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Patience: A New Account of a Neglected Virtue

ABSTRACT: *The goal of this article is to outline a new account of the virtue of patience. To help build the account, we focus on five important issues pertaining to patience: (i) goals and time, (ii) emotion, (iii) continence versus virtue, (iv) motivation, and (v) good ends. The heart of the resulting account is that patience is a cross-situational and stable disposition to react, both internally and externally, to slower than desired progress toward goal achievement with a reasonable level of calmness. The article ends with an application of the account to better understanding the vices associated with patience.*

KEYWORDS: calmness, goal, impatience, patience, virtue

Whether someone is patient or not matters to most of us. We often encourage our children to be more patient ("Don't rush through your homework," "You need to wait a little longer before dessert."). A lack of patience can lead to the downfall of a project or activity if we don't follow all the steps or if we cut corners to finish sooner. Impatience can give rise to rudeness, anger, harm, and even death. Just think of cases of tailgating, road-rage, and other displays of impatience in traffic.

But what is patience? In philosophy, relatively little attention has been devoted to better understanding this important trait (for recent work, see Callan 1993, Kupfer 2007, Bommarito 2014, Pianalto 2016, Vigani 2017, and Dolin and Baehr forthcoming). The goal of this article is to outline a new account of the virtue of patience. As such, our focus will not be on reviewing the literature, either historically or more recently. This account is clearly indebted to existing work, and we will make those debts clear as needed while briefly highlighting areas of disagreement. But our focus is on trying to break new ground.

The structure of the article is as follows. First some background assumptions will be clarified with respect to how we are thinking about virtues and character traits. Section two will then raise five issues that are central to developing an account of patience. Using our views on these issues, section three will formulate an account of at least some central components of the virtue of patience. Section four will end the article with an application of the account to better understanding the vices associated with patience.

1. Background Assumptions

There are a number of situations which provide an opportunity to exercise (or fail to exercise) patience. Here are likely to be some examples:

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> Waiting at a traffic light, behind a slow car, or in a traffic jam.
> Being on hold with the cable company (or phone company, etc.).
> Standing in line at the grocery store or the Department of Motor Vehicles.
> Trying to get out of the house with young children to make it on time to an event.
> Sitting in the waiting room of the doctor's office, or the emergency room.

Each of these situations affords us with an opportunity to display patience or not. Each time we do so, we can be said to act patiently in that particular instance.

Our focus here, however, is not on particular actions but rather on the virtue of patience, which is an underlying character trait. More specifically, it is a psychological disposition that can give rise to patient behavior, but is not to be identified solely with that behavior. Using a broadly Aristotelian framework for thinking about the virtues in general, here are some of the features we will assume apply to the virtue of patience (for more on components of virtues in general, see Miller 2013, Battaly 2015):

> *An Emotional Component*: The patient person tends to experience patient emotions in relevant situations and tends to avoid impatient emotions, which are sometimes marked by anger, frustration, or some forms of excitement.
>
> *A Motivational Component*: When striving to behave patiently, the patient person tends to do so primarily for good motivating reasons.
>
> *A Cognitive Component*: When in patience-relevant situations, the patient person tends to avoid beliefs or judgments that would likely trigger impatient emotions and behavior, as well as properly discern what is reasonable when it comes to the duration and amount of patience to exhibit.
>
> *A Behavioral Component*: The patient person tends to exhibit patient behavior when in the relevant situations and tends to avoid impatient behavior, which is sometimes marked by sighing, yelling, or certain aggressive actions.
>
> *A Cross-Situational Consistency Component*: The patient person reliably exhibits patient behavior, emotion, cognition, and motivation across relevant situations, such as waiting in line at the grocery store and in a traffic jam.
>
> *A Stability Component*: The patient person reliably exhibits patient behavior, emotion, cognition, and motivation over time, from day-to-day, week-to-week, and so forth.

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To sum up, a patient person is someone with a character trait that disposes the person to at least think, feel, be motivated, and act in virtuously patient ways, across a variety of situations and stably over time. There might be more to the virtue, such as requirements about the manner in which a patient person acts or whether the trait was acquired voluntarily or not. But the above are going to be assumed to be central elements of the virtue.

One more preliminary comment before we begin to unpack these elements. Our focus is on the *virtue* of patience, rather than just a trait of patience or a patient disposition. As a virtue, patience needs to be an excellence of some kind or other. For now, though, we won't say anything more about what form that excellence might take. It could be that as an excellence, patience is only instrumentally good, or it could be that it is intrinsically good, or it could be that it is both (or some other option). We will return to this issue at the end of the next section.

2. Five Important Issues Surrounding Patience the Virtue

There are at least five different issues which we think are highly relevant to developing an account of the virtue of patience. By weighing in on them, we will be able to constructively develop a new account. Along the way, we will also briefly comment on differences with existing accounts.

(a) *Goals and Time*. The first issue concerns whether exercising patience (or impatience) always arises in the context of goal pursuit. In other words, when I am being patient (or impatient), is that always a reaction to the pace of progress that I believe I am making toward one or more goals? And when I am impatient, is that always because I am reacting negatively towards what I see as insufficient progress being made towards a goal or goals?

On our view, patience is tied to goal pursuit.[1] Consider the examples from the previous section of situations which often afford opportunities to be patient. Now we can add the goals which might commonly be associated with each:

> Waiting at a traffic light, behind a slow car, or in a traffic jam.
> *Goal*: Getting to your destination (on time, or not being late, or before dinner, etc.).
>
> Being on hold with the cable company.
> *Goal*: Getting the problem with the bill fixed (or ordering a replacement part, etc.)

[1] Following Fishbach and Ferguson, a goal is a "cognitive representation of a desired endpoint that impacts evaluations, emotions, and behaviors" (2007: 491). An activated goal typically is bound up with a desire for a certain end or outcome, plans to try to attain the desired outcome, and emotions attached to the outcome, all of which motivate behavior in pursuit of the desired outcome.

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> Standing in line at the grocery store or the Department of Motor Vehicles.
>
> *Goal*: Checking out or renewing my car registration in a timely manner.
>
> Trying to get out of the house with young children to make it on time to an event.
>
> *Goal*: Not being late to the event.
>
> Sitting in the waiting room of the doctor's office, or the emergency room.
>
> *Goal*: To get better.

Generalizing from these examples and others, the following seems like a plausible view:

> In all cases, patience is a virtue with respect to goal pursuit and progress towards goal achievement.

Other cases where patience can be relevant—waiting on a referee report for a journal, wanting to eat dessert as soon as possible, and working towards resolution of a major conflict—would fit the framework of goal pursuit and achievement as well.

Now it might be that when it comes to patience, we need to exclude very weakly held goals. Suppose a goal of mine is to clean my closet, but it is such a minor goal that I always prioritize other goals over it and never get bothered when I see that the closet is still messy. In this case, I am not actually pursuing this weakly held goal, and thus patience is not a relevant experience. If this is intuitively plausible, then the goals in question in the remainder of this article should be understood to be restricted to those that have some degree of *importance* or *significance* to the person in question (for related discussion, see Kupfer 2007: 266; Dolin and Baehr forthcoming). Another clarification worth making is to note that the goal needs to be something that the person believes (rightly or wrongly) is *attainable*. This might already be implied by the idea of goal pursuit; you don't pursue something that you don't think you can attain, after all. But we think it is worth highlighting anyway.

One consequence of a goal pursuit approach to understanding patience is that it will involve a temporal dimension. When one exhibits impatience, it is in response to the amount of time it is taking to achieve your goals—the checkout person is going too slowly, the line at the DMV is barely moving, I've been on hold with the cable company forever, what is taking the waiter so long? On the flip side, patience would involve reacting in a virtuous manner in light of the time needed to achieve a goal (for a similar view, see Kupfer 2007: 265 and Dolin and Baehr forthcoming).

It is important to note that it is not enough to just say that time is related to patience in some way or other. Patience is typically not involved when you are the first person to checkout, or there is no line at the DMV, or your food is brought to you immediately. Faster than desired attainment of our goals does not invoke patience. The same is true of attaining goals at roughly the desired speed. Patience normally does not come into play when it is our standard 10-minute commute to

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work in the morning. Instead, patience comes into play when there is *slower than desired* progress towards attaining my goal. What slows down goal attainment is often externally imposed, as in cases of traffic jams or long lines. But sometimes there is no unexpected or external impediment; some goals just take a long time to achieve, like building a complex airplane model or becoming an elite chess player.

Yet the claim that there is necessarily a temporal dimension to patience, has been challenged in the recent literature, most notably by Nicolas Bommarito (2014; for a different challenge, see Pianalto 2016: 44–45). He raises two alleged counterexamples. Let us take each one in turn. Here is the first:

> "Someone who patiently puts up with the snarky comments and backhanded compliments of an ill-tempered colleague seems patient not because she is waiting for anything; she isn't *waiting* for anything at all. Instead, she is patient because of how she handles the situation *at that moment*" (Bommarito 2014: 271 emphasis his; for a similar example see Pianalto 2016: 46).

We would want to see many more details about the case before having a clear sense of whether there was a temporal dimension or not. But in theory at least our response to this case hinges on whether it involves an activated goal that the person deems attainable and at least somewhat important. For example, the person might have goals like the following:

> Short-term goal: Bringing about an end to this particular unpleasant interaction as quickly as possible.
> Longer-term goal: Promoting harmony in the department, or avoiding conflicts.
> Longer-term goal: Trying to be a more forgiving person.

Absent goals like these, we are not sure we can make sense of the case as one of exhibiting patience. But with a goal like one of these, we can then talk about progress towards achieving the goal, which necessarily involves a temporal dimension (for related discussion, see Dolin and Baehr forthcoming). Any type of goal progress or achievement must, practically speaking, take time to unfold. If one desires an outcome (e.g., an end to snarky comments, achieving harmony, being a forgiving person) that is not being achieved, then "putting up with" the lack of the outcome implies the passage of time. It thus involves some form of waiting.

Here is Bommarito's second alleged counterexample:

> ". . .one can be patient with a special needs child even (or perhaps especially) when one is quite certain that there is no possibility of improved functioning or better behavior. In this case, a person who is patient with the child is not waiting for improvement; they don't expect any improvement to come. They are patient because of how they deal with frustrations in the moment, failing to get angry at a cause of suffering" (2014: 271).

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Here a number of people have reported to us that they do not intuitively see this as a case of patience. If so, then it can be put to one side.

Suppose, though, that we can spell out the case to more clearly bring out its relevance to patience. Bommarito is right to note that then the parent's patience should not be understood in terms of progress towards the goal of improving function or eliminating the special need. Indeed, such goals would not be deemed attainable. But clearly those are not the only goals which might lead the parent to behave in the way that she does. As above, here are both short-term and long-term goals that might be deemed attainable and important by the parent:

> Short-term goal: Helping the child get past this particular emotional outburst or meltdown (compare Vigani 2017: 331).
> Longer-term goal: Being a better parent towards my special needs child.
> Longer-term goal: Treating my child with kindness and love.

Again, absent some goal or other like one of these, we have a hard time seeing how the parent could be exhibiting patience to her child. However, if there is an outcome that the parent desires, sees as attainable and important, and is striving to achieve, then patience does come into play. And again, pursuit of such goals necessarily involves a temporal component (for additional discussion of Bommarito's examples, see Vigani 2017: 330–331).

A related challenge involves cases of individuals we might be inclined to call patient in their work with those who tend to take a long time to accomplish tasks. Examples include nurses working with sick patients, teachers working with preschool or elementary students, and learning specialists working with persons with cognitive disabilities. In such cases, the work can take a long time, but it is not necessarily slower than these individuals desire it to take (thanks to a reviewer for raising this challenge).

Note that the challenge here is not to our broad framework of patience as involving goals and time; the challenge is just to the requirement of *slower than desired* progress. What can we say about this challenge? Let's shift to cases involving elementary school teachers and consider when their patience might be tested. Paradigm instances would seem to include students not cleaning up their tables, or talking over the teacher, or knocking their crayons on the floor on purpose, or more generally being rowdy and disruptive. But these all seem to involve slower than desired progress. Using the same framework as above, here are some potential goals that might be involved:

> Short-term goal: Getting the room cleaned up.
> Short-term goal: Finishing the lesson before time is up.
> Longer-term goal: Making sure the students attain the learning objectives.
> Longer-term goal: Treating the teacher with respect.

If the teacher has one (or more) of these goals or similar goals and views the students' behavior as slowing down attainment of those goals, then the teacher's patience will

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be tested. However, if the teacher has one of these goals but does not view the students' behavior as slowing down attainment (or has no goal that is being impeded by the students' behavior), then it is not clear to us how patience would be involved. In that case, the students' behavior may be irritating and may challenge the teacher's ability to remain calm. However, as a distinct phenomenon, patience is narrower than a tendency to react calmly across all types of irritating situations. Rather, patience is relevant to a specific type of situation—one in which a person's goal attainment is slower than desired.

On the flip side, the mere fact that elementary students might take longer than you or I do to clean up their table, by itself, isn't an occasion for patience. The same is true for nurses and their patients who take a longer than normal time to eat, walk, or speak. Similarly with professionals working with children with disabilities. Slow progress by itself is not an occasion for the exercise of patience. It is slower than desired progress, not merely slow progress, that matters here.[2]

To sum up, the first building block of our account of patience is that displays of both patience and impatience are reactions to the person's perception of slower than desired progress toward goal achievement. These elements make for a significant departure from Bommarito's account. There is also little overlap with Pianalto's approach, which denies the necessity of a temporal element to patience and centers on avoidable and unavoidable burdens (2016: 44–45, 51–54). Perhaps closest to our approach is Denise Vigani's, which is both temporal and goal-oriented, but does not involve the requirement of slower than desired progress (Vigani 2017: 333).

(b) *Patience and Emotions*. If patience involves reacting to goal pursuit, what reactions are considered *appropriate* to the virtue of patience, and what reactions are considered *inappropriate*? In asking this question, we could be examining a person's internal psychology or their outward behavior. Here our focus is on the inward psychology, which in turn is causally responsible for the behavior.

Suppose you have a goal that is being impeded, delayed, achieved more-slowly-than-desired, or the like. That can give rise to a variety of responses. Let's start with inappropriate responses. What responses might you expect of an impatient person, but not of a patient person?

Here is one proposal. According to Joseph Kupfer: "The vice that afflicts most of us is impatience. . .it involves anger. We are angry at not having our desires satisfied quickly enough" (2007: 266). And again he claims that, "Impatience would be anger in the modality of time" (2007: 279). Hence a patient person would not react angrily to being stuck in traffic or waiting a long time at the DMV.

Kupfer is surely right that at least unjustified anger is one manifestation of impatience. But it is also unlikely to be the *only* manifestation. Frustration for instance is another. Exasperation is yet another. Perhaps despair, disgruntlement, and displeasure also count too. So Kupfer's approach needs to be expanded

[2] In some contexts, slow progress is actually desirable. See Kidd 2023, who focuses on academic research and suggests ways in which a culture of relentless speed in doing research can be harmful. Kidd ultimately advocates for pace, or a good balance of being sometimes fast and sometimes slow in the academic life.

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(indeed he even mentions exasperation, disgruntlement, and displeasure (2007: 266)).

Bommarito offers a second, broader approach: "patience requires some suffering or frustration" (2014: 271). Similarly Eamonn Callan writes that, "in patience, anger and despair are the things to be controlled if we are to cleave to the good. . ." (1993: 526; see also Pianalto 2016: 14–15). This is an improvement but still, we claim, too narrow. It seems to us that patience need not be limited just to preventing negative emotions. Here is a case from Kupfer that can be adapted to make this point:

> *Model Airplane*: "When John was a teenager, he assembled prefabricated model airplanes made of plastic. He would rush from one stage to the next and so would start working on the tail section, for example, before the glue that attached the front wings to the fuselage had dried. Even though John had completed several model kits and understood the time it took for glue to dry and the consequences of rushing, he moved on prematurely. He lacked patience and he paid for it. The front wings would be smeared with half-dried glue and droop from the body of the plane" (2007: 265; see also Kidd 2023: 335).

Denise Vigani has another nice example:

> *Award Ceremony*: "Suppose, for instance, that one is waiting in the audience for one's name to be called for a prestigious award. The awards ceremony drags on and on: as yet another speaker takes the podium, one feels as though one simply cannot take the wait for much longer. It seems like a mistake to characterize this sort of impatient anticipation as anger" (2017: 332).

We agree that both of these cases involve failures of patience, yet anger and frustration do not seem to play a role. Other examples involving archeological research (Dolin and Baehr forthcoming), or professional calligraphy, or nature photography have also been mentioned (the last two are from Vigani 2017: 329). Hence patience can pertain to certain positive emotions as well, like excitement, anticipation, enthusiasm, and eagerness (and perhaps it can range even wider to include states of mind besides emotions, such as urges, as suggested by Dolin and Baehr forthcoming).

It is important to note that we do not suggest that *all* experiences of excitement in goal-pursuit are indicators of impatience. Indeed, one could be happily excited about an upcoming outcome or event without being impatient. We only suggest that impatience can be linked to a form of positively-valanced urgent excitement or emotional activation rooted in an eagerness for the outcome or event to occur as soon as possible.

The upshot, then, is that it is a mistake to build a particular emotion, or even a class of positive or negative emotions, into an account of patience (for similar remarks, see the very helpful discussion in Vigani 2017: 331–332 and Dolin and

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Baehr forthcoming). Nevertheless, anger, frustration, and over-eagerness are common signs of impatience. What then is the reaction to progress toward goal achievement in a *patient* person? Here there seems to be a clear and widely held answer, namely calmness (see, e.g., Kupfer 2007: 265, Bommarito 2014: 273, Pianalto 2016: 14, and Dolin and Baehr forthcoming). The patient person reacts calmly to how long it is taking the slow cashier at the grocery store. Similarly with the traffic jam, being on hold with the cable company, the many steps involved in building the model airplane, and having one's name called for the award.

To clarify a bit more, we do not claim that patient people have a general disposition or trait of calmness. Ours is a narrower claim that patient people are those who tend to respond to patience-relevant situations with emotional calmness. That is, they tend to experience a calm emotional state in patience-relevant situations.

Also, while we do not attempt to define this emotional calmness here, at the very least it would involve a lack of intense emotional activation in response to slower than desired goal progress. Note that we do not think of calmness as requiring a Zen-like state of coolness and relaxation. Hence being patient while stuck in traffic is compatible with enjoying myself energetically while listening to a great song. The key point is that the traffic delay itself is not causing me to be emotionally activated.

So to sum up what we have said about the first two issues, we can claim that patience involves reacting to slower than desired progress toward goal achievement with calmness. In expanding the range of reactions that can count as failures of patience, we thereby depart from the accounts offered by Kupfer, Bommarito, and Callan. Pianalto's account appeals to acceptance, and Vigani's account appeals to acknowledgment, which don't factor into our approach (Pianalto 2016: 50–51, Vigani 2017: 333).

(c) *Continence versus Virtue*. It is common in work on the virtues to distinguish between a virtuous state of mind and mere continence or *enkrateia* (for the classic statement of this distinction, see Aristotle 1985). Roughly the difference has to do with experiencing and reacting to temptation to do what is wrong. A virtuous person will not experience such temptation in the first place, whereas a continent person will experience temptation and struggle with it, but reliably succeed at overcoming it.

In the case of the virtue of patience, can we develop a plausible distinction between the two? One answer is to say that we cannot. In other words, it is enough for the virtue of patience to prevent the person from *giving into* frustration, anger, exasperation, etc. and proceeding to quit, rush, or the like, even if that involves an internal psychological struggle of some kind (Vigani highlights this possibility as well (2017: 334–337)).

But we want to hold out hope for an affirmative answer (as does Kupfer 2007: 265–266, Pianalto 2016: 40–41, and Vigani 2017: 335–337). Continence, on our approach, would be marked by *continued* struggle, over significant periods of time, with anger, frustration, and all the rest, even if the person's outward behavior is patient. For the virtue of patience, however, there are two options:

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(1) The patient person typically either:

(i) Experiences no relevant negative or positive emotions that are a mark of impatience, and only experiences calmness in goal pursuit.

or

(ii) Experiences one or more of the emotions which are a mark of impatience, but only momentarily, and then the person is reliably able to calm down.

Let's expand on each of these options.

The second one might seem surprising, since it holds that reactions of unjustified anger or frustration are compatible with being a patient person. The option is included, however, because otherwise the bar for instantiating the virtue of patience will be set very high. Few of us will ever get to the point where we are cross-situationally and stably immune to impatient reactions at delays in the pursuit of our goals. If that is one of the threshold requirements for patience, then it becomes a category that is useful in theory only.

Perhaps the *perfectly* patient person has no emotional experiences of any duration which are a mark of impatience. That could very well be true. But we are working with the standard framework whereby virtues come in degrees, and so it makes sense to talk of people being moderately or very patient without being perfectly patient. The second option above, we want to suggest, is compatible with being patient *to some degree*, even if it is incompatible with perfect patience.

Let's turn to the first option. More needs to be said to develop it, since it matters *why* there are no emotions that are a mark of impatience being experienced. Some possibilities could include:

- The person has sustained neurological damage that prevents the experiencing of these emotions in general and has brought about a persistent sense of calmness.
- The person is regularly under the influence of a drug that induces a sense of calmness.
- The person has been hypnotized to experience a sense of calmness.

Yet in these cases, while the person's outward behavior might mimic what you would expect of a patient person, it is clear that it is not arising from a virtuous character trait of patience (see also Bommarito 2014: 272–273).

Why not? Because exhibiting only calmness in goal pursuit needs to be an *achievement* in the virtuous person. It is presumably not the default state of the human condition, and to count as virtuous in this first respect outlined in (i), a person needs to bring herself to the point where she no longer reacts with anger, frustration, over-eagerness, and the like, but rather with calmness. This is an accomplishment that is difficult to achieve and does not happen overnight. As Dolin and Baehr write in a similar context, "Regarding those in whom patience is *performing its full corrective function*, there may be no temporally-charged urges,

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but that's precisely *because* these people are patient—because patience is doing its job in them" (forthcoming, emphasis theirs).

We can spell out what this sense of achievement involves a bit more by drawing on recent work by Gwen Bradford. Applied to the calmness experienced by the virtuously patient person, Bradford's view would require that to be an achievement, this consistently calm mindset must be the result of an earlier, difficult causal process whereby the person competently and non-accidently formed herself in this way through her own efforts (2015: 13–20). Thus becoming calm via a drug would not count as an achievement in the relevant sense since it would not be difficult, nor would calmness via neurological damage count as it would not be brought about competently through the person's own efforts (for what 'difficulty' and 'competent causation' amount to, see Bradford 2015, chapters two and three). Finally, note that while the achievement needs to be brought about through the person's own efforts, it need not be *solely* due to one's efforts. From an Aristotelian perspective, for instance, the person's upbringing plays a significant role as well.

Clearly there is much more that could be said in spelling out the sense of achievement involved in virtuously experiencing calmness and a lack of persistent emotions which are a mark of impatience. Note, though, that the need to address these issues is not specific to the virtue of patience. There are many ways of not harming others that would not fall within the scope of non-malevolence, many ways of not overindulging that would not fall within the scope of temperance, many ways of not distorting the facts that would not fall within the scope of honesty, and so forth. Achievement is a topic that must be addressed by accounts of *all* of the moral virtues.

To sum up this discussion of continence and virtue, any account of the virtue of patience needs to add a condition requiring that the person have brought herself in an appropriate way to the point whereby she typically does not experience desires which persist in opposing calm progress towards goal achievement. None of the existing accounts, so far as we can tell, formulate such a condition.

(iv) *Motivation*. On many accounts of virtue, and especially according to Aristotelian approaches, underlying motivation matters. Even if the person consistently acts well in a way that brings about good in the world, that won't be enough to count as being a virtuous person if he is doing so for less than virtuous motivating reasons (we remain neutral on whether reliably producing good consequences is a necessary condition on virtue in general. For a helpful overview, see Battaly 2015).

In the case of patience, the claim is that a necessary condition on virtuous patience is that there be virtuous motivation, specifically for why the person strives to react with calmness to delayed progress towards goal achievement (see also Bommarito 2014: 273; Dolin and Baehr forthcoming). Suppose Sara has a sudden reaction of anger or frustration at how long things are taking in a particular situation. But then she might intentionally strive to overcome or override this reaction and calm down. As we just saw, this is compatible with still being a virtuously patient person. Note that there can be a variety of different reasons for *why* Sara wants to calm down. The claim is that to be virtuously patient, her motivating reasons for striving to react calmly need to be virtuous ones.

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What form does this virtuous motivation take? There are two different ways of answering this question: with a monist account or with a pluralist account. The former attempts to reduce all forms of patient motivation to just one fundamental motive. The pluralist instead maintains that the patient person can exhibit stable and cross-situationally consistent patterns of patient behavior for a variety of admirable motivating reasons which are not reducible to one more fundamental kind.

We lean in the pluralist direction. We do not have a general argument for this preference, but are simply moved by examples. These are cases where it seems that a variety of different motivating reasons would be compatible with exhibiting patience, and we do not see any way to reduce them to one more fundamental motive. Here is such an example:

> "Why did you try to not get upset at how long the checkout person was taking to scan everything?"
> "She's my friend."
> "She was trying her best."
> "What if I were in her shoes – how would I feel if people got upset at me?"
> "That wouldn't have been the right thing to do."
> "What good would that have done?"
> "That's wouldn't have been very patient."

More generally, a variety of loving, justice-oriented, friendship-oriented, dutiful, and explicitly patient ("because it would be patient") ultimate motives could count as virtuously patient.

There are limits to this pluralism, however. If in the example the person had responded to why he tried to not get upset with a response like this:

> "I was checking my phone and so didn't even notice how long it was taking."
> "I was totally spacing out and wasn't paying attention to the line."

then those don't count as virtuous motivating reasons precisely because this wasn't a situation where patience was being exercised in the first place. Suppose instead the person clearly was aware of how long this was taking, but strived to not get upset for one of these reasons:

> "I was trying to impress everyone in line with how patient I am."
> "I was enjoying checking my phone."
> "I didn't want to get kicked out of the store."
> "I wanted to get rewarded in the afterlife."

then this would not be the kind of response worthy of moral admiration. These are all self-interested motivating reasons, and our pluralist approach excludes all such reasons.

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It is important to note that the virtuous motivating reasons in question need to be *ultimate* motivating reasons. Returning to our example, suppose things proceed as follows:

> "Why did you try to not get upset at how long the checkout person was taking to scan everything?"
>
> "That wouldn't have been the right thing to do."
>
> "Why is doing the right thing important?"
>
> "So I can get rewarded in the afterlife."

then in this case the rightness motive is merely instrumental to a self-interested reward motive. Ultimately motivation in this case bottoms out in self-interest, and so we do not have a display of the virtue of patience. Alternatively, if the response had even been something like "It just is," or "Well obviously doing the right thing is important," then that would not conflict with the person acting from virtuous patience.

What about the case of self-directed patience, where a person is patient with herself during the process of pursuing the ultimate goal of her own excellence or flourishing? This would make the ultimate motive egoistic, since it is her own flourishing which is in view, but it might be claimed that in this case the person can still be virtuously patient (thanks to a reviewer for raising this issue).

In response, we could acknowledge an exception for this one form of egoistic motivation in the case of self-directed patience. Or we could hold that the person is not being virtuous in this instance unless the motivation of pursuing her own flourishing was *not ultimate* but instead was derived from an ultimate motive of caring about the flourishing of *people in general*. The virtuous person, in other words, would ultimately care about human flourishing as such, rather than just her own flourishing, and the same would apply to caring about excellence in general.[3]

So on the topic of motivation, we claim that if the virtuously patient person had to overcome momentary impatient desires, then she did so primarily for good or virtuous ultimate motivating reasons of one or more kinds K_1 through K_n. As far as we can tell, none of the leading accounts in the recent literature advocate for a pluralist account, or even take up the topic of virtuous motivation for patience in the first place.

(v) *Good Goals?* The final issue to be raised in this section returns to the question of the value of the virtue of patience—is it a character trait which is intrinsically good, or is it merely an instrumental good trait which is useful for achieving a person's goals?[4]

[3] Another reviewer raised the related case of the person's being motivated to become a better person. In this instance, we may not in fact have an egoistic motive, and if so then there is no worry for the approach we are developing. But if it is an egoistic motive, then the same two moves are available that we present above. We could make an exception in this case to the ban on egoistic ultimate motives, or we could allow this motive to be derivative from a deeper motive of concern for everyone becoming better but not allow it to be a virtuous ultimate motive itself.

[4] There are other options as well, e.g., it could be instrumentally bad for achieving various goals, or it could be intrinsically bad, or both, but we will set these aside.

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One way to approach this question is by considering the content of the goals that a patient person is pursuing. Note that up to this point, there have been no normative constraints imposed upon these goals whose pursuit might provide an opportunity for patience or impatience. They could be goals to advance admirable causes but also deplorable ones. Furthermore, this is compatible with what we just said about virtuous motivation. Note again that the role virtuous motivation plays is specifically with respect to why the person strives to react with calmness to delayed progress towards goal achievement. It does not enter into the decision of what goals the person is pursuing in the first place.

To reinforce this, let's return to the checkout example one more time. We didn't say anything about what the customer was buying or what the supplies might be used for. Suppose that he is buying ingredients to make a bomb in order to advance a cause which he thinks (quite mistakenly) is a just cause. In the short-term his goal is just to pay for his things and leave the store, but in the long-term his goal is to build the bomb. He overcomes his momentary annoyance at how long the checkout process is taking in advancing both of these goals, because he thinks it would not be right or just to get upset at the employee. Thus his motivation can be virtuous, but this doesn't thereby prevent his long-term goal from being bad.

So let's first take up the question of whether we need to add a separative, normative restriction onto the content of the goals in the patient person. Then we can return to the question about the instrumental and/or intrinsic value of virtuous patience.

Ordinary discourse seems to deny a restriction on what goals can co-exist with patience. We talk about the *patient assassin*, the *patient mobster*, and even the *patient serial killer*. If an assassin is fighting for the enemy, we can still note how his patience helped him carry out his mission. As Kupfer writes, "Patience may be needed by bank robbers and kidnappers, and not just model airplane builders, to get what they want. Instrumental virtues do not themselves pick out moral ends" (2007: 277; see also the citations in Vigani 2017: 327–28).

Furthermore, it might seem odd to think that whether a person is virtuously patient or not could fluctuate with the value of their goals. Take two snipers who are equally skilled but fight on opposite sides of a war. Suppose in both combat and non-combat situations they typically exhibit equally patient behavior and strive to be calm for reasons that are on our pluralist list as virtuous motivating reasons. But one side of the war is clearly just and the other side is clearly unjust. Is it right to say that because of the difference in the goodness of their goals, one sniper counts as exhibiting virtuous patience and the other does not?

On this way of thinking, then, it is plausible to conceive of the virtue of patience as an instrumentally good quality which assists in better achieving our goals, whatever they happen to be. At the same time, it would not be intrinsically good.

Alternatively, the Aristotelian tradition would tend to require only good goals for the virtues in general, and furthermore to claim that all virtues must be intrinsically good (see, e.g., Vigani 2017: 327–28). Some of the recent work on patience makes a similar case. Bommarito, for instance, argues that, "Though it can help to achieve other goals, patience also supplies us with a goal: to experience the world in a particular way both emotionally and perceptually" (Bommarito 2014: 278; for a

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purely instrumental approach, see Kupfer 2007: 277–78). Similarly Vigani argues that "patience is a *good* way of relating to the temporary aspects of the world. As such, I contend, it is choiceworthy in itself" (2017: 337 emphasis hers; see also Pianalto 2016: 106–108).

What then should we say about the value of the virtue of patience? Our approach is ecumenical. Rather than having to take a stand, we will instead note that for those who think patience has to be intrinsically good, they can add an additional restriction to the account so that the goal pursuit involved is limited to only good goals. For those on the other side of the debate, this restriction can be dropped.

These are the five issues (arguably among many others) that are relevant to constructing an account of patience. In the next section, we put all the pieces together.

3. The Preliminary Account

The previous section allowed us to make significant progress in better understanding the conceptual parameters of virtuous patience. What follows compiles those results together into the following preliminary account:

> (P) The virtue of patience is a cross-situational and stable disposition to react, both internally and externally, to slower than desired progress toward goal achievement with a reasonable level of calmness, and with the typical absence of persistent desires which oppose calmly progressing toward goal achievement. Furthermore, the virtuously patient person will have brought herself in an appropriate manner to the point at which she typically does not experience these persistent desires opposing calm progress towards goal achievement. If the person has to overcome momentary impatient desires, then she does so primarily for good or virtuous ultimate motivating reasons of one or more kinds K_1 through K_n.

We want to stress that this is preliminary, and will need further refinement in future work.

The inclusion of 'primarily' and 'reasonable' is something that has not been mentioned before. The 'primarily' is intended to make room for mixed motives. To require that the only motivation behind striving to be calm be virtuous motivation, is to set the bar for virtuous patience very high. It might be a reasonable requirement for being perfectly patient. But again, patience comes in degrees, and making pure virtuous motivation in striving to be calm necessary for being patient to any degree whatsoever, will have the effect of excluding (almost?) everyone from counting.

At the same time, it would be too permissive to only require the *presence* of virtuously patient motivation. That is compatible with such motivation being very weak, and self-interested motivation doing the main causal work in overcoming anger or frustration.

As a compromise, then, we suggest that patience is compatible with mixed motivation, *provided that* the motives which are primarily causally operative in

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striving to be calm are good or virtuous motivating reasons of one or more kinds K_1 through K_n. Secondary or supplemental motivation can be self-interested.

What about requiring a 'reasonable' level of calmness? Why not just say that there has to be a calm reaction? We have in mind three reasons.[5]

The first has to do with the *duration* of time involved in being calm. If you are put on hold by the cable company, it is not a failure of patience if you hang up after 30 minutes. If you are stuck behind a car that is not moving when the light turns green because the driver is looking at his phone, it is not a failure of patience if you politely honk your horn after 20 seconds have gone by. Same with writing to an editor of a philosophy journal after a paper has been under review for 6 months. Virtuous patience requires a reasonable length of time in which you behave calmly. It typically does not require being calm forever.

The second reason has to do with the *amount* of calmness being exhibited. In some cases of delays to goal pursuit or achievement, it is perfectly appropriate to feel anger or frustration. Righteous anger at (the lack of) progress towards equality or at (the lack of) progress towards ending a brutal military conflict, can be the right response to have in certain cases. In some instances, a 'reasonable level of calmness' might be not being calm at all (for righteous anger, see Cherry 2021; in the case of patience, see Pianalto 2016: chapter five).

A third reason takes us back to the question of whether virtuous patience is compatible with bad goals. We did not take a stand on this debate. But *if* bad goals are to be excluded, then the "reasonable" requirement can be assigned this job as well. For there is no reasonable level of calmness with respect to goal pursuit of bad goals (this parallels Vigani's excluding bad goals using her "appropriate" qualifier in her 2017: 338).

The work of discerning what is reasonable falls under the scope of the cognitive component of the virtue of patience. There the virtuously patient person will properly assess evidence as to whether enough time has gone by, for instance, or whether being calm is even appropriate in the first place. From an Aristotelian perspective, this will take us in the direction of clarifying the contribution that practical wisdom will make as well, which is a distinct intellectual virtue that informs the cognitive components of moral virtues in various ways. But all this will have to wait for another occasion (for more on different accounts of the relationship between practical wisdom and the moral virtues, see Miller 2021).

So the addition of 'primarily' and 'reasonable' is significant; they are doing important work in (P). Admittedly there is much more that could be said in unpacking and refining the proposal in (P) further. But this is as far as we will take it in this article.

4. Applying the Account

Having clarified the nature of virtuous patience to a significant extent, let's end with a little vice by applying the account to the vices associated with patience.

[5] We take reasonability to be an objective matter, and not something that is a matter of what each person takes to be reasonable. Kupfer invokes normative concepts of 'enough' and 'warranted' to do some of the work for which we use 'reasonable' (2007: 266). Similarly Vigani appeals to 'appropriate' (2017: 333). Pianalto uses 'reasonable' (2016: 54).

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On a standard Aristotelian approach to the relationship between virtues and vices, each virtue is a mean. More precisely, for any virtue there is at least one vice of excess and at least one vice of deficiency.

In the case of patience, the vice of deficiency is straightforward—impatience. On the proposal developed in (P), this can be roughly understood as lacking a reasonable level of calmness in the process of goal achievement. Experiences of impatience are familiar, and of the two ways to fail to hit the mean, this is the way that is likely to be far more widespread (for a similar observation, see Kupfer 2007: 268).

To spell out the proposal a bit more, here are two forms that impatience might take:

- Being disposed to not be calm at all in the process of goal achievement.
- Being disposed to be calm for too short of time.

Someone who flies off the handle and begins cursing loudly after having to wait 2 minutes in line or 5 seconds for the car in front of him to accelerate when the light turns green, is manifesting behavior that could stem from a vice of impatience. Perhaps he was indeed calm for that short of period of time before he lost it. Or perhaps he was never calm at all. Either way, he is falling short of a reasonable level of calmness.

What about a third possibility along the following lines:

- Being disposed to be calm for extended periods of time, but not calm enough.

On our approach, this would *not* amount to a form of *vicious* impatience. Rather it is more like incontinence or weakness of will (*akrasia*), where calmness repeatedly gets outweighed by, say, an urge to rush. Just as we said that having to struggle with frustration or anger persistently over time, even if one succeeds in eventually calming down, is a mark of continence, not virtue, so too experiencing calmness persistently over time, even if one succeeds in eventually giving into frustration, anger, or the like is a mark of incontinence, not vice (for more on incontinence and patience, see Kupfer 2007: 268).

To sum up, then, the picture of the impatient person is one that is a perfect inversion of what we said about the patient person in section two:

(2) The impatient person typically either:
  (i) Experiences no calmness in goal pursuit, and only the relevant negative or positive emotions that are a mark of impatience.

  or

  (ii) Experiences calmness but only momentarily, and then the person reliably experiences one or more of the emotions which are a mark of impatience and which eliminate the calmness.

One challenge in developing an account of impatience further has to do with *why* a person lacks a reasonable level of calmness. Suppose it is due to an addiction or

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condition like severe anxiety which is beyond his voluntary control. If so, then paralleling what was said in section two, that would not be a mark of a vice (for relevant discussion, see Kupfer 2007: 267). One option to explore in addressing such cases is to see whether parallel moves for virtuous patience could be made in terms of thinking of vicious impatience as an achievement, with Bradford's work (2015) being applied to the case of vice just as it was in section two in the case of virtue. But we will not pursue this possibility here.

Having said all this, impatience is the easier of the two vices to understand. Less straightforward in our view is the vice of *excess*. One proposal—which we will ultimately reject—is to understand the vice of excess as *excessive patience*. On this approach, the vice of excess is realized when a person consistently and stably exhibits too much of the virtue of patience in the relevant situations. That might not sound very illuminating until we are told what 'too much' amounts to, yet there are good reasons to be skeptical about even this vague of a specification of the approach (in what follows we have been helped by Colgrove 2024).

One immediate reason to reject the 'excessive patience' proposal is that it is incoherent given the specific details of our account of virtuous patience in (P). That account requires 'a reasonable level of calmness,' but then an 'excessive' degree of calmness would automatically not count as reasonable. So there is no room for the possibility of 'excessive patience' given the framework in (P).

A second reason to reject 'excessive patience' has to do with a broader view of whether virtues in general can lead to wrong actions or moral failures. It is plausible to hold, as Paul Bloomfield has recently argued (2022), that actions stemming solely from an underlying virtuous disposition cannot be morally wrong, provided that the virtue does not conflict with any more important virtues that pertain to the circumstances. But on the proposal we are considering, excessive patience would consistently lead to moral failures. So it would follow that patience cannot be a moral virtue. That's a difficult conclusion to accept, and to avoid it we should reconsider whether excessive patience is in fact the best candidate for the vice in question (Bloomfield 2022; see also Pianalto 2016: 52, chapter six).

The final reason to avoid appealing to excessive patience as the vice of excess is that, when we turn to cases of alleged excessive patience, one can argue that the fault there is often not with the person's *patience*, but rather with some other part of her character. Matthew Pianalto has defended just such a view:

> Rather than blaming an excess of patience, we should blame a deficiency of confidence or an excess of fear. In other words, if we want to understand the source of error, we should consider the vices that cause the error, rather than offering the suggestion that a virtue itself sometimes leads to vice. "Too much patience" is not a failure of patience, but rather a failure to possess some other virtue (Pianalto 2016: 105).

So for these three reasons, we should put the 'excessive patience' proposal to one side.

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A better approach is to say that there is at least one unnamed vice of excess which is also concerned with progress towards goal achievement. Unlike the previous approach, this vice of excess would not be understood as the virtue of patience possessed to an excessive degree. Rather it would be a distinct character trait.

What form would this vice take? To help, we can make use of the 'reasonable' qualifier from the account of patience in (P). Hence there will be at least two distinct vices of excess. Here is one of them:

> One Vice of Excess – Being unreasonable by being disposed to be calm for too long (this seems close to what Callan calls "witless passivity" at 1993: 523; see also Kupfer 2007: 268–70, Pianalto 2016: 41).

To return to an earlier example, it is excessive to be calm and not frustrated or angry after waiting on hold with the cable company for more than 60 minutes. The same is true of being calm in waiting years for a philosophy journal to reach a verdict on a submission.

But being calm for too long is not the only form of unreasonableness. Here is another:

> A Second Vice of Excess – Being unreasonable by being disposed to be too calm (for related discussion, see Callan 1993: 538).

Regardless of how long you are calm, in some situations it is a mistake to be as calm as you are, or even to be calm at all. Here we said earlier that cases of righteous anger provide helpful illustrations (see also Bommarito 2014: 276–77).

A possible third vice of excess in this area takes us back to the topic of good and bad goals:

> A Potential Third Vice of Excess – Being unreasonable by being disposed to be calm to any extent with respect to one's reaction to progress towards goal achievement of bad goals.

If one thinks that the virtue of patience requires only good goals, then one can also think that there is no reasonable level of calmness with respect to progress towards bad goals. The calm serial killer, or Ponzi schemer, likely has multiple vices, but the one in question here is being excessively calm with respect to bad goals for which there should be no calmness in the first place.

Regardless of what we think about this third possibility, it is worth noting the parallel with what we said about reasonableness and the virtue of patience. Being unreasonable when it comes to the vice of excess pertains to the cognitive component of that vice. In Aristotelian terms, that part of the vice is not being guided by practical wisdom to discern how long and to what degree to remain calm. This results in consistent failures of judgment on the part of the vicious person in one or more of these respects.

The three candidates for vices of excess are not meant to be exhaustive; perhaps there are other ways to be viciously excessive with respect to progress towards goal

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achievement. But the main point for our purposes is just to note that patience does seem to obey the doctrine of the mean after all, and indeed there could even be a variety of different vices of excess.[6]

5. Conclusion

In this article we hope to have made a number of contributions to the philosophical literature on the virtue of patience. In particular we have:

(i) Developed an account of the virtue of patience that takes seriously the emotional, motivational, cognitive, behavioral, cross-situational consistency, and stability components of the virtue of patience.
(ii) Developed one of the few approaches centered on goals and supported a novel requirement of slower than desired progress towards goal achievement.
(iii) Argued for a broad approach to the emotional reactions opposed to patience, unlike most scholars of patience who tend to focus just on negative emotions.
(iv) Offered the first developed account of the difference between the virtue of patience and continence, and proposed a novel condition requiring that the person has brought herself in an appropriate way to the point whereby she typically does not experience desires which persist in opposing calm progress towards goal achievement.
(v) Developed the first account of virtuous motivation for patience, an account that is pluralist and also permits mixed motives.
(vi) Provided an account of how the vices of excess and deficiency differ from the virtue of patience.

Though we have not been able to engage in detail with the existing views of patience in the literature, we noted along the way where we have either built upon or parted ways from those views. Where we parted ways, we tried to explain why.

Of course, nothing said in this article is meant to be the final word in unpacking the virtue of patience. While we consider (P) to be the most promising direction to take in developing an account of this virtue, far more work needs to be done. We

[6] Highlighting the work of Heather Battaly (2021), a reviewer noted potential parallels between the vices of excess for patience and procrastination. We are cautious about drawing too many comparisons between the two, though. Procrastination, on Battaly's framework, involves "intentionally delaying acting in pursuit of intellectual goals that one believes one should be actively pursuing" (2021, emphasis removed). But as we are understanding the vices of excess for patience, there is no delaying or stalling being undertaken by the agent. Rather, the undesirable delay in attaining a goal, such as when stuck in a line or in traffic, is not of the person's own doing, yet she still reacts to the delay with calmness.

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should all be impatient about the lack of attention that has been paid to this neglected virtue.[7]

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