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Matthew Sharpe
Deakin University, Australia
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8165-5775>
msharpe@deakin.edu.au

A Good Person for a Crisis? On the Wisdom of the Stoic Sage (in Himself & for Us)

Abstract:

Is the Stoic sage a possible or desirable ideal for contemporary men and women, as we enter into difficult times? Is he, as Seneca presents him, the very best person for a crisis? In order to examine these questions, Part 1 begins from what Irene Liu calls the “standard” modern conceptions of the sage as either a kind of epistemically perfect, omniscient agent, or else someone in possession of a specific arsenal of theoretical knowledge, especially concerning the physical world. We contest this contentious conception of the sage for being inconsistent with the Stoic conceptions of wisdom, the *technai* and knowledge which can be gleaned from the doxographic sources. In Part 2, we suggest that the wisdom of the Stoic sage reflects the Stoics’ “dispositional” conception of knowledge, their substantive conception of reason (*Logos*), and their sense of philosophy as above all an “exercise” or *askêsis* of a craft or *technê* for living. It is embodied in an ongoing exercise of examining one’s impressions for consistency with what one already knows, looking back to the natural *prolēpseis* with which all people are equipped. In Part 3, we show how only this account of the wisdom of the sage, at the epistemic level, enables us to understand how, in the non-doxographic texts led by Seneca’s *De Constantia Sapientiae*, the sage is celebrated above all for his ethical characteristics, and his ability to bear up in a crisis. Concluding reflections return to our framing concern, as to whether philosophy as a way of life, and the ancient ideal of the sage, can speak to us today not only as scholars, but as individuals called upon to live in difficult times. We suggest that they can and should remain sources of orientation, contestation, and inspiration.

Keywords:

sage, wisdom, exercise, Seneca, Cato, *technê* for living

For it is not the man who listens eagerly and memorises what philosophers say who is prepared for philosophizing but the man who is prepared to carry into action what is pronounced in philosophy and to live by it.

Stobaeus, *Epitome of Stoic Ethics*, 11k.

What can philosophy do in a period of crisis, such as that which the world has seemingly entered in 2020? Modern academic philosophy is as limited in its resources as in its audience. At most, we can offer arguments about the nature and causes of the crisis and how it might be addressed, at a more or less abstract level, and hope against precedent that these will be read by policy-makers. The different ancient schools of philosophy, by contrast, offered themselves as therapeutic and eudemonistic. They not only presented theories about the good life, the good society, and what could enable them. After Socrates, these philosophies proffered themselves as the needed means to achieve the highest human good(s). In a standard *topos* which would survive at least until the renaissance, this meant recommending people the means to fare with both prosperity and adversity. In each of the schools, therefore, the figure of the “sage” or perfectly wise man (gender specific) emerged as the ideal human embodiment both of the wisdom philosophy seeks, and of the fully human life. This sage, as we might say, was the very best kind of person for the adversities different nations globally are already in the grips of, and the political and social unrest many seem destined soon to experience.

Consider the example of Stilpo, presented by Seneca the Younger in *De Constantia Sapientia*, whose city Megara was taken by Demetrius Poliorcetes, as an example of sage-like conduct:

Demetrius, who was surnamed Poliorcetes, took Megara, and the philosopher Stilpo, when asked by him whether he had lost anything, answered, “No, I carry all my property about me.” Yet his inheritance had been given up to pillage, his daughters had been outraged by the enemy, his country had fallen under a foreign dominion, and it was the king, enthroned on high, surrounded by the spears of his victorious troops, who put this question to him. (*De Con.* 5.6)¹

Seneca’s famous, principal exemplar of the sage in *De Constantia* is of course the republican diehard Cato the Younger, who “the immortal gods have given ... as a pattern of a wise man to us, ... [as] they gave Ulysses or Hercules to the earlier ages” (*De Con.* 2.1). Cato was favored by *fortuna* scarcely better than Stilpo, in terms of avoiding living in times of crisis:

In an age which had thrown off its belief in antiquated superstitions, and had carried material knowledge to its highest point, he had to struggle against that many-headed monster, ambition, against that boundless lust for power which the whole world divided among three men could not satisfy. He alone withstood the vices of a worn-out State, sinking into ruin through its own bulk; he upheld the falling commonwealth as far as it could be upheld by one man’s hand, until at last

1) Ancient texts with standardized pagination will be referenced parenthetically, in-text, using abbreviations: *De Con.* refers to Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *On the Constancy of the Wise Person*; *Met.* refers to Aristotle, *Metaphysics*; *NE* refers to Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*; *DL* refers to Diogenes, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*; *Stob. Ek* refers to Stobaeus, *Epitome [Eklogai] of Stoic Ethics*; *SVF* refers to von Arnim, *Stoicorum veterum fragmenta*, 1–3; Plutarch, *Sto. Con.* refers to *On Stoic Self-Contradiction*; *Rep.* refers to Plato, *Republic*; *LS* refers to Long & Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*; Seneca, *Ep.* refers to *Moral Letters to Lucilius*; Plutarch, *Comm not.* refers to *Of Common Conceptions*; Cicero, *Aca.* refers to *De Academica*; Sextus Empiricus, *Adv.* refers to *Against the Professors*; *Meds.* refers to Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*; *Gor.* refers to Plato, *Gorgias*; *Disc.* refers to Epictetus, *Discourses*; Cicero, *De Fin* refers to *On Moral Ends*; *Ench.* refers to Epictetus, *Enchiridion*.

his support was withdrawn, and he shared the crash which he had so long averted, and perished together with that from which it was impious to separate him – for Cato did not outlive freedom, nor did freedom outlive Cato. (*De Con.* 2.2)

As Pierre Hadot has noted, the ancient discourses on the sage, which can be found across all the schools (and even in Aristotle's writings (*Met.* 1, 982a²), raise larger questions for us today. The existence of these discourses, and of this cultural ideal, prompts reflections as to whether the modern world's development of scientific and technical knowledges has come at the cost of the atrophy of other ways of knowing, providing an existential and ethical orientation we struggle to find: "How will the modern world rediscover wisdom, that is to say a form of knowledge or a consciousness which does not bear solely upon the objects of knowledge (*connaissance*), but upon life itself taken in its lived everydayness and the way in which we live and exist?"³

On the other hand, the very *foreignness* of so much of these ancient discourses on the sage, and the exemplary figures for emulation they present, forces us at the same time to ask just how seriously today we can take the ancient paradigm of philosophy as a way of life. Are such examples as Stilpo and Cato edifying for us today, or could they be? Should we want to teach students to be like Cato, Stilpo, or various other of the ancient philosopher-heroes who, when they did not exactly die uncomplainingly on the rack (a common ancient test case for the sage's powers), were often exiled or unceremoniously disposed of by political authorities? Ancient representations of the sage, after all, often present this figure as almost divine, far closer to a god than the ordinary run of people (eg: DL VII, 30, 119; Stob. *Ek.* 2, 11g; *De Con.* 8.2).⁴ The Stoic Chrysippus warns us that "because of their excess of grandeur and beauty, the things which we say concerning them [sages] may seem to resemble fictions and to be foreign to human beings and to human nature" (Plutarch, *Sto. Con.*, 17, 1041). On some representations, the sage's liberty or happiness – for, we are assured, he is the freest and happiest of human beings – is hence comparable to that of Zeus Himself, in everything but duration. For such very good reasons, "the sage like the Egyptian phoenix springs into being once in every five hundred years" (Alexander of Aphrodisius, *On Fate* 199, 18; cf. Seneca, *Ep.* 42, 1). Such a sage is moreover the only true general, the only true king, truly wealthy person, and bearer of nearly every conceivable practical and technical excellence (DL VII, 118–19, 122, 125; Stob. *Ek.* 2, 5b11–12, 11m), as the satirist Lucian took pleasure in mocking.⁵

But, surely, problems attend any ethical ideal which asks more of human beings than we can reasonably be asked to encompass. How could aspiring to be more than human, as the sage ideal seems to suggest,⁶ assist us in the all-too-human problems that beset us, in conditions of pandemic, lockdown, fraying political civility? As Plato suggests in the *Republic*, to long for some god-like, messianic deliverer in the political realm is arguably, exactly, opposed to the philosophical nature (*Rep.* 496c–d).

More basically than this, there is the question of just what exactly the sage's extraordinary "wisdom" could consist in, given his unlikely *aretaic* profile. It is surely not for nothing that such ethical exemplars as Cato, but other texts cite Odysseus, Socrates, and even Diogenes the Cynic,⁷ are called "sages," *Sophoi*, or *Sapientes*: that is, individuals principally possessing certain *epistemic credentials*. In some hyperboles, the Stoic sage is hence presented to us as epistemically as well as morally perfect (Stob. *Ek.* 2, 11m), if not (as we will consider) seem-

2) Hadot, "On the Figure of the Sage," 190–91.

3) *Ibid.*, 185.

4) See for example Hadot, "Figure of Sage," 192–93, 199.

5) Lucian, "Sale of Creeds," 199–200.

6) Hadot, "Figure of the Sage," 199–200.

7) See Liu, "Nature and Knowledge in Stoicism: On the Ordinarity of the Stoic Sage," 250, 257.

ingly omniscient. The Sage and god are equal in wisdom, we are thus told (Seneca, *Ep.*124, 13–14; Plutarch, *Comm not.* 1076a & SVF 3, 246).⁸ The Sage is moreover free from error, weakness, ignorance, opinion, and suspicion: an enviable state for non-Sages (SVF 3, 548; SVF 3, 560; Cicero, *Acad.* I, 42 & SVF 53). But the question of how such epistemic attainments could relate to the ethical excellences of such sages as Socrates, who after all claimed his wisdom consisted in a kind of ignorance, or Diogenes, who shunned logical and physical studies, is perplexing. Why should any amount of knowledge of human and divine things, however comprehensive, enable the constancy of the sage in crises advertised by Seneca, or the liberty of the sage advertised by Philo of Alexandria, in his Stoicizing text on this subject? Why should not a superfluity of such knowledge, or of any knowledge, be morally indifferent, and even capable of being turned to the worst ends?

This paper will address these questions. Part 1 begins from what Irene Liu, in an invaluable article on the Stoic sage,⁹ calls the “standard” modern conceptions of the sage as either a kind of epistemically perfect, omniscient agent, or else someone in possession of a specific arsenal of theoretical knowledge, especially concerning the physical world. We contest this contentious conception of the sage for being inconsistent with the Stoic conceptions of wisdom, the *technai* and knowledge which can be gleaned from the doxographic sources. In Part 2, following Liu, we suggest that the wisdom of the Stoic sage reflects the Stoics’ “dispositional” conception of knowledge,¹⁰ their substantive conception of reason (*Logos*), and their sense of philosophy as above all an “exercise” or *askêsis* of a craft or *technê* for living. It is embodied in an ongoing exercise of examining one’s impressions for consistency with what one already knows, looking back to the natural *prolêpseis* with which all people are equipped. In Part 3, we show how only this account of the wisdom of the sage, at the epistemic level, enables us to understand how, in the non-doxographic texts led by Seneca’s *De Constantia Sapientiae*, the sage is celebrated above all for his ethical characteristics, and his ability to bear up in a crisis. Concluding reflections then return to our opening, framing concern, as to whether philosophy as a way of life, and the ancient ideal of the sage, can speak to us today not only as scholars, but as individuals called upon to live in difficult times.

1. Of Wisdom and Philosophy: Systematic, Technical, Dispositional, and Practiced

“It is ... (logically) possible to imagine a man, whose knowledge and understanding is coextensive with the complete structure of the Universe, the ‘objective existence’ (the *lekton*) of his systems of cognition being identical with the objective content of Nature”; John Christensen has claimed: “this man is *the* Stoic sage.”¹¹ Christensen’s conception of the sage, as we have already glimpsed, can draw textual support in the Stoic sources from the many hyperbolic claims made on behalf of this singular ideal figure.¹² Following René Brouwer, in fact, when we look at the two extant Stoic definitions of wisdom in the doxographic sources, we see that both Plutarch and pseudo-Galen specify that it involves an *episteme* or “cognitions” of “human and divine matters” (*Placita*, in Plutarch, SVF 2, 35 [LS 26A]; Ps.-Galen, *History of Philosophy* 5, 602, 19–3, 2 Diels; see below). “Divine matters” points to physics, including theology; knowledge concerning the nature of Zeus or the gods, identified by the Stoics with the cosmos itself. “Human matters” speaks to ethics. The conjunction of “human and divine,” which was traditional in ancient texts, speaks to the interconnection between ethical and physical knowledge.¹³ This

8) *Ibid.*, 260.

9) *Ibid.*

10) *Ibid.*, 263 (with n. 20), 266.

11) Christensen, *An Essay on the Unity of Stoic Philosophy*, 68–69; cf. Watson, *The Stoic Theory of Knowledge*, 63.

12) See the famous hyperboles listed at Liu, “Nature and Knowledge,” 248–49.

13) *Ibid.*, 248.

interconnection is also implied, amongst other places, in Zeno's famous definition of the goal of philosophy as "living in agreement with nature" (DL VII, 87; cf. Stob. *Ek.* 2, 5b3).

Nevertheless, as we have glimpsed, there are different reasons to be hesitant about Christensen's conception, and this "standard" idea of the sage.¹⁴ One wonders how omniscience, even if logically conceivable, could be humanly achievable, and whether a lifeless supercomputer on this definition would not be closer to a sage than Socrates, Odysseus, or Diogenes. Zeno, Cleanthes, and Chrysippus who developed and systematized Stoic physics, moreover, did not claim themselves to be sages.¹⁵ As we will see, the sage – and even the Stoic *prokopton* – approaches all matters of deliberation and decision in practical reality with a caution or "reserve clause" (Stob. *Ek.* 2, 11s), precisely because he knows that he cannot know how events will turn out. Even Stobaeus, whose account of the sage includes many improbably hyperbolic claims, notes at several places that the sage in principle can, but in fact will not necessarily be, a master of all of the *technai*: "and some virtuous men are better at others than encouraging [others to virtue] and persuading them; again, some are more quick-witted than others" (Stob. *Ek.* 2, 11p).

If, following Betegh, Menn and White, we then suppose that the sage must have a grasp only of the general and fundamental principles governing the physical universe¹⁶ – not unlike the Aristotelian sage of *Metaphysics* Alpha (*Met.* I, 982a) who knows the *archai* of the different *epistemai*¹⁷ – different issues emerge. If what is at issue is "an understanding of the total *structure* of ... Nature,"¹⁸ or knowledge of the "organizing principle which is also the structure" of the *Kosmos*, its "rational plan,"¹⁹ Chrysippus' disavowal of sagedom is again enigmatic. For surely, it is such general cognitions concerning the structure of the *Kosmos* that Stoic physics provides. More decisively, difficult questions which the texts never directly resolve surround just which "cognitions" are so fundamental as to necessarily be those of the sage, and which are not. Far more than concerning Chrysippus, moreover, the question of why Socrates and Diogenes, let alone the republican statesman Cato (Seneca, *De Con.* 1–2), should be singled out as sages on this model, is perplexing.

If, however, we look with René Brouwer at the full extant Stoic definitions of wisdom,²⁰ we see that they introduce several other convergent element which suggest a need to more basically reconceive our consideration of what and how it is the sage could know. Introducing our own enumerations, these definitions read as follows:

1. The Stoics said that:
 - [i] wisdom is knowledge of human and divine matters, and
 - [ii] philosophy [is] exercise of fitting expertise; [where],
 - [iii] the single and supremely fitting expertise is virtue/excellence (*kai anôtatô tèn aretên*),
 - [iv] and excellences at their most general are three: in nature, in behaviour, in reasoning.

(*Placita*, in Plutarch SVF 2, 35 [LS 26A]).²¹

14) *Ibid.*, 252.

15) *Ibid.*, 257.

16) White, "The Role of Physics in Stoic Ethics," 57–74; Betegh, "Cosmological Ethics in *Timaeus* and Early Stoicism," 273–302.

17) See Hadot, "Figure of the Sage," 168; Owens, "Aristotle's Notion of Wisdom," 1–16.

18) My emphasis.

19) Hankinson, "Stoic Epistemology," 78; Kerferd, "What does the Wise Man Know?," 132; Menn, "Physics as a Virtue," 29.

20) Brouwer, *The Stoic Sage: The Early Stoics on Wisdom, Sagehood and Socrates*, 7–50.

21) We follow here, with small amendments, the translation of Brouwer at *The Stoic Sage*, 8.

2. Others [the Stoics] defined philosophy:

- [i] as the exercise of fitting expertise of the best life for human beings, saying that
- [ii] philosophy is exercise, and
- [iii] calling wisdom fitting expertise, which is also
- [iv] a cognition of human and divine matters.

(Ps.-Galen, *History of Philosophy* 5, 602, 19–3, 2 Diels)

When we look at these definitions, we are struck by the sense in which how, in contrast to Christensen *et al*'s claims, they operate in not one, but two dimensions. These we might call provisionally the epistemic and the practical, although we will see why “epistemic” is about to be qualified. Wisdom in both (1-i) and (2-iv) involves *episteme* of things human and divine. This seems to be a matter of something like what philosophers today would call justified true beliefs about these elevated matters. Secondly, and more strikingly, wisdom in both (1) and (2) also involves “fitting expertise/craft/art/technique” (*epitêdeiatechnês*), a *technê*, which other clauses in the definitions suggest concern either (or both) of the virtues in definition (1) from Plutarch, including the highest virtues, or “the best life for human beings (*anthropois aristês zôês*)” in (2) from pseudo-Galen. In (2), we next note – strikingly enough, given a later modern starting point – that philosophy itself is defined as “the exercise (*askêsin*) of wisdom”²² as the “fitting *technê*” of the best life (as in 1-ii). Whatever else this might mean, it clearly indicates the sense of *philosophia* as a kind of active practice above all, as well as any completed set of knowledges or teachings concerning matters human and divine.

It is this active, “verb-al” sense of philosophy as an exercise, already redolent for readers of Pierre Hadot’s work,²³ that seems to us decisive to pursue if, we are to better understand the wisdom of the sage. Since wisdom is a *technê* that would in philosophy be exercised, it becomes informative to better grasp then the Stoic understandings of *technê*. Following the *Gorgias*, again strikingly, we know that the Stoics thought of the *technai* as each having the same two dimensions as *sophia: epistemically*, they involved “a system and collection of cognitions” (in Chrysippus, at Sextus Empiricus, *Adv.* 7, 373);²⁴ but at the practical level, Zeno saw a *technê* as a system of cognitions (*systema ek katalêpseôn*) in addition “unified by training (*syggegunnasmênôn*) towards some useful end in life” (Olympiodorus, *Commentary on the Gorgias* 12, 1).²⁵ With Cleanthes, a third dimension is then added which we will later, following Liu, call “dispositional.”²⁶ For Olympiodorus tells us that, according to Cleanthes, a *technê* is a “tenor/disposition (*hexis*) [of the psyche] that accomplishes everything methodically” (Olympiodorus, *Commentary on the Gorgias* 12, 2; SVF 1, 490).²⁷

What we therefore see in these definitions is that for the Stoics technical knowledge, including philosophy as a *technê tou biou* or *ê peri ton bion technê* (craft/art of living),²⁸ is not reducible to, although it includes, propositional knowledge concerning some particular object field, like carpentry, horse breeding, and so forth. This knowledge is connected to, and perhaps even “unified” by practice, as in the training or apprenticeships craftspeople still do, including “on the job work” to become master craftspeople. Thirdly, in addition to justi-

22) See Hadot, “Marcus Aurelius,” in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 192; *ibid.*, 273; and “Divisions of the Parts of Philosophy,” 114–15.

23) See esp. Hadot, “Spiritual Exercises,” in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 81–125.

24) See Brouwer, *Stoic Sage*, 45.

25) *Ibid.*

26) Liu, “Nature and Knowledge,” 263.

27) *Ibid.*, 46.

28) On which, see Sellars, *The Stoic Art of Living*, esp. 5, n. 6.

fied true beliefs about the world, this expertise is also held to effect a *dispositional* change in the craftsman, giving them as it were a new set of capabilities. This is telling in the light of Aristotle's famous specification of the virtues as above all forms of *hexis* (NE VI, 1139a-b),²⁹ and remembering (from the first definition of wisdom above) that virtue itself, and those virtues concerning nature, behaviour, and reasoning, are the object of philosophy as exercise (Ps.-Galen, *History of Philosophy* 5, 602, 19–3, 2 Diels).

In fact, our re-conception of wisdom as a technical, hence also dispositional knowledge concerning the best life or virtues, in contrast to Christensen *et als'* position, are confirmed when we turn next to the Stoic account of *episteme* itself. Stobaeus gives four definitions, which we again enumerate:

- [1] a cognition/grasp (*katalêpsis*) that is secure and unshakeable by reason;
- [2] it is also a system of cognitions, like the knowledge of the part of logic as it exists in the sage;
- [3] it is also a system of such *technê*-like (*technikôn*) cognitions that has stability (*echon to bebaion*), just as the virtues have;
- [4] it is also a tenor/disposition (*hexis*) that in the reception of impressions cannot be shaken by reason (*ametaptôtôn*) by reason (*logou*), which they say consists in tension (*en tonô*) and in power (*dynamei*) (SVF 3, 112, LS 41h).³⁰

Of these definitions, only [1] and [2], the latter especially with its stress on systematically-ordered cognitions, approaches anything like the kind of knowledge claim many commentators look for, to understand “what the wise man knows.”³¹ By [3], we have knowledge itself being defined as *technê*-like, in ways which mark a distance from Aristotle's better-known virtue epistemology.³² *Epistêmê*'s stability is in turn compared to that of the virtues, lasting dispositions to different action-types in salient practical situations (DL VII; Stob. *Ek.*). However, by [4], we have arrived at the Cleanthean third, dispositional dimension we met in the understanding of *technê*. Now, *episteme* is described as a *hexis*, identified specifically with the reception of impressions (*phantasia*), as against the formulation and justification of propositional beliefs. Moreover, this *hexis* is then said to consist in a certain *tenor*, an important word in Stoic physics, as well as a power or potential, *dynamis* (SVF 3, 112, LS 41h).

If we then put together what this analysis of the Stoic definitions of wisdom, *technê* and *episteme* suggest, our point is, a very different portrait of the epistemic excellences of any fully wise human being emerges from what we might initially imagine. We can in fact say now four things concerning this sage, in contrast to someone merely possessed of a grasp of theoretical claims about the universe, however so imposing. Such a person:

1. would be the practitioner of a “*fitting craft*” of the best life and the virtues;
2. this “*fitting craft*” would involve stable and unshakeable, systematic knowledge of things human and divine (as in the received understandings); but also

29) See Liu, “Nature and Knowledge,” 263.

30) See Brouwer, *Stoic Sage*, 30. Confirming Stobaeus [4] here, Diogenes Laertius tells us that for the Stoics *epistêmê* names both a system of propositions or beliefs, and the “consistent state” (*diathêsis homologoumenê*) internalizing such a system in the knower's psyche (DL VII 89).

31) Kerferd, “What does the Wise Man Know?”

32) See in Aristotle (NE VI), *technê* is just one of the five intellectual or “dianoetic” virtues enabling human beings to know the world, alongside *nous*, *sophia*, *epistêmê*, and *phronêsis*. In Aristotle, also, “practical wisdom” (*phronesis*) is distinguished from *technê*, in that the latter is positioned as always producing a result external to itself (NE VI, 4), by which its excellence can be assessed, whereas the excellence of practical decision-making is not identifiable in any objectifiable product. With that said, it is notable that in *Metaphysics*, I, 1–2 Aristotle introduces *technê* as paradigmatic of knowledge in contrast with mere “experience” or *empeiria*.

3. the active exercise (of philosophizing) would serve to unify his cognitions or impressions, like training to master a craft; and
4. through this exercise, he would over time shape a “tenor” in his psyche which *is stable and unmovable by reason* – a qualification which is going to point us, in due course, to why *constantia* should be considered by Seneca such an outstanding feature of the sage.

2. The Epistemic Craft of the Sage

Three new questions however emerge, concerning this new figuring of the sage and his wisdom. First of all, what is the “fitting” (*epitêdeias*) in the “fitting craft” that wisdom amounts to? “Fitting” to or for what or whom? Secondly, how could any knowledge or “tenor” (*hexis*) in a person’s soul be unshakably stable if it is not theoretically omniscient? Thirdly and above all, in what could the “exercise” of the philosophizing of the sage consist, such that it makes possible the formation of such a *hexis*?

We can begin to answer these questions starting with this seemingly strange claim that the sage’s wisdom will be unmovable by reason. This sounds dogmatic, in a pejorative sense; as if a sage would be an intransigent crank, rather than, as Stobaeus tells us:

Affable in conversation and charming and encouraging and prone to pursue goodwill and friendship through his conversation, he fits in as well as possible with the majority of people; and that is why he is lovable and graceful and persuasive, and again flattering and shrewd and opportune and quick-witted and easy-going and unfussy and straightforward and unfeigned. (Stob. *Ek.* 2, 11m)

Also, surely an epistemic virtue for a philosopher, let alone a sage, is precisely to be moved by reasons. Marcus Aurelius will hence remind himself of the need, if someone who criticizes him speaks the truth, to acknowledge it and change his behaviors (*Meds.* IV, 12; VIII, 16). As Liu has argued, in order not to misconceive these claims, we need to understand the Stoic account of reason, *logos* or *logismos*, since it importantly differs from standard understandings today.³³ Reason for the Stoics is not simply a faculty for rendering our different beliefs coherent, according to logical or inferential rules. Rather, with weight falling on each term, it involves “an ordered collection (*athroisma*) of preconceptions (*prolēpseis*)” (SVF 2, 841; 2, 83). “Ordered collection” is simple enough; it refers to what we might call the semantic and inferential connections between logically-ordered, non-contradictory ideas. But the Stoics would argue that a cunning criminal, able to effect great crimes, may have an “ordered collection” of ideas about the law, property, how the police work, and so on. The “preconceptions” at stake here however point to a more substantive and normatively directive dimension in Stoic epistemology. According to the Stoics, all people have the same preconceptions at the beginning of life: they are implanted in us by nature, as marks of our human nature (Cicero, *Aca.* 2, 22). But these *prolēpseis* involve the beginnings of both descriptive and evaluative notions, such as “that happiness is good,” “that whatever conduces to happiness is good,” “that the world is ordered,” “that justice is fairness,” that Stoic philosophy will bring to clarity. Decisively, and comparably to how Platonism conceives the Ideas, Stoics deem these preconceptions as both starting points of inquiry, and as criteria of truth (DL VII, 54).³⁴

This idea becomes decisive, however, in distinguishing the clever, Calliclean rogue, from the truly wise, Socratic sage. For the Stoics claim that, however well the cunning man may reason, on the basis of his beliefs

33) Liu, “Nature and Knowledge,” 260–65.

34) See Long, *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life*, 82–83.

that wealth, pleasure, and dominating others are good, at some point, these pursuits will fall out of consistency with our natural *prolēpseis*. Anyone who pursues anything other than virtue as the goal of life, the Stoics believe, is bound to discover at some point that they have been misguided. Reality will contradict their beliefs about what is or ought to be the case. Of course, this is deeply Socratic. Socrates' refutation of Callicles in the *Gorgias* for instance turns around thinking through the implications of pursuing unlimited bodily pleasure, relative to our other preconceptions of what happiness should look like (*Gor.* 493d–494e). In a Stoic example, the fool who believes riches are good is contradicted by the observation that many wealthy people are unhappy, and many happy people are poor. For, according to a Stoic *prolepsis*, the good is what always benefits its possessor or enjoyer (*Stob. Ek.* 5d; DL VII, 55).

And so we come to an answer to our third question, as to what “exercise” philosophy could consist in, which could create a specific unshakable *hexis* in the sage. This exercise, as Liu again has contended,³⁵ consists in nothing else than learning through practice to refer every new impression one receives back to one's *prolēpseis*. Epictetus famously formulates this injunction of “practical logic” in Socratic terms, as not allowing any representation to go unexamined (*Disc.* III, 12). It is therefore primarily a matter of how the sage thereby gives or withholds his assent to new impressions, as against what the sage thereby comes to statically know. As Liu reflects:

This gives us a new way to explain the difference between the cognitions of the Fool and those of the Sage. The Sage's beliefs are firmly held and “unshakable by reason” because he acquires them in a perfectly rational way. He assesses new impressions for consistency with his preconceptions and cognitions. If he assents, this belief must necessarily follow from and be supported by unimpeachably true beliefs. Thus, there is no way for him to be argued out of what he believes.³⁶

In many cases, impressions of everyday affairs and objects will be clear, not meriting close scrutiny. But it is not always easy to know whether some new impression one has received coheres with one's other well-founded beliefs.³⁷ Think today of the plague of conspiracy theories online, which too many people accept, without questioning the way such a belief coheres with other, better-founded notions about the world. Some impressions might concern areas about which we have little knowledge, for instance, like the politics of a foreign nation which we have only heard about on TV. In such cases, the sage as against the unwise will withhold their unqualified assent. Perhaps some new idea about a politician is plausible, but she cannot know enough to be sure. “In the same sense we say that the prudent man does everything well,” Stobaeus hence comments, “both what he does *and, by Zeus, what he does not do too*” (*Stob. Ek.* 2, 5b10, my emphasis). The sage withholds his assent (*synkatathêsis*) to every impression which contradicts his well-founded beliefs. At stake is the Stoic virtues of “caution” and “non-precipitancy” (*aproptôsia*) in assent (DL VII, 46–48).³⁸ She will only assent to anything as true, good, or right when she knows that this is so. Hence, as Stobaeus (*Stob. Ek.* 2, 11m) says again of the claimed knowledge of the sage, he “never supposes anything weakly, but rather securely and stably, therefore, he does not opine either. . . . Opinions [claiming knowledge of what is not known] are alien to his character” (*Stob. Ek.* 2, 11m). The sage is in no rush, epistemically, we can say. This is why one of his virtues here is that of “unhastiness” (*aneikaiôtês*) (*Stob. Ek.* 2, 11m).³⁹

35) *Ibid.*, 263–66.

36) *Ibid.*, 266.

37) *Ibid.*, 264–65.

38) Jedan, *Stoic Virtues: Chrysippus and the Religious Character of Stoic Ethics*, 67, 86.

39) *Ibid.*

So, finally in this part, we arrive at our first question above, about this strange predicate “fitting” (*epitê-deias*) describing the *technêtou biou* of the sage. With what exactly does the sage’s exercise of testing their impressions against their preconceptions “fit,” so as to develop a stable *hexis* which can, as far as possible, never be upset by new impressions? Following the Stoic statements concerning the goal of philosophy in Diogenes Laertius (VII, 87) and elsewhere, the best response seems to be nature (*physis*) herself. For the Stoics, as we know, nature as the embodiment of the *Logos* is “the reference point for judgments of value; as the ground of all reality, nature is the truth.”⁴⁰ But we should again be careful before supposing that the sage’s wisdom “fits” with nature solely by containing the maximal amount of true beliefs concerning the gods and the physical world. On the basis of what we by now know, to “fit” with or be in “harmony” with nature here seems instead to indicate “an activity and tenor, as much as it is an established body of secured cognitions.” As Liu writes:

Emulation of nature does not take the form of gleaning and then applying certain general principles of action or thinking. Stoic nature is not simply, or not most properly, an object of knowledge – something which, under scientific scrutiny, yields up principles to be mastered and applied. Rather, nature is perfect reason. As such, nature is simply that which humans actualize or display when they engage in perfect reasoning.⁴¹

Our reason, we might say, less reflects nature in our system of cognitions, than it participates in the *Logos* by testing all impressions against these conceptions, preventing (as far as possible) any of our beliefs from being “unfitting” in this way. As Diogenes Laertius tells us concerning the Stoic view of nature: “they hold that nature is an expert-like fire, proceeding methodically to come into being, which is a breath in fiery and expert-like form; and the soul is a nature with impressions” (DL VII, 156; SVF 1, 171). Olympiodorus adds that, for the Stoics, “nature is also a tenor (since she has her being in things that have it, as in a human being, a stone, in a piece of wood) and moves methodically in its course (for she proceeds according to a pattern)” (SVF 1, 490). The sage’s *technê*, whose exercise is philosophy, “fits” with nature when he “proceeds methodically” with impressions, thereby developing a tenor in his *psyche* which increasingly harmonizes with that of larger nature. The sage in this way is not an inhuman “know it all.” He is a finite, human “know it well,” who is also scrupulously aware, like Socrates, of just how much he does not know. It is in this way that he “lives in agreement with nature” (*to homologoumenôs tê physei zên*) (DL VII, 87).

In Part 3, we suggest that only this kind of picture of the sage can allow us to square the epistemic formulae concerning this figure with what, after all, are his most striking attributes for Seneca, Philo, Cicero and others – namely, his ethical virtues, “not simply infallible, [but] impeccable, unshakable, happy, free, beautiful and wealthy.”⁴²

3. The Ethical Excellences of the Sage

We have now addressed the “question of possibility” raised by some of the more hyperbolic claims about the epistemic credentials of the sage. The sage, as wise, will have knowledge of human and divine matters, but this knowledge need not be an encyclopedic theory of everything. His fitting *techne*, one which through practice unifies his cognition and reforms his *psyche*, consists rather in a practice of what Hadot sometimes calls “lived

40) Ibid., 262.

41) Ibid.

42) Hadot, “On the Figure of the Sage,” 196

logic”:⁴³ examining each representation, in particular assessing its coherence with her other well-founded beliefs, looking back to those natural preconceptions which she shares with ordinary non-sages. The non-sage, *mutatis mutandis*, is not simply someone who has not taken a five-year course in Stoic physics, logic and ethics with Chrysippus, so much as someone who does not undertake this fitting expertise which is philosophy. As such, the Stoics contend, he will have a more or less unstable body or beliefs and disposition. He will be right about many things, tied to the more immediate, practical concerns of his existence.⁴⁴ But he will be incautious and hasty in accepting new impressions as true or good (SVF 2, 993; 3, 548). In many cases, he will accordingly assent to ideas that contradict other of his own beliefs, and he will in this way epistemically flip-flop, in the American expression.

The second question we raised above concerns how this wisdom could be specifically ethical, so that it could answer to Stoic descriptions as sages of the wily Odysseus, the ironic Socratic, the Cynic Diogenes, and the politician Cato. So far, our epistemic model is suggestive in this regard, in making wisdom above all a kind of activity one *does*, which creates over time a stable *hexis*. But just how this activity of monitoring our impressions, this practiced logic in Stoic terms, could translate into an ethical mode of living, capable of guiding us in any normative decision-making, including concerning others, remains opaque.

The Stoics considered the three parts of philosophy, logic, ethics, and physics as deeply interdependent, describing their relationship as that between the shell, white and yoke of an egg (DL VII, 33). There is, moreover, a deep ontological ground for this unity in division:

This unity of the parts of philosophy is founded on the dynamic unity of reality in Stoic philosophy. It is the same *Logos* which produces the world, which illuminates human beings in their faculty of reasoning and which is expressed in human discourse, all the while staying fundamentally identical to itself in all the degrees of reality. Physics thus has for its object the *Logos* of universal nature. Ethics, in turn, has as its object the *Logos* in the reasonable nature of human beings. Finally, logic examines this same *Logos* as it is expressed in human discourse ... it is therefore the same force and the same reality which is simultaneously creative Nature, the Norm of ethical conduct and the Rule of discourse.⁴⁵

This ontological unity, in turn, finds its corollary in the Stoic account of action, whose dependency on the assent (*synkathêsis*) of the governing part of the psyche (*prohairesis*, *hegemonikon*) echoes their understanding of how we come to hold (or not hold) descriptive beliefs about the world. On this account, we act (or not) on the basis of receiving an “hormetic impression” [*hormêtikê phantasia*] (SVF 3, 169; 3, 171; *De Con.* 1057a=SVF 3, 177). These impressions do not represent states of affairs but register viewpoints on what is appropriate [*kathêkon*]. When and only when we assent to such an impression, and to its suggestion as to what is appropriate to be done in some situation, an impulse [*hormê*] to act in some way is then formed (DL VII, 107–110). Anger, for example, involves an hormetic impression that it is appropriate to desire revenge against some perceived wrongdoer (DL VII, 63; *Stob. Ek.* 2, 10c). Here, as with our descriptive views of the world, the Stoics hold that nature furnishes each of us with hormetic impressions which point us toward what is natural, and hence truly appropriate, for beings like us to pursue and avoid (DL VII, 85–86). We act in harmony with nature when we act on these impressions, selecting to pursue what has selective value (*axia*) (Cicero, *De Fin.* 3, 20–24; DL VII, 108–9).

43) Hadot, “Ancient Philosophy,” 65, 68.

44) Liu, “Nature and Knowledge,” 264–65.

45) Hadot, “Division of Parts,” 113.

Moreover, just as in the realm of impressions concerning things and states of affairs, there are different levels of certainty and clarity with which hormetic impressions present themselves to us. The wise man will hence, here as elsewhere, be characterized by a self-reflective caution, which examines each of his impressions, assessing them for consistency with his well-founded normative beliefs (SVF 3, 633; DL VII, 35). By contrast, the non-sage will here again be characterized not by caution but by hastiness or, as we might put it, a certain suggestibility or gullibility which inclines him to assent too readily to particular kinds of impulses (Stob. *Ek.* 2, 11m). As Liu writes:

Because hormetic impressions move people to action, the precipitancy which characterizes Fools will manifest in their propensity to certain actions. In particular, they are prone to fall for impressions which represent things such as health, pleasure, and wealth as good or beneficial, and those that represent things such as illness, pain, and poverty as bad things. On the Stoic view, these are all non-cognitive and false impressions: while it is natural to pursue the former and avoid the latter, such things are completely indifferent [*adiaphoron*] in moral value. (DL VII, 102–3; Cicero, *de Fin.* 3, 51–3; SVF 3, 128) The Fool’s precipitancy skews his sense of value, priorities, and proportion, making him prone to “disorderly and unseemly” behavior; his ignorance, or his insanity, “makes his impulses unstable and fluttering.” (DL VII, 48; SVF 3, 663)⁴⁶

At exactly this point, we can understand why it is exactly the *wisdom* of the sage with which the Stoics identified this exemplary figure, even as texts like *De Constantia Sapientiae* emphasize above all his ethical attributes. This wisdom, in the ethical as well as the physical realm, is based above all in an exacting, active care as to which descriptive as well as hermetic, action-directing impressions he assents to. It is for this reason that, in the Stoic tables of virtues, each of these is identified with a certain *epistêmê*, in another departure of Stoic from better-known Aristotelian categorizations (DL VII, 126; cf. NE VI, **). The sage in the ethical realm will pursue only those external things, like wealth, health, reputation and beauty which it is natural for humans to select, to the exact extent that this pursuit does not compromise their deeper commitment to virtue (Stob. *Ek.* 2, 7e). This wisdom is grounded in the reflective philosophical assent to the rationality of the claim that virtue is the only good. Experience and argument confirm that other things are alternatively beneficial or harmful, depending on circumstance and how they are used by individuals. This virtue will above all consist in the knowledge of which things are preferable, because they are natural for human beings, to select and avoid (DL VII, 108–10). But, decisively, it will also recognize the extent to which successfully attaining everything he selects does not depend upon him. He will hence desire everything external which he selects with reserve: “they also say that nothing contrary to desire, contrary to impulse, nor contrary to his inclination occurs in the case of the worthwhile man, because he does all such things with reservation and nothing adverse befalls him unforeseen” (Stob. *Ek.* 2, 11s). This is far from omniscience, although there is an unshakable constancy about it. This constancy however is exactly one which takes into account the finitude of any human beings’ practical knowledge, and the variability and mutability of human affairs. As Philo writes in *Peri tou panta spoudaion eleutheron einai* (*That every virtuous man is free*):

He who adapts his circumstances and actions to the present occasion, and who voluntarily and in an enduring spirit bears up against the events of fortune, not looking at anything of human affairs as extraordinary, but having by diligent consideration fully assured himself that all divine

46) Liu, “Nature and Knowledge,” 267–68.

things are honored by eternal order and happiness; and that all mortal things are tossed about in an everlasting storm and fluctuation of affairs so as to be subject to the greatest variety of changes and vicissitudes, and who, from those considerations, bears all that can befall him with a noble courage, is at once both a philosopher and a free man (IV, 24).

So, in this light, let us return to our beginning, and Seneca's extraordinary description of the constancy of the sage which he sees epitomized in the life and death of Cato the Younger (*De Con.* 2.1–2.3). The sage's theoretical knowledge is not mentioned, although it is not excluded. Instead, it is his exemplary value as a figure who points the way “out to that elevated peak which rises so far beyond the reach of any missile that it towers over fortune” that is foregrounded (*De Con.* 1.1). The key structuring principle of the text comes at the end of the section on Cato, where Seneca claims that “the wise person is safe and sound, and cannot be affected either by any injury or any insult” (*De Con.* 2.3). Sections 2–9 concern this improbable invulnerability to injury; sections 10–19 concern the sage's equally-paradoxical immunity to insult. Neither of these accomplishments seem to presuppose, although they do not exclude, a highly developed philosophical physics or logic.

Seneca's arguments to assure Serenus that the sage is indeed a possible exemplar instead concern how injury and insult are *understood* by the Stoics, in such a way that the sage is situated “in that place in which no injury is permitted” (*De Con.* 3.2). It is of course not that there will not be many people who might wish to harm the sage, or even kill him. We think of Anytus, Meletus, and Lycon. Injurious actions aim to inflict loss or harm to the target of the action with what is bad. However, the sage knows that virtue is the only good, and that the only bad is shameful, vicious action. He also knows that no injury can compel him into such action. He cannot therefore be harmed. As for loss, the sage understands that all he possesses by nature are his impulses, choices, opinions, and actions (*Epi. Ench.* 1.1). In this light:

The wise man can lose nothing. He has invested everything in himself, has entrusted nothing to fortune, has his property in safety, and is content with virtue, which does not need casual accessories, and therefore can neither be increased or diminished; for virtue, as having attained to the highest position, has no room for addition to herself, and fortune can take nothing away save what she gave. Now fortune does not give virtue; therefore she does not take it away. (*De Con.* 5.4)

And what of the externals that a figure as admirable as Stilpo could nevertheless lose to a tyrant's ambition and baseness? “Other things [than virtue] he uses as if on loan ... he had enjoyed them [these externals], but not as his own, because the possession of things that flow in from outside is slippery and uncertain” (*De Con.* 5.5, 5.7). That which harms needs to be greater than that which is harmed. But the virtue of the sage, by virtue of its knowledge concerning what is truly good, is stronger than wickedness (*De Con.* 7.2). The sage knows that even death, being natural, is not to be feared, so that he can “tolerate other things more easily: losses and griefs, dishonors, changes of location, deaths of kin, and separations” (*De Con.* 8.3). Hence, the soul of the wise man, even as people try to harm him, will be as if surrounded by fortifications neither human wickedness nor reversals of fortune can breach (*De Con.* 6.8). As such, his inner life will be “sublime, well-ordered, without fear, proceeding in a regular and harmonious course, tranquil, beneficent, made for the good of mankind useful both to itself and to others, he will neither long nor weep for anything that is groveling” (*De Con.* 8.2).

The same virtue, alike founded in an *episteme* concerning good, evil, natural and indifferent things, equips the sage to bear up in the face of that species of intentional injury involved in slander and insult, however many people feel that “there is nothing more harsh” (*De Con.* 5.1). Again, to feel oneself harmed by another's insult, for the Stoics, involves a species of misunderstanding that shapes people's emotional responses of anger,

outrage, and offence. “Someone then who is affected by insult does not show that he has any good sense in himself or any confidence,” Seneca argues, “for he judges ... that he has been disrespected, and this sting does not occur without a certain lowliness of mind” (*De Con.* 10.2). The sage, by contrast, knows that others’ words or actions have no power over his thoughts, choices, and actions. He also knows that insults are made mostly by “arrogant and insolent men who bear their good fortune poorly” (*De Con.* 11.1). He by contrast responds with magnanimity, looking down upon insults as things which befall good and bad people alike and which, moreover, have no sting unless one feels oneself scorned by the insulter. Instead:

The wise man retains in his dealings with all men this same habit of mind which the physician adopts in dealing with his patients... . The wise man knows that all those who strut about in purple-edged togas, although fit and of healthy complexion, are in poor health. He regards them no differently than sick people, full of follies. He is not, therefore, angry, should they in their sickness presume to bear themselves somewhat impertinently towards their physician, and in the same spirit as that in which he sets no value upon their titles of honour, he will set but little value upon their acts of disrespect to himself. (*De Con.* 13.2; cf. 19.1)

He also knows that to take offense, and bite back, is to place oneself on the same level as the person who has insulted you: “he who puts up a fight makes himself into an opponent, and even though he may win, he is at their level” (*De Con.* 14.2). The sage’s magnanimity therefore does not exactly consist in turning the other cheek, so much as not admitting that any such trespass can be more than intended, rather than effected: “he does not [sic.] even forgive [the offence] ... he denies that an injury has been done” (*De Con.* 14.3). It is this position, above all, which differentiates the Stoic from even the Epicurean position, which supposes that the wise man will tolerate injuries. “We say that there are no injuries” for the sage (*De Con.* 16.1):

We do not deny that being beaten, being struck, or losing a limb is an unfortunate thing, but we deny that all these things are injuries. We remove from these not the sensation of pain, but only the name “injury,” which cannot be sustained with virtue intact (*De Con.* 16.2).

It is also on this basis that Seneca, like Philo, argues that the sage is the freest of human beings, independently of the *fortuna* that befalls him. For: “Freedom is putting one’s mind above injuries, making oneself into the sole source of one’s joys, and separating external things from oneself so that one does not have to live an unsettled life, afraid of everyone’s laughter and everyone’s tongue” (*De Con.* 19.2).

What is decisive for us here, in light of our analysis in Part 1, is that Seneca’s text in no way contradicts the more abstract descriptions of the attributes of the sage in the doxographic sources, including his epistemic excellences, despite the apparent differences of these texts. It is insofar as the sage sees the world differently, or insofar as he interprets the impressions he receives so differently, including those which non-sages call injurious, that he is able to manifest his uncanny constancy under fire, or in crisis. This constancy involves *tharraleotês*, a serene confidence based in an *epistêmê* that nothing terrible can befall him (Stobaeus, 2, 5b2).⁴⁷ This and his other *aretaic epistêmai*, in turn, have effect only insofar as they become part of a practiced *technê*. The exercise of this craft is based in his grasp of core Stoic claims concerning good and evil, natural, and indifferent things, and the limits of what is in his control (*Ench.* 1.1–3), themselves grounded ontologically in physical claims. However, above all, it involves the ongoing work of examining the impressions that the sage receives, unifying

47) See Jedan, *Stoic Virtues*, 82, 169.

his desiderative or hormetic impressions, through practice, with what he firmly knows, on the basis of the innate *prolēpseis*. Through this exercise, which is the activity of philosophy itself, a new *hexis* is gradually developed in the individual's *psychê*, one whose activity harmonizes with the "methodical movement" of nature itself (SVF 1, 490). At some point – even in some moment unsensed by the individual himself (Stob. *Ek.*, 2, 11n) – this *hexis* will become so stable and unshakable as to render the individual that rarest and most excellent of beings, a sage. Far from without all affect (cf. DL VII, 117), the sage will hence know only: the *eupatheia* of a caution which reasonably avoids what is unnatural and dishonorable; the reasonable "wish" including "good will, kindness, acceptance, contentment"; as well as bringing joy (*charis*) at the world as he finds and acts within it, including "enjoyment, good spirits, [and] tranquility" (DL VII, 116).

4. Conclusion: From Possibility to Desirability, the Sage in Himself and for Us

Our account of the wisdom of the sage has now addressed the question of possibility, raised by the interpretation of this figure as somehow improbably omniscient, as well as morally perfect (Part 1). The exercise that is Stoic philosophy we have now laid out (Part 3) – checking impressions against well-grounded beliefs looking back, and in harmony with, the *prolēpseis* – is surely demanding: a long-distance race. But at any given moment, as Marcus Aurelius reminds himself, it is possible for the non-sage in training; one needs only to attend wisely to what is at hand in the present moment (*Meds.* VII, 54; VII, 46; III, 9; VII, 29; IX, 6; VIII, 48; II, 14).

The same account allows us to explain the enigmatic (for us) insistence that the wisdom of the sage is ethical. It is manifest in, and often spoken as if it were identical with, the four cardinal virtues including courage (*andreia*), justice (*dikaïosynê*), and moderation (*sophrosynê*). The sage's cautious refusal to assent to what he does not know is also manifest in a refusal, in the ethical realm, to assent to hormetic impressions pointing him to action-types about whose probity he remains uncertain: "for there are two [kinds of mere] opinion: one is assent to something which is not graspable; the other is weak belief. And these are alien to the disposition of the wise man and this is why hastiness and assenting before he has a grasp are traits of the hasty and base man" (Stob. *Ek.* 2, 11m).

This interpretation, it is true, pushes against those Stoic hyperboles which suggest that the sage just is, as sage, the best king, general, household manager, economist, as well as "nobly born" (Stob. *Ek.* 2, 11g, 11m), and more. It fits those extant texts which point to the necessary role of experience in the sage's wisdom, as when Chrysippus qualifies the goal as "living according to the experience of events which occur in nature" (DL VII, 87), or when Stobaeus qualifies that not every wise man has mastery of all the *technai*, "since some of these also require a mastery of certain theorems" like a priest for instance "must be experienced in the laws concerning sacrifices and prayers and purifications and foundations of all such things," which it is clear that Socrates, Cato, or Diogenes were not (Stob. *Ek.* 2, 5b12). Such an interpretation of the sage, we suggest, is also more consistent with the Stoics' positioning as *Sokratikoi*,⁴⁸ as well as independently being more plausible for finite embodied knowers such as human beings. Finally, this interpretation is more fecund than the "received" interpretation of the sage as all-knower in explaining several of the sage's advertised virtues, such as freedom from arrogance (Stob. *Ek.* 2, 11m) and vanity (DL VII, 117), which follow less easily from putative omniscience. The sage on our reading remains in possession of "so many good things that they are in no way lacking with respect to having a perfect life" (Stob. *Ek.* 2, 11g). But these things do not include total propositional knowledge of all events and processes, past, present, and future.

So, to return to our beginning, is the Stoic sage a good person for a crisis? More saliently, is the ancient Stoic reflection on the nature of the best human life, embodied in this striking ethical ideal, one to which we

48) Long, *Epicetus*, 67–96; Stephens, *Marcus Aurelius*, 59–62.

should continue to pay attention as the twenty-first century rocks from one crisis to the next? The continuing realities of human frailty, mortality, epistemic finitude, and subjection to catastrophes like COVID-19 and other, less dramatic reversals of fortune, all prescribe the wisdom of people seeking out systems of understanding and action which fortify us to bear up to the difficult aspects of existence. The ideal of a person able to respond with maximal reasonableness, given their limited powers, and characterized by inner freedom (*autarkeia*), tranquility (*ataraxia*), and constancy is surely attractive,⁴⁹ especially when we consider potential (and real) world leaders and officeholders. Critics from Augustine to Nussbaum have questioned the wisdom of the Stoic stance on the passions,⁵⁰ and there are real concerns about whether the Stoics' valorization of virtue and tranquility, as well as their account of the passions, can do justice to the rightful place of love and sympathy in the good life and good society. Comments in Diogenes Laertius (VII, 123) and Stobaeus concerning the sage's lack of need for equity or pity (Stob. *Ek.* 2, 11d) themselves seem profoundly unsympathetic, and ripe for deeply problematic, even cruel interpretations. Nevertheless, unless we accept – *per impossibile* – that people could cease somehow concerning themselves with pursuing the good life, exemplars exhibiting the highest virtues will continue to exert a fascination, serving to make the abstract eudemonistic visions of competing philosophical visions concrete. And unless we in 2021 hope against reason and experience that technological advances can render natural and human disasters, as well as suffering itself, wholly historical affairs, the rationality of continuing to debate just what the best way of life could look like in a world we did not create, and which exceeds human control, will remain.

Seneca's proverbial Cato may have died at his own hands, and Roman freedom with him, but the examples held up for us by the Stoics' paradoxical *logoi* about the figure of the sage should continue being a source of reasonable contention, orientation, and inspiration.

49) See Hadot, "Figure of the Sage," 198.

50) On Augustine's criticism of the Stoics, focussing on the passions, see Brooke, *Philosophic Pride: Stoicism and Political Thought from Lipsius to Rousseau*, 1–11; Martha Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 359–401.

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