

The appearances trap

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No one likes to be fooled

Do you like to be tricked or fooled? Do you like finding out you misunderstood something? No, neither does anyone else. We all hate to be taken for a ride, and we find intrinsic pleasure in understanding the world. Think about the last time you solved a riddle, or figured out the surprise ending of a movie ahead of time, or found a solution to a complex problem. That aha! moment, when all the pieces click into place and you see the answer, is delicious and intrinsically rewarding. And, naturally, as the questions get bigger and harder, the pleasure we find in understanding increases. Whether it's searching for the origins of life on Mars or searching for the meaning of life in a book, we take delight in understanding our world.

We desire to know the truth

The ancient Greeks, going back at least to Socrates, appreciated our desire for understanding and incorporated it into their philosophies. The Stoics believed that one of the most fundamental characteristics of humans, and one of our primary motivations, is our desire to know the truth. In the words of Cicero, who based *On Duties* on Stoic wisdom:

“Knowledge of the truth comes closest to the essentials of human nature, for we are all impelled and attracted towards a desire for discovery and knowledge. We think it a fine thing to excel in this, whereas we regard it as wicked and shameful to relapse into error or ignorance or being duped.” (On Duties, 1.18)

You might also recall that both Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius quote a line from Plato's Sophist:

So whenever anyone assents to what is false, one may be sure that he does not willingly give his assent to falsehood (for every mind is deprived of the truth against its will,' as Plato observes), but rather that what is false seemed to him to be true. (Discourses, 1.28, 4-5)

The truth is not obvious

Despite our love of truth, though, difficulties arise because the truth is not always obvious or easy to understand. In fact, when it comes to what is most important in life, many people are misled by superficial appearances. They often mistake opinion for truth, or they might uncritically accept conventional assumptions that money and popularity are good while poverty and insults are bad.

We need to dig deeper

But if we really want to know the truth, we have to dig deeper. We have to become as objective as possible, which means detaching our rational understanding from our egocentric concerns and knee-jerk reactions. Instead of blindly accepting as truth whatever claims we hear from others — watercooler chatter, Twitter tirades, or alluring advertisements — we should make every effort to question our assumptions. For instance, are the claims of this politician or journalist really based in truth? Is this person, product, or publication a reliable guide to understanding the complex realities of our complex world? Do these slick slogans really address the underlying problems of our society? Will this new product really make me happy? What motives does this person or entity have for wanting me to think in this way?

It takes hard work

Our natural thirst for the truth — so obvious in the boundless curiosity of children — can easily give way to complacency as we become socialized into conventional ways of thinking. We can lose our way amidst the desire to fit in and get ahead. But it is absolutely essential for us to continually question our own emotional reactions and the information we receive from the world. There's no doubt that it takes hard work to maintain a reflective and discerning stance toward our impressions. But all the effort is worth it: ultimately, there's no other way to learn the truth.