



On Children's Rights and Patience

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Introduction

 "On Children's Rights and Patience" was produced by the summer 1999 Apogee class—Philosophy: Ways of Wisdom—at Northwestern University's Center for Talent Development (CTD). The class had ten students from four states; three entering 5th grade, one entering 6th grade, six entering 7th grade.

The Apogee course focused on brief primary-source readings from various philosophers. During discussion of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, a dispute arose concerning whether patience was always a virtue. David White commented that Aristotle analyzed such virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (the class had read excerpts from Book VIII on friendship). A sixth-grader exclaimed, "We should do our own theory of patience!" Thus was born the "patience project."

Jana Mohr Lone suggested via correspondence that this interest in patience might intersect with the topic of children's rights and she offered useful suggestions in this regard. White then arranged a series of ideas on patience—all produced by the Apogee students—in rudimentary prose. The resulting account went through three drafts, each criticized by the students. At this point, a student suggested that their work be critically appraised by the older students in CTD's Spectrum Introduction to Philosophy class (grades 7–9). The Spectrum instructor, Jennifer Thompson, had her students read the relevant section from Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics* as theoretical background.

After discussing their account of patience and children's rights with their Spectrum counterparts, the Apogee students integrated the Spectrum contributions (White advising when necessary), resulting in the account that follows.

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Are parents patient with children? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. A more interesting question is—do parents sometimes *use* patience as a way of controlling children, perhaps even controlling them excessively and to the point of oppressing them? For example, should a child be told "Be patient!" whenever a parent does not want to do what the child wants to do? This tactic does not seem fair. Even if patience is a virtue, it does not seem right for a parent to wield patience as a weapon to force a child to act in a certain way.

But just what *is* patience? The dictionary defines patience as "enduring pain or discomfort without complaining." A second meaning is "calmly tolerating delay, confusion, etc." How helpful are these dictionary descriptions for understanding patience in general?

"The more mature children are the less decisions their parents should make. The older they are the less decisions their parents should make for them. And the more responsibility and trust that they've shown, the less their parents have to interfere with their lives. Because once they are old enough to handle things physically and strong enough to handle mentally, they can do it."

"I think that no matter how mature you are when you're young, you shouldn't have all your rights when you're like 6 or 7 or 8. I mean the smartest kid in the world might be 8 years old, but it's not safe for a mature 8 year old to go out and do whatever he or she wants. So it does depend on age, when you are mature."

"Obedience doesn't always mean maturity. Because if your parents tell you to go rob a bank and then jump off a bridge and you do that. You probably wouldn't be very mature because you couldn't make your own decisions and it wouldn't be very good for yourself."

Let us examine a teacher exercising patience with her students in the classroom. Two conditions, making an active decision and reasonableness, appear to be necessary for thinking of patience as a *virtue* rather than as merely some sort of personal characteristic. Thus the teacher must *decide* to be patient; if the teacher is patient just by nature, then it would not appear that patience should be called a virtue. After deciding to be patient, the teacher must be *reasonable*; if in order to learn the lesson the students need more time than the teacher had planned, then the teacher should be flexible and use the extra time for this purpose. Her reason would quietly tell her, "They are close to learning the lesson; let's spend just a bit more time on it and they will have it."

Furthermore, the teacher would think this even if she also felt that the lesson was becoming dull for her—in short, she would calmly tolerate delay, as the dictionary suggests. In fact, the teacher might even slow down to an uncomfortable pace in teaching the material, but she would do so because she recognized that the interests of her students are better served by her enduring this discomfort than if she said, "Well, that's it for today," and then moved on to something which, for her, is more interesting. The teacher would take the time to get things right in making as certain as possible that her students learned what should be learned. She would wait, as courteously as she could, for this result to be achieved. A teacher acting in this way would be an example of someone practicing the virtue of patience.

But patience has limits. For a teacher exceeding these limits, patience would cease being patience and become foolishness. If the teacher spent several hours more than she had planned on the lesson, then her attempts



at getting the students to learn would be unwise. She would be foolish to go beyond a certain point just in the hope of trying to “be patient.” At the other extreme, a teacher who thinks that no extra time whatsoever is necessary in order to teach her class a lesson would be shortsighted. In general then, patience lies between foolishness and shortsightedness.

But it is always possible that the teacher is patient, waits calmly and courteously for the desired result, endures personal discomfort—and the students never do learn the lesson! It seems that the intention to be patient could lead to wasted time depending on whether or not the hoped-for result had been achieved. Would the teacher have decided to be patient if she knew in advance that the students would never learn? This decision is surely foolish.

It seems then that *knowing something about the result* is necessary in order to justify rationally the decision to be patient. If you knew that the train you are waiting for would never come, would you wait patiently for the train? If you knew that the cash register would break down, would you wait patiently in line at the check-out counter of the supermarket? Surely not, in both cases. Should the teacher then be patient with her students if she knew that they would not learn the lesson?

One way to determine when to be patient is to reflect on the *importance* of the hoped-for result and the *probability* of its being attained. If it is true 99% of the time that the train has arrived and the cash register has functioned, then it is probable that they will do so now, while you are

patiently waiting. And you would also ask yourself: How important is it that you catch *this* train? Or, in the other case, can you wait and make your purchases at the store at some other time? These questions appear to be relevant for determining whether or not you should be patient.

It seems, however, that importance and probability in these senses would be difficult for the teacher to determine when she was in the process of deciding whether to be patient with her students. Her decision seems to require a fair amount of experience with students as well as with the subject matter she was trying to teach. This point also makes us wonder whether patience is *acquired* by some sort of training or whether it is *innate*, merely an inborn ability. If we are born with patience, then it does not seem completely correct to call patience a virtue. But if we must learn to be patient, at what age should we begin to attempt to acquire this characteristic and through what kind of circumstances?

These are difficult questions and they must be addressed if patience is to be properly understood. But assuming that one is patient, then it appears that patience can combine with other similar characteristics. Thus if the teacher were patient and if it is true that patience has limits, then she would also know when to *stop* being patient in order to attend to other matters. Her reasoning would tell her that in some cases, patience must be combined with, e.g., justice or doing her duty; for if the teacher carried patience to extremes, then she might be unable to do her duty to other students or to other subjects. So patience must be capable of being combined with other virtues, otherwise patience itself ceases to be a virtue.

“I think it really depends on whether the child is usually obedient or not, that's how many rights they should have.”
“I disagree because I mean you can't expect kids to be perfect. They're not going to obey their parents every single minute of every single day.”

“You also need to show some responsibility, that you are mature enough to do things that are right. To make choices for yourself and that is also important.”

“... How do parents feel their children are mature? As soon as you can speak you can just say I'm an adolescent. It doesn't mean it would be true. How do you make the distinction between mature and not? Do you have to take a bi-monthly test?”

“Well many parents are overprotective and they're always watching their children at all times. And too, many children need some freedom from their parents.”

“I think you can't really determine how mature children are just by how old they are. And also I don't think you can judge by their obedience because if you're mature then you can make decisions on your own. Not by simply doing what someone tells you.”



Although this discussion of patience is incomplete, it has been sufficiently developed to answer the question posed at the beginning. Was the parent correct to say "Be patient" to the child just because the parent did not want to do what the child wanted to do? Has the parent respected children's rights in saying this to the child?

It is true that a parent saying "Be patient" to a child generally has the best interests of the child in mind. However, a parent using "Be patient" to control a child's activity merely because the parent does not want to participate in or

supervise that activity would be abusing patience by requiring the child to act in a virtuous way when, in fact, no good reason exists for the child to practice such a virtue. The child's right to seek his or her interests is being impeded by the parent's unjustified appeal to patience. In these cases, it seems that parents should say "Be patient" to themselves rather than to the child!

It is obvious but worth saying: in matters involving patience (and everything else!), children *and* parents should try to think about and evaluate the reasons for their actions before they act.



*"The right to pursue your own happiness."
Grade 6 Student, Whitman Middle School, Seattle*