

Patience

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“Patience is a virtue,” or so a familiar saying goes. Still, we might wonder: is it a moral virtue (*see* VIRTUE), or merely prudential? And is it even really a virtue at all? To address such questions, we must delve more deeply into the nature of patience.

For the Stoics, patience is a fundamental virtue – one that arises from, yet also sustains, the reasoned detachment crucial to Stoic ethics (*see* STOICISM). Through patient study we gain an understanding of the world and come to see there is only one genuine good: virtue. This knowledge allows us to calmly accept burdens and delays that would frustrate most people because we realize that wealth, pleasure, and other commonly pursued objects are only indifferents, and not in fact real goods. A proper understanding of the world enables us to avoid the passions that undermine our virtue and self-control (Harned 2015 [1997]; Pianalto 2014).

Early writers in the Christian tradition, including Tertullian and Augustine, also treat patience as a central moral virtue (Harned 2015 [1997]: Chs. 3–4). For them, patience involves turning ourselves over to God’s will, and accepting our own weakness. In enduring burdens calmly and demonstrating forbearance with others, we accept God’s will, and imitate God’s own patience and forbearance with us. These writers would reject a Stoic understanding of patience, with its emphasis on detachment from the external world and self-mastery. For them, this would reflect both a rejection of God’s creation, and a problematic pride. This early Christian approach to patience is echoed in later Christian thought (*see*, e.g., Kierkegaard 1990; Hauerwas and Pinches 1996).

Contemporary Accounts of Patience

Joseph Kupfer treats patience as the “disposition to [calmly] accept delays in the gratification of our desires – delays that are warranted by the circumstances or the desires themselves” (2007: 165). Thus an artist might patiently prepare a raw canvas prior to painting in order to achieve her best results. Or we might wait patiently as we are stuck in gridlocked traffic, even as we desire to arrive home. Many social scientists have operationalized patience in terms of waiting or deferred gratification. For example, Fowler and Kam (2006) found that patient individuals – ones who were less prone to significant future-discounting – were more likely to vote. Such individuals were more willing to accept the short-term costs of becoming informed and voting for the sake of potential longer-term benefits.

While illuminating for some purposes, patience cannot be characterized solely in terms of calm waiting or (merely) deferring gratification. With respect to the latter,

our attitudes while waiting matter. A person who is terribly frustrated and constantly complaining while she defers gratification may demonstrate a certain continence, but is not yet patient. And even if she were to refrain from outward complaint, her inner frustration and agitation would be incompatible with genuine patience.

More generally, there are instances where patience is manifested, but not in waiting for the satisfaction of some desire. Eamonn Callan gives the example of a man who loses his sight and requires patience to cope with the changes and burdens he faces, rather than giving in to resignation or anger (1993: 525–6). We can manifest patience in enduring chronic pains, in calmly forbearing from reacting to belligerent neighbors, and in other situations where we are not waiting for the satisfaction of some desire.

Nic Bommarito suggests that patience “requires some suffering or frustration” (2014: 271). After all, without such negative states, it might seem there is no need for patience. However, his claim needs to be modified – presumably a truly patient individual might not feel any frustration in the face of delays or time-consuming work. Such equanimity is often a mark of patience.

Matthew Pianalto can be seen as addressing this worry. He characterizes patience as “the virtue of bearing one’s unavoidable or wisely assumed burdens with equanimity,” where burdens should be understood broadly as “obstacles, delays, or other forms of adversity that may give rise to undue anger or despair – to which one can respond, or fail to respond with patience” (2014: 91, 92). Some of our burdens are unavoidable, such as the suffering associated with losing a loved one, while other burdens we choose – devoting ourselves to a program of physical exercise, or helping to look after an ill relative. Crucially, Pianalto does not require patient agents to actually feel anger or frustration in the face of delay or adversity; rather, patience is exercised in situations that *may* give rise to such reactions.

Still, to further refine Pianalto’s account, it seems that patient individuals bear *reasonably borne* burdens with equanimity rather than “wisely assumed burdens.” As Pianalto himself suggests (2014: 92–3), what matters for patience is that a burden is still appropriately borne. A burden that was wisely assumed might no longer be appropriate given changing circumstances. And even if a burden was unwisely assumed, it may now be reasonably borne. Claire may have been foolish to adopt a puppy on a spontaneous whim. But now that the commitment has been made, it is appropriate for her to bear the burdens, and she can be virtuously patient in doing so.

A second, rather minor concern is that it seems strained to speak of many ordinary burdens as being *wisely* assumed. For example, while such hobbies as collecting stamps or playing video games may be fine pastimes, and the burdens associated with them *reasonably* or *appropriately* borne, it may be too generous to characterize them as *wisely* borne. To say that the burdens attached to such hobbies are wisely borne suggests a certain praiseworthiness and importance that seem unwarranted; they instead seem to be simply permissible and unobjectionable.

Finally, some form of epistemic or awareness requirement may be needed in characterizing patience. For example, if Emmeline *merely* forgets about something she has been waiting for (where this is not part of a strategy on her part to avoid thinking

about the desired event, etc.), and this forgetting explains why she is not agitated, it is not clear that she is being patient – it does not seem to reflect any particular virtue on her part.

Perspective and Detachment

Many philosophers have suggested that there are particular understandings of the world that make patience possible – making us capable of calmly waiting, enduring various burdens, knowing when to act, and so on (*see WISDOM*). Pianalto expresses sympathy for a broadly Stoic detachment from the external world as a source of an apt patience. He writes:

[D]etachment is intended to foster a state of mind in which loss can be borne without rage, resentment, or despair, and thus enables one to make sound decisions and commitments ... [W]e step back from our impulses, desires, and ambitions, and consider both their merits as well as our own capacity for satisfying them. (2014: 101)

On the other hand, Bommarito points to an underlying perspective on the world as fundamental to patience. While hard to define, Bommarito has in mind the sense of perspective at stake when we say such things as “That accident really helped me to gain some perspective.” Bommarito discusses four aspects of such perspective:

- 1 Perspective concerning our desires and values – an understanding of what really matters to us, allowing us to avoid frustration when trivial desires are left unsatisfied, etc.
- 2 Perspective on ourselves as members of a community or species – an understanding that other humans face similar burdens and sufferings, and that many are experiencing far worse than us.
- 3 Perspective in understanding causes and laws of nature – we may be more patient when we understand why our boss is being irritable (perhaps he is experiencing a family crisis), and so on (*see SYMPATHY*).
- 4 Perspective in seeing burdens and obstacles as an opportunity for growth and improvement – a delayed flight can be seen as a chance to exercise patience and other virtues.

Drawing on Pianalto’s discussion of detachment, we might add:

- 5 Perspective concerning our abilities – recognizing when achieving a goal will be long and difficult given our flawed temperament and limited abilities can reduce frustration; in some cases certain goals will not be realistically achievable by us.

As Bommarito notes (2014: 274), perspective is not simply a matter of knowledge; it is a way of experiencing the world. We might add that it is a morally laden understanding: patience is grounded in a forgiving, tolerant perspective on the world – one that

correctly assesses the value of things, including the triviality of so much that often frustrates us.

Such a perspective seems a more attractive grounding for patience than a Stoic detachment. Detachment rests on the belief that many of the apparent goods in the world – including health, pleasure, and life itself – are not genuine goods. Though it is typically natural and appropriate for us, as humans, to select them when given the opportunity, in the end these things do not truly matter. On the other hand, having perspective allows us to treat such goods as genuine, and their absence as a genuine harm or evil. With perspective we understand which such goods are most valuable, which are trivial, and recognize the burdens that must often be overcome in securing such goods.

Patience as a Virtue

A strong case can be made for treating patience as a moral, not merely prudential, virtue. First, many will accept broadly theistic positions where in seeing and acting patiently we see the world aright, give ourselves over to God, and – in a small way – imitate God in His endurance and forbearance. Second, even for those who do not embrace such a theistic worldview, it seems that the perspective underlying patience is constituted by a morally laden, forgiving, and humble understanding of the world – one that correctly recognizes genuine goods and harms.

Beyond this, patience plays a crucial role in developing and manifesting other moral virtues. For example, consider a volunteer with a chronically underfunded community-based, nonprofit organization. For her to act benevolently in such circumstances will require her to endure significant burdens and frustrations. More generally, patience allows us to pursue our goals and desires effectively. It also makes our life more pleasant – “Being disturbed or irritable is not a desirable way to perform tasks” (Kupfer 2007: 273). Finally, patience allows us to avoid the frustrations and errors that accompany impatience or, on the other hand, an excessive torpor and inaction.

We can consider two major objections to the status of patience as a moral virtue. First, some worry that patience is not a virtue as it will allow or even require a passive acceptance and endurance of injustices. We might imagine a woman in an abusive marriage who “patiently” endures the situation. But Callan provides a clear response: “It is only a puerile, coarse-grained patience that could motivate a blanket impassivity towards evils that are fit objects of indignant resistance” (1993: 538). A genuine patience is a mean between impatience and a vice of lassitude or enduring burdens that are not reasonably borne. Patience does not require suffering endlessly without complaint when a problem could instead be addressed.

A second objection draws attention to individuals who are apparently patient but otherwise largely vicious – consider a supposedly patient con artist; his patience makes him more dangerous. Such cases may suggest to some that patience is merely a prudential, and not a moral, virtue. Still, a range of responses is available. First, it could be that patience is a moral virtue even if there can be occasional cases where

possessing the trait makes a particular individual worse. A trait can be generally positive and valuable even if there are some circumstances where it becomes problematic. Compare a drug that is an effective, good medication – this can be so even if there are some individuals who are allergic to it.

A second response would hold that not only is patience a moral virtue, it remains a moral virtue even in the grifter. It is true that he has worse impacts on others because of his patience. But while his character is clearly morally flawed, on this second response there is at least one moral flaw that he does *not* possess: a lack of patience. Or, put otherwise, while the grifter must improve his moral character, his patience is a good trait that may help him when he tries to change, and he also requires less improvement than someone with a similar character, but who lacks patience. His patience brings him closer to having a morally good character.

Finally, a third response would instead hold that the grifter who takes the required time for his schemes to develop is not actually patient. He possesses a character trait that *might* develop into genuine patience – but this will require acquiring greater moral perspective and other virtues. To justify this claim, compare a putatively benevolent person who happily assists neo-Nazis as they vandalize a synagogue (perhaps she helps them to carry their heavy, awkward bags); despite a superficial appearance of being benevolent, her moral understanding is flawed, and she does not genuinely possess the virtue. Or consider a putatively courageous person who encounters a Kodiak bear while hiking, and decides to wrestle it (*see* COURAGE). This is vicious foolhardiness and not genuine courage. Similarly, then, we might hold that the apparent patience of the grifter is in fact vicious. It could be that the grifter is simply trying to become rich while being unwilling to take the time to make money through morally acceptable means. The grifter may also lack perspective on the value of money, and its importance relative to various moral goods – just as our superficially courageous and benevolent individuals lack the requisite understanding and perspective in order to truly possess these virtues.

Patience and Other Virtues

There is interesting work to be done in further considering the relationship of patience to other virtues. For example, consider the perspective underlying patience. Is this a more fundamental virtue, one that finds expression in derivative virtues such as patience, humility, and forgivingness? Or might each of these virtues instead simply include a certain perspective as a component?

We might also consider whether we ought to distinguish more fine-grained forms of patience. For example, compare being patient in working diligently and carefully (perseverance), with being patient with a yapping dog or overtired child (forbearance), or with being patient in enduring a chronic illness or the loss of a loved one (endurance or fortitude). Are these expressions of a single core virtue of patience or, instead, several distinct virtues? And if these are distinct virtues, is any one of them more fundamental than the others? Answering such questions will further clarify the nature of patience, and its relationship to other virtues.

See also: COURAGE; STOICISM; SYMPATHY; VIRTUE; WISDOM

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