

THE BIG IDEAS



Warrior vs. Librarian

Which are you?

CBT

Has its roots in Stoicism

Highest Human Purpose

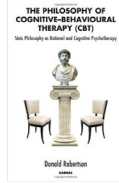
High five your highest self.

The Reserve Clause

Deo Volente.

The Ideal Sage

Your ultimate guide.



The Philosophy of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

Stoic Philosophy as Rational and Cognitive Psychotherapy

BY DONALD ROBERTSON · KARNAC BOOKS © 2010 · 316 PAGES

“However, there is an important sense in which psychotherapy, even as we know it today, can trace its roots much further back, perhaps all the way back into prehistory, before such ideas were committed to writing. Modern psychotherapy, especially in the form of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), the most ‘modern’ of our contemporary schools, can also be viewed as part of an ancient therapeutic tradition derived from the informal philosophical circle surrounding Socrates (470-399 bc), and, therefore, stretching back to Athens in the fifth century bc. Of the various schools of Socratic philosophy, the one that bears the strongest therapeutic orientation is undoubtedly Stoicism, especially that of the later Roman schools. According to Galen, physician to the Stoic Emperor Marcus Aurelius, Chrysippus, one of the founders of Stoicism, emphasized the role of philosophers as that of ‘physician of the soul,’ someone whom we would now refer to as *psychotherapist*.”

~ Donald Robertson from *The Philosophy of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy*

Got problems with your soul?

These days, you’d see a psychotherapist.

But, back in the day, it was the *philosopher* who’d help you optimize--they were the preferred *physician of the soul*.

This book is about the philosophical roots of modern psychotherapy. Specifically, it outlines the connection between cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and [Stoicism](#).

Ryan Holiday recommended it in his great book [The Daily Stoic](#). (I picked it up along with a bunch of other titles we’ll be exploring.)

As a lover of both ancient wisdom and modern science, I really enjoyed it. It’s not your typical self-help book but if you, like me, are deeply interested in the intersection of ancient (Stoic) philosophy + modern psychotherapy, I think you’ll dig it. (Get a copy [here](#).)

It’s packed (!) with Big Ideas. I’m excited to share some of my favorites so let’s jump straight in!

WARRIOR OF THE MIND VS. LIBRARIAN OF THE MIND

“Recent decades have seen growing interest in movement called ‘philosophical practice’ and other attempts to promote philosophy outside of the academic institutions as something that ‘ordinary people’ do in cafes, or apply to their own life problems in the form of individual counselling or group sessions with a quasi-therapeutic style. Even many academic philosophers appear to crave, quite understandably, a return to the days when philosophical discourse was meant to be rooted in corresponding behavioral and emotional transformation and not *merely* an ‘academic’ pursuit abstracted from any practical application. The ancients conceived of the ideal philosopher as a veritable *warrior* of the mind, a spiritual hero akin to Hercules himself,

*“Philosophy does not promise
to secure anything external
for man ... the subject matter
of the art of living is each
person’s own life.”*

~ Epictetus

" Marcus Aurelius speaks of the Stoic philosopher training himself to become, 'an athlete in the greatest of all contests—the struggle not to be overwhelmed by anything that happens.'"

~ Donald Robertson

but since the demise of the Hellenistic schools, the philosopher has become something more bookish, not a warrior, but a mere *librarian* of the mind."

This is one of my favorite Ideas from all the books we've covered.

In the old days, a philosopher (literally: a LOVER of wisdom!!) was a *warrior* of the mind. He or she ceaselessly did battle with their lower selves in pursuit of complete self-mastery such that they could give themselves most fully to the world.

Today? Today the average "philosopher" has fallen out of touch (and out of love?) with the true meaning of the word. Rather than showing up and doing battle every day as a proper warrior, they are mere *librarians* of Ideas--cataloguing and debating rhetorical concepts but forgetting the fact that the most important part of the process is to actually LIVE the Ideas.

Warriors vs. Librarians of the mind. <-- So good.

Here's how Ryan Holiday puts it in *The Daily Stoic*: *"The Stoics loved to use boxing and wrestling metaphors the way we use baseball and football analogies today. This is probably because the sport of pankration—literally, 'all strength,' but a purer form of mixed martial arts than one sees today in the UFC—was integral to boyhood and manhood in Greece and Rome. (In fact, recent analysis has found instances of 'cauliflower ear,' a common grappling injury, on Greek statues.) The Stoics refer to fighting because it's what they knew.*

Seneca writes that unbruised prosperity is weak and easy to defeat in the ring, but a 'man who has been at constant feud with misfortunes acquires a skin calloused by suffering.' This man, he says, fights all the way to the ground and never gives up.

That's what Epictetus means too. What kind of boxer are you if you leave because you get hit? That's the nature of the sport! Is that going to stop you from continuing?"

I'm sure there are some really tough librarians out there, but the warrior-philosopher KNOWS life will be challenging, rubs their hands together when it gets hard, chants OMMS ("obstacles make me stronger!) and gets back to work.

Why do we want to engage in this fight? To have, as modern-day Warrior-Philosopher Mark Divine says in the title of his book, an [Unbeatable Mind](#). A hallmark of that type of unbeatable mind? Uncommon resolve.

Like this: *"It took me considerable resolve to write three books in one year in 2013 when I finished *The Way of the SEAL*, *8 Weeks to SEALFIT*, and this one all in an eleven-month period. Some may call that uncommon resolve. The same kind of resolve is required for any goal or project that has an unreasonable level of challenge...*

Is resolve a quality that can be developed? Of course it can—it is a natural corollary to forging mental toughness. You develop uncommon resolve by deepening confidence and courage, fortified with five attributes that define character and resolve. They are:

I. Desire: you must desire the outcome as if your hair were on fire.

II. Belief: you must believe in your purpose, your mission and yourself.

III. Attitude: you must have a positive attitude, drive, and be able to mobilize a team with it.

IV. Discipline: you must be willing to give up unnecessary attachments and commitments and put in the right amount of daily effort toward your goal.

V. Determination: you must have an unwavering commitment to finish the job, stay the course, and never, ever quit."

How's your resolve?

Remember: Desire + Belief + Attitude + Discipline + Determination.

Let's not categorize Ideas. Let's LIVE these Ideas--like proud, heroic warriors of the mind.

P.S. Speaking of heroes and Hercules, in [Natural Born Heroes](#), Christopher McDougall tells us: “Theseus was just a boy out to prove himself when he went to Crete, and Hercules wasn’t exactly the hulking He-Man we’ve come to assume. Hercules was never the strongest guy in the fight; in fact, Pindar even went hard the other way and chalked Hercules’s achievements up to a little man syndrome: Hercules was ‘of short stature with an unbending will.’ The heroes were still plenty powerful, but muscle alone would never get them out of a jam. Their real strength was their ears: Theseus and Hercules were lifelong learners and equal-opportunity students, always seeking advice and just as happy to get it from women. That was the mark of a hero and the signature of pankration: total power and knowledge.”

COGNITIVE-BEHAVIORAL THERAPY AND ITS STOIC ROOTS

“It is not the things themselves that disturb people but their judgments about those things.”

~ Epictetus

“Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is the predominant school of modern evidence-based psychological therapy. As the name implies, it employs both cognitive and behavioral interventions. Unfortunately, this name belies the fact that CBT is concerned with helping clients to deal with irrational or disturbing emotions, and to cultivate rational, healthy, and proportionate ones in their stead. The terms ‘cognitive’ and ‘rational’ also suggest to some people’s minds that CBT must be a form of *rationalization*, or that it neglects emotion, intuition, or practical experience. However, in this sense of the word, CBT is probably *anti-rationalist*, in its emphasis upon the value of behavioral experiments and empirical observation. In other words, CBT emphasizes that, in so far as it is reasonable to do so, beliefs should be tested out in practice, in the laboratory of our personal experience.”

Alright. So, the book is all about making the connection between ancient Stoic philosophy and modern-day cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT).

To establish the connection, Donald brilliantly walks us through all the parallels between CBT and Stoicism and all the references made to Stoicism by the two founders of CBT--Albert Ellis, who created something called Rational-Emotive Behavioral Therapy ([see Notes on A Guide to Rational Living](#)) and Aaron Beck (who extended that into CBT).

If you ever need therapy, philosophers + science says: stay away from the Freudian approach and lean into CBT. (That or the similar mindfulness-based approach known as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) we talk about in [The Happiness Trap](#) + [The Confidence Gap](#).)

(And, while we’re recommending therapeutic approaches, if you have marital issues and are seeking therapy, go with Jon Gottman’s approach we talk about in [The 7 Principles for Making Marriage Work](#) that’s evidence-based as well.)

So, what do both CBT and Stoicism tell us?

In short, that our feelings follow our thoughts and behaviors.

As Donald tells us, the three primary tenets of CBT are:

1. “Cognitive activity affects behavior.
2. Cognitive activity may be monitored and altered.
3. Desired behavior change may be affected through cognitive change.”

And, we can go to the very first line of Epictetus’s [Enchiridion](#) for the essence of Stoicism: “Of things some are in our power, and others are not.”

The Stoics tell us that the wise sage is able to see which things are within our control and which are not and then focus EXCLUSIVELY on the things within our control.

Hint: The only thing within our control is how we choose to respond to each moment. The target? Life with virtue. Period.

“If guilt serves a purpose, it is surely to motivate us to change today, in order to prepare for tomorrow, but not to condemn ourselves to endless complaining about yesterday.”

~ Donald Robertson

"If our emotions are not ultimately determined by external events alone but by our own beliefs and value judgments, then the habit of making healthy and rational judgments is more valuable to us than anything else."

~ Donald Robertson

P.S. Sidenote: Although the *Enchiridion* is often translated as "handbook" it literally means "ready at hand"--not in a "handbook" kinda way but in a SWORD kinda way. The wisdom is READY AT HAND (!!) to deal with any of life's challenges that may pop up. Apparently, God bless them, a librarian-philosopher must have translated the title--lol.

P.P.S. Donald suggests that Shakespeare was likely influenced by Stoic thought when he had Hamlet say, "There's nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so."

YOUR HIGHEST HUMAN PURPOSE

"The ideal state of the human mind is not irrational indulgence in mere sensory pleasure (*hedonism*), therefore, but something known as *eudaimonia*, a Greek term that encompasses rational fulfilment, happiness, and well-being. If 'daemon' were taken simply to mean mind, the word *eudaimonia* could be literally translated as meaning 'mental health,' although this does fail to do justice to the metaphysical connotations of the Greek word, which can also be taken to mean being on good terms with one's inner daemon or guide, a concept not unlike the Christian idea of conscience. In any case, the cardinal virtue or quality (*areté*) that contributes to *eudaimonia* is simply wisdom (*sophia*), or, if you prefer, it could be translated as meaning philosophical 'enlightenment.' Knowing this leads us to value and pursue the cultivation of human wisdom above all else, which is illustrated in the very word 'philosophy,' the *love of wisdom*. Philosophy in this concrete sense, the *everyday* pursuit of wisdom, is, therefore, defined as the *art of living*, the highest human purpose, though different schools of ancient philosophy differed on their interpretation of specifically how this was to be put into practice. It should be evident that for Socrates and the Stoics, the notion that the goal of human life is the pursuit of wisdom does not equate to saying that the 'meaning of life' is that one should spend it reading books on philosophy, but, rather, that one should strive for practical wisdom in facing everyday challenges."

We've talked a fair amount about hedonic pleasure vs. eudaimonic joy (like in [this Micro Class](#) for example).

But I never knew the precise etymology of the word *eudaimonia* until reading this book.

To feel a deep sense of joy and mental well-being, we must be on good terms with our inner daimon or inner guide or inner soul.

Wow. Think about that for a moment.

That little part of you that's A L W A Y S watching you (yah, that guy/gal!) is your inner daimon. If he/she likes what she sees? Then we're all good. Literally. We feel great!

If not... Well, then we've got issues and we're likely to follow the siren songs and crash into our kryptonite.

The solution is really really really simple.

And equally challenging.

Be good.

Live with areté.

Make yourself and your inner daimon proud. Experience *eudaimonia*.

That's really the only thing that matters.

And... As I like to say when I describe something that's simultaneously super simple and super challenging: "Good luck with that!"

Laughing with my daimon as we send you and your daimon virtual high fives!

" O God, give us
serenity to accept what
cannot be changed
courage to change what
should be changed
and wisdom to distinguish one
from the other."

~ Reinhold Niebuhr

TOP STOIC PRACTICE: THE RESERVE CLAUSE (AKA: DEO VOLENTE)

"Seneca defines the reserve clause by the following formula, 'I want to do such and such, as long as nothing happens which may present an obstacle to my decision.' He gives the example, 'I will sail across the ocean, if nothing prevents me,' and elaborates,

Nothing happens to the Sage contrary to his expectations, for he foresees that something may intervene which prevents that which he has planned from being carried out. ...

What he thinks above all is that something can always oppose his plans. But the pain caused by failure must be lighter for one who has not promised success to himself beforehand.

The Stoic, therefore, makes a point of qualifying the expression of every intention by introducing a distinction between his will and external factors beyond his control. The sage, thereby, holds two complementary propositions in mind simultaneously, viz.,

1. I will do my very best to succeed ...
2. while simultaneously accepting that the ultimate outcome is beyond my direct control.

It implies, 'I will try to succeed, but am prepared to accept both success and failure with equanimity,' and, thereby recognizes human fallibility. Centuries later, Christian theologians would signify the same notion by appending letters 'DV,' or *Deo Volente* ('God Willing') to their correspondence."

Want a bulletproof way to maintain your confidence--aka true, deep, abiding trust in yourself? Simultaneously do your very best AND know (!!!) that the results are *always* out of your control THEN love whatever happens as you continue to live with arete moment to moment.

(#repeat. Forever.)

Apparently, the patron god of philosophy is Apollo. Apollo was an archer. Here's the thing with archery: You only have control over everything leading up to releasing the arrow. Then? Then you literally let it fly and know that the ultimate outcome is beyond your control. (For example, a wind may come out of nowhere and blow the arrow off course--hard to control that variable. :)

As Donald says, "*Cicero uses this analogy of the archer shooting an arrow at a target. His ultimate wish is to hit the target, but he can only do everything within his power to shoot his arrow straight, and so shooting straight, as opposed to actually hitting the target, must be his primary concern, and so it is with life in general. Nowadays we say, 'All that anyone can ask is that you try your best.' Marcus Aurelius writes, 'Thanks to action 'with a reserve clause'... there can be no obstacle to my intention.'*"

<-- That's a genius articulation of the whole "focus on PROCESS not results" theme we come back to often: We need to pick a target but then *shooting straight* must be our primary concern, NOT actually hitting the target.

In *The Inner Citadel*, Pierre Hadot tells us that [Aurelius](#) says, "*At every instant, I encounter the event which has been reserved for me by Destiny; that is, in the last analysis, the unique, universal, and common Cause of all things. The discipline of desire will therefore consist in refusing to desire anything other than what is willed by the Nature of All.*"

<-- The way of the Sage: Anticipate that obstacles will arise then love whatever happens.

P.S. I'm having fun practicing the reserve clause by qualifying my goals with the fact that some things are out of my control.

To support the cause, I now have "DEO VOLENTE" on my white board. *God Willing*. Combine that with my mantra "*Thy will be done*" in response to whatever arises = magic.

"Underlying this conviction is the parallelism between physical and spiritual exercises: just as, by dint of repeated physical exercises, athletes given new form and strength to their bodies, so the philosopher develops his strength of soul, modifies his inner climate, transforms his vision of the world, and, finally, his entire being."

~ Donald Robertson

THE IDEAL SAGE <-- YOUR ULTIMATE GUIDE

"Begin with the end in mind,' is one of the 7 *Habits* recommended in recent decades by the bestselling self-help author Stephen Covey. It is not a trivial matter to observe that, unlike Stoicism and most classical philosophies, CBT lacks any clear account of the ideal toward which it aims. ... By contrast, one of the most fundamental techniques of ancient philosophical therapy appears to have been the public discussion and private contemplation and visualization of the sage and his virtues, the imaginary embodiment, ideal role model, and ultimately 'end,' or goal, of philosophical practice."

Remember that relationship with your inner soul that will determine your sense of well-being?

Keeping that highest version of yourself in mind and asking it what it thinks you should do in any given moment is a REALLY good way to keep yourself on track.

Another great, classic technique the Stoics employed? Invite your version of the heroic sage to visit you throughout the day. When you're facing a choice (whether it's the mundane, "Should I hop online now and check notifications?" or the more challenging, "Should I do X or Y (or Z)?"), try imagining what your ideal sage would do.

This is the perfect embodiment of the "What would Jesus do?" approach. I like to ask myself that question and I also find myself striving to embody the qualities of Marcus Aurelius (noble leader) and [Epictetus](#) (intense teacher) as well. What would Aurelius do? Epictetus?

How about YOU? Who are your heroes? How are you like them and how can you be more like them throughout your day?

Today a good day to BE that highest version of yourself?

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

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you'll probably like...

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[A Guide to Rational Living](#)

[Thoughts of a
Philosophical Fighter Pilot](#)

[The Inner Citadel](#)

[Meditations](#)

[The Enchiridion](#)

[The Discourses](#)

[Letters from a Stoic](#)

[On the Shortness of Life](#)

[The Obstacle Is the Way](#)

The Author of "The Philosophy of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy"

DONALD ROBERTSON



Donald Robertson is an integrative psychotherapist and trainer, who specializes in the treatment of anxiety and the use of cognitive-behavioral approaches to clinical hypnotherapy. He is the author of a number of articles on philosophy and psychotherapy in professional journals, and the forthcoming book, *The Discovery of Hypnosis, The Collected Writings of James Braid*. Donald's background in academic philosophy has helped him to appreciate the relationship between modern psychotherapy and ancient philosophy, a subject that he has frequently written about and lectured upon in training courses and professional conferences over the years. Connect: philosophy-of-cbt.com.

About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at optimize.me.