatically accepting things as they are: “his head no longer sheltered ideas of how things could be and should be on the planet, as opposed to how they really were” (105-06). He decides to accept an invitation to the Midland City Arts Festival, not to seize the opportunity of his newfound celebrity to improve his condition or seek to better that of his fellow man, but to pessimistically present himself as a “representative of all the thousands of artists who devoted their entire lives to a search for truth and beauty --- and didn’t find doodley-squat” (37).<sup>105</sup> However, when his absurd story, *Now It Can Be Told*, pushes Dwayne Hoover over the edge of insanity, Trout is jolted into a greater awareness by witnessing how “bad ideas” can “bring evil into the world” (15). Despite having been a “nobody” full of “pessimism” (31) who “supposed” and “hoped” that he was dead (14), Trout gains a measure of redemption by finding the will to get “out of [his] cage” (36), achieving an awareness of the “importance of ideas as causes and cures for diseases” (15), and not succumbing to some “fantasized nirvana” (*Images of the Shaman* 208) as Billy does. In REBT-like fashion, Trout comes to understand that the ideas or beliefs we hold have a significant impact on our degree of well-being.<sup>106</sup> Recognizing (along with his alter ego) that irrational thoughts are a major cause of malfunction in the human “machine,” Vonnegut confirms that “[b]ad chemicals and bad ideas [are] the Yin and Yang of madness” (14) (emphasis supplied).

Further illuminating concepts underlying REBT, Trout describes several beliefs that Vonnegut refers to as “madness”: irrational beliefs once held regarding the exposure of “wide-open beavers” (24) and the absurdly high value of gold, which far from being the strongest or most durable element, is nothing more than a “soft, weak metal” (24). Discussing these beliefs of “madness” from a perspective akin to that of REBT’s view of irrational beliefs, Trout identifies them as “monsters . . . [that] inhabited our heads,” and states: “I thank those [beliefs] for being so ridiculous, for they taught us that it was possible for a human being to believe anything, and to behave passionately in keeping with that belief – *any* belief” (25).

In another parallel to *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Harry LeSabre fails to unconditionally accept himself, irrationally allowing his self-worth to be dependent on the approval of others in much the same vein as Roland Weary. When Dwayne Hoover ignores Harry’s Hawaiian Week costume -- which Harry presents to him with “every molecule in his body await[ing] Dwayne’s reaction” (115) -- Harry is “destroyed” (115) and “close[s] his eyes . . . never want[ing] to open them again” (116).<sup>107</sup> Most of the women in Midland City are locked in a similar cycle of irrational thinking, having “trained themselves to be agreeing machines instead of thinking machines” (140). However, Dwayne’s secretary, Francine, appears as one of the sanest and most grounded characters in the novel, communicating concepts of REBT by putting a humorous sign on the wall of Dwayne’s dealership to “remind [people] of what they so easily forgot: that people didn’t have to be serious all the time” (117), and by wearing a smiley face

button on her dress since it “showed a creature in a healthier, more enviable frame of mind” (118).<sup>108</sup>

More than any other character in the story, Vonnegut’s depiction of Dwayne Hoover shows us just how fragile and fleeting rational thought can be. As the owner of a lucrative car dealership, Dwayne seems to be what Western culture would deem a success, but with “bats in his bell tower” (227) Dwayne serves as the novel’s most prominent example of the failure to follow principles of REBT.<sup>109</sup> Dwayne is financially successful, but depressed due to what Jerome Klinkowitz calls the “essential crumminess of his surroundings” and the “depressingly shabby quality of contemporary life” (*Effect* 108). He lives in a “dream house” in the “most desirable residential area in the city” (17), but he lives alone because his wife committed suicide by swallowing Drano (40), and his only son is a notorious homosexual called “Bunny” (66). Dwayne’s mother died in childbirth as a “defective child-bearing machine” (45), and he suffers lingering psychological effects from having “spent the first three years of his life in an orphanage” (65). Dwayne’s overall psychological state emits “obvious cries for help” (39) since he is “mentally diseased” (98), besieged by “fear” and “worry” (80), and suffers from feelings of guilt even though he knows he has “done nothing he should feel guilty about” (80).

Since it is “exhausting having to reason all the time in a universe which wasn’t meant to be reasonable,” Dwayne is “pooped and demoralized” (259). Having “lost [his] way,” he desperately wants to know “what life is all about” (169), confiding to Francine: “I need somebody to take me by the hand and lead

me out of the woods” (170). In a bizarre twist on the familiar story of the spiritual seeker searching for the wise man on the mountain, Dwayne seeks out Kilgore Trout hoping to “discover . . . truths about life which he had never heard before” that would “enable him to laugh at his troubles, to go on living, and to keep out of the North Wing of the Midland County General Hospital, which was for lunatics” (200). Dwayne needs the sort of “brand new viewpoint on life” (171) that REBT provides, but instead he finds -- in Trout’s *Now It Can Be Told*, which is “mind poison” to Dwayne (15) -- “bad ideas . . . that [give] his craziness . . . shape and direction” (14). Confronted by the idea that everyone else on the planet is a robot meant to “get a reaction from” him (263), Dwayne not only fails to control his reaction, but fails to care whether he should try to control his reaction. Rather than using rational thoughts to guide his actions, Dwayne lashes out in an irrational rampage. Dwayne’s descent into a pit of irrational thoughts and beliefs resembles Billy’s to a degree, but the self-defeating behavior that Dwayne undertakes is decidedly dissimilar. Rather than peacefully retreating into an illusory existence, Dwayne becomes belligerent, behaving more like a homicidal maniac than the utterly pacified being that Billy becomes.

Dwayne illustrates the  $A \times B = C$  formula of REBT by encountering the activating event (A) of reading Trout’s book, which triggers the irrational belief (B) that he is the only person on the planet with “free will” (15) and that everyone else is a robot put here for the sole purpose of provoking reactions from him. This irrational belief, in turn, causes the self-defeating behavioral consequence (C) of his violent psychotic rampage against everyone he encounters, ultimately

resulting in his imprisonment and financial destitution due to lawsuits filed by those he injured.<sup>110</sup>

At the time they meet, Dwayne is “fabulously well-to-do” (13), while Trout is a “nobody” (7) who has “doodley-squat” (13). Subsequent to their meeting, their worlds turn upside down. Dwayne is stripped of everything he owns and “carted off to a lunatic asylum” (15), while Trout becomes “one of the most beloved and respected human beings in history” (7) as a “pioneer in the field of mental health” (15). In the end, Dwayne’s story illustrates the detrimental and sometimes dangerous consequences of failing to employ REBT’s technique of deliberately disputing irrational beliefs. As Davis writes, *Breakfast of Champions* “refutes any notion . . . [of] the mechanistic and fatalistic reverie that drives Dwayne to see all humans, except himself, as robots” (*Crusade* 89), reflecting Vonnegut’s own realization that we are not machines, and are instead capable of exerting influence on our state of being by choosing our responses to external events.

In *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut correctly refers to the biochemical process that affects our moods and feelings, but he also comes to the realization that the mind – through its direction of the brain’s thoughts – exerts a powerful influence on our state of being. Like REBT, Vonnegut’s ultimate message in *Breakfast of Champions* is that if we wish to be happy we must exercise our awareness to think and act rationally, while exorcising irrational thoughts and beliefs.<sup>111</sup> *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon*, published one year after *Breakfast*

of *Champions*, evidences that Vonnegut took that message to heart. In his personal account of a visit to his parents' grave, Vonnegut reveals:

I looked at those two stones side by side and I just wished . . . that they had been happier than they were. It would have been so goddamned easy for them to be happier than they were . . . . They wrecked their lives thinking the wrong things. And, damn it, it wouldn't have taken much effort to get them to think about the right things.

(*Wampeters* 255). Getting individuals to “think about the right things” notwithstanding “what preposterous adventure may befall us” (226) is precisely the goal of REBT.

### Galapagos – Making a Big Deal about Big Brains

“In proportion to our body mass, our brain is three times as large as that of our nearest relatives. This huge organ is dangerous and painful to give birth to, expensive to build, and, in a resting human, uses about 20 per cent of the body's energy even though it is just 2 per cent of the body's weight. There must be some reason for all this evolutionary expense” (Blakemore).

In *Galapagos*, Vonnegut's rejuvenating belief in the power of human awareness so grandly articulated in *Breakfast of Champions* appears in danger of eradication, as he takes us to the near extinction of the human species and a corresponding evolutionary shift away from our disproportionately large brains. *Galapagos* manifests Vonnegut's disappointment that, despite all of the great technological inventions and scientific advancements over the course of human history, we “still experience little more emotional maturity or happiness than we did in past centuries. Indeed, in some ways we act more childishly, outrageously, and emotionally disturbed than we ever did before” (*Guide* 21). At first glance, through its apparent theme of “blame the big brains,” *Galapagos*

seems to undercut or reject the underlying philosophy of REBT that we can use our brains to control our thinking. However, a closer reading reveals differently.

Narrating his tale from a distant future, the ghost of Kilgore Trout's son, Leon Trotsky Trout, describes how human brains became "nearly fatal defects in the evolution of the human race" (6), causing a "series of murderous twentieth century catastrophes" (17). Trout contrasts our "very innocent planet" with the "only real villain[s] in [the] story" (167): "those great big brains" (6), which were "irresponsible, unreliable, hideously dangerous, wholly unrealistic – [and] simply no damn good" (17). According to Trout, "there wasn't a person alive . . . who didn't know what [it] was like" to have their "big brain simply . . . [not] working right" on occasion (101), particularly since "[w]hether we had anything for them to do or not, [those] preposterously huge and active brains" never ceased "going 'Blah-blah-blah' all day long" (104). Reflecting sarcastically on his own experience, Trout reveals: "[w]hen I was alive, I often received advice from my own big brain which . . . can be charitably described as questionable . . . . Thanks a lot, big brain" (19).<sup>112</sup>

Notwithstanding its conspicuously critical stance, *Galapagos* is not an "anti-brain" book. While its characters are depicted as suffering the adverse affects of their oversized brains in various ways, the novel should not be read as advocating less reliance on the rational capacity of the human intellect. As Broer points out, it would be a mistake to interpret the novel as "Vonnegut's condemnation of our oversized brains" (*Sanity Plea* 155). Indeed, Trout eventually assures us that the "big problem . . . wasn't insanity, but that people's

brains were much too big and *untruthful* to be practical” (115) (emphasis supplied). Hence, it is not the human brain’s innate power of reason that Vonnegut cautions against in *Galapagos*. Rather, it is the “*misuse* of human reason” (*Imagining* 135) (emphasis supplied) -- the fact that we have allowed our brains to become “disruptive” (104) -- that he decries.<sup>113</sup> To put it in words Vonnegut might have used: “Listen: it’s not the bigness of people’s brains that’s the problem. It’s how people keep allowing their malfunctioning minds to irrationally control them that leads so frequently to the excrement hitting the air conditioner.” The need for overcoming such irrational thinking is seen in Trout’s description of Jesus Ortiz, the formerly good-natured hotel employee who degenerates into irrationality and rips apart the hotel’s telephone communications equipment. Describing Jesus’s actions as an example of how big brains could “deceive their owners,” Trout notes that “[i]n a matter of seconds, a typical brain . . . turned the best citizen of Guayaquil into a ravening terrorist” (54).<sup>114</sup>

Vonnegut’s depiction of the von Kleist brothers, Adolf and Siegfried, underscores the importance of the healthy manner of thinking touted by REBT. Despite the fact that he suffers from Huntington’s chorea – an “incurable disease of the brain” (52) -- Siegfried von Kleist is able to think (and therefore behave) in a much more rational manner than his brother. Although Adolf unintentionally sires the new generation of the human race, it is Siegfried who ensures the continuation of the species. Siegfried’s rational thinking is solely responsible for ensuring the survival of Mary Hepburn, Hisako Hiroguchi, Selena MacIntosh, and the six Kanka-bono girls, whose subsequent pregnancies permit the perpetuation

of humankind. With chaos and destruction all around him, Siegfried “maintain[s] a placid exterior” because he does not “wish his . . . guests to panic,” and, in a “perfectly calm tone of voice” (106), he directs them into a bus so that he can shepherd them to safety. Importantly, it is Siegfried’s awareness that enables him to suppress irrational thinking and panic, and command rational thoughts and behavior: “[I]t was still possible for his soul to recognize that his brain had become dangerous, and to help him maintain a semblance of mental health through sheer willpower” (53).

In contrast, Adolf -- who harbors a “feeling that life [is] a meaningless nightmare” (77) – continually falls victim to irrational thinking, allowing his big brain to fool him over and over again, such as when he steers the ship carrying the last of humanity off course while his brain “assured his soul that its mistake was minor and very recent” (145). Adolf exemplifies the self-defeating thinking tendencies of the human mind, as revealed by Trout’s narrative about his experience inhabiting Adolf’s head: “That was often my experience back then: I would get into the head of somebody in what to me was a particularly interesting situation, and discover that the person’s big brain was thinking about things which had nothing to do with the problem right at hand” (76).<sup>115</sup> Adolf’s brain, which “had a life of its own” (145), prompted such irrational thoughts and behaviors that a “time would come when he would actually try to fire it for having misled him” (145). Of course, by the time he musters the awareness to “fire his brain” (151), the ship is so off course that not even “navigating on the advice of his soul alone” (151) can correct the problem.<sup>116</sup> Juxtaposed with Siegfried, who

dies heroically having ensured the future of the human race, Adolf ends his days in “exasperating” circumstances: “quietly desperate” (167) with his “body . . . still perfectly capable of taking care of itself . . . [but] “his deteriorating big brain” confining him to bed rest and “allowing him to soil himself and refuse to eat and so on” (178).

Vonnegut’s description of Adolf’s thoughts while star gazing suggests a critique characteristic of REBT:

[Adolf] looked up at the stars, and his big brain told him that his planet was an insignificant speck of dust in the cosmos, and that he was a germ on that speck, and that nothing could matter less than what became of him. That was what those big brains used to do with their excess capacity: blather on like that. To what purpose? You won’t catch anybody thinking thoughts like that today (120).

In this description, like his discussion of the purposelessness of asking “why me” in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut highlights the pointless, self-defeating nature of thoughts that pessimistically ruminate about the human condition. Rather than indulging in such a counterproductive response, Vonnegut would have us exercise our ability to conduct an introspective analysis for the purpose of correcting our irrational thinking before we allow it to lead us further astray.<sup>117</sup> He wishes us to employ our awareness to control our thinking processes and thereby direct our thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors in a happier, more humane way. Trout’s description of the last human marriage humorously reinforces the need for the rehabilitative skills offered by REBT:

That cumbersome computer [the brain] could hold so many contradictory opinions on so many different subjects all at once, and switch from one opinion or

subject to another one so quickly, that a discussion between a husband and wife under stress could end up like a fight between blindfolded people wearing roller skates (41).

The convergence of Vonnegut's thought and principles of REBT continues in his discussion of Kilgore Trout's novel about a man who created robots that were perfect at sports, such as a "basketball robot who could hit the basket every time" (43). Satirizing the human need to be perfect (and promoting the REBT principle of unconditional self-acceptance despite intrinsic faults), Trout writes: "At first people couldn't see any use for robots like that . . . But then he let advertisers know that his robots would also endorse automobiles or beer or razors or wristwatches or perfume or whatever. He made a fortune . . . because so many sports enthusiasts wanted to be exactly like those robots" (43). The absurdity of idolizing a robot because it always sinks a three-point basket or hits a hole-in-one every time illustrates the fallacy of engaging in envious thoughts or following similarly self-defeating beliefs.

The Kanka-bono women -- who Mary Hepburn dismisses as being "very primitive in their thinking" -- follow in the footsteps of Billy Pilgrim's philosophy of acceptance, and thereby incorporate REBT principles in their lives: "They try to make the best of whatever happens. They figure they can't do much of anything about anything anyway, so they take life as it comes" (171). Surprisingly, these seeming simpletons may be some of the most enlightened of the bunch by demonstrating an awareness of their unalterable lot in life consistent with the teachings of the REBT-like Serenity Prayer.

Leonard Mustazza observes that in many of Vonnegut's novels, the "cause of human suffering turns out to be, paradoxically, that which most of us would consider the cause of human greatness as well, namely, our own inventiveness" (*Genesis* 169). In some ways, *Galapagos* seems to fit into such a category since it addresses the "idea of human inventions and the ways in which they affect . . . the human condition" (*Genesis* 25). Yet, Roy Hepburn's deathbed scene, in which Roy whispers to his wife that the "human soul" is the "part of you that knows when your brain isn't working right" (27, 28), suggests a different reading of Vonnegut's message. Roy's dying words keep alive Vonnegut's faith in awareness as the means of monitoring our big brains to prevent their malfunctioning. From a neurobiological perspective, brain scientists now recognize that an individual suffering from a psychological disorder such as anxiety can "automatically gain a certain measure of control over [it] when you say to yourself, 'This is my brain doing this. It is not me, and I can control it'" (Wehrenberg 1). Likewise, proponents of REBT understand that developing the self-awareness necessary to realize when one's brain is leading one astray with irrational thoughts constitutes perhaps the single-most important skill for overcoming such self-defeating thoughts. Roy Hepburn's dying words reinforce the importance of this self-awareness, as does the depiction of Siegfried von Kleist overcoming his genetic brain disorder to act heroically.

By novel's end, despite having previously felt that "life was a meaningless nightmare" (77), there is an indication that Leon Trout has come to the belief that human beings have the innate ability to improve themselves and

their reality. As Charles Berryman points out, Trout declines to follow his father into the “blue tunnel leading into the Afterlife” (*Galapagos* 136) because he “resists [his] father’s deep-rooted cynicism” about the human mind and its capacity to direct human action (Berryman 198).<sup>118</sup> It is only after watching humanity’s big brains *devolve* in size, and seeing their capacity for creativity and rational thinking similarly diminish for “one thousand millennia,” that Trout is ready to take his leave. He realizes that, rather than having been some malicious organism inevitably stifling human progress, the human brain actually contained humanity’s greatest potential:

I can expect to see the blue tunnel again at any time.  
I will of course skip into its mouth most gladly.  
Nothing ever happens around here anymore that I  
haven’t already seen or heard so many times before.  
Nobody, surely, is going to write Beethoven’s Ninth  
Symphony – or tell a lie, or start a Third World War.

Mother was right: Even in the darkest times, there  
really was still hope for humankind.

(159). With this commentary -- what Berryman deems the “most important scene for understanding the significance of the narrator” in the novel (198) -- Vonnegut reveals his continuing belief in the capacity of the human mind, “[t]hat most awesome of human empowerments” (*Genesis* 169).

Lawrence Broer rightfully reads *Galapagos* as communicating Vonnegut’s message that “there is time to steer the floundering *Bahia de Darwin* (the ship of human destiny) in a more humane and intelligent direction” (*Sanity Plea* 13). He convincingly interprets the novel’s conclusion as conveying the message that, while the characters of the novel cannot change their condition, it is not too late

“[f]or us . . . with that sometimes frustrating big-brained capacity for choice” (*Sanity Plea* 160) to choose to live rationally in an otherwise irrational world. In a similar vein, Mustazza reads *Galapagos* as illustrating that Vonnegut “wishes that [people] would change their priorities, bringing them more into line with reason” (*Genesis* 178).<sup>119</sup> Thus, rather than being a novel of pessimism, *Galapagos* sounds an alarm against irrationality, cautioning that “[w]e must choose what we are . . . or else forces beyond our control may end up doing the choosing” (*Genesis* 179). This parallels an essential point of REBT: that we must actively choose our beliefs and consciously direct our reactions to events in a rational manner if we wish to have some control over our degree of happiness and mental well-being.

Though at first counterintuitive, Vonnegut’s criticism of how individuals misuse their “big brains” is entirely consistent with REBT since its goal is to help individuals use their minds in the most self-empowering way possible, limiting irrational thoughts and beliefs and promoting healthy, rational ones. Indeed, what Vonnegut calls the “copious and irresponsible . . . suggestions” made by our big brains (47) are the same irrational thoughts and beliefs that REBT aims to remedy. In the final analysis, Vonnegut’s “beef” in *Galapagos* is not that humans’ big brains inevitably lead to their downfall. His concern, like REBT’s, is that our brains are self-defeating when we allow them to freely perpetuate irrational beliefs and promote self-defeating behaviors. Vonnegut’s purpose is not simply to hurl criticisms about human thinking or throw stones at what we allow ourselves to believe. Rather, he seeks to fulfill his function as a canary-in-a-

coalmine, sounding an alarm intended to capture our attention so that we may take a timeout from the turmoil of our everyday lives to evaluate how we think, how we feel, and how we act. He wishes to share the awareness that we are governed by a brain that has an innate ability to engage in rational thinking, but which has an equal capacity to indulge in irrational thoughts and behaviors.

By questioning the perceived perfectness of our big brains, Vonnegut does not wish to attack the innate shortcomings of his fellow man, who he “still believe[s] . . . are really good at heart” (Nuwer). Instead, he wishes to give us the means to think more rationally so that we may have a chance to better our condition, not by looking back at the irrationality of our prior circumstances like Lot’s wife, but by becoming aware our present manner of thinking.<sup>120</sup> *Galapagos* suggests that, despite its many failures, Vonnegut feels that “[m]ankind is trying to become something else . . . to improve itself” (*Conversations* 76), and his writing evidences that he held onto a “little dream . . . of a happier mankind” (*Conversations* 80).

Trout’s concluding narrative about the manner of his liberation from the irrationality of war, and his escape from Bangkok to Sweden following an apparent nervous breakdown, captures Vonnegut’s (and REBT’s) view of the power and positive capacity of the human brain:

[The Swedish physician] said he had friends who could arrange to get me from Bangkok to Sweden, if I wanted to seek political asylum there.

“But I can’t speak Swedish,” I said.

“You’ll learn,” he said. “You’ll learn, you’ll learn.”

(184). Vonnegut includes the thrice-repeated phrase, “you’ll learn,” to reiterate and affirm his belief in the human brain’s innate ability to discern how to improve its situation. Reinforcing the REBT notion that we can learn to control our thoughts and limit or eliminate irrational beliefs and behaviors, these final words of *Galapagos* convey a final, positive evaluation of the cerebral fitness of our big brains and Vonnegut’s optimistic outlook on our ability to learn to apply principles of REBT in our own lives.

*Timequake* – Awareness of Free Will and Free Won’t<sup>121</sup>

“Every human has four endowments – self awareness, conscience, independent [free] will and creative imagination. These give us the ultimate human freedom . . . [t]he power to choose, to respond, to change” (Stephen Covey).

In his final novel, *Timequake*, Vonnegut revisits the debate of determinism versus free will previously addressed in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*, illuminating principles of REBT by probing humanity’s “power to choose, to respond, to change” (Covey) and calling for the use of free will to direct more rational thoughts and behaviors.<sup>122</sup> On the opening page of the novel, Vonnegut approaches the issue of self-determination by commenting on the depressive effect of the human condition: “It appears to me that the most highly evolved Earthling creatures find being alive embarrassing or much worse . . . Two important women in my life, my mother and my only sister, Alice, or Allie . . . hated life and said so. Allie would cry out, ‘I give up! I give up!’” (1).<sup>123</sup> On the very next page, he observes that “[f]or practically everybody, the end of the world can’t come soon enough” (2), and thereafter he refers to the human condition as having caused the “smartest animals [to] hate being alive” (5).

Testing an apparent antidote to “giving up” in despair, Vonnegut explores in subsequent pages how we respond, how we *should* respond, and to what degree we can *control* how we respond to a human condition that is often alienating and inherently absurd.

Deftly painting a portrait of the absurdity of the human condition, Vonnegut tells of Andrei Sakharov, who won a Nobel Peace Prize in 1975 despite the fact that, during the years immediately following World War II, he created a hydrogen bomb for the Soviet Union capable of causing widespread death and destruction. The absurdity of the situation is driven home by Vonnegut’s imagined discussion between Sakharov and his wife, a pediatrician dedicated to healing children:

“Anything interesting happen at work today, Honeybunch?”

“Yes. My bomb is going to work just great. And how are you doing with that kid with chicken pox?”

(5).

Vonnegut freely admits that our absurd existence -- an existence that is “[s]tranger than fiction” (85) and inhabited by “[p]eople so smart you can’t believe it, and people so dumb you can’t believe it. People so nice you can’t believe it, and people so mean you can’t believe it” (12) -- can easily lead to the mindset that “being alive is a crock of shit” (3). Vonnegut’s alter ego, Kilgore Trout, recognizes the absurdity of our condition as well, likening the harsh happenstance of reality to a continuing timequake: “Listen, if it isn’t a timequake dragging us through knothole after knothole, it’s something else just as mean and powerful” (46). Like his creator, Trout acknowledges that the “truth about the

human situation is . . . awful” (105), noting that life in a “world gone mad” (*Fates* 216) can at times seem so pointless as to resemble “cleaning birdshit out of cuckoo clocks” (52).

Consistent with the absurd conditions that Vonnegut describes, after the event named in the novel’s title occurs, people become “robots of their pasts” (xii). Cast back ten years in time from 2001 to 1991 due to a “sudden glitch in the space-time continuum” (xii), they are condemned to following the same patterns of thinking and repeating the same behaviors over and over again no matter how counterproductive or self-defeating, “betting on the wrong horse again, marrying the wrong person again, getting the clap again. You name it!” (xiii).

When the 10-year timequake “rerun” ends, Trout emerges as a “rational hero” (92) “through his humanitarian use of free will” (Paradox 64) and awareness. Trout is one of the first people to realize that “free will had kicked in” (99) because most everyone else suffered from “*Post-Timequake Apathy*,” meaning that “after the relentless reprise of their mistakes and bad luck and hollow victories during the past ten years, [they] had, in Trout’s words, ‘stopped giving a shit what was going on, or what was liable to happen next’” (99). The remedy for such extreme apathy can be found in REBT, principles of which Trout employs to free individuals whose brains “don’t work well enough” (183) from their self-imposed cognitive and emotional shells. Viewing the situation from a perspective akin to REBT, Trout recognizes that the restoration of free will and awareness allows individuals to choose to reject irrational thoughts and

behaviors.<sup>124</sup> The sudden ending of the 10-year rerun administers a shock to their systems that provides them the opportunity to consciously direct their thinking again: “Only when free will kicked in again could they stop running obstacle courses of their own construction” (xiii).<sup>125</sup>

Echoing Vonnegut’s statement in *Breakfast of Champions* that he “was really sick for a while” but is “better now,” Trout overcomes the robotic adherence to an existence on autopilot by telling everyone he encounters after the timequake: “You’ve been very sick! Now you’re well again” (155). Far from being another “cockamamie exhortation” (6), Trout’s call is a rational voice in an irrational world. Through Trout, Vonnegut exhorts us to take ownership of our lives, to be creators of our own happiness, rather than living mechanically as mere “technicians” of life (Krishnamurti). Framing his enlightening message as “You were sick, but now you’re well again, and there’s work to do” (169), rather than bluntly informing everyone that they have “free will again” (155), enables Trout to short circuit the irrational belief that they must continue to plod through life as unthinking automatons, and prods them into taking their first steps toward self-determination and rational thinking. As if driven by the maxim that “[w]hen a man cannot choose he ceases to be a man” (Schwartz 291),<sup>126</sup> Trout effectively restores their humanity, “convert[ing] more living statues to lives of usefulness” (170). Trout’s mantra, like REBT, “promise[s] better times” (155), providing what Vonnegut calls a “credible promise” (155) of a better life.

Jerome Klinkowitz interprets Trout’s reformulation of his initial call to free will as “allow[ing] people to take action without accepting the full responsibility of

free will . . . They are not being called on to account for the nature of the world. All they are being asked is to do something to make an immediate situation better” (*Effect* 167). This is strikingly similar to what REBT asks of its subjects: accepting reality as it is without feeling responsibility for the irrational state of things, and exercising the cognitive power of rational thinking to make their immediate situations better. Going further, one sees in Trout’s *reveille* to his fellow man an underlying message that, if *everyone* followed Vonnegut’s lead in incorporating principles of REBT into their daily lives and taking responsibility for their thoughts, feelings, and acts, the collective effect will produce a more rational world. Klinkowitz continues his REBT-like interpretation of *Timequake* by noting that throughout the novel “there have been examples of human futility and reasons for despair. All is refuted, however, when it is shown how human comprehension . . . lets them make something worthwhile out of what would otherwise lack redeeming worth” (*Effect* 173).

Vonnegut delves further into an exploration of the power of the human brain through his ironic comments about the unbelievable intelligence of Sir Isaac Newton, the “slow” development of human civilization that he sarcastically attributes to its “stupid[ity]” (88), and the outrageous skepticism of Dr. Fleon Sunoco, Trout’s mad scientist creation, who dissects the brains of the super smart and the ridiculously dumb in order to study them. Dr. Sunoco examines the brains of the super intelligent because he believes that smart people must have “little radio receivers in their heads” (91), since it is obvious to him that “[t]here was no way an unassisted human brain, which is nothing more than a

dog's breakfast, three and half pounds of blood-soaked sponge, could have written 'Stardust,' let alone Beethoven's Ninth Symphony" (93).<sup>127</sup> In an act of ultimate irony, when he discovers a substance in the brains of the "smarties" (94) that confirms his suspicion, Sunoco has no choice but to kill himself in disgust since he obviously could not have achieved such an insight with nothing more than his own unassisted brain.

Continuing the novel's illumination of significant principles of REBT, Vonnegut's inclusion of Kilgore Trout's story, "Dr. Schadenfreude," humorously depicts the REBT notion that an individual must accept, and learn to be at peace with, the fact that he or she is not the center of the universe. As told by Trout, a famous psychiatrist named Dr. Schadenfreude would calmly listen to his patients talk about the latest gossip or "things that had happened to total strangers" (61), but:

if a patient accidentally said "I" or "me" or "my" or "myself" or "mine," Dr. Schadenfreude went ape. He leapt out of his overstuffed leather chair. He stamped his feet. He flapped his arms.

He put his face directly over the patient. He snarled and barked things like this: "When will you ever learn that nobody cares anything about you, you, you, you boring, insignificant piece of poop? Your whole problem is you think you *matter!* Get over that, or sashay your stuck-up butt the hell out of here!"

(61). The good doctor's hostility toward self-centeredness reinforces REBT's position against the self-defeating, unrealistic expectations that "[o]thers *must* . . . put me in the center of their attention" and that "[c]onditions *must* be easy and nice and give me everything I want on a silver platter" (Bernard 47). Vonnegut

elucidates another principle of REBT by including an account of his attendance at a performance of *Swan Lake* by the Royal Ballet in London:

I was in the audience with my daughter Nancy . . . .

A ballerina, dancing on her toes, went *deedly-deedly-deedly* into the wings as she was supposed to do. But then there was a sound backstage as though she had put her foot in a bucket and then gone down an iron stairway with her foot still in the bucket.

I instantly laughed like hell.

I was the only person to do so.

(103). By finding humor in the midst of a supposedly serious affair, Vonnegut illustrates the important REBT notion of not taking oneself (or others) too seriously, no matter how serious things seem.<sup>128</sup>

In Kilgore Trout's final appearance in a Vonnegut novel, the author expands on the recurring concept of awareness introduced in *Breakfast of Champions*, as Trout announces with his concluding words: "I have thought of a better word than *awareness* . . . Let us call it *soul*" (214). Trout's renaming of "awareness" as "soul" suggests that Vonnegut deems them to be interchangeable references to the unique human trait allowing a conscious change of thought, belief, and behavior.<sup>129</sup> Whether called awareness, mind, or soul, what Vonnegut discovers in *Breakfast of Champions* and chooses for the conclusion of *Timequake* is the key to REBT; it is the sentient source existing in harmony with our "three-and-a-half pound blood-soaked sponge" (183) that makes it possible for us to employ the principles of rational thinking espoused by REBT.<sup>130</sup> Vonnegut's recitation of Trout's mantra of awareness during his final

exchange with his alter ego suggests that Vonnegut learned to apply principles of REBT to his own life:

“Ting-a-ling! If this isn’t nice, what is?” [Trout] exclaimed to us all.

I called back to him from the rear of the crowd:  
“You’ve been sick, Mr. Trout, but now you’re well again, and there’s work to do.”

(212). With this exchange, Vonnegut acknowledges the irrational thinking and mental disturbances of his past, while recognizing his improved condition and verifying that there is still “work to do” to maintain his psychological health. At the same time, he affirms his faith in REBT’s notion that we can all learn to think and behave better. Despite the observance that “life [is] undeniably preposterous,” Vonnegut distances himself from the superficial “blame the big brains” theme of *Galapagos*, confidently asserting that “our brains are big enough to let us adapt to the inevitable pratfalls and buffoonery” of life (19).<sup>131</sup>

In *Timequake*, the anxiety of the preceding novels (perhaps most palpable in *Breakfast of Champions*) has been subdued, largely replaced by a comfortableness and a sense of being at ease with the human situation, as evidenced by the feelings of peace and contentedness that Vonnegut and Trout experience at the clam bake concluding the novel. No longer overwhelmingly disturbed by the absurdity around them or apprehensive about what it is to be a human being, they have made their peace with the human condition. In the language of REBT, these are individuals who have learned how to disturb themselves less by unconditionally accepting themselves and the unalterable aspects of reality irrespective of its inevitable absurdities.

Although he wrote in *Fates Worse Than Death* that “those who choose to laugh rather than weep about demoralizing information, become intolerably unfunny pessimists if they live past a certain age” (183), the optimism of Vonnegut’s final fictional novel – written six years after *Fates*, on the 75th anniversary of his birth – belies this view. Indeed, Jerome Klinkowitz sees *Timequake* as a “joyful, even festive book” (Vonnegut *Effect* 157), “provid[ing] hope” and reaffirming Vonnegut’s belief in “simple human awareness” (Fact 134) (emphasis supplied), and Loree Rackstraw calls *Timequake* a “celebration” of “humanity’s capacity for awareness” (*Paradox* 65) (emphasis supplied), while Broer contends that the “central story” of *Timequake* is Kilgore Trout’s overcoming of “apathy to assume the role of Vonnegut’s shaman: the canary bird in the coal mine who values awareness and responsibility” (*Goodbye* 77) (emphasis supplied). I agree with these readings and second the notion that Vonnegut sounds a “hopeful voice,” while demonstrating a “faith in the inviolability of human awareness” (*Goodbye* 80).<sup>132</sup>

Vonnegut’s gift of a happy ending for a reborn Kilgore Trout who “regain[s] [his] emotional equilibrium” (*Guide* 21) effectively endorses REBT’s fundamental premise that, regardless of the irrationality surrounding us, we can use our free will and choose to change how we think and what we believe. Indeed, free will and the notion of having the ability to choose one’s thoughts or actions is wholly consistent with the premise of REBT, which promotes the positive existentialist notion that we have some control over our lives and are not simply passive things subject to immutable casual relations.<sup>133</sup> Trout’s ultimate attainment of

happiness through the application of his awareness affirms the core concepts of REBT, confirming Vonnegut's belief in the "efficacy of free will" (*Goodbye* 78), and reinforcing that Trout's creed -- "[y]ou were sick, but now you're well again, and there's work to do" (169) -- has "continuing applicability to the human condition" (169).

## CHAPTER SIX:

### CONCLUSION – ARE YOU HAPPY NOW?

“Most folks are about as happy as they make up their minds to be” (Abraham Lincoln).<sup>134</sup>

Like the best works of literature, Vonnegut’s writing “reflects human experience while at the same time it affects human experience” (*Crusade* 35). Indeed, the world of Vonnegut’s fiction in many ways mirrors our own: it is peopled with characters for whom life no longer seems to make sense; individuals caught in a tempest of ever-present uncertainty, indiscriminate suffering, and absolute absurdity; individuals facing the constant challenge of maintaining rationality in a senseless, irrational world. Moreover, as seen in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Breakfast of Champions*, *Galapagos*, and *Timequake*, Vonnegut’s works reflect literature’s ability to touch different realms of research, serving as an extension of psychology and philosophy, and providing insight into principles of psychotherapy aimed at improving our experience of the human condition.<sup>135</sup>

Even though he battled the psychological disorder of depression for much of his life, Vonnegut did not succumb to his mental demons. Likewise, though disillusioned by the failed promise of the technological products of our collective brainpower, Vonnegut never quit on his fellow man.<sup>136</sup> Despite recognizing that the “human brain” is at times “ridiculous” (163), he retained an “optimistic faith that human beings can be anything we want to be” (*Sanity Plea* 107).<sup>137</sup> Infused

with a renewed appreciation for the human capacity to exercise free will, Vonnegut's writings seek to "make mankind aware of itself" (*Wampeters* 228) by sharing perspective on a "process of becoming," rather than imposing a "personal hopelessness" (*Identity* 15). In his humanistic approach to life and his writings, Vonnegut employs essential principles of the psychotherapeutic methods of REBT, pursuing ways to replace irrational thoughts and conduct with rational beliefs and behaviors.

As Broer insightfully observes, Vonnegut's works advocate resistance to any irrational belief:

that undermines the individual's sense of control over and responsibility for his own destiny and that of the planet, including all theories of philosophic or religious determinism, historical determinism, and psychological, genetic, or chemical determinism.

. . . .

Vonnegut admonishes us that our only hope for salvation is intelligently and humanely directing our course into the future . . . **using our brains to determine . . . more sane and rational behavior.**

(*Sanity Plea* 101) (emphasis supplied). Put another way, Vonnegut's novels communicate "a plea . . . for the exercise of reason" in an unreasonable world (*Genesis* 115).

In this thesis, I have offered a new perspective on an issue fundamental to Vonnegut's work: how human beings, having the power of self-awareness and the capacity for rational thought, respond to the unescapable absurdity of the human condition. After establishing the similar philosophies and shared beliefs of Vonnegut and Albert Ellis, I have suggested that Vonnegut's works support

that the most prudent response to that inexorable condition can be found in principles of REBT promoting rational self-direction. In *Sanity Plea*, Broer recites part of a letter from Vonnegut in which the author states: "I have been profoundly depressed, but have always been able to keep working *somehow*" (13) (emphasis supplied). It is my contention that the "somehow" which enabled Vonnegut to keep the demon of his depression at bay so he could "keep working" consists of the essential ideas of REBT that are illuminated in his novels. Like Billy Pilgrim, who adapted the REBT-like Serenity Prayer as *his* "method for keeping going" (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 58), Vonnegut's unknowing practice of REBT enabled him to control the tendency to see "life as meaningless" (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 96) and permitted him to keep his pessimistic side at bay.

As mentioned in the *Introduction* to this thesis, Vonnegut's works reveal and heal. They reveal the absurdity of the human condition, as well as our place within such an irrational reality. They heal by suggesting that application of principles of REBT enables one to alleviate unhappiness and find fulfillment by disputing irrational thoughts and overcoming self-defeating behaviors. Rather than being held hostage by irrational beliefs and behaviors that direct us into self-defeating "obstacle courses of [our] own construction" (*Timequake* xiii), Vonnegut beckons his reader to an improved way of engaging the world by using his or her brain's unbelievable ability to consciously steer itself toward a better way of thinking. "Calling Dr. Fleon Sunoco! Sharpen your microtome. Do we ever have a *brain* for you!" (*Timequake* 104).

Through his accidental engagement with principles of REBT, Vonnegut provides a much-needed compass for navigating through the often turbulent human condition. Illuminating core concepts of REBT, while illustrating literature's continuing interaction with philosophy and psychology, Vonnegut's writings affirm the acceptance of unalterable reality, coupled with the cultivation of a rational awareness, as the most effective means for fortifying ourselves against the otherwise debilitating absurdity of an unremittingly irrational world.

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Quoting Rakic, Pasko T. "Great Issues for Medicine in the Twenty-First Century". *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 882 (1999), p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> As quoted in *Human: The Science Behind What Makes Us Unique* (Gazzaniga 325).

<sup>3</sup> A prominent neurologist contends that "poetry and literature . . . have more in common with science than many people realize" (Ramachandran 259), and Neil Scheurich recently noted the similarities of literature and psychotherapy by observing that the two "share a group of core values" (305). While acknowledging that they are not "interchangeable endeavors," Scheurich emphasizes how literature "nourishes the *autonomous* self, providing self-understanding as well as awakening [us] to novel possibilities," while psychotherapy is "likewise fundamentally empowering" (312). Samuel Shem also sees a "nexus of shared purpose between literature and psychiatry" (43) centered around the "same focus on self" (61).

<sup>4</sup> Although principles of REBT appear in Vonnegut's works, it seems that Vonnegut is an "accidental" practitioner of REBT. Rather than having a deliberate intent to practice REBT or promote its principles in his literary works, Vonnegut seems to have stumbled on essential ideas of REBT through his own life experiences. Since he battled depression and watched his son suffer and recover from a mental breakdown, Vonnegut may have been familiar with REBT, but there does not appear to be any conclusive evidence of this. Likewise, although he saw a psychiatrist and reports enjoying and benefiting from such sessions, I found nothing to establish that Vonnegut's psychiatrist practiced REBT.

Vonnegut's story about a taxi driver in Germany suggests that he would have been amused to learn of his accidental engagement with REBT. When Vonnegut returned to Dresden in 1967 with his war buddy, Bernard O'Hare, they met a taxi driver whose mother had been incinerated by the allied firebombing. The German taxi driver subsequently sent O'Hare a postcard at Christmas, stating "I wish you and your family and also as to your friend Merry Christmas and happy New Year and I hope that we'll meet again in a world of peace and freedom in the taxi cab if the accident will" (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 2). After recounting the story, Vonnegut added: "I like that very much: 'If the accident will.'" (2).

<sup>5</sup> Bokey points out that "[t]he affinity between literature and medicine is not new," noting that "[i]n Ancient Greece, Apollo was the God of Literature and Medicine" (393). He also observes that "[a]s a specific mode of psychotherapy, the reading, writing and telling of literature has long been promoted . . . go[ing] as far back as Aristotle's observation on literature's powers of catharsis" (397). Bokey also cites a 2000 poll of the Congress of Adelaide, which found that 94% of those polled agreed that "the humanities are as important as the sciences in the proper practice of psychiatry" (398).

<sup>6</sup> Vonnegut's notion that a "plausible mission of [writers] is to make people appreciate being alive" (*Timequake* 1) parallels REBT's mission of improving our psychological health and mental state.

<sup>7</sup> To Vonnegut, the human condition includes "not knowing whether to shit or go blind in the midst of economic and technological and ecological and political chaos" (174), and (comparing it to a steeplechase horse race) attempting to hold "one's self-respect together, instead of a horse, as one's self-respect is expected to hurdle fences and hedges and water" (*Timequake* 182).

<sup>8</sup> Vonnegut's experience as a prisoner of war during the 1945 firebombing of Dresden left a deep psychological scar at a time when he was "nothing but [a] bab[y]" (*Man Without* 19), yet he wrote that the death of his mother and the adoption of his sister's children upon her death affected him even more than his experiences during the firebombing (*Palm Sunday* 273).

<sup>9</sup> Broer sees Vonnegut's writings in *Palm Sunday* as containing his questioning of the "notion that schizophrenia is purely chemically induced rather than a result of warping life experiences" (*Pilgrim* 160 n. 79).

<sup>10</sup> In *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut writes of his weekly meetings with his psychiatrist, who teaches him and other patients "how to comfort one another intelligently" (276). Elsewhere, he references having spent time in a "laughing academy" by committing himself to a "bughouse for a short stay" (*Fates* 41).

<sup>11</sup> REBT is not a Freudian method of psychoanalytic treatment.

<sup>12</sup> Vonnegut's personality "permeates everything he writes" such that "we never lose touch with the character behind the characters" (Boon x). Klinkowitz agrees that "[r]eading anything Kurt Vonnegut has written is to engage in a remarkably personal dialogue with the man himself" (*Essayist* 1). Leonard Mustazza and Kathryn Hume also see Vonnegut's characters as projections of the author (*Genesis* 125).

<sup>13</sup> Vonnegut's characters often exhibit the "feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, worthlessness, guilt, and loneliness" typical of persons suffering from depression or related mental disturbances (Moore 8). Klinkowitz sees Kilgore Trout as an "image of Vonnegut himself" (*Fact* 118), and in *Timequake*, Vonnegut acknowledges that Trout "has been my alter ego in several of my other novels" (xiii). The contention that these psychologically disturbed characters reflect the state of their creator is bolstered by Vonnegut's insistence that nearly all authors "reveal a lot about themselves to readers" in their writings, whether such "revelations [are] accidental or intentional" (*Style* 40).

<sup>14</sup> Lawrence Broer describes Vonnegut's "prototypical fragmented hero" as being "ominously familiar with psychiatrists and mental wards" (*Sanity Plea* 3). He notes the "psychic malaise" (*Heroes* 197 n.4) and "emotional malaise" (*Heroes* 181) of Vonnegut's protagonists, and describes how Vonnegut's "fictional self-creations have their author's history behind them" (*Goodbye* 71).

<sup>15</sup> As Broer points out, Vonnegut "has been telling us for years that his 'career has been about craziness'" (*Pilgrim* 139). Writing of Vonnegut's "interest in

craziness,” Broer describes the “dominant impulse of all Vonnegut’s art” as his effort to “show us ‘what makes people go crazy’ and the ‘different ways they go crazy’” (*Sanity Plea* 4). Additionally, in *Wampeters Foma & Granfalloon*, Vonnegut describes how writing “allow[s] lunatics to seem saner than sane” (xxii).

<sup>16</sup> Vonnegut endorsed Edmund Bergler’s book, *The Writer and Psychoanalysis*, which states that “writers were fortunate in that they were able to treat their neuroses every day by writing” (*Shaking Hands* 31-32). This view of “[w]riting as therapy” (*Goodbye* 70) underscores the relationship between Vonnegut’s writings and REBT.

<sup>17</sup> That Vonnegut’s works also have the potential for providing psychotherapeutic benefits to his readers finds additional support in Mark Vonnegut’s observance that the “difference between my fans and Kurt’s is that my fans know they’re mentally ill” (*Retrospect* 8).

<sup>18</sup> Our capacity to produce this “spark of rationality” has been called the “key to the universe” (Ramachandran 256).

<sup>19</sup> In *Timequake*, Vonnegut expresses his amazement at the seemingly limitless power of the human brain in his discussion of Sir Isaac Newton, describing the:

tremendously truthful ideas this ordinary mortal, seemingly, uttered, with no more to go by, as far as we know, than signals from his dog’s breakfast, from his three and a half pounds of blood-soaked sponge. This one naked ape invented differential calculus! He invented the reflecting telescope! He discovered and explained how a prism breaks a beam of sunlight into its constituent colors! He detected and wrote down previously unknown laws governing motion and gravity and optics! Give us a break! (104).

<sup>20</sup> According to a 1982 survey of clinical psychologists, Albert Ellis is the second most influential psychotherapist in history, with Carl Rogers number 1 and Freud number 3 (Ramirez 1).

<sup>21</sup> Ellis writes that REBT is “unusually philosophic and stresses cognitive processes in human disturbance” (*Overcoming* 61), and notes that “much of the theory of REBT was derived from philosophy rather than psychology” (*Therapist* 16).

<sup>22</sup> Additionally, Freud was “one of the first people to emphasize that human nature could be subjected to systematic scientific scrutiny, that one could actually look for laws of mental life in much the same way that a cardiologist might study the heart or an astronomer study planetary motion” (Ramachandran 152).

<sup>23</sup> Clinical application of REBT is typically found for depression, anxiety disorders, antisocial behavior, personality disorders, relationship and family problems, and general stress management (Froggatt 8). REBT “explain[s]

individual differences in responses to stressful life events in terms of a set of maladaptive thinking patterns” (Alloy 128).

<sup>24</sup> REBT grew in part out of the work of Alfred Adler, who hypothesized that an individual “does not relate himself to the outside world in a predetermined manner . . . He relates himself always according to his own interpretation of himself and of his present problem . . . It is his attitude toward life which determines his relationship to the outside world” (*Humanistic* 113) (quoting Adler).

<sup>25</sup> In *The Gift of Fear*, Gavin de Becker describes a similar process of interrelated thought, feeling, and action: “The truth is that every thought is preceded by a perception, every impulse is preceded by a thought, every action is preceded by an impulse” (16). Drawing on the notion that how our brain chooses to view reality is determinative of what we interpret reality to be and how we react to it, de Becker points out that “it is the brain which sees, not the eye. Reality is in the brain before it is experienced” (32) (citing Burke, James. *The Day the Universe Changed*).

<sup>26</sup> Much of Bernard’s quotes of Albert Ellis come from 80 audiotapes of Ellis’s clinical interviews and public lectures, which Ellis gave to Bernard in connection with writing his book on REBT (Bernard 5).

<sup>27</sup> Thus, the “emotionally disturbed can examine their irrational thoughts and restructure the way they view the situation . . . Over time, a person using REBT techniques can come to do so without working at it. The steps become instinctual, and in time he or she no longer needs to consciously work at viewing life in a positive, less stressful manner” (Moore 3). LeDoux recognizes that “thoughts can easily trigger emotions,” but contends that the human brain finds it difficult to “willfully turn[ ] off emotions” (303). However, he speculates that individuals’ ability to control their emotions will be significantly enhanced in the future because, from an evolutionary standpoint, neuroscience suggests that the human brain may be moving toward a more pronounced “cognitive-emotional connectivity” (303).

<sup>28</sup> Broer’s reference to “descends into self for the knowledge and wisdom to combat the chaos within and the chaos without” fittingly describes REBT’s method of disputing irrational thinking (*Sanity Plea* 13).

<sup>29</sup> REBT distinguishes between “*healthy* negative feelings – such as sorrow, regret, frustration, and annoyance – and *unhealthy* negative feelings – such as panic, depression, rage, and self-pity” (*Therapist* 21).

<sup>30</sup> As Ellis notes, “rational” in the context of REBT means “sensible, efficient, *unself-defeating*” and includes “human emotion, sensitivity, creativity, and art as quite rational pursuits” (*New Guide* 73). Rational thinking consists of thinking that “assists you (1) to survive and (2) to achieve the goals or values you select to make your survival pleasurable, enjoyable, or worthwhile” (*New Guide* 23). “Rational” for REBT means “cognition that is effective or self-helping, not merely cognition that is empirically and logically valid” (*Overcoming* 59). Irrational beliefs include thinking that undermines, erodes, or otherwise negatively affects an individual’s happiness and mental and

physical health. Irrational beliefs also stem from a distortion or misinterpretation of reality.

<sup>31</sup> Despite its emphasis on rational, reasoned thinking, REBT does not demand that its practitioners lead an emotionally sterile, Spock-like existence, nor does it lead to a “mechanical existence – a life too cold, unfeeling, and machinelike [that] would undermine the creation and expression of . . . art, literature, and music” (*New Guide* 70).

<sup>32</sup> As discussed further in Chapter Five of this thesis, many of the characters in Vonnegut’s novels, including a large number of his protagonists, “unduly inhibit themselves” or “withdraw” in this fashion.

<sup>33</sup> The related notion of unhealthy “awfulizing” consists of an individual’s tendency to “view frustrating conditions as totally bad,” to think that “[t]his frustrating condition . . . is *completely* bad, is the end of the world, is totally devastating” (*Overcoming* 21).

<sup>34</sup> REBT teaches that “what exists, *exists*. If it includes misfortunes and frustrations, you can see that as bad. But you’d better not *define* it as catastrophic and *awful!*” (*Rational Living* 140).

<sup>35</sup> The cognitive conditioning of REBT “engages the prefrontal cortex executive functions . . . [which] include . . . making meaning of experience” (*Anxious Brain* 89).

<sup>36</sup> Neuroscience supports these principles of REBT through the discovery that the human limbic system – responsible for supporting emotions and behavior – is “neither directly sensory nor motor but constitutes a central core processing system of the brain that deals with *information derived from events*, memories of events *and emotional associations to these events*. This processing is essential if experience is to guide future behavior” (Ramachandran 178) (emphasis supplied).

<sup>37</sup> As quoted in *Phantoms in the Brain* (Ramachandran 127).

<sup>38</sup> Ellis and Vonnegut died about three months apart in 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Further elaborating, Ellis states: “None of us – no, not a single, solitary one of us – fails to have intimate encounters, almost every day of our lives, with several individuals . . . who behave stupidly, ignorantly, ineffectually, provocatively, frustratingly, viciously, or disturbedly” (*New Guide* 196). Reflecting on the human condition, Vonnegut wrote that, when contemplating “how many people on the whole planet had . . . lives worth living,” his best guess was a paltry “seventeen percent” (*Timequake* 141).

<sup>40</sup> Ellis and Vonnegut approached life with a similarly “humanistic” philosophy (Bernard 257), and both men were recognized by the AHA as its “Humanist of the Year”: Ellis in 1971 and Vonnegut in 1992 (*American Humanist*).

<sup>41</sup> Todd Davis sees Vonnegut’s works as demonstrating a “postmodern humanism” (*Grumbling* 150). According to Ellis, the “essence” of humanism is that “man is fully acknowledged to be human – that is, limited and fallible – and that in no way whatever is he superhuman or subhuman” (*Humanistic* 2).

<sup>42</sup> Ellis presents REBT as a way for individuals to be “more constructive and less hostile to themselves and others . . . surely one of the most important humanistic goals” (*Overcoming* 97).

<sup>43</sup> Vonnegut’s frequent call for the re-establishment of extended families to counteract the loneliness and loss of emotional security brought about by the Industrial Revolution further suggests that he would favor the method of emotional support offered by REBT.

<sup>44</sup> Vonnegut often described the human brain’s tendency to engage in “ridiculous” (irrational) thinking, including by “hating life while pretending to love it, and behaving accordingly” (*Timequake* 163).

<sup>45</sup> Echoing Vonnegut, Ellis notes that human beings are bestowed with the:

most incredibly mixed-up *combination* of common sense and uncommon senselessness you ever did see. They of course have done and will continue to do wonders with their mental processes . . . . [P]eople grow up as highly reasonable, brain-using creatures. But they also have strong tendencies to act in the most ridiculous, prejudiced, amazingly asinine ways . . . . And even when they *know* they behave in a self-defeating, perfectly senseless manner, and *know* they would feel far happier and healthier if they acted otherwise, they have such difficulty achieving and sustaining a level of sound and sane behavior that they rarely do so for any length of time, but keep falling back to puerile ways (*New Guide* 60).

<sup>46</sup> Spatt deems Vonnegut’s “crucial insight” to be his understanding that “although life is inevitably revealed as a tragedy by the time the final curtain falls, it is a screamingly funny farce while the performance is on” (129).

<sup>47</sup> A respected neuroscientist recently wrote that he is “convinced that the most effective antidote to the absurdity of the human condition may be humor” (Ramachandran 154).

<sup>48</sup> Mustazza cites R.B. Gill for the notion that “we admire [Vonnegut] because he can make us laugh at the irrationalities of our world” (*Genesis* 196 n.4). Vonnegut “extracts humor out of even the direst of circumstances” (*Chronicles* xiii).

<sup>49</sup> Morse makes a related point about Vonnegut’s use of humor: “Laughter also has an added advantage over crying in that it takes far less time to recover from laughter so a person is able to begin reasoning and getting on with life” (*Imagining* 5). If laughter allows us to quickly recover from the inevitable “pratfalls” (*Imagining* 5) of life, we are that much quicker to think rationally and better equipped to dispute our irrational beliefs. By being a source of stress relief, humor enables us to arrive at a point of constructive engagement in which we may strive to better our condition.

<sup>50</sup> In *Palm Sunday*, Vonnegut reveals that his great-grandfather Clemons Vonnegut’s beliefs make up the “most evident thing in my writing” (177).

<sup>51</sup> Vonnegut repeatedly made statements along the lines of: “if Christ hadn’t delivered the Sermon on the Mount, with its message of mercy and pity, I wouldn’t want to be a human being. I’d just as soon be a rattlesnake” (*Man Without* 81).

<sup>52</sup> Vonnegut found inspiration in individuals he described as “saints,” people who “behaved decently in an indecent society” (*Timequake* 141). To act decently in an indecent (irrational) world requires the ability to think about oneself and others from a rational perspective that recognizes and accepts reality as it is, but that seeks to improve the human situation for oneself and others to the extent one is able to do so.

<sup>53</sup> Ellis considered himself “largely a postmodernist” (*Overcoming* 37).

<sup>54</sup> REBT recognizes that, like an author crafting a novel, all human beings construct narratives about their lives in the form of a continuing dialogue about events that happen to them and how they react to those events.

<sup>55</sup> Vonnegut’s status as a postmodern writer lends further legitimacy to my interpretation of his works as illustrating principles of REBT. Like Vonnegut’s postmodernist works, REBT illuminates things in a new light, focusing on the construction of personal truth that enables one to better deal with the stress and adversity of everyday existence, faithful to the premise that the “only meaning in the universe is the meaning we create for ourselves” (*Comforting* 86).

<sup>56</sup> Davis identifies as part of Vonnegut’s “main theme” his concern “with our response to existence” (*Grumbling* 151), a concern that also underlies the “theme” of REBT: how we respond to irrational events.

<sup>57</sup> In a novel that Vonnegut strongly endorsed, Lee Stringer’s comments arrive at the heart of REBT.

<sup>58</sup> Like REBT, Vonnegut beckons us to break out of what de Becker calls the “darkest parts of the human soul” by listening to the “better angels” of our brain and following a path of rational thinking that reflects the “brightness of the human spirit” (298).

<sup>59</sup> Viewing the world as “overplanted and rigged with both natural and manmade booby traps” (183), Vonnegut despaired of what he saw as an “era when so many Americans find the human condition meaningless that they are surrendering their will and their common sense” (*Fates* 158).

<sup>60</sup> In his final speech, completed shortly before his death and delivered by his son on April 27, 2007, Vonnegut revealed: “I asked Mark a while back what life was all about, since I didn’t have a clue. He said, ‘Dad, we are here to help each other get through this thing, whatever it is.’ . . . Not bad. That one could be a keeper” (*Retrospect* 30-31). His son’s emphasis on helping others without worrying about *why* things are the way they are struck a chord with Vonnegut, and echoes REBT’s maxim of accepting reality (and others), no matter how irrational or absurd it (or they) may be.

<sup>61</sup> Ellis elaborates on the psychological benefit of accepting unalterable reality by stating: “You look at that crummy, irrational world . . . and you first say to yourself, ‘Well, it’s bad, obnoxious, it’s deplorable, it’s a pain in the ass, but

it's not all bad. *Everything* is not bad . . . [T]he way you live with and stop whining about reality even when it's crummy, and the way you live happily . . . in this execrable world is by acceptance" (Bernard 80-81).

<sup>62</sup> Vonnegut makes a similar point elsewhere: "No matter what a young person thinks he or she is really hot stuff at doing, he or she is sooner or later going to run into somebody in the same field who will cut him or her a new asshole, so to speak" (*Timequake* 127).

<sup>63</sup> As Todd Davis contends, Vonnegut is "more concerned with our response to existence than with the philosophical nature of that existence" (*Comforting* 13).

<sup>64</sup> In the memoir of his struggles with what was originally thought to be schizophrenia, Vonnegut's son Mark observes that one's "mental health is not dependent on the moral, sociopolitical health of the world" (*Express* 208). Rather, it is greatly controlled by how we choose to use our capacity for rational thought and how we choose to respond to forces acting upon us. In concluding his memoir, Mark Vonnegut sounds as if he could be promoting REBT: "The things in life that are upsetting you are more than likely things well worth being upset about. It is, however, possible to be upset without being crippled, and even to act effectively against those things" (*Express* 214). Since Vonnegut not only read his son's work, but frequently encouraged his audiences to do so as well, it is reasonable to conclude that he agreed with or otherwise approved of Mark's thoughts on the matter.

<sup>65</sup> The brain sciences support REBT's attempt to dispel such illusions by suggesting that "we have no privileged position in the universe" (Ramachandran 256). Ramachandran describes a modern trend of brain science that rejects the idea that each individual is "something special in this world," offering instead the "liberating" belief that we are "part of something larger" in the "evolving universe" (157), part of the "eternal ebb and flow of events in the cosmos" (256).

<sup>66</sup> Referring to Billy Pilgrim, Dwayne Hoover, and Rudy Waltz, Mustazza contends that Vonnegut's protagonists are typically men "more acted upon than acting" (*Genesis* 158). While I agree that his protagonists are acted upon by outside forces, I do not interpret Vonnegut's depiction of them as minimizing the significance of their reaction to such events.

<sup>67</sup> As Broer states, the "standard reading" of *Slaughterhouse-Five* results in a "major misunderstanding of Vonnegut's work – the view that Vonnegut is a writer of 'pessimistic' or 'defeatist' novels" (*Sanity Plea* 7).

<sup>68</sup> Like the man and woman in Kilgore Trout's story, "The Big Board" (included in *Slaughterhouse-Five*), who are kidnapped by aliens, put in a zoo, told they have money invested in the stock market, and set to watch a fake investment board and ticker, which are "stimulants to make the[m] . . . jump up and down and cheer, or gloat, or sulk, or tear their hair, to be scared shitless or to feel as contented as babies in their mothers' arms" (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 192).

<sup>69</sup> I disagree with Charles Harris's contention that Vonnegut takes a "dim view . . . of the human character" and that "[I]ike most novelists of the absurd . . .

Vonnegut entertains little hope for either social or individual reform” (Harris 133-34).

<sup>70</sup> Vonnegut believed that “writers should serve their society” (Conversations 45). By advocating an approach to life that parallels principles of REBT aimed at reducing self-defeating thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors while cultivating self-actualizing ones, Vonnegut’s writings serve their society by attempting to bring about positive change in the lives of the members of that society.

<sup>71</sup> According to Vonnegut, artists exercise rational thinking through the realization that they cannot change reality, but they can “make this square of canvas, or this eight-and-a-half-by-eleven piece of paper, or this lump of clay, or these twelve bars of music, exactly as they *ought* to be” (140).

<sup>72</sup> As Klinkowitz observes, Vonnegut is concerned with the fact that humans are the “only creatures in nature whose lives seem[ ] bedeviled by having to find a purpose for things . . . [which] can distract one from the pleasures of life” (*Fact* 8) and which will “almost inevitably lead to frustration when life itself refuses to work out according to [one’s] plan” (*Fact* 9). Klinkowitz sees Vonnegut’s overall message as “hopeful,” contending that a “quest for meaning” in a purposeless world can be “self-defeating” (*Fact* 9).

<sup>73</sup> I disagree with Lynn Buck’s argument that Vonnegut “sees man . . . in [a] futile struggle against his own human weaknesses and his own brilliance” (181). While Vonnegut recognized that such a struggle exists, he did not consider it to be futile.

<sup>74</sup> De Becker describes modern man as a “hyperanxious animal who constantly invents reasons for anxiety even when there are none” (278) (citing Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death*). Yet, he asserts that it “need not be this way” (278) since “man’s fears are fashioned out of the ways in which he perceives the world” (295). Following the rationale of REBT, de Becker agrees that if we change our manner of perceiving reality, we can control self-defeating reactions like anxiety and fear.

<sup>75</sup> REBT professes that the “way you live with and stop whining about reality even when it’s crummy, and the way you live happily . . . in this execrable world is by acceptance” (Bernard 81).

<sup>76</sup> The “Serenity Prayer” is generally attributed to the Protestant theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr (Goldstein 1). I read the Serenity Prayer as specifying the state of “awareness” more broadly described in *Breakfast of Champions*.

<sup>77</sup> After quoting the Serenity Prayer, Vonnegut writes without further comment that “[a]mong the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future” (58). I interpret this to be a statement of Billy’s erroneous belief, as opposed to Vonnegut’s. Reading Vonnegut’s works as a whole supports the conclusion that he, like Ellis, would respond that while this statement is certainly true of the past, and partly (but only partly) true of the present, it is largely not true of the future.

<sup>78</sup> The Serenity Prayer serves as an antidote to Billy’s death-in-life existence, one in which he “feel[s] nothing” (100).

<sup>79</sup> At least one critic has suggested that, rather than schizophrenia, Billy suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, since his symptoms appear to be caused by external events (Vees-Gulani 176).

<sup>80</sup> Revealing that he too has learned the REBT principle of accepting things that he cannot change and controlling his own thoughts and feelings, Vonnegut responds to the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the daily body counts of the dead in Vietnam, and the death of his father by simply stating: “So it goes” (200). Beginning with *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut seems to have “accepted suffering as a necessary part of life” (*Imagining* 22).

<sup>81</sup> “Now, when I myself hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is ‘So it goes.’” (26).

<sup>82</sup> Billy joins Vonnegut characters such as Bokonon, Kilgore Trout, and Rudy Waltz in practicing the “serenity to accept things I cannot change,” while Malachi Constant, Eliot Rosewater, and Mary Hepburn practice the courage “to change the things I can” (Adabi-Nagy 16).

<sup>83</sup> In the early 1970’s, John Somer argued that Vonnegut’s novels comprise a continuing search for “a hero who [can] survive with dignity in an insane world” (Somer 224), with Vonnegut advocating the resigned acceptance of Billy Pilgrim as the best response to a harsh and uncaring reality. Conversely, Peter Scholl and Robert Merrill contend that “Vonnegut does *not* recommend ‘resigned acceptance’ of life’s injustices,” and instead intends to “challenge the Tralfamadorian point of view when it is adopted by human beings in a position to know better and to act upon what they know” (Merrill 13).

<sup>84</sup> Vonnegut’s rejection of the thinking of the Trafalmadorians, who “don’t believe in free will” (82), can be seen in his depiction of the absurdity of their view of the end of the universe. Although they know that they will accidentally destroy the universe experimenting with a new flying saucer fuel, they never take any action to prevent the accident from occurring, even though it would simply require them to stop a button from being pushed. Vonnegut also distances himself from the Trafalmadorians by revealing that they believe that “every creature and plant in the Universe is a machine” (146), a belief that Vonnegut discards as irrational following his rebirth in *Breakfast of Champions*.

<sup>85</sup> Cautioning that cognitive science is “really a science of only a part of the mind, the part having to do with thinking, reasoning, and intellect,” LeDoux contends that “minds without emotions are not really minds at all. They are souls on ice – cold, lifeless creatures devoid of any desires, fears, sorrows, pains, or pleasures” (25). By LeDoux’s account, Billy would be such a soul on ice, emotionally hollow in his self-imposed phantom reality.

<sup>86</sup> Vonnegut’s anxiety and fear finds frequent expression in the novel in the form of the distant but ominous barking of a dog: Trout (Vonnegut’s alter ego) is “scared to death of dogs” while “[s]omewhere a big dog barked” (160); just before Billy is captured by Germans during the war, a “big dog barked . . .

[with] a voice like a big bronze gong” (46); and as Billy is led to a POW camp on a cold, dark night, another “dog barked . . . [with] a voice like a big bronze gong” (79).

<sup>87</sup> Beginning with *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut’s novels became “more and more autobiographical” (*Conversations* 46).

<sup>88</sup> While in a military hospital after the war, Billy hears Eliot Rosewater tell a psychiatrist: “I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful new lies, or people aren’t going to want to go on living” (97). Later, Billy sees Rosewater reading a Kilgore Trout novel, *Maniacs in the Fourth Dimension*, that is about “people whose mental diseases were all in the fourth dimension, and three-dimensional Earthling doctors couldn’t see those causes at all, or even imagine them” (99). By including these passages, Vonnegut is either commenting on the psychiatric profession’s inability to properly diagnose psychological disorders, or he is satirizing Rosewater’s view of psychiatry as offering false comforts. Since Vonnegut elsewhere revealed that he learned how to cope with his depression and to get “better” (*Breakfast of Champions* 199) with the “help” of a psychiatrist (*Wampeters* 213), I interpret these passages as being aimed at the latter.

<sup>89</sup> Even if, as the Tralfamadorians contend, the universe inevitably ends when they accidentally destroy it, REBT suggests that it would be irrational to waste one’s life worrying about something that will not happen in one’s lifetime and that one has no control over anyway.

<sup>90</sup> As the Tralfamadorians explain, “Why *you*? Why *us* for that matter? Why *anything*? Because this moment simply *is*” (73).

<sup>91</sup> As Broer states, the “standard reading” of *Slaughterhouse-Five* results in a “major misunderstanding of Vonnegut’s work – the view that Vonnegut is a writer of ‘pessimistic’ or ‘defeatist’ novels” (*Sanity Plea* 7).

<sup>92</sup> Vonnegut also comments on the irrational thinking often followed by his fellow man in the story about Howard Campbell’s monograph, which explains: “[H]uman beings everywhere believe many things that are obviously untrue . . . . Their most destructive untruth is that it is very easy . . . to make money . . . and, therefore, those who have no money blame and blame and blame themselves” (123).

<sup>93</sup> Further supporting my REBT reading of the hobo, Vonnegut’s comments at a 1974 commencement address reinforce his view of humanity’s ability to choose how to react to the absurdities of life: “We had better make the best of a bad situation, which is a wonderful human skill” (*Genesis* 19).

<sup>94</sup> As seen more directly in *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut rejects the Tralfamadorian belief that “every creature . . . in the Universe is a machine” (146).

<sup>95</sup> When asked about the meaning of the title of *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut replied that it “has to do . . . with my making peace with certain things that happened to me during the breakfast of my life” (*Conversations* 70).

<sup>96</sup> Vonnegut describes taking “a white pill which a doctor said I could take in moderation, two a day, in order not to feel blue” (254), but he is wary of the fact that his “mother wrecked her brains with chemicals, which were supposed to make her sleep” (4).

<sup>97</sup> Vonnegut instructs in *Breakfast* that human beings are far too often “agreeing” machines -- like Dwayne Hoover’s wife or the prostitutes who gladly “surrendered” (74) their free will to a pimp -- and too rarely the rationally thinking beings that REBT encourages us to be.

<sup>98</sup> One brain scientist refers to the human brain as the “most sophisticated machine imaginable” (LeDoux 104).

<sup>99</sup> The REBT-like message of *Breakfast of Champions* could be said to be that we must “learn to adapt [ourselves] to the requirements of chaos rather than to the requirements of an orderly universe” (Lundquist 101). Rackstraw perceives a related concept in her discussion of Vonnegut’s work with respect to how “language . . . creates rational order and meaning out of chaos,” but can also “distort the clarity of our awareness” (*Paradox* 54). Such analysis is readily applicable to Vonnegut’s work in the context of its illumination of principles of REBT by simply substituting “human thought” for “language,” thereby capturing the notion of rational thinking creating self-affirming “meaning” juxtaposed with irrational thinking, which distorts and undermines awareness.

<sup>100</sup> Reflecting on *Breakfast of Champions* in an interview with *Playboy*, Vonnegut’s comments reveal his belief in the ability to bring about personal change:

VONNEGUT: At the end of *Breakfast*, I give characters I’ve used over and over again their freedom. I tell them I won’t be needing them anymore. They can pursue their own destinies. I guess that means I’m free to pursue my own destiny, too. I don’t have to take care of them anymore.

PLAYBOY: Does that feel good?

VONNEGUT: It feels different . . . I’ve changed. Somebody told me the other day that that was the alchemists’ secret: They weren’t really trying to transmute metals. They only pretended to do that so they could have rich patrons. What they really hoped to do was to change *themselves*.

(*Wampeters* 283-84).

<sup>101</sup> Sartre illustrates this REBT-like concept through Aesop’s fable of the fox and the grapes: although the fox at first craves the grapes, when he cannot get them despite his best efforts, he changes his belief and chooses to think that “they’re probably sour anyway”.

<sup>102</sup> Broer notes that *Happy Birthday Wanda June* contains Vonnegut's "clearest statement of belief that humankind can become anything it wants to become" through the transformation of Harold Ryan from a "man of violence into a man of peace" (*Pilgrim* 160 n. 80).

<sup>103</sup> Contending that Vonnegut used *Breakfast of Champions* to "purge himself of his more embittered and cynical self, that eternal harbinger of doom Kilgore Trout" (*Sanity Plea* 151), Broer describes *Breakfast of Champions* as comprising Vonnegut's "moral rebirth and new artistic faith" (*Goodbye* 73).

<sup>104</sup> In *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut equates himself to the "Creator of the Universe" (205).

<sup>105</sup> He also succumbs to irrational, catastrophic thinking, "automatically moon[ing] about his own mortality" when he accidentally wanders into a morgue, and "wonder[ing] automatically if anything bad was growing inside himself" when he sees an x-ray machine (289).

<sup>106</sup> He also comes to the realization that – as advocated by REBT – we must unconditionally accept and treat ourselves and others kindly and humanely, as encapsulated by his tombstone, which reads: "WE ARE HEALTHY ONLY TO THE EXTENT THAT OUR IDEAS OUR HUMANE" (16).

<sup>107</sup> Paralleling the ideas of the Serenity Prayer and REBT (of accepting things that cannot be changed and attempting to change those things that can be changed), Dwayne tells Harry LeSabre: "I don't mind that you have the name of a Buick, Harry, when you're supposed to be selling Pontiacs . . . You can't help that . . . But there are a hell of a lot of things you can change, Harry" (47).

<sup>108</sup> The pointless "why me" of *Slaughterhouse-Five* finds its way into *Breakfast of Champions* as well in the form of a "common question" by the people of Midland City, who were "always asking that as they were loaded into ambulances after accidents of various kinds, or arrested for disorderly conduct, or burglarized, or socked in the nose and so on" (43-44).

<sup>109</sup> Dwayne could be said to represent a large segment of the human population, those in need of REBT because they "create[ ] chemicals in their own bodies which [a]re bad for their heads" (71). He "certainly wasn't alone, as far as having bad chemicals inside of him was concerned" (137).

<sup>110</sup> The explanation in Trout's novel of everyone but Dwayne being robots who "have committed every possible atrocity and every possible kindness . . . to get a reaction from Y-O-U" (263), and having as their "only purpose . . . to stir you up in every conceivable way, so the Creator of the Universe can watch your reactions" (261) fits into the  $A \times B = C$  equation of REBT as well.

<sup>111</sup> In discussing what he feared would result from "technological nincompoopery," Vonnegut suggested the following as an appropriate message to leave to visitors to Earth after humanity has ceased to be: "WE PROBABLY COULD HAVE SAVED OURSELVES, BUT WERE TOO DAMNED LAZY TO TRY VERY HARD" (*Fates* 116). The same might be said with respect to individuals' continuing to follow self-defeating irrational beliefs without trying to change them.

<sup>112</sup> Vonnegut also pokes fun at our big brain belief in the “illusion” of “somebody . . . always watching over [us],” as Trout states that “People have no such illusions today. They learn very early what kind of a world this really is” (74).

<sup>113</sup> “[L]ike all reasonable people, Vonnegut sees no problem with human inventiveness itself . . . . Rather, motive and usage are what he finds fault with” (*Genesis* 170).

<sup>114</sup> Similarly, the Peruvian pilot’s feeling of elation upon launching a rocket -- which Vonnegut describes as having “to be entirely products of that big brain of his” (114) -- illustrates the REBT notion that what we think about events determines how we feel about them. Private Geraldo Delgado, the “paranoid schizophrenic,” is yet another example of someone whose “big brain was telling him all sorts of things that were not true” (91).

<sup>115</sup> Vonnegut equates alcohol use (which Adolf engages in to the point of drunkenness) to an attempt to gain some degree of control over the out-of-control thinking of our brains: “Why so many of us a million years ago purposely knocked out major chunks of our brains with alcohol from time to time remains an interesting mystery. It may be that we were trying to give evolution a shove in the right direction – in the direction of smaller brains” (128).

<sup>116</sup> In an exchange between Adolf and Mary Hepburn, Vonnegut comments on the absolutist thinking that REBT seeks to eradicate: “‘Maybe it’s time you stopped being so absolutely certain about so much!’ said Mary. ‘That thought has occurred to me,’ he said” (152).

<sup>117</sup> This is strikingly similar to Ellis’s contention that “it is irrational to obsess about questions of . . . our place in the universe because of the unavailability of ultimate answers” (Bernard 249).

<sup>118</sup> As Kilgore Trout says to his son: “You believe that human beings . . . will eventually solve all their problems and make earth into a Garden of Eden again” (158).

<sup>119</sup> Jerome Klinkowitz reads *Galapagos* as ending on a note of “true optimism,” and calls it “one of the most positive works in Vonnegut’s canon” (*Effect* 133). Peter Freese also sees *Galapagos* as ending on a positive note, explaining that while the “climax of despair and pessimism seems to have been reached . . . there is a ray of hope” since, out of the thousands of quotations stored in the Mandarax computer, Leon chooses an affirmative statement as the story’s epigraph: “In spite of everything, I still believe people are really good at heart” (Freese 160).

<sup>120</sup> Rather than standing by and letting them “lead lives of quiet desperation,” Vonnegut endeavors to show the “mass of men” (167) how to take some control of their lives by self-direction of their thought processes.

<sup>121</sup> The phrase “Free Will or Free Won’t” is taken from: Obhi, Sukhvinder S. & Patrick Haggard. “Free Will and Free Won’t”. *American Scientist* (July-Aug. 2004) pp. 358-365. Web.

<sup>122</sup> Although he published various thoughts and beliefs in 2005's *A Man Without a Country*, I consider *Timequake* to be Vonnegut's last novel because it is the last fictional literary work that he created.

<sup>123</sup> Vonnegut also comments how his hero, Mark Twain, "found life for himself and everybody else so stressful" (1). Learning to deal with the monumental stress of life is a task that Vonnegut and REBT undertake with similar vigor. The alternative, allowing oneself to be overcome by life's ever present stressors, runs the danger of cultivating a philosophy that "being alive is a crock of shit" (3).

<sup>124</sup> Trout's realization is supported by modern brain science, including advanced "[c]haos and quantum theories [which] suggest that life is not predetermined," providing "new life for the concept of free will" (Sweeney 217).

<sup>125</sup> Rackstraw interprets the timequake to be a "metaphorical device to . . . shock readers into an awareness of their careless disregard of human potential" (*Paradox* 64).

<sup>126</sup> Quoting Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange*.

<sup>127</sup> Jeffrey Schwartz refers to the "absurdity of the situation" befuddling Dr. Sunoco in similarly wondering how "three pounds of gelatinous pudding inside the skull" is "able to generate this ineffable thing called mind" (21).

<sup>128</sup> In the epilogue to *Timequake*, Vonnegut provides additional insight about REBT. Discussing the death of his brother, Vonnegut reveals:

He was enraptured at the very end by a collection of sayings of Albert Einstein. Example: "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science." Another: "Physical concepts are free creations of the human mind, and are not, however it may seem, uniquely determined by the external world"

(215). Both sayings by Einstein have relevance to REBT. The first reminds us that, while the reason why reality is the way it is may always be a mystery, by enabling us to deal with life events despite the inescapable uncertainty of our existence, REBT allows us to appreciate the beauty that might otherwise be overshadowed by the absurdity of our condition. The second saying reinforces the REBT notion of the power of the human brain to dictate how we perceive and interpret reality, while implying that how we choose to use that cognitive power shapes our mental well being.

<sup>129</sup> Vonnegut refers to the awareness that Trout describes as the "special place of Earthlings in the cosmic scheme of things" (xiv), and explains that awareness exists "only because there are human beings" (213).

<sup>130</sup> According to LeDoux, the ancient Greeks commonly referred to the mind as the "soul" (24).

<sup>131</sup> At the end of his introduction for *Timequake*, Vonnegut describes how in the novel he pretends to be alive in 2001, imagines himself in 2010, places himself in 1996, and refers to himself in the ten-year period preceding 1996,

and concludes: “I must be nuts” for doing so (xiv). Vonnegut’s ironic statement is a comment on our unique ability to rationally think about the past, present, and future, and to imagine alternative beliefs and behaviors.

<sup>132</sup> In recent years, scholars have increasingly taken to reading Vonnegut’s works as projecting a more positive outlook. In his 1994 essay, “Images of the Shaman,” Broer interprets Vonnegut’s works as projecting an ultimately optimistic view of the world with the author cast in the role of a “Shaman,’ a kind of spiritual medicine man whose function it is to expose . . . various forms of societal madness . . . while encouraging reflectiveness and the will to positive social change” (203). Broer sees Vonnegut’s despair in reaction the irrationality of reality as “balanced by an optimistic faith in the possibility of change or renewal” (201), echoing REBT’s call to change irrational thoughts and beliefs.

Peter Reed’s 1996 essay, “The Responsive Shaman: Kurt Vonnegut and His World,” similarly contends that “Vonnegut keeps on being bothered that so much in life does make him feel cynical, that he keeps on trying to cheer, trying to inform, trying to affirm . . . . This larger persistence underlies the surface dismissiveness” (*Shaman* 51). In his 2001 essay, “Vonnegut’s Goodbye: Kurt Senior, Hemingway, and Kilgore Trout,” Broer notes how critics “no longer persist in reading Vonnegut as a writer of ‘pessimistic’ or ‘defeatist’ novels, but at long last appreciate the nature of his work as *therapy* . . . [which] warns against the perils of fatalism” (Boon 80) (emphasis supplied). In his 2006 publication, *Kurt Vonnegut’s Crusade*, Todd Davis cites Charles Harris’s 1990 essay, “Illusion and Absurdity: The Novels of Kurt Vonnegut,” as representative of the frequent (mistaken) interpretation of Vonnegut’s works as depicting the “futility of human endeavor, the meaninglessness of human existence” (10). As Davis argues, “Vonnegut’s belief that the universe is purposeless is not his main theme; it is his assumption” (11). Davis contends that Vonnegut offers suggestions for better living and “hope for the despondent” (11), and “strives to make sense of our existence, to understand better how he should live in a world absurdly committed to its own destruction” (85). All of these scholars have offered insightful perspectives on Vonnegut’s continuing quest to understand how we -- “never having been asked to be born in the first place” (*Timequake* 139) -- should handle living in an irrational, absurd world. In this thesis, I offer a new perspective by extending that fundamental issue of Vonnegut’s works to the essential issue underlying REBT. In doing so, I contend that Vonnegut’s writings support principles of REBT as mapping the way to live in an absurd, irrational world.

<sup>133</sup> REBT and Vonnegut follow Sarte by holding that we have free will in that we always have choices with respect to what to believe, how to feel, and how to behave (though the choices are sometimes constrained by our circumstances).

<sup>134</sup> As quoted in *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (Carnegie 70).

<sup>135</sup> Vonnegut's belief in the interconnected relationship of literature and science can be seen in the fate of Kilgore Trout, who, in *Breakfast of Champions*, becomes "recognized as a great artist and scientist" (15), promoting mental health by teaching his REBT-like insights through literature, "advanc[ing] his theories disguised as science fiction [stories]" (15).

<sup>136</sup> Even though the "excrement [has] hit the air conditioner" (*Hocus Pocus* 4), Vonnegut still sees a potential saint in each of us: "saints . . . who could be anywhere . . . people who behave [ ] decently in a strikingly indecent society" (*Man Without* 106). Behaving decently in an indecent and absurd world requires one to live and act rationally amidst a maelstrom of irrationality, presupposing an ability to control negative emotions, irrational beliefs, and hostile reactions in an imperfect, often hostile reality.

<sup>137</sup> According to his son, Vonnegut was an "optimist posing as a pessimist" (*Retrospect* 7).

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