

## A Comparative Analysis of Stoicism and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

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**Abstract:** After the Peloponnesian war, Athens fell, life became more miserable and people lost sense of control. Aristotle had passed on prior to that, consequent upon these, philosophy was no longer the medicine of the soul; atrocities and immoralities were committed. These led to the emergence of post Aristotelian philosophy among which was stoicism. Centuries later, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) emerged using the propositions of stoicism to back up its major activity of treating mental disorders like depression and anxiety. This academic piece has therefore endeavoured to present an examination of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) as it pertains to the philosophical background and dictates of stoicism. Therein, it was apparently understood that stoicism was a consequence of the aftermaths of the Peloponnesian war, where people lost sense of morality and how to live a better life in the society. A greater part of the Nigerian society becomes an example to this. Stoicism has three main tenets on which CBT was built and that is Logic, Acceptance and Control. CBT was understood to be a form of therapy amongst others, used in treating certain mental disorders in both adults and non-adults. The textual method of analysis was employed. While expository and evaluative methods were used to analyse the two major variables, harnessing their strengths and weaknesses. It was discovered that despite the influence of the stoics in curtailing human disorder, there is an incompatibility between a philosophy which is for life, and a therapy which is for a particular disorder.

**Key Words:** Stoicism, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).

### Background to the Study

After Aristotle completed his great speculative system, philosophy altered its direction into a new emphasis. The schools of thought that evolved helped to shape this new direction, namely: Academics, Peripatetic, Cynicism, Epicureanism, Stoicism, skepticism and Neo-Platonism. They were of course, largely influenced by their predecessors. What made the philosophers of this era different, however, was that their emphasis was practical. Philosophy became more practical by emphasizing the art of living (even though they also dealt with metaphysical and epistemological issues). These new directions in philosophy were brought about to a great extent by the historical conditions of the times; especially the aftermaths of the Peloponnesian war. People lost sense of control over their lives, within the community. Philosophy therefore shifted to this practical emphasis in a direction of increasing concern for the more immediate world of the universe.

As social beings, the path to happiness for humans is found in accepting this moment as it presents itself, by not allowing ourselves to be controlled by our desire for pleasure or our fear of pain, by using our minds to understand the world around us and to do our part in nature's plan, and by working together and treating others in a fair and just manner; this was the major atmosphere that established the stoics' thought. Stoicism includes some of the most distinguished intellectuals of antiquity. Founded by Zeno of Citium (334-262 BCE), who assembled his school on the Stoa (Greek for porch, hence the term stoic), this philosophical movement attracted Cleanthes (303-233 BCE), and Aristo in Athens. Later it found such advocates in Rome as Cicero (106-43 BCE), Epictetus (60-117 CE), Seneca and the emperor Marcus Aurelius. This influence helped to fix the overwhelming Emphasis of stoic philosophy upon ethics, although the stoics addressed themselves to all three divisions of philosophy formulated by Aristotle's Lyceum, namely, logic, physics and ethics (Stumpf and Fieser 108).

The precursor Zeno, was widely acclaimed for his moral earnestness, and Athenians gave him official honors (Law head 94).

The Stoics taught that emotions resulted in errors of judgment which were destructive, due to the active relationship between cosmic determinism and human freedom, and the belief that it is virtuous to maintain a will that is in accord with nature. Because of this, the Stoics presented their philosophy as a way of life, and they thought that the best indication of an individual's philosophy was not what a person said but how a person behaved. To live a good life, one had to understand the rules of the natural order since they taught that everything was rooted in nature (Uduigwomen 44).

Hundreds of years later, after the current of the Stoics philosophy, problems that pertains to human condition is still not yet solved. Thus, certain psychological theories emerged to adopt the Stoics position, and work out blue prints towards which human disorder can be solved. Example of such antidotes was the CBT discussed explicitly by Aaron T. Beck in his *cognitive theory of depression* (Beck 28). His theory states that depressed people think the way they do because their thinking is biased towards negative interpretations. According to this theory, depressed people acquire a negative schema of the world in childhood and adolescence as an effect of stressful life events, and the negative schema is activated later in life when the person encounters similar situations. Cognitive behavioral therapy has been shown as an effective treatment for clinical depression (Driessen et al. 538). The American Psychiatric Association Practice Guidelines (April 2000) indicated that, among psychotherapeutic approaches, cognitive behavioral therapy and interpersonal psychotherapy had the best-documented efficacy for treatment of major depressive disorder (Hirschfeld, Robert PDF). In the United Kingdom, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommends CBT in the treatment plans for a number of mental health difficulties, including posttraumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), bulimia nervosa, and clinical depression. Cognitive behavioral therapy has been shown as an effective treatment for clinical depression. This theory was however heralded by Albert Elli in his Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy. Consequently, the notion of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has been stated in most literatures to be rooted in stoicism. Hence the philosophical origins of cognitive therapy can be traced back to the Stoic philosophers (Still and Dryden 37).

Against these, it becomes necessary to reawaken necessary ingredients from our ancient moral theorists in order to advance other alternatives towards making or creating less immoral and depressed society, especially in a country like Nigeria which is characterised by individuals who see practically little or no reason to keep living, as a result of the pains and miseries surmounting them. The aftermaths of the current pandemic is of course an issue to take into consideration, In Nigeria, Uduigwomen observes that the traditional ideals of good citizenship which manifests in patriotism, honesty, hard work, uprightness, fidelity and respect for the sanctity of human life have taken flight. What remains now are purifying socio-ethical sores straining us in the face and begging for urgent modification (183).

### **Clarification of Terms**

#### **\* Cognitive Behavioural Therapy:**

Cognitive behavioral therapy, henceforth CBT, has been defined as a type of psychotherapy in which negative patterns of thought about the self and the world are challenged in order to alter unwanted behavior patterns or treat mood disorders such as depression or anxiety (emphasis mine). Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a very popular form of therapy because it has been proven effective for a large number of people suffering from anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses. Also, CBT is a psychosocial intervention that is the most widely used evidence-based practice for improving mental health. Guided by empirical research, CBT focuses on the development of personal coping strategies that target solving current problems

and changing unhelpful patterns in cognitions (e.g. thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes), behaviors, and emotional regulation. It was originally designed to treat depression, and is now used for a number of mental health conditions (Field et al. 2006).

\* **Stoicism:**

**Etymology**

Stoic comes from the Greek *stōikos*, meaning “of the portico”. This, in turn, comes from *stoa*, the painted portico, in reference to where the influential Stoic Zeno of Citium taught—his front porch. This term can be understood considering their basic tenets. Thus: “Philosophy does not promise to secure anything external for man, otherwise it would be admitting something that lies beyond its proper subject-matter.

**Modern usage**

The word “stoic” commonly refers to someone indifferent to pain, pleasure, grief, or joy. The modern usage as ‘person who represses feelings or endures patiently’ was first cited in 1579 as a noun, and 1596 as an adjective. In contrast to the term “Epicurean”, the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy’s entry on Stoicism notes, “the sense of the English adjective ‘stoical’ is not utterly misleading with regard to its philosophical origins”. (Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy)

**The Stoic Ethics**

Apparently, Stoicism is a school of philosophy that rose to prominence in Greece during the 3rd Century B.C. There were no psychologists, psychiatrists, or therapists at this time; philosophers, instead, were the “physicians of the soul.” It was philosophy alone that provided the Greeks with guidance, and Stoicism was a particularly useful tool for self-improvement. In their moral philosophy, the Stoics aimed at happiness, but unlike the Epicureans they did not expect to find it in pleasure. Instead, the stoics sort happiness through wisdom, a wisdom by which to control what lay within human ability and to accept with dignified resignation what had to be. Zeno was inspired as a youth by the ethical teachings and the life of Socrates, who had face death with serenity and courage. This example of superb control.... provided the stoics with an authentic model after which to pattern their lives. It was Epictetus who wrote... “do not demand that events should happen as u wish; but wish them to happen as they do happen, and you will go on well. We should not fear future events, for they will happen as they should. In the real sense, we should have nothing to fear, but fear itself... (Stumpf and Fieser109). It is important to note however, that it was their metaphysics that gave the basis upon which their moral philosophy rested.

**Ethics and the Human Drama**

According to Epictetus, moral philosophy rested upon a simple insight, wherein each person is an actor in a drama. What Epictetus meant when he used this image as analyzed by Stumpf and Fieser, was that an actor does not choose a role, but, on the contrary, it is the author or director of the drama who selects people to play the various roles. In the drama of the world, it is God, or the principle of reason, who determines what each person shall be and how he or she will be situated in history. Human wisdom, said the Stoics, consists in recognizing what our role in this drama is and then performing the part well. Some people have ‘bit parts’, while others are cast into leading roles. If it is God’s pleasure that you should act a poor person, see that you act it well, or a handicapped person or a ruler, or a private citizen. For it is your business to act well the given part. The actor develops a great indifference to those things over which he or she has no control, as for example, the shape and form of the scenery, as well all who the other players will be. The actor has no control over the story or the plot. But there is one thing which actors can control and that that is their **attitude and emotions**. We sulk because of a bit part, or be consumed with jealousy because someone else is chosen to be the hero, or feel terribly insulted because the makeup artist has provided a particularly ugly nose. But neither sulking, nor jealousy nor feeling insulted can in any way alter the fact that we have bit parts, are not heroes,

and must wear an ugly nose. These feelings can only rob the actors of happiness. If we can remain free from these feelings...we will achieve a serenity and happiness that are the mark of a wise person. The wise person is the one who knows what his or her role is (Stumpf and Fieser 110).

When you make the decision to seek counseling or therapy because of issues, circumstances and problems which are beyond your control as the stoics have asserted, you are in part making the decision to consult an applied philosopher – your therapist just may not know it! Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is one of the most well-known treatment models for issues such as anxiety, depression, and substance abuse – you would be hard-pressed to find a psychotherapist who does not use any aspect of CBT in his or her practice, but CBT is also deeply indebted to the Stoic philosophers of ancient Greece. ([https://googleweblight.com/i?u=https://www.ukhypnosis.com/2010/07/31/excerpt-the-philosophy-of-cognitive-behavioural-therapy-cbt/&grqid=\\_uTPJpsa&hl=en-NG](https://googleweblight.com/i?u=https://www.ukhypnosis.com/2010/07/31/excerpt-the-philosophy-of-cognitive-behavioural-therapy-cbt/&grqid=_uTPJpsa&hl=en-NG)). Stoicism teaches the development of self-control and fortitude as a means of overcoming destructive emotions; the philosophy holds that becoming a clear and unbiased thinker allows one to understand the universal reason (logos). A primary aspect of Stoicism involves improving the individual's ethical and moral well-being: "Virtue consists in a will that is in agreement with Nature". This principle also applies to the realm of interpersonal relationships; "to be free from anger, envy, and jealousy, "and to accept even slaves as "equals of other men, because all men alike are products of nature" (Robertson 74). Uduigwomen observes that the moral life can simply be defined as the life that is conducive to the attainment of peaceful communal coexistence. It is a life of uprightness, probity, honesty and goodness. .. (175). The Stoic ethics espouses a deterministic perspective; in regard to those who lack Stoic virtue, Cleanthes once opined that the wicked man is "like a dog tied to a cart, and compelled to go wherever it goes". A Stoic of virtue, by contrast, would amend his will to suit the world and remain, in the words of Epictetus, "sick and yet happy, in peril and yet happy, dying and yet happy, in exile and happy, in disgrace and happy", (Epictetus Qtd in "list of CBT techniques" <https://www.infocounselling.com/list-of-cbt-techniques/&grqid=ltFI4cey&hl=en-NG>) thus positing a "completely autonomous" individual will, and at the same time a universe that is "a rigidly deterministic single whole".

### **Framework of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)**

From our previous discussion, we shall examine three tenets of Stoicism that have formed the framework of cognitive-behavioral therapy and hence contributed greatly to human disorder, namely: logic, acceptance, and control.

#### **1) Logic**

Stoics believed that the mind functions as an intermediary between our impressions and actions. A wise mind, they said, could successfully differentiate between accurate and faulty impressions through the use of logic. True impressions were based in observable laws of nature, and they were to be assimilated into one's worldview and acted upon. False impressions had no natural basis, and would lead to destructive emotions if not discarded. A stoic understood that emotional suffering occurs when expectations do not align with reality – when our expectations and interpretations are illogical. Instead of trying to change nature – a fruitless effort – a stoic would realign his or her thoughts to more accurately reflect nature. Reducing the discrepancy between expectations and reality meant reducing one's suffering, as suffering was the result of this discrepancy.

#### **2) Acceptance**

Stoics believed all of nature was to be accepted, even its more tragic elements – death, loss, pain, misfortune, etc. These things are naturally occurring, and therefore part of the natural law. Equally accepting our strengths and limitations, along with the beauties and horrors of the world, would lead to a balanced, well-adjusted life. Stoics were skeptical of overly optimistic or pessimistic judgments – after all, nature isn't all good, or all bad. We are all recipients of good

and bad fortune. So Stoics strived to live in the present moment and non-judgmentally accept their circumstance without forming rigid expectations about what was to come.

### **3) Control**

Stoics recognized that we don't have complete control over external circumstances—our reputations, or the way people treat us, for example. But we do have control over our own thoughts and attitudes. They believed we should concentrate our energy into these things we truly can control, and that doing so would give us the best opportunity to influence the world around us for the better. It was through acting ethically that Stoics believed each individual could do his or her part to combat the injustices of the world. Everything else, they said, was outside our control, and the best we can do is accept it. *These three things – using logical thought to identify unrealistic beliefs, accepting our circumstances, and making the distinction between the things we can and cannot control, are core tenets of cognitive-behavioral therapy. These can be seen in Aaron Beck's original list of cognitive distortions: catastrophizing, all-or-nothing thinking, or magnification and minimization are all faults of logic that can lead to destructive emotions; jumping to conclusions, mind reading, and fortune telling are examples of failure to accept that which we do not know; personalization and overgeneralization are mistakes of locus of control.*

#### **Psychology and Psychotherapy**

**“Man is disturbed not by things, but by the views he takes of them.” – Epictetus, 1st Century Stoic philosopher**

**“People don't just get upset. They contribute to their upsetness.” – Albert Ellis, 20th Century psychologist**

Stoic philosophy was the original philosophical inspiration for modern cognitive psychotherapy, particularly as mediated by Dr Albert Ellis' Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), the major precursor of CBT (Ellis). The original cognitive therapy treatment manual for depression by Aaron T. Beck et al. states, "The philosophical origins of cognitive therapy can be traced back to the Stoic philosophers". A well-known quotation from The Handbook of Epictetus was taught to most clients during the initial session of traditional REBT by Ellis and his followers: *"It's not the events that upset us, but our judgments about the events."* This subsequently became a common element in the "socialization" phase of many other approaches to CBT. The question of Stoicism's influence on modern psychotherapy, particularly REBT and CBT, was described in detail in The Philosophy of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (2010) by Donald Robertson. Moreover, several early 20th century psychotherapists were influenced by stoicism, most notably the "rational persuasion" school founded by the Swiss neurologist and psychotherapist Paul DuBois, who drew heavily on Stoicism in his clinical work and encouraged his clients to study passages from Seneca as homework assignments.

#### **How Stoicism could Contribute Greatly to Human Disorder in the Light of CBT**

The contemplation of universal determinism, of the transience or impermanence of things, including our own mortality, and the meditative vision of the world seen from above, or the cosmos conceived of as a whole, constitute specific meditative and visualization practices within the field of ancient Hellenistic psychotherapy. Contemplation of the good qualities (“virtues”) found in those we admire and in our ideal conception of philosophical enlightenment and moral strength (the “Sage”) provides us with a means of role-modelling excellence and deriving precepts or maxims to help guide our own actions. The rehearsal, memorization, and recall of short verbal formulae, precepts, dogmas, sayings, or maxims resembles the modern practice of autosuggestion, affirmation, or the use of coping statements in CBT. The objective analysis of our experience into its value-free components, by suspending emotive judgments and rhetoric, constitutes a means of cognitive restructuring involving the disputation of faulty thinking, or cognitive distortion. By sticking to the facts, we counter the

emotional disturbance caused by our own “internal rhetoric.” Socratic philosophy has a broader scope than modern psychotherapy, it looks at the bigger picture, and allows us the opportunity to place such therapy within the context of an overall “art of living”, or philosophy of life.

### **Stoicism and Global Pandemic**

The Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus was the last famous Stoic philosopher of antiquity. During the last 14 years of his life he faced one of the worst plagues in European history. The Antonine Plague, named after him, was probably caused by a strain of the smallpox virus. It's estimated to have killed up to 5 million people, possibly including Marcus himself. From AD166 to around AD180, repeated outbreaks occurred throughout the known world. Roman historians describe the legions being devastated and entire towns and villages being depopulated and going to ruin. Rome itself was particularly badly affected, carts leaving the city each day piled high with dead bodies. In the middle of this plague, Marcus wrote a book, known as *The Meditations*, which records the moral and psychological advice he gave himself at this time. He frequently applies Stoic philosophy to the challenges of coping with pain, illness, anxiety and loss. It's no stretch of the imagination to view *The Meditations* as a manual for developing precisely the mental resilience skills required to cope with a pandemic.

First of all, because Stoics believe that our true good resides in our own character and actions, they would frequently remind themselves to distinguish between what's “up to us” and what isn't. Modern Stoics tend to call this “the dichotomy of control” and many people find this distinction alone helpful in alleviating stress. What happens to me is never directly under my control, never completely up to me, but my own thoughts and actions are – at least the voluntary ones. The pandemic isn't really under my control but the way I behave in response to it is. Much, if not all, of our thinking is also up to us. Hence, “It's not events that upset us but rather our opinions about them.” More specifically, our judgment that something is really bad, awful or even catastrophic, causes our distress. This is one of the basic psychological principles of Stoicism. It's also the basic premise of modern CBT, It's not the virus that makes us afraid but rather our opinions about it. Nor is it the inconsiderate actions of others, those ignoring social distancing recommendations, that make us angry so much as our opinions about them (Robertson Pdf download).

### **Evaluation and Conclusion**

Suffice it to say that the ideas discussed above are not mutually exclusive, as there are more to what has been said when it comes to talking about the contribution of the stoics to human disorder. Also, although tons of prints have been expended on this issue, to do an evaluation will not be uncalled for. Despite the influence outlined above, Stoicism and cognitive-behavioral therapy do diverge in significant ways. The most significant difference is perhaps one of scope. Many Stoics, including Epictetus, ascribed to fatalism. They believed that our fates were out of our control, and that the best we could do was dispassionately accept whatever our fates may be. C B T has a more limited scope, and does not posit any hypotheses about the greater workings of the universe. CBT is merely a therapeutic tool, though a powerful one. However, from my research, it was understood that the modern industrialization of psychotherapy, the division of the therapist's labor, has compartmentalized it in a manner that is bound to cause certain contradictions. What was once a lifestyle and calling, a vocation in the true sense of the word, has now been degraded into a mere “job”. By nature, however, we do not merely study the cure of human suffering in order to alleviate it, but also to understand and transform ourselves and our relationship with life itself. Perhaps, as the ancients seemed to believe, the philosopher-therapist must first transform his own way of life, making it a living example of his views, in order to be able to help others. By contrast, if the goal of the “rational” or “philosophical” therapist is merely to do his job and leave it all behind him at the weekend, to treat what we call “psychotherapy” as just another profession then perhaps that's not a very rational or philosophical goal.

There is a fundamental problem in stoics' philosophy of indifference and CBT's adaptation of it. Plain men do not believe that the best to live is to cultivate the virtue of indifference to the exclusion of all other virtues. For instance, if your son or wife dies, to suggest the best way to react is to be indifferent will seem ridiculous to most of us says A. F. Uduigwomen (44). Moreover, the implication of the philosophy of indifference is that immoral acts such as abortion, adultery, stealing and murder done out of indifference would be regarded as good by the stoics. But such a moral outlook is not consistent with our usual ethical beliefs. But as Robertson, LeBon and others are the first ones to point out, therapy is not philosophy. Therapies consist of a collection of techniques (derived from a given theory and refined via pertinent empirical evidence), not of general precepts about how to live one's life. And therapies – especially CBT – are meant to target specific problems for limited periods of time, not to serve as lifelong all-purpose companions. So the difference between Stoicism (or any philosophy of life) and CBT-related (or any other) therapies is that you go to therapy if you have a specific, potentially treatable problem, like depression, or a type of phobia, or panic disorder. Conversely, you reflect on and practice a philosophy your entire life, and it informs your outlook on pretty much everything.

The situation human kind find itself today is such that the ancient tradition and its teaching need not be underestimated. Suicide is in the increase, armed robbery, prostitution, kidnapping and a host of other maladies are perpetrated with the view to finding consolation by such acts. My opinion is that hope need not be lost we need to learn how to accept things we cannot change and play our parts here on earth as far as we can. It is hoped that, in the future research may be conducted on the potential applications of combined Stoicism and CBT-based training courses as a form of long-term emotional resilience-building.

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