

# **Christian Agapē and Platonic Eros: How Different and Similar Are They?**

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## **Introduction**

The essay, as the title suggests, focuses on the two concepts of love in the understandings of Christianity and Classical Greek (Socratic-Platonic) philosophy, the two fundamental and overwhelming thoughts having shaped the so-called western civilization throughout history.

The emotionally originated affection for someone is employed as the common and primordial basis for meaningful comparison and elaboration; its mechanism is an important issue in such subjects as psychology and biology, but is irrelevant here.

Definitions of the two specific terms, *Agapē* and *Eros*, both having the ancient Greek as the etymological origin, are provided as follows. *Agapē* is the spiritual love the Christian “God has for us persons, as well as our love for God and, by extension, of our love for each other” (Helm “Love”). *Eros*, on the other hand, means the “love in the sense of a kind of passionate desire for an object” (“Love”). Among the various versions of *Eros* presented in *Symposium*, that of Socrates’ portrayed by Plato is used.

## Analysis

### i. Origin: God in *Agapē* vs. Self in *Eros*

Merely glancing over the definitions stated above is sufficient to arrive at this conclusion. The Christian love originates from the Christian God, and the various forms of love existing in the world are understood to be reflections of that love from God. The three following short excerpts from the New Testament justify this point with utmost concision: “God *is* Love” (*New American Standard Bible*, 1 John 4.8; italic mine); and being Love itself, “God so loved the [people in the] world” (John 3.16; interpolation mine). As a result, “We love, because He first loved us” (1 John 4.19).

The Socratic-Platonic sense of love, however, is not parallel to its Christian counterpart for being a divine gift; instead, it is a self-produced desire for becoming better, evoked by a medium of beauty, and practised by one in “the intermediate class” between the contrasting states of being “wise and resourceful”, and that of being “foolish and resourceless” (Plato 204b). This is indeed symbolized in the unusual choice of Eros’ parentage, of which, Resource and Poverty were set to be Eros’ father and mother respectively (204b), replacing Aphrodite’s role as his mother in common Greek mythology.

It is worth-mentioning that the emotional affection shared by the two kinds of love, stated in the introduction, should be comprehended differently in their respective contexts. As for *Agapē*, the affection is only the *effect*, with God being the *cause*; whereas in the case of *Eros*, the affection *coincides* with *Eros*, the desire, itself.

### ii. Hierarchical Status: *Agapē* as End/Aim vs. *Eros* as Means

*Agapē* is not simply the gift, but also the compulsory command of God. When asked what the foremost commandment is, after stating the sole-

ness of God in common with Judaism, Jesus answered the two foremost commandments of God over men are, firstly, to “love . . . your God with all heart, . . . soul, . . . mind, . . . and . . . strength” (Mark 12.30), and secondly, to “love your neighbour as yourself” (Mark 12.31). Hence, loving the Christian God, and thus all men created by him from the *inside*, “much more than all” external expressions of “burnt offerings and sacrifices” (Mark 12.33), are in themselves the ends in Christianity.

*Eros* as the self-generated desire conjured up through a medium of beauty, by nature, is not an extra-imposed command; instead, it is instrumental in pursuing something lovable, of which the object pursued is the subject of the next section.

Before proceeding, a brief section about the role of self in the two concepts of love is given for conceptual clarification. Self obviously plays a crucial role in *Eros*, making it tempting for us to deliberately contrast *Agapē* with its counterpart by proclaiming the Christian love to be *selfless*. Certainly, *Agapē* is altruistic, but self-love is *not* denied, or else the commandment of loving “your neighbour as *yourself*” (Mark 12.31; italic mine) would be paradoxical; nonetheless, the Christian self-love, unlike that of *Eros* as desire, is *still* a divine-imposed command, for oneself is too a human and thus supposed to be loved.

### iii. Object Loved: Human in *Agapē* vs. Goodness in *Eros*

Concerning *Agapē*, it has already been illustrated that to love the fellow men is commanded by God. If we further adopt such humanist view that religions are cultural products of humanity, the Christian God, who “created man in His own image” (Gen 1.27), can be interpreted reciprocally as a concept created by people according to their own image, but in a flawless form, eternal and eternally good. This helps us consistently understand the

centrality of human being *as such* in the Christian faith, as shown by the very fact that the object worshipped is the “perfect” form of human.

This is not so for *Eros*. In the Socratic-Platonic understanding, “the good is the only object of human love” (Plato 206) i.e. the object of *Eros*. An ingenious analogy given in the text pinpoints the use of the word “love” in common sense is confined merely to “one particular mode of loving” (205d), instead of the love in the macro and complete sense, in which the lovers universally “regard the good as their own property, and evil as alien to them” (206).

**iv. Ultimate Purpose: Eternity/Immortality in both *Agapē* and *Eros***

Up to this point, the two kinds of love are presented as if they are entirely contrasting. In essence, though, this is not true. Both concepts actually hold immortality, despite manifesting in different manners, as the underlying notion.

Regarding *Agapē*, immortality takes the literal form in human flesh, symbolized in the series of miracles including the Crucifixion of Jesus (Mark 15.33–46), his Resurrection in the human form three days later from the dead (Mark 16), and eventually he being “received up into heaven” directly (Mark 16.19), altogether acting as “the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation” (Mark 16.19), with the premise that one practises the Christian faith wholeheartedly according to the commandments of love previously discussed. Such supernatural doings of Jesus, along with his other miracles, are core to the faith as they help assure the believers that the seemingly incomprehensible literal-immortality in the Kingdom of God is true, “for all things are possible with God” (Mark 10.27).

Regarding *Eros*, immortality takes the metaphysical form, in the realm of idea. The Platonic love, indeed, “is the desire to use beauty to beget

and bear offspring” (Plato 206e) “for permanent possession of the good” (206). The Socratic-Platonic view takes the death of physical body as the inevitable *fait accompli*; therefore, immortality cannot exist physically. Following this logic, the literal human offspring produced by sexual intercourse, again doomed to decay, are considered inferior to the thoughts produced by intellectual intercourse (/communication) (209). Using the “better” latter as the start, one ascends from the figurative ladder of love: from physical to conceptual, and from particular to general, until the *Idea* of beauty, spaceless, timeless, changeless, real, and ultimately, perfectly good, is approached (211–211c), earning one “the friendship of the gods and makes him . . . immortal” (212).

To conclude the analysis, I would like to interpret the reasons behind the two preferred, specific models of personal love in *Agapē* and *Eros* respectively, by continuing the reasoning thus far. Heterosexual marriage aiming to produce children is the partial realization of immortality in human flesh, thus, preferred in Christianity; while the necessity of marriage, as a bond with contract, manifests the deontological spirit of the commandments of love. The homosexual intimate relation preferred in the ancient Greek context, with its sexist presumption of female being incapable of intellectual engagements, was considered life-enhancing due to the intellectual communication involved, which is essential for the realization of the Greek version of immortality.

## **Commentary**

### **i. Concerning Human Nature**

Philosophers and thinkers have defined human nature in various ways, making it particularly difficult to pick a definition without over-generalizing. Some, like anthropologist Clifford Geertz, have even gone

to the extreme that “there is no . . . human nature independent of culture” (qtd. in “Human Nature and Anthropology–Anthropology”). For constructive discussion, I would acknowledge that human nature has multiple facets. The subject matter then becomes *which* of the facets are focused on. I opine that *Agapē* is based on the negative facets, while *Eros* on the positive facets.

Christian love, as both the grace and command from the personalized God for the sole salvation of human beings, who are, in the Christian understanding, “sinful” due to Adam and Eve’s violation of God’s command (Gen 3), implies the impossibility for men *themselves* to transcend their own existential limits. Even when salvation is received through faith towards the non-self being, one only returns to the originally immortal state as a non-degenerated man, “like angels in heaven” (Mark 12.25) but nothing more.

*Eros*, on the contrary, as shown in its English derivative “erotic”, originates from the self-centered and physical desire, considered sinful in Christianity; nevertheless, Plato firmly believed in humanity’s *own* ability to transcend such desire through reasoning, thus, becoming more than being merely human. The core importance of intellectuality in general, is chiefly expressed in the text that the lover’s ultimate purpose is to rationally “understand[s] what true beauty is” (211c), as well as through the dialectic dialogue between Socrates and Agathon, showing the significance of truth. This idea of transcendental self-love has been enormously influential on subsequent western thinkers, of which its essence can be found in the other concepts taught, for instance, Aristotle’s *Philia*, and *common good* from Rousseau’s political perspective along with Adam Smith’s economic perspective.

**ii. Concerning Life Situations**

From the above, it seems plausible to suggest that *Agapē* is preferred amid formidable difficulty, to the extent that one simply cannot overcome it both factually and mentally, thereby resorting to that faith from outside; otherwise, when one is in a positive state, and faithful in oneself for the pursuit of intellectuality, Platonic *Eros* would likely be the inclined mode of love.

Such results, of course, hardly materialize in reality, where its contexts and causations are immensely complex. The simple fact that people are exposed to more concepts of love than the two discussed is indeed enough to refute the imaginary situations proposed in the last paragraph; but still, I provide the situations, for the sake of feasibly constructive discussion within the scope of this essay and my ability.

**iii. Concerning Own Life Experience and Character**

After all, it is irrational to conceive that I myself am able to observe and analyze in a totally impartial manner, unless having reached the state of “Tao” conveyed in *Zhuangzi*, which, needless to say, is not the case. Hence, my personal preferences influencing my views and judgments throughout the essay are to be presented for the readers’ reference.

Personally, I have had a preference for abstractness; for example, as a child, I was quite naturally inclined to the purely instrumental classical music instead of songs with words expressing concrete meanings. This should make me vote for *Eros*, *ceteris paribus*. However, influenced by Christianity during my childhood, I have taken commands and obligations, especially when morality is concerned, seriously to the point that I quite intuitively look at the Christian model as the ought-to-be one, because of

its deontological nature. The mental tension resulted leads to my inability to rank the two.

## Coda

In both the course and the essay, *Agapē* and *Eros* are treated as if they are completely separable concepts. Working on this, however, I accidentally discovered the term “Augustinian Platonism” (“Platonism”), showing that Plato’s ideas have already been incorporated into Christian theology even before the medieval period, during the era of the late Roman Empire when St. Augustine was active. Therefore, is it possible for us, in the 21st century, to comprehend the two as completely independent ideas? Or should we, according to Thích Nhất Hạnh, view them with “interbeing” in mind? Both questions I have yet to think about, but I hope they can provide some insights, no matter how trivial, into the dialogue with humanity.

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### **Teacher's comment:**

Rarely found in the work of an undergraduate student, this essay captures the theses of love in an ontological sense, and presents a subtle comparison of Agapē and Eros—two prominent ideas of love in the western tradition—that reasonably manifests the transcendental function of love to ease the desire of immortality. With reference to the *Bible* and Plato's *Symposium*, this essay precisely brings out the nature of love and its influence on oneself from the worldview of Christianity and Platonic rationalism. Throughout the essay, the author shows thorough understanding of the texts, and a compassion for human being falling into the dilemma of struggling between the two notions.  
(Leung Cheuk Hang)