

UNITED WISDOM

One word, different concepts: a trap in comparative reading

World and Consciousness

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W-04-N02 · EN

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Epigraph

> *“words which in translations and dictionaries are supposed to answer one another”*

John Locke, An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding, III.V.8. Short exact fragment from the historical English text. The continuation concerning nonidentical complex ideas is discussed in section III.

What this article is about

Two writers speak of peace, freedom, or knowledge, and readers may immediately recognize a shared teaching. Similarity can help identify a common question. But a familiar word can refer to different things, connect with different contrasts, and permit different conclusions. This is especially easy to miss when several traditions are read in one translated language. This article examines a concept's work within a particular argument. Selected passages from Aristotle, Locke, Augustine, and Kant show why naming is not yet asserting, dictionary correspondence does not guarantee identical boundaries, and peace changes its role with a text's purpose. This is no complete survey of these thinkers or current legal definition of peace. It offers comparative reading in which similarities become more precise and differences do not require declaring another text meaningless. We can name what was compared, on which grounds, and which question remains open.

I. A similarity that needs further reading

Imagine a reader collecting expressions about inner peace, civic peace, and peace between states. A repeated word suggests that every writer describes one condition of agreement. This attractive beginning is still a hypothesis. Who agrees, what disrupts agreement, and what result is required? A calm person can inhabit a divided society; fighting can cease without trust; a settled order can retain inequalities another writer rejects. These hypothetical possibilities do not refute the historical texts. They reveal questions lost when a shared word is already treated as evidence of unity. Comparison gains substance when repetition opens inquiry rather than closes it before the actual statements have been examined.

The opposite rush declares comparison impossible as soon as a difference appears. Yet differences can be intelligible and discussable. Two arguments may answer a common question differently or use a term for neighbouring questions. Name the connection without

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complete identification. Both might consider conditions for lasting coexistence while defining their worth differently. This modest formulation permits further reading, agreement on one point, and disagreement on another. Comparison need not yield an identical answer to help understanding. Sometimes its result is a precise account of the dispute. That result is stronger than either an assumed secret unity or a refusal to consider what the texts could clarify for each other.

Keep the scale of the work clear. Four fragments represent neither all ancient thought nor all Christian and Enlightenment teachings. One writer also changes questions between works. We can compare passages actually read, retaining names, editions, and boundaries. A conclusion about a tradition would need more. Limits do not prevent discovering a useful distinction now; they identify its weight. In translation, shared wording may also belong to translators. Readers therefore have reason to examine transmission rather than assume that familiar sounds directly unite people separated by languages, periods, and purposes. The meeting can remain worthwhile while its extent is specified and broader possibilities remain questions for subsequent reading.

II. Name, concept, and assertion

In On Interpretation Part 1, Aristotle distinguishes expressions without truth or falsity from combinations in which assertion arises. A name alone does not perform the same work as stating existence or a property. Part 2 describes a name as significant by convention. This is philosophical analysis of speech, not a modern experimental language model. Its bounded question for us is whether we have compared a label or what someone asserts through it. Matching words in two columns is insufficient. Restore the relationships through which a term participates in thought, instead of granting one name the evidential force of an entire sentence or the conclusions that sentence would need to support.

Here concept means a working distinction: what is included, excluded, and connected to other judgments. This editorial definition does not reconstruct Aristotle's complete theory of concepts. Imagine two organizations' notes using independence. One means performing tasks without prompts; another means having authority to choose goals. A shared name establishes no conceptual match. Someone may carry out assignments proficiently without deciding which assignments to accept. Ask about criteria, cases, and consequences. The text can then answer questions absent from a dictionary entry. A word has become a route into reasoning rather than a substitute for finding out what the speaker means by it in these particular circumstances.

Assertion adds another task: saying what is true, possible, or desirable. Independence is useful differs from independence is permitted here, even with an identical meaning of the noun. One evaluates; another states a condition of action. Comparative collections of expressive nouns

easily lose this difference. A writer may describe experience, recommend a life, or explain reality. Statements can concern one subject without answering one question. Keep the verb and nearby qualifications with the term. This small step settles no entire philosophical problem, but makes comparison more precise: the commitments of a particular utterance become visible, along with commitments readers added themselves without finding them in the text.

III. Where dictionary correspondence ends

In Essay III.V.8, Locke warns that dictionary and translation equivalents may not express the same precisely bounded complex idea. He also gives measures whose names translate conveniently despite differing quantities. This historical philosophical argument provides no present statistic about dictionaries' accuracy. Its relevant form is that convenient passage between labels does not establish identical content. A dictionary assists the start of reading; use decides conceptual boundaries. Historical comparisons of languages in the paragraph are not adopted as judgments of their current capacities or grounds for cultural hierarchy. The limited warning allows a concrete question about correspondence without turning the text into a survey that was never performed.

Boundaries appear through cases one text includes and another excludes. Consider an invented term, agreement. One account means no objections voiced at a meeting; another means a freely and explicitly expressed choice. Silence is classified differently. A boundary case helps: someone attended and said nothing. If one text accepts that as sufficient and another does not, a substantive difference appears. The example establishes no correct rule for an actual contract. It shows how to read a definition: seek not only a positive account but circumstances in which application changes and a conclusion no longer follows. This can clarify the difference while leaving its normative merits for a separate examination.

One boundary case does not exhaust a concept. A later passage may add an exception or reveal irony. Check the surrounding context and record a question when support is insufficient. Distinguish a translation error from actual disagreement between writers. Awkward language can obscure close ideas; fluent language can combine different ones. Without the original, not every case can be decided confidently. But readers lacking that language can notice a need for checking and retain both whole sentences. Their work is useful when a doubt becomes neither evidence of complete incompatibility nor something concealed behind a familiar label. A precise question can be passed to someone able to assess the missing part.

IV. Augustine's several kinds of peace

At the beginning of City of God XIX.13, Augustine distinguishes peace of body, soul, household, citizens, and the heavenly city through ordered relationships. In Marcus Dods's historical translation, heavenly peace concerns enjoyment of God and one another in God. This is theology rather than modern political or psychological measurement. Good mood does not capture its distinctions; household relations of rule and obedience cannot automatically become today's family norm. This is a limited historical passage. Present practical norms need their own grounds. Notice how one term takes different relationships within a particular horizon of meaning, instead of translating every occurrence into one current and conveniently agreeable experience.

Suppose someone extracts tranquillity of order and places it beside a person's statement that they have finally calmed down. Personal resonance is possible; textual equivalence remains unestablished. The historical passage concerns more than feeling and includes grounds the personal account need not accept. Both can provoke thought about coherence while retaining different objects and criteria. Claiming that Augustine describes a relaxation method would require additional work. The encounter need not make that claim to be valuable. An explicit boundary can reveal an unfamiliar thought rather than return our familiar thought under someone else's name. Recognition may remain personally meaningful without doing the work of establishing what the historical author meant.

The most convenient quotation can hide the most differences. Offer peace without its kind or grounds and readers supply the rest. One fills the gap religiously, another politically, another personally. Discussion may appear agreed until conclusions are examined. Return the formula to its sentence and location. Which order is discussed, whose concord matters, and what is the highest aim? Readers can understand an answer without agreeing. This respects the text because it need not confirm everything now associated with a familiar word. A quotation becomes usable with its conditions intact rather than a blank surface onto which each participant projects a preferred meaning and calls it shared understanding.

V. Peace and truce in Kant's first condition

Kant's first preliminary article in Perpetual Peace rejects a peace treaty containing a secret reservation for future war. In Mary Campbell Smith's historical translation, such an arrangement is merely a suspension of hostilities, not peace. This is a political philosophical project from 1795, not current legal interpretation of agreements. The entire essay and its conditions were not read here. The selected distinction suffices: the label alone matters less than the relationship between stopping conflict and intending to resume it. No current war is assessed through this passage. It shows the additional work a concept does within one argument, without turning historical philosophy into a judgment on unread contemporary evidence.

Imagine participants in a shared undertaking declaring a dispute ended while one intends to revive it at the first opportunity. The other hears closure although only a pause has been agreed. This contemporary analogy does not place a private conversation under every condition of Kant's project. It reveals the distinction between a present state and its continuation. Peace alone states no commitments. Ask what ends, what remains, and on what grounds the arrangement is considered lasting. Otherwise shared praise for a word masks different expectations that emerge at the next difficulty. The analogy illustrates the question while leaving the actual source's object, states and their relations, distinct from the invented conversation.

Comparison with Augustine can now become precise. Kant's selected passage concerns a treaty between states and reserved future hostility. Augustine's distributes peace across ordered relationships and includes a theological aim. Both invite thought about conditions of peace, but no identical definition follows. We have not compared all Kant's political arguments with all Augustine's. A large conclusion should not fill that gap. A limited result already exists: one translated word connects differently structured questions. Identify the object, nearby contrast, and stated grounds before claiming agreement or contradiction. These steps help preserve the meeting between texts without pretending that a short fragment represents the complete account either author gives of the subject.

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VI. What a concept allows us to infer

Concepts also appear through the inferences they permit. Calling a situation peaceful might let us stop expecting attack, call its order just, or say a person feels calm. Those are different conclusions. One text may support the first, another the second, and another only the last. A word does not transport every inference. Try continuing with therefore. If the continuation changes the object or adds an unstated condition, a jump appears. This is an authorial reading device rather than a formal proof procedure. It makes visible a transition previously hidden by familiar wording and positive evaluation. Its purpose is to identify a question, not certify that every argument using the word is wrong.

An invented note says the room is quiet, therefore everyone agrees. The observation concerns sound; the conclusion concerns positions. Grounds are needed between them. Agreement may have been expressed earlier, nobody may wish to speak, or participants may be tired. None becomes fact from the short sentence alone. Comparative reading makes similar jumps between concord, peace, and justice. If a writer supports the transition, read the argument. If readers added it, they should not attribute it to the source. Semantic resemblance is then separated from the convenience of our narrative, and an argument returns to the person who actually made it with the reasons that person supplied.

This does not put concepts into impermeable boxes. Writers can relate calm, order, and justice or dispute that relationship. The connection needs its own examination. Calling terms synonyms and then offering a resulting inference as proof of equality is circular. Record the intermediate claim and grounds: why should this relationship support that evaluation? Historical, theological, legal, and personal grounds remain distinguishable. People can agree on a practical step without a shared worldview. That is valuable but different from identical concepts. Name it clearly so cooperation does not depend on inventing unity among all the reasons people have for being willing to act together in a particular situation.

VII. Description and approval

A favourable term can silently combine description with approval. Order may indicate stable organization or imply proper organization. Freedom may name a capacity or commend a way of living. A text can reasonably connect these tasks, but the connection should be read rather than supplied by the noun. Two writers praising peace have not thereby shown which conditions deserve their praise. Our bounded historical comparison must not erase one text's theological grounds or the other's political conditions to produce an equally pleasing phrase. Approval gains precision with its object. Readers can then ask whether the criteria match instead of concluding that the warmth of the language has already established agreement.

Imagine an institution carrying out decisions without visible dispute. Stability may be accurately described, yet access to explanation, disagreement, and exit remains unestablished. Calling it harmonious may close questions about how possibilities are distributed. Elsewhere open dispute may coexist with rules and respect, despite appearing less calm. These examples evaluate no actual organization; they show why normative judgment needs another criterion. One writer may value absence of disagreement most, another the opportunity to discuss disagreement. Shared praise of concord then hides different answers about worthwhile coexistence. The difference matters even if both terms seem positive, because different practices may follow from the respective grounds offered for that praise.

Historical context need neither excuse everything nor prohibit moral questioning. Establish what a source says, then separately name personal evaluation. Understanding does not require approval; approving one thought does not approve every ground. Adapting a useful historical question for present life should be labelled rather than presented as the whole system. Learning and disagreement can coexist. This also protects others from being required to submit to an old hierarchy merely because its description uses a word now sounding warm and promising unity. The historical argument remains available for examination while a present demand must explain its own grounds and cannot acquire authority simply by borrowing the quotation's favourable vocabulary.

VIII. Keep the level of the question clear

Texts can differ in level: one concerns a person's state, another participants' relations, another society, another life's highest aim. Moving a conclusion between levels needs an additional argument. Personal calm establishes no peace between states; a stable civic agreement does not describe everyone's day. Mutual influence is not identity. This is an editorial question about scope, not a complete social theory. Ask who or what is the sentence's subject and retain that subject in paraphrase rather than expanding it to everyone across all time. The original observation may remain valuable without supporting the broader statement, and a limited conclusion can be strengthened later through appropriately broader evidence.

Someone writes that they now understand why they work. An editor turns that into proof that meaning is available to everyone in the organization. Personal testimony became collective assertion without support. The reverse jump is equally rash: an institutional goal does not establish every employee's satisfaction. In comparative religious and philosophical reading, one narrator's experience can similarly become a whole tradition's doctrine, or a system's proposition can be assigned to every follower's internal state. Restore the scale: who spoke, about which case, and in what capacity? These details limit inference without erasing the message's value. They identify what is known and which additional claim still needs examination on its own terms.

Levels may also be connected deliberately. A writer explains how social organization relates to personal good or how orientation toward a highest aim changes everyday action. Look for the bridge rather than assuming impossibility. Two writers' ways of supporting such a bridge can be compared. They may share an outcome but differ about mechanism or suggest similar action for different goals. That says more than declaring that soul and politics can never meet. Yet it requires transitions actually read. With only a short quotation, the supposed bridge remains a question rather than established source content. A meaningful connection can be sought without being filled in on the author's behalf from the reader's expectations.

IX. Contradiction must also be established

Difference is not always contradiction. Contradictory statements need a shared object, comparable conditions, and mutual exclusion. Civic peace and bodily repose can have different features without creating a direct dispute. Two accounts of one treaty, one accepting a condition and another rejecting it, offer stronger grounds for disagreement. Even then qualifications matter. A negation added for clarity by a translator differs from the author's negation. Preserve the assertion rather than matching names alone. Our approach proves no automatic compatibility; it identifies where contradiction is shown and where merely supposed. Both disagreement and agreement become more informative when their precise objects and grounds survive the comparison instead of disappearing behind the shared word.

Nor does assigning texts to different questions establish complete compatibility. They may dispute the highest aim, criteria of justice, or grounds of knowledge. If the available passages do not settle that, read another. Everyone is right in their own way can close inquiry as early as they are incompatible. It removes the question of what authors consider true and why. Retain specific uncertainty instead: one usage was compared, but the broader criterion was not. The next source can then be sought purposefully. Uncertainty has an address and can shrink through work, rather than becoming a convenient declaration about worldviews that no further reading is allowed to alter or qualify.

Aristotle and Locke also require this care. Aristotle's opening concerns signs and shared experiences represented by them; the selected Locke passage concerns complex ideas' boundaries and dictionary correspondence. A few sentences cannot adjudicate their complete theories. Identify the passages' distinct tasks and ask how each account explains moving from a name to judgment. That is already comparative work. Neither thinker thereby becomes an advocate of one modern procedure or the other's opponent throughout the language question. A precise boundary protects against both easy inventions: total agreement and total separation without sufficient reading. A later comparison can examine the broader relationship when the necessary texts and grounds have actually been assembled.

X. Similarity after examination

After clarification, similarity can become smaller and more substantial. Rather than identical definitions of peace, we find a shared question about lasting relationships and different accounts of worthy order or ended hostility. Rather than one doctrine of words, we find bounded questions about signs and complex ideas' correspondence. This map preserves interest in common human searches without appropriating another voice. Commonality becomes a grounded conclusion, not the compulsory outcome of every reading. Less similarity is a result too: we know which expressions can be compared and why others need a different question. The discovery can guide further inquiry rather than be concealed because it disappoints an expectation of universal agreement.

Comparison can assist everyday discussion as well. People discover that responsibility means accepting consequences to one and authority to decide to another. Clarification may reveal a needed agreement about who decides and who answers for outcomes. This invented analogy is no empirically established way to eliminate conflict. Real disagreement can remain after complete clarity. But the issue no longer depends on substituted meanings: shared questions and unresolved decisions become visible. Sometimes naming two concepts and agreeing on action is more useful than demanding acceptance of a broad formula everyone interprets differently. A limited agreement can remain valuable precisely because it does not claim more conceptual unity than participants have actually established.

Comparative reading moves between curiosity and checking. A familiar word attracts attention; a sentence clarifies its work; context identifies boundaries; comparison reveals similarities and differences. This need not make every attractive quotation suspect. It permits careful use and a return to sources when conclusions grow stronger. Another text owes no confirmation of our favourite idea. It may offer a question, limit confidence, or suggest grounds not yet accepted. Respect permits that encounter. Different voices remain different even after a shared translated word stops misleading us. The comparison has done useful work when readers can preserve those differences and still explain the connection they found, rather than having to silence one text to maintain the desired agreement.

What this means in practice

For a voluntary exercise, choose two short passages with the same important term. Save whole sentences, nearby paragraphs, writers, works, and translators. Ask what each denotes, contrasts with, and asserts. Begin without judging an entire tradition. Mark an unchecked original language. This organizes reading; psychological efficacy and effects on decision quality are not established. One pair can suffice. Stop if further notes do not help or turn curiosity into a requirement to prove every text identical. The aim is a concrete comparison that another reader can inspect, not a complete map of philosophies or a demand to reconcile every difference before the current reading can continue.

Next suggest a boundary case: what would one passage include under the term that another might exclude? Use grounds in the passage. Label guesses. Examine the next inference: can therefore follow without introducing a new condition? Separate description, approval, and a practical demand. For professional decisions this home comparison cannot replace appropriate checking. In conversation, ask about personal usage without requiring someone to represent a language or tradition. The reply primarily clarifies their current statement. That scope preserves the value of their explanation without converting it into evidence about every historical use of a word or the beliefs of everyone who shares the same language.

Finish with three lines: similarity, difference, and remaining question. For example, both passages concern lasting relationships; evaluative grounds differ; conditions of shared action remain uncompared. This is a form, not a conclusion about arbitrary writers. Keep references and the earlier formulation available for new information. When quoting publicly, retain qualifications on which meaning depends. A sufficiently precise limited result helps more than an unsupported final declaration. You can value a similarity while allowing another text to say more, or differently, on the next reading. The record should make that revision possible without pretending that the earlier comparison already established everything the sources could eventually contribute.

Key quotation

> *“The peace of all things is the tranquillity of order.”*

Augustine, The City of God, XIX.13. Short sentence from Marcus Dods's English translation. Theological and historical context is retained rather than replaced by a modern psychological meaning of tranquillity.

Connections between traditions

Comparison	What can be compared	What should remain distinct
Aristotle, On Interpretation1–2 — LockeIII.V.8	A name's work and relation to content	Signs of experience and complex ideas' boundaries serve different tasks; full theoretical compatibility is unestablished here.
AugustineXIX.13 — Kant, preliminary article1	Conditions of peace in selected passages	Ordered relations with a theological goal and a treaty/truce distinction yield no identical definition.
Aristotle1 — AugustineXIX.13	A name and assertions about its subject	Speech analysis does not establish theological grounds for the kinds of peace listed.
Aristotle1–2 — Kant, preliminary article1	A treaty's name and a condition for judgment	Naming establishes no fulfilled political requirement; a historical project is no current legal determination.
LockeIII.V.8 — AugustineXIX.13	Shared wording and distinct boundaries	Dictionary correspondence differs from kinds of order; one term does not imply one object.
LockeIII.V.8 — Kant, preliminary article1	An equivalent label and a distinguishing criterion	A convenient equivalent does not convey every condition of an argument about peace and future hostility.

Primary sources

1. Aristotle, On Interpretation, parts1–2. Historical E. M. Edghill translation; expressions, assertion, and conventional naming read. No complete psychology or Greek collation.

2. John Locke, An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding, III.V.8. Historical English text; paragraph read with neighbouring7–10. No comprehensive language survey or full-book reading.

3. Augustine, The City of God, XIX.13. Marcus Dods translation,1887 Philip Schaff edition, New Advent revision. Opening account of peace and conclusion on temporal/eternal peace read; no complete treatise or Latin collation.

4. Immanuel Kant, Perpetual Peace, First Section, preliminary article1. M. Campbell Smith translation, first edition1903, displayed later impression. First article and explanation read; R. Latta's preface distinguished from Kant's text. No complete essay or German collation.

Tags

comparative-reading, concepts, words, meaning, translation, context, philosophy-of-language, Aristotle, Locke, Augustine, Kant, peace, truce, order, agreement, assertion, dictionaries, conceptual-boundaries, criteria, premises, inference, normative-judgment, description, intercultural-dialogue, primary-sources, historical-context, Christian-philosophy, political-philosophy, right-to-difference, United-Wisdom

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