

Chapter Title: The Unique, the Comparative and the Competitive

Book Title: Are We Comparing Yet?

Book Subtitle: On Standards, Justice, and Incomparability

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Published by: transcript Verlag, Bielefeld University Press. (2019)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2f9xshj.4>

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The Unique, the Comparative and the Competitive

Comparisons, we hear, are never innocent: but once scrutinized for intent, can a comparison be classed as good, bad, or value-neutral?¹ Are there good or bad practices of comparing? What makes it risky? Through a chain of examples, none of them, of course, innocently summoned, but invoked for their potential to illuminate the consequences of comparing and not comparing, I would like to discover what tends to go wrong. I have (I blush to say) a normative idea of comparison, and I will chase it here through examples positive and negative. If the examples are adequate to the purpose, perhaps we can even determine whether the fault lies with comparing itself or with the situations wherein comparisons are made.

First, then, an example of non-comparison. The Byzantine chronicler Theophanes tells a story of brief, unfortunate political-religious reform in the year 528.

The king of the Huns in the area around the [Cimmerian] Bosphorus, Gordas by name, joined forces with the emperor [Justinian], became a Christian, and was baptized; and the emperor received him, loaded him up with many gifts, and sent him back to his own country, so that he might guard the Roman possessions and the city on the [Black Sea] Bosphorus. [...] So the king of the Huns, now a Christian, went back

1 For a wide-ranging set of discussions, see Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman, eds., *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

to his own land and found his own brother and told him about the emperor's kindness and love of honor, and that he himself had become a Christian; and taking the statues that the Huns worshiped, he melted them down, for they were made of silver and electrum.² The Huns grew angry and conspired with the brother, and rising up they killed [Gordas], and then made the brother king under the name Mouageris. Then, fearing that the Romans would find them out, they went in stealth to the city of Bosphorus and killed the tribune Dalmatios and the generals.³

At this, the Romans sent out a stronger force and pacified the region for the time being.

This is but one short episode in a year-by-year listing of significant events in the history of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire. The Huns are one of many groups of outsiders who besiege the empire's borders. Within those borders, theological controversies often rage. A zealous critic of Emperors Leo III and Constantine V for their "shameless warring against the august, holy icons" (*ἀναιδέστερον κατὰ τῶν ἁγίων καὶ σεπτῶν εἰκόνων... πόλεμον*)⁴, Theophanes often registers with satisfaction the downfall of those who fail to honor images. Plagues, military defeats, and civil unrest are regularly connected with the failure of the bad emperors and their accomplices to give the icons proper reverence.

Given this overt endorsement of the power of icons on the narrator's part, it may seem surprising that the story of Gordas and the Hunnish idols is not presented as a cautionary tale or exotic parallel. It might seem to be a point in favor of the veneration of icons that this chieftain who failed to show any respect to the images of his people was eliminated, apparently without a dissenting voice, by supporters

2 According to John Malalas, whose account Theophanes is summarizing here, the Hunnish gods were melted down into Byzantine coin. See Ioannes Malalas, *Chronographia*, ed. Ludwig Dindorf (Bonn: Weber, 1831), pp. 432, 646-47. The Cimmerian Bosphorus was located in present-day Crimea.

3 Theophanes [the Confessor], *Chronographia*, ed. Carl de Boor (2 vols., Leipzig: Teubner, 1883-85), pp. 175-76.

4 Theophanes, *Chronographia*, p. 405.

of the old-time religion. But Theophanes is not interested in making anything like that point. The murder of Gordas and his replacement by Mouageris simply show the reprobate nature of the Huns, who in the end meet with justified collective punishment. I cannot imagine that Theophanes would welcome the suggestion that the Hunnish iconoclast and the Byzantine iconomachs were examples of a more general category or pointed to the same lesson. His universe of comparisons is too narrow. Someone else might speculate that the destruction of icons, violating some compact between the people and their gods, always precipitates a kind of constitutional crisis, but for Theophanes there is apparently no such thing as images-in-general, no "always." There is no category in relation to which Orthodox images, Hunnish images, Buddhist images and so forth would be particular cases. Such a universalizing path is probably inconceivable for the chronicler because adducing the two instances of image as cases of a general law would amount to treating them identically, relativizing their differences, and that is simply unthinkable. There are on the one hand "the holy icons" and on the other those contemptible idols, and what happens in reference to one set is never the same as what happens with the other set.

A series of attitudes about image-worship can be extracted from Theophanes's chronicle. There are (1) those who give due reverence to the holy icons; there are (2) those who fail to revere them, some of them within the empire, like Leo X; there are (3) those opposed to all images, who trouble the empire from without (the Arabs); and finally there are (4) those who revere things that are not the holy icons (idolators). But these characterizations emerge piecemeal. No attempt is made in the chronicle to draw these categories together, to analyze them, to work out what relations of similarity or causality might obtain among them. Evidently, Theophanes's history is a history of the tribe. Its attachment to one set of images is non-negotiable, non-transferable. There is for it no point worth making about icons as a subset of images, or about Byzantium as one of a set of theological-political constitutions in which images play a leading role. We can say that his is a history that excludes comparison.

But to speak in this way is to assume that comparison was always possible, that for someone like Theophanes it would have been possible to draw the parallels between Hun and Byzantine. Is this assumption justified? Might it not be rather that we create criteria of similarity in the act of noticing Theophanes's myopia about images-in-general? If that is so, comparison is not inevitable, nor self-evident. It reposes on a set of conditions—conditions that were not met when Theophanes wrote the page just cited.

In describing Theophanes's worldview as narrow, bigoted, and thus closed to comparison, I may be only stating the obvious. Lest it appear that comparison is intrinsically open-minded and universalizing, and in order to reveal a certain other kind of need that comparative arguments can fulfill, consider a widely-circulated clip from Dan Murdoch's 2015 documentary film, "KKK: The Fight for White Supremacy." In it we see a father and son, both robed and hooded in the gear of the Loyal White Knights faction of the Klan. The father raises a hand and shouts, "White Power!" echoed by the four-year-old son: "White Paya!" Asked by the British interviewer why he dressed his little boy up in Klan clothes, the father, with no particular anger in his tone—only a bit of defensiveness, as if he were accounting for the choice to have his son play soccer rather than baseball in a town where most of the kids play baseball—explains, "I just want my kid to know that it's okay to be proud of who he is. And if being proud of his heritage makes him a racist, well, I'll teach him to be a racist, you know? [...] [The purpose is to help him] to go through what he has to go through to become who he needs to be in life."⁵ The father's motive (his public rationalization, anyway) for inculcating in his son the view that (as he says) whites are "supreme" and "God's chosen people" takes the form of a comparison. "It's okay to be proud of who he is" echoes the language used by every advocacy group in the United States: if you are Asian, or Native American, or gay, or a Mensa member, or a cancer survivor, or a coal miner's daughter,

5 Dan Murdoch, *KKK: The Fight for White Supremacy* (London: British Broadcasting Company, 2015). The brief episode here described was often linked to in my social media feed during the race agitations of 2018.

you have every right to be “proud of your heritage,” so why not extend the same permission to white people? To do otherwise, goes the argument, would be to impede the child’s natural growth into “who he needs to be in life.” Latinos, African Americans, Chinese, transsexuals, and so forth all have this wonderful thing called “Pride”— recognition of one’s group membership and the approval that goes with it; a yearly parade; the sympathy of the public. Why then is “Pride” denied to one group in particular? Suppose that in a certain town there are five high schools of equivalent size and reputation, each school having its team and mascot: the Panthers, the Leopards, the Eagles, and so on. Each team is followed around by a cheerleading squad (“Louder, Leopards!”), except for the Polar Bears, to whom this vital resource is denied. Who could fail to see the injustice done to the Polar Bears? Apparently implying just such a scenario, the Klansman presents himself as supporting a general principle of fairness. And given that fairness is a massively uncontroversial virtue in the United States (one never hears there the complaint that a court decision is “too fair,” only perhaps that it “doesn’t take into account particular circumstances”), he can then, having taken up position on that secure rock, advance to a more controversial label for his advocacy: if you dare call his attachment to fairness “racism,” well, he will accept the label, because in the context of the greater issue it no longer carries a negative implication for him. Washed in the pure waters of formal equivalence, “white power” becomes nothing more than a local form of the ambient self-esteem cult, translating into the terms of whiteness such affirmations as “girl power” or “each of us is special.”

The interviewer, chiefly concerned to document the existence of people like the Klan father and son, does not tarry with the semantics in play, though it would have been interesting to see how the Klan members gathering for a rally in the background would establish the grounds of equivalence whereupon whiteness, in the US, can be presented as just another identity. That is: an identity, and not a status dependent on the mass of interlocking institutions that sustain the ability of the white plurality to exclude or oppress others not so favored—exclusions and oppressions that, as it turns out, stimulated the rise of the identity movements that the Klan father finds so vexingly

envious. After all, monopolists too ask for nothing more than the right to participate in the free market—as monopolists of course. It is only by being phrased in comparative terms, and only by detaching those terms from historical or experiential content, that the slogan “white power” can aspire to be recognized as a demand for fair treatment. Since history is a tiresome, easily forgotten subject, and since other people’s perspectives are beside the point when it is a matter of “becoming who you need to be,” the operation is quickly performed, and for the Klan father and son perhaps definitively, since the whole point of being a Klansman is to avoid the company of people who would insist on parsing “white power” for its actual implications.

I surmise that this Klansman has also become aware of a creeping habit in American speech of preceding one’s opinion on whatever subject with a statement of community membership.⁶ “As a Huguenot-American, I...” The shared identity takes the place of a demonstration of facts and reasons; it is, apparently, itself the facts and reason for one’s speech. Disturbing for grammarians but an even stronger proof of the gambit’s implied justificatory power is the construction which omits the “I think” or “I want to say that” clause: “As a trans person, the Chicago School District has committed a massive injustice in closing this school.” Left aside is the question, do all wearers of a label think alike? And is the opinion expressed meant to be persuasive to members of other communities as well, or is an assertion of community membership all that is required for the public use of reason? Whether the purpose be to shore up the speech (many stand with me) or to deflect possible criticism (my opinion being a facet of my identity, no one can take it away from me), the tangle of self-classification and self-justification must appeal to a felt interest of speakers. It also contributes to fragmenting the public space where open comparison, not to mention the debunking of nonsense, might happen.

6 For a discussion of the “*azza* clause” as a tic that “signals the urgent insecurity of democratic culture and at the same time declares a temporary invulnerability and a goal-seeking purpose,” see David Simpson, *Situatedness, or, Why We Keep Saying Where We’re Coming From* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 41-47.

Theophanes's obtuseness and the Klansman's sophistry alike bring into view the question of the comparable. For the one, nothing is comparable (to the numinous icons); for the other, everything (every "identity") is. Both speakers reduce history to the history of the tribe, but the second one does so with an awareness of processes of rivalry and legitimation that eludes the former. (It may be that the Klansman longs to return to the splendid isolation of a Theophanes.) Theophanes implies that the genuine, legitimate, charisma-conferring MacGuffins are uniquely possessed by his tribe; as there is no comparison, there can be no question of being fair. The Klansman knows that he is living in a complex society with many competing beliefs, many identities seeking recognition, and his claim for special recognition is couched as comparison; he can get what he thinks of as his due only by putting forth the assertion that *others* have received a good that he deserves *no less than they*. He simply pretends not to understand the structure of the relevant universe of comparisons. However hypocritical and deceptive the Klansman's claim, it does at least aver that he is living in a society *regulated by comparisons*, a society in which it makes sense to appeal to fairness as a decisive standard.

Theophanes, for his part, was not living in a multiconfessional state where he would have had to face the question of dealing justly with fellow citizens who worshiped differently. His lack of concern for comparison in the matter of the Huns' idols corresponds to the unreceivability, for him, of a certain kind of claim about justice that has been noted by citizens of secular or multiethnic states. The chronicle of Theophanes ticks forward, year by year, recording events and naming them without needing to erase or replace any of the already given names. Its categories are fixed. The fit between data acquisition and classification is tight. The flexibility to modify categories is not required. A reader who does not share those categories, a reader for whom the difference between icons and idols is not unquestioned, appears as an unwanted annoyance.

Flexibility, however, is amply on show in the Klansman's sophism. The case of "white power" as identity politics seems to be a category mistake, a local malfunction of the comparative faculty—a wrong con-

clusion derived from faulty data (since we know that the status “white” has never in United States history been equivalent to, or interchangeable with, any other status). But it is doubtful that a logician-on-call could fix it.

In both cases a privileged example defeated the process of comparison. As a consequence, general questions of causality, value, and consistency—questions of judgment—were blocked. It seems then (reasoning *a negativo*) that a good comparison must not only be accurate, it must also be fair. The standards of both accuracy and fairness are hard to specify in advance, and hard to satisfy as well. In what follows I will examine a number of scenarios or situations of comparison, in order to ask such questions as: What are the conditions that make comparison possible, desirable, impossible, undesirable, obligatory, or fraught? What needs does comparison fulfill? Which is more challenging to explain, the ability to compare or the inability?

To “do justice” to a subject, as writers and researchers are supposed to do, is no mere figure of speech. In neither of the cases just cited can we say that justice was done. The difference between them can be expressed as that between obtuse and underhanded comparison. Obtuseness denies comparability, underhandedness denies the incommensurate (that is, the non-common denominators, or whatever makes examples unlike each other). In their contrary ways, non-comparison and the underhanded comparison fall short of a standard of good comparative practice. Although we usually say that the objects themselves can or cannot be compared, this is nonsense; the point is that the act of comparing, or of refusing to compare, raises our moral hackles. What is the forum within which we do so? When testing for epistemic injustice we must necessarily invoke a framework, a background, a horizon that establishes the sorts of properties that justice would need to have.

One such framework has long been nationality. The example from Theophanes shows how limiting that frame is. The Huns stood outside the Eastern Roman state as enemies or wavering clients; no one in Theophanes’s position would feel obliged to take their beliefs seriously. The sophisticated Klansman gestures vaguely at features of the liberal state as realized in US legal culture (“freedom of speech,” “freedom of associa-

tion," "equal protection," "pursuit of happiness") and his language shows some concern for public opinion as manifested in such a state (the appeal to the hearer: "you know?"). In citizenly fashion, he is presenting himself as a victim of the maldistribution of self-esteem and as in need of redress.⁷

In calling attention to the shortcomings of both the refusal to recognize comparability and the refusal to admit incomparability I, too, am appealing to some regulative instance, perhaps one that is imaginary or under construction: the "world community," the judgment of history, the assembly of rational beings. (Or, with infinitely more triviality though greater reality, my academic peers.) Whoever compares does so against the background of a claim of justice, one that sketches out a community as (potentially) capable of answering that demand. "Yes," that community might say, "we have reviewed the evidence and find the comparanda comparable, therefore we pronounce what you said of the first case also true (within limits) of the second case. Go then and perform the appropriate action: say a word, do a deed, join a side, enter into a right or a resource, as the analogy of cases may direct."

In societies made up of people who believe, act, speak and exist diversely, much is expected, then, from comparison. (A society without dissent could not be a liberal society. To think in such a society would mean, I suppose, to pile up perceptions in categories established by

7 As Asad Haider observes (and not in defense of liberalism), "When you can claim to have been injured in some way on the basis of your identity, you can then make an appeal to the state for protection. [...] That's the basic way that liberal politics works. I rely on the insights of Judith Butler and Wendy Brown for this. It means that not only do people get more and more reduced to whatever identity category has constituted them as political, because they were injured on the basis of having that identity, it also takes away their agency as political actors. Because they become victims who need to be protected by the state." Daniel Denvir, "Mistaking Identity Politics: An Interview with Asad Haider" (posted August 14, 2018), available at <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3972-mistaking-identity-politics-a-conversation-with-asad-haider-part-i> (accessed October 5, 2018). For a more fully referenced discussion of these points, see Haider, *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump* (London: Verso, 2018), pp. 10-11, 105-07.

consensus, continuing to register details but not modifying the framework—exactly the style of the chronicle, by the way.) Comparison is part of our daily moral life, a component of our on-board navigation system, one of many canaries we take down the mine. But can comparison do what is seemingly expected of it? Can it adjudicate claims, by discovering what is comparable and evaluating degrees of similarity? Does it reckon with dissimilars and incompatibles, finding for them a basis on which to associate and signify? Does it necessarily reduce, relativize, trivialize, and if so, is that necessarily a bad thing? Is it capable of finding out and defusing the sophistical abuses of its own logic? Does its reach extend universally, as it would have to do if it were to have this regulative function, or are there zones of exception in the generally consented texture of comparison?