

Seeing things the way they are

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Learning to see clearly

As Stoics, one of our primary tasks is learning to see the world clearly and accurately not just because we have a passionate interest in the truth, but because seeing clearly is the only way to live a happy life. Why? Because by understanding the world as it is (not the world as we would wish it to be), we can have a good life despite pain, illness, bereavement, and other “misfortunes”. By studying the nature of things, we learn that events which can happen to anyone are not worth getting upset about. They are just part of life.

Asking important questions

When you pause from the busyness of everyday life to ask yourself important questions (Why do bad things happen to good people? What should I do with my life?), you are starting to investigate the nature of things. In order to properly answer these questions, you need to know something about the world, how humans experience the world, and the relationships between various entities in the world. Stoicism offers guidance as we explore these questions in our own lives.

Most of us don't see things clearly

For instance, the Stoic theory of impressions explains our psychological responses to sensory information and concludes that most of us do not see things accurately at all. We have an unfortunate tendency to blend our own subjective judgments with incoming experiential information, which leads to a misinterpretation of events. But once we start to understand how we experience the world, we can remove false information and get a much clearer picture of our relative position in the universe.

Likewise, when we investigate the relationship between ourselves and other things in the world – like that annoying colleague we want to avoid – we develop a deeper understanding of the underlying nature of things. Is it possible, we ask

alongside Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, that there should not be annoying colleagues in the world? No, it's not possible. Annoying colleagues are in the nature of things. And if there are annoying colleagues in the world, why should you not have one? It's got to happen to someone. Why should it not be me or you?

Looking past the surface level

Once we start looking past the surface level of events and start looking at the underlying nature of things, we see how pointless it is to get upset about them. Maybe it's impossible for there to be no annoyances in the world, but it is possible for us not to be annoyed at them. In the same way, it's impossible for there to be no illness, pain, and death, but it is possible for us to handle these trials well. Rather than despairing or raging at them, we can accept that they are bound to happen sometimes and get on with the business of managing them. The Stoics referred to this as living in agreement with nature.

Living in agreement with nature

Living in agreement with nature means we understand that, at a deep level, we can't change the nature of things. Instead, we must figure out how to confront them. Sometimes that means rationally working to improve things, and sometimes it means simply learning to accept them. But either way, as Epictetus tells us, we should apply our understanding of “the way things are” to our own individual circumstances:

Now that you recognize this, you will have no greater concern henceforth, and set your mind on nothing else, than to come to know the criterion by which one can judge whether things are in accordance with nature, and then to apply that knowledge in judging each particular case. - Epictetus, Discourses, 1.11, 15

So stay curious, keep asking questions, and when life gets difficult, remember that the world isn't against you – all those difficulties are just in the nature of things.