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Commentary on Phillips' "Deep Disagreement and Patience as an Argumentative Virtue"

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1. Introduction

When culture wars rage around us, deliberate misinformation obfuscates the facts and conspiracy theories are treated as though on a par with scientific theories, it can be hard to exercise patience in argument and in inquiry, particularly towards those with whom we disagree. Kate Phillips' paper argues that patience has a central role to play in good arguing. Adopting a virtue-oriented account of good argumentation, she argues that patience is unambiguously an argumentative virtue that is necessary for productive engagement, deliberation, continuation of discussion, and the possibility of collaborative resolution. Patience, she writes, enables us to understand more, to learn things that we wouldn't have had we refused to encounter those with whom we disagree or had we refused to continue conversations with them. While virtue accounts tend to be ideal accounts, Phillips notes that in practice the picture is more complex. Arguing is complicated by power dynamics, social marginalisation and stereotyping and as a consequence; the burden of patience tends to be disproportionately distributed to those with less power. Phillips is particularly interested in the role of patience in the resolution of deep disagreements. Following Scott Aikin (contra Chris Compolo) in taking an optimistic stance towards the possibility of resolving deep disagreements through discovering common ground and shared commitments, she seeks to show that patience has a crucial role to play in a process that is slow and challenging especially when we are arguing about something in which we are personal invested and which may be deeply connected to our identity. The paper is timely and topical given the hurried nature of much public discourse and the rush to judgement that attends it. The paper is interesting and thought-provoking and my comments are intended to suggest elements that seem ripe for further expansion or give rise to further questions for reflection and investigation.

2. What is patient argumentation in practice?

Following Denise Vigani (2017), Phillips characterises patience as a virtue of self-control. Finding the right balance between hastiness and sluggishness relative to her role in that process, the patient arguer grants the right amount of time to the process of arguing; whereas the impatient arguer makes hasty assumptions and jumps to conclusions engaging without sufficiently understanding the evidence, while the sluggish arguer is too slow to engage and too quick to back off. There is something of Dan Cohen's *Deaf Dogmatist* in the impatient arguer and something of his *Concessionaire* in the sluggish, overly patient arguer (Cohen, 2005, p. 61). As I reflected on the role of patience in argumentation, I was reminded of the extent to which patience is important for the success of inquiry more broadly. Inquiry starts from ignorance or uncertainty and the desire to overcome them by achieving understanding or knowledge. Thorough inquiry usually requires

patience, first to identify just what it is we want to find out and what kinds of evidence might be relevant to the inquiry. Then to gather and analyse that evidence, testing and re-testing hypotheses, taking new evidence and opposing points of view into consideration and working towards a reasoned conclusion that is likely to remain open to revision. The value of patience, then, is not only in permitting time for an argument to play out fully, but also in helping us emotionally to cope with the uncertainty of not (yet) understanding or knowing. The challenging phenomenology of investigating difficult questions makes a flight to scepticism and conspiracy theories more attractive if we are unable to cultivate sufficient patience to dedicate time and energy to working through inquiry while at the same time remaining uncertain of its outcome. In connection with this, I see a close relationship between patience and hope. It is perhaps easier to remain patient as an arguer if one can maintain realistic hope that resolution of a disagreement or conclusion of an inquiry can be arrived at. At the same time, perhaps patience helps to make that hope realistic. Phillips observes that the arguer who lacks patience doesn't take the trouble to understand the social context and motivation of their interlocutors. The resultant ongoing ignorance of where one's partners in dialogue are coming from makes proper engagement impossible. Cultivating patience, then, is a means of opening up possibilities for ongoing engagement. According to Phillips, as well as enabling us to be more aware of our interlocutors, patience as arguers enables us to be better able to recognise and accept our own weaknesses as arguers. I am curious as to the connection Phillips sees here. It seems plausible that if we slow things down, taking time to build awareness of the broader contexts in which an argument is playing out, we may also give ourselves opportunities to build self-awareness and to reflect on our own behaviour within the argument, coming to realise that we are not being sufficiently open-minded, say, or that we are mistakenly treating someone as an expert on the matter in hand. But I wondered if there was more that she sees that I'm missing here.

3. The place of patience among the argumentative virtues

The author's claim that patience occupies a central role in good argumentation prompted me to consider the relationship between patience and some of the other argumentative virtues identified by Cohen, Andrew Aberdein and others. Patience can play something of an enabling role, fostering other virtues that are often easier to enact if more time is made available. An arguer may find that it is easier to be open-minded about alternative positions, or about revising her own if she gives herself time to consider those alternatives and the consequences of adopting them. An arguer who exercises patience is more likely to be in a position to argue conscientiously, to ensure that she has taken all the available evidence into account and is aware of any gaps in the evidence. Perhaps the closest connection is with perseverance. In part, perseverance combines determination to resolve or conclude an argument with patience with oneself and with one's interlocutors. There are some traits that enable patience itself. Not least of these is resilience. While resilience is not specifically an argumentative virtue, the cultivation of patience will be aided by the capacity to keep going when arguing becomes tough and to know when to strategically withdraw, albeit temporarily, out of a sense of self-preservation. This seems particularly important when we are immersed in the types of deep disagreement in which the author is interested.

Furthermore, the author shows the way in which, particularly in situations of deep disagreement, patient engagement with one's interlocutors can enable one to understand their social positioning and to appreciate the social context(s) of the disagreement. Paying attention to

and taking account of social context are also aspects of virtuous argument and inquiry. In attempting to place them within Andrew Aberdein's 'tentative' yet most helpful typology (2016, p. 414) they can be considered to contribute a) to diligence in argument in so far as taking account of social location in this way can be an enactment of thoroughness and carefulness; b) to intellectual empathy in so far as that can involve insight into persons and insight into problems; and c) to the recognition of salient facts, in this case facts about those with whom one is engaged and about the social context of the argument or disagreement in process. If this suggestion is plausible, then patience, in so far as it is required to reflect and develop an awareness of and sensitivity to those contexts is itself enabling of these further aspects of argumentative virtue.

4. Problems of patience

The author deals insightfully with what she identifies as the problems of patience. While good argumentation, understood as virtuous argumentation, requires patience of us all, as she highlights, the burden of patience does not fall equally. Rather, expectations of who should be patient and when are unevenly distributed with patience more likely to be expected of the marginalised than of the dominant. In considering possibilities for resolution of deep disagreements, she points out the way in which those possibilities incline us towards virtue argumentation thanks to the resources it offers for understanding the role of character and the cultivation of traits that foster productive engagement with one another.

I would like to explore the risks for those arguers a little more than the author is able within the confines of her paper. By conforming to stereotype and to others' expectations, the agency of those who are marginalised as arguers is diminished. Social situation may effect one's ability to achieve a mean between patiently listening to and weighing up others' positions, positions which may involve claims about one's own reality, and feeling confident enough to be bold and to speak up. By erring on the side of patience when others don't, an arguer may disadvantage herself. She may miss out on the gains achieved when rationally persuading others of her position. And her interlocutors may be disadvantaged by not reaching the understanding or knowledge at which they may have arrived through the process of having been rationally persuaded by her argument. This may be particularly pernicious in situations such as those that arise in public deliberation and discourse, where there is a wider audience for the argumentative exchange or disagreement who are also potentially open to being rationally persuaded of a position, of a solution to an issue, or of a plan of action.

The author connects this unevenness in norms of patience to Miranda Fricker's (2007) work on Epistemic Injustice. Drawing on Fricker's notion of hermeneutic injustice, and a subsequent expansion of that idea by Charlie Crerar (2016), she notes that the burden of explanation, which I would argue is often a burden of proof, falls disproportionately on the marginalised to explain their experiences and to help the non-oppressed to understand them. And this expectation that, for example, those subject to racism will take responsibility for explaining and justifying why certain behaviours are indeed racist for members of those groups that perpetrate it, and thereby carry the burden of helping them to understand that racism, is, in part, an expectation of patience, an expectation that the oppressed will take time and energy carefully to educate the oppressor. Here we see a risk that exercising patience in response to a refusal by the dominant to make use of the conceptual resources available to them gives rise to a form of epistemic

exploitation whereby the heavy intellectual lifting is done by the marginalised on behalf of the dominant even though the tools for that work are available to them.

While the author focusses on a connection with hermeneutical injustice, there is also a connection between testimonial injustice and expectations of patience. Testimonial injustice plays out when someone's epistemic credibility is denied or diminished as a result of identity prejudice. Identity prejudice will shape our expectations of others such that we expect them to conform to certain stereotypes. Someone who doesn't conform may, as a result, have their credibility diminished as an inquirer. The person who speaks up too much, or who appears more knowledgeable than they should, or who isn't patient when they are expected to be, who generally *doesn't know their place* may find themselves doubted, interrogated beyond what is reasonable, silenced, or simply ignored. The connection with epistemic injustice is well made and I wonder if there is also a connection to make more specifically with argumentative injustice, along the lines of the notion developed by Patrick Bondy (2010).

The paper concludes by asking how we can encourage a more even distribution of burdens of patience in argumentative situations. A tentative answer might be that a first step towards that is working to cultivate patience in ourselves. And then it is perhaps incumbent on us to check our privilege both in the immediate context of the argument in hand and more broadly, recognising a responsibility for those who wield more power in a particular context to try to display more patience, not less. Take for example, the situation of the teacher and the learner. In engaging with the arguments of her students, she has a responsibility to exercise patience with the processes of their coming to understand, with their misunderstandings and with their mistakes. Patience is as central to good teaching as it is to good arguing and good inquiry, and much of learning is inquiry, of course. Here, the teacher has a responsibility not only to cultivate patience in herself, but to create environments where others are able to cultivate it properly, rather than merely appearing to behave patiently out of fear. Intellectually nurturing environments will also offer arguers and inquirers a better chance of achieving something close to a balance between sluggishness and rushing in foolishly, between the right degree of patience and the right degree of boldness. In exercising patience so as to enable others to cultivate patience appropriately and not under duress, we need to take care not to slide into condescension, so patience exercised in this way also requires respect for and sincerity towards our interlocutors as well humility towards them as inquirers.

5. Conclusion

In my introduction I commented that Kate Phillips' paper is timely given the often sorry state of public discourse and debate on disagreements and problems. But it is especially timely given the events that we are currently living through. These times of the COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant lockdowns and restrictions on our freedoms call for patience more generally, patience in enduring those restrictions, patience in waiting until we can meet family and friends, until we can travel, teach our classes face-to-face, embrace one another, take things off hold. And so perhaps if patience becomes more central in our ways of being in the world, it can also become central to the ways in which we attempt to engage with each other in the resolution of disagreement.

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