Example of Foundation for Comparative Religion on the Issue of Suffering

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The major purpose of the present paper is to provide brief outline of Neville's comparative methodology and suggest psycho-neurophysiology as a comparative category on the issue of suffering. Although there is no general agreement about what the term comparative religion signifies as a religious methodology, I shall not polemicize here on the debate on comparative religion to avoid diffusing discussion. Rather, this paper will be limited to consideration of Neville's methodology and psycho-neurophysiology on the issue of suffering.

1. Comparative Religion

Among different modes of reactions to the encounter different religions, Neville addresses the question of comparative religion. Comparative religion is not a new methodology in religious study but it has been given scholarly considerable attention with the emphasis on oriental study since Müller and Tiele. However, it is important to bear in mind to distinguish Neville's from earlier comparisons. In three ways he criticizes the comparisons of nineteenth and early twentieth century thinkers and develops his own methodology.[1] First, according to Neville, the earlier methodologies were not neutral, but biased in favor of the comparers' own religion. They interpreted other religions through the lens of their own religion, specifically Christianity. Their religion was source-tradition to translate other religions into a comparative category. In this process, Christianity received preferential treatment and all other religions were distorted. Second, concerning what to compare, their comparative category was biased in favor of their own religion. They picked the comparative categories which were partial and preferential to Christianity. While their categories were appropriate to Christianity, other religions did not fit and were incongruous in the comparative progress. Neville calls early comparison "imperialism" because all other religions were certainly subordinated to Christianity in their comparison. Finally, by limiting narrowly their aims within the simple enumeration of religions some earlier comparers did not attempt to offer any framework for analyzing the full range of the relationship among religions.

In contrast to the early comparative methodology, there are two main pursuits

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[1] Robert Cummings Neville and Wesley J. Wildman, "On Comparing Religious Ideas" in *Ultimate Realities: A Volume in the Comparing Religious Ideas Project,* ed. Robert Cummings Neville, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 14.

of the methodology in Neville. The first pursuit is to identify a religion with its deeper intrinsic rhetoric and narrative. Prior to comparison, he emphasizes the identification of a religious idea at a specific level because comparison between deeply reflected religious ideas can produce meaningful results. According to him, comparison makes one recognize not only others but also oneself because it clarifies things compared as well as things comparing.[2] To identify a religion signifies to speak in its own voices, its own rhetoric, its own intellectual and practical styles.[3] It is, however, not the same as intrinsic inquiry within a religious tradition. Comparison can challenge religions to rediscover their fossilized heritages and ignored ideas and reinterpret neglected conception in the intrinsic traditions and vitalize them. By expressing the ignored intrinsic value of a religion with its own voice, a religion can recognize the identification of itself in a deeper way. Furthermore, he insists that comparison manifests complex perspectives of religions that are based on different texts and motifs because comparers can recognize the complexity of religious phenomena.[4] Comparison should not generalize and simplify the complexity of a religion but rather conserve and recognize its complexity. The generalization of a religion's complexity disparages the worth of comparison.

The other pursuit is to produce true and important knowledge.[5] Religiously plural societies require mutual understanding of differences and similarities among religions. This mutual understanding motivates religions that are forced to interact with each other by social conditions to encounter one another actively and positively. Comparison signifies differences and similarities among religions, and whether they find differences or similarities, mutual understandings cause cultural and personal change in a social context.

2. Process of Comparison

Neville insists that there is vulnerably common ground among religions which make religious comparison available and that ground becomes distinct through comparison. I think that Neville's ground is not the same as Hick's because his ground signifies neither substantial entity nor ideas to be shared among religions but formal and normative ground to bring aspects of religions.[6] More to the immediate point, Neville's

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[2] Ibid., p. 3
[3] Ibid., p. xxii.
[4] Wesley J. Wildman and Robert Cummings Neville. "On the Nature of Religion" in *Religious Truth: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project*, ed. Robert Cummings Neville, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 205.
[5] Robert Cummings Neville and Wesley J. Wildman, "On Comparing Religious Ideas," p. 187.
[6] Ibid., p. 197.

'formal ground' is to bring religious respect to the subject matter.

According to Neville, religions have a common aspect to the comparative category.[7] Thus common aspect formally guarantees comparison. This common ground is the very foundation of his comparison. He founds comparison on this common ground as much as religions' common aspect can be neutrally compared.[8]

The process of comparison is as follows. First, a comparative category should not exclude any aspect of religions. The comparative category which is based on common ground among religions should be general enough to encompass religions' particular aspects so that it should be illuminated from different aspects of religions. Accordingly, this category is so vague and flexible that religions' particular aspects can meet. However, this flexibility does not mean that the comparative category is unformed and shapeless, because it is not vague but vulnerable to be corrected and specified.[9]
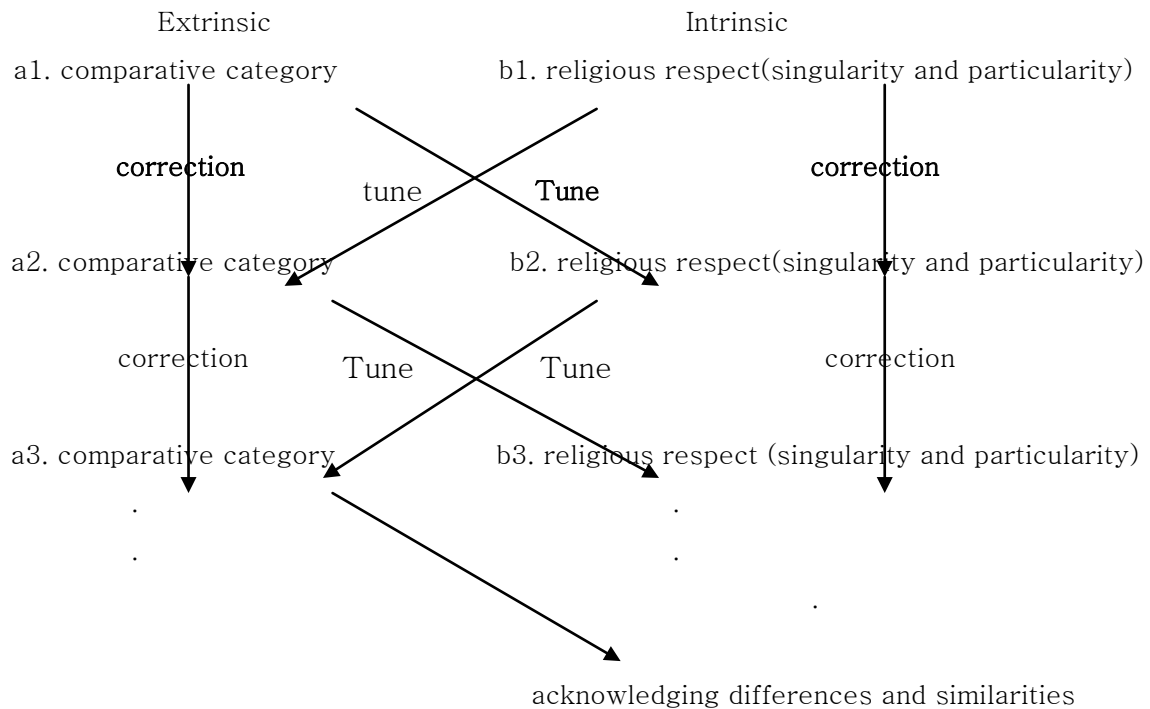
Second, this comparative category should be vulnerable in two ways: intrinsically and extrinsically. Concerning a religion's identification, intrinsic vulnerability signifies that a comparative category is specifically corrected within a religion's texts, motives, and contexts. A religious aspect intrinsically speculates, specifies, and interprets a comparative category on its own terms. Through this intrinsic reflection of religious aspect, a comparative category becomes more singular and particular and a religion can identify itself through a specified comparative category in a deeper way. Singular and particular aspect of a religion causes a religion of distinctive identification of itself, which does not lose its identity in comparison. Extrinsic vulnerability denotes, on the other hand, that a respect of a religion which is intrinsically reflected can tune a comparative category. A comparative category is not separated from intrinsic respect of a religion but it mutually tunes the other as far as a comparative category does not exclude any religion to be compared and a respect of religion is not generalized in terms of singularity and particularity.

This intrinsic and extrinsic vulnerability are dialectically interrelated. Intrinsic speculation corrects a past respect of a religion and a corrected respect tunes a past comparative category. A tuned comparative category reversely adjusts an intrinsic speculation of respect of a religion to be compared. This process can be seen in the following diagram:

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[7] Wesley J. Wildman and Robert Cummings Neville, "Our Approach to Comparison," p. 213.
[8] Peter Burger supports his premise. According to him, all communication is based on a philosophical principle, the natural reason. The natural reason is communal among participants of communication and the basement of comparison. Peter Burger, "Foreword" in *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
[9] Robert Cummings Neville and Wesley J. Wildman, "On Comparing Religious Ideas," p. 10.

Extrinsic   Intrinsic

a1. comparative category   b1. religious respect(singularity and particularity)

correction   tune   **Tune**   **correction**

a2. comparative category   b2. religious respect(singularity and particularity)

correction   Tune   Tune   correction

a3. comparative category   b3. religious respect (singularity and particularity)

.   .

.   .

                                      .

acknowledging differences and similarities

4. Neville's Religious Comparison as a Mode of Interreligious Dialogue

By proposing plausible explanations for comparative religion, Neville attempts to overcome fanaticism, relativism and syncreticism. First, his religious comparison is differentiated from fanaticism because his comparative category is not biased toward any specific religious idea but conserves a neutral point of view.[10] Second, the purpose of Neville's comparison is not merely to describe and enumerate narratives of different religions' rhetoric. His religious comparison does not merely assemble accurate representations of the things to be compared, but represents how religious ideas relate to one another and their similarities and differences.[11] Accordingly, his mode is differentiated from relativists' mere enumeration of religious ideas. Third, he does not attempt to syncretize religions as syncreticists do, but rather specifies each religious idea within a religious text, motif, and cultural context. I think that his comparative study is one of the interreligious modes. There are two crucial conditions for interreligious dialogue: respect for another religious tradition and communication. Neville's comparative study is, on the one hand, based on two convictions: religions can

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[10] Ibid., p. 14.
[11] Ibid., p. 190.

share a basic ground and comparativists can neutrally and properly analyze it. Without respect for other religions, one would not agree with 'basic ground' and comparativists would be biased toward a particular religion. On the other hand, Neville does not attempt to promulgate one-sided ideas of a religion or impose comparisons. Rather his method of comparison aims to discover true and important knowledge through mutual dialogue among religions.

The goal of Neville's pursuit of comparison is not different from Cobb's in the sense of the conceptual framework of dialectics of emphasis on self-uniqueness and mutual understanding. Both Neville and Cobb suggest that interreligious dialogue should conserve and recognize unique particularities of its participants. In Cobb, interreligious dialogue starts from each religion's particularities and uniqueness, which identify each religious tradition. Like Cobb, Neville grounds the dialogue on the intrinsic rhetoric of a religion and its internal relation within the religious tradition. Particularities of religions motivate and vitalize the dialogue. Both methodologies seek mutual understanding and transformation. The dialogue becomes more valuable when it leads each religion to transform itself by identifying its uniqueness and learning from the other.

5. Comparative Category

Anti-representationalistic critique of the linguistic substantialism makes us aware of subtlety and complicatedness of comparative category. Rorty maintains an attack on the idea of language as a mirror of the world in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.[12] Fully recognizing the Wittgensteinian notion of language as a tool, rather than as a mirror, he insists that we have to understand language not only as not the externalizing of inner representations but as not a representation at all. According to him, we should free ourselves from the notion that language can represent the real and slough off philosophical conviction that language can represent the truth because of contingency between language and the world.[13] Even in the case of speaking the same word, we cannot guarantee that the languages refer to the same object.

Rorty's critique challenges the generalized and simplified comparative category. If the languages did not refer to the same object, the comparison would be implausible between two linguistic frameworks and systems. In the case that two languages are used in different ways and they refer to different objects and meanings, they cannot be

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[12] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979)

[13] Richard Rorty, *Consequence of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 162-3.

plausibly and intellectually compared.[14]

Language of A   Language of B

Suffering →

                                    ← Suffering

The World
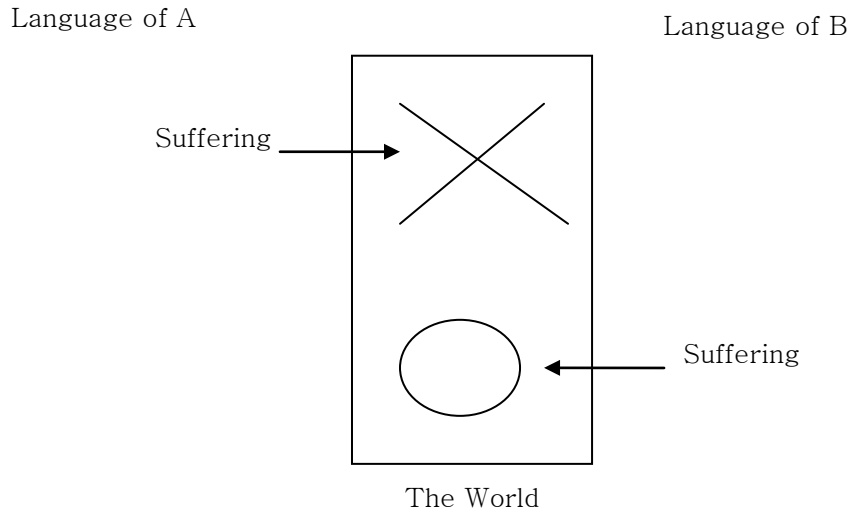
Languages of 'suffering' could refer to different objects ('O' or 'X'). For those who adopt 'suffering O talk', it is an a priori truth that suffering denotes O because, for them, there exist such things as sufferings from suffering refers to O. What makes this an a priori truth is just the fact that they do adopt 'suffering O talk'. However, if there are those who do not adopt 'suffering O talk', but 'suffering X talk', this is not an a priori truth because for those who adopt 'suffering X talk', suffering does not denote O, but X. Whether suffering denotes O or X depends upon the categories, rules, linguistic practices, and procedures of each tradition.

Hence, we need to neutrally establish the least yardstick of the category to mediate references of two linguistic systems. I suggest 'a mediating language' between two languages which can fulfill two conditions (neutrality and normative boundary).[15] A mediating language which is based on either religion is not able to identify the category's boundary because it is biased in favor of either any of religions. Rather, the boundary should be neutrally identified and recognized without bias. This condition causes the category to be identified by the neutral language.

In addition to neutrality, the mediating language must meet another significant condition in the case of comparing the experience of suffering: comprehension of the concrete human experiences of suffering. The comparison frames uniqueness and

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[14] See. Alvin Plantinga, "How to be an Anti-Realist" in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* (1982), p. 66.
[15] Rorty also does not reject the possibility of communication but focuses on probable solidarity of languages referring truths.

similarities of coherent, logical, and the necessary system of general religious ideas in human suffering. However, Whitehead's critique of abstraction implies that the language of comparative categories should be inclusive of the concrete experience of suffering.

According to Whitehead, general ideas should not exclude varied complexities of the full concrete reality of things.[16] He does not overlook the role of abstraction, but points out that the initiation of philosophy is neither the external principle nor abstraction, but the concreteness of the thing. Whitehead states, "I hold that philosophy is the critique of abstractions"[17] and "the true method of discovery … starts from the ground of particular observation."[18] Hence, the Whiteheadian philosopher Emmet insists,

> Philosophy therefore imposes all sorts difficulties on itself by starting from abstract universals, and then asking how concrete fact can be built up of them … Instead the problem should be stated as: How can concrete fact exhibit characteristics, which can be considered as abstract from itself […].[19]

I believe that Whitehead's critique of abstraction is not only effective within the finite province of his philosophical scheme, but also should be applied to the language of comparative category. The language of the comparative category should be inductive to human concrete experiences of suffering. Although the general ideas are compared at the abstract level, their origin in concrete experience should not be disregarded because prior to the conceptualization and abstraction of suffering, suffering is definitely a concrete human experience. Accordingly, the categorical mediating language should be able to include the concrete human experience of suffering. If we deal with human suffering in religiously abstracted ideas and consider ideas as a complete fact of suffering, the comparison would commit "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness"[20] and the comparison would not represent the complexity of a human phenomenon, in this case, suffering.

In conclusion, the comparison needs a neutral language that has both physical and mental observations of a concrete human experience of suffering.

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[16] Thomas E. Hosinski, *Stubborn Fact and Creative Advance: An Introduction to the Metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993), p. 5.
[17] A. N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, (New York: Free Press, 1967), p. 126.
[18] A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality,* ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: A Division of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. and London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1978), p. 5.
[19] Emmet, *Whitehead's Philosophy of Organism* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1966), p. 75.
[20] Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 7; *Science and the Modern World*, p. 75.

6. Medical Science as a Language of Comparative Category and Its Limitation

I believe that medical science can play the role of a mediating language because in spite of its limitations, medical science is one of the most persuasive sciences which is able to fulfill two conditions of neutral language (neutrality and normative boundary) and to deal with human concrete experiences of suffering.

Medicine can be roughly defined as "the art or science of restoring or preserving health, and may involve drugs, surgical operations, or other types of intervention."[21] Modern medicine in particular systematically focuses on the factors impeding the health condition like disease, illness, and psychophysical-disability, and deals with them in investigative, laboratory, or clinical works. Since the early twentieth century, it has drawn on such sources as chemistry, physics, electronics, nuclear physics, and genetics. Furthermore, it has expanded its scope into the psychosocial environment relating human health condition since Engel's 'biopsychosocial' model of medicine.[22]

I believe that medical science is at least neutral toward any religious tradition. Although medical science is interrelated with various disciplines and it expands its scope variously, its most distinctive orientation is that it looks for the restoration and preservation of health. Physics, chemistry, electronics, and engineering play a significant role in medical science, but medicine uses them as a mere method for restoring and preserving health. Likewise, there is a great gap between medicine's orientation and that of the compared religions in the sense that their essential pursuits are not the same. Religious traditions partly comprehend the aim of medicine, e.g., petitioner prayer for health, but their essential orientations differ from that of medicine. Medicine is not preferential to any religion and, hence, can be neutrally applied to both religions as a mediating language.

On the one hand, I think that the normative boundary of suffering can be most clearly illuminated by medical science. Although it is applied to patients in various ways, medical science draws an obvious line between health and suffering, and identifies health and its impediments. In most cases, medical science's definition and its identification of experiencing suffering is recognized as essential. Hence, medical science plays the important role of identifying the normative boundary of suffering.

On the other hand, medical science deals with the concrete experience of

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[21] Kenneth F. Schaffner and H. Tristram Engelhardt, "Philosophy of Medicine" in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* Vol 6., ed. Edward Craig, (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 265.

[22] George Engel, "The Need for a New Medical Model: A Challenge for Biomedicine" in *Science* 196 (1977), p. 36.

patients. It has a very intimate relation with patients and their suffering. In order to release them from suffering and help them to restore and preserve health, scientists investigate the pathological causes of suffering, concrete symptoms, experiences of patients, and the neurophysiological and psychological mechanisms of suffering experiences in the body. Medicine is intimately concerned with the concrete experiences of patients. It is one of the most indispensable disciplines that analyzes and schematizes the concreteness of suffering experience. It does not imply that medicine has no abstract theory, but its foundation and application is based on concrete experience.

However, we need to remark that medical science has two limitations: a limitation in its neutrality and in its presentation of concrete human suffering. Medical science's neutrality is not absolute, nor does it represent the whole concreteness of human suffering.

Although medical science does not have preferentiality to any religion, it is based on certain scientific worldviews. The concept of medical science's absolute neutrality has been challenged since 1970. According to Currer and Stacey, medical science does not independently exist as it is, but correlates to other factors such as value systems and social structures conceptualizing health and illness.[23] Unshuld insists that the conceptualization of medical science and the experience of illness are molded by social structures and health and is also conceptualized within the social frame.[24] Kleinman, Fabrega, and Janzen support this notion and suggest that medical science has to be understood within the context of a total cultural scene in which this kind of medicine is recognized and practiced.[25]

As for the second limitation, we have to recognize that medical science does not represent the whole concrete reality of human suffering because there are many other available means of revealing human suffering, such as poetry and painting.[26] Medical science is one of the hermeneutical lenses with which to observe the concreteness of human suffering. Because it is based on a certain scientific worldview
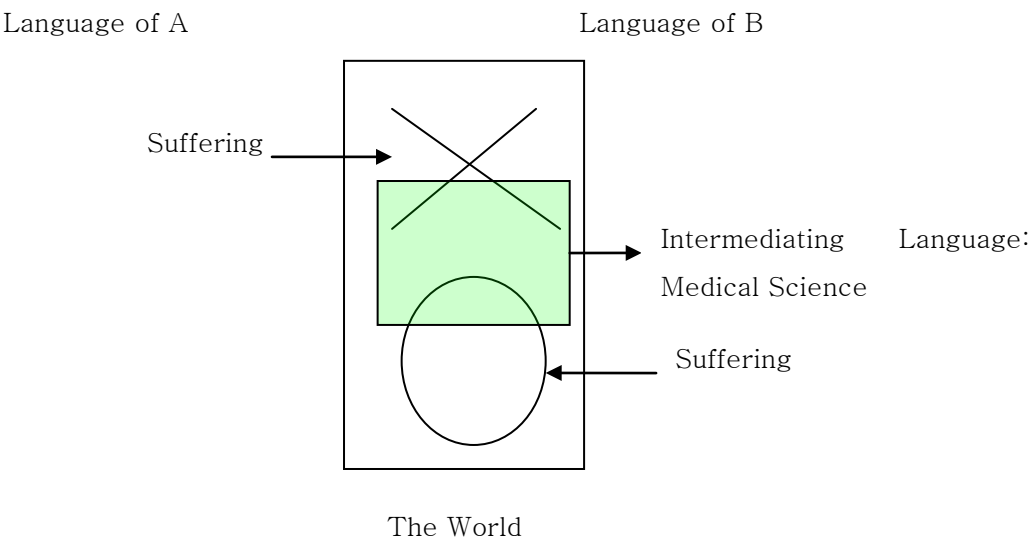
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[23] Caroline Currer and Meg Stacey, "Conclusion" in *Concepts of Health, Illness and Disease: A Comparative Respective.* ed. Caroline Curer and Margaret Stacey, (Oxford: Berg Publishers Limited,1986), p. 295.

[24] Paul Unshuld, "The Conceptual Determination (Überformung) of Individual and Collective Experiences of Illness" in *Concepts of Health, Illness and Disease: A Comparative Respective,* p. 53.

[25] A. Kleinmann, "Toward a Comparative Study of Medical Systems: An Integrated Approach to the Study of the Relationship of Medicine to Cultures" in *Science, Medicine and Man* 1 (1973), p. 65.; H. Fabrega, "The Function of Medical-Care Systems: A Logical Analysis" in *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 20 (1976), p. 118.; J. M. Janzen "The Comparative Study of Medical System as Changing Social Systems" in *Social Science and Medicine* 12 (1978), p. 129.

[26] Whitehead insists that poetry is very important to provide "more concrete intuitions of the universe." See Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World,* p. 126.

it is delimited within the worldview.

Language of A   Language of B

Suffering ⟶

Intermediating   Language:
Medical Science

Suffering

The World

In spite of these limitations, I believe that medical science still offers one of the most persuasive ways to illuminate the concreteness of human suffering. It is not biased toward any specific religion and it has a comprehensively intimate relation with the concrete experience of suffering. Hence I think that medical science provides us one of the most persuasive and probable comparative category.

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Abstract

The major purpose of the present paper is to provide brief outline of Neville's comparative methodology and suggest psycho-neurophysiology as a comparative category on the issue of suffering. According to Neville, religions have a common aspect and this common ground is the very foundation of his comparison. In terms of the comparison of suffering experience in different religions, it needs a neutral language that has both physical and mental observations of a concrete human experience of suffering. Neutral language should mediate different linguistic understanding of suffering. I suggest that medical science can offer one of the most persuasive ways to illuminate the concreteness of human suffering. It is not biased toward any specific religion and it has a comprehensively intimate relation with the concrete experience of suffering.