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Author(s)	Malik, Luke
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The Ontology of Suffering: Grammar, Metaphor, Metonymy

Luke Malik

Abstract

Contemporary sentientist ethics typically relies on a reductive ontology, restricting the capacity to suffer—and thereby the boundaries of moral compassion—to biological entities with specific neurophysiological structures. This article challenges this biological chauvinism by advocating for a maximalist thesis: all things suffer. Reversing the standard ontological inquiry from “what is suffering?” to “what suffers?”, this article grounds its argument in the etymology and expansive grammar of the English verb to suffer. To dismantle the anticipated reductionist objection that the suffering of non-biological entities is merely a figure of speech, the article evaluates the concept of inanimate suffering across several different semantic and pragmatic models—traditional, positivist, Gricean, and interactionist—as well as Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). This analysis demonstrates that the reductionist position cannot be sustained on linguistic or cognitive grounds. Ultimately, the reductionist’s error is diagnosed as a *pars pro toto* metonymic fallacy—mistaking the highly salient prototype of biological nociception for the broader ontological category of structural degradation and burden-bearing. By correcting this fallacy, the concept of suffering is freed from its biological confines, radicalizing our understanding of alterity and establishing a philosophical framework for limitless compassion extending to ravaged ecosystems, collapsing economies, and maltreated robots.

Keywords: Suffering, Compassion, Grammar, Metaphor, Metonymy

Introduction

We start with two ontological questions: (a) what is suffering? and (b) what suffers? These questions can be answered in different ways. We can answer (a) first and then (b), or we can go in the other direction. If we travel down the first road, we are likely to tread a familiar path. We are, that is, likely to:

1. Identify suffering with our personal, subjective experiences;
2. Move from our personal, subjective experiences to think of suffering as qualitative;
3. Associate our qualitative suffering with certain neurophysiological structures;
4. Restrict the answer to the second question to “only those things that have the right neurophysiological structures suffer.”

Typically, humans, most mammals, some birds, and a rarefied group of other animals are thought to have this capacity to suffer. This is nowhere better exemplified than in the metric-driven ethics of philosophers like Peter Singer (1975, 1993; Matheny 2006) and Tom Regan (1986, 2003), who rely on strict biological criteria to evaluate moral status. However, this reduction imposes severe psychological restrictions: it shrinks the boundaries of what we can feel or show compassion for. We can, for example, feel compassion for dogs, but not for rainforests. Dogs have the requisite neurophysiological structures; rainforests do not. Therefore, dogs suffer, but rainforests do not.

However, we can consider these questions in the opposite direction—for example, through the medium of language. When we begin with *what suffers*, the answers to our questions are very different, and the scope of compassion becomes maximal. Based on everyday English, as we shall see, *everything* suffers. This linguistic reality suggests several things about suffering, providing negative answers to our first path: suffering is not strictly reducible to neurophysiological structures, nor to any psychological features, nor even to the qualitative features we typically associate with it. Just as importantly, if anything can suffer, it becomes possible to feel compassion for everything—dolls, clams, and rainforests alike. That is a radically different answer to the one above, and it leads to profoundly different outcomes.

There are, then, two ways to answer our initial ontological questions, with each process leading to a distinct outcome. Answering the questions from (a) to (b) is restrictive and reductive: suffering is reduced to a set of neurobiological conditions, and only a rarefied set of objects can become the subjects of our compassion. Traveling in the other direction is expansive and maximalist: everything suffers, and there is no limit to the compassion we can feel and show.

I advocate for a maximalist perspective on suffering. To ground this argument, I first introduce everyday English sentences that demonstrate the concept's extensive, non-biological scope. I then address the reductivist counterargument that 'suffering' in these broader contexts is merely metaphorical. By employing traditional, positivist, Gricean, interactionist, and cognitivist frameworks—including Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT)—I demonstrate why this dismissal fails. Next, I diagnose the reductivist's underlying conceptual error precisely as a *pars pro toto* metonymic fallacy. Finally, drawing upon an etymologically grounded definition of compassion, I suggest that a correspondingly broad notion of alterity and compassion is the necessary and logical outcome of the maximalist view of suffering.

“To suffer” in the English Language

In the English language, the verb “suffer” can be used both intransitively and transitively. In the first case, almost any type of subject will do. The subjects undergoing the suffering can be:

- Human
- Animal
- Physical
- Abstract

Thus, people and animals, but also buildings, bones, reputations, and economies, typically suffer. The following sentences demonstrate this flexibility:

- (1) She suffers from endometriosis. (human)
- (2) The dog suffers from separation anxiety. (animal)
- (3) The building suffered from years of neglect. (physical)
- (4) The economy suffered under his regime. (abstract)

In its transitive sense, "suffer" pairs this expansive range of subjects with various types of direct objects. Persons, for instance, can suffer qualitative, affective, and intentional states, as well as physical and abstract events. Consider the following sentences:

- (5) She suffers pain. (qualitative)
- (6) He suffers moments of anxiety. (affective)
- (7) He suffered terrible hallucinations on his acid trip. (intentional)
- (8) He suffered a heart attack. (physical)
- (9) She suffered a heartbreak. (abstract)

Non-human animals may also suffer in these various ways, as the next set of sentences illustrates:

- (10) The dog suffers pain in her hind legs. (animal, qualitative)
- (11) The dog suffers separation anxiety. (animal, affective)
- (12) Sleep-deprived cats suffered hallucinations in a famous experiment. (animal, intentional)
- (13) The racehorse suffered a broken bone at Aintree. (animal, physical)
- (14) Within his troop, the ape suffered a loss in status. (animal, abstract)

Crucially, this transitive usage extends seamlessly into the non-biological realm. Physical and abstract subjects can also suffer several types of physical and abstract ailments or events:

- (15) The bone suffered a break.
- (16) The building suffered neglect.
- (17) The city suffered an outbreak of measles.
- (18) The economy suffered a banking crisis.

Moreover, there is a sense of “to suffer” which extends to tolerating an other or something other, exemplified in sentences like the following:

- (19) She suffers him
- (20) The dog suffers the cat

(21) We suffered their poor performance

The etymological root of suffering ties these senses of suffering together, for the etymology of the verb “to suffer” involves the carrying of a weight: its Latin root *sufferre* (*sub*-, ‘under’, and *ferre*, ‘to bear’) classically denoted the act of supporting a physical load (Lewis and Short 1879; OED 2023). That weight or load may be something that harms or simply the burdensome presence of something or someone.

So, it appears that anything can suffer, and a vast array of things can be suffered. But if this is true—if the linguistic boundaries of suffering are truly this expansive—then the limits of suffering are borderless, and the possibilities for compassion are endless.

The Metaphorical Objection

At this point, the reductivist—or the defender of the pathocentric view—will likely raise an objection they take to be fundamental: linguistic flexibility does not entail ontological reality. While it is true that the syntax of the English language allows us to assign “suffer” to almost any subject, the reductivist will argue that doing so in the case of inanimate objects or abstract concepts is strictly metaphorical. Under this view, we must be careful not to confuse grammatical permissibility with metaphysical fact.

The objection rests on the premise that true suffering requires subjectivity—a localized point of consciousness capable of experiencing a qualitative, affective state. When we say that a dog or a human suffers, we are describing a literal phenomenological reality grounded in a neurophysiological structure. There is a “what it is like” to be the dog experiencing separation anxiety. Conversely, when we say that a building “suffers” neglect or an economy “suffers” a downturn, there is no conscious subject enduring the burden. The building does not feel its structural degradation; the economy does not experience the anxiety of a banking crisis.

Therefore, the reductivist argues, applying the verb “to suffer” to non-biological entities is merely a semantic projection. It is an anthropomorphic figure of speech where we borrow the emotional weight of biological pain to describe structural damage, functional failure, or abstract decline. For the reductivist, the Latin root *sufferre*—to bear a weight—might be etymologically shared, but the *nature* of the weight is ontologically entirely different. A bridge bears a literal physical load, but it does not bear a psychological or moral burden. To use the English language to bridge this gap, the objection concludes, is to build an ontology out of a metaphor, leading to an unwarranted expansion of ontological boundaries.

The Response

To dismiss a usage as merely metaphorical is to assume a theory of metaphor. To properly understand—and evaluate—the reductivist’s objection, we must therefore make this underlying theory explicit. The trouble for the objector is that there are numerous theories of metaphor, and they are generally at odds with their objection. I will focus on several theories pertinent to this discussion: the traditional theory, the positivist theory, Gricean theory, interactionism, and contemporary cognitivist theories including conceptual metaphor theory (CMT).

The Traditional Theory

The classical (or Aristotelian) theory of metaphor treats terms as names or labels. A metaphorical use involves the transference of a label from its ordinary use to an extraordinary use by way of similarity (Vico 1996). Thus, to refer to Richard as a “lion” is to use the term in an extraordinary way, grounded in the similarity that Richard is as brave as a lion. In schematic terms, “*x* is as *P* as *y*” where *P* is the ground of the similarity, and *y* is the primary bearer of it. With this in mind, let us apply this theory to the verb “to suffer” and its related forms.

According to our reductivist objector, the expressions in question have an ordinary use: they apply to biological entities undergoing a particular kind of qualitative experience. These terms are then supposedly applied in an extraordinary manner to entities that are neither biological nor capable of that experience. Under the traditional theory, this transference must be grounded by a similarity between the suffering of the

biological entity and the non-biological entity (e.g., a bone, a building, or a rainforest). What is this similarity? What is the ground of it and what is the primary literal anchor for it?

Answering the aforementioned questions brings trouble. It is surely impossible that the similarity is some aspect of the qualitative aspect of the experience of suffering itself—the *qualia* of it all. It is more likely that the similarity involves a shared appearance—for example, the appearance of distress. But for the reductivist, assigning the "appearance of distress" to a building is just trading one metaphor for another. Perhaps, then, the similarity is the appearance of being harmed or degraded. But here, the shared similarity is inescapably *physical*. And this creates a fatal problem for the reductivist: if the ground of the similarity is physical, the metaphor is progressing in the wrong direction. If the transference of the terms in question is grounded on physical appearance, then the *physical* meaning is the primary, literal anchor.

Consequently, applying "suffering" to a physical structure is not a metaphorical extension of biological pain. Rather, applying "suffering" to a qualitative, psychological state is a metaphorical extension of the physical world. What makes matters worse for the reductivist is that this reversal is perfectly corroborated by the etymology of the verb "to suffer"—to bear a weight—for weight bearing is, primarily and originally, *physical* in meaning.

The Positivist Theory

Because the logical positivists rarely formalized a standalone theory of metaphor, their view must be reconstructed from their broader semantic theories and general hostility toward non-literal language. At its core, the positivist approach is non-cognitivist: it denies that metaphorical utterances express propositional content (Carnap 1935; Hempel 1965). To understand this, we must distinguish between an expression's *representative* function and its *expressive* (or emotive) function (Ayer 1936; Carnap 1935; Stevenson 1937). Using a term for its representative function adds to the propositional content of an utterance; for example, using "clouds" in the sentence "I see rain clouds" represents a literal meteorological phenomenon and establishes clear truth conditions. In contrast, using a term for its expressive function serves only to articulate an affective state or to influence the behaviour of others—much like C.L. Stevenson's analysis of the emotive meaning of "old maid" (Stevenson 1937). While the literal sentence "He is a prince" has representative propositional content, uttering it in a metaphorical context strips it of this function. The word "prince" is no longer representing literal royalty, and the utterance itself lacks truth conditions. This does not mean it lacks *all* meaning; it retains an expressive meaning, carrying a historical tendency to express an affective state (such as admiration) and to motivate others to feel or act in certain ways (Stevenson 1937). Let us now apply this non-cognitivist framework to the sentences our objector dismisses as metaphorical.

Applying this positivist architecture to an utterance like "Your tibia suffered a fracture in four places" creates insurmountable problems for the reductivist. First, it is absurd to assert that such a sentence lacks propositional content; it is a clear, verifiable claim about the physical world, and no contemporary scholar would seriously suggest otherwise. Second, in most contexts, it is highly unlikely that this utterance primarily carries expressive meaning aimed at motivating feelings or behaviours—it is typically delivered as a cold statement of clinical fact. Finally, recalling the etymology of "to suffer" (to bear a weight), the representative function of the verb is actually most literally engaged when applied to a physical subject bearing a physical load. If any usage is metaphorical under the positivist framework, it is the *psychological* utterance "he suffered a pain." As a consequence, it is this utterance that would lack propositional content—the exact opposite of the reductivist's claim. It is highly doubtful, therefore, that the objector would want to rely on such a self-defeating theory.

The Gricean Alternative

The classic cognitivist alternative to the positivist's non-cognitivist theory of metaphor is Gricean pragmatics. This theory assumes that an utterance can have a speaker meaning that differs entirely from the literal meaning of the sentence used to make it. For example, the literal sentence meaning of "you are the cream in my coffee" is different from its utterance meaning; according to Paul Grice (1975), in a metaphorical context, the speaker is actually communicating "you are my pride and joy." In such a context, we move from the sentence meaning to the utterance meaning by using the former to "work out" the latter. This "working out" is a necessary condition for this type of utterance meaning, because metaphorical meaning is a kind of conversational implicature—typically arising when a speaker deliberately flouts the maxim of quality

(truthfulness) (Grice 1975). This derivation must take the form of a logical argument. The philosopher A.P. Martinich (1984) exemplifies this process using the following argumentative form: (a) My love is a rose, (b) Roses are sweet-smelling, beautiful, etc.; (c) My love is sweet-smelling, beautiful, etc. Thus, from the literal sentence in (a), the implicature in (c) is derived. The implicit assumption of similarity licenses this move; as a consequence, we can say “My love is like a rose in respect of smelling sweet, being beautiful, etc.” Although it is extremely difficult to understand exactly how this formal method gets us from “you are the cream in my coffee” to “you are my pride and joy” without relying on massive associative leaps and ignoring the logical problem of deriving a category mistake from a category mistake, let us assume for the sake of argument that the Gricean method is correct. We can now apply it to the types of utterances that the reductivist claims are metaphorical.

The reductivist tells us that the utterance of a sentence such as “I am suffering” is literal, while the utterance of a sentence such as “The building is suffering” is metaphorical. From this supposedly metaphorical utterance, a conversational implicature is derived. We can assume that something like the following deductive process is involved: (a) The building is suffering. (b) Suffering implies harm. (c) The building is being harmed. Again, there is an assumption of similarity between the building and a biological entity capable of being harmed, allowing us to infer the simile: “the building is like a biological entity that is suffering in respect to being harmed.” But, just as we saw with the Traditional Theory, this similarity cannot be qualitative. The quality of biological suffering (the subjective sensation of pain) is a psychological state, but the harm itself cannot be that. The respect in which harm is shared by the “I” and the building is strictly physical. This tells us that the utterance “I am suffering” is either a literal statement of physical fact, or *it* is actually a metaphor. If we rely on the physical reality of harm, the correct Gricean analysis should be as follows: (a) I am suffering. (b) Suffering is synonymous with physical harm or bearing a load. (c) I am being harmed or bearing a load. Crucially, all biological suffering (including pain, when reduced to nociception) can be analysed in exactly this way. There are no category mistakes in this deductive process, even if the supposedly metaphorical utterance is referring to qualitative pain, because—as reductivists themselves must accept to maintain their worldview—biological pain reduces to nociception (the physical detection of structural harm). Utterances about economies and the like can be treated in the same manner, by a nominalist reduction to particulars and concrete processes. Therefore, the Gricean model is not entirely rejected here; rather, it reveals that the reductivist is applying it completely back-to-front.

Interactionism

It is unlikely that reductivists will find the interactionist theory of metaphor appealing, for the theory does not draw strict boundaries between the literal and the metaphorical—a single expression can simultaneously be both. The classic statement of the interactionist theory originates with I. A. Richards, who introduces it in the following way: “when we use a metaphor we have two thoughts of different things active together and supported by a single word, or phrase, whose meaning is a resultant of their interaction” (Richards 1936, 93). Thus, an expression such as “wooden leg” is both literal and metaphorical—what makes it metaphorical is that it involves the thoughts of two different things (the biological limb and the inanimate material) active together in a single expression. Even more interesting is the way metaphor and its construction can both depend on *and* generate experience. For example, the metaphorical expression “giddy brink” is grounded on a human experience: that of feeling vertigo in high places. On the other hand, consider the expression “sharp pain.” Once we learn this metaphorical expression, we have no trouble experiencing pains as distinctly sharp or dull. In these cases, though we may abstract away from the metaphor, our world and the ideas associated with the metaphorical expressions are forever changed. Experience and conceptualization are inextricably linked through language for the interactionist. Let us apply this framework to the reductivist’s claims.

The reductivist has claimed that expressions like a “suffering building,” “suffering bone,” “suffering economy,” and “suffering population” are merely metaphorical. On the interactionist account, however, this poses no threat to the maximalist thesis. These expressions may be metaphorical, but under Richards’ framework, this does not mean they cannot also be literal. The metaphorical meaning of an expression such as a “suffering economy” is the result of two different ideas—perhaps an experientially grounded biological idea and an abstract structural idea—interacting to create a new meaning, with each modifying the meaning of the other. Furthermore, interactionism tells us that this new meaning actively structures our reality, allowing us to genuinely experience and conceptualize an economy *as* a suffering thing. We are no longer merely thinking of it *as if* it were suffering, nor are we simply thinking of it as being *like* something that suffers. Through the interaction of these concepts, its suffering becomes a literal, conceptual reality. If the

interactionist theory of metaphor provides little succour for the reductionist, more contemporary theories provide no remedy.

The Cognitive Sciences and Metaphor: CMT

Theories from the cognitive sciences provide another vital perspective. Within this domain, there are language-focused frameworks, such as François Recanati's (2004) contextualist theory and Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 2008, 2012), as well as conceptually focused frameworks, such as Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). The language-focused theories do not treat literal and metaphorical expressions as differing in kind. For example, under Recanati's framework, in certain contexts, the complete *literal*, truth-conditional meaning of the sentence "He swallowed the bitter pill" is simply "He accepted the bad news." In such contexts, the schematic concept associated with "pill" is pragmatically broadened to include ideas, and the concept associated with "to swallow" is similarly broadened to allow for the intake of information. This is a purely pragmatic process that actively determines the literal meaning of the utterance. Any "metaphoricity" identified with the expression merely lies in the feeling one experiences when examining it schematically—that is, when artificially abstracting the words away from their contextual use to look only at their strict semantic categories. Relevance theorists discuss metaphor in a remarkably similar way, framing it as the broadening of a concept. A key point of difference is that Relevance theorists view this as an inferential process, whereas Recanati understands it to be automatic. In either case, the consequence for the reductionist is severe. To claim that the verb "to suffer" is metaphorical under these frameworks is merely to acknowledge that the verb has both narrower and broader *applications*, and little more. It does not identify the verb with a distinct ontological type, nor does it succeed in contrasting a "false" non-literal use with a "true" literal one.

CMT is arguably the dominant theory of metaphor today. It is a rich, continually developing framework, but for our purposes, three of its foundational claims are particularly important for evaluating the reductionist's position. First, CMT demonstrates that the strict dichotomy between literal and metaphorical language is a false one; what we consider "literal" is often just deeply conventionalized metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). The coexistence of the literal and the metaphorical can be exemplified by the sentence "Kitty is in Texas." A strict, formal semantic reduction assigns each expression a function or abstract entity: the preposition "in" acts as a function taking the entity "Texas" to deliver a truth condition if and only if the subject entity "Kitty" meets the spatial requirement. Ultimately, "in Texas" is mapped to a literal mathematical set (e.g. see Winter 2016). In contrast, CMT reveals that "in Texas" is structured by a conceptual metaphor: Texas is conceptualized as a physical receptacle, pointing to the foundational cognitive metaphor PLACES ARE CONTAINERS. The crucial point is that a statement can be simultaneously truth-conditionally literal and conceptually metaphorical. Second, CMT holds that conceptual metaphors exist because abstract target domains are best understood in terms of concrete, embodied source domains. For example, expressions like "time is running out" or "time flies" indicate that the abstract concept of time is understood through the concrete source domain of spatial movement. We map the physical realities of our bodies moving through space onto the abstract reality of temporal progression. Third, conceptual metaphors do more than just shape language; they provide the conceptual framework through which we actively understand and experience the world. We do not just understand the linguistic definition of being "in trouble"; we physically and psychologically experience "trouble" as a container we are trapped inside, complete with its own set of sensations and affective states. These three aspects of CMT provide a powerful lens through which to evaluate the reductionist's claim that talk of non-biological suffering is merely a figure of speech.

There are two hypotheses we can consider regarding the conceptual mapping of suffering:

1. Suffering as it relates to psychological phenomena is a conceptual metaphor that has become deeply conventionalized in the verb "to suffer," as exemplified by sentences like "He suffers from anxiety."
2. Suffering as it relates to physical phenomena is a conceptual metaphor that has become deeply conventionalized in the verb "to suffer," as exemplified by sentences like "The bone suffered from osteoporosis."

The first thing to note is that, in either case, the verb can be reduced to a literal, truth-conditional meaning within a system of formal semantics. If the first hypothesis is correct, the literal, foundational nature of the concept applies to physical entities, and the original nature of the verb applies to physical load or degradation.

This suggests that the reductivist is as deeply confused as the metaphorical use is conventionalized—they have mistaken the conceptual target for the literal source. On the other hand, if the second hypothesis is correct, the conceptualization of the bone is indeed metaphorical. But, as noted earlier, this does not mean that the relevant sentences lack a *literal*, truth-conditional reduction. Furthermore, the conceptual metaphor will not merely shape language; it will shape our understanding and experience of the world. In our cognitive reality, these physical objects will genuinely be experienced as suffering. In actual fact, however, CMT strongly suggests that the *first* hypothesis must be correct. According to CMT's foundational principle, we conceptualize the abstract through the concrete. Physical suffering (observable, spatial, and structurally embodied throughout the physical world) is much more concrete than abstract psychological suffering—which, though intimately lived, is qualitative, subjective, and dependent on inference.

If this first hypothesis is correct, we should expect the descriptors and modifiers of psychological suffering to be borrowed from the physical, spatial world. Indeed, this is exactly what we find. Collocations associated with “suffering” routinely include expressions that refer to physical size, mass, or spatial extent, such as “enormous suffering,” “widespread suffering,” or a great “amount of suffering.” Furthermore, given the well-known metaphorical nature of how we describe pain itself (e.g., sharp, dull, heavy, burning, stabbing), the qualitative experience of psychological suffering is thoroughly structured by physical conceptualizations (Munday et al. 2020; Munday et al. 2021; Hearn et al. 2025). Perhaps, this is also identified by the reductivist attempts to identify suffering entirely with physical nociception. Thus, CMT is yet another theory of metaphor that utterly fails to support the reductivist's objection against the maximalist thesis proposed here.

Having examined the metaphorical objection from several distinct philosophical angles—traditional, positivist, Gricean, interactionist, and cognitive conceptual frameworks—it becomes clear that the reductivist position cannot be sustained on linguistic grounds. The attempt to sideline the suffering of non-biological entities as mere metaphor fails to align with how meaning, reference, and cognition actually function. However, if theories of metaphor help to undermine the reductivist's defence, the concept of metonymy—synecdoche in particular—helps to pinpoint their fundamental mistake. The reductivist commits a *pars pro toto* metonymic fallacy.

The Reductivist's *Pars Pro Toto* Metonymic Fallacy

Classical rhetoricians defined metonymy as the transfer of a name from its proper use to an improper one based on associative conditions, a primary example being part-whole transference (synecdoche). A name for a part is transferred to the whole, such as when we refer to a corporate executive as a “suit,” or a vehicle as “wheels.” However, contemporary cognitive linguists define it more fundamentally: metonymy is the use of one entity or event to comprehend another related entity or event (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Littlemore 2015). Here, “entity” and “event” refer to conceptual nodes and event-schemas. Part-whole relations constitute one major type of cognitive metonymy. Crucially, this cognitivist definition allows us to analyse a deep conceptual confusion. Many part-whole metonymies are obvious and harmless, such as “I'll have a glass of red,” but some are insidious. For example, using “IQ” as a direct substitute for the entirety of human “intelligence.” This is what we shall refer to as the “*pars pro toto* fallacy.”

Metonymy is highly effective for focusing attention on a specific aspect of a concept. It is cognitively expedient to use a prototypical part to exemplify a complex whole—for instance, using a robin to represent the entire category of birds (Rosch 1975; Lakoff 1987). Nevertheless, a profound ontological error occurs when the part is mistaken for the whole, and the specific attributes of the prototype are fallaciously mapped onto the broader category. This conflation creates severe confusion about what a concept inherently includes and excludes. For example, the concept of MAN was historically utilized as the unquestioned prototype for HUMAN. Because elements associated with this specific prototype (such as maleness, whiteness, adulthood, and neurotypicality) were treated as the standard, it fostered immense conceptual and concrete exclusions. As a consequence, language structurally excluded the feminine pronoun, while institutions and systems were built exclusively to serve the prototype—effectively erasing women, the disabled, children, and racial minorities from social ontology.

This is precisely the error committed by the reductivist. The broad reality of suffering encompasses a vast ontological domain. Biological nociception, psychological distress, affective states, and their physiological markers are undeniably salient, highly visible parts of that domain. They are localized, biological instances of lived structural degradation. However, the reductivist takes this specific biological part and metonymically

substitutes it for the entire conceptual category of suffering—effectively blinding themselves to any suffering occurring outside specific biological hardware. By treating this part-for-whole mapping as an exhaustive definition, the reductivist artificially shrinks the ontological landscape. Just as with the previous historical example, this restriction has profound consequences. If the framework defines suffering strictly as the firing of a central nervous system, it becomes a type of biological chauvinism. Thus, we are told that oysters cannot suffer, and the suffering of a collapsing ecosystem or a decaying social structure goes entirely unnoticed. By recognizing nociception as merely one metonymic instance of a much broader reality, we free the concept of suffering from its biological cage, opening the door to a framework of limitless compassion.

A Note on Compassion

The maximalist thesis has now been defended: recognizing the reality of suffering in all things opens a space for limitless compassion. This framework also allows us to reexamine alterity in a profoundly new way. Etymologically, compassion (*com-passio*) is the act of "suffering with" an Other's suffering. Under the maximalist thesis, the Other is any entity in which suffering—the bearing of a load or structural degradation—can be recognized. The concept of the Other is thus radicalized. It is no longer restricted by biology, the strictures of analytic ethics, or the anthropocentric characterizations of the Other found in the phenomenological traditions of Husserl, Sartre, and Levinas. Instead, the ethical "face" of the Other can be encountered in all things. Consequently, compassion can be legitimately extended to all animal and plant life, rainforests, environments, planets, economies, buildings, works of art, robots, AI models, and much more. There are no artificial limits placed on one's compassionate nature. If compassion is indeed the true basis of morality, as Arthur Schopenhauer (1998) contends, then under the maximalist thesis, it becomes the unbounded bound.

Conclusion

This article has argued for a maximalist thesis: all things suffer. This stands in stark contrast to the reductivist framework, which artificially restricts suffering to a specific biological reduction. By examining the etymology and grammatical flexibility of the verb "to suffer," we demonstrated that the bearing of a physical load is its foundational meaning. An analysis across multiple theories of metaphor corroborated this thesis, revealing that the reductivist cannot simply dismiss inanimate suffering as a mere figure of speech. Finally, applying cognitive metonymy allowed us to diagnose the reductivist's core error: a *pars pro toto* fallacy that mistakes the highly salient prototype of biological nociception for the entire ontological category of suffering. While this paper has established the linguistic and semantic foundations of the maximalist thesis, its broader consequences for compassion, alterity, and moral action have only been briefly sketched. Future research must expand upon these implications. Furthermore, there is substantial empirical evidence supporting the maximalist thesis across other disciplines—including cultural anthropology, sociology, and Human-Robot Interaction (HRI) studies—that warrants dedicated exploration. Last, while several theories from the cognitive sciences were utilized to support our thesis, Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT) was notably reserved. CBT offers a highly promising avenue for understanding exactly *why the* reductivist becomes confused about the literality of the maximalist thesis, demonstrating how the conventionalized experience of biological suffering actively feeds back into our conceptualization of the physical world. By continuing down this expansionist path, future research can fully articulate how freeing suffering from its biological cage transforms our conceptual and ethical relationship to the world around us.

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