

The Pain-Patience Continuum

A Humane Understanding of Our Space-Time Reality

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Abstract

The problem of suffering haunts humanity. For Christians, this problem is addressed in part by the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. However, natural moral virtues, in addition to the theological, can help us cope and hope in the midst of life's trials. The natural virtue of patience is particularly powerful. Humanity lives in a fallen space-time continuum. Therefore space, or material existence, necessitates pain. Time, or duration, necessitates patience. However deplorable the fact may be, pain is natural to human existence and patience is its natural remedy. By practicing the natural virtue of patience, humans can preserve serenity in suffering and even transcend their suffering by aiding others, thereby holding on to the good life.

To demonstrate the reality of this pain-patience continuum, and to show the transcendent power found in natural moral patience, examples of human suffering are needed. This article turns to archetypes of suffering found in the literature of antiquity. Analyzing pagan literature over Christian literature helps to illustrate the natural effects of a space-time existence on the human condition, and thereby human suffering. From storm-tossed Aeneas to storm-tossed Odysseus, from tortured Oedipus to tormented Orestes, the ancients shied not from the reality of pain. Prometheus, Antigone, and Socrates are the archetypes examined herein. Their lives, as shown in brief works of literature, show the necessity of patience, the great benefits of patience, and the great harm that can come from impatience.



Introduction

In 1983, Archie Williams was convicted of raping and stabbing a young woman in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.¹ At the young age of twenty-two, he went into the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola—one of the toughest prisons in the country—for the start of his eighty-year sentence, no parole. However, thirty-seven years later, at the less young age of fifty-nine, he walked out of prison. Archie Williams had been wrongly convicted. While it took until 2019 for the State of Louisiana to acknowledge Archie's innocence, Archie obviously spent those thirty-seven years knowing that he was innocent. However, he did not despair. Rather, he hoped and prayed and waited for his day of deliverance.

Few of us will ever have our patience tested like Archie Williams, yet how difficult we find it to be patient nonetheless. "Be patient!" mothers and fathers must repeatedly tell their children. "Patience is a virtue!" preachers and teachers must remind us. It is clearly not a favored virtue. This is rather unfortunate when we consider that there are "few virtues for which there is such a continual necessity as patience."² Firstly, we cannot always have what we want when we want it; we must learn to wait. More significantly, life throws suffering at us that cannot be avoided or conquered, but only endured. Sometimes, these sufferings are incredibly difficult to bear. Josef Pieper considers these pains the ultimate test of man's strength. "[I]n the world as it is constituted," he writes, "it is only in the supreme test, which leaves no other possibility of resistance than endurance, that the inmost and deepest strength of man reveals itself."³ That is, when we cannot escape our sufferings, the quality of our virtue is made known by our patience.

We thus see that patience is inextricably connected to pain. Humanity is, of course, no fonder of pain than it is of patience. "[N]ature seems above all to avoid the painful and to aim at the pleasant," writes Aristotle.⁴ This is true to such an extent that we generally view pain as extraneous or intrusive to the good life, rather than as fundamental to life in a fallen world. "If I just didn't have this particular pain, life would be great," we say to ourselves. Or "[i]f I just didn't have so-and-so or such-and-such in my life, I could be happy." However, these pains and so-and-sos and such-and-suches are not mere intrusions into life as we would have it. They are bedrock qualities to life as it exists. Since we cannot escape suffering in this world, the best alternative is to learn how to deal with it. If we want to bear as best as we can the unavoidable pains of life, we must change our mindset. Due to living in a fallen space-time continuum, pain is natural to human existence

¹ Ryan D'Agostino, "Why Archie Williams Refuses to Let Anger Imprison Him," *Good Housekeeping*, September 23, 2020, <https://www.goodhousekeeping.com/life/a32851494/archie-williams-agt-wrongful-conviction-story/>.

² Richard F. Clarke, *Patience: Meditations for a Month* (Fitzwilliam: Loreto Publications, 2015), 2.

³ Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 130.

⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W.D. Ross, in *Great Books of the Western World*, 2nd ed., vol. 8. (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1993), 409.

and patience is its natural remedy. By practicing the natural virtue of patience, we keep hold of the good life, preserving serenity in suffering and even transcending our suffering by aiding others.

A Preliminary Remark

It is not easy to write about so universal yet so personal a topic as suffering. The topic is universal for, as Sophocles notes, “[i]s anyone in all the world safe from unhappiness?”⁵ The topic is personal, for, no matter how little or how much pain people have, they tend to find their portion unjustified at times; different souls have differing capacities. In fact, this is not an uncommon source of conflict between people. A soul tries to share their sorrows with a companion, and they only hear this in reply: “You think that’s bad? Wait till you hear about *my* day.” How does one write about bearing suffering when loads and bearers differ so greatly? This is even harder to do if you imagine your words falling into the hands of true champions of suffering—patients with Lou Gehrig’s disease, parents who have lost a child, men and women wrongly imprisoned for nearly four decades, to name a few. Any words you might have to say suddenly feel inexperienced, cheap, or insensitive. No one wants to be like Job’s friends or Prometheus’ visitors, offering further pain instead of comfort. “It is an easy thing for one whose foot is on the outside of calamity to give advice,” Prometheus remarks to the daughters of Oceanos.⁶ All too true.

C.S. Lewis acknowledged this same concern in his masterful work on the problem of suffering, *The Problem of Pain*:

All arguments in justification of suffering provoke bitter resentment against the author. You would like to know how I behave when I am experiencing pain, not writing books about it. You need not guess, for I will tell you; I am a great coward.... When I think of pain—of anxiety that gnaws like fire and loneliness that spreads out like a desert, and the heartbreaking routine of monotonous misery, or again of dull aches that blacken our whole landscape or sudden nauseating pains that knock a man’s heart out at one blow, or pains that seem intolerable and then are suddenly increased, of infuriating scorpion-stinging pains that startle into maniacal movement a man who seemed half dead with his previous tortures—‘it quite o’ercrows my spirit.’ If I knew any way to escape I would crawl through sewers to find it.⁷

With C.S. Lewis, this writer hereby classifies himself with the cowards. Nonetheless, this coward seeks insight and inspiration, if for no other reason than his own sake. If his words offer any insight

⁵ Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald, in *Great Books of the Western World*, 2nd ed., vol. 4 (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1993), 157.

⁶ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, trans. David Grene, in *Great Books of the Western World*, 2nd ed., vol. 4 (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1993), 43.

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperOne, 1996), 104-105.

to anyone else, then God be thanked. If they cause anyone any additional pain, then please forgive the writer's fumbling about for answers.

Recognizing the Pain-Patience Continuum

"How are we to understand the existence of evil in a world created by a God who is omnipotent and perfectly good?" asks Mortimer Adler.⁸ This question is precisely the one that Lewis sets out to answer in *The Problem of Pain*. Even though a somewhat lengthy quote from this work was just given, another excerpt is essential to our discussion, for it captures the essence of much of the book:

[It is impossible] for the matter of the universe at any moment to be distributed so that it is equally convenient and pleasurable to each member of a society. If a man traveling one direction is having a journey downhill, a man going in the opposite direction must be going uphill. If even a pebble lies where I want it to lie, it cannot, except by coincidence, be where you want it to lie. And this is very far from being an evil: on the contrary, it furnishes occasion for all those acts of courtesy, respect, and unselfishness by which love and good humour and modesty express themselves. But it certainly places the way open to a great evil, that of competition and hostility. And if souls are free, they cannot be prevented from dealing with the problem by competition instead of courtesy. And once they have advanced to actual hostility, they can then exploit the fixed nature of matter to hurt one another. The permanent nature of wood which enables us to use it as a beam also enables us to use it for hitting our neighbor on the head.⁹

Lewis is making the point that—in our fallen world—suffering is natural to us because it is natural to an existence that has material beings with free wills living in a material reality. "Try to exclude the possibility of suffering which the order of nature and the existence of free wills involve, and you find that you have excluded life itself."¹⁰

In the course of his work, Lewis goes into other reasons for the existence of pain. For example, God uses pain as a tool to shape and move us, for pain "shatters the illusion that what we have, whether good or bad in itself, is our own and is enough for us."¹¹ As interesting and valuable as this and his other insights are, we will not examine these other reasons for pain here. Rather than going broader, we want to go deeper in our exploration of the existence of pain. Additionally, the problem of evil itself is not our focus so much as handling it or dealing with it. For better insight

⁸ Mortimer Adler, "Good and Evil," *The Syntopicon*, in *Great Books of the Western World*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1993), 471.

⁹ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 23-24.

¹⁰ Lewis, 25.

¹¹ Lewis, 94.

into dealing with pain, we want to examine the fundamentals of human nature that make pain unavoidable.

We thus return to the discussion of the nature of our material world. “[T]he chess player’s freedom to play chess depends on the rigidity of the squares and the moves,” Lewis analogizes.¹² A chess piece would describe its limitations—and therefore its reality—by the countable squares on its board, by the finite moves within that realm, and by the time on the game clock. How do humans, in the far greater game of life, define our natural limitations?

By the space-time continuum. Lewis briefly notes that “space and time” are our “environment,” but he does not elaborate on this point.¹³ We can turn to Mortimer Adler for a comment on this fundamental aspect of material existence: “On the level of our everyday observations, space and time seem to be the obvious, the common, and the connected properties of physical things. We distinguish things from one another by their position in space, as we mark happening by the date of their occurrence. The where and when of a thing is often used to identify it.”¹⁴

While physicists and science fiction fans are not infrequently aware of the space-time continuum, how much does this nature of our existence affect and direct the worldview of the typical suffering soul crying to heaven in pain? Likewise, does this nature of our reality give enough direction to the work of the theologian looking for an understanding of life’s ills? Edward Leen writes:

Inability to comprehend the meaning of the evil, the pain and the cruelty of existence, and a passionate resentment against the irresistible invasion of life by what is at one and the same time felt to be both unreasonable and intolerable, are the enduring causes of man’s unhappiness. One can submit to what one understands. One cannot but experience revolt against what does brutal violence to the reason.¹⁵

The space-time limitations of our existence are fundamental to human suffering. Does this fact sufficiently inform our reasoning, or does a lack of consideration lead instead to what Leen calls *feelings of the unreasonable and intolerable*? It seems that increased meditation on fundamental aspects of living in a fallen material world can aid the reasoning of the suffering soul, perhaps lightening the *experience of revolt* and preserving a sense of the good life. To that end, it is necessary to give more examination to the effects of a space-time existence on the human condition and thereby human suffering.

Returning to our limitations, humans can only be in one place at one moment. In fact, we must be in one place and at one moment. We cannot physically retreat into the past, and we cannot

¹² Lewis, 65.

¹³ Lewis, 21.

¹⁴ Mortimer Adler, “Space,” *The Syntopicon*, in *Great Books of the Western World*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1993), 642.

¹⁵ Edward Leen, *Why the Cross?* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1938), 287-288.

physically leap into the future; neither can we be here and there at the same time. These moments and places of our existence, however, are not separated from each other. Because we have memory, the moments we spend in spaces build up the present state of our existence. “An instantaneous experience is an impossibility, biologically and psychologically,” explains Dewey. “An experience is a product, one might say a by-product, of continuous and cumulative interaction of an organic self with the world.”¹⁶ This is one reason why suffering is so difficult: Suffering is pain graphed over time. If life’s hard knocks were over in an instant, the need to bear suffering would be needless.

Since we live in a fallen space-time continuum, might we not say that the difficulty of this existence can be described as a pain-patience continuum? Pain is a quality of life because matter or space is a quality; having a fire to roast our food also means having a fire that can burn our skin. Likewise, patience—the bearing of that burning from one moment to the next—is a quality of life because time is a quality; being able to enjoy the taste of our cooked meal means risking enduring the burning of our skin. As space and time are co-qualities for us, so are pain and patience co-qualities. Note, when I say *patience* in the context of *pain-patience continuum*, I mean patience in the negative sense of something we do not want to practice—hence my coupling it with pain as a difficult aspect of life that must be borne as a reality of a fallen space-time continuum. Obviously, patience is a virtue and therefore a moral good, but not all virtues are equally appealing or enticing. For instance, kindness and generosity and honesty all sound rather desirable (unless we are having a particularly bad day), but patience is more like chastity: No one wants to practice either, but they are the only sane solution to their respective problems.

In summary, living in a space-time continuum means enduring pain with patience. That is, once pain is recognized as an inescapable aspect of human life, the need for patience then becomes seen as the unavoidable co-aspect, for “the spatial and temporal always go together.”¹⁷ We can think of patience, then, or forbearance or endurance, as the bearing of pain across the x-axis. We have to bear our pain over time, which is pain’s true burden. Of course, there is the virtue of patience, distinct from the act of simply forbearing, as was just noted above. To forbear in anger, spite, and resentment is a type of endurance, but it is not the *virtue* of patience. How do we take the necessity of patience and turn it into a virtue, and what benefits are derived from a virtuous approach to suffering? These questions will be examined in the next two sections.

¹⁶ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee, 2005), 229.

¹⁷ Dewey, 190.

The Nature of Patience as Virtue

In his series of questions on patience, Aquinas begins by ascertaining “whether patience is virtue.”¹⁸ One of the objections he recounts is that patience is not a virtue because wicked men are known to “bear many evils patiently” for the sake of worldly or unjust gain. In answer, Aquinas goes on to make the same distinction just noted above. That is, there is a difference between a “hardness” of character that is required for living in a continuum containing time, and the virtue of patience proper. As for the exact distinction between this “hardness” and the virtue of patience, Aquinas agrees with Augustine, who places emphasis on the end goal of the act of endurance. “The patience of man, which is right and laudable and worthy of the name of virtue, is understood to be that by which we tolerate evil things with an even mind, that we may not with a mind uneven desert good things, through which we may arrive at better.”¹⁹ That is, when we act with real patience, we are striving for something objectively good. Since no crime or sin is an objective good, the virtue of patience is not practiced by us when we persevere for unjust gain or with unjust means.

With that distinction made, we can look closer at the essence and fruit of patience. Note how Augustine emphasizes that patience results in an “even mind” in the midst of suffering, helping us not abandon the good due to a “mind uneven.” As every human being knows, pain can be incredibly difficult to bear, and bearing it over time can cause much disquiet and eventually despair; that is, over time we begin to lose our peace and sometimes our perseverance. We lose our grip on the good life. Patience, meanwhile, holds on to serenity amid suffering. Jumping forward to a modern Christian philosopher, we see that Josef Pieper says the same: “To be patient means to preserve cheerfulness and serenity of mind in spite of injuries that result from the realization of the good.”²⁰

How, then, do we preserve this cheerfulness and serenity? What is the key to practicing patience? Richard Clark writes, “Patience is the willing endurance of what is painful to us.”²¹ Patience is thus an act of our wills to not rebel against the pain of life that arises despite our attempts at living virtuously, but to accept it. This does not mean that we love pain or that we cannot dislike pain, but it does mean that our hearts and minds bow to the fact and presence of suffering rather than rising up in rebellion against the inevitable.

¹⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologiæ of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2nd ed., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (n.p: New Advent, 2017), II-II, q. 136, a. 1. <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/>.

¹⁹ Augustine, “On Patience,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, trans. H. Browne (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), par. 2. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1315.htm>.

²⁰ Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, 129.

²¹ Clarke, *Patience: Meditations for a Month*, 1.

While this acceptance of suffering is key to patience, the acceptance can spring from two different motivations. Firstly, we can accept life's pains in love and submission to Our Father. "Patience is the virtue which makes us accept for love of God, generously and peacefully, everything that is displeasing to our nature, without allowing ourselves to be depressed by the sadness which easily comes over us when we meet with disagreeable things," explains Gabriel of Saint Mary Magdalen.²² Clarke agrees, saying that "[t]he virtue of patience consists in the willing endurance for God's sake of all that is painful to nature, of whatever kind it may be."²³ True Christian patience is therefore intrinsically connected with the theological virtues, and our growth in the theological virtues and our growth in patience seem thereby interconnected. This explains why suffering—as in the case of Job—is often viewed as a test or trial from God.

The second motivation for the acceptance of suffering is not religious at all, but simply practical. Once we recognize the reality of living in a fallen space-time continuum, we realize that pain is unavoidable and that patience is a mandatory companion to pain "if we wish to pass happily through life."²⁴ After all, refusing to accept life's ills will only lead to bitterness, resentment, revenge, and despair, and this is obviously not a happy way to live; rather, it is an abandoning of the good life. This is why Clarke can make this incredibly significant point: "Patience is therefore a virtue worth cultivating quite apart from any motives of religion."²⁵ It is this natural moral virtue rather than religious patience that interests us more here in this essay. This is not because Christian patience is not superior; because of its connection to the theological virtues, it clearly is. Nonetheless, since there are natural reasons for suffering in fallen space-time, the role of natural patience must not be diminished or ignored. "Although man's final destiny is otherworldly, that destiny is prepared and achieved through the conditions of the present life," explains Leen. "Jesus did not teach men that they had to step out of the stream of existence in order to spiritualise themselves."²⁶ We are looking for the insights to be had when standing in the stream of our space-time existence.

Examining the Benefits of the Natural Virtue of Patience

Philosophically, it is clear and natural that patience is a vital virtue for the good life. Nonetheless, it would be both encouraging and enlightening to look at examples of how natural patience does in fact preserve peace amid suffering—and how impatience only increases pain. Also, we can see

²² Gabriel of Saint Mary Magdalen, *Divine Intimacy: Meditations on the Interior Life for Every Day of the Liturgical Year* (n.p.: Baronius Press, 2019), 365.

²³ Clarke, *Patience: Meditations for a Month*, 1.

²⁴ Clarke, 1.

²⁵ Clarke, 1.

²⁶ Leen, *Why the Cross?*, 201.

how practicing patience helps us to transcend our suffering, which is normally seen as a limitation, and help those around us.

To look for profound examples of patience and impatience in action, we would be wise to turn to literary archetypes of suffering, those characters whose great pain throws light on the importance and value of patience. Job is obviously the great Christian archetype of the suffering soul, but we are looking for natural rather than Christian examples. The Greco-Roman world is full of such cases, for the ancients did not shy away from the problem of evil. In fact, they often seemed preoccupied with it. From storm-tossed Aeneas to storm-tossed Odysseus, from tortured Oedipus to tormented Orestes, the ancients of Western Civilization shied not from the reality of pain. “Count no mortal happy till he has passed the final limit of his life secure from pain,” Sophocles famously wrote, capturing well the Greek view of life and pain.²⁷

There are many suffering souls to choose from, many of them with quite complex stories. Rather than one of these epic heroes, we will start with the simple but powerful example of Sophocles’ immortal Antigone. She will serve as an example of imperfect virtue, a soul whose virtuous life would have been improved by patience. We will then look at Aeschylus’ Prometheus, an example of perfect patience personified. Lastly, we will look at the life of Socrates, a real-life example of perfect patience from the ancient world.

The Impatient Virtue of Antigone

That Sophocles’ Antigone possesses tremendous loyalty is undeniable. Firstly, she wanders across Greece with her blind father, “going without shoes, and hungry, beaten by many rains, tired by the sun.”²⁸ In short, she is “leading a beggar’s life” to aid her ailing father.²⁹ Secondly, Antigone gives her life to honor the gods and save the soul of her brother. More than just loyalty, these acts are all examples of tremendous virtue—the virtue of piety. However, the final days and hours and moments of Antigone’s virtuous life, chronicled in *Antigone*, are incredibly dark. Her very virtue ends up the cause of her demise. “What divine justice have I disobeyed?” she laments. “I stand convicted of impiety, the evidence my pious duty done.”³⁰ This overwhelming trial breaks her strong spirit: “Unwept, no wedding song, unfriended, now I go the road laid down for me. No longer shall I see this holy light of sun. No friend to bewail my fate.”³¹ What could Antigone have

²⁷ Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, trans. David Greene, in *Great Books of the Western World*, 2nd ed., vol. 4 (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1993), 132.

²⁸ Sophocles, 138.

²⁹ Sophocles, 144.

³⁰ Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. Elizabeth Wyckoff, in *Great Books of the Western World*, 2nd ed., vol. 4 (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1993), 169.

³¹ Sophocles, 169.

done differently to avoid such a hopeless end? Namely, how would the virtue of patience have brought her serenity?

Primarily, Antigone would not have been as lonely if she would have been patient. “I go, without a friend,” Antigone mourns at the end.³² While this is true, her impatience is largely responsible for her loneliness. Antigone has a loving sister, Ismene. Ismene initially lacks the strength to support Antigone’s noble plans to bury their brother. Instead of calmly trying to persuade her, Antigone loses control, saying, “if now you wished to act, you wouldn’t please me as a partner.”³³ When Ismene expresses fear for her sister’s fate, Antigone only rebuffs the affection and care: “For me, don’t borrow trouble. Clear your fate.”³⁴ While Antigone has the fortitude to persevere in her intentions to do justice to the gods and her brother, she lacks all patience with her faltering sister. She even goes so far as to tell her sister that she hates her on two occasions.³⁵

Considering that patience is an aspect of fortitude, it might seem odd that Antigone possesses the parent virtue but lacks the child. However, Aquinas makes an important distinction between these two virtues:

[F]ortitude is chiefly about fear, which of itself evokes flight which fortitude avoids; while patience is chiefly about sorrow, for a man is said to be patient, not because he does not fly, but because he behaves in a praiseworthy manner by suffering things which hurt him here and now, in such a way as not to be inordinately saddened by them.³⁶

Because Antigone possesses fortitude, she does not let fear of suffering and death stop her from practicing justice. However, her lack of patience with her sister leads to bitter sorrow. Clarke writes, “Impatience is one of the most foolish of all faults. It gains nothing for us; it does not relieve our sufferings, but aggravates them. No one enjoys any peace as long as he is yielding to feelings of impatience; he is discontented, miserable, uneasy.”³⁷ Indeed, Antigone’s impatience gains her nothing; rather, her soul only grows more desolate.

While impatience not only uproots serenity, it also stops a soul from being a source of grace for others. That is, when we are impatient in our sufferings, we are unable to do good for others. For example, while Antigone is right in being saddened to some degree, her sadness—unchecked—grows into anger. Aquinas notes this possibility, writing, “[p]atience is said to have a perfect work in bearing hardships: for these give rise first to sorrow, which is moderated by patience; secondly,

³² Sophocles, 169

³³ Sophocles, 160.

³⁴ Sophocles, 160.

³⁵ Sophocles, 159, 160.

³⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 136, a. 4.

³⁷ Clarke, *Patience: Meditations for a Month*, 11.

to anger, which is moderated by meekness.”³⁸ Because Antigone lacks patience, her soul gives way to anger. She shows no meekness towards her uncle, the king. “[I]f you think my acts are foolishness,” she says to him, “the foolishness may be in a fool’s eye.”³⁹ Antigone loses the opportunity of persuading her uncle to virtue through her own virtue. In fact, her angry response has the opposite effect; it helps Creon see her actions as prideful rather than virtuous. “The girl was expert in her insolence when she broke bounds beyond established law. Once she had done it, insolence the second, to boast her doing and to laugh in it.”⁴⁰ Creon is certainly blinded by his own pride, but this is something that Antigone must work with by practicing patience and thereby maintaining her calm and innocence. By bringing about a change in Creon, Antigone could have affected the entire kingdom for the better.

Ismene, on the other hand, does take a more patient approach with her uncle, and she is ultimately allowed to live.⁴¹ Haemon, Antigone’s lover, takes the same patient approach as Ismene, and perhaps he would have been successful in affecting his father had the damage not already been done by Antigone.⁴² Thus, instead of saving her lover, Antigone only aids in his arrival at despair.

In these senses, Antigone’s pains are wasted. Had she borne them with patience, she could have effected good for many around her. Augustine writes, “[w]herefore the impatient, while they will not suffer ills, effect not a deliverance from ills, but only the suffering of heavier ills.”⁴³ As we have seen, these heavier ills can fall not only on us but on those around us as well.

It must be said that none of this criticism of Antigone is intended in a genuinely judgmental fashion. Antigone is a young woman of incredible virtue. With heroic fortitude, she honors the gods and her family through piety, not obeying those who would “over-run the god’s unwritten and unfailing laws,” even when the reward for such virtue is death.⁴⁴ However, her life shows that, through an increase in patience, we can bear our sorrows and demises with less lonely and more peaceful hearts—and we can even bring others to goodness as well.

The Perfect Patience of Prometheus

Crucified to a mountaintop for the sake of humanity, Prometheus is perhaps as close to a Christ-like figure as the Greeks could come. Unlike Antigone, who is but a young woman, Prometheus is

³⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 136, a. 2.

³⁹ Sophocles, *Antigone*, 164.

⁴⁰ Sophocles, 164.

⁴¹ Sophocles, 165, 168.

⁴² Sophocles, 167-168.

⁴³ Augustine, “On Patience,” par. 2.

⁴⁴ Sophocles, *Antigone*, 164.

a renowned Titan.⁴⁵ Despite the fact that Prometheus aided Zeus and the gods against the other Titans, Zeus turns his back on Prometheus, ordering that Prometheus be lashed to a “desolate crag in the Caucasus” with adamantine chains.⁴⁶ What is the Titan’s crime? Saving humanity from being destroyed by Zeus. Prometheus explains:

As soon as [Zeus] ascended to the throne that was his father’s, straightway he assigned to the several gods their several privileges and portioned out the power, but to the unhappy breed of mankind he gave no heed, intending to blot the race out and create a new. Against these plans none stood save I: I dared. I rescued men from shattering destruction that would have carried them to Hades’ house; and therefore I am tortured on this rock, a bitterness to suffer, and a pain to pitiful eyes. I gave to mortals a precedence over myself in pity.⁴⁷

The story of Prometheus is similarly powerful to Antigone’s. In both cases, the titular characters—though innocent of real crime—are punished for doing good, seemingly serving as ancient examples of the maxim that no good deed goes unpunished. It is hard enough to practice patience when incidental ills befall our pursuit of the good. However, when the pursuit of good itself becomes the cause of the pain, the struggle to practice patience can take on heroic dimensions.

That Prometheus is struggling heroically is clear; being a Titan does not remove the pain. Shortly after being chained and abandoned, he cries: “Oh woe is me! I groan for the present sorrow, I groan for the sorrow to come, I groan questioning when there shall come a time when He shall ordain a limit to my sufferings.”⁴⁸ For a moment, he is tempted to despair. His suffering is enormous, and exactly how long it shall last remains a mystery. Patience, however, wins in his soul. Prometheus calms his heart, saying, “I bear, as lightly as I can, the destiny that fate has given me; for I know well against necessity, against its strength, no one can fight and win.”⁴⁹ Prometheus recognizes that life—fate—gives us pains that are unavoidable. Fighting them is futile. Of course, this patient acceptance of what one cannot change is not to be confused with passivity. In order to have serenity, one must have “willing endurance of what is painful”⁵⁰—an active, not passive, frame of mind. Prometheus’ words and calm demeanor show this willing endurance.

What about Prometheus’ final cries of agony? The last lines of the play (though it likely had sequels, now lost) are stark: “O Holy mother mine, O Sky that circling brings the light to all, you see me, how I suffer, how unjustly.”⁵¹ Do these words display serenity of mind? In his defense, Zeus has just thrown a storm at the mountain, so it would be unrealistic for him to seem serene at that

⁴⁵ Edith Hamilton, *Mythology* (New York: Warner Books, 1999), 71.

⁴⁶ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 40-41.

⁴⁷ Aeschylus, 43.

⁴⁸ Aeschylus, 41.

⁴⁹ Aeschylus, 41.

⁵⁰ Clarke, *Patience: Meditations for a Month*, 1.

⁵¹ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 53.

moment. In the words of Lewis, “I am not arguing that pain is not painful. Pain hurts. That is what the word means.”⁵² Therefore, we cannot confuse serene spirit with continual external shows of happiness. After all, patience is not the same thing as insensitivity to pain, which would arguably take away the virtue of bearing pain. Aristotle is in agreement, writing that “nobility shines through [sufferings] when a man bears with resignation many great misfortunes, not through insensibility to pain but through nobility and greatness of soul.”⁵³ In both *Ethics* and *Politics*, Aristotle considers the good life to entail the practice of virtue. Still, he realizes that the material aspect of nature cannot be ignored: “A good man may make the best even of poverty and disease, and the other ills of life; but he can only attain happiness under the opposite conditions.”⁵⁴ Thus, Prometheus’ reactions to pain are hardly blameworthy. They are “human.”

In the case of Antigone, we saw that her impatience stops her from helping her sister, her lover, and her uncle. Aquinas writes, “man is said to possess his soul by patience, in so far as it removes by the root the passions that are evoked by hardships and disturb the soul.”⁵⁵ Antigone’s possession of her virtue, and therefore capacity to do more good, is weakened by her passions.

This is not the case, though, with Prometheus. Through patience, he restrains his passions and retains possession of his magnanimous soul. “Patience keeps man from the danger that his spirit may be broken by grief and lose its greatness,” writes Pieper.⁵⁶ One of the qualities that makes Prometheus great is that he cares for others over himself. Since his spirit is not broken by grief, Prometheus does not lose this aspect of his greatness. Despite immense suffering, he continues to think of others and aid them. Oceanos, a fellow Titan and a friend, comes to console and counsel Prometheus. Oceanos even offers to visit Zeus and attempt to persuade the god to let Prometheus go. However, Prometheus stops him, knowing that it will achieve no good and only endanger his friend. “Him you will not persuade,” Prometheus cautions. “He is not easily won over: look, take care lest coming here to me should hurt you.”⁵⁷ In addition to saving his friend, Prometheus is also able to help a stranger. Io, the maiden cursed into an ox, wanders by Prometheus. Though bearing his own ills, the kindly Titan does what he can to offer Io advice and hope. This kindness is further testimony that his sufferings have not created a bitter, resentful heart. “Because I am unlucky,” he says, “I would not, for that, have everyone unlucky too.”⁵⁸ By the power of his patience, Prometheus transcends his suffering and helps another.

⁵² Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 105.

⁵³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 346.

⁵⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in *Great Books of the Western World*, 2nd ed., vol. 8 (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1993), 536.

⁵⁵ Aquinas, *The Summa Theologiæ* II-II, q. 136. a. 2.

⁵⁶ Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*. 129.

⁵⁷ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 44.

⁵⁸ Aeschylus, 44.

The Real-life Patience of Socrates

While literary analysis is a time-honored way of exploring the human condition, it is worth examining a historical character along with these fictional figures for additional confirmation of the value of natural patience. Staying with the Greco-Roman world, we turn to the [literary] life and death of Socrates, as recounted by his pupil Plato.

Like Antigone and Prometheus, Socrates suffers on account of doing good. He lives the life of a peripatetic teacher, showing the supposedly great minds of Greece that they lack the wisdom and knowledge that they think they possess:

My hearers always imagine that I myself possess the wisdom which I find wanting in others; but the truth is, O men of Athens, that God only is wise; and in his answer he intends to show that the wisdom of men is worth little or nothing; he is not speaking of Socrates, he is only using my name by way of illustration, as if he said, He, O men, is the wisest, who, like Socrates, knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing. And so I go about the world, obedient to the god, and search and make enquiry into the wisdom of any one, whether citizen or stranger, who appears to be wise; and if he is not wise, then in vindication of the oracle I show him that he is not wise; and my occupation quite absorbs me, and I have no time to give either to any public matter of interest or to any concern of my own, but I am in utter poverty by reason of my devotion to the god.⁵⁹

Thus, not only does Socrates devote his life to fighting against intellectual pride and falsehood, but he does so at great expense to his own welfare. For his service to the Greek people, he is accused of disbelieving in the gods, corrupting youth, subverting truth, and is ultimately brought to trial in Athens, his own country.

Socrates would seem rather justified in feeling embittered and angry, but then that would rob him of his serenity. While there is much about Socrates' trial that is remarkable, one of the most remarkable aspects is, in fact, his serenity. Rather than being disturbed by his ill treatment, he realizes that "the envy and detraction of the world" have long been and will continue to be sources of destruction.⁶⁰ That is, his patience helps him keep his suffering in perspective; they do not disturb his soul. Even after he receives the death penalty, Socrates' patience preserves his clarity of vision: "The difficulty, my friends, is not to avoid death, but to avoid unrighteousness."⁶¹ Rather than being filled with regret and confusion, he holds on to his moral convictions in peace. He refuses to trade the good life for one of bitterness.

Just like Prometheus, Socrates' patience allows him to transcend his suffering and help others. At the very close of his trial, Socrates' first thought is his companions: "Friends, who would have

⁵⁹ Plato, *Apology*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in *Great Books of the Western World*, 2nd ed., vol. 6 (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1993), 23.

⁶⁰ Plato, 28.

⁶¹ Plato, 39.

acquitted me, I would like also to talk with you about the thing which has come to pass, while the magistrates are busy, and before I go to the place at which I must die.”⁶² Socrates encourages his friends that this path is the right path, and that a good death provides “great reason to hope.”⁶³ Though Socrates’ death sentence is supposed to be carried out soon, it is ultimately prolonged for nearly a month. This could easily have allowed anxiety and disturbance to creep into his soul, but Socrates patiently awaits his end with complete resignation. His friend Crito finds him sleeping peacefully a few days before his death. “I only wish I were not so sleepless and depressed myself,” Crito laments.⁶⁴ Crito is in a frenzy to persuade Socrates to escape prison while he still can; he assures Socrates that the arrangements can easily be made—that guards can be bribed. Most of us would unthinkingly jump at the chance to escape a wrongful death sentence, but Socrates, preserving an even mind by his patience, takes the time to deliberate the proper course of action with Crito. This allows him the freedom to realize that, in his case, running is the “dishonorable way”.⁶⁵

The very day of Socrates’ death is no different. The fruit of his patience is an incredibly generous soul. His final day is spent conversing cheerfully with his friends, bringing them wisdom and even laughter.⁶⁶ When it comes time to drink the infamous cup of hemlock, there is no change. “Calm yourselves and try to be brave,” he tells his weeping companions.⁶⁷ And so passes the “bravest and the wisest and the most upright man”⁶⁸—and the most patient, too.

Conclusion

Imagining that he is Aeschylus, Louis Markos writes a letter to modern humanity:

I see that your age is averse to suffering. I don’t suppose there has ever been an age that has enjoyed suffering, but yours seems bent on avoiding it at all costs. You have remedies for every ache and pain, whether it be physical, emotional, or spiritual. You insulate yourselves and your children from suffering and applaud yourselves for your ingenuity. Many of you have come to believe that you have a right not to suffer.

But no such right exists.

⁶² Plato, 39.

⁶³ Plato, 40.

⁶⁴ Plato, *Crito*, trans. Hugh Tredennick, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (New York: Pantheon Books, 1966), 43b.

⁶⁵ Plato, 54c-d.

⁶⁶ Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. Hugh Tredennick, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (New York: Pantheon Books, 1966), 58e-59a.

⁶⁷ Plato, 117e.

⁶⁸ Plato, 118.

The world we live in can only flourish through suffering. . . . There are few, if any, goods that come to us except through trial and error and tribulation.⁶⁹

Instead of viewing suffering as an abnormal human state that gets in the way of life as we would have it, we must view pain—and the necessity of bearing it over time—as fundamental to life as it is. Not only will this bring us peace, but it will also help us help others and bear fruit in this fallen world. The Greco-Roman world clearly realized this, as we have seen in their ancient literature. “Whatever may happen, we master fortune by fully accepting it,” Aeneas advises.⁷⁰

The modern world needs to realize this too. As Markos points out, via the voice of Aeschylus, technology has made modern man feel like suffering can be avoided with the right solution. However, this is a lie. While technology eases certain pains for sure—I am not interested in ridding the world of acetaminophen—it comes with a price. Namely, a lack of realization, acceptance, and practice of a fundamental aspect of reality; the necessity of bearing pain across time. In a world that is becoming more and more instantaneous, patience is becoming a lost concept. One cannot help but wonder if another part of modernity’s problem is a lack of understanding what the good life entails. The good life is not pain free. The good life is pain accepted and pain transcended.

While this essay has focused on the benefits of natural patience, natural patience does have its limits, for the truest and fullest transcendence ultimately means connection with the Divine. That is, we need a Christian patience, an acceptance of suffering that is rooted in love of God.⁷¹ Much could be said on that topic—far more than can be done here with any justice. What can be noted here is that natural patience can serve as a medium to carry us in the direction of Christian patience. “Having experienced the worst and risen above it, we realize that there is something in us that transcends the merely physical,” writes Markos. “Ultimately, we stop thinking about ourselves altogether and rest in the arms of something, or someone, larger and wiser”.⁷² We see this happen in the life of Socrates. Throughout his trial, his mind and heart are turned away from this world. His hopes are placed in the supernatural. “[B]e of good cheer about death,” he says to his friends, “and know of a certainty, that no evil can happen to a good man, either in life or after death. He and his are not neglected by the gods.”⁷³

We also see this supernatural influence in the life of Archie Williams, for he did not survive thirty-seven years unjustly imprisoned on natural patience alone. “Since I can remember in life, my relationship always has been with God,” he says. “Believing in him and trusting in him. I don’t know

⁶⁹ Louis Markos, “Aeschylus on Suffering,” *The Imaginative Conservative*, March 5, 2019, <https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2019/03/aeschylus-on-suffering-louis-markos.html>.

⁷⁰ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. C. Day Lewis, in *Great Books of the Western World*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1993), 170.

⁷¹ Gabriel, *Divine Intimacy*, 365; Clarke, *Patience*, 1.

⁷² Markos, “Aeschylus on Suffering.”

⁷³ Plato, *Apology*, 41.

what other peoples' beliefs are, but that's my belief. That's where I get everything from".⁷⁴ His patience, faith, hope, and charity are beyond inspiring.

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⁷⁴ D'Agostino, "Why Archie Williams."

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