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**Intellectual Patience:**

**Controlling Temporally-Charged Urges in the Life of the Mind**

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In Reginald Rose’s *Twelve Angry Men*, the acquittal or conviction of a young man charged with murder depends on the deliberation of twelve jurors: eleven ready to convict, one reluctant.[[1]](#footnote-1) Among the eleven, Juror Seven appears most eager for a verdict. He’s clearly in haste, restive, and quick to judge. A glance at the evidence, he thinks, is all one needs to be sure that the defendant is guilty.

Juror Eight differs. He takes time to ponder, asks good questions, and hesitates to judge. Slowly, one by one, he persuades each juror that they have reasonable doubt. Had his character mirrored Juror Seven’s, the defendant would have been swiftly convicted and soon after strapped to an electric chair.

Temporally-charged urges, like *wanting* to reach a verdict *now* or *soon*, can seriously impair cognition. Give in to them and you may well become intellectually impatient, a third-rate thinker. Good thinkers have learned to control such urges. They’ve learned *intellectual patience*.

In this chapter, we’ll spend most of our effort on somewhat technical issues concerning what patience is and what it isn’t. With an eye to the life of the mind, we’ll analyze the contexts that call for patience, and what patience demands in those contexts. Together these tell what patience is. Appreciating how patience differs from neighboring character traits can help us further understand patience and shed light on how character traits cooperate. So, having analyzed patience, we turn to consider how it differs from *perseverance*, a trait often associated with patience. We then reflect on the nature of *virtuous* patience, which involves skill, judgment, and good motives – excellence surpassing a mere character trait. Finally, we conclude by considering a poetic reflection on the importance of patience to deeply human inquiry.

1. THE CONTEXT OF PATIENCE

Patience is a character trait. Character traits are dispositions to think, feel, or act in certain ways. Without a *context*, a set of preconditions, dispositions can’t manifest. Matches can’t light without sufficient oxygen, and the same goes for character traits: without fear or danger, courage can’t manifest; neither can compassion manifest in the absence of someone suffering.[[2]](#footnote-2) A character trait’s context, we might say, consists of the circumstances that put us *in need of* that trait. We can call what one typically thinks, feels, or does in such contexts the *substance* of a character trait. Persisting in the face of fear or danger, for example, can be understood as the substance of courage. What shall we say about patience? Let’s begin with its context.

Some character trait contexts are internal, involving the presence of a particular psychological state. Others are external or environmental; they’re challenges generated outside one’s head. Consider courage again. If its context is strictly internal, it’ll involve the onset of *fear* or the *appearance* of danger; if its context is strictly external, it’ll involve facing *actual* danger.[[3]](#footnote-3)

It’s tempting to think that the context of patience is external, that patience is only for objectively time-consuming activities – reading tomes, teaching slow-learners, and the like. But suppose you enjoy the tome you’re reading, don’t notice time passing, and are in no rush. In that case, you won’t need patience. Or suppose you’re frustrated over how long you *think* something will take. And imagine you’re mistaken in this expectation – your student learns faster than you had anticipated, say. Here, frustration over a mere *appearance* of significant time-consumption will put you in need of patience. So it seems that external features of a given circumstance, including *de facto* time-consumption, don’t constitute the context of patience. Such features may awaken nothing more than calm, pleasant enjoyment, and mere illusions of extended time-consumption can spark psychological states that call for patience. Patience, it seems, is an internal affair.

How should these internal states be understood? Two possibilities come to mind: they may be cognitive or perspectival, or they may be affective or emotional. (Sharp distinctions here arouse suspicion, but rough distinctions do offer guidance.) First consider whether to need patience one must have certain cognitive, perspectival states. For Nicholas Bommarito, a need for patience is a need for a “sense of scale,” a sense that our “desires and values as a whole” outweigh our “particular desires and values,” and a sense of “our place in a larger context – a relationship, a family, a community, a species…”[[4]](#footnote-4) Imagine, for instance, a professor wanting her students to grasp a particular point. They aren’t getting the point, however, and she can tell. *Perceiving* that the satisfaction of this particular desire and her role in her students’ overall education are relatively unimportant, she’ll likely be calm, her students’ failure to get the point notwithstanding. Without such *perspective*, frustration will set in and she’ll need patience.

At first glance, this view has something going for it. But it comes with a few problems. The claim that patience requires keeping our concerns in perspective, that it requires seeing that what’s happening now matters little compared to the “bigger picture,” suggests that we can’t need patience when we consider the bigger picture itself. But that seems false. Imagine awaiting your sole love’s urgent medical diagnosis, or searching for ultimate meaning to life. Trying to see the bigger picture might be futile *because for you there isn’t one* – whether your sole love has a terminal illness, or whether there’s ultimate meaning to life, *is* the big picture. And yet, as you wait, or as you search, you may need patience all the same, perhaps more so.

Note, too, that we need patience withourselves, as when we fail to learn something by ourselves – a new language, for example – as quickly as we’d like. In at least some such cases, we have no need to perceive our place in a larger social context, no need to perceive who we are, or what role we play, in relation to others. No “other” is relevant; we’re in this situation alone. And so, it makes little sense to take a step back to realize that we’re “just one among many.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Acknowledging our need for help from others may be appropriate, as may be acknowledging our limitations in shaping certain temporal aspects of our environment.[[6]](#footnote-6) But that’s a task for humility, not patience.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Perhaps one can develop another analysis of the context of patience similar to Bommarito’s, one that can overcome these problems. But we’ll proceed under the assumption that the context of patience is marked not by cognitive or perspectival states, but rather by particular affective or emotional states. We can unpack this claim by first noting the connection between patience and *desires*.

To need patience, some philosophers argue, one must possess certain desires.[[8]](#footnote-8) That seems right; “indifferent patience” does sound odd. And, as we just saw, desires show up even in cases meant to show that a need for patience is a need for perspective. Patience, though, needn’t involve a desire *for* some end – at least not straightforwardly so. It can involve wanting something to *cease*, as when a bored student wants a lecture to end. The context of patience requires wanting some end, or wanting something *to* end.

Potentially any end – good or bad – could be relevant here. Both philanthropists and thieves need patience. One needn’t desire a good end, nor that some bad activity would end, to count as needing patience in some sense. We’ll say more about patience and motives later (§4). For now, given our focus on the life of the mind, let’s say that the context of intellectual patience involves a desire for any epistemic end – whether trivial knowledge or deep understanding – or a desire that some intellectual activity or circumstance would end – like wanting a (good or bad) lecture to end.

There’s more to say here, of course. We can desire an epistemic end, or that some intellectual activity would end, without needing patience. Whatever we want, we must want it *now* or *sooner*. The context of patience includes a *temporal* component. The desires at issue must be “temporally-charged” – they must involve a certain feeling of or attitude toward *time* passing. Desires requiring patience come with a felt sense of, for example, *how long* it’s taking to achieve a given epistemic end, to finish some intellectual activity, or to get out of some intellectual circumstance. We don’t mean to restrict this component to an explicit awareness of time. Consciously counting seconds isn’t required to exercise patience. Something more visceral counts, too. A *felt sense of*, say, the slowness of a rather boring lecture, coupled with a desire for it to end, can occasion an exercise of patience.

One might object that *suffering* is enough to put us in need of patience, and that sometimes suffering has nothing to do with an attitude toward time; we can patiently suffer an insult, for example, not caring how long it took for the insult to be communicated.[[9]](#footnote-9) But it’s unclear that we really suffer without wanting the cause of our suffering to end *immediately*. What’s more, note that we often want time to slow down. We don’t want our children to grow up too fast, for example, and when they do, we suffer to some extent. Something similar can happen in the life of the mind, as when we wish that some important, meaningful learning experience wouldn’t go by so fast. Assume that this is a kind of suffering. Would it make sense to counsel people suffering in this way to have patience with regard to how they feel about time moving too *fast*? Presumably not. This suggests that suffering *per se* isn’t enough to fix the context of patience.

To us the context of patience seems to require the presence of a temporally-charged desire. Putting things this way can mislead, however. It suggests that a faint, temporally-charged inner stirring might call for patience, which doesn’t sound right. We prefer a stronger notion. Note that patience is a response to desires that generate certain *emotions*, like anger or frustration, or certain *impulses*, like an impulse to quit.[[10]](#footnote-10) Wanting to learn something and noticing how long it’ll take might not call for patience. It will, though, when we’re frustrated over how long the learning process seems to take, or when the felt slowness of it tempts us to give up. That’s why a stronger notion is better. The context of patience, it seems, requires the presence of temporally-charged *urges* – desires that come with certain emotions, impulses, or both. We’ll stick with that, but we should say more about these emotions and impulses.

The first thing to note is that impulses to act don’t arise when we realize we have no control over when we get our desired ends or the pace with which we’re able to pursue them. University applicants want to know about admission decisions. But they can’t know that right away, nor can they speed up the process. Still, they might need patience. Their frustrated desire to know now or sooner can generate precisely that – *frustration*. The emergence of such an emotion is enough to make a desire an urge in the sense noted above. Again, one needn’t have an impulse to act to be in need of patience.

What else should we say about these emotions and impulses? Beginning with the former, note that we’ve considered emotions like anger and frustration, which have an unpleasant valence. Let’s call them “unpleasant emotions” as opposed to emotions such as enthusiasm, agreeable excitement, or zeal. For Annette Baier, patience is “the virtue of slowness to anger.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Eamonn Callan likewise thinks that patience “entails a discipline” of anger.[[12]](#footnote-12) Perhaps all patience-relevant emotions are unpleasant in this sense.

This isn’t unreasonable. Consider a passage in Shūsaku Endō’s novel *Silence*. For two priests in hiding, there was “nothing but rain and more rain, [and] a feeling like anger [rose] up within [their] breasts. How much longer is this life to continue? Certainly both [became]…impatient.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Here impatience is, in part, giving in to anger, and nothing seems odd about that. Anger also has epistemic relevance. Psychological literature suggests that anger disrupts deliberation. Lerner and Tiedens say that consistently angry persons “are eager to make decisions and are unlikely to stop and ponder.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Being “unlikely to stop” like this is suggestive of impatience. Given this epistemic relevance, there’s reason to connect anger control to *intellectual* patience.

But *must* the context of patience involve unpleasant emotions? Well, pleasant emotions such as enthusiasm or agreeable excitement can lead to haste, which can constitute a failure of patience. Imagine a fledgling archeologist who has unearthed an ancient potsherd bearing an inscription he considered the “missing link” to longstanding research. Suppose that out of excessive excitement over his swift “discovery” he hastily begins writing and trying to publish on the subject. He’s without anger, frustration, or related psychological states, yet his excessive excitement seems to put him in need of patience to keep him from making mistakes in conceptualizing or communicating his discovery. So, patience seems to concern a response to (temporally-charged, desire-induced) emotions such as enthusiasm and excitement as well as anger, frustration, irritation, and the like. (Notice how this feature of the context of patience widens the temporal component we’ve discussed. Anger and frustration over *how long* it’s taking to accomplish some intellectual task calls for patience. So does the lure of *how* *swiftly* we might accomplish it. And notice that, per above, patience as a response to pleasant temporally-charged urges further suggests that patience needn’t be a response to suffering.)

That’s all we’ll note about the sort of emotions that can arise in the context of patience. But what about the impulses that may arise? How should we characterize them? Let’s bring our discussion of the context of patience to a close by briefly considering this question. As noted, a temporally-charged desire can trigger impulses that call for patience. Impulses to do *what*, though? Such impulses seem marked by what we might call a “push-and-pull” nature. Some impulses push us forward, causing us to *rush*, while others pull us back, prompting us to *quit*. The archeologist discussed above gave in to the impulse to rush; he rushed into writing on a new, underdeveloped subject. And consider again the example of learning a new language. We may suddenly quit altogether; feeling that we’ve “lost our patience,” we simply give up trying. This seems like the right way to understand the impulses that characteristically emerge from temporally-charged desires – they’re impulses to rush or to quit.

2. THE SUBSTANCE OF PATIENCE

Unless certain internal states emerge, patience isn’t needed. Without those internal states, we can’t do what the patient person characteristically does. We’ve seen that a temporally-charged desire must emerge – in the case of intellectual patience, a desire to have some epistemic end now or sooner, or a desire that some intellectual activity or circumstance would end now or sooner. These must give rise to certain (un)pleasant emotions or to impulses to rush or quit. The context of patience is, in our parlance, the onset of temporally-charged urges.

But how do patient people respond to these urges? They *calm themselves* or *calmly wait*. That’s the (disjunctive) “substance” of patience.

Let’s look at each of these, beginning with the former. Consider university applicants again. They might go about their day not thinking about whether they were admitted to their university of choice. They’re not consciously or occurrently waiting. But even so, we might suppose that, in some other sense, they *are* waiting – they’re waiting to hear back from the university. “Did they hear back from University X, or are they still waiting?” That which delays the satisfaction of a desire could be called waiting; it’s not what we’re doing, but what’s not yet being done to or for us, that makes us say that we’re waiting in this sense.

Such unconscious waiting doesn’t seem to require a manifestation of patience. Again, the context of patience seems to be an *internal* affair; it concerns psychological states, not any external state of affairs that delays the satisfaction of a desire. Still, unconscious waiting may bring about a temporally-charged urge. When noticed, it might, for example, cause frustration over how long it’s taking to hear back from the university. Patient people *resist* giving in to such frustration – they calm themselves. This resistance is one way to manifest patience.

We can exercise patience in this way by resisting unpleasant emotions like frustration, but what of *pleasant* excitement? Above we saw that emotions of this sort may call for patience. But it’s not clear that resisting such excitement, which amounts to calming oneself, is an act of patience. Happily awaiting the swift satisfaction of a desire doesn’t require patience. This point is a complication to explain, not an objection to overcome. It merely reveals that when temporally-charged desires give rise to pleasant emotions, we need patience only when we also have impulses to rush (out of excitement).

Now, as noted, a temporally-charged desire may give rise to impulses to rush or quit. Patient people characteristically resist these impulses. This is another way to manifest patience. It can be characterized as *conscious* or *active* waiting. Patient persons actively wait; they delay gratification; they stay, stop, halt, pause. Among the imperatives of patience, we have “Wait! – don’t rush into this!” and “Don’t quit now – wait!” Patient people keep these impulses in check. They choose to *not* give in to them. Note, though, that although this sort of waiting involves resisting an impulse to rush or quit, successful resistance on this front may occur without also resisting patience-relevant emotions. We might resist giving in to an impulse to rush through a book we’re reading and still feel frustrated over how long it’s taking to finish. For this reason, this way of manifesting patience also requires calming oneself or remaining calm. When patient people actively wait, they do so calmly.

This way of waiting captures how patient people engage in intellectual activities. The intellectually patient wait to assert until they obtain sufficient evidence; they wait to move on to the next chapter of a book until they have understood the present one; they wait to close their minds when another’s point of view sounds ridiculous at first blush; they wait to give up learning when it seems too time-consuming; and more besides. (The first two examples describe resistance to rush unduly while the next two describe resistance to quitprematurely.)

But aren’t patient people those for whom temporally-charged urges *don’t* arise? If so, they would have no need to resist such urges, no need to calm themselves or to calmly, actively wait. They already *are* calm, one might argue. To clarify, we understand patience as a “corrective” character trait. For Philippa Foot, character virtues are correctives, compensators for psychological deficiencies.[[15]](#footnote-15) Courage, for instance, is a virtue because it compensates for the human proclivity to give in to fear. We don’t endorse this view wholesale, but we do see *some* character traits as correctives in this sense, and we see patience as one of them. Patience isn’t a matter of being unperturbed; it’s a corrective to temporally-charged urges.

Regarding those in whom patience is *performing its full corrective function*, there may be no temporally-charged urges, but that’s precisely *because* these people are patient – because patience is doing its job in them. If their character has become so reformed that they *never* have temporally-charged urges to rush or quit, and if there are no nearby possible worlds in which they have these urges, then they aren’t patient but rather “beyond patient” or “beyond the need for patience” – just as those who are so accustomed to facing danger no longer feel fear or perceive any threat could be considered “beyond courageous” or “beyond the need for courage.”

Patience, it seems, is a character trait of *restraint*. It’s a kind of *self-control*. Once again, it’s a quelling of temporally-charged urges. It consists in calming oneself or calmly waiting. This, of course, applies to spheres of human engagement and activity that aren’t distinctively intellectual in nature. Intellectual patience manifests the same way, the difference being that the relevant ends and activities are straightforwardly epistemic or intellectual, as the examples we’ve given illustrate. Having offered an account of patience, let’s now turn to discuss how patience relates to perseverance, a neighboring character trait.

3. PATIENCE AND PERSEVERANCE

The very suggestion that perseverance is a neighbor of patience might seem counterintuitive. We’ve seen that patience is about *refraining* from giving in to certain urges. But perseverance is about *pressing forward* or *persisting* in pursuit of some end or goal. To sharpen this contrast, note that patience appears to have a *negative* characterand to be *internally* focused.Again, patience is about resisting or refraining (negative); specifically, it’s about resisting certain psychological states (internal). Perseverance, however, appears to have a *positive* characterand to be *externally* focused. To persevere is to moveforward in pursuit of a goal (positive) – a goal which typically lies outside oneself (external).

Yet patience and perseverance also seem intimately linked. For instance, patient waiting can be protracted and burdensome. When it is, perseverance is often called for. Patience and perseverance also make regular appearances together in the philosophical literature. Eleonore Stump says that if one perseveres, then one has patience.[[16]](#footnote-16) Robert Roberts and W. Jay Wood describe a person slogging through a difficult philosophical text and say that by “patience and perseverance she continues on.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Other theorists, moreover, illustrate a deficiency of perseverance with examples that could easily serve as illustrations of impatience.[[18]](#footnote-18) Finally, perseverance is sometimes treated as an aspect or constitutive element of patience; patience is seen as one part enduring and another part “persevering in our pursuit of good.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

So, patience and perseverance differ and pull in opposite directions, yet they also seem intimately connected. To better understand the relationship between the two, let’s look at how they can come apart and at how they can intertwine. We can see how they can come apart by addressing a pair of narrower questions: Can we manifest patience in the absence of perseverance? Can we manifest perseverance in the absence of patience?

The second question is easier than the first. Familiar cases of perseverance suggest an affirmative reply. Imagine a sleep-deprived student questioning whether to work through the night to complete a critical term paper. We might encourage her to persevere, but we wouldn’t counsel her to be patient. In such cases, a persevering person resists an impulse to quit. Yet patience also regularly involves resisting an impulse to quit. So why exactly do cases like this involve perseverance but not patience?

The answer concerns the nature of the impulses that the patient person characteristically resists. Again, impulses the resistance of which is expressive of patience have a *temporal* aspect. The student’s impulse to quit and head to bed isn’t like this. She isn’t tempted to quit because she’s frustrated with how long it’s taking to complete the paper; her temptation arises out of sheer exhaustion. Resisting this impulse, while expressive of perseverance, doesn’t manifest patience.

Perseverance can be instantiated in the absence of patience, but can patience be instantiated in the absence of perseverance? This is less clear. Patience may involve active waiting. Active waiting can take much time. The patient person might persevere *in waiting*. This suggests that patience requires and perhaps even is a species of perseverance.

But this isn’t quite right. Patience may involve waiting for an *extended* period of time; when it does, it’s likely accompanied by perseverance. But one can manifest patience for a very *brief* period; in cases like this, perseverance seems out of place. Imagine a researcher awaiting the results of a 30-second lab test that will decisively confirm or disconfirm one of her hypotheses. In those 30 seconds, she might need patience to remain calm so she can focus. But it’s odd to suggest that she would also need perseverance. While patience tends to involve perseverance, we can be patient without persevering. Patience comes apart from perseverance when the waiting period proper to patience is sufficiently brief.

We’ve seen that patience and perseverance can come apart. We’ve also shed some light on how they can be co-instantiated. Perseverance may involve overcoming temporally-charged impulses to quit; when it does, it requires patience. Patience may involve actively waiting for an extended period of time, and so it may require perseverance.

That patience and perseverance can be co-instantiated is, as suggested earlier, at least a little puzzling given that patience involves a kind of *pulling back* or *refraining*, while persevering involves *persisting* and *moving forward*. How can these seemingly opposite forces work together within a rational and coherent self? Consider how perseverance can manifest in the operation of patience. Suppose you’ve had a paper rejected from a journal and you’re looking over the accompanying, several-page referee report. Having read the first criticism or two, continuing may require patience. If the desire to quit is acute, and the report sufficiently long, getting through the remainder of the report might also require perseverance. Given that patience is about refraining, how can it simultaneously involve persevering, which is about moving forward or pressing on?

Any hint of a paradox here is due to the fact, noted earlier, that perseverance typically manifests in actions that are *positive*. By contrast, when perseverance manifests in the operation of patience, it does so in activity that is *negative* – in *refraining* from rushing or quitting. A further notable difference is that when perseverance manifests in patience, its immediate focus is *internal*. Again, when one perseveres in patience, one continues to resist a psychological state. Patience can involve perseverance in the sense that patient people can persevere in resisting, say, the impulse to rush. While perseverance typically issues in positive action and is externally focused, when it manifests in the operation of patience, it lacks both of these features.

Now consider cases in which patience is manifested in the context of perseverance. Returning to the example from Roberts and Wood, one may work one’s way through a long text and need patience to carry on with the task. Given that perseverance is a matter of moving forward in pursuit of a goal, and that patience involves *waiting* (vs. moving forward), how is it possible for patience and perseverance to co-exist in this way?

Patience is relevant to perseverance when the persevering agent experiences a certain motivational *conflict*, when tempted to cease pursuing or to move too quickly in pursuit of some aim (in other words, when she experiences an impulse to rush or quit). This secondary motive introduces the need for patience. The persevering person must resist the temptation to rush or quit. When patience is manifested in perseverance, the motive it resists isn’t a motive proper to perseverance *per se*. It’s a motive *alien* or *opposed* to perseverance. The persevering agent *as such* is motivated to achieve a particular aim or goal. When perseverance demands patience, patience involves resisting, not the motive to achieve, but the motive to quit or rush in the context of achievement.

So, when patience involves perseverance, perseverance uncharacteristically manifests in negative activity and has an internal focus. When perseverance involves patience, their respective objects are distinct: the object of perseverance is a prospective achievement, whereas the object of patience is an impulse that threatens to derail this achievement.

Let’s step back and extrapolate a few lessons. Character traits can support and reinforce each other, and our discussion shows that this can happen in either of two ways. One trait can support the operation of another *directly* by regulating the motivation proper to the latter trait (perseverance can reinforce a patient person’s motivation to wait). One trait can also support the operation of another *indirectly* by silencing a motivation that runs counter to the motivation proper to the second trait (patience can silence an impulse to quit). These principles pertain to many other traits as well. Caution, for example, might support the operation of honesty *directly* by curbing a tendency to overshare, thereby functioning like perseverance. Courage might provide *indirect* support to the operation of nearly any other trait provided that the activity characteristic of the other trait leads one into dangerous or fearful territory. Courage in such cases, functioning as patience can, might silence a fearful impulse to escape, hide, or something along these lines. So, while our focus in this section has been fairly narrow, it sheds light on broader issues in virtue theory. There are, we’ve seen, a couple of structurally distinct ways character traits can come apart and reinforce each other.

4. VIRTUOUS PATIENCE

Developing a disposition to resist temporally-charged urges may be sufficient for developing an attribute of character. But it’s not sufficient for developing a *virtue* of character. So, what is it to be *virtuously* patient?

 If we’re less than virtuously patient, we might resist temporally-charged urges quite unlike the virtuously patient person. We might try to calm ourselves by conjuring thoughts that end up making us even more upset. We might redirect our attention – pass time on our phone, say – which would be to escape from a need for patience. Another inept attempt at patience happens when we rush something in an effort to resist the temptation to quit, or vice versa. Virtuous patience precludes such ineptitude. We must learn the *skills* of patience. That’s why it takes practice.

 We’ve focused on patience in the life of the mind. What motivates the intellectually patient person? Just any epistemic end? No. Virtuously patient inquirers are intrinsically motivated to learn *important* truths (though not in a crudely instrumental sense). More precisely, they desire, at least partly for its own sake, deep comprehensive understanding of important truths, not disconnected or fragmentary knowledge of such. They also like to see others achieve these epistemic goods. And they resist their temporally-charged urges *out of* their concern for deep understanding of important truths. So, learning the virtue of intellectual patience requires learning to care deeply about epistemically good ends.

When should we calmly wait? Where? With whom? How long? Absolute answers aren’t forthcoming. That’s why virtuous patience requires practical wisdom or good judgment.[[20]](#footnote-20) Consider *when* to calmly wait. Virtuously patient people know when *not* to calmly wait, when to *give* *in* to their temporally-charged urges. Jane Goodall, chasing a pack of chimpanzees on the move, *shouldn’t* delay satisfying her curiosity; the time for her to inquire is *now*. Yet this isn’t always the case. Often it *is* wise to calm oneself or to calmly wait. To learn the virtue of intellectual patience, then, we must learn the wisdom of when – but also where, with whom, for how long, etc. – we should calmly wait.

To become virtuously intellectually patient we must practice the skill proper to patience, deploy that skill because we care about epistemically good ends, and we must do so when, where, with whom, and for how long practical wisdom dictates.[[21]](#footnote-21) Learning a skill, learning to care, learning wisdom – that’s a tall order. But virtue is demanding.

5. PATIENCE TO LIVE A QUESTION

By way of conclusion, we consider some remarks from the poet Rainer Maria Rilke that we believe shed light on the importance of patience to the life of the mind.

“I would like to beg you,” Rilke writes in his *Letters to a Young Poet*, “to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves.”[[22]](#footnote-22) What does this mean? Unresolved questions might concern gaps in biogenesis or historical records. But unanswered questions in these domains aren’t best characterized as unresolved in one’s *heart*. They don’t involve deep human concerns that require resolution or commitment – at least not typically. Questions unresolved in one’s heart more likely include questions like “Should I forgive my parents?” or “Should I quit searching for a ‘soul-mate’?” But Rilke advises to love the questions themselves, and this pair of questions seems hard to love. So, what sorts of questions pertaining to matters of the heart might it make sense for us to love?

Perhaps questions like these: “What gives life meaning?” “Does God exist?” “What’s true love?” “What’s friendship?” Those who raise such questions may well feel deeply unresolved about them, and yet delight in pondering them alone or in discussion with others. Perhaps the advice is to love such questions.

Rilke continues: “Don’t search for the answers which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Imagine someone who grows weary of being unresolved about what gives life meaning. Imagine that they then settle on a view in order to feel resolved, to see life through the lens of that particular understanding of what gives life meaning, and to live life accordingly. They have become resolved without being able to properly “live the answer,” and this is what Rilke advises against. The worry, in other words, is that we might be unable to properly live out what gives life meaning without first having “lived [our] way into the answer,” as Rilke goes on to say.[[24]](#footnote-24) And to do that, we must first “live the question” – that is, perhaps, we must keep the question present in our hearts till life experience teaches, first hand, what gives life meaning.

“Live the questions now,” says Rilke, for perhaps “someday far in the future, you will gradually, without ever noticing it, live your way into the answer.”[[25]](#footnote-25) This is an important aspect of our intellectual lives. But where does patience come in? Why might temporally-charged urges arise and require resistance here? Because, as suggested, we tend to grow weary with questions unresolved in the heart, and their answers may come, as Rilke says, someday far in the future. If he’s right, we should calmly wait for answers to questions that must be “lived into.”

There’s danger here. We must take care not to deceive ourselves. There’s danger in excusing our intellectual laziness or procrastination or cowardice on the grounds that we’re “living a question.” Still, perhaps we can’t fully understand certain answers if we don’t “live into them,” if we don’t leave questions unresolved in the heart in order to let them bleed into our life experiences. And that takes intellectual patience.

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1. Reginald Rose, *Twelve Angry Men* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Christian Miller, *Moral Character: An Empirical Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Jason Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), Ch. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Nicholas Bommarito, “Patience and Perspective,” *Philosophy East and West* 64, no. 2 (2014): 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bommarito, “Patience and Perspective,” 274. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Denise Vigani, “Is Patience a Virtue?” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 51, no. 2 (2017): 333. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Dennis Whitcomb, Heather Battaly, Jason Baehr, and Daniel Howard-Snyder, “Intellectual Humility: Owning Our Limitations,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 94 no. 3 (2017): 509-39. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See, for instance, Vigani, “Is Patience a Virtue?” and Joseph Kupfer, “When Waiting is Weightless: The Virtue of Patience,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 41, no. 2-4 (2007): 265-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See, for instance, Bommarito, “Patience and Perspective,” Thomas Hurka, *Virtue, Vice, and Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), and Matthew Pianalto, *On Patience: Reclaiming a Foundational Virtue* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Desires and impulses are distinct. A desire to have never existed, for example, isn’t an impulse to undo one’s own conception. For this example, see Nomy Arpaly and Timothy Schroeder, *In Praise of Desire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Annette Baier, *Reflections on How We Live* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Eamonn Callan, “Patience and Courage,” *Philosophy* 68, no. 266 (1993): 526. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Shūsaku Endō, *Silence* (New York: Picador, 2016), 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cited in Zac Cogley, “A Study of Virtuous and Vicious Anger,” in *Virtues and Their Vices*, eds. Kevin Timpe and Craig Boyd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Eleonore Stump, *Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See, for instance, Heather Battaly, “Intellectual Perseverance,” *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 14, no. 6 (2017) and Nathan L. King, “Erratum To: Perseverance as an Intellectual Virtue,” *Synthese* 191, no. 15 (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Pianalto, *On Patience*, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1985), 1107a1; 1105a31-32; 1144b14-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For further discussion on these dimensions of intellectual virtue, see Jason Baehr, “The Four Dimensions of Intellectual Virtue,” in *Moral and Intellectual Virtues in Western and Chinese Philosophy: The Turn Toward Virtue*, eds. Chienkuo Mi, Michael Slote, and Ernest Sosa (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 86-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet* (Gearhart, OR: Merchant Books, 2012), 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Rilke, *Letters*, 30-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Rilke, *Letters*, 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Rilke, *Letters*, 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)