From hindrances to horrors

Mapping "negative happenings"

Tim Peebles

Introduction

Christians believe that human beings are creatures. To be a creature is, among other things, to be finite, limited—not occasionally, but all the time. And one of the ways we encounter our limits is by experiencing things happening to us, often without our choosing. Those "happenings" have to do with our relationships with other finite and limited creatures—animals, plants, forces, objects, and, of course, other human beings. Other human beings can be observers of what happens to us, participants in it, or perpetrators of it. To be created, then, is to be implicated—folded into and tangled up with a web of finite creatures—and complicated—impacted and intertwined with those finite creatures in ways that can be beautiful as well as befuddling. This essay aims to reduce our befuddlement regarding the complications of negative happenings by guiding us in noticing and naming several elements in those happenings:

- the different intensity in a recipient's experience (a subjective, first-person perspective);
- the range of interpretive responses by observers of those same experiences (an objective, third-person perspective);
- how some of those others might be implicated in those experiences as a participant or perpetrator (an interpersonal, second-person perspective);
- what proper expectations the original recipient might have for such observers, participants, and perpetrators; and
- what proper obligations observers, participants, and perpetrators might themselves have in relation to such a recipient.

I begin with a hiking scenario illustrating some complications present in negative human experiences, which then serves as a metaphorical launching point for considering other negative experiences. While hiking, one can wander without any reference points or sense of orientation. Or one can "wayfind," using actual terrain and plants "on the ground" as reference points.

Further, one can use maps that abstract and generalize from on-the-ground conditions. I prefer maps, and a good map serves a walk by clarifying key reference points, paths between them, and relations among them. The following offers some mapping regarding "negative happenings," inviting you, my reader, to join in that effort. Wanderers and wayfinders are also welcome!

A "map" of negative happenings

Let's start by returning to a key element of being a creature—things *happen* to us. We experience some of those "happenings" as good and positive for us; they contribute to our wants and choices, to our well-being and flourishing. They are *helps* in living and leading our lives. An unexpectedly clear sky is a "help" if it makes a walk up the hill easier and more pleasant. We experience other "happenings" as bad and negative for us; they take away from, or make more difficult, our wants and choices, our well-being and flourishing. They are *hindrances* to living and leading our lives. An unexpected thunderstorm is a "hindrance" if it makes the same hill walk more difficult.

Many happenings are a mix of help and hindrance and are not easily sorted into positive or negative categories. But a distinction between helps and hindrances allows us to notice and name some of those differences. In doing so, we find that for both sets of happenings (good and bad, positive and negative, helpful and hindering) there are degrees of intensity in how they impact us. To illustrate this, let's consider some hindrances that have happened (or could happen) to me when hiking.

In the lovely White Mountains of New Hampshire, it's common to find trees fallen on and over the trails. Sometimes a fallen tree yields a positive experience, a new element that enriches the sights I anticipated when I began the walk. Other times, I experience a fallen tree negatively: It causes a minor inconvenience to my progress toward the mountain's summit. The tree on the path is a *hindrance*—it's in the way such that I need to exert a little bit more energy and dexterity than if it weren't there.

If there's no way around the tree, I'll have to climb over it, an endeavor typically resulting in scrapes and bruises. In this case, the hindrance of the fallen tree gives *hurts*, a feeling connected to a *surface*-level and mild violation of my bodily integrity and well-being. To the inconvenience of needing more energy and dexterity is added some discomfort and pain, intensifying my sense of hindrance. Not only is there an obstacle to overcome (the inconvenience), but now that obstacle has impacted me in a way that will require further attention (a bandage or ice pack). And I learn something from this experience: While not all hindrances hurt, all hurts do hinder. Hurts intensify, or add to, the experience of hindrance.

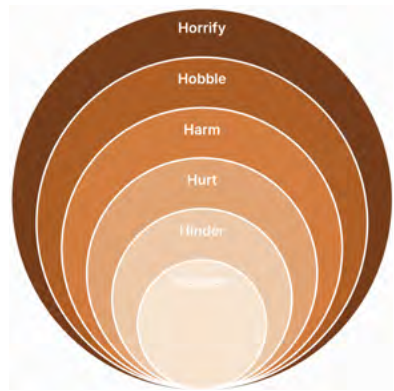
If I stumble when climbing over the tree and break my leg, the relatively minor hurt of a scrape or bruise becomes a more significant *harm*—the

impact has gone beyond a surface violation of my bodily integrity to a more *substantive* one, a deeper injury, introducing some impairment that will take time to repair. A cast might be required, and likely a temporary period of mild disability. Both the hindrance and the hurt from the fallen tree have been intensified. The experience of harm *includes* the experience of hurting, which means it's also hindering. But the converse is not the case: Not all hindrances hurt, and those that do don't always harm.

Imagine one step further: Suppose that, instead of breaking my leg as I climb over the tree, I wrench my knee, tearing ligaments and destroying cartilage, requiring surgery and leaving me with a permanent impairment, a *structural* violation of my bodily well-being. In this scenario, I have become *hobbled* (at least to some degree). I can't be hobbled without also being harmed, which also involves being hurt, which includes being hindered. But I *can* be harmed (as well as hindered and hurt) without being hobbled—a broken leg (a harm) will heal in a way that won't leave lasting impairment, unlike a permanently altered joint.

Finally, when climbing over the fallen tree, I could (God forbid) slip and fall into a ravine, which could lead to a slow and lonely death, a *systemic* violation of my bodily integrity and well-being. In this scenario, I will likely experience *horror*—an impairment that is systemic and final, ending my capacity to want and choose. While this horror involves hobbling (lasting injury), hurt (a painful experience), and hindrance (the unfulfilled hike), horror was not present in the mere hindrance (extra expended energy), or in the hindrance that hurt (the tree requiring a climb that produced scrapes and bruises), or in the hindrance that hurt as well as harmed (the climbing that produced a broken leg), or in the hurting and harmful hindrance that hobbled (the permanently damaged knee).

We can picture these negative happenings as "nested" circles, with each smaller circle *including* what's in the larger circle(s) but *adding* elements to what it shares with those circles. For example, happenings that horrify (the most intense form of hindrance) include elements of hobbling, harm, hurt, and hindrance, but each adds its own unique elements.[1]



1 This is an update and adaptation of a scale of force Steve Thomas and I employed to illustrate Mennonite martial arts. There, we developed a continuum of physical force in response to more simplified assumptions about "violence." For more on this, see Steve's article "Martial Arts as a Model

Expanding the map

For the most part, I have presented my scale of negative happenings in terms of their *subjective* impact on me, how they have been experienced and felt from my *first-person* point of view. And I have noted how those experiences include different degrees of violation of my bodily integrity and well-being, violations that could be seen and observed by others. So, correlated to this subjective impact, there are also *objective* outcomes, things that can be noticed and named by others from a *third-person* point of view. These can produce a similar, corresponding scale of objective outcomes, moving from difficult to deadly (systemic violation corresponding to horrors).[2]



for Nonviolence: Resisting Interpersonal Violence with Assertive Force," *Conrad Grebel Review* 33, no. 1 (Winter, 2015): 72–91.

2 When we assess our own negative experiences, we sometimes adopt a more "objective" third-person observer's perspective. It might be that as we move up the scale of intensity, "objective" considerations become more prominent than "subjective" ones, whereas as we move down the scale of intensity, "subjective" considerations become more prominent than "objective" ones. Still, both subjective and objective, recipient and observer considerations will always be present. Pain illustrates this mix of subjective and objective. Pain involves some degree of psychological interpretation of physiological sensations. And for the most part, when we talk about pain experiences, we give subjective interpretation priority—when someone claims to feel pain we presume accuracy as a starting point. But more objective discernments (whether in the first- or third-person) about objective physiology still play a part. We have conversations, with ourselves and others, in which we say things like: "I know this feels painful, but I think you are over-interpreting something that is really simply uncomfortable, or unpleasant, but not really painful." Our overall assessment of "pain" will

With these nested and correlated scales of negative happenings in place, we can then map different domains of our lives. There are negative outcomes on and impacts to a *body* by other bodies we encounter. But we are not only physically connected to other things—animals and objects (water and rocks), patterns (weather and disease), and plants. We are also spiritually connected to the divine, and soulfully connected to other human persons. The same scaling and nesting of impacts can be used for negative happenings to our soul and spirit.[3]

Second, since human beings have bodies, there are impacts that we have on one another that are simply a matter of our bodies interacting in the world, often without any deliberate choice or decision—they are inadvertent or accidental. You could, for example, replace the fallen tree in my examples above with another hiker who accidentally and unintentionally trips into my path. The point is that, as embodied human beings interacting with other embodied human beings, there will also be negative happenings of the same sort that arise from objects and patterns, plants and animals. These negative happenings are impersonal: They don't involve personal elements of desire, deliberation, and decision. They are not moral happenings, since moral happenings involve personal elements of desire, deliberation, and decision; motive, choice, and act.

Of course, human beings are not just bodies that bounce off one another in the world; we are also creatures who sense and intuit, feel and emote, think and reflect, discern and decide, act and do. We intend and decide, sometimes with deliberation, to do certain things with our bodies, which often have impacts and outcomes on other persons on purpose. Back to the hiking scenario: Someone could decide to cut down a tree and lay it on the trail, wanting or intending any of the outcomes mentioned earlier—to hinder me, to hurt me, to harm me, to hobble me, to horrify me. There is, for the impact and outcome on me, *in the first-person*, an intention, desire, or choice from another human, *in the second-person*.

Put another way, when we look at the impacts and outcomes on us resulting from human thought and choice, things become personal. And

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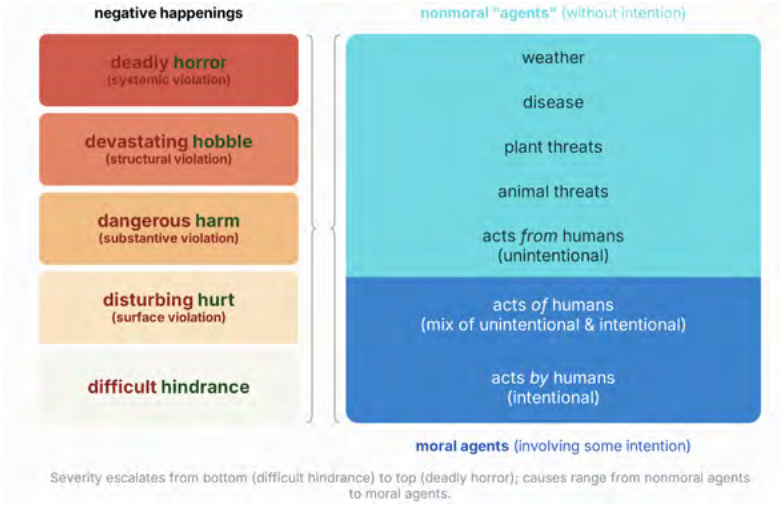
involve discerning subjective and objective facets, or features, or aspects of an experiential happening. The same is true of all negative happenings, and not only painful ones.

3 Although it can't be developed here, the relationship of body, soul, and spirit is also "nested." What happens to my soul, in interpersonal interactions, will always include something happening to my body *plus something more*, while not everything that happens to my body impacts my soul. The same with spirit: Everything that impacts my relationship with the divine will include what impacts my soul and my body *plus something more*. A quick example: To attend to soul trauma in therapy will (always?) include attention to bodily sensations (a need to calm the nervous system by creating a relaxed bodily state), as well as other modes of psychological and relational treatment.

that means we are now considering moral matters in a moral context because motive, intention, deliberation, decision, choice, and action are involved.[4]

But there is a complication: There are "mixed motives" and "unintended consequences," often in terms of degree ("that was more physically forceful than I expected"), but sometimes in kind ("I didn't know *that* would happen when I moved my body in this way"). And human beings are also often careless, inattentive, and impaired. Much of what we experience from others is a mix of intention and unintended consequences, chosen behavior and unanticipated results, one motive mixed with another, healthy thinking and impairment, personal engagement and impersonal impact.[5]

We can, then, supplement the previous chart with one further column.



The lighter part of the right column highlights those causes we take to be impersonal and nonmoral;[6] the darker part of the right column highlights those causes that we take to be personal and moral. The brackets

4 As with the previous footnote, there is more that could be said here about how *moral* matters might always involve *nonmoral* elements *plus something more*. If attending to matters of our interpersonal souls will always involve yet supplement attention to our physical bodies, then attending to morality will always involve yet supplement attention to nonmoral considerations.

5 Cognitive impairment is a good instance of this mix: I might have a diagnosed condition that hinders my judgment, which then inclines me to drink too much, further impairing my judgment.

6 Mapping structural violence (or violation) and institutional violence (or violation) would be a further complication, insofar as these producers of negative happenings do involve intention and choice, but these are more collective, composite, and diffuse, meaning they are a mix of impersonal and personal elements.

are meant to show that each of the causes of negative happenings in the right column can have the full range of subjective impacts and objective outcomes. Weather can produce deadly horror just as acts by humans can; conversely, moral acts by human agents can be mere hindrances to us, just as the weather sometimes is.

Why have a map?

By this point, you might be asking: Why is it necessary to display and map all these complications? One possible answer is that it's simply worthwhile to explore a fuller, richer account of human experiences, including the negative ones. If it's true that our negative experiences come in an array of intensities and relationships, then it's good, at least to some degree, to see and speak that truth, even if we don't immediately know what consequences might come of it. But perhaps a better answer is that once we see this larger, more complex display of negative happenings, we can step back from how we currently navigate them and consider alternatives. We might find, for example, that in our current thought and practice, there is a narrowness and imprecision in our noticing and naming of negative happenings, which contributes to narrowness and imprecision in developing spiritual and moral practices for engaging those negative happenings. As finite creatures, we also often map the "same" experiences in different categories of intensity of impact or outcome: The same negative happening to me, when seen by another, might be placed in different categories of outcome by them than by me.[7] We may encounter mismatches between negative happenings and the obligations we might have as observers, participants, or perpetrators with respect to those happenings. This is true for both interpersonal behavior and professional guidance (like pastoral care).

For example, we sometimes under-respond to possibly dangerous harms because they are felt or treated like difficult hurts, especially when perpetrated by respected figures or trusted institutions. Conversely, "harm" is commonly overused, referring to everything from a bad day to a devastating violation. Applying hurt-level responses to harms—treating genuine moral injury as "just a misunderstanding" or "something we all need to move past"—fails the person harmed, enables the one who caused harm to escape accountability, and leaves our relationships damaged. Conversely, mere hindrances and hurts caused by the motive, intention, and choice of others (however clear,

7 More holistic accounts of meaning and knowledge allow us to give an account of how experience and its interpretation come to be and be sustained, showing how experience and its interpretation can be both internally coherent/plausible in first-person discourse, while simultaneously being externally opaque to second- and third- person discourse, as well as the reverse. See Rachel Miller Jacob, *If You Think You've Been Wronged, You're Right: Why Small Hurts Matter* (Fortress Press, forthcoming 2027).

unambiguous, and decisive) are overburdened with the more demanding expectations and obligations that are properly applied to higher-level negative happenings (harms and horrors), thereby depriving us of more modest expectations and obligations for responding to those lower-intensity happenings. Applying harm-level responses to hurts—treating every painful slight as a moral injury—can produce guilt disproportionate to the act, burden relationships with relational processes ill-suited to their scale, and leave the person who was hurt without the more fitting resources they need.

In addition, when responding to higher-intensity negative happenings (harms, hobbles, and horrors), we are often so focused on what is appropriate for the added intensity of those happenings that we overlook what is appropriate for responding to the merely hurtful or hindering elements within them. However, a fuller response to higher-intensity negative happenings would do well to include the expectations and obligations appropriate to lower-intensity negative happenings as well.

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There seem to be rich resources in both personal practice and pastoral care for shaping our expectations and obligations regarding intensely negative events (harms and above). We have practices such as confession, forgiveness, repentance, accountability, justice, and restoration.

But there are few resources in personal practice and pastoral care for cultivating wise and life-giving responses to mere hurts and hindrances, even though they are the most common negative happenings within human relationships. So we need more and better resources for shaping our interpersonal expectations and obligations regarding what we might call moral-but-minimal negative happenings (hindrances and hurts caused by the clear, ambiguous, or ambivalent motives, intentions, and choices of another human).

And we also have very few, if any, resources for attending to our expectations and obligations regarding nonmoral impacts and outcomes from other human beings (accidental and inadvertent consequences of bodies interacting with other bodies). Much of what accumulates in ordinary relationships sits in the nonmoral range: illness, loss, disappointment, and the ordinary friction of life, along with the things we accidentally, inadvertently, and unintentionally do to one another. And we need more and better resources to

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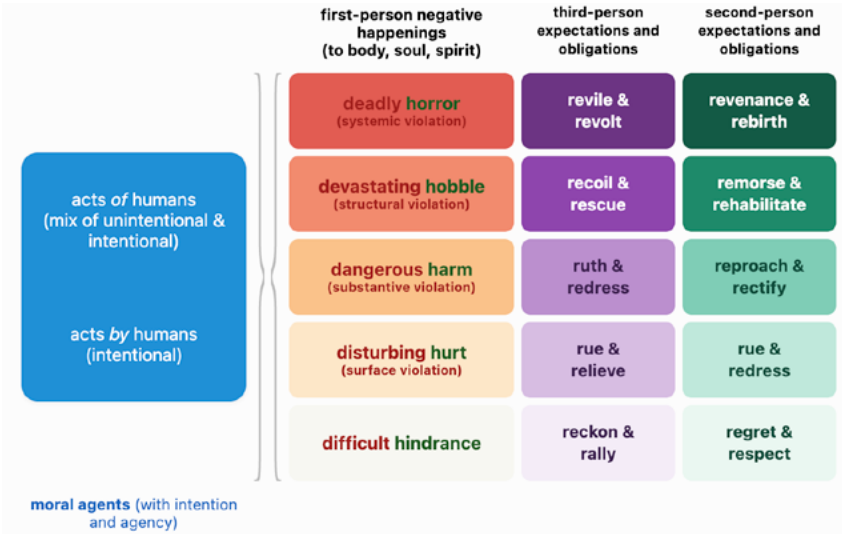
shape our interpersonal expectations and obligations regarding such *nonmoral* negative happenings of all intensities, including the impacts and outcomes produced by other human bodies without any motive, intent, or choice.

Using the map better

The kinds of responses to negative happenings that we develop must be, like the happenings themselves, "nested" or "layered," something like this:

- *Hindrances* call for: acceptance, adjustment, equanimity, the wisdom to distinguish what can be changed from what cannot; resignation in the best sense—not passive defeat but a kind of grounded trust.
- *Hurts* call for everything that hindrances call for, *plus*: acknowledgment of the pain (by self and others), the possibility of expressing regret (even without clear moral fault), and the gentle work of repair in relationship. A statement like "I'm sorry that happened to you, and that I was part of it"—even absent clear malice—can be genuinely healing.
- *Harms* call for everything that hindrances and hurts call for, *plus*: explicit accountability, genuine remorse (not just regret), active remediation, and the slower work of trust-rebuilding.
- *Hobbles* call for everything that hindrances, hurts, and harms call for, *plus*: justice, sustained accompaniment, careful attention to the disruption of the whole person (body, mind, spirit), and patience with the nonlinear, often long journey toward restoration.
- *Horrors* call for everything that hindrance, hurt, harm, and hobbling call for, *plus*: lament for what cannot be restored, bearing witness so the truth isn't lost, vigilance and solidarity so that the violation is not repeated.

It seems that we need two additional columns for our "map"—one for the expectations and obligations we have for observers of negative happenings, and one for participants in (though not perpetrators of) negative happenings. There is some "nesting" here as well: The relationship of participant expectations and obligations will always include the corresponding observer expectations and obligations, along with something more. Whether the cause of the negative happenings is moral (with intent) or nonmoral (unintentional or caused by non-agential "powers"), the larger map might look like this:



As I hope is evident from both additions, some of this terminology is archaic, made up, or unclear, along with relationships among elements that probably need revision. The extensions in the last two columns are intended as working models or starting points. The pairs of terms in each of the observer and participant columns are a gesture toward recognizing that our expectations and obligations in these places have both an interior element having to do with motive, intent, and feeling (the first term in the pair) and an exterior element having to do with action, behavior, and performance (the second term in each pair).

Before concluding, one final point should be noted by way of clarifying and developing the expectations and obligations we have for recipients of negative events in subsequent relationships, as well as for observers, participants, and perpetrators. A negative experience has happened. Observers, participants, and perpetrators have engaged in that negative happening with the recipient. How should the recipient then respond to those engagements? What should their inner motive or feeling be? What should their external action or behavior response be? We need the same kinds of paired terms for the engagement of the person who has experienced a negative happening in the past, seen the responses of observers, participants, and perpetrators, and now needs to engage those responses in the present.[8]

8 This would expand our chart with three more columns: one for the experiencer's subsequent engagement with observers of the initial negative experience, one for subsequent engagement with participants in the initial experience, and one for subsequent engagement with perpetrators of the initial experience.

An example of this: in an Anabaptist Christian perspective, first-person recipients of a negative experience, when engaging with the responses of participants and perpetrators to that experience, are often encouraged to "forgive" or "reconcile," English words that translate Biblical terms. But how are biblical "forgiveness" and "reconciliation" to be understood in light of these larger ranges of negative experiences and possible participant and perpetrator responses? Might responses other than forgiveness or reconciliation be needed? Or might forgiveness and reconciliation be more complex, involving different forms or dimensions? I tend to take "forgiveness" as the internal aspect of a peaceful response to the participants in and perpetrators of all moral (and even some nonmoral) negative happenings, and "reconciliation" to be the external aspect of a peaceful response to the participants in and perpetrators of those same moral negative happenings. And I then go on to speak of different forms of forgiveness and different forms of reconciliation that correspond to the full range of moral (and nonmoral) negative happenings. But I suspect we need a broader "naming" of subsequent recipient responses, including biblical backing and contemporary resonance.[9]

Conclusion

Christian practice, whether interpersonal or professional, involves both noticing and naming. It can include fundamental acts of personal ethics and pastoral care, both a starting point and an orientation for shaping our relational instincts, feelings, and thoughts, which in turn shape our actions, behaviors, and performance. Within our churches, among the wider church, and in the church's engagement with the wider world, much of our conflict and disagreement about both moral and nonmoral matters is rooted in how we notice and name things, since we notice and name differently as individuals, communities, and societies. In this light, having a rich and nuanced set of observations and conceptions regarding negative

9 I do the same for naming our expectations of perpetrators, taking all our expectations for second-person perpetrator feelings (regret, rue, reproach, remorse, revenance) as forms of "apology," and all our expectations for second-person perpetrator actions (respect, redress, rectification, rehabilitation, rebirth) as forms of "repentance." There are different kind of apology and repentance, each corresponding to different negative happenings of which one has been a perpetrator. But it might be that a range of terminology is needed, whether from scripture or our contemporary context. For a further exploration of the complexities of how we understand and talk about such things, including biblical considerations, see Maria Mayo, *The Limits of Forgiveness: Case Studies in the Distortion of a Biblical Ideal* (Fortress Press, 2015); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Journey Toward Justice: Personal Encounters in the Global South* (Baker Academic, 2013), especially chapter 28, "Justice, Forgiveness, and Punishment"; and James K. Voiss, SJ, *Rethinking Christian Forgiveness: Theological, Philosophical, and Psychological Explorations* (Liturgical Press, 2015).

happenings is not an act of taxonomy for its own sake, but rather an effort to widen the map of the field in which our lives take place, offering shared reference points and enriching our capacity to understand and care for our finite and fragile limits in our relationships with each other, the divine, and the more-than-human world.

About the author

Tim Peebles is a husband, father, theologian, Mennonite pastor, and martial artist, with a love of heavy metal music, horror movies, and whiskey.