The Grammar of Pain: Political Perception and Ethical Sensibility

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Abstract

Political philosophy often treats ethics as a problem of judgment, justification, or obligation. But before judgment there is perception: someone must appear as someone to whom one can be answerable. Drawing on Rancière's *distribution of the sensible* and Wittgenstein's remarks on the *grammar of pain*, I argue that social injustice often operates by shaping the very conditions under which suffering becomes perceptible as suffering. Ethical failure, then, is not only a failure of sympathy or principle, but a failure of moral perception that is itself politically organized. If Rancière shows that every political order distributes in advance what can be seen, heard, and recognized as meaningful, Wittgenstein reminds us that pain is never encountered as a purely private object but through publicly shared criteria of expression, acknowledgment, and response. The question is therefore not simply whether we respond appropriately to another's suffering, but how particular forms of life determine whose suffering appears as suffering in the first place. A recent controversy surrounding Turkey's legislation on street animals serves as a preliminary test case for this framework. The aim is not to offer a normative resolution of the controversy, but to show that ethical disagreement often presupposes a more fundamental political struggle over the sensible conditions under which vulnerability becomes visible, intelligible, and answerable.