

Whose Wound Is Worse? On the Limits of Comparing Suffering, Lived Experience, Social Imaginaries, 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, because each person's pain is constituted within a moral and perceptual world that is not commensurable with anyone else's. Drawing on Charles Taylor's account of social imaginaries and the sources of the self, the phenomenological tradition's analysis of perspective and intersubjectivity (Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and Ricoeur), and Isaiah Berlin's value pluralism, I argue that lived experience functions like a kaleidoscope: the patterns we perceive shift as we turn the instrument, but the colored fragments through which all perception passes were set by the maker and cannot be exchanged for another's. I distinguish *appreciation* (the disciplined understanding of what drives another's story) 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 a prominent strand of contemporary equity discourse commits a category error by using comparative judgments of privilege to minimize individual suffering, and I connect this critique to research on competitive victimhood. The paper closes with a section developing a Christian theological anchor in the *imago Dei*, which grounds the equal and irreducible dignity of every person's story, and with practical proposals for a posture of appreciative understanding.

The Incommensurability of Suffering: Lived Experience, Social Imaginaries, 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,” “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 of 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 understand another's suffering; we cannot rank it. And when we attempt to rank it by deploying 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.

To see why, I will move through four bodies of thought. First, Charles Taylor's account of how the self is constituted within moral frameworks and social imaginaries, which explains why our own reality takes on a priority and density that other realities cannot have for us. Second, the phenomenological tradition's analysis of perspective and our access to other minds clarifies the precise sense in which another's experience is given to us but never possessed by us. Third, the distinction between appreciation and empathy, sharpened by recent work in social neuroscience and moral psychology, shows why the right response to incommensurable suffering is understanding rather than emotional fusion. Fourth, a critique of the comparative logic embedded in a prominent reading of equity, connected to empirical research on competitive victimhood. I will then develop a Christian theological account that anchors the dignity of every person's story in the *imago Dei*, and I will close with the practical question that motivates the whole inquiry: how, then, should we listen to one another?

The Kaleidoscope

It helps to begin with an image because the thesis is partly about perception, and images do what propositions cannot. Picture a kaleidoscope. You raise it to your eye, and you see a pattern, symmetry of color and shape that is genuinely beautiful and genuinely there. You turn the barrel, and the pattern dissolves into another, then another, an apparently endless variety of designs. It is tempting to say that the kaleidoscope shows you everything. But it does not. Every pattern you will ever see through that instrument is composed from 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 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 at the world through a chamber of fixed fragments: the experiences, attachments, injuries, loves, and inherited meanings that were placed in us by our history and that we did not choose. We can turn the barrel. We can attend to new aspects of a situation, adopt new angles, and 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. This is not a failure of effort or goodwill. It is the structure of perspective itself. And it is precisely this structure that should make us humble about ranking what we cannot inhabit.

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) introduced the notion of a social imaginary to name “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. It is not a doctrine that a person consciously holds and could state on request. It is the largely pre-theoretical, taken-for-granted background that is carried in stories, images, and practices rather than in propositions that a society's members use to make sense of their common life. It is, as Taylor (2004) put it, “that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” (p. 23).

The crucial feature of an imaginary, for present purposes, is that it is a medium of intelligibility rather than an object within the visual field. We do not look at our social imaginary; we look through it, in much the way that we look through, rather than at, the lens of an eye of the kaleidoscope. 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. 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 that 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 work, *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 what he calls a moral framework, a horizon of “strong evaluations” in light of which some ways of living strike us as higher and others as base, some goods as worth orienting a whole life around. “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, what Taylor describes as a kind of identity crisis, a failure to know where one stands or what has significance.

If Taylor is right, then the significance an experience has for a person is a function of where that experience falls within the person's moral framework, and frameworks differ. An event that touches what Taylor (1989) calls a person's “hypergood” the highest good that orders all their other goods, 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.

This gives the kaleidoscope a more exact reading. The fixed fragments are the strong evaluations, the inherited goods, the imaginary that furnishes one's world. The maker is the long

history (familial, cultural, religious, biographical) that placed those fragments in the chamber before reflection began. And the bounded variety of patterns is the range of interpretations available to a person who can turn the barrel but cannot restock it with someone else's colors. When we judge another's suffering as lighter than our own, we are reading their pattern with our fragments and concluding that, composed of our colors, it would not amount to much. But it was never composed of our colors. It was composed by them.

Why the First-Person World Cannot Be Demoted

A natural objection arises here. Even granting that experience is framework-relative, surely some frameworks are better than others, and surely an outside observer can sometimes see that a person is making too much of a small thing. Taylor would not deny that frameworks can be assessed; *Sources of the Self* is, among other things, an argument that some moral sources are richer than others. But there is a difference between evaluating a framework and demoting a person's first-person experience of significance from within their framework. The former is a legitimate, if delicate, philosophical activity. The latter is the move I am contesting. When I tell you that your pain does not warrant your distress because, measured against my imaginary, it is minor, I am not offering you a better framework. I am refusing to grant that your framework confers real significance on your experience, which is to refuse to grant that you are the kind of being whose interpretations of your own life carry authority. That refusal, repeated across a culture, is corrosive, and I will argue later that it has migrated into the very discourses that present themselves as champions of the marginalized.

This conviction has a direct analog in the clinical tradition, which reached it from another direction entirely. Carl Rogers (1951) built his theory of personality on the premise that each person exists at the center of a continually changing world of experience (the phenomenal field)

and that what a person perceives to be true functions, for that person, as reality itself (Tudor & Merry, 2006). The therapeutic implication Rogers drew is the one I am pressing here: the helper cannot substitute an external assessment of an experience's gravity for the sufferer's own, because the sufferer alone has access to the frame in which the experience carries its weight. Rogers' (1957) insistence on unconditional positive regard (an acceptance of the person that does not wait upon first ratifying or correcting their account) names, in the consulting room, the very refusal to demote the first-person world that I am defending here. That two such different traditions, phenomenological philosophy and humanistic psychology, arrive independently at the same conclusion should raise our confidence that the conclusion tracks something real.

The Phenomenology of Perspective

Given but Not Possessed: The Other in Phenomenology

Taylor tells us how the self is furnished. The phenomenological tradition tells us, with great precision, about the structure of perspective itself and about the peculiar way another person'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, another perspective on the same world. How? Husserl's answer is that the other is given through what he called appresentation: in perceiving your expressive, living body, I am led to co-intend, to “appresent,” a stream of consciousness that is analogous to my own, but that is never presented to me directly the way my own is. The other is, in Husserl's formulation, accessible precisely as that which is inaccessible, given exactly in the mode of not being given in the original. The alter ego is verified and yet never made present in person.

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 a kind of analogical co-presence that can be rich and accurate but can never collapse into identity. To say “I know exactly how you feel” is, strictly, false, and the phenomenologists explain why it must be false. The very structure that lets me encounter you as another subject is the structure that keeps your interiority from ever becoming mine.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2012) deepened this account by relocating perception in the lived body. For Merleau-Ponty, I do not first encounter the world as a disembodied mind and then add a body; I am a body-subject, and my perception is always already a bodily, situated taking-up of a world. Crucially, 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 encounter happens across what Merleau-Ponty called an intercorporeal space, a space between lived bodies. The other's perspective is genuinely there for me, woven into the same fabric of the world I perceive, and yet it opens onto the 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. Merleau-Ponty's whole point is that we really do meet in the perceptual world. But it does mean that the meeting is a meeting of

perspectives, not a merging into a single perspective from which comparative scores could be read off objectively. The comparative impulse imagines a scoreboard hovering above all perspectives. Phenomenology denies that the scoreboard exists.

Levinas and the Priority of the Other's Face

Emmanuel Levinas pressed the ethical direction that bears directly on our theme. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas (1969) argued that the face of the other person (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, he wrote, overflows the idea I can form of it; it manifests an infinity that I cannot contain. And the first word of the face is ethical before it is cognitive: prior to any deliberation, the face commands, calling me to responsibility. Levinas (1969) insisted that this responsibility is asymmetrical and non-reciprocal: I am responsible for the other without first calculating whether the other is responsible for me, and I cannot discharge the obligation by pointing to what the other owes me in return.

Levinas gives us a powerful reason to refuse the comparative ranking of suffering. To rank the other's pain against my own is precisely to reduce the other to a quantity within my system (to totalize, in his vocabulary) and so to evade the ethical summons that the face issues before any such calculation. The face does not present itself for grading. It presents itself as a claim. When I respond to another's account of their pain by weighing it against a ledger, I have already turned away from the face and toward the ledger; I have substituted measurement for responsibility. Levinas would say that I have thereby missed the ethical event entirely, because the ethical relation begins exactly where my comparative knowledge ends.

Ricoeur and the Narrative Self

Paul Ricoeur (1992) supplies the final piece by showing how the self that suffers is a narrated self. In *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur distinguishes two senses of identity: idem-identity, the sameness of a thing that persists by remaining unchanged, and ipse-identity, the selfhood of a person who maintains identity through change by means of a story. Personal identity, for Ricoeur, 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 person's unfolding narrative: its place in the plot, its relation to what came before, and what the person hopes, or fears, will come after. The same external occurrence can be a turning point in one life-story and a footnote in another, and which it is cannot be determined apart from the narrative in which it figures.

Ricoeur's title already gestures at our theme: the self is always *oneself as another*, constituted in relation to others and capable, through narrative imagination, of a solicitude that takes the other's story seriously without pretending to author it. This is the phenomenological grounding for what I will call appreciation. To appreciate another's suffering is to attend to the place that the wounding event occupies within their narrative, rather than to extract the event from their story, drop it into mine, and grade it by its weight in my plot. Extracted from the narrative that gives it significance, any event can be made to look small. That is the cheap trick the comparative impulse performs, and Ricoeur shows us why it is a trick: it works only by stripping away the very thing (the narrative framework) that constitutes the event's human meaning.

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 provides the conceptual tool. Berlin (1990) argued that fundamental human goods are genuinely plural, often in conflict, and (this is the decisive term) frequently incommensurable, meaning that 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; they are distinct goods, and when they collide, there may be no rational procedure that ranks them objectively, only choices that involve real loss. Importantly, Berlin distinguished this pluralism from relativism. He did not hold that all values are equally good or that anything goes; he held that there are real values, plural and sometimes incommensurable, which is a different and more demanding claim.

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. The demand for a ranking presupposes a commensurability that does not exist.

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 (to insist that there is a true, framework-independent ranking that the sufferer has simply gotten wrong about their own life) is to claim an epistemic access to the other's interior that, as the phenomenologists have shown, no one possesses.

Appreciation Without Approval

It is essential to distinguish the position defended here from two caricatures. The first caricature says that if we cannot rank suffering, then we must approve of everything, validate every interpretation, and treat every account of being wronged as beyond question. That does not follow. To appreciate another's experience, in the sense I intend, is not to approve it, endorse it, or agree that the person has correctly understood their situation in every respect. It is to understand what is driving them: to grasp, as far as a specifying being can, the framework within which the experience has the weight it has for them. Appreciation in this sense is closer to comprehension than to commendation. I can appreciate that an experience is genuinely devastating within your framework while still believing, and even gently saying, that your framework might be enlarged. What I may not do is pretend that my failure to feel the weight of your experience is evidence that the weight is not there.

The second caricature says that this position dissolves all moral discrimination, leaving us unable to say that genocide is worse than a slight. But the thesis is carefully bounded. At the level of public policy and shared institutions, we must and do make judgments about the

comparative gravity of harms; a legal system that punished murder and rudeness identically would be monstrous. Berlin's pluralism operates at the level of ultimate values and does not forbid practical rankings within a shared scheme of justice. The claim here is at the interpersonal level: what happens when one person sits across from another and presumes to grade the other's interior life. It is at that level, the level at which selves are actually wounded and formed, that the comparative impulse does its damage, and it is at that level that appreciation rather than ranking is the fitting response. Accepting another's story as it is, with no narrative adjustment imposed from outside, is the practical shape of that appreciation.

Appreciation Versus Empathy

Why Understanding Is Not Emotional Fusion

If appreciation is the right response, it is worth distinguishing it sharply from empathy, because the two are often conflated and the conflation matters. By empathy, I mean the vicarious sharing of another's felt emotional state: feeling, to some degree, what the other feels. By appreciation, I mean the disciplined understanding of what the other feels and why, anchored in a stable concern for their good. The distinction is not merely terminological. Recent work in psychology and social neuroscience suggests that these are distinct capacities with different consequences, and that unanchored empathy carries liabilities that appreciation does not.

Paul Bloom (2016) made the provocative case in *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*. Bloom's target is narrowly defined as 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. Empathy is innumerate and parochial: it shines its light on the near, the vivid, the identifiable, and the similar, and it goes dark on the distant, the statistical, and the different. Because it is a spotlight, it is easily captured and easily weaponized; it

amplifies the suffering we are primed to feel and dims the suffering we are not, which is exactly the bias that fuels the comparative ranking of pain. Bloom (2016) argues that we do better to cultivate rational compassion: a more diffuse, less spotlight-bound concern for others' well-being that is informed by understanding rather than driven by contagion.

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. In subsequent work, Singer and Klimecki (2014) drew a clean contrast: empathy for another's pain activates networks associated with negative affect and, when unbuffered, motivates withdrawal, whereas compassion (concern for the other coupled with the motivation to help) engages different systems associated with warmth, approach, and resilience. Their training studies indicate that compassion can be cultivated and that it protects against the very distress that unregulated empathy produces. This is the empirical core of the worry, captured in the user's own intuition, that empathy can become toxic when it is unchecked and unanchored: empathic fusion without an anchoring frame degrades into distress, and distress turns the helper inward, away from the very person they meant to help.

Appreciation, by contrast, 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 that we have entered the other's chamber and seen with their fragments (the very illusion the phenomenologists dispelled), and then, when we find that we feel less than the other does, to conclude that the other feels too much. Appreciation makes no such claim to fusion and so is not betrayed into that conclusion. It accepts the asymmetry and works within it.

It is worth adding that the clinical tradition itself, at its most careful, already understood empathy in this disciplined way. When Rogers (1957) named empathy a core therapeutic condition, he defined it as sensing the other's private world as if it were one's own while never losing the “as if” quality: the very asymmetry the phenomenologists describe. What I am calling appreciation is therefore not a rejection of empathy rightly understood but a recovery of it: the loss of the “as if,” the collapse into fusion that Bloom (2016) and the social-neuroscience literature warn against, is precisely the corruption of empathy that Rogers' definition was built to prevent.

The Blind Spot of Comparative Equity

From Standpoint to Scoreboard

I can now state what I take to be a genuine blind spot in a prominent strand of contemporary thought, particularly in the dominant modern interpretation of equity. The blind spot is not equity as such, nor the recognition that social location shapes experience, which is true and important. 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 perspectives of 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. So far, so good. Crucially, even sympathetic theorists insisted that a standpoint is an achievement, won through critical reflection, rather than an automatic possession conferred 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 then 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 perfectly coherent and useful concept) and becomes an instrument for minimizing a particular person's experience in a comparative state. The reasoning runs: because you belong to a category we have coded as advantaged, your pain is presumptively less serious than the pain of someone coded as disadvantaged, and so it may be discounted or dismissed. 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 was read off the scoreboard.

It is only fair to locate this usage in the tradition that gives it intellectual form. In the critical-theory account that shapes much contemporary equity discourse, privilege names a structural position within systems of power, and the work of justice is to expose and redistribute

that power (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Read as a description of structures, the account has real explanatory force. The error enters when the structural category is transferred, without remainder, onto the interior life of an individual, so that a person's standing in a group hierarchy is taken to settle how much their particular pain may weigh. Sowell (2023) calls the broader version of this move the pursuit of cosmic justice (the attempt to rectify categorical imbalances on a cosmic ledger) and warns that it generates injuries of its own, sacrificing actual persons to the symbolic rebalancing of the categories they are taken to represent. The discounting of an individual's wound because of the category to which the person has been assigned is exactly such an injury: it is collateral damage in a contest the sufferer never entered.

This is a category error, and the preceding sections explain exactly why. It treats incommensurable framework-relative significances as if they were commensurable quantities arrayed on a single scale (contra Berlin, 1990). It presumes epistemic access to the interior of the discounted person that no perspectival being possesses (contra Husserl, 1960, and 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 the scoreboard was built precisely to rank what cannot be ranked.

The Empirical Cost: Competitive Victimhood

There is, moreover, an empirical reason to be wary of comparative suffering, beyond the conceptual one. A substantial body of social-psychological research documents the phenomenon of competitive victimhood: the tendency of groups in conflict to strive to establish that their group has suffered more than the adversary group. 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. Groups locked in competitive victimhood are more motivated to assert their own suffering than to relinquish a painful past, which depresses intergroup forgiveness, hardens biased memory, and impedes reconciliation. The very act of ranking suffering, in other words, tends to entrench the antagonisms it claims to adjudicate.

Young and Sullivan (2016) extended this analysis in their review of the theoretical and empirical literature, showing that competitive victimhood operates not only in violent intergroup conflict but also across contexts of structural inequality and even within minority groups, organizing relations around the question of who has suffered most. The lesson for our purposes is sobering. A culture that trains its members to grade one another's wounds on a comparative scale is not building solidarity; it is, predictably, manufacturing the conditions for competitive victimhood, in which energy that might have gone toward mutual understanding is instead spent on litigating rank. The conceptual error of comparative suffering thus has a behavioral signature: conflict. If we wish to reduce that conflict, the research suggests, we will do better to abandon the ranking altogether than to keep refining the formula by which the ranking is computed.

The deeper psychology behind this pattern is illuminated by moral-foundations research. Haidt (2012) shows that moral judgment is largely intuitive, group-bound, and tribal: we bind ourselves into moral communities and then reason, after the fact, to defend our side against theirs. A discourse that distributes moral standing according to comparative suffering supplies

precisely the raw material such tribalism feeds on, converting the question “who is right?” into the more combustible question “who has suffered more?” And because, as Sowell (2023) observes, categorical rebalancing tends to overlook the concrete persons sacrificed in its name, the cost is paid twice: once by the individual whose pain is discounted to protect the ranking, and again by the wider community, whose capacity for solidarity erodes as the contest over rank intensifies.

A Christian Worldview: The Imago Dei and the Dignity of Every Story

The Image as the Ground of Irreducible Worth

The secular argument stands on its own, and I have tried to make it stand. But for readers who share the Christian worldview (and in continuity with my earlier work), there is a deeper anchor for everything said above, one that does not merely permit the appreciation of each person's story but commands it. That anchor is the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, the teaching that every human being is created in the image of God. “So, God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27, New International Version, 2011). Whatever the secular arguments establish about the incommensurability of frameworks, the doctrine of the image establishes something stronger: that the dignity of each person, and therefore the seriousness of each person's experience, rests on a foundation that no human comparison can raise or lower.

A word about method is owed before proceeding, in the spirit of the argument itself. To name the worldview from which one writes is not a lapse in rigor but a condition of honesty, since no account of suffering and dignity proceeds from nowhere; the appearance of a neutral, presuppositionless vantage is itself a worldview wearing a disguise (Entwistle, 2015; Slife et al., 2012). I therefore state plainly that the anchor I am about to describe is theological, offered to

those who can receive it and left as a transparent disclosure to those who cannot, rather than smuggled in under a claim of neutrality, the preceding pages have themselves called into question.

The contemporary theological literature on the image is unanimous on the point that matters here. Kilner (2015) argues at length that human dignity grounded in the image of God is not a quality that persons possess in degrees, earn through achievement, or forfeit through weakness; it is a status conferred by the Creator and therefore equal, inviolable, and prior to any human assessment of a person's worth. Kilner traces in detail how misunderstandings of the image (treatments that tie it to some measurable capacity such as rationality or productivity) have historically licensed the demeaning of those judged to fall short, from the enslaved to the disabled to women, and he insists that the biblical doctrine cuts in the opposite direction: because the image is a gift and not an attainment, it equalizes absolutely. We are equal, as one formulation has it, precisely because none of us is the maker of another; we have each received our life equally as a gift.

Middleton (2005), reading the image against its ancient Near Eastern background in *The Liberating Image*, sharpens the social and ethical edge. In the surrounding cultures, the title image of a god was reserved for the king, the singular royal mediator of divine rule. Genesis performs a quiet revolution by democratizing the image: it is not the king but humanity as such (every person) who bears the divine image and shares the royal vocation. Middleton draws from this an ethic of power rooted in compassion rather than domination, and the implication for our theme is direct. If every person, and not merely the eminent or the favored, bears the image, then there is no human scoreboard on which some images count for more and others for less. The

comparative ranking of dignity is not simply mistaken; it is a re-establishment of exactly the hierarchy that the doctrine of the image was given to overturn.

Recent theological reflection reinforces the point and extends it. Contemporary hermeneutical work on the image treats the *imago Dei* as the very ground of intrinsic human dignity and moral responsibility, a status that no social gradation can confer or remove (Mufanebadza & Masengwe, 2025). Plantinga (1995) draws the complementary implication from the doctrine of sin: because the fault line between good and evil runs through every human heart rather than between tidy classes of the righteous and the guilty, no scheme that sorts persons into rankable categories of merit or grievance can be telling the whole truth about them. And Wolterstorff (2008) binds dignity to justice itself, arguing that genuine peace (*shalom*, the flourishing of persons in right relationship) is not the rival of justice but its fullness, so that to honor each person's irreducible worth and to refuse the ranking of their wounds turns out to be the same act. The theological tradition thus converges with the secular argument from the other side: dignity that is equal and intrinsic cannot be parceled out in degrees, and a wound suffered by an image-bearer cannot be priced against another's.

Here, the kaleidoscope receives its theological completion. Throughout the secular argument, I spoke of the maker who sets the fixed fragments in each person's chamber. In the Christian frame, the maker is named. It is God who has fashioned each person's interior world, who has set within them the particular fragments of their history, and who declares that interior world to be his own image and therefore of immeasurable worth. To look through another's pattern and pronounce it slight is, on this account, to second-guess the workmanship of God, to tell the Maker that the image he has stamped on this person warrants less seriousness than the image he has stamped on another. The doctrine of the image forbids the comparison at its root,

not by denying that suffering differs in its outward shape, but by insisting that the sufferer is, in every case, one whose dignity God has already settled, and no human ranking can revise.

Lament: A Theology That Refuses to Minimize Pain

If the *imago Dei* grounds the equal worth of every sufferer, the biblical practice of lament models the refusal to minimize anyone's suffering, including one's own. A striking proportion of the Psalms are psalms of lament, in which the sufferer brings raw grief, protest, and even accusation directly into the presence of God without first having to prove that the suffering qualifies as serious enough to mention. Scripture does not instruct the grieving to compare their loss against the greater losses of others and to fall silent if they come up short. It gives them words for the full weight of their pain. The tradition of lament thus enacts, at the level of worship, precisely the appreciation without ranking for which this paper has argued.

Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Lament for a Son* (1987), written after the death of his twenty-five-year-old son in a climbing accident, is a modern classic of this refusal. Wolterstorff declines every consolation that would diminish the loss; he will not let the death be explained away, relativized, or folded prematurely into a larger good. Out of that refusal, he arrives at the conviction of a suffering God: a God who does not stand at an analytic distance from human pain, weighing and ranking it, but who enters into it, whose own heart is pierced by the fallenness of the world. "God is not only the God of the sufferers," Wolterstorff writes, "but the God who suffers." Here, the Christian worldview offers something the secular argument cannot reach on its own: not merely the negative claim that we ought not rank one another's pain, but the positive claim that at the center of reality there is a God who takes each person's suffering with infinite seriousness, having taken it, in the cross, into himself.

This theological vision converges remarkably with Levinas's account of the face, though it grounds the convergence differently. Where Levinas locates the source of infinite responsibility in the face of the other, the Christian tradition locates it in the God who made that face in his image and who himself bore a human face unto suffering. Miroslav Volf (1996), in *Exclusion and Embrace*, develops the implication for our relations across difference: the cross models a God who makes room within himself for the other, even the offending other, and who calls his people to the costly work of embrace rather than the cheap work of exclusion. To embrace, in Volf's sense, is to open one's own world to make space for the other's, which is the theological name for the appreciation I have been describing. And Jonathan Sacks (2002), writing from the Jewish tradition that the Christian one presupposes, names the corresponding virtue *the dignity of difference*: the recognition that the other is not a defective version of myself to be ranked beneath me, but a distinct bearer of the image whose difference is itself a gift to be honored rather than a deficit to be scored.

Application: How, Then, Should We Listen?

From Ranking to Appreciative Understanding

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 people enact, usually without noticing. The recommendation that follows from everything above can be stated in a sentence: replace the reflex of ranking with the discipline of appreciative understanding. But a sentence is not a practice, so let me say concretely what the discipline involves.

First, it involves 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 than 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 almost all the work, because it returns the experience to the framework that gives it weight rather than extracting it for grading. It is the practical form of accepting the story as it is, with no narrative adjustment imposed from outside. In the language of person-centered practice, it is the disciplined exercise of unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1957): meeting the account on its own terms before, and instead of, measuring it against any outside standard of how serious it ought to be.

Second, it involves choosing appreciation over empathy as the operative stance, in the precise senses distinguished above. You do not have to 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: understanding what drives the person, held within a stable commitment to their good. 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.

Third, it involves linguistic vigilance, because the comparative impulse lives in particular phrases and dies when those phrases are retired. The expressions cataloged 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 to decline to complete them, is a concrete spiritual and intellectual discipline. The same vigilance applies to the more sophisticated, credentialed forms of the same move, in which the language of privilege

is used to accomplish what the folk phrases accomplish more crudely: the discounting of a particular person's pain on the authority of a category applied from outside.

Fourth, and this is where the bounded character of the thesis must be kept firmly in view, appreciative understanding at the interpersonal level does not dissolve the work of justice at the institutional level. We can and must continue to make public judgments about structural harms, to weigh policies by their consequences, to attend with particular care to those whom social arrangements have disadvantaged. None of that requires us to grade the interior suffering of the individuals in front of us, and indeed, 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. The structural concern for the disadvantaged and the refusal to rank individual suffering are not rivals; the former is best served when the latter is honored, because both rest on the same conviction that persons are not to be reduced to their position on a scale.

What This Does Not Mean

Lest the proposal be heard as an invitation to relativism or to the abandonment of moral judgment, three 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, challenged, or grown beyond; appreciation is the beginning of a relationship, not its terminus. And it does not mean that the outward magnitude of harms is illusory or that we may not speak truthfully about grave injustices as graver than minor ones in the public square. What it means 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 not ours to demote, and that the habit of demoting it (whether through folk dismissal or through the

sophisticated machinery of comparative equity) rests on a measurement that cannot be made, wounds the person it judges, and, the evidence suggests, breeds the very conflict it pretends to resolve.

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. Taylor showed us that the self is constituted within moral frameworks and social imaginaries that give our own reality a density others cannot have for us. The phenomenologists showed us that the other's experience is genuinely given but 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 whose wounds mean what they mean within a story. Berlin showed us that the goods whose loss constitutes suffering are plural and often incommensurable, so that the demand for an objective ranking may have no answer to find. The distinction between appreciation and empathy, sharpened by social neuroscience, showed us that the fitting response to incommensurable suffering is anchored understanding rather than emotional fusion. And the critique of comparative equity, joined to the research on competitive victimhood, showed us that the scoreboard does not merely err in theory but harms in practice.

The Christian worldview, for those who hold it, completes the argument by naming the maker of the kaleidoscope and declaring the dignity of every person's interior world to be the very image of God: a dignity that no human comparison can raise or lower, and that the practice of lament refuses to minimize even in the depths of grief. Whether one arrives by the secular

road or the theological one, the destination is the same. We are asked 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. "Very few people," this inquiry began by observing, "can appreciate other lived experiences in the truest sense." The argument of this paper is that such appreciation, though it is difficult and runs against a deep reflex, is both possible and obligatory, and that learning it may be among the more important things a person, or a culture, can do.

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