

STOBAEUS ON THE STOIC SAGE

My purpose in this paper is to discuss Stobaeus' account on the Stoic sage (most of all as attested in *SVF*), his methodology, his major role and originality, compared with the other sources as to their different terminology and point of view.

1. The structure of Stoic ethics

In a brief introduction, I'll try to figure out some guidelines of the Stoic ethics: 1) its three main principles (the *oikeiosis* as the "starting point", the sage as the goal of the true moral life, the *logos* as the substratum of the entire ethical thought); 2) its two-fold structure, as to the subjects and to the objects of moral life, i.e. individuals (sages and fools), and actions or their contents (*katorthomata/agathà* and *kathekonta/adiaphora*). 3) The importance of the moral progress is thus apparently underestimated by Stoic authors, being usually limited to the fool man who is proceeding on the path to virtue (the so called *prokopton*), but who, in most of the cases, is not able to reach a true moral life. He is therefore forced by his own perverse nature to stay in his foolishness for the whole life (see, e.g., Cicero in *SVF* III, 530).

2. The moral progress of the sage and the "conversion" of the fool

First of all I'll consider carefully Stobaeus, *Eclogae* II 7, 11g, p. 99, 3 Wachsmuth (= *SVF* I, 216), where an important and somehow original account on the sage is given. He is described, with a pretty uncommon terminology if compared with other sources, as "invincible" (*aettetos*) and "insuperable" (*akatagonistos*), being able not only to tolerate and to understand the decisions of the Fate, but also – in a sense – to deter other people from damaging him. Being well seen as a result of his moral beauty, his power is both a tolerating, an understanding and a deterring one towards the Fate and the other people (in this case, it is a sort of moral suasion).

The second and most important aspect attested in the passage is the moral progress of the Stoic sage, which is something different and less attested than the (useless) progress of the fool (the *prokopton*). In a few lines Stobaeus apparently admits the possibility that the sage develops and improves his own behaviour in order to reflect at the best the *logos'* will. This is a somewhat bothersome matter, because in this case we should assume that the sage hasn't always been just as he is, but becomes wise from an original state of foolishness (if we admit – as the Stoics did – that only sages and fools exist). This seems to be impossible, as the original vicious condition of the fool prevents him from becoming a real sage. But in this case things could be different. First of all, the sage is no more (or, better, he is not) threatened by the wicked nature of the fool, and therefore he really has the possibility to improve his own behaviour. Indeed, just his own "agreement" with the divine providence allows him to make a progress in his moral life. Such a progress is also important to give sense to the sage's life itself, which would be otherwise in conflict with the dynamic condition of the human behaviour. The moral progress of the sage is thus relevant in terms of moral responsibility: only assuming a dynamic condition for the sage, he could have a merit in doing what he does.

The moral progress of the sage raises one further question: should we admit that a person is born "sage", is become such, or what else? Evidences are not too clear about it. Although it seems impossible for a fool to become wise, Stobaeus (*Eclogae* II, 7, p. 113 W. (= *SVF* III, 540)) apparently attests the possibility of a "conversion" of the fool, from a state of foolishness to

wisdom. This would not mean, I think, that, before becoming wise, the sage was a real fool, but rather that he was a “potential” sage and that he was not conscious of his moral justice.

3. The sage as a god and moral law

A few passages from Stobaeus (see esp. *Eclogae* II, 111, 18 W. (= *SVF* III, 548)) attest moreover the features achieved by the sage at the end of his moral progress (i.e. at the end of his life, as the death for the sage is the last and supreme moral act). He is irrefutable – because he cannot be wrong (i.e. he cannot give wrong assents) –, infallible – because his own will, being the same as the *logos*’ one, always comes true –, invincible (as we have seen), but also almighty – because, being in full harmony with the universal *logos*, he can do what he wants. In this sense, the sage is moral law in himself, as what is right and what is wrong should be determined according to the wise man’s behaviour.

I’ll discuss in detail the meaning of the terminology used by Stobaeus, sometimes in agreement with other sources, sometimes clarifying them with more precise references.

4. Determinism and freedom in the Stoic sage: a possible solution

One last problem attested in Stobaeus’ account on the Stoic sage is the relationship between determinism and freedom, a controversial matter deeply discussed by modern literature. After a brief outline of the most important positions about such a garbled problem, I’ll try to show that Stobaeus’ description of the sage (see, e.g., *Eclogae* II, 7, p. 95, 24 W. (= *SVF* III, 640)) is also helpful to solve – as far as I can – this controversy and to set a positive relationship between the necessity of the Fate and the freedom of the wise man, the sage’s moral disposition being in full and free harmony with the decisions of the Fate. The freedom of the sage is also useful to reconsider some aspects of the Stoic (and Socratic) moral intellectualism, which is well attested in the *SVF*, but apparently mitigated in a few passages of Stobaeus. In such a condition the ethical discussion is in the sage apparently suspended, as he desires the same things as the Fate.

5. The joy

The wise man’s life – as attested by Stobaeus and other sources – is therefore a celebration and a rejoicing, as the sage feels and understands that what happens to him is the best that could ever happen. Being in full and free harmony with the Fate, he is the protagonist – not only a spectator – of his own life.

6. Stobaeus as a source on the Stoic sage

The role of Stobaeus as a major source on the Stoic sage could be outlined as follows:

- a. His description of the sage is one of the most complete and precise in the *SVF*;
- b. Although on many problems he agrees with other sources, his account on the behaviour of the sage is sometimes more detailed or, in a few occasions, it is in disagreement with them;
- c. His terminology is sometimes pretty new, if compared with other sources;
- d. As a result of his doxographical method, his terminology is usually neutral and does not reflect his own position;
- e. Stobaeus’ description of the Stoic sage gives a coherent view, which is able to harmonize some controversies on Stoic ethics.