

This paper discusses Stoic physics as providing an alternative account of the relationship between reason and matter to that prevalent in other philosophical and rhetorical schools of antiquity. The Stoic commitment to the universality and continuity of matter prompts a distinctive understanding of aesthetic experience as effecting real, bodily changes. The experience of a work of art—like any perceptual experience—entails aligning or attuning the bodily mind with the sensory presentation generated by the external object. The “reason” of the Stoic is immanent in the material world, not externally imposed. The Stoic position has several interesting implications. First, while art may not have the privileged position it enjoys in other schools of thought, its capacity to align the viewer with the order of the universe is in fact intensified. Second, the “rationalization” of aesthetic practice and judgment assigned by Tanner and others to Hellenistic and later periods of Greco-Roman civilization has a distinctively different meaning in Stoic, as opposed to Peripatetic, Platonic, or rhetorical contexts. Finally, the Stoic understanding of cognition as a process unifying brain, body, and environment bears a strong resemblance to contemporary neuroscientific accounts of mental activity. This recognition in turn (a) restores a lost coherence to Stoic physical and aesthetic thought and (b) makes of Stoicism a privileged site for reflection on contemporary topics such as neuroaesthetics and the ethics of artistic experience.