

JULIA ANNAS

THE SAGE IN ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY

In ancient ethical theories we find the notion of the sage, the ideally virtuous person, put to extensive use and also extensively discussed. This is interesting in itself, particularly since not every kind of ethical thinking has a place for the ideal figure of the sage. If we look at contemporary ethical thought, for example, we find it all but absent. In this distinctive contribution of the ancient theories we can find much that is suggestive and interesting. I am pleased and proud to be able to offer this paper in honour of the memory of Gabriele Giannantoni, whose contributions to the Italian and international practice of ancient philosophy have been so important.

First, two parenthetical but important points. The word we standardly translate "sage" is *ho sophos*, the wise man. In past English-language scholarship, this was long translated "sage", but when the word became archaic it was replaced by "the wise man". This became objectionable in turn because of gender exclusivity. Some, including me, struggled on for some time substituting "the wise person", but this solution is clumsy, and "the sage" has returned because it is gender-neutral¹.

It is also important to bear in mind that in ancient philosophical discussions "the sage" is used interchangeably with "the good person" (*ho agathos*), and "the virtuous person" (*ho spoudaios*, *ho asteios*)². This is not very surprising when we reflect that the ancient notion of virtue is one that has wisdom at its core. This does not imply that the sage in these theories is a *purely* ethical figure, as

¹ This is explicit in W. Haase, *Comments on Reesor*, "Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy", 11 (1989) pp. 124-34.

² The interchangeability is very obvious in Stoic texts like the accounts of Stoic ethics in Diogenes Laertius and Stobaeus; also in Philo of Alexandria. The term *spoudaios*, found also in Aristotle, has the sense of seriousness or worthiness. The term *asteios* originally means civilized. These may seem slightly odd terms to us, but they are used with no felt strain in philosophical texts as variants for *ho agathos*, the good person who has *arete*, virtue.

though ethics were cut off from the rest of philosophy. For these theories ethics can be grasped on its own, but full understanding of it ultimately requires understanding the rest of philosophy — that is, in the ancient way of thinking, logic and physics; the sage is the ideal figure who ultimately grasps all philosophical truths. But ethics, rather than physics or logic, is the best entry-point for understanding the sage, and for meeting some of the issues involved in the sage's place in ancient philosophy.

Ancient ethical theory is eudaimonist. One of its two most basic concepts is that of virtue, but ancient theories also take as a basic concept that of happiness or *eudaimonia*. In these theories, we start from the common-sense assumption that we all seek happiness or *eudaimonia* in all we do. *Eudaimonia* is a thin conception of what we seek in life. It is, furthermore, an achievement on our part, the active living of a life, not a state of feeling. We achieve happiness, it is agreed in all theories, by making ourselves into a certain kind of person, and this in turn we do by acquiring the virtues. Given that we are all seeking to live well, and that we accept that we do this by achieving a certain character which requires having the virtues, how do we go about doing this? How do we get from here to there?

Ancient ethical theory begins by recognizing a point which I call *social embeddedness*. By the time we get to thinking about ethical matters at all, we already, as we say, have a life. We have been brought up in a family, in one culture, society and language rather than another, with some views about what is right and wrong, what are worthy and unworthy ways to behave, what are admirable and despicable ways to be. So when we ask how to live well, we are not, for the ancients, regarding our past and present life and commitments as something disposable, to be thrown over in favour of living in a completely different way. Rather, we start from where we are, and ask how we are to *improve* our lives so that we may live well, achieve *eudaimonia*.

We start by accepting our ethical beliefs and ideals from others — parents, teachers, the culture generally. At some point we reflect that what we have been taught has limitations: perhaps it doesn't go far enough, or contains conflicts, or we realize that it rests on complacency or prejudice. We realize that we have to learn for ourselves to do better. This is the point brought home to many of Socrates' interlocutors in Plato's "Socratic" dialogues. Like people who are learning a practical skill — Aristotle compares the process with learning to be a builder — we learn to improve, prominently by imitating those who are better than we are in the relevant respects. Learning

here is not just taking over information or skills: it involves the learner's aspiring to do better. The process of becoming virtuous, for the ancients, always involves an *aspirational element*. I begin, ethically, from where I am, culturally and socially, but insofar as I am thinking ethically I am aspiring to do better. The different philosophical schools offer different theories of how to do this in a rigorous and self-aware manner; their different ethical theories can be seen as offering different structures for ethical aspiration.

The idea of ethical aspiration, then, is built into ancient ethical theories. It takes the form of aspiring to be more virtuous — to be brave, for example, not just in the ordinary, conventional way but in a way that is based on and expresses a deeper understanding, and as a result is better focussed and more practically effective. Virtues are traits of character — being brave, just and so on are ways in which I am one kind of person rather than another. The aspiration to be virtuous thus turns out to involve an aspiration to be a better person overall, to improve my entire life. And this is encouraged by the idea that the virtues form a unity, that the practical reasoning displayed in each of them is the same as is displayed in one's life as a whole.

How strongly do I have to aspire? How much do I have to change to become a virtuous person? There is no single answer here, since the different philosophical schools make demands that differ in their rigour. But all the philosophical schools agree that once we start taking ethical thought seriously, we must change; it is never seen as an option that we might find that we are just fine as we are. For our everyday ethical thought is deeply dependent on convention, current fashions and other factors with no ethical authority. By embarking on ethical reflection at all, we are committing ourselves to a change of life, and in the ancient world this took the form of aspiring to become a virtuous person, helped in this by one of the available philosophical theories.

In aspiring to become a more virtuous person, I am aiming to get nearer to an ideal which at present I do not exemplify. This is the end of the road I have started on by reflecting about the inadequacies of my ethical state. We can see, then, how the sage, the ideally virtuous person, comes in naturally as the ideal I aspire towards when I start to think and act as a more ethical person.

The different philosophical schools, however, have different theoretically defensible conceptions of what it is like to be a good person, differing, for example, in their demandingness, as we have noted. Unsurprisingly, then, they have different versions of the sage. Thinking about the sage, and taking him as exemplary, helps to give

my ethical progress direction; but the fact that there are different figures on offer from the different philosophical schools brings home the point that I have to choose: some ways of being virtuous exclude others. Stoics are adamant that Aristotelians and Epicureans are wrong, and they return the criticism. There is no one obvious single answer as to how to become a good person, and the contributions of philosophy, far from easing this problem, sharpen it. So, once I begin to aspire to be virtuous, my choice of one particular way of doing it will involve awareness of alternatives and the need to defend my choice by countering the arguments of the alternatives.

How does the conception of the sage function in giving shape to my ethical aspirations? There are as many versions of the sage as there are philosophical schools, but we can reasonably find among them a division between two very different ways in which the ideal of the virtuous person can be developed. I will look at these two and the roles they play in our attempts to live virtuously.

One conception of the sage is that of the person living according to an ideal which transcends the everyday, rising above it and regarding ordinary life, its concerns and troubles, as petty and fleeting. The sage on this view is the ideal of tranquillity and calm, of being unbothered by the cares that trouble most people because he has achieved a perspective from which he is above them. He has achieved self-sufficiency in being virtuous, and so neither rejoices nor grieves the way we do, since he is not needy in the way that we are. Plato expresses this idea in two memorable passages in the *Republic* where he talks of the virtuous person's attitude to grief. If his friend dies, he will not consider this something terrible, so will bear it quietly and not give way to lamentations³. Drama and poetry are dangerous just because they encourage us to give way to lamentations, as though we really were suffering an important loss⁴.

Those who are above everyday human life are the gods, and Plato in one of his most famous passages tells us the following: "[Evil] must inevitably haunt human life, and prowl about the earth. That is why a man should make all haste to escape from earth to heaven; and escape means becoming as like God as possible; and a man becomes like God when he becomes just and pure, with understanding"⁵. Someone who

³ *Resp.* 387d-e.

⁴ *Resp.* 605c-606b.

⁵ *Theaet.* 176a-b. Levetz translation in J. Cooper (ed.), *Plato. Complete Works*, Indianapolis 1997.

tries to do this "grows up without knowing the way to the marketplace, or the whereabouts of the law-courts or the council chambers [...] And in all these matters, he knows not even that he knows not; for he does not hold himself aloof from them in order to get a reputation, but because it is in reality only his body that lives and sleeps in the city. His mind, having come to the conclusion that all these things are of little or no account, spurns them and pursues its winged way [...] throughout the universe"⁶. On this conception, philosophy seems to be, as is memorably claimed in the *Phaedo*, a preparation for death⁷.

Since the gods are not needy and desiring as we are, this ideal requires us to aim at becoming something entirely different from a human living an ongoing human life. This ideal implies that we should detach ourselves from the practical concerns which are the normal business of virtue to deal with. Obviously this stands in the sharpest contrast with virtue thought of as a concern to live and act well. Both Plato and Aristotle feel the pull of this ideal of removal from everyday life as well as the force of the idea that the best life is the life best *lived*. In Plato, there are passages characterizing the ideally virtuous person as fleeing the world (in the *Theaetetus*) and dead to it (in the *Phaedo*), though there are also others which characterize virtue as an improved way of dealing with the practical matters that beset us. Aristotle likewise gives us a divided picture. In the passage which we read as Book 1 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* happiness is the well-lived life, and virtue the traits which will enable us to lead it. In the passage which we read as Book 10 we find that the best life is the one spent in study of the best objects, which are those which transcend the world of our practical lives, so that what we have to do is to "make ourselves immortal" as far as we can, in order to study them in a worthy way. (Gallons of ink have been spent trying to make these passages consistent)⁸.

Epicurus also has an ideal of tranquillity which is, like the unworldly ideals of Plato and Aristotle, quite explicitly godlike. If you learn and practice his precepts, he promises, "you will live as a god among men. For a man who lives with immortal goods is in no way like a mere mortal animal"⁹. Epicurus was hailed as a god by his

⁶ *Theaet.* 173 d-e (Levet translation).

⁷ *Phaed.* 63e-65a.

⁸ Apart from the problems in trying to reconcile the two texts, this endeavour ignores the point that what we have as our *Nicomachean Ethics* was certainly never written by Aristotle as a unified book.

⁹ *Ep. Men.* 135.

followers, and Epicurean descriptions of happiness tend to use terms normally used of the gods¹⁰. This fits with Epicurus' own account of the gods as having a tranquil existence which neither bothers and interferes with humans nor is bothered or interfered with by human activity.

This is an ideal of static and tranquil self-sufficiency, rising above the matters which impinge, positively or negatively, on us. It has, of course, an obvious problem: how can it be an ideal *for us*? How does the ideal of fleeing from the world get you through the day — especially if you don't know the way to the market-place? The more the sage is thought of as someone whose life has risen above mere practicalities, the harder it is to see how she can live in a way which makes any consistent and usable kind of distinction among practicalities, since all are equally worthless when compared to the ideal. It can of course be responded that this is not an ideal which is meant to respond to practical need; it is driven by the thought of passing beyond all such considerations. But this leaves us no further with the problem, how it can be an ideal for us, since we are inescapably set among practical matters and the need to negotiate them.

Here I leave this problem in order to focus on the other strand in ancient thought about the sage: the sage as the person whose ideal virtue is displayed not in rising above the everyday but precisely in staying at that level and dealing with it. This is arguably the more challenging notion, since instead of contrasting the ideal and the practical it tries to bring them into relation, showing how ideal virtue can be found in actual practical, goal-directed activity.

Aristotle gives us an example of this when he appeals to the good man as the ethical norm: “[F]or the good person the object of wish is that which is truly an object of wish, but for the bad person it is any chance thing”; “The good person judges each case rightly, and in each case the truth is manifest to him”; “virtue and the good person seem to be the standard in each case”; “virtue — that is, the good person in so far as he is good — is the measure of each thing”¹¹.

However, Aristotle does not treat the sage, the ideal good per-

¹⁰ For discussion of this issue, see F. Deleva Caizzi, *Felicità e immagine del filosofo nel pensiero antico*, Milano 1988, pp. 283-96.

¹¹ *Eth. Nic.* 1113a25-6, 29-33; 1166a12-3; 1176a16-7. The translation is that of R. Crisp, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, Cambridge 2000. The term in every case is *ho spoudaios*.

son, as a topic in its own right, whereas later theories do. We have large amounts of material about the sage from one of our major sources for early Stoic ethics¹², and in wider ancient culture the idea was one of the best-known aspects of the Stoa, though usually for purposes of ridicule¹³. The Stoics are thus the most useful school on which to focus when we are thinking about the sage. For them it is an explicit topic, and they have distinctive and deliberately challenging ideas about it.

It may at first seem odd to think of the Stoic sage as embedded in the everyday world, for there are plenty of texts which seem to support the view that he is above, and indifferent to, the everyday stuff of living. The most notorious are those that hold that the Stoic sage has no emotions, is *apathe*s. However, the Stoics themselves point out that this does not mean that he is affectless¹⁴. For the Stoics emotions are by definition faulty, since they embody a false belief about value, which gets us to attach ourselves to things we think good, like health and wealth, in an unconditional way appropriate only for virtue. To understand this we have to explicate the way that the things that we think good other than virtue are not actually good, for the Stoics — they are indifferents. These are not, however, indifferent in the ordinary sense; it is rational to go for some and avoid others. They are indifferent as far as happiness is concerned. We thus find out that the sense in which the Stoic sage lacks emotions and regards everything but virtue as indifferent is a special technical sense within Stoic philosophy, needing other Stoic concepts to explicate it. It is not, then, surprising that in isolation it sounds odd from outside the school, and suggests the ordinary idea of indifference to the everyday; ordinary people have to make an effort to learn Stoic theory to see why this is misleading.

Stoic sages are also said to be “godlike” and to have “god in them”¹⁵. The Stoic god is, however, very different from Plato’s. It is *in* the world, the active force ordering the world, not something

¹² The epitome of Stoic ethics in Stob. II 7, often attributed to Arius Didymus, discusses the sage for over a third of its length. I use the edition of A.J. Pomeroy, *Arius Didymus: Epitome of Stoic Ethics* (Society of Biblical Literature, Texts and Translations 44, Graeco-Roman Series 14), Atlanta (Georgia) 1999.

¹³ Cicero uses it in *Pro Murena*, 61-3 to ridicule Cato (in a way which he recognizes elsewhere as unfair, cf. *De finibus*, IV 74) as someone who tries to embody unrealistic Stoic ideas.

¹⁴ Diog. Laert. VII 117.

¹⁵ Diog. Laert. VII 119; Senec. *Ep.* 41, 3-4.

outside it. The god in the Stoic sage is his reason, actively shaping his actions, and divine in that it is a part of divine reason shaping the world and events within it. Once again, an idea that seems at first glance to remove the Stoic sage from the everyday turns out on closer inspection to do no such thing.

The Stoic sage also grasps things from "the point of view of the universe", the perspective of reason in the cosmos. Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius in particular constantly tell us to think of ourselves as part of a great whole, to loosen our grasp on the importance of our own individual viewpoints and to pass to one from which all individual viewpoints are seen as partial and petty. However, these two authors are precisely the ones who also emphasise the need to think of our lives from inside our social and cultural roles, to think of the obligations we have as family members, friends and citizens. The importance of the universal viewpoint goes along with emphasis on the embedded viewpoint and the obligations and ends that belong to that¹⁶.

Many texts make it unequivocally clear that the sage will take full part in everyday life. He will marry and have a family¹⁷. He will take part in political life "unless some obstacle intervenes"¹⁸ and will try to encourage his society towards virtue and away from vice¹⁹. As if this were not enough, the Stoics startle the followers of Plato and Aristotle by holding that the sage will (shock horror!) *make money*, earn a living. Chrysippus even suggests three ways of doing it²⁰.

Moreover, not only does the sage live an embedded life, he should do so. The Stoics are not tempted by the ideal of detachment from practical life in order to study transcendent objects, an ideal which has such intermittent appeal for both Plato and Aristotle. Chrysippus explicitly rejected the life of study — Plato's vision of the Forms, Aristotle's life of theoretical contemplation. It is, he claims, really, despite appearances, a life devoted to one's own plea-

¹⁶ How these two perspectives are to be related is, of course, a complex matter. Here I am emphasizing the importance of the embedded viewpoint and evidence that even the sage is taken to remain in it, rather than flee it for one that transcends it.

¹⁷ Diog. Laert. VIII 121; Arius 11b, 11m.

¹⁸ Diog. Laert. VII 121 (cf. 123); Arius 11b.

¹⁹ Arius 11d.

²⁰ Plutarch. *De stoic. rep.* 1043b-e, Arius 11m, where we find the three morally permissible ways of making money. They are: from being a king or advisor to a king, from "friends" (in the context, probably advisors at a court), and from philosophical lectures.

sure²¹. The Stoics see the life detached from everyday practical concerns, devoted to a transcendent ideal, as selfish and self-indulgent.

The Stoics see virtue as skill in living, and so the virtuous person will be the person most skilled in dealing with the material of life — the actual circumstances of the ways we are embedded in various contexts. It is reasonable, then, for them to see the completely virtuous person, the sage, as dealing with the same material that we all have to deal with, but doing so in a correct and expert way, whereas we fumble around and make mistakes. Virtue resides not in rising above the ordinary materials of everyday living, but in dealing with them *well*, and the sage is the ideal person whose dealings with the everyday are in all respects faultless.

When we try to understand what it is to live ordinary life in an ideally virtuous way we find in the Stoics quantities of material making the unpromising-looking claim that we are all not really what we appear to be — kings, doctors, generals, money-makers, and so on: only the sage is a king, doctor, general, money-maker and so on. This was among the Stoic claims most easily ridiculed. Lucian, in his *Philosophies for Sale*, presents the Stoic philosopher as a bargain: “Who wants to be the only one to know everything?”²² Plutarch gives us another very common response, in telling a story of the Spartan king Eudamidas, who heard a philosopher claim that only the sage was a good general, and remarked that the discourse was admirable, but the speaker not credible, for he had never been under fire²³.

The idea seems troublesome not just intuitively but theoretically. If the sage is the only general, the only person who can fulfil the general's part excellently, then he will need experience of a certain specific type. The general needs to know certain particular facts, and to have certain skills whose development requires experience. Eudamidas seems to have a good point. How can someone be a good general who lacks these? But the sage is the only general *and* the only king, money-maker and so on. It looks as though complete virtue requires knowing masses of empirical facts and having masses

²¹ Plutarch. *De stoic. rep.* 1033c-d.

²² Luc. *Phil. vit.* 20. Only the sage is fine, just, brave, a king, an orator, rich, a lawgiver and everything like that. He is also the only cook, tanner, carpenter and so forth.

²³ Plutarch. *Apoph. Lac.* 220e. The story recurs in slightly different form at *Reg. et imper. apoph.* 192b. Eudamidas figures as the plain unsophisticated man, who is nevertheless on to something which eludes the over-sophisticated philosophers.

of skills that are empirically developed²⁴. The sage will have to know everything he needs to know to be a plumber, electrician, pianist, administrator, computer expert and so on. But this makes no sense. How could virtue require you to have such large amounts of particular experiences and training? And in fact we find the Stoics explicitly denying this. "Only the sage is a good prophet and poet and orator and dialectician and critic, but not all of them, since each of these [skills] needs in addition the acquisition of some principles"²⁵.

What is the idea, then? An attractive interpretation is the thought that, for any skill, only the sage can truly exercise it. This is the interesting idea that the virtuous person's actions are done differently from those of the non-virtuous, so that even if outwardly the same action is performed, still *what is done* is radically different. Hence any ordinary skill, when performed virtuously, is in the process transformed²⁶. The virtuous person, to the extent that she is virtuous, wise, and so on, will grasp the particular facts and skills she needs as a matter of character, from a disposition with a firm intellectual basis. Thus everything she does, she does well, since she acts from a developed disposition to act for the right reasons, with the right amount of care and forethought and so on. If she is a general, she is not just a good general with the add-on advantage of virtue; everything she does is transformed by being done from her virtuous disposition. Similarly if she is a computer expert. And so on. This gives us the requisite contrast with other people, whose actions are not performed from a disposition of this kind.

Dio Chrysostom discusses what is going on here. The philosopher, he claims, will not, judged by the standards of the relevant skill, do carpentry better than the carpenter or farm better than the farmer²⁷. He is superior in the following way: "in his acting, or not, advantageously, and in recognizing when and where to act,

²⁴ This is a problem which arises for Aristotle also, since he regards traits as virtues which require specific experiences and endowments, for example the large-scale virtue of magnificence. The issue is discussed in T.H. Irwin-R. Kraut, *Disunity in the Aristotelian Virtues*, "Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy", suppl. vol. (1988) pp. 61-90.

²⁵ Arius 5b12.

²⁶ Compare the way that skills and practices, when performed by the virtuous person, become virtuous conditions (Arius 5b11).

²⁷ Dio Chrys. *Orat.* 71, 5 and 8.

and in recognizing the right moment (better even than the craftsman) and what is possible”²⁸.

So the sage is not better than the expert with respect to the expert’s own skill. He doesn’t have to be better at computing than the professional computer expert, better at playing the piano than concert-hall pianists, better at farming than successful farmers. The difference is that everything he does is done in accordance with wisdom, which in practical matters will mean grasp of, for example, the right priorities. (Ultimately, of course, this will involve grasp of how this and other practical matters relate to truth in areas other than ethics.) Hence anything the sage does is done well. Any role he fills is filled well and virtuously, whether farming or being a king. As we find in an unfortunately corrupt passage, the sage, we are told, does everything well, as the flautist plays all flute tunes well²⁹.

The sage, then, is not absurdly omniscient, able to outdo the experts in every role. Rather, he illustrates what it would be to fill a role, practical or ethical, well, with virtue. I can relate to the sage, then, from within my ordinary socially and culturally embedded life, since I will be in fact a carpenter, a town councillor or the like. The sage represents the possibility of an ideal life not as an entirely different life from this, one lived contemplating transcendent entities, but as the ordinary life lived as well as it can be, from a basis of wisdom.

The sage does everything well because he does everything for the right reasons — he farms for the right reasons, to use Dio’s example,

²⁸ *Ibid.* 6. This passage is not explicitly about the Stoics, but it is reasonable to think that Stoics are in mind, and von Arnim lists the passage in his *SVF* (III 562).

²⁹ Diog. Laert. VII 125; Arius 5b10. I follow Pomeroy in accepting Sedley’s emendations to this passage of Arius (see A.A. Long-D. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, Cambridge 1987, II, p. 377, noted by Pomeroy on p. 5). After a comparison with a flautist and lyre-player, who do everything well with an understood restriction to flute- and lyre-playing, the text says that in the same way the sage does everything well, and adds a phrase. Wachsmuth’s text here reads *kai hosa poiei nai [ou] ma Dia kai ha me poiei*, “both what he does and by Zeus what he does not do too”. This accepts Hense’s conjecture *nai [ou]* for the manuscript *kai ou*. It is accepted by B. Inwood-L.P. Gerson, *Hellenistic Philosophy, Introductory Readings*, Indianapolis 1997, p. 207. Long and Sedley emend to *kath’hosa poiei kai ou ma Dia kath’a me poiei*, translating, “so far as concerns what he does, and not of course also what he does not do”. While we cannot be certain about this corrupt text, the Long-Sedley version, which makes sense of the *kai ou* in the manuscripts, seems to me to fit better with the restriction emphasised in the case of the flautist and lyre-player. I am grateful to Brad Inwood for calling my attention to the importance of this passage.

not just by the farming book. The Stoic view of the wise exercise of various roles thus has the effect of internalizing the excellent exercise of various roles: these roles are seen as involving thought and intellectual exercise, and thus the achievement of wise performance, rather than being defined by mere success in achieving various results.

We can see, in some passages where Stoics discuss the sage, that they hold that various skills which might be thought to be nothing more than non-rational knacks of producing results do in fact require intellectual effort and can thus be performed in wise or unwise ways. Money-making, for example, and household management are regularly treated by Plato and Aristotle as something beneath the intellectual level, and notice, of the sage. The Stoics, however, throw out an intellectual bridge, claiming that running a household is not just a sub-theoretical knack, but "a state both theoretical and practical concerning what is advantageous for the household", and that money-making is "experience of acquiring money from the right sources and a state making one behave in agreement [with nature] in collecting, preserving and spending money with a view to being well off"; this is to show us that "only the virtuous person is skilled at money-making, recognizing what the sources are from which one should make money, and when and how and up to what point"³⁰. Here we find that a practical skill is intellectualized as a way of showing how its correct performance might indeed be one which requires the achievement of wisdom. There are other passages to the same effect. It turns out, for example, that running a symposium and managing a love affair can be described in terms of their intellectual basis³¹.

For the Stoics it is the achievement of this overall goal or *telos* of living virtuously and wisely which is important, and is compatible with failure to achieve various ordinary objectives, where this does not happen through lack of wisdom. The wise farmer farms well even if a particular crop is lost one year through unforeseeable drought or the like. Hence the sage is a good general even in circumstances of defeat, better than a non-virtuous general who wins. This result is perfectly acceptable within Stoic ethics overall; success that is not

³⁰ Arius 11d. The passage admits that "some" think that making money is only *meson*, something that the non-virtuous can do too, while others think it virtuous (*asteios*).

³¹ At Arius 5b9; see 5b12 for prophecy and being a priest.

virtuously achieved cannot lead to happiness, and so is not worth having, while it is only wisdom and virtue that lead to happiness, regardless of whether they lead to success in worldly terms. However, this point about the sage in particular left the Stoics open to the copious ridicule they in fact received about their wise man being the only king and rich man while powerless and in rags, and so on.

This idea of intellectualizing roles applies with some plausibility to roles like king, general or carpenter, where there is a skill to be intellectualized. There are other cases, however, where this move is not available, for example the claim that only the sage is free³². The sage is free, we are told, in the true sense of freedom, for only he has achieved true internal freedom, which is freedom from the passions and from the pull of conventional motivations. Here the relevant notion has been internalized without any attempt to provide a bridge from the everyday notion, which has been rendered simply irrelevant. The same is even more obviously true of the claims that only the sage is beautiful, tall and strong, even if by ordinary standards he is ugly, small and weak³³. He is strong, for example, because he has the strength appropriate to the wise: nothing can overcome or conquer him³⁴. Mere physical strength will not enable him to stick to his resolves. Here it is clearly moral rather than physical strength which is being referred to. Some Stoic characterizations of the sage, then, do not proceed by reference to the wisdom with which he acts, and are simply bold transferences of terms from the external to the internal life, reconfiguring our understanding of beauty, strength and so on without attempting to make a bridge between this and everyday usage.

We can, then, best relate our understanding of the sage to our own everyday life, if at all, through the passages which describe him in terms of doing the actions which ordinary people do, but from wisdom, thus transforming the way in which those actions are performed. The sage is the person who does what we do, but succeeds where we fail. He does it all *well*, in a manner that cannot be criticized in any respect. We have some idea of what this would be in a restricted area, but the sage does this in any area, since his wisdom is unrestricted in scope. The idea that the sage does everything well, we are told, goes with the idea that he completes everything in accor-

³² Diog. Laert. VII 122, Philo's essay *Quod Omnis Probus*, especially 16-25.

³³ Arius 11g, 11k, 11m ascribe many characteristics to the sage in internalized form.

³⁴ Arius 11g, 23-25.

dance with correct reason, so as to accord with virtue, which is the skill concerned with the whole of one's life³⁵. This chimes well with Stoic definitions of our final end in life as "living in accordance with experience of what happens by nature" and "living in a way that completes all our right actions"³⁶.

This notion of the sage as embedded in everyday life, yet performing ideally, is a difficult one, and it is clear that the Stoics do not strive to clarify it in terms easily available to people unfamiliar with other Stoic ideas. But the basic idea is easily available: philosophy must be exercised *in your life and actions*, not in removing yourself from them. "It is not the person eagerly listening and taking notes at philosophy lectures who is ready to philosophize, but the person who is ready to carry the prescriptions of philosophy into his actions and live according to them"³⁷.

How does this conception of the sage actually function in our ethical lives? It is easy to assume that the sage will always function in an *exemplary* way, that is, as an example which we find admirable and attractive, and so move on to striving to emulate. Cicero, for example, introduces the sage in his rhetorical climax to his presentation of Stoic ethics in book III of *On Moral Ends*. The Stoic sage, his spokesman Cato says, is dignified and noble, with a constant character³⁸. He is more truly a king, and rich, than bad King Tarquin and the deplorable millionaire Marcus Crassus. This, however, cannot be the whole story. For the Stoic sage would still be the only king, and the only rich person, even if compared with good King Numa and an admirable millionaire.

It is easier for Stoics to inspire us by pointing to examples that we can aspire to who are not sages. Posidonius claimed that the fact that the followers of Socrates, Diogenes and Antisthenes made progress is a sign that virtue exists³⁹. Epictetus often appeals to Socrates, Diogenes and Heracles. Philo of Alexandria, in his essay de-

³⁵ Arius 5b10 (cf. 11i).

³⁶ The definitions of Chrysippus and Archedemus at Arius 6a. The definitions of Diogenes and Antipater make reference to the technical notions of "selecting" and "counter-selecting" indifferents, but the basic idea is the same: we aim at making a difference in the way we perform actions.

³⁷ Arius 11k.

³⁸ Cic. *De fin.* III 75-6. The happiness of the sage is presented as the conclusion of argument, not as something independently persuasive. (I have used two of Cicero's three examples.)

³⁹ Diog. Laert. VII 91.

fending the Stoic thesis that only the sage is free, appeals to a wide variety of admirable figures from many countries⁴⁰. These are figures which we can admire and emulate for the virtues they have, but they are not completely virtuous, and so do not have the daunting characteristics of the sage.

The figure of the sage hardly seems suited to *inspire* us non-virtuous people and it is not surprising to non-Stoics that some Stoics appeared to downplay the idea⁴¹. It is, however, notable how far some Stoic passages go in pushing, quite aggressively and confrontationally, the point that the sage is utterly different from anything we encounter. The sage is the only true king, general and so on. Not only that, he is the only person who is just, brave and free. He is the only person who is beautiful, tall and strong. The idealization goes all the way down: he is the only person who makes correct judgements, perceives things correctly, makes no mistakes. Because virtue is not an isolable aspect of your life, but rather a total achievement, the sage represents what your life would be like if totally transformed. Many passages stress not only the most available version of the idea, that of doing all one's actions well, from a transformed disposition, but also the internalizations of beauty, riches, size and the like, where there is no such bridge, and where we are most likely to regard these characterizations as metaphorical.

This suggests the thought that the Stoic sage may not be intended as a protreptic device, an example to encourage virtue in the non-virtuous. It may have a rather different role, as a check, a reminder to the non-virtuous of how far they have to go. This goes with the Stoic insistence that, while there are degrees of progression towards virtue, there are no degrees of virtue: only the sage is virtuous, while we are all vicious, misguided and unhappy. Despite our doing the best we can, and sometimes doing the right thing, none of us are virtuous; that is, none of us are brave, just, generous and so on. The sage indicates to me not only how far I have to go to be virtuous, but also how very different I will be when I get there. On this view, the role of the sage is not to inspire me but, assuming that I am already on the path of ethical aspiration, to remind me not to be

⁴⁰ Sages in Greece; magi in Persia; gymnosophists in India; the Essenes and very many more, including heroes like Heracles, historical figures (including women), even animals displaying a "dauntless" spirit.

⁴¹ Panaetius, when asked whether the sage would fall in love, shelved the question in order to focus on ordinary people (Senec. *Ep.* 116, 5).

too confident of my achievement, and to keep me aware that there remains a huge distance between my present stage and that of the ideal⁴². The Stoics bring out uncompromisingly a result that we get with any version of the idea that the fully virtuous person extends over her life as a whole the kind of difference made locally by the virtuous, rather than merely conventional, performance of right actions. They take this idea to the extreme by idealizing everything about the sage, not just the performance of actions but psychological and even physical properties.

At this point it appears that we have disconcerting results about both conceptions of the sage. When I realize the limitations of what I have been taught about virtue, and start to aspire to become virtuous, the sage appeared as the natural goal of that aspiration, something to give shape to my ethical aspirations by giving me an idea of the kind of person I aspire to be. But in both of its major forms the ancient figure of the sage raises problems for precisely this endeavour. The ideal is so utterly different from the way I am now that it is hard to see how it could have any appeal to the way I am now — and if it does it may be the wrong kind of appeal. I can be assured that as I approach the ideal I will find it ever more attractive. But that is what will come about when I have improved, and so changed; how can the ideal sage inspire me now?

If I am someone who has embarked on the path of aspiration to virtue, the sage shows me what I will be like at the end of the journey. But the sage does not provide any motivation to improve which I might otherwise have lacked. The ancients do not see the figure of the sage as exerting a kind of independent ethical pull towards virtue. The motivation for that has to come from my own ethical aspirations.

Even in theories where he enters naturally as the goal of ethical aspiration, the sage is so remote from the way I am now that he may exercise little or no appeal independently of the rest of the theory. Given the rest of the theory, I realize several things. I need to change drastically. As and when I do improve, I will have changed, and will be a different kind of person. At this point the sage might have appeal for me, but only insofar as I have changed drastically. But the sage does not, before I have changed in the way the theory

⁴² I have made this point briefly in my introduction to *Etica Stoica: Diogene Laerzio e Ario Didimo*, a cura di C. Natali, Introduzione di J. Annas, Bari 1998.