



# THE STOIC PHILOSOPHER

## A STOIC UNDERSTANDING OF MORITA THERAPY



### APPLIED STOIC ETHICS AND JAPANESE PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC PRACTICES

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#### Introduction

Stoicism is an all-encompassing philosophical system that provides a coherent worldview to its adherents. Traditionally, the Stoic system consists of three main disciplines: 1. Physics, which lays down the fundamental cosmological aspects of the philosophical school, 2. Logic, which provides the technical and epistemological tools for correct reasoning and 3. Ethics, which deals with both the theoretical and practical questions of living a meaningful life. Since Stoicism, founded in the Greek world, took roots in ancient Roman society, Ethics has been the most widely studied discipline of Stoicism.

Stoic Ethics, just like many other post-Socratic schools, has a primarily eudaimonist approach, that is, its main focus is on eudaimonia, a Greek word that is often translated to English as happiness or the good life. In the ancient world there were no psychologists or counsellors, and what we consider today mental health issues, including the fundamental questions about how to live a good life, were dealt with either in a religious or

philosophical context. In this sense, applied Stoic Ethics could be considered a form of therapy, counselling or coaching.

Stoicism as (self-)therapy survived the decline of the philosophical school and its tools were incorporated and widely used by Christian authors throughout the centuries. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that in the modern era Stoicism directly inspired some psychotherapeutic models. In this lineage, Albert Ellis and his Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) should be mentioned first. However, Aaron T. Beck's Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is the psychotherapeutic approach that is most widely associated with applied Stoicism. In fact, both Ellis and Beck acknowledged the influence of Stoicism on their work and many contemporary therapists openly emphasise the Stoic roots of CBT. One of them, Donald J. Robertson, is also an active and well-known member of the Modern Stoic movement.

#### The CBT Model: a Triangle with a Limp

The axis of Stoic philosophy is reason. The Stoics propounded that knowledge can be attained through the use of reason, and their main tenet, i.e. living according to Nature in the case of humans, basically means living according to reason. Given the importance of reason in Stoicism, it is little wonder that Stoic concepts and practices can be easily adopted by cognitivist

psychologists. This is particularly true about the aforementioned Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).

CBT, at least in theory, focuses on three aspects of human existence:

- Cognition (thoughts)
- Emotions (feelings)
- Behaviour (actions)

These three are often represented by a triangle, and, again in theory, the three vertices of the triangle are of equal importance in a therapeutic context. However, in practice, CBT sessions tend to focus on the first two only, whereas the actual deeds and actions of the client are not addressed to the same extent. Of course, this imbalance is quite understandable if we take into account the fundamentally verbal nature of talking therapies.

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This imbalance is the reason why many CBT therapists started adopting more and more behaviourist techniques or have moved entirely towards more action-focused methods, particularly Constructive Living (based on Japanese Morita and Naikan therapies) or its Western counterpart: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). In this essay we will focus on Morita therapy, even though most of our conclusions could apply to Acceptance and Commitment Therapy as well.

We will argue that, in spite of being separated by culture, space and time, Stoicism can enrich and complement Morita therapy, while also showing that key ideas and practices of the Japanese method might benefit modern-day Stoic practitioners as well.

### **Morita Therapy (Constructive Living)**

Morita Therapy, a Japanese psychotherapy developed by Dr Masatake Morita in the early 20th century, is a holistic, experiential approach which aims to re-orientate patients in nature (Morita 1998). With a focus on allowing suffering as it is- and unpleasant thoughts and emotions conceptualised as natural and uncontrollable phenomena, Morita Therapy contrasts with the focus of established Western approaches on symptom reduction and control. (Krech 2014).

Morita Therapy was later introduced into North America by anthropologist and therapist David K. Reynolds, who combined Morita Therapy with Naikan, another Japanese method, and adapted them to a Western audience. His method is known today as Constructive Living. Although Stoicism predates Morita Therapy and Constructive Living as such, these oriental methods were heavily influenced by Zen Buddhism.

### **Nature in Stoicism and Morita Therapy**

'Nature' plays an important role in Morita Therapy. The word does not refer

only to an isolated concept of the natural world as distinct from humans, but in a broader sense to the reality of all phenomena, encompassing both the environment and human nature (Fujita 1986; Morita 1998). This kind of understanding of Nature rings a bell with Stoic practitioners as well.

Morita Therapy seeks to redress the ultimately self-defeating emotional and behavioural imbalances by moving patients from an unnatural, inauthentic state to a natural, authentic state in which they live in harmony with the natural world, accepting the body and mind's natural reactions to life rather than resisting the inevitable cycles and fluctuations of (human) nature (Kitanishi 2005; Morita 1998). Again, very similar concepts exist in Stoic philosophy.

All phenomena, including those of the mind and body, are in a constant flux: as humans are always interacting with their environments, their thoughts and emotions shift accordingly. (Heraclitus: panta rhei). Analogous to the natural world, these responses cannot be controlled or manipulated by will (Ogawa 2007).

Arugamama (literally, 'as it is') means to accept things as they are: to concede to phenomenological reality and live according to Nature (Morita 1998; Ogawa 2007; Reynolds 1976). Unlike the intellectual reasoning of Stoicism, this is not an intellectually-induced state of acceptance, but an embodied, empirical, intuitive state in which one is immersed in action and has no awareness of the self as set apart from Nature. (Kitanishi 2005; LeVine 1998).

### **Actions: Appropriate but not Completely Correct?**

Trying to harmonise Western rationalistic models with more intuitive Oriental approaches does not come without challenges. In Stoicism, at least in the case of healthy humans, the cognitive processes predate action: we act upon assenting to an impression.

Constructive Living -especially Morita therapy, which was heavily influenced by Zen-based Samurai ethics- emphasises the importance of correct actions while trying to reduce the emotional and cognitive load in our head. The therapeutic goal is to help the client function instead of actively changing his thoughts and feelings. Unlike Stoics, Moritists believe that any change in the cognitive and emotional aspects of the client may (or may not) happen only after he has gained insight into his problems, rather intuitively, through purposeful and meaningful action.

Acting reasonably without a full cognitive grasp of the situation is possible within the Stoic framework, but we must distinguish appropriate and completely correct actions.

*"One may act in a reasonable way without thought or effort. Their actions may be appropriate, but they will not be completely correct unless there has been conscious deliberation. The one whose actions result from conscious choice is preferable, because they will arrive at a firm conclusion that is derived from the internal mental disposition of virtue."* (Sellars: 2006, pp. 121-122)

As we can see, any purposeful and meaningful action that takes place intuitively would be classified by a Stoic as appropriate but not completely correct. Nevertheless, even from an orthodox Stoic perspective, an appropriate action, even if it is not entirely correct, is still preferable to an inappropriate action (or lack of appropriate action). Therefore, we would argue that a strongly behaviour-focused method, such as Morita-therapy, might successfully complement other cognitivist tools and might benefit clients who are either unable to function on a basic level due to, for instance, chronic depression, or suffer from a cognitive paralysis due their tendency to overthink even the most trivial and routinary actions. Once the client is able to look after his basic physical and social needs and is able to reason without procedural impediments, the therapist can gradually switch the focus of the intervention and pay attention

more directly to cognitive processes.

### Emotions and Proto-passions

Manuals of psychotherapy routinely mention emotions, emotional states and emotional control mechanisms, and although many theoretical works are keen to define precisely what they mean by these concepts, in practice a much less sophisticated understanding of emotions prevails. Cognitive and cognitive-behavioural therapists quite often directly try to regulate the feelings of their patients with varying degrees of success. If they approach emotions in the Stoic way, i.e. emotions are the product of a judgement, then this may make some sense, however, more often than not, when trying to control emotions, they actually want to influence initial involuntary emotional reactions (propatheiai or proto-passions).

According to the Stoic understanding, an emotion is formed when we assent to an impression by adding unconscious or irrational value judgments. This is quite different from involuntary first movements or proto-passions. First movements are immediate physical responses to an impression before a judgement is made, while a genuine emotion is formed after there has been time to form a judgement or opinion about that impression.

A therapist may successfully engage with the value judgements of his client, however, trying to alter involuntary first movements or proto-passions would be a futile attempt. As Stoic philosopher Paul H. Aube pointed out (private correspondence, 2022), changing first movements would be a futile attempt, because these are natural and instinctive reactions of the body that one cannot prevent unless numb or unresponsive; or because of immaturity of reason to evaluate the impact of the impressions onto one's experience, value system, memories and desires/aversions, like in the case of a child or mentally disabled individual.

Morita therapists, who often deal with severe cases of chronic depression, would consider any attempt to change the patient's emotions pointless. They would argue (or, most likely, would not argue at all) that our feelings are not under our control whereas our actions are. This approach is reminiscent of Epictetus' teaching of the dichotomy of control. Of course, there are some underlying cultural differences between Stoics and Oriental Morita therapists. Within the Stoic framework, there is no emotion without deliberate assent to an impression, while a Moritist considers that emotions come and go, and we have little or no power over them. At first glance, this may seem to be an irreconcilable difference between Stoics and Moritists, however, if we dive a bit deeper, we might realise that the Japanese concept of emotions is akin to the Stoic understanding of first movements or proto-passions.

### Reestablishing Rational Faculty Through Actions

While there are undeniable cultural and fundamental differences between Stoicism and Japanese psychotherapeutic practices, as we have shown, it is not impossible to find a common denominator. The Stoic emphasis on correct reasoning and assenting in relation to emotions does not mean that actions are undervalued. The Stoic ethical system is a form of virtue ethic, where intentions and attitudes are more important than the actual outcome, however, this by no means implies that deeds are unimportant.

*"In your actions, don't procrastinate."*

*"In your thoughts, don't wander."*

*"Waste no more time arguing what a good man should be. Be one."*

The quotes above from Marcus Aurelius may have been said by any Morita therapist. The importance of acting over procrastination and overthinking in

Morita therapy does not contradict the Stoic approach in its fundamentals.

*"That's why the philosophers warn us not to be satisfied with mere learning, but to add practice and then training."*

*"Don't explain your philosophy. Embody it."*

Just like Epictetus, Moritists emphasise the importance of practice and action over mere intellectual waffling.

As Morita therapy is primarily applied in cases of severe depression and different phobias, especially of a social nature, the activity first approach has the obvious benefit of pushing the patient out of his never-ending intellectual and emotional rat race. By carrying out purposeful deeds, the patient acquires the necessary mental and emotional stability to deal with his more complex problems. His actions, again, might not be completely correct from a Stoic point of view, but getting him temporarily out of his head actually helps him to reestablish his rational faculty that was affected by a mental illness. Once his rational faculty is functioning properly, he will be able to understand his situation and turn his appropriate, but not fully correct, actions into completely correct ones, as he has not only recovered his full rational faculty but also has acquired some practice in acting appropriately.

### The Dichotomy of Control

The recognition of the dichotomy of control, i.e. that some things are within our control and others are not, plays a key role in both Stoicism and Morita therapy.

*"Some things are within our power, while others are not. Within our power are opinion, motivation, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever is of our own doing; not within our power are our body, our property, reputation, office, and, in a word, whatever is not of our own doing."*  
(Epictetus)

*"Trying to control the emotional self willfully by manipulative attempts is like trying to choose a number on a thrown die or to push back the water of the Kamo"*

*River upstream.”*  
(Masatake Morita)

*“To hold one of us responsible for another's behavior is meaningless for the one and demeaning for the other.”*  
(David K. Reynolds: *Playing Ball on Running Water*. New York, Morrow, 1984 p. 20)

“Our own doing”, as Epictetus puts it, is under our control, while things, people and phenomena outside of us are not. Morita therapy also emphasises this distinction, stating that only our actions are really within our control, whereas our feelings or other people’s behaviour are not.

There is, of course, a slight difference between the Stoic and Moritist understanding of emotions, however, as we have already pointed it out, it is quite possible to interpret the references to emotions in Morita manuals in the Stoic way, equating them with involuntary first movements or proto-passions. This makes even more sense if we take into account the modern scientific understanding of emotions, which, according to research, have undeniable physical and neuro-hormonal aspects that cannot be controlled by will.

### **Virtue: The Key to Purposeful Action**

*“Begin taking action now, while being neurotic or imperfect, or a procrastinator, or unhealthy, or lazy, or any other label by which you inaccurately describe yourself. Go ahead and be the best imperfect person you can be and get started on those things you want to accomplish before you die.”*  
(Masatake Morita)

*“Waste no more time arguing about what a good man should be. Be one.”*  
(Marcus Aurelius: *Meditations* - Book X, 167 A.C.E.)

*“Accept your feelings. Know your purpose. And do what needs to be done.”*  
(Masatake Morita)

“What is the goal of virtue, after all, except a life that flows smoothly?”  
(Epictetus: *Discourses* - Book I, 108)

Both Stoicism and Morita therapy recognise the importance of purposeful action. Several Stoic authors, from Seneca to Marcus Aurelius, have warned us about the danger of aimlessness and procrastination. Morita therapy, being a primarily behaviour-centred method, befits perfectly this Stoic attitude.

There is, however, an important difference between the two approaches. As we have already seen, Moritists, drawing on Japanese Zen Buddhism, advocate a deedful and active life in an intuitive way, whereas Stoics emphasise reason and intellectual understanding. Some Western authors have openly criticised Dr Morita for his action-centred approach, arguing that knowing one’s purpose and acting upon it, without a deeper analytical or moral process, might fit a psychopath perfectly well. While we consider this criticism the result of cross-cultural misunderstanding, there is a kernel of truth in it, especially if Moritist principles are applied outside of their original socio-cultural context. It is perhaps not a coincidence that David K. Reynolds, who first popularised Morita therapy in the West, combined it with Naikan therapy, a method that pays more attention to morality-linked duties, emotions and insights.

Is there anything applied Stoicism could apport to Morita therapy and help it prevent possible intercultural misinterpretations in the West? We strongly believe that the answer is yes. While Stoicism accepts the importance of actions, and the way of the prokopton resonates well with Dr Morita’s concept of taking action now, while being imperfect, it also must be noted that the axis of Stoic Ethics is virtue. A Stoic might temporarily focus on preferred indifferents, yet his ultimate purpose is always a virtuous life. “Do what needs to be done”, said Masatake Morita, and his words might make sense in an Oriental cultural milieu, but leave too many questions unanswered

for a Westerner. And here is where Stoicism could step in and solve this dilemma that many Western Morita therapists face when their clients simply don’t know what needs to be done. If we place virtue at the top of the purpose-hierarchy and preferred indifferents underneath, then the picture becomes much clearer and the patient receives a compass into his hands, transforming his random business into meaningful and virtue-centred actions.

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