

Deep Resistance: Nature, Freedom, and Joy

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The essay below is the final part of the **Deep Resistance** series by [W.D. James](#). It was first published on [Winter Oak](#). The rest of the series can be found at Winter Oak or at W.D. James' [Philosopher's Holler](#).

Nature, Freedom, and Joy (Deep Resistance Part 5)

by [W.D. James](#), [Winter Oak](#), [Philosopher's Holler](#)

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*Fish in the sea, you know how I feel
River running free, you know how I feel
Blossom on the tree, you know how I feel*

*It's a new dawn
It's a new day
It's a new life, for me
And I'm feeling good*

– Nina Simone, *Feeling Good*ⁱ

So far in this series of essays we have talked much of 'nature' and things like 'custom' that may get in its way. However, we have not yet really gotten down to brass tacks about what nature, *phusis*, is for the ancient Greeks. The great Stoic maxim was "Live according to nature". So, we

should determine what that really means.

Phusis

According to Pierre Hadot, explaining the Stoic doctrine, "Living in conformity with reason thus means living in conformity with nature, which causes the evolution of the world *from within*" (my italics).ⁱⁱ For we moderns, 'nature' pretty much just means all the bits of matter out there plus the energy that moves them and possibly the laws of physics which govern that movement. For the Greeks, it meant all of that *plus* the innate striving of all things toward good order. They called this the *telos* of things; the aim and purpose of things. While we tend to see nature in terms of mechanism, they saw things as genuinely organic.

To illustrate this, we can take Aristotle's famous example of the acorn. For him, and the Greeks generally, it is not wrong to speak of the acorn having the purpose of becoming a mighty oak tree. This tendency is innate to the acorn as an acorn (is part of its acorn/oak nature). It is not going to become anything else: a cherry tree, a chicken, or an amoeba. Further, it will seek to become a good, healthy, flourishing (*eudaimonia*) oak tree. It might not succeed: it might not get enough water or sunlight, it might get eaten by a squirrel, or might get ripped up as a sapling by a mischievous person. Nevertheless, it possesses the internal propensity to grow towards becoming a mighty oak.

Further yet, all things have this internal propensity toward good order. The first bits of matter formed themselves into galaxies and solar systems, every living thing strives towards its perfection, even inert matter behaves as proper to its nature. In fact, everything in nature strives towards the good. Nature is an engine of goodness. The acorn strives towards the oak tree, the thoroughbred horse delights in running swiftly, and the human being seeks to live in accordance with her nature as a rational and moral being. The

Stoics did not hesitate to describe this universal quest for goodness as a providential order. As Gilbert Murray expressed it, "We now see what goodness is; it is living or acting according to *Phusis*, working with *Phusis* in her eternal effects towards perfection... It means living according to the spirit which makes the world grow and progress."ⁱⁱⁱ

Finally, as Nina Simone celebrates in the lyrics of the song quoted at the opening of this essay, freedom consists in just this fulfilling of natural tendencies towards the good. The fish swimming in the sea. The river coursing down a mountain ravine. The blossom on a tree (no doubt an oak). Goodness, freedom, and joy ultimately all coincide and inhere in nature.

Philosophic Practices

The practices, or spiritual exercises, we explore in this concluding look at Epictetus will demonstrate some of the practical implications of this view of nature. First, we'll delve into what it is to live according to nature and then look at the conception of virtue that goes with this.

Practice 3: Living according to nature

Conduct yourself in all matters, grand and public or small and domestic, in accordance with the laws of nature. Harmonizing your will with nature should be your utmost ideal. (9)

For good or ill, life and nature are governed by laws that we can't change... Freedom isn't the right or ability to do whatever you please. Freedom comes from understanding the limits of our own power and the natural limits set in place by divine providence. (21)

Each of us is part of a vast, intricate, and perfectly ordered human community... We properly locate ourselves within the cosmic scheme by recognizing our natural relations to one another and thereby identifying our duties. Our duties naturally emerge from such fundamental relations as our

families, neighborhoods, workplaces, our state and nation. Make it a regular habit to consider your roles – parent, child, neighbor, citizen, leader – and the natural duties that arise from them. (42)

Your possessions should be proportionate to the needs of your body, just as the shoe should fit the foot. Without moral training, we can be induced to excess. In the case of shoes, for instance, many people are tempted to buy fancy, exotic shoes when all that is needed is comfortable, well-fitting, durable footwear. (67)

When we name things correctly, we comprehend them correctly, without adding information or judgments that aren't there. (73)

Stoicism is one of the primary sources for the Western 'Natural Law' tradition. Epictetus was able to build a whole theory of natural law out of meditating on a pair of shoes. Let's see what is involved here. We need shoes because we have feet. Our feet have a certain nature, a purpose to serve. They help us to stand upright and to propel ourselves forward. That's what they are for. Hence, if we are to clothe them well by putting them into shoes, those shoes should augment, not hinder, the natural purpose of feet: they should work with nature. So, the shoes should fit well, be sturdy, support us in propelling ourselves forward. Those would be good shoes. Bad shoes would hinder this. Perhaps they have pointy toes that cramp our feet because we think that looks good or inordinately high heels to make us look taller, but which make us clumsy. Bad shoes. Perhaps they're cheaply made and will fall apart or damage the arch of our foot. Bad shoes.

Further, we will *choose* the shoes. This will also be in accordance with nature, or not. The shoes are to serve our bodies, our feet. It is not part of the natural aim of shoes to augment our social standing, make us look good to others, or demonstrate our wealth. If we make our choice in footwear

to serve those purposes, say by having them be made of expensive materials that don't make them any better shoes or because of their brand recognition (the devil wears Prada), we have chosen in a way contrary to nature: *contra natura* as the medieval theologians would have said.

In this little illustration from a pair of shoes, Epictetus has shown us the pattern we can apply to all human artifacts and actions. What is it we are talking about? Nail that down, get it right. Call it what it is. This is what Confucius, in another tradition of natural law, called 'the rectification of names.' Ok, we are concerned with X. What is the place of X in the nature of things, what is its nature, its purpose and function? Given the nature of X, as a free being, act in accordance with nature by cooperating with X performing its function. Then, things will go well.

We can learn the same sort of lesson by reasoning from the very mundane and intimate outward. Each part of your anatomy has a purpose to serve in the overall flourishing of the organism of your body. Recognize that and support the healthy functioning of your parts. You as an individual also have a role or roles to play in the overall functioning of the social organisms of which you are a part (your family, your neighborhood, your nation, the society of all humans—the Stoics coined the term 'cosmopolitan' to denote that). Do your part. Our species has a role to play in the overall operation of our ecosystems and planet.

All of this is what is meant by 'live according to nature'.

Practice 4: Cultivating virtue

Every difficulty in life presents us with an opportunity to turn inward and to invoke our own submerged inner resources. The trials we endure can and should introduce us to our strengths. (17)ⁱ

The surest sign of the higher life is serenity. Moral progress results in freedom from inner turmoil. You can stop fretting about this and that. If you seek the higher life, refrain from such common patterns of thinking as these: "If I don't work harder, I'll never earn a decent living, no one will recognize me, I'll be a nobody," or "If I don't criticize my employee, he'll take advantage of my good will." (19)

Attach yourself to what is spiritually superior. (29)

Clearly assess your strengths and weaknesses...Different people are made for different things... You can't be flying off in countless directions, however appealing they are, and at the same time live an integrated, fruitful life. (40-41)

...find worthy models to emulate... We all carry the seeds of greatness within us, but we need an image as a point of focus in order that they may sprout. (60)

Decide to be extraordinary... (79)

Goodness exists independently of our conception of it. The good is out there and it always has been out there, even before we began to exist. (91)

Virtue has gotten kind of a bad name in recent times. Mainly, that is because we have turned it into its opposite. We tend to think of a virtuous person as a person who doesn't do certain things. Don't smoke, don't drink, don't rock-n-roll. We conceptualize of virtue as restraint, as *not* doing. That is the opposite of the ancient Greek idea. Virtue, *arete*, means 'excellence'. It referred to a power, a capacity for doing. The virtuous person was the one with the power of character to achieve excellence.

Excellence by what measure? By the measure of nature, *phusis*, as developed above. To perform one's purpose, to achieve one's natural goals, to achieve the state of flourishing, requires power. The acorn must have a certain power to survive and grow

into that oak. My beagle dog Ellie, if she is to fulfill her purpose of beagling (rabbit hunting), must possess certain powers and capacities of smell, speed, sight, strength, intelligence, endurance, etc... These are her virtues and she is a 'good' beagle to the extent she possesses these virtues. With humans, we move to the specifically moral sense of virtue: the powers of will and character to choose and act in accordance with our nature.

There are a great many potential moral virtues, but the Greeks distilled these down to four virtues on which all the others were held to rest. The later Christian moralists called them the 'cardinal virtues' to denote their fundamental status. These are wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice. We need to be able to see into the nature of things to know what they are, what their purpose is, and what would constitute their state of flourishing. We must be wise. There will be those who hinder us, who wish to block us from acting according to our wisdom. We must have courage to face up to them. In the particular circumstances in which we find ourselves, we must know how to apply the abstract wisdom we possess to the situation at hand. We must possess the virtue of moderation: neither too much nor too little, neither too strong nor too weak, neither too strenuous nor too apathetic. Finally, we must give each thing and each person their due. What do they need from us? What do we owe them? We must act justly.

Epictetus encourages us to cling to our high ideals and find noble examples to model ourselves on. Do what comes naturally to us, seek the good. Life will test you with hardship. It is a providential world: each time you reach down inside yourself and find the moral resources to respond appropriately to a situation, that resource will grow stronger and equip you for even more challenges in the future. We become progressively stronger and more integrated with ourselves. We experience the tranquility of the Stoic sage.ⁱⁱ

Practices of Resistance

Living according to nature

- The modern world has defined itself *against* nature. The current 'woke' ideology of our global elites actively *denies* nature with its anti-gender and transhumanist goals.
- Capitalism denatures everything by commodifying it.
- Stick with nature, with reality.
- Call things what they are. Not what we are falsely told they are.
- Get good at recognizing the organic purposes in everything, including yourself and your life.
- Discipline yourself to will what nature wills.
- Seek the natural good.
- Nature is a resource for values, not just commodities.
- The Stoic seizes on these values to cultivate their soul.
- With an emboldened soul, they are prepared to take on the large, impersonal world of a complex society and start setting it to rights.
- Buy proper shoes (you have to start somewhere).

Cultivate virtue

- Natural, harmonizing, power usually operates from the inside out.
- Become wiser, braver, more balanced, and more just.
- Act for a wiser, braver, more balanced, and just world.
- Start with yourself. Then your family and friends. Then your community.
- Virtue does not depend on the results, but on the intentions. No one can keep you from becoming morally stronger.
- If you steel yourself against the many subtle arts of persuasion and control, you establish a center of freedom.

- Take opposition and setbacks in your stride; all things can work for the good of your character.

i Listen to the song here: [Feeling Good – YouTube](#)

ii Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, translated by Michael Chase, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002 (original French edition, 1995), p. 129.

iii Gilbert Murray, *The Stoic Philosophy*, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1915, pp 38-39.

iv As with Diogenes, I have opted for a non-literal but more flavorful translation that seeks to capture Epictetus' meaning: Epictetus, *The Art of Living: The Classic Manual on Virtue, Happiness, and Effectiveness*, translated and interpreted by Sharon Lebell, HarperSanFrancisco, 1995. This contains the whole of the *Enchiridion* as well as a few supplemental passages from *The Discourses*.

v The 'sage' was the Stoic ideal. However, no Stoic philosopher ever claimed to be a sage; it was always an ideal goal for them. Maybe, just maybe, there had been a few sages. Maybe Socrates was a sage. Maybe Cato, who had opposed the rise of Julius Caesar, was a sage.

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