No Wound Is Worse; Suffering Has No Common Scale:

Continued Analysis of Seeing, Being Seen, and the Limits of Comparative Judgment

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Abstract

This paper advances a single thesis: the suffering of another person cannot be ranked, weighed, or ordered against our own or others, because each person's pain is constituted within a moral and perceptual world that is not commensurable with anyone else's. The argument is spined on the author's account of seeing and being seen (Stafford, 2026b), which distinguishes the *constitutive* limit of human perception (the fact that we are each "known only in part" and can never enter another's interior) from the *constructed* shape of any particular frame, which is built by a self-reinforcing loop of cognition, interaction, and social system and can therefore be remade. Drawing this together with Charles Taylor's account of moral frameworks and social imaginaries, the phenomenological analysis of perspective (Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and Ricoeur), and Isaiah Berlin's value pluralism, I argue that lived experience is a kaleidoscope whose colored fragments were set by the maker and cannot be exchanged for another's. I distinguish *appreciation*, modeled on the disciplined, partial move of frame-stepping, from *empathy*, which research in social neuroscience and moral psychology suggests can become a source of distress and bias when it is unanchored. I then argue that some comparative uses of identity categories (not equity as such, nor the recognition that social location shapes experience) commit a category error when they convert situated knowledge into a comparative scoreboard, sacrificing the person to the symbol and erecting a hierarchy of grievance; I connect this critique to research on competitive victimhood. The paper closes with practical proposals for a posture of appreciative seeing, namely suspending the scoreboard, choosing appreciation over empathic fusion, widening the frame over time, and making room for forgiveness, and with the claim that, whatever finally grounds the dignity of persons, we already have sufficient reason to refuse the comparative ranking of pain.

The Incommensurability of Suffering: Seeing, Being Seen, and the Limits of Comparative Judgment

The Problem of the Unweighable Wound

Consider an ordinary scene. Two people are talking, and one of them describes something that hurt. Before the description is finished, the other has already begun to measure it. The wound is held up against a private standard, against what the listener has survived, against what the listener imagines the world distributes to people of that kind, and a verdict is quietly returned: it was not that bad; others have had it worse; given everything you have, what is the problem? The verdict is rarely spoken so plainly, but its grammar is familiar. We hear it in the phrases that circulate as common sense: “they don't have it that bad,” “who hasn't been through that,” “they think they have it worse than they do,” “check your privilege,” “they actually have it better.” Each phrase performs the same operation. It takes one person's experience and compares it with another's, and on that basis decides how much attention, sympathy, or moral seriousness the experience deserves.

This paper argues that the operation is mistaken at its root. Not merely unkind, though it is often that, but mistaken confusion about what kind of thing suffering is and about whether it admits to the comparisons we so confidently make. My claim is that the felt weight of a person's pain is constituted within a world of meaning that belongs to that person, and that this world is not laid out on a common scale alongside everyone else's. We can come to understand another's suffering, in part and across time; we cannot rank its felt significance against our own. And when we attempt to rank it, when we deploy categories such as privilege to discount one person's wound in favor of another's, we do not arrive at a more just distribution of concern. We commit an error of measurement, and we wound a second time the very person we have decided does not qualify to be hurt.

I want to be precise about what is and is not being argued, because the territory is easily misread. I am not claiming that all events are equally harmful in their objective consequences, that famine and slight are the same, or that nothing can ever be said about the relative severity of injustices at the level of public policy. Berlin (1990) was right that pluralism is not relativism, and I follow him. What I am claiming is narrower and, I think, more defensible: that at the level of the individual person, the level at which a life is actually lived and a self is actually formed, the significance of an experience is indexed to that person's own frame of meaning, and that this significance cannot be overridden by an outside observer's confidence that, on some imagined universal ledger, the experience should not count for much. The most important metric of an experience's weight is the person's own relation to it, not the assessment of popular culture or academic assumption.

The argument proceeds in stages. I begin with the perceptual fact that grounds everything else: that we see one another only in part, and that this partial seeing has two very different sources. From there I move through Taylor's account of how the self is furnished by moral frameworks; the phenomenological analysis of how another's experience is given to us yet never possessed; the mechanism by which our partial picture of others is manufactured and made to seem complete; Berlin's pluralism and the resulting incommensurability of suffering; the distinction between appreciation and empathy; and a critique of the comparative logic that can attach to some comparative uses of identity categories. The paper is secular throughout and is meant to stand on its own; it deliberately stops at the threshold where the question of what finally grounds human dignity begins. A note on method is also in order at the outset. This is a work of philosophical synthesis rather than an empirical study. It draws on several empirical literatures: in social neuroscience, moral psychology, and the social psychology of intergroup conflict, to

support a conceptual and normative argument, using them illustratively rather than as direct tests of its central thesis. I return to the implications of this method, and to the limits it imposes on the argument, in a dedicated section before the conclusion.

A Map of the Literatures

Because the argument draws on several literatures from different disciplines that are easily conflated, it helps to lay them out before beginning. Four are in play. The first is the *phenomenology of perspective and the theory of moral frameworks*, namely Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Ricoeur, and Taylor, which supplies the account of why perspective is irreducible and why a person's own world carries a density that no other world can have for them. The second is the *philosophy and bioethics of suffering*, where the very nature of suffering is actively contested among value-based, feeling-based, and objective accounts (Kious, 2022; de Campos-Rudinsky, 2026), and where value pluralism and incommensurability have been shown to matter not only in theory but in lived decision-making (Berlin, 1990; Isacs et al., 2023). The third is the *empirical science of empathy and compassion*, which dissociates affect sharing, perspective-taking, compassion, and personal distress and traces their distinct consequences (Decety & Cowell, 2014; Klimecki & Singer, 2012; Coetzee & Laschinger, 2018; Rushton et al., 2013). The fourth is the *social psychology of competitive victimhood*, which documents what happens when groups rank their wounds against one another's (Noor et al., 2012; De Guissmé & Licata, 2017; Bloy et al., 2025). What follows is a synthesis across these four. It rests its conceptual and normative weight on the first two and draws on the empirical literature of the third and fourth to illustrate that the limits of empathy and the costs of ranking suffering are well attested where measured. Keeping the four apart matters because the thesis lives in philosophy

while its evidence of consequence lives in empirical social science, and the handoff between them is marked throughout rather than blurred.

Seeing Only in Part

The Kaleidoscope

It helps to begin with an image because the thesis is partly about perception, and images do what propositions cannot. We are each known only in part, and we know others only in part. It is, as I have written elsewhere, "a prism, or a kaleidoscope, of sorts: we catch glimpses of one another, refracted at angles, never the whole light at once" (Stafford, 2026b). Raise a kaleidoscope to your eye, and you see a pattern; a symmetry of color and shape that is genuinely beautiful and genuinely there. Turn the barrel and the pattern dissolves into another, then another, an apparently endless variety of designs. It is tempting to say the kaleidoscope shows you everything. But it does not. Every pattern you will ever see through that instrument is composed of the same fixed set of colored fragments that the maker placed in the chamber. Turn as you like; you will only ever see new arrangements of those particular pieces, refracted through those particular mirrors. The variety is real, but it is bounded. The maker has already determined the colors out of which all your patterns will be made.

Human perspective is like this. Each of us looks out through a chamber of fixed fragments: the experiences, attachments, injuries, loves, and inherited meanings placed in us by a history we did not choose. We can turn the barrel. We can attend to new aspects of a situation, adopt new angles, revise our interpretations; the scene changes as we adjust. But the colors through which we see were set before we began to look, and we cannot reach into another person's chamber and see with their fragments instead of ours. When I try to understand your suffering, I am turning my own barrel toward you. I may compose, out of my fragments, an

arrangement that genuinely corresponds to something in your experience. What I cannot do is exchange my chamber for yours and look out as you look out. As I have put it, this "is not a failure of attention or of love. It is the ordinary architecture of human relationships" (Stafford, 2026b).

Constitutive and Constructed

Everything in this paper turns on a distinction that the kaleidoscope conceals, and that must now be made explicit: the difference between the *fact* of partial seeing and the *shape* of any particular partial view. The fact is constitutive. It is a structural feature of being finite, embodied, perspectival creatures, and it cannot be engineered away; no quantity of effort or goodwill will let one mind hold another in full. The shape, by contrast, is constructed. The specific picture I have formed of its emphases, its distortions, the places where it has gone thin and hard was built over time by a process that can be examined and, in part, revised. The whole practical hope of this paper rests on the seam between these two: "because the fact of partial seeing is given, it can be accepted rather than fought; and because the shape of any frame is made, it can be remade" (Stafford, 2026b).

The comparative ranking of suffering, I will argue, is a constructed shape masquerading as a constitutive fact. It presents itself as simple realism, as merely seeing that one wound is objectively heavier than another, when in truth it is a particular frame, manufactured by habit and culture, that has hardened into the appearance of plain sight. Naming it as constructed is the first step toward remaking it. But to see why the ranking is not realistic, we must first understand why our own world has, for each of us, a density and authority that no other world can have.

The Architecture of Lived Experience

Social Imaginaries and the Density of One's Own World

Charles Taylor gives us the vocabulary to say what the kaleidoscope shows. In *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Taylor (2004) named the social imaginary "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (p. 23). A social imaginary is not a theory or a doctrine that a person could state on request. It is the largely pre-theoretical background, carried in stories, images, and practices, against which the members of a society make sense of their common life. We do not look at our imaginary; we look through it, much as we look through, rather than at, the lens of an eye. It supplies the sense of what is normal, what is expected, what counts as an insult or a kindness, what kinds of harm are even legible as harm.

The consequence is that two people raised within different imaginaries are not merely disagreeing about the facts of a shared world; to a significant degree, they inhabit differently furnished worlds, in which the same external event carries different freight. A gesture that is trivial within one imaginary may be a profound violation within another, and (this is the point the comparative impulse forgets) the violation is not less real for being unintelligible to an outsider. It is simply being assessed from outside the imaginary that gives it its meaning.

Taylor's (1989) earlier and more monumental *Sources of the Self* supplies the deeper anthropology. There, he argues that selfhood and moral orientation are inseparable: to be a self at all is to be situated within a moral framework, a horizon of "strong evaluations" in light of which some ways of living strike us as higher and others as base. "To know who you are," Taylor (1989) writes, "is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary" (p. 28). These frameworks are not optional accessories to an

otherwise neutral self; they are constitutive. Strip them away, and you do not find a clearer, more objective person underneath. You find disorientation: a failure to know where one stands or what has significance.

If Taylor is right, the significance an experience has for a person depends on where it falls within that person's framework, and frameworks differ. An event that touches what Taylor (1989) calls a person's "hypergood," the highest good that orders all the others, will reverberate through the whole structure of the self in a way that an outsider, who locates the same event in a peripheral region of a differently ordered framework, simply cannot register. This is why our own reality takes on priority and density that other realities cannot offer us. It is not that we are selfish, though we may be. It is that our experience arrives already woven into the framework that makes us who we are, while another's experience reaches us, at best, as a report from a world we must reconstruct. The asymmetry is built into the constitution of the self.

Taylor's account is not without critics, and the objection most relevant here should be met rather than ignored. Commentators have charged that *Sources of the Self* is surprisingly cognitive and discursive, privileging articulated self-understanding and the intellectual history of the West while under-describing how moral selfhood is actually formed through interaction and social development (Calhoun, 1991). Abbott (2020) presses the point by placing Taylor alongside George Herbert Mead, arguing that Taylor neglects the significance of interaction and social relations and thus cannot fully explain how dialogic moral subjectivity develops within a world of shared meaning. The criticism has force, and I do not ask Taylor to supply what he is accused of lacking. The interactional and developmental dimension the critics call for is precisely what the loop described below provides: a self whose frame is not merely furnished by inherited meanings but continually shaped and confirmed in encounter, across cognitive,

interactional, and systemic levels. Taylor is invoked here for one claim only, that to be a self is to be oriented within a moral framework that lends one's own world its density, and that claim survives the objection, which concerns the genesis of a framework rather than its constitutive role once in place.

The Phenomenology of Perspective

Given but Not Possessed

Taylor tells us how the self is furnished. The phenomenological tradition tells us, with precision, about the structure of perspective itself and the peculiar way another's inner life is, and is not, available to us. Edmund Husserl confronted the problem directly in his *Cartesian Meditations* (1960). I have direct, lived access to my own conscious experience; I do not have such access to yours. And yet you are given to me not as a mere physical object but as another center of experience. Husserl's answer is that the other is given through *appresentation*: in perceiving your expressive, living body, I co-intend a stream of consciousness analogous to my own but never presented to me directly the way my own is. The other is accessible precisely as that which is inaccessible, given exactly in the mode of not being given in the original. This is not an isolated reading of one Husserlian text. Contemporary phenomenologists have synthesized the tradition's several voices, including Husserl, Scheler, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre, into a common claim that intersubjectivity is not first a problem to be solved by inference but a structure already at work in perception itself, and that the other is given to me as genuinely other, in a mode of access that constitutively withholds the other's first-person life from me (Zahavi, 2001, 2014). What the tradition calls the *irreducibility* of the other is precisely this: that the experience of another subject is given to me as that which I cannot make my own without thereby destroying its character as another's (Zahavi, 2014).

This is the phenomenological core of the kaleidoscope. The other person is real to me, genuinely encountered, not inferred like a hidden mechanism, but the encounter is structured by an irreducible asymmetry. I live my experience from the inside; I apprehend yours from the outside, by an analogical co-presence that can be rich and accurate yet never collapses into identity. To say “I know exactly how you feel” is, strictly, false, and the phenomenologists explain why it must be. The very structure that lets me encounter you as another subject is the structure that keeps your interiority from ever becoming mine. This is what existential psychology calls our final isolation: however close any two human beings become, neither can fully enter the inner life of the other, and this “is not a failure of love… It is the condition of finite, embodied existence” (Stafford, 2026b; cf. Yalom, 1980).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2012) deepened the account by relocating perception in the lived body. For Merleau-Ponty I am not first a disembodied mind that later acquires a body; I am a body-subject, and my perception is always a situated, bodily taking-up of a world. He rejected both the solipsism that traps me in my own head and the objectivism that reduces other people to mere bodies. Through the expressive behavior of others, their gestures, their speech, the affective comportment of their bodies, I directly encounter another subjectivity inhabiting a shared perceptual world. But this happens across an intercorporeal space, a *between* of lived bodies. The other's perspective is genuinely there for me, woven into the same fabric of the world I perceive, yet it opens onto that world from a location I do not occupy. My perception is perspectival all the way down: I always see from somewhere, and that somewhere is not your somewhere.

If perception is irreducibly perspectival and embodied, then the demand to evaluate another's suffering from a neutral, view-from-nowhere vantage is incoherent. There is no such vantage. Every assessment I make of your experience is grounded in my embodied situation and

my fragments. This does not condemn us to isolation, since Merleau-Ponty's whole point is that we do, really, meet in the perceptual world, but it means the meeting is a meeting of perspectives, not a merging into a single perspective from which comparative scores could be read off. The comparative impulse imagines a scoreboard hovering above all perspectives. Phenomenology denies that the scoreboard exists.

The Face and the Narrated Self

Emmanuel Levinas pressed the asymmetry in an ethical direction. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas (1969) argued that the face of the other, the face understood not as a set of features but as the living self-expression of another, resists every attempt to reduce it to a concept, a category, or a quantity within my system of knowledge. The face overflows the idea I can form of it; it manifests an infinity I cannot contain. And its first word is ethical before it is cognitive: prior to deliberation, the face commands, calling me to responsibility. This responsibility, Levinas (1969) insisted, is asymmetrical and non-reciprocal: I am responsible for the other without first calculating what the other owes me. To rank the other's pain against my own is precisely to reduce the other to a quantity within my system, to totalize, and so to evade the summons of the face issues before any such calculation. The face does not present itself for grading. It presents itself as a claim.

Paul Ricoeur (1992) supplies the final piece by showing that the self who suffers is a narrated self. In *Oneself as Another* he distinguishes *idem*-identity, the sameness of a thing that persists by remaining unchanged, from *ipse*-identity, the selfhood of a person who maintains identity through change by means of a story. Personal identity is narrative identity: we know who we are by the story we tell, and are told, about our lives. An event's meaning for a person is therefore its meaning within that unfolding narrative: its place in the plot, its relation to what

came before, and what the person hopes, or fears, will come. The same external occurrence can be a turning point in one life and a footnote in another, and which it is cannot be settled apart from the narrative in which it figures. Extracted from that narrative, any event can be made to look small. That is the cheap trick the comparative impulse performs: it strips away the very thing, the narrative framework, that constitutes the event's human meaning, and then grades the bare event by its weight in an outsider's plot.

How Partial Sight Is Manufactured

The Loop

We have established that partial seeing is constitutive. We must now examine how its particular *shape*, the specific, often distorted picture I carry of another, is constructed, because it is at this level that the comparative ranking of suffering does its work and at this level that it can be undone. Elsewhere, I have described the construction as “a single self-reinforcing loop running across three nested levels” (Stafford, 2026b). At the cognitive level, the mind construes the other, going “beyond the information given” to sort a person into a ready category. At the interactional level, repeated encounters enact the construal and elicit a confirming response. At the systemic level, the surrounding network organizes the confirmed pattern into an assigned position and defends it. And then the loop closes: “the defended position becomes the ready category through which the next perception is formed” (Stafford, 2026b).

The loop matters here because it explains why a constructed frame feels like plain perception. Once a frame is in place, it is remarkably sticky; it does not merely interpret the other but, as Merton (1948) showed in naming the self-fulfilling prophecy, reaches “across the space between them and elicits the behavior that proves it right” (Stafford, 2026b). The most consequential product of the loop, for our purposes, is the *thin description*: the flattening of a

whole person into a single function within my field of vision. Conflict accelerates this flattening; it "flattens people into their function within it," so that the task of any reconciler is "in real measure, the work of restoring fullness" (Stafford, 2026b). The comparative ranking of suffering is a thin description applied to pain. It reduces a person's interior catastrophe to a token in a category, the privileged complainant, the genuine victim, and then prices the token. What it never does is the thick work of seeing the person whose suffering it has just scored.

Two clarifications follow. First, because the loop is constructed, its products are reversible: a frame that has gone thin can be thickened, and a person reduced to a function can be restored to fullness. This is the ground of hope for the practice proposed later. Second, the loop reveals that the comparative impulse is not a neutral act of measurement performed on a finished fact, but a partly self-confirming construction: we frame a person as someone whose pain is exaggerated, treat them accordingly, and so elicit exactly the defensiveness that seems to confirm the frame. We are, in a real sense, co-authors of the picture we then claim merely to have observed (Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1959; Stafford, 2026b).

The Incommensurability of Suffering

Value Pluralism and the Refusal of a Common Scale

We are now in a position to state the central thesis with more rigor, and Isaiah Berlin's value pluralism supplies the tool. Berlin (1990) argued that fundamental human goods are genuinely plural, often in conflict, and, the decisive term, frequently *incommensurable*: they cannot all be measured on a single common scale or reduced to manifestations of one super-value. Liberty and equality, mercy and justice, loyalty and candor are not interchangeable quantities of some underlying stuff; when they collide, there may be no rational procedure that ranks them objectively, only choices that involve real loss. Berlin was careful to distinguish this

from relativism: he did not hold that all values are equally good, only that real values are plural and sometimes not jointly measurable.

Suffering inherits this structure because suffering is the frustration, loss, or violation of goods, and the goods at stake differ from person to person and are themselves incommensurable. The grief of a man who has lost the vocation that organized his entire moral framework and the grief of a woman who has lost a relationship that anchored hers are not two quantities of a single substance called suffering that could, in principle, be compared and ranked. They are losses of different, incommensurable goods, each devastating within the framework that made the lost good a hypergood for that person. To ask which is objectively worse is to ask a question that, on Berlin's analysis, may simply have no answer: not because we lack information, but because there is no common scale on which the answer could be located.

It is worth pausing to acknowledge that what suffering *is* remains contested, and that the account just given takes a side. Contemporary bioethics distinguishes at least three families of theory: *value-based* accounts, on which suffering is distress at a threat to what a person cares about; *feeling-based* accounts, which identify suffering with aversive experience; and *objective* accounts, which tie it to the absence of flourishing, however the sufferer feels (Kious, 2022). The thesis of this paper leans on the value-based family, suffering as the frustration or violation of the goods that organize a person's framework, and that is a deliberate choice, not an oversight, because the claim at issue concerns first-person significance, the dimension on which the value-based view is strongest. I do not deny that the other families track something real. Feeling-based accounts capture the raw aversiveness of pain, and objective accounts, such as the recent Personalist proposal that grounds suffering in a disruption of Aristotelian flourishing brought on when love or justice is violated (de Campos-Rudinsky, 2026), rightly insist that some harms

damage a life whether or not the person registers them. My argument requires denying none of this; it requires only the narrower point that, at the level of felt significance, the operative metric is value-based and framework-relative. And that this incommensurability is no mere philosopher's abstraction has empirical support: when people are made to weigh genuinely plural goods against one another in deliberative settings, the incommensurability surfaces as real difficulty and resistance rather than as smooth trade-off (Isacs et al., 2023).

This is why the most important metric of an experience's weight is self-comparison: the relation between the loss and the framework of the one who suffers it. Within a person's own moral economy, a particular wound can be catastrophic, striking at the hypergood around which the whole self is organized, while the same wound, transposed into another person's economy where the affected good is peripheral, would barely register. Both readings are correct, each within its frame, and the frames are incommensurable. In relative terms, then, two experiences that look wildly unequal on some imagined universal ledger can be quite equal in the only currency that finally matters for a life: the degree to which each strikes at what its bearer holds most dear. To insist otherwise, that there is a true, framework-independent ranking the sufferer has simply gotten wrong about their own life, is to claim an epistemic access to the other's interior that, as we have seen, no one possesses.

Appreciation, Not Empathy

Frame-Stepping as the Disciplined Alternative

If we cannot rank suffering, what is the fitting response to it? Not, I will argue, empathy in the sense of emotional fusion, but appreciation: the disciplined, anchored understanding of what drives another, held within a stable concern for their good. The distinction is not merely terminological, and the model for it is the practice I have called *frame-stepping*: "helping each

party… step temporarily into the frame of reference from which the other party is acting, while remaining anchored in their own" (Stafford, 2026b). Frame-stepping is neither agreement nor self-abandonment. It is, precisely, "not to agree with it. Not to abandon their own. Just to enter it long enough to see what the other is actually seeing" (Stafford, 2026b). It accepts the asymmetry described by the phenomenologists and works within it, aiming for a thick description of the other rather than a score.

Empathy, by contrast, tempts us toward a fusion we cannot actually achieve, and the temptation has costs. Paul Bloom (2016) made the provocative case in *Against Empathy*. His target is narrowly emotional empathy, the spotlight that makes us feel what a particular other feels, and his argument is that this capacity, however warm, is a poor guide to moral action: it is innumerate and parochial, shining its light on the near, the vivid, the identifiable, and the similar, and going dark on the distant and the different. Because it is a spotlight, it is easily captured and easily weaponized, amplifying the suffering we are primed to feel and dimming the rest, which is the very bias that fuels the comparative ranking of pain. Bloom (2016) argues that we do better to cultivate rational compassion, a more diffuse concern informed by understanding rather than driven by contagion. Bloom's case, though polemical, is no longer an outlier. A growing empirical literature treats "empathy" not as a single capacity but as a family of dissociable processes, namely emotional sharing, empathic concern or compassion, personal distress, and cognitive or affective perspective-taking, that recruit distinct neural circuits, follow distinct developmental trajectories, and carry distinct consequences (Decety & Cowell, 2014; Stietz et al., 2019). Decety and Cowell (2014) go so far as to recommend retiring the catchall term *empathy* in favor of these more precise constructs, precisely because the relation between empathy and good moral action is contingent rather than guaranteed: at times affective sharing

supports moral judgment, at times it distorts it. The distinction is not merely conceptual. In a meta-analysis of 304 independent samples, Longmire and Harrison (2018) found that perspective-taking and empathic concern have distinct consequences: empathic concern more reliably signals support, whereas perspective-taking is the better asset in strategic, mixed-motive interactions where shared affect can be a liability. McAuliffe and colleagues (2019), meta-analyzing experiments that used *imagine-self*, *imagine-other*, and *remain-objective* instructions, found that detachment instructions reliably reduce empathic concern but that "imagine" instructions do not reliably increase it: evidence that empathic resonance is neither a stable default nor easily summoned on command. Taken together, this work supports two claims the present argument needs: that the affective and cognitive routes to understanding others are separable, and that the affective route, in particular, is an unreliable instrument when asked to bear normative weight.

Social neuroscience sharpens the picture. Klimecki and Singer (2012) proposed that the burnout long called "compassion fatigue" is better named *empathic distress fatigue*, because what exhausts and eventually withdraws the helper is not compassion but empathic distress: the aversive, self-focused state that arises when one shares another's suffering without a regulating frame. Singer and Klimecki (2014) drew the contrast cleanly: empathy for another's pain activates networks associated with negative affect and, unbuffered, motivates withdrawal, whereas compassion, concern for the other joined to the motivation to help, engages different systems associated with warmth, approach, and resilience, and can be trained. This is the empirical core of the worry that empathy, "unchecked and unanchored," can become toxic: empathic fusion without an anchoring frame degrades into distress, and distress turns the helper inward, away from the very person they meant to help.

It is worth pausing to define *appreciation* with more precision than ordinary usage allows, and to situate it against the constructs that the empirical literature now carefully distinguishes, because the term is doing real work in this argument and should not be heard as a vague synonym for warmth. By appreciation, I mean a stance with four features. First, it is *cognitive in its primary route*: like perspective-taking, it proceeds by comprehension, reconstructing what an experience means within the other's frame, rather than by affect sharing. Second, it is *motivationally anchored* in a stable concern for the other's good, which it shares with compassion (and with what the literature calls empathic concern), and which gives it an other-directed orientation. Third, it is defined precisely by what it withholds: unlike emotional empathy or affect sharing, it makes no claim to feel what the other feels, and so, fourth, it is structurally protected from *personal distress*: the aversive, self-focused state that, on the social-neuroscience account, exhausts the helper and turns attention inward (Klimecki & Singer, 2012; Singer & Klimecki, 2014). In the vocabulary of that literature, appreciation is closest to a fusion of cognitive perspective-taking with compassion, deliberately excluding both affect sharing and personal distress (Decety & Cowell, 2014; Stietz et al., 2019). It is not identical to any single validated construct, and I do not claim it has been measured as such; it is a normative recommendation built from components that have been measured: an argument that the right response to incommensurable suffering combines the comprehension of perspective-taking with the steady, other-directed motivation of compassion, while refusing the contagion of affect sharing. Naming it separately is justified because no existing label picks out exactly that combination, and because the combination is what the foregoing argument requires.

Appreciation is anchored by design. It does not require me to feel your feelings; it requires me to understand them and to hold a steady concern for your good. Because it is not

contagion, it does not flicker with the vividness of the stimulus, and it is not captured by similarity or proximity. I can appreciate the suffering of someone whose framework is alien to mine, whose pain I cannot feel, precisely because appreciation runs on comprehension rather than on resonance. This is why the response to incommensurable suffering should be appreciation rather than empathy. Empathy tempts us to believe we have entered the other's chamber and seen with their fragments, the very illusion the phenomenologists dispelled, and then, finding that we feel less than the other does, to conclude that the other feels too much. Appreciation makes no claim to fusion and so is not betrayed into that conclusion. To appreciate is not to approve, endorse, or agree that the person has read their situation correctly in every respect; it is to understand what is driving them and to accept their story as it is, with no narrative adjustment imposed from outside.

Two qualifications keep this argument honest about what the empathy science does and does not show. The first is that the harm attributed to empathy is not produced by empathy alone. An integrative review of the compassion-fatigue literature concludes that empathy itself is not what places caregivers at risk; rather, the risk stems from inadequate resources, too little positive feedback, and how the helper handles personal distress (Coetzee & Laschinger, 2018). Related work finds that perceived social support buffers the link between empathy and fatigue (Zhang et al., 2023), and that where empathy does corrode the helper, it tends to act through mediators such as guilt and secondary traumatic stress rather than directly (Mottaghi et al., 2020). This complicates the picture in a way that, on balance, favors appreciation: the toxic element these studies isolate is the *personal-distress* response, precisely the component that appreciation is built to exclude. But it also chastens the prescription: if context and support shape the outcome, then choosing appreciation over empathic fusion is a help, not a panacea, and a culture that asks

its members to sit with one another's suffering owes them the resources that make doing so sustainable. The second qualification is that comprehension and motivation are not the whole of a fitting response. Rushton and colleagues (2013), building a clinical framework for moral distress, locate the response to another's suffering at the intersection of four capacities: empathy, perspective-taking, memory, and *moral sensitivity*, the ethical attunement that registers a situation as morally weighted at all. Appreciation, as I have defined it, draws chiefly on perspective-taking and compassionate motivation; moral sensitivity names a further condition, the readiness to perceive that the person before us has a claim on us in the first place, without which even accurate comprehension can go cold.

The Blind Spot of Comparative Equity

From Standpoint to Scoreboard

I can now name what I take to be a genuine blind spot that can attach to some comparative uses of identity categories. I am careful here to name the target narrowly. The blind spot is not equity, which I take to be a worthy aim; it is not the project of attending to those whom social arrangements have disadvantaged, and it is not the recognition that social location shapes experience, which is true and important. What I have in view is a specific and avoidable move: a particular *use* of identity categories, not the categories themselves, and not equity as such. The blind spot is the slide from the legitimate insight that perspective is situated to the illegitimate practice of using a person's location to grade their suffering on a public scoreboard, and, very often, to discount it.

The legitimate insight has a respectable pedigree in standpoint epistemology. Feminist standpoint theorists such as Sandra Harding (1991) argued that knowledge is socially situated and that the perspectives of the marginalized can disclose features of the social world that the

powerful systematically obscure. Whatever one thinks of its stronger epistemic claims, the situated-knowledge thesis is largely continuous with the phenomenological point developed above: we all see from somewhere, and where we stand shapes what we can see. Crucially, even sympathetic theorists insisted that a standpoint is an *achievement*, won through critical reflection rather than conferred automatically by group membership, and intersectional critics such as Crenshaw (1991) warned that no single axis of identity could be treated as the master key to a person's experience, since axes of advantage and disadvantage cross in ways that defeat any simple ranking of who suffers most.

The blind spot appears when the situated-knowledge thesis is quietly converted into a comparative scoreboard. On the scoreboard, each person is assigned a position in a hierarchy of privilege, and that position is used to set, in advance, how much their suffering is permitted to count. The word *privilege*, in this usage, ceases to name a structural fact about unearned advantage, a coherent and useful concept, and becomes an instrument for minimizing a particular person's experience in a comparative state. The trauma of the person judged privileged is deemed not as bad, not because anyone has entered that person's framework and found it shallow, but because a category was applied from outside and a verdict read off the scoreboard. As I have argued for the parallel move in professional practice, “when individuals are viewed primarily as members of categories rather than as persons, justice becomes a zero-sum exercise in which some voices are amplified while others are rendered invisible” (Stafford, 2026a).

This is a category error, and the preceding sections explain why. It treats incommensurable, framework-relative significances as if they were commensurable quantities on a single scale (contra Berlin, 1990). It presumes an epistemic access to the interior of the discounted person that no perspectival being possesses (contra Husserl, 1960; Merleau-Ponty,

2012). It extracts the wounding event from the narrative that gives it meaning and grades the bare event by its weight in an outsider's plot (contra Ricoeur, 1992). And it turns away from the face that summons responsibility in order to consult a ledger (contra Levinas, 1969). The very framework of thought that began by honoring situated, marginalized perspectives ends by authorizing a new and confident ranking of whose pain is real, reproducing in a different idiom exactly the totalizing gesture it set out to resist. Something that seems insignificant to one person can be genuinely significant to another, and in relative terms, measured against each person's own framework, the two can be quite equal. The scoreboard cannot see this, because it was built precisely to rank what cannot be ranked.

The Person Sacrificed to the Symbol

There is a further cost, beyond the conceptual error, that I have watched play out in practice. When the category becomes the unit of moral concern, the person inside the category can be sacrificed to the symbol. I have described a civic episode in which the application of social-justice principles "resulted in the prioritization of one marginalized group at the expense of others who were equally vulnerable," with "little consideration… given to recovering individuals struggling with addiction or to trauma survivors whose access to services was impaired" (Stafford, 2026a). The mechanism is the same one the loop describes: a thin description, scaled up to a population. Advocacy conducted at this altitude can become performative, satisfying "the moral sensibilities of the advocate while failing to address the material and relational needs of the person in crisis" (Stafford, 2026a), and can, ironically, "reproduce the very power imbalances it seeks to dismantle" (Stafford, 2026a). The antidote at the structural level mirrors the antidote at the interpersonal one: a return to the primacy of the

actual person, “the person sitting across from the counselor who deserves to be seen, heard, and valued as a whole person, not as a vehicle for systemic transformation” (Stafford, 2026a).

The Empirical Cost: Competitive Victimhood

There is, moreover, an empirical reason to be wary of comparative suffering. A substantial body of social-psychological research documents *competitive victimhood*: the tendency of groups in conflict to strive to establish that their group has suffered more than the adversary. Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, and Nadler (2012) reviewed evidence that this competition over the status of greatest victim is not a harmless accounting exercise but an active driver of conflict: depressing intergroup forgiveness, hardening biased memory, and impeding reconciliation, because groups locked in it are more motivated to assert their own suffering than to relinquish a painful past. Young and Sullivan (2016) extended the analysis, showing the dynamic operates not only in violent intergroup conflict but across contexts of structural inequality and even within minority groups. More recent work shows the dynamic migrating into the arenas where contemporary moral argument actually happens: movement and countermovement discourse, and social media. Maxwell and colleagues (2025), combining topic modeling with discourse analysis across more than 40,000 tweets from opposing feminist groups, found that competitive-victimhood repertoires, each side claiming the more authentic injury and delegitimizing the other’s, were a recurring feature of how the groups positioned themselves against one another. At the level of political strategy, Barton Hronešová and Kreiss (2024) document how victimhood can be deliberately claimed and instrumentalized to advance a cause and to discredit rivals. These studies do not concern individual sufferers in a counseling room or a kitchen conversation, and I do not present them as if they did; they concern groups, movements, and strategic actors. The lesson is sobering: a culture that trains its members to

grade one another's wounds is not building solidarity but, predictably, manufacturing the conditions of competitive victimhood, in which energy that might have gone toward mutual understanding is spent litigating rank. The conceptual error has a behavioral signature, and the signature is conflict.

The breadth of this literature is worth registering, because the dynamic is wider and stranger than the image of two warring nations suggests. Sometimes the competition is not over whose suffering was objectively greater but over whose suffering is *recognized*: De Guissmé and Licata (2017) found that a felt lack of recognition for past victimization, rather than its measured severity, was what predicted hostility toward another victimized group. Sometimes it migrates into domestic movement-and-countermovement contests, as Solomon and Martin (2019) show in analyzing how the Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter movements each positioned itself as the authentic victim. And the standings are not fixed by who is in fact disadvantaged: Bloy and colleagues (2025) found competitive victimhood to be dynamic and context-dependent, with a higher-power group out-claiming a lower-power one under transient threat, so that perceived threat can override actual power in deciding who insists most loudly on victim status. Taken together, these findings sharpen the present worry. The scoreboard is not only unjust; it is unstable, its rankings shifting with recognition, narrative, and threat rather than tracking any settled fact about who has suffered most, which is precisely what one would expect if, as I have argued, there is no common scale for it to track in the first place.

One caution is required here, lest the argument claim more than this evidence can bear. The competitive-victimhood literature studies *groups* in conflict, and its findings establish that comparative victim claims, at that level, predict measurable harms: reduced forgiveness, hardened memory, impeded reconciliation. They do not, by themselves, establish the normative

thesis of this paper, which concerns the incommensurability of suffering at the level of the individual person. The relationship between the two is one of consonance and illustration, not of proof: the social psychology shows that ranking wounds tends to produce conflict where it has been measured, which makes the conceptual argument more plausible and more practically urgent, but the conceptual argument does not *follow from* the empirical findings, and the empirical findings do not license treating every comparative use of identity categories as an instance of the group dynamics these studies document. I take up this limit explicitly below.

Application: From Ranking to Appreciative Seeing

The Practice

An argument of this kind is incomplete until it issues in a practice, because the comparative impulse is not primarily a theory people hold but a habit they enact, usually without noticing. The recommendation can be stated in a sentence: replace the reflex of ranking with the discipline of appreciative seeing. Concretely, this involves several moves. The first is a deliberate suspension of the scoreboard. When another person tells you what hurt, the first move is not to locate their wound on a hierarchy, not to ask, even silently, whether they have it worse or better than you or some third party, but to ask what this experience means within their world. The relevant question is not “Is this objectively serious?” but “What is this serious *to*, and why?” That reframing does most of the work, because it returns the experience to the framework that gives it weight rather than extracting it for grading.

The second move is to choose appreciation over empathy in the precise senses distinguished above, and to practice it as frame-stepping: entering the other's frame long enough to see what they are actually seeing, while remaining anchored in your own. You need not feel what the other feels; the research suggests you may do better, and last longer, if you do not

attempt the fusion (Klimecki & Singer, 2012; Singer & Klimecki, 2014). What is asked is comprehension anchored in steady concern. This protects both parties: the listener from the distress and eventual withdrawal that unanchored empathy produces, and the speaker from the subtle insult of an empathy that, having failed to feel as much as they feel, concludes that they feel too much.

The third move is linguistic vigilance, because the comparative impulse lives in particular phrases and weakens when they are retired. The expressions catalogued at the outset (“they don't have it that bad,” “who hasn't been through that,” “they think they have it worse,” “they have it better”) are not innocent figures of speech; each is a small act of ranking, a quiet placement of another's wound on the scoreboard. To notice them as they form and decline to complete them is a concrete discipline. The same vigilance applies to the more sophisticated, credentialed forms of the same move, in which the language of privilege accomplishes what the folk phrases accomplish more crudely.

The fourth move is to widen the frame. Because the shape of partial seeing is constructed, “the slow work of widening it is neither naive nor futile” (Stafford, 2026b). Appreciative seeing is not a single act but a practice extended over time: the patient thickening of a description that habit had made thin. Here a place opens for forgiveness, lightly but importantly. Much of the friction that drives us to rank and dismiss one another is the residue of small, ongoing demands our partial seeing produces, and a posture of daily forgiveness, “the daily, repeated release” of those demands (Stafford, 2026b), keeps the work sustainable. The clinical literature supports its place here: forgiveness can be cultivated as a process rather than summoned as a single event, and it reliably reduces anger and restores hope (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015; Worthington, 2006). It is worth stressing that forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation and does not require

pretending one was not wronged; in Smedes's (1984) memorable formulation, “to forgive is to set a prisoner free, and to discover the prisoner was yourself.” Forgiveness, so understood, is one of the practices by which a person steps off the scoreboard of grievance without denying that the grievance was real.

What This Does Not Mean

Lest the proposal be heard as relativism, several boundaries deserve restatement. It does not mean that all interpretations of one's own experience are equally accurate; people can and do misread their own lives, and a faithful friend may, in time and with care, help enlarge a framework that has grown too small. It does not mean that no experience can ever be addressed or grown beyond; appreciation is the beginning of a relationship, not its terminus. And it does not dissolve the work of justice at the institutional level. We can and must make public judgments about structural harms, weigh policies by their consequences, and attend with particular care to those whom social arrangements have disadvantaged. None of that requires grading the interior suffering of the individuals in front of us, and the two are in tension: a politics genuinely committed to the dignity of persons will be most suspicious of any practice that licenses the ranking of whose pain is real. What the thesis denies is narrower and, I hope, now well supported: that the felt significance of a person's suffering, indexed to that person's own framework, is ours to demote.

Scope and Limitations

It is worth stating plainly what kind of argument this has been, and what it can and cannot claim. This is a work of philosophical synthesis, not an empirical study. Its central thesis, that the felt significance of a person’s suffering is indexed to that person’s own framework of meaning and cannot be overridden by an outside observer’s comparative ranking, is a conceptual and

normative claim, defended by argument from phenomenology, the theory of moral frameworks, and value pluralism. It is not a hypothesis that the empirical literatures invoked here were designed to test, and I have not tested it.

This has consequences for how the empirical material should be read. The studies in social neuroscience and moral psychology, on the dissociation of empathy, perspective-taking, compassion, and personal distress, and on empathic distress fatigue (Decety & Cowell, 2014; Klimecki & Singer, 2012; Longmire & Harrison, 2018; McAuliffe et al., 2019; Singer & Klimecki, 2014; Stietz et al., 2019), establish that the constructs I rely on are real and separable and that affective empathy is an unreliable guide to action. They do not establish that appreciation, as I define it, is superior in practice; appreciation is a normative construct assembled from validated components, not itself a measured variable, and the claim that it is the fitting response to incommensurable suffering is an argument, not a finding. Similarly, the research on competitive victimhood (Barton Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024; Maxwell et al., 2025; Noor et al., 2012; Young & Sullivan, 2016) documents harms that follow from comparative victim claims at the level of groups and movements. It makes the present thesis more plausible and more urgent, but it concerns a different unit of analysis, the group rather than the individual, and so functions here illustratively rather than as direct confirmation. The empirical literatures, in short, show that the limits of empathy and the risks of comparative victimhood are well attested; they do not, on their own, demonstrate the full normative conclusion that the felt significance of suffering cannot be ranked across persons. That conclusion rests on the conceptual argument and stands or falls with it.

Three further limits deserve acknowledgment. First, the argument is developed within a largely Western philosophical idiom, namely Taylor, the phenomenological tradition, and Berlin,

and I do not claim that its framing exhausts the ways other traditions might describe the same terrain. Second, the critique of comparative uses of identity categories is deliberately narrow, and I have tried to keep it so; it is a critique of a particular move, the conversion of situated knowledge into a public scoreboard of grievance, and it should not be read as a verdict on equity, on attention to disadvantage, or on standpoint epistemology, each of which I take to be defensible and, in the case of equity, valuable. Third, the practice the paper recommends, appreciative seeing, is offered as a reasoned proposal whose effectiveness is, at present, argued rather than demonstrated; whether it produces the goods I claim for it, relative to the alternatives, is an open empirical question and a natural direction for future work. Naming these limits does not weaken the thesis so much as locate it: it is a claim about what we ought not do to one another's suffering, grounded in what kind of thing suffering is, offered for the reader's assessment on those terms.

Because the effectiveness of appreciative seeing is at present argued rather than demonstrated, it is worth saying concretely how it might be tested, since the construct can be operationalized even though I have not measured it. On the definition given above, appreciation is a composite of three measurable dimensions: high *cognitive perspective-taking*, high *compassionate motivation*, and low *personal distress*. Each already has validated instrumentation: perspective-taking and personal distress are distinct subscales of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, and compassionate motivation can be indexed by established compassion scales, so a study could define an "appreciation profile" as the conjunction of the first two with the suppression of the third, and distinguish it empirically from emotional-empathy or affect-sharing profiles (Decety & Cowell, 2014; Stietz et al., 2019). A natural design would compare instructional or training conditions, an appreciation or compassion-cultivation condition

against an “imagine-feel” empathy condition and a detached-objectivity control, on the outcomes this argument cares about: the listener’s sustained engagement and resistance to withdrawal, the speaker’s sense of being accurately understood rather than ranked, and the suppression of comparative judgments about whose suffering counts. The prediction that follows from this paper is specific and falsifiable: relative to both empathy-induction and detachment, the appreciation profile should preserve helping and felt understanding while lowering both helper distress and the comparative discounting of others’ pain. Until such work is done, appreciation remains a normative recommendation assembled from validated parts; specifying it this way is meant to make it answerable to evidence rather than to settle the question by definition.

Conclusion

I began with an ordinary scene: one person quietly pricing another's wound and returning a verdict. I have argued that the verdict cannot be valid, because the operation that produces it, the ranking of incommensurable, framework-relative suffering on a common scale, mistakes the kind of thing suffering is. We see one another only in part, and that partial seeing has two sources: a constitutive limit we cannot remove and a constructed shape we can. Taylor showed that the self is furnished by moral frameworks that give our own reality a density others cannot have for us. The phenomenologists showed that the other's experience is genuinely given yet never possessed, that perception is perspectival all the way down, that the face summons responsibility before it submits to grading, and that the self who suffers is a narrated self. The loop showed how a thin description of another hardens into the appearance of plain sight. Berlin showed that the goods whose loss constitutes suffering are plural and often incommensurable. The distinction between appreciation and empathy, sharpened by social neuroscience and modeled on frame-stepping, showed that the fitting response is anchored understanding rather

than emotional fusion. And the critique of comparative equity, joined to the research on competitive victimhood, showed that the scoreboard does not merely err in theory but sacrifices the person to the symbol and breeds the conflict it pretends to resolve.

The argument has deliberately stopped at a threshold. To establish that suffering cannot be ranked is to establish a negative, what we ought not do, and a reader may fairly ask what positive ground secures the equal worth of every person's story, and toward what end the practice of appreciative seeing finally moves. Those are real questions, and there are deep traditions, religious and philosophical, that answer them; I have pursued one such answer elsewhere and set it apart so that the argument given here could stand on its own terms. But the central claim does not wait on those answers. Whatever finally grounds the dignity of persons, we already have reason enough to set down the scale we were never able to read, to turn from the ledger back to the face, and to receive one another's stories as they are. Such appreciation is difficult and runs against a deep reflex, but it is both possible and obligatory: the long, patient widening of a sight that will always, in this life, be partial, and the practice of love that widening turns out to be.

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