

THE PHILOSOPHY OF
COGNITIVE-BEHAVIOURAL
THERAPY (CBT)
Stoic Philosophy as Rational and Cognitive Psychotherapy



Donald Robertson

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The Philosophy of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy: Stoic Philosophy as Rational and Cognitive Psychotherapy

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Why should modern psychotherapists be interested in philosophy, especially ancient philosophy?

Why should philosophers be interested in psychotherapy?

There is a sense of mutual attraction between what are today two thoroughly distinct disciplines. However, arguably it was not always the case that they were distinct. The author takes the view that by reconsidering the generally received wisdom concerning the history of these closely-related subjects, we can learn a great deal about both philosophy and psychotherapy, under which heading he includes potentially solitary pursuits such as "self-help" and "personal development."

The Philosophy of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy: Stoic Philosophy as Rational and Cognitive Psychotherapy Details

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Mandy Nash says

I wish there was a category on Goodreads for "started to read but didn't finish." Because that was my experience with this book. So, my rating is for what I read of the introduction and part of chapter 1. Talk about some mind-boggling material! This is definitely a book for the philosophical mind. I thought I'd dip my toes in some stoic philosophy but found unable to understand and be excited about reading the material. Being that I am not in school, I want to read for a pleasurable past time, and despite my interest in psychology and stoic principles, this book was difficult to read and comprehend.

Bill says

Well-written discussion of the links between Stoic Philosophy and Cognitive Behavior Therapy. For those who may feel a bit embarrassed about seeing a therapist or doing CBT self-help exercises, this book provides some useful historical context. I had little knowledge of stoic philosophy prior to reading this book; it was very eye-opening for me. I had never realized that any western philosophy was so practical or so focused on how to be happy.

The only criticism I have of the book is that while reading it, I got the sense the the author was continually relying on the same 6 or 7 sources.

Taylor Grayson says

This book is by far the best of several that I've read about Stoicism. Other books rely too heavily on large quotes of Roman or Greek authors, quotes that themselves are written as rather archaic translations, difficult to understand in a modern context. Robertson, instead, explains concepts in modern English, drawing upon concepts from modern cognitive therapy, then provides relevant quotes from the ancient authors. Even without the quotes, this book could stand alone as a good explanation of Stoicism and a successful philosophy in how to live one's life.

Gary Brooks says

It took me four months to read this book as I purposely took my time to reflect on the chapters, and follow up on the references. Robertson has provided an exhaustive account of stoicism and its relation to CBT from the early history of psychotherapy to contemporary practice, and shows how each stage of CBT's evolution can be explicitly linked to a parallel practice in stoicism.

The book is authoritative and extremely well-written.

The only criticism I have is not to do with the content but how the publisher put this together: there are plenty of typos and errors throughout which sometimes distract. This does reflect poorly on Karnac books, if not the author.

Elf M. says

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a form of psychological counseling in which the therapist eschews the traditional seeking of root causes for a more objective and forward-seeking approach. Rather than help the patient seek reasons for their problems, the CBT therapist trains the patient in the use of psychological tools and rationalizations to help the patient manage and overcome their disorder. Through the building of habits, repetition, and framing, the patient is expected to develop a behavior pattern that, through dissonance, drags their emotional state into compliance with their daily activities. This approach has demonstrated surprising efficacy in double-blind studies.

The Philosophy of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy, by Don Robertson, is a sadly long-winded treatise that attempts, and mostly succeeds, to show that the roots of CBT can be found in ancient traditions, mostly Stoicism but also Epicureanism, Skepticism, and even Buddhism. But it's too long, too wordy, too desperate to make its case.

Robertson starts by showing that modern psychotherapy, the sort where the patient must *do* something to overcome his problems, is trying to be exactly what philosophy was two millennia ago: a *practice*, a daily routine, a way of living that was harmonious with both human nature and the inevitability of life and life's challenges. Each of these, be it Buddhism or Stoicism or whatever, taught people both a fundamental set of truths about the human condition, and a daily practice for how to manage the frustrations and even despair that comes from those truths.

Robertson then goes through the various standard practices of CBT and its modern precursors, and shows how the Stoics were already doing all of those things 2,000 years ago: mental rehearsal for tragedy or disaster, daily planning to do "the work the world has brought you," always with the tagline, "fate willing," nightly journaling of your day to ensure your actions were in line with your planning, actively imagining a present counsellor over your shoulder to see your own actions as others would see them; imagining your frustrations as others might see them to assess their true weight; and embracing a long-term sense of love, happiness, and joy that has nothing to do with immediate pleasures, but instead is ultimately about ensuring your own long-term mental health, by embracing trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, intimacy, productivity, and the ultimate condition: integrity.

This book, however, could have been half as long and accomplished twice as much. Robertson tries too hard, and co-opts too many different traditions, in his attempt to make his point. At several points Robertson quotes Spinoza, Montaigne, Descartes, and other philosophers, and this comes across much less as a connection between the two traditions and more as an argument from authority: "All these smart guys embraced Stoicism, so you should as well." At one point, Robertson makes a tenuous connection between the teachings of Jesus and his premise, but the material there is weak and desperate; it comes out as an attempt to reassure his audience that there's nothing un-Christian about either practice, and it's one that fails.

This is a thick book of small but valuable nuggets of knowledge and wisdom. It is most definitely not a self-help book, nor is it really a solid introduction to either Stoicism or CBT. Robertson jumps around too many different issues to do more than make his central case: everything in CBT has been done before, successfully,

and CBT practitioners should both understand that and be proud of it.

James Andersen says

I give this book 3 out 5 Stars because, although this book was written with a focus on Stoicism and its relations to Psychotherapy, the author makes references to Christianity and when he does the references are more so ignoramus and implied biased (e.g. Biblical God as Myth, The Laws seen as Arbitrary, Catholicism seen as Oppressive, etc...) one gets a sense of being spiteful toward Christianity, which is a shame considering the High Quality Intellectual work that went into the book.

The Author does a wonderful job, Explaining the History, Practices, and Principles of Stoicism as well as the History, Practices, and Principles of REBT and CBT leading to the bridge-building and elucidating of the relations between Stoicism and Modern Psychotherapy practices in REBT and CBT [even to a certain extent Modern Philosophy and Self-Improvement Movement] which I much enjoyed seeing these connections made.

If asked whether or not I would recommend this book to others, I would, but I would have to qualify that recommendation with the pre-caution that the peppered biases and misconceptions the author makes toward Christianity throughout the book.

John Carncross says

Paul Tillich wrote in the Courage to Be that a devout stoic was a greater danger to first century Christianity than a tyrant like Nero. This is because we know what to do with an enemy (resist and persevere) but the stoics provided a real alternative (in the west!) for finding peace in one's soul. Robertson shows the debt of modern CBT and REBT to Stoic writings, exercises, mindfulness and meditation.

I was initially confused. Why do empirically tested best practices need ancient philosophical underpinnings? Roberson argues that in the ancient world, philosophies were a way of life and not just a set of ideas. Robertson hints that the real goal of the book is to inspire CBT practitioners and their clients to adopt a stoic way of life.

I would recommended this book to people getting and providing CBT therapy. And to anyone who is in to this sort of thing :)

Colin says

An excellent review of ancient Stoic philosophy and how it formed the basis of a number of therapeutic techniques in modern psychology, especially Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy. There is a lot of practical "how-to" advice that applies equally to self-therapy and Stoic philosophy . . .

Reid says

Nice book. Lends support and evidence to the promise of Stoicism, the forerunner of CBT therapy, and records the links that were badly needed and mostly ignored, apparently, by the major rational and cognitive behavioral "originators" (Ellis, Beck). (An even better focus on Stoicism is *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy* by William B. Irvine.)

Richard says

I read this book accidentally, after an embarrassing lapse of drunk Inter-Library Loan requesting. I was quite astonished when my library told me they'd summoned a copy from a few hundred miles away, and then vaguely recalled stumbling over the title somewhere and — did I request it? Oh, I guess I did.

I felt bad: I already had too many books that I was “currently reading”, and while this one still looked interesting, it probably wouldn’t have normally climbed to the top of the heap. But the shame of sending it back home unread was too much. So read it — and finish it I did, wrapping up literally in the wee small hours on the day it was due to be returned.

This is probably a great book for the philosophically-minded psychologist, especially one who specializes in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, or perhaps Rational-Emotive Behavioral Therapy, which is apparently closely related. Or a philosophically-minded patient under the guidance of such a therapist.

It’s also going to be a great book for a philosophical type who is intrigued by how the ancient teachings of Socrates and his ilk still reverberates strongly — and in psychotherapy! How cool is that?

Those are pretty obvious. But I’m neither (although if you think I *should* be under the guidance of a psychologist, I wouldn’t argue with you), and I still found it quite interesting.

About that: really, this is just part of the zeitgeist.

You see mindfulness everywhere these days, for example. Well, we tend to look towards Buddhism for the roots of that, but it can also be traced back to the Stoics (and several other branches descending from Socrates’ teachings). In fact, the parallels between Stoicism and some aspects of Buddhism are actually quite stunning.

Which I liked, because there’s nary a hint of spiritualism or other annoying forms of *woo* here, and that kind of thing can make me throw a book across the room in frustration.

But this touches on that zeitgeist thing in another way. I think I’ve typed this two or three times in the past

few days: our cognition was adequately adaptive during the Paleolithic, but is performing dismally in our modern civilization. We just didn't evolve to think rationally, but it never really got in the way until recently.

And Stoicism (as well as *Cognitive Behavioral Therapy*, and *Rational-Emotive Behavioral Therapy*) is all about training ourselves to pause and consider our responses. If you've been paying attention, that should make you think of Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Thinking "fast" (what Kahneman also calls "System 1" thinking) is what our evolution handed us, and thinking "slow" ("System 2") is what we can do when we deliberate on those fast results, and probably amend them.

Here's a little chart the author provided to show that Seneca, one of the more famous Stoic philosophers, saw that same process.

Well, here it is about a person's emotional responses, which is the connection to therapy.

But that's actually beside the point. Because it is precisely when we have a strong identity attachment to a conclusion that we're likely to be misled by our instinctive "fast" thinking. When we're detached from something emotionally, it's pretty easy to pause and reconsider. And, yeah, that's the same "detachment" that Buddhists and Stoics are renowned for.

Which gets to something I've been thinking about in recent years. The more we *care* about something, the less we should trust ourselves that our opinions are valid. And it is precisely when someone is most passionate about a topic that we should be wary and seek opinions from others. That's counter to much of what we tend to do; we're attracted to those who feel strongly and speak movingly — but I think the evidence is growing pretty strong that their thinking (unless they're highly trained Stoics, perhaps?) is probably flawed.

Fernando Rainho says

Livro excelente e bem escrito. Feito por alguém que claramente conhece a filosofia estoica assim como a prática psicoterapia em TCC. Existe um grande preconceito sobre o "ser estoico" como alguém frio que racionaliza de forma defensiva as emoções. Fruto de mas traduções e interpretações de termos antigos, bem como falta de aprofundamento teórico do conteúdo proposto e praticado por epicteus, seneca, marco aurélio... o estoicismo em muito é a base/raiz originária do trabalho em psicoterapia atual e vai muito além do "não são os eventos em si mas a forma como interpretamos esses eventos que causam sofrimento". Um conjunto de técnicas poderosas e auto aplicáveis são encontradas nesses escritos. Filósofos em seu termo originário, praticantes de sua filosofia no dia a dia e não apenas teóricos de biblioteca. Leitura altamente recomendado para quem tem interesse em aprimorar sua qualidade de vida e/ou nível de entendimento a respeito do assunto em questão. Nota: 5

Greg says

A practical and philosophical gold mine

Having been interested in both Stoicism and REBT for decades, this book does a laudable job of explaining and discussing the impact of Stoicism on modern psychotherapy. It also gives countless pearls - both ancient and modern - for using these principles in everyday life. An excellent read.

Tyler Muse says

Practical book on stoicism

One of the best and most practical books on stoicism. Robertson shows how one can easily enact stoic principles and habits in your life.

Karen says

Ack! So many thoughts! So hard to get them down in a logical sensible way for book club. It has been a long time since a book has rocked me page-by-page with such intense ambivalence.

am·biv·a·lence? [am-biv-uh-luhns]

noun

1. uncertainty or fluctuation, especially when caused by inability to make a choice or by a simultaneous desire to say or do two opposite or conflicting things.
2. Psychology- the coexistence within an individual of positive and negative feelings toward the same person, object, or action, simultaneously drawing him or her in opposite directions.

The whole stoic suck-it-up/CBT workbooky brain re-training thing and the uber-masculine and/or scientific language of doing "war" to master and dominate your own thoughts and forcing yourself to say that you are in complete "control" your feeling is so repellent and literally gives me panic attacks just reading it. On the other hand the notion of being aware of what you can and can't control, and making peace with how little you can control (it does seem wise to admit that really the single thing we seem to be able to affect in some way is our own response to events and circumstances), is incredible, and the two ideas are totally intertwined throughout this book. Maybe if the author was a little less dismissive of "exotic" (feminine?) eastern thought" I could integrate the paradoxes and challenges of those two linked notions better, because a lot of the CBT and Stoic ideas are very similar to Buddhist ideas, but the Buddhist ideas are somehow expressed in kinder and funnier and more relational language in significant, but subtle ways. Arg. Inarticulate watery girl-mind is arising.

Eric says

Really enjoyed this book - thought it was a good intro to stoicism and the comparison to modern psychology

