

# The Concept of Eros in Plato's Philosophy and the Concept of Agape in Christian Thought

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper delves into the philosophical underpinnings and theological significance of the concepts of Eros and Agape, exploring their origins, and implications in their respective contexts. In examining Plato's dialogues "Symposium" and "Phaedrus," the fundamental aspects of Eros in his philosophy are investigated, discussing its enduring influence and relevance today. Following this, the concept of Agape in Christian thought is explored, focusing on its presentation in the New Testament and the innovative perspectives it brought to the understanding of love. Key aspects of Agape love in Christian thought are identified, illustrating how Agape reconsiders religious and moral values, transforming traditional thinking. The paper concludes by discussing the opposition and similarities between Eros and Agape, emphasizing that interdisciplinary research on love is prolific and remains open to new avenues of investigation. Both concepts challenge individuals to transcend immediate desires and embrace a more expansive vision of love, encompassing personal growth and selfless devotion. The ongoing dialogue between Eros and Agape continues to enrich our understanding of love and its role in the human experience, providing practical guidance for living a life grounded in love, wisdom, and compassion.

**KEYWORDS:** eros, agape, Plato, Christian thought, love

## **Introduction**

The concepts of love, in their various forms, have been central to human thought and experience throughout history. Two of the most profound and influential interpretations of love come from Plato and Christian theology (Rotaru 2005a, 187-196), embodied in the ideas of "eros" and "agape" respectively. The concepts of Eros and Agape represent two distinct yet profoundly influential interpretations of love within Western thought. Eros, a term deeply rooted in ancient Greek philosophy, particularly in the works of Plato, denotes a passionate and often sensual love that seeks beauty and fulfillment. In contrast, Agape, derived from Christian theological traditions, embodies a selfless, unconditional love that prioritizes the well-being of others (Moseley 2024). This paper explores the philosophical underpinnings, the implications, and the intersections of these two concepts, aiming to illuminate their significance in both ancient and contemporary contexts.

## **Eros in Plato's Philosophy**

In his Theory of Forms, Plato posits that true reality consists of abstract, perfect Forms or Ideas, of which the material world is only an imperfect reflection. Eros motivates the soul to seek knowledge and union with these Forms, particularly the Form of Beauty. Eros thus functions as a driving force that leads the soul from the world of sensory experience to the intellectual apprehension of the Forms, enabling the soul's ascent to a higher state of being and understanding (Allen 2010, 148 – 153). Plato discusses the relationship between Eros and the Theory of Forms primarily in the dialogues "Symposium" and "Phaedrus." In Plato's works, Eros is not merely a physical or erotic attraction but a profound metaphysical force that drives individuals towards the pursuit of beauty, wisdom, and ultimately, the divine. Plato's exploration of Eros is most prominently featured in his dialogues "Symposium" and "Phaedrus." In the "Symposium," Plato presents a series of speeches by different characters, each offering their perspective on Eros. The dialogue culminates in Socrates' recounting of Diotima's teachings, which present a hierarchical view of love, often referred to as the "Ladder of Love." According to Diotima, Eros begins with

the physical attraction to a beautiful body but gradually ascends to the love of all beautiful bodies, then to the love of beautiful souls, and finally to the love of beauty itself, which is eternal and immutable. This ascent represents a journey from the physical to the spiritual, highlighting Eros as a motivating force towards higher knowledge and the divine. In "Phaedrus," Plato further elaborates on the nature of Eros, describing it as a form of divine madness that can lead the soul to recollect the Forms, the perfect and eternal realities beyond the material world. Eros, in this dialogue, serves as a powerful catalyst for spiritual awakening and intellectual growth. The lover, inspired by the beauty of the beloved, is reminded of the true beauty that the soul once knew before its incarnation in the physical world. Thus, Eros is portrayed as a bridge between the mortal and the immortal, the temporal and the eternal (Stanley 2021,12).

### **Symposium and Phedrus**

Eros, in Platonic philosophy, is not merely physical or romantic love but a complex form of love that encompasses a wide range of meanings from physical desire to a deeply spiritual yearning for truth and beauty. The most significant discussions on eros can be found in "The Symposium" and "Phaedrus." "The Symposium" is one of Plato's key dialogues where eros is discussed in depth. It is a series of speeches given by different characters at a banquet, each exploring different aspects of love. The dialogue culminates in Socrates' speech, which relays the teachings of Diotima, a wise woman who instructed him on the nature of eros. In his own speech (178a-180b), Phaedrus discusses (Howatson 2008, 8-10) about the nobility of love, asserting that love is the greatest of the gods and the source of the greatest benefits. He emphasizes the motivational power of love, particularly its role in inspiring heroic deeds. Pausanias (180c-185c) distinguishes between two kinds of love: Common Eros (Pandemian) and Heavenly Eros (Uranian). Common Eros is purely physical and seeks sexual gratification, while Heavenly Eros is intellectual and aims for the mutual growth of lovers (Howatson 2008, 11-17). Eryximachus (185e-188e), a physician, expands the concept of eros to the harmony and order in nature and the human body. He views love as a cosmic force that promotes health and balance. Agathon (194e-197e) praises love as the youngest and most beautiful of the gods, embodying virtues like justice, moderation, and wisdom. He sees love as delicate and gentle (Howatson 2008, 28-31). Socrates (201d-212c), through recounting Diotima's teachings, presents the idea of eros as a ladder of ascent. Starting from physical attraction, one ascends to the love of all physical beauty, then to the love of beautiful souls, the love of beautiful laws and institutions, and finally the love of the Form of Beauty itself. This ultimate love is a philosophical and spiritual quest for truth and wisdom. Socrates recounts Diotima's teachings on the nature of eros, describing it as a ladder of ascent. The journey begins with physical attraction to a beautiful body, which then evolves into the appreciation of beauty in all physical forms. This physical love matures into a deeper affection for beautiful souls, where virtues and character take precedence over mere appearance. As one climbs higher, this love for beautiful souls fosters an admiration for just and noble laws and institutions. Beyond this, there emerges a love of knowledge and wisdom. Ultimately, the pinnacle of this ascent is the love for the Form of Beauty itself, an eternal, perfect, and unchanging ideal (Howatson 2008, 36-50). In conclusion, in "The Symposium," Plato's concept of eros is multifaceted, ranging from physical desire to a deep spiritual and philosophical quest. Eros motivates individuals to seek higher truths and beauty, leading to personal and intellectual growth. This journey, as described by Socrates through Diotima's ladder of love, illustrates how physical attraction can evolve into a profound love for wisdom and the divine.

In "Phaedrus," Plato delves further into the nature of eros, linking it closely with the soul's immortality, and explores the concept of eros concerning the soul, presenting it as a crucial force in the pursuit of truth and divine beauty. Plato presents the nature of the soul (246a-254e) and describes the soul as a charioteer with two horses: one noble and the other unruly. The noble horse represents the rational and spiritual aspects, while the unruly horse symbolizes irrational and physical desires. Eros is the force that propels the soul towards the

divine and the true Forms. Plato presents a detailed allegory to describe the nature of the soul. The soul is depicted as a charioteer guiding two horses: one noble and the other unruly. The charioteer represents reason (*logos*) and the guiding principle of the soul, tasked with harmonizing the two horses to ensure the soul's ascent towards the divine. The noble horse symbolizes the rational, spirited part of the soul (*thumos*), characterized by courage, honor, and the pursuit of noble actions. It is white, well-behaved, and obedient to the charioteer's commands. In contrast, the unruly horse embodies the irrational, appetitive part of the soul (*epitumia*), associated with bodily desires and hedonistic impulses. This dark, wild, and rebellious horse often resists the charioteer's guidance. Eros, or love, acts as a powerful force that propels the soul towards the divine and the true Forms. It awakens a longing for beauty and truth, stirring the soul to rise above mundane desires. In the presence of beauty, especially human beauty, the soul recalls the true, eternal beauty it once knew before its earthly existence, initiating a desire to ascend towards the divine realm. The charioteer's challenge lies in balancing these opposing forces. While the noble horse readily cooperates, the unruly horse constantly seeks to pull the soul back towards physical pleasures (Stanley 2021, 103 – 114). The soul must continuously strive to maintain control and direct its energies towards higher, spiritual goals. Plato's allegory of the charioteer and the two horses illustrates the internal struggle within the soul between rational and irrational forces. Eros, as a divine force, plays a crucial role in this journey, motivating the soul to seek and ascend towards the ultimate truths and the divine Forms. This ascent represents the soul's philosophical and spiritual growth, aiming for a deeper understanding of the eternal realities that underlie the physical world. (Waterfield 2002, 28 - 39).

Plato emphasizes the role of eros in the ascent of the soul (255a-257b) and says that Eros plays a vital role in reminding the soul of the Forms, the eternal and perfect realities. When a person experiences physical beauty, it triggers a recollection of the true Form of Beauty and other Forms, leading the soul on a journey toward greater understanding and enlightenment. Plato delves deeply into the transformative power of eros, highlighting its crucial role in the soul's journey toward the divine and the eternal Forms. According to Plato, the soul is immortal and has encountered the true Forms before its earthly existence. These Forms are perfect, eternal realities that exist beyond the physical world. Eros, or love, serves as a catalyst for the soul to remember these Forms. When an individual experiences physical beauty, it acts as a trigger that reminds the soul of the true Form of Beauty, stirring a deep, almost nostalgic longing for the purity and perfection it once knew. The journey begins with an appreciation of physical beauty, which is not merely a superficial or physical desire but a profound recognition of the beauty that stirs the soul. As the individual contemplates physical beauty, this appreciation expands to include beauty in all physical forms, leading the soul to see beauty universally, not confined to a single body or object. The soul then moves beyond physical beauty to recognize and love the beauty of souls, valuing virtues, moral character, and the inner qualities that make a person truly beautiful. With the love of beautiful souls comes an appreciation for beautiful laws and institutions, recognizing the beauty in just and noble structures that govern society, reflecting higher principles of order and goodness. As the soul ascends further, it seeks knowledge and wisdom, driven by the recognition that true beauty is intertwined with understanding and wisdom. The final stage of the ascent is the love for the Form of Beauty itself, the highest and most abstract form of beauty, representing an ideal that is eternal, unchanging, and perfect. At this pinnacle, the soul no longer seeks beauty in physical forms or even in abstract virtues and institutions but contemplates and loves the pure Form of Beauty, achieving a profound union with the divine. Eros serves as a powerful motivator throughout this journey, driving the soul to ascend from the physical to the spiritual, from the particular to the universal. This divine madness, inspired by eros, propels the soul towards greater understanding and enlightenment, transforming mere physical attraction into a philosophical quest for truth. In "Phaedrus," Plato illustrates how eros is not

merely a physical or emotional experience but a profound force that guides the soul toward the divine. Through the stages of the ascent, eros helps the soul to remember the true Forms and to seek a deeper understanding of eternal realities. This transformative journey underscores the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of love, portraying eros as essential in the soul's pursuit of the highest truths and ultimate beauty (Waterfield 2002, 39 - 42).

### **The key aspects of Eros in Plato's philosophy**

In Plato's philosophy, the Theory of Forms holds a pivotal position. According to his Theory of Forms (Annas 2003, 10), true reality is composed of abstract, perfect Forms or Ideas, with the material world being merely an imperfect reflection of these. Eros drives the soul to seek knowledge and union with these Forms, especially the Form of Beauty. As such, Eros acts as a motivating force that guides the soul from sensory experience to intellectual comprehension of the Forms, facilitating the soul's ascent to a higher state of being and understanding (Ebrey 2022, 291). Plato's Theory of Ideas synthesizes Greek rationalism with Eastern mysticism (Betegh 2022, 239-243). Recognizing these dual conceptual foundations helps us grasp the depth of his philosophy. Plato's view of life and the world is both soteriological and partly rooted in a religious foundation. This is evident in his use of the concepts of logos and mythos (Havelock 2009, 236). In antiquity, there was no clear boundary between philosophy and religion; both dealt with the salvation of the soul, which entailed freeing it from the body and senses and returning it to its heavenly origin. The difference lay in the methods used. The author highlights that mythos is conceptually closer to Eros and the liberation of the soul. To clarify terms: for Plato, logos represents reason and the essence of things, while mythos represents mystery and the salvific narrative. Because mythos focuses on the soul's liberation from the body's prison, Eros aligns more with mythos than with logos. Nygren says that the myth of Eros can even be described as the central Platonic myth, offering the best insight into the deep of Platonic conception (Nygren 1953, 168). The author cautions against neglecting logos, dialectics, and their interconnectedness; soteriologically, they are not separate. Instead, logos and mythos are deeply connected through Eros. Plato effectively synthesizes and unifies the theories of Eros and Ideas, identifying a common fundamental theme of salvation and liberation. The author aims to demonstrate the interdependence between the concept of Eros and Plato's Theory of Ideas. This analysis reveals the dualism inherent in Plato's Theory of Ideas, distinguishing between the sensory world and the world of Ideas (Rotaru 2005b, 142-143). The rational world of knowledge and the sensory world of perceptions coexist but are not equivalent. Humans are called to transition from one world to the other, existing between them and connected to both. This does not imply merging the two worlds within oneself; rather, humans must detach from the inferior, sensory world and ascend to the superior world of Ideas. True reality resides in the world of Ideas, with sensory experiences being mere illusions. Only the world of Ideas holds true value. Thus, Ideas prevail over the senses. The Ideas, by their nature, are not forces and cannot intervene in the sensory world. Eros is the force that activates and materializes this ascent process. Eros is the sole means by which the world of Ideas can overcome the world of senses. While Ideas cannot intervene in the sensory realm, Eros is the real force that enables humans to empower Ideas with strength and life. Eros signifies the shift from the physical to the metaphysical. It represents the soul's inherent drive to ascend and acts as a genuine force drawing the soul towards the realm of Ideas (Nygren 1953, 169-171). This is humanity's calling: through Eros, to reach the superior world of Ideas, achieving liberation and salvation. Thus, philosophy and soteriology converge at this point—Eros. Eros inherently exhibits a dual nature. Plato posits that Eros holds an intermediate position, being neither purely divine nor merely human. He uses the term daimon to illustrate its intermediary nature. Eros mediates between mortal and immortal, wisdom and ignorance. This duality is exemplified in what Plato calls the myth of Eros, or the salvific narrative of Eros. Nonetheless, the author suggests that Eros tends towards the love of beauty and goodness. Beauty itself, as the primary contemplation of Eros, is Being itself. Plato's concept of Eros, as described in his writings, is imbued with mythos. The key

aspects of Plato's conception of love in three main points: eros is love-desire; eros is the path to the divine; eros is self-centered love.

Eros is a Love-Desire. The mediation of Eros lies between having and not having. Consequently, Eros is what the author terms aspiration, fervor, and longing. Thus, individuals desire and crave what they lack and, on the other hand, seek what they consider valuable. Two aspects characterize Plato's Eros: continuous awareness of a deficiency and the desire to fill that void with a higher, happier state. This feeling of lack drives this love-desire and is an essential element. It is a contradiction of terms to speak of a wealthy and generous Eros; one cannot give if one constantly feels deprived and without resources. Nevertheless, it is highlighted that this desire and fervor are directed towards noble, superior things (Obdrzalek 2022, 203-205). This showcases another feature of love-desire: it must be directed towards something of value. There is an interdependence between love and value; they condition each other. One cannot love something devoid of value, just as only something valuable enters the sphere of desire. Therefore, love-desire is motivated by the value of the object towards which the desire is directed. Another essential element in shaping this love-desire is its orientation upwards. "Eros is the longing, the soul's aspiration directed towards the heavenly realm, towards the world of Ideas" (Nygren 1953, 176). This does not mean there is no downward-directed love-desire—an Eros—towards sensuality, towards the sensory world, but this is not the desired outcome of Plato's concept of Eros.

Eros is considered as the Pathway to Divinity (Nygren 1953, 177). Plato attributes religious significance to the concept of Eros by considering it an intermediary and mediator. Eros serves as the conduit for humans to ascend towards divinity. It acts as the bridge between human existence and divine life, guiding individuals towards salvation, perfection, and immortality (Obdrzalek 2022, 213-215). It clarifies that Eros facilitates the human ascent to divinity, rather than divinity descending to humanity. Love is situated entirely on the human side, representing the action and fervor directed towards higher, superior entities. Concurrently, Eros functions as an escape from the sensory world. However, this theory of Eros does not dissolve the fundamental dualism between the two worlds. Instead, it suggests the possibility for humans to transition from one realm to the other. Even if sensory beauty is considered part of the material world, the beauty of the soul is prioritized over physical beauty. Sensory beauty conceptualizes and embodies universal beauty, aiding in the transition to the Idea of Beauty (Obdrzalek 2022, 217 - 220), or Beauty itself, in the supra-sensory world of Ideas. Thus, Eros is an escape, a departure from the sensory realm.

Eros is like an Egocentric Love (Nygren 1953, 179). Egocentrism is the essential characteristic of Eros. Everything revolves around one's self and destiny. The concept of love-desire inherently carries this egoism of desire. The clearest evidence of Eros's egocentrism is its identification with eudaimonia. That is, humans desire what they consider good and makes them happy. The focus is on the individual. The theory of Eros is predominantly individualistic, where humans seek to conquer and possess the value they feel they need. One of Plato's favorite expressions highlighting this desire and aspiration is: "The happy are happy because they have attained the good"—meaning people crave everything that brings personal satisfaction and is advantageous to them. Therefore, loving the good is synonymous with possessing the good, and this possession is desired to be eternal. Hence, the conclusion is that love is always the selfish desire for immortality and divinity. Eros is possessiveness (Nygren 1953, 180 - 181).

### **The Enduring Influence of Eros in Plato's Philosophy and Its Relevance Today**

In Plato's philosophy, the concept of eros occupies a central role, deeply interwoven with his Theory of Forms. Plato posits that true reality consists of abstract, perfect Forms or Ideas, with the material world serving merely as an imperfect reflection. Eros, in this philosophical framework, is far more than mere physical or romantic love; it is a profound metaphysical force that drives the

soul toward the pursuit of beauty, wisdom, and ultimately, the divine. This concept is explored extensively in Plato's dialogues "Symposium" and "Phaedrus," where eros is depicted as a complex form of love encompassing a wide range of meanings, from physical desire to a deeply spiritual yearning for truth and beauty. In the "Symposium," Plato presents a series of speeches on eros, culminating in Socrates' recounting of Diotima's teachings. Diotima introduces the idea of eros as a hierarchical journey, often referred to as the "Ladder of Love." This journey begins with physical attraction to a beautiful body and gradually ascends to the love of all beautiful bodies, then to the love of beautiful souls, and ultimately to the love of beauty itself, which is eternal and immutable. This ascent represents a journey from the physical to the spiritual, illustrating how eros motivates individuals to seek higher truths and the divine. Similarly, in "Phaedrus," Plato elaborates on the nature of eros, describing it as a form of divine madness that can lead the soul to recollect the Forms, the perfect and eternal realities beyond the material world. Eros, in this context, serves as a powerful catalyst for spiritual awakening and intellectual growth, bridging the gap between the mortal and the immortal. Eros, in Platonic philosophy, is thus characterized by a continuous awareness of a deficiency and the desire to fill that void with a higher, more fulfilled state. This feeling of lack drives the love-desire, propelling the soul towards what it considers valuable and noble. Unlike other forms of love, eros is directed towards superior things, emphasizing the intrinsic link between love and value. It is through this upward orientation that eros guides the soul towards the heavenly realm and the world of Ideas. Plato attributes a significant religious dimension to eros, viewing it as an intermediary that facilitates the ascent to divinity. Eros acts as a bridge between human existence and divine life, guiding individuals toward salvation, perfection, and immortality. This ascent involves transcending the sensory world, with eros serving as the force that propels the soul towards higher, spiritual goals. The influence of Plato's concept of eros on Western thought is profound and enduring. Eros, as a motivating force for intellectual and spiritual ascent, has shaped philosophical, theological, and literary discussions for centuries. It has inspired a wealth of philosophical inquiry into the nature of love, beauty, and the pursuit of knowledge. The Platonic idea of love as a journey towards higher understanding and divine beauty has permeated Western culture, influencing various schools of thought and artistic expressions.

In contemporary times, Plato's concept of eros remains relevant, offering valuable insights into personal growth, ethical behavior, and the pursuit of higher ideals. The idea that love can drive individuals to seek truth, wisdom, and beauty provides a compelling framework for understanding human motivation and aspiration. Eros, as depicted by Plato, encourages a movement beyond mere physical or superficial desires, urging individuals to strive for intellectual and spiritual fulfillment. This can be particularly useful in modern contexts, where the pursuit of material success often overshadows the quest for deeper meaning and personal development. Plato's thinking about eros challenges contemporary society to reconsider the nature of love and its role in human life. By emphasizing the transformative power of love in seeking truth and understanding, Plato's concept of eros invites individuals to engage in a continuous process of self-improvement and enlightenment. It underscores the importance of pursuing higher ideals and cultivating a love for wisdom and beauty, which can lead to a more fulfilling and meaningful life. Thus, the relevance of Plato's eros today lies in its ability to inspire individuals to look beyond the immediate and the tangible, fostering a deeper connection with the timeless and the transcendent.

In conclusion, Plato's concept of eros, as a profound metaphysical force driving the soul towards the pursuit of beauty, wisdom, and the divine, remains a cornerstone of Western thought. Its depiction in dialogues like "Symposium" and "Phaedrus" illustrates eros not just as physical desire but as an essential motivator for intellectual and spiritual ascent. This hierarchical journey from physical attraction to the love of pure beauty itself underscores the transformative power of love in seeking higher truths and understanding. The impact of this Platonic idea on Western philosophy, theology, and literature is profound, inspiring centuries

of exploration into the nature of love and the pursuit of knowledge. In modern times, Plato's concept of eros continues to offer valuable insights, encouraging a movement beyond superficial desires toward intellectual and spiritual fulfillment. By challenging individuals to strive for higher ideals and personal growth, Plato's eros remains relevant, fostering a deeper connection with the timeless and transcendent aspects of human experience. Through this enduring legacy, Plato's philosophy invites us to engage in a continuous process of self-improvement and enlightenment, emphasizing the vital role of love in our quest for truth and meaning.

### **Agape in Christian Thought**

The concept of agape holds a central, essential position in Christianity. The reasons and arguments supporting this centrality stem from the questions raised by the very notion of fundamental reasoning. The framing of questions significantly influences the resulting answers. Christianity introduces the concept of agape with a novel perspective, providing transformative answers to fundamental questions within the religious, theological, and ethical domains. Through Christianity, a transformation has been introduced in the approach to these issues—both ethically and religiously—redefining their meanings. The concept of agape (Thayer 1889, 4) in Christianity offers a new response, fundamentally transforming the ethical and religious field. This transformation is driven by the core ideas embodied in agape. Agape (Lampe 1961, 7), a term that frequently appears in the New Testament, represents a selfless, sacrificial love that is central to Christian ethics and theology. Unlike eros, which is often associated with desire and longing, agape is characterized by a commitment to the well-being of others, regardless of personal cost. This concept is epitomized in the teachings and life of Jesus Christ, who is portrayed as the ultimate embodiment of agape. The distinctiveness of agape lies in its unconditional nature, emphasizing love that is given freely without expectation of reciprocation. This form of love transcends personal desires and is directed towards the welfare of others, embodying altruism at its highest level. In Christian thought, agape is not merely an emotion but an active expression of love, demonstrated through acts of kindness, compassion, and service. Theologically, agape is seen as a reflection of God's nature and His love for humanity. It is this divine love that serves as the foundation for the moral teachings of Christianity. Agape calls for believers to love their neighbors, including their enemies, which marks a radical departure from conventional human inclinations towards self-interest and retaliation. Ethically, agape introduces a paradigm shift in how moral obligations are understood and practiced. It challenges individuals to adopt a selfless attitude, prioritizing the needs of others over personal gain. This ethical framework has profound implications for social justice, community building, and interpersonal relationships. In summary, the centrality of agape in Christian thought underscores its pivotal role in shaping the religion's ethical and theological foundations. By redefining love as selfless and sacrificial, agape fosters a transformative approach to morality and spirituality, influencing how believers engage with the world and with each other.

### **The New Testament and Communion with God**

The commandment of love in the Old Testament is one among many Judaic commandments and prescriptions. In Christianity, or rather through Christianity, it has gained a dominant position. The commandment of love, inspired by the Old Testament (Wischmeyer 2021, 36-37) and synthesized in the New Testament, states: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart" and "Love your neighbor as yourself." This commandment of love is not new, as it also appears in the Old Testament tradition. However, the specific nature of Christian love is fundamentally different – it has an entirely different meaning than what is understood by love in Judaism. In Christianity, love for one's neighbor is a universal love encompassing all people. In Judaism, love for one's neighbor is only for those of the same faith, only for those from one's people. Christian love, on the other hand, transcends all such boundaries; it is universal and all-encompassing: 'There is

neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female' (Galatians 3:28). Hence, Christ, through the parable of the Good Samaritan, shows that our neighbor is also the stranger, the one who has a different faith than ours. "If you love those who love you, what reward do you expect? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you embrace only your brothers, what extraordinary thing do you do? Do not even the pagans do the same?" (Matthew 5:46-47). Christian love is revealed simply as a denial of the idea of reward. In Judaism, the principle of perfect compensatory reward applies – the law of retribution, an eye for an eye, whereas the novelty that Christianity brings is to love your enemy. Christian love is closely linked to the relationship with God, to communion with God. Nygren says that Christian communion with God is what gives the idea of agape its specific imprint (Nygren 1953, 44). Even though Christianity emerges in the context and teaching of the Old Testament, it is something entirely new. The new that emerges is not a denial of the old but combines with the maintenance of what already exists: The truly great transformations begin within, and the new life gradually dispels the old forms, creating new ones" (Nygren 1953, 44). Thus, with the birth of Christianity, "we find something absolutely new and, at the same time, a preservation of the connection with the old" (p. 45). Jesus does not abolish the Law and the Prophets; rather, He fulfills them. He does not proclaim another God; the God of the Old Testament is also His God. The essence of His mission is oriented towards one thing: directing, guiding people towards communion with God. Here lies the novelty. He does not want to bring new representations or ideas about God, but a new communion with God. The novelty in Christianity is the type (or kind) of communion with God (Rotaru 2012, 5). Christian communion with God is, by its nature, something completely different from communion with God in Judaism. The specific nature of Christian communion with God is highlighted by Christ through contrast: "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Mark 2:17). In Jewish tradition, those worthy of receiving God's love were only the righteous. The others were rejected a priori. The novelty that Christ brings is that God seeks the sinner and, more than that, wants to enter into communion with him. This highlights that communion, the relationship with God, is not a legalistic, formal, religious, or conditional one, but a communion of love. "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Therefore, the specific nature of Christian communion with God is love. Communion is understood as a strong relationship with God, a close, intimate, steadfast, and enduring bond. God's relationship with man acquires its specific imprint not from distributive justice, but from *ἀγάπη* (agape), not from avenging justice, but from love that gives (Nygren 1953, 45). God calls us to a communion of love, where the emphasis is on the idea of love, of agape. To better understand the meaning of the idea of agape, it is necessary to investigate this new type of communion with God. It can be observed that God's love is not motivated or conditioned by the fact that man is righteous and fulfills God's Law. Love does not come as a reward; it is not the result of justification; it is not motivated by resentment or guilt. Love is not forced by anything. God's love for the sinner and for each person best demonstrates God's sovereignty and the essence of His nature. To the question 'Why does God love?' there is only one Christian answer: because His essence is Love".

### **Key Aspects of Agape in Christian Thought**

In Christian thought Agape is characterized by three fundamental aspects: Agape as an inherently unmotivated and creative form of love, Agape as the initiator of relational dynamics, and Agape as the mechanism through which transformative processes and selfless virtues are realized. Agape is spontaneous and "without motivation" (Nygren 1953, 75). By spontaneous, the author means that agape comes from one's own initiative, is unexpected, and, most importantly, is intrinsically motivated. By "without motivation," we understand that one does not have to do something for love, to persuade love; simply, love manifests without extrinsic motivation, without an external, extrinsic basis. This manifestation of love is inexplicable and unjustified; it does not even seek to be justified. It exists as it is, through itself, and manifests as it wishes. Nygren says that if God's

love were actually addressed to the righteous, it would be conquered, and not spontaneous. But precisely because it seeks the sinner who does not deserve it and cannot claim it, its spontaneous and unmotivated character is clearly revealed (Nygren 1953, 77-78).

Agape is creative and is the Creator (Nygren 1953, 78). Beyond all the other characteristics of divine love mentioned above, there is one fundamental, essential to the divine nature: being creative. Agape is creative love because God Himself, by His nature, is Creator. The following quote is essential in defining what love means, divine love. Nygren says that divine love does not love what is already worthy of love in itself, but on the contrary: what, in itself, has no value receives value precisely because it is the object of divine love. Agape has nothing to do with the kind of love that is based on recognizing the meritorious condition of its object. Agape does not recognize values but creates values and virtues (Outka 1977, 133-134). Agape loves and thereby confers value. The man loved by God has no value in himself; he gains value precisely by the fact that God loves him. Agape is a value-creating principle (Nygren 1953, 77-78). In this context of value closely related to love, the author draws attention to an idea that would change the entire meaning of the concept of love if valid: that man is valuable in himself, the infinite value of the human soul. The mistake becomes more evident in the context of forgiveness and then divine love. If man is valuable in himself, then forgiveness is no longer obtained out of love, undeservedly; but on the consideration that man, after all, deserves to be forgiven, that he has something valuable inherent in his essence. If man is valuable by himself, then forgiveness is merely an acknowledgment of an already implied, preexisting value and does not come from spontaneous and unmotivated divine love. Christ's forgiveness is given and comes from love; this is precisely the novelty it brings. Christ forgives because He loves and is God's Love, He grants forgiveness and does so from the position of the Son of God, the Almighty Creator. The forgiveness of sins is an act of divine authority (ἐξουσία), a creative act, which Jesus knows He is called to accomplish on earth and which is placed alongside other miraculous divine acts (Mark 2:5-12) that prove that Jesus is the Creator.

Agape establishes the relationship and communion. This statement draws attention to the fact that agape is not only what characterizes, in essence, relation and communion with God but also realizes this communion and relationship. Divine agape establishes communion in the relationship between man and God. Moreover, communion with God comes as an initiative from God. Man cannot and does not have at his disposal any other way, any other means of relating to God. The only way to relate to God, to enter into communion with God, is Agape, God's Love. God is the one who offers, out of love, communion with Himself. There is, therefore, no path of man to God, but a path of God to man: agape (Nygren 1953, 80-81). Christian love is a love of sharing, a love of communion; it gains meaning and vitality in the context of giving and receiving towards God and one's neighbor. This Christian agape, which is required here, has its model in that agape is demonstrated by the God Jesus Christ. Like Jesus must be spontaneous and without motivation, devoid of calculation, limitless, and unconditional. For Jesus, love for God is absolute belonging to Him. This is emphasized in the commandment of love: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10:27). This commandment of love originates from God's love, given to man through communion and relationship. The initiative belongs to God. "We love because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). God loves people unconditionally. This paper emphasizes a very important, essential aspect that Christ wants to introduce as new compared to the commandment of love already existing in the Old Testament (Wischmeyer 2021, 52-57). Since divine love is unconditional, it is also transformative. This transformation occurs only through communion with God, through the relationship with God, and by sharing this love further with our fellow humans. But this exercise of giving is not only for those dear to us but especially for our enemies. "But I tell you: Love your enemies" (Matthew 6:44-48). Divine love becomes

transformative in people lives when love is given unconditionally, spontaneously, and without motivation to both fellow humans and especially enemies. Only in this way does divine love transform into a creative one. In other words, the same love – agape – that is receive from God, should be shared further to fellow humans. If one claim to love God, this is evident only through the love shown for fellow humans, not only for brothers but for enemies as well. One's attitude towards enemies and brothers is the test of love. "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And this is the commandment from Him: "Whoever loves God must also love his brother." (1 John 4:20-21). This is the Christian meaning that Christ wants to give to the commandment of love. The commandment of love is no longer a commandment, an imperative disposition; it is a transformation. This commandment takes shape when it is internalized in an individual's value system and beliefs of faith. When divine love – agape – is the most important value in the conception of life. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts" (Jeremiah 31:33).

Therefore, this time, love for one's neighbor is inclusive; it includes love for enemies (Wischmeyer 2021, 10-11). Love for enemies is not even a superior demonstration of love for one's neighbor, in which it finds its fulfillment, its perfection. Love for enemies is as natural, spontaneous, and unconditional as love for one's neighbor (regardless of who they may be). However, in love for enemies, it is very clear that love is not human love; it is agape – divine love. Nygren says that just as God's love is love for sinners, so Christian love is love for enemies. God's love for sinners and Christian love for enemies are correlated notions (Nygren 1953, 99.). It is also emphasized that Christian love is not reactive; it is not a response to the love received. Christian love is full of action, takes initiative, and finds meaning and significance in the divine love of Christ.

### **The Reconsideration of All Values Through Agape in Christianity**

Nygren says that what Christianity brought through agape is the reconsideration of all values. Interestingly, this expression belongs to Nietzsche, a German philosopher who holds a highly critical stance towards Christianity. The author adopts this expression as it best portrays the definitive contribution of Christianity in relation to all of antiquity, to ancient Judaism, and generally to the entire pre-Christian and extra-Christian world (Nygren 1953, 200).

Firstly, concerning the religion of the Jews, where according to the Law, only the righteous and devout are worthy of being loved and blessed by God, the upheaval brought by Christ is unimaginable. How can God love the unrighteous, the sinners, all those who break the Law given by God? Such agape love destroys the entire legal order through which man can enter into a relationship with God. How is it possible for God's justice to exist when forgiveness and clemency are offered to sinners? In this context, the agape love demonstrated by Christ not only opposes the Law of Moses but also represents the destruction of the very foundation upon which the entire Jewish order of values was built. For the Jews, it was inconceivable that the forgiveness of sins – which represents the essence of divine love – agape, could be the foundation for communion with God (Outka 1977, 175). Thus, this reversal of values also targets their prioritization, meaning a different value system where priorities shift: "Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matthew 9:13).

Similarly, a reversal of values in the Greek-Hellenistic order proposed by eros is the opposition of the idea of agape. The Greeks did not conceive love as inherent to the divinity in its relationship with humanity. In their thinking, God does not love because He has no unfulfilled desires. The divinity already possesses everything it desires. Love pertains more to desire, to craving something that belongs to it; you love something if it deserves to be loved. Compared to this love, agape – Christian love – is self-giving, a sacrifice, a love without merit (Outka 1977, 24 – 26). God loves man because it is His nature, not because man deserves to

be loved. In Christianity, communion with God is founded on this agape love, which, by its essence, involves God's initiative through this self-giving. In contrast, in Greek thought, communion with divinity is initiated by man, out of a desire to be like God. Somehow, this path of man should be meritorious for him, along with the reward. The Greeks believed that God loves those who deserve to be loved. God, moreover, loves the divine spark in man, represented by reason, intellect, and thus rewards the one who loves this divine nature of man. Christian agape love is, according to Greek philosophy, the opposite of everything considered rational. The Greeks could not conceive of loving sinners or the degraded; such love is degrading, irrational. Apostle Paul specifies this in 1 Corinthians 1:27: "But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong."

What is specific about this Christian reconfiguration of values is this sacrifice of the Divinity, the fact that God is crucified. Paul clearly saw this overturning of old values when he said: "We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor. 1:23). This sacrifice, crucifixion, is an expression of God's agape love. For the Jews, it was a stumbling block because, in their thinking, the Messiah could not be crucified. Such a thing was unimaginable, inconceivable. And for Greco-Roman thought, such a thing seemed foolish because it was opposed to their ethics and religion. Nygren identifies these two reasons why agape came into contradiction with this ancient conception. From an ethical standpoint, agape seems to promote injustice. This is not the ideal of the wise man, whose goal is to transcend his condition and ascend to God, not to something contrary to divinity. Agape, by descending and granting favor to sinners, seems to offer clemency to those who deserve no clemency and should not be shown clemency, as they deserve their own condition. Religiously, this is sacrilege, an offense to God. Here lies the "foolishness of the cross": how can a God not punish injustice? If He does not, He becomes worse than a human judge, who at least strives for objectivity, justice, and truth. Divine love – agape – is seen here as sacrilege, contradicting everything characteristic of the ancient conception of God, of a God who is at least impartial. This love contradicts the immortality and immutability of God. How can an unchanging God descend, become human, and undergo changes? What kind of God renounces His own self-satisfaction, His happy life, to give Himself and sacrifice? (Nygren 1953, 203-204)

### **The Opposition between Eros and Agape**

The argument that this reconsideration of values has a historical-religious background is based on the fact that this opposition between eros and agape is not only a conceptual one but an all-encompassing opposition. These two concepts, eros and agape, are essential characteristics of two different life concepts, of two fundamental models, both religious and ethical. Both currents are found throughout the history of religions, sometimes in confluence, and sometimes in separation. These are called the egocentric and theocentric conceptions of religion (Nygren, 1953, 205). In the first conception, man is at the center of all religious concerns. The religious relationship between man and divinity is not impenetrable; on the contrary, it is dominated by man. Man himself is similar to God, perhaps even a divine being, who has only been disturbed by the sensitive, non-essential things around him. To reach divinity, all that needs to be done is to return to oneself. This return to oneself is a return to divinity and is the greatest desideratum of man, through which he finds satisfaction and happiness. There is not a significant difference between man and God. The difference is negligible, and relative; there is rather a continuity between the human and the divine. Therefore, man has the possibility to gradually ascend towards a greater resemblance to Divinity, to draw closer to God step by step. In the theocentric conception of religion, everything revolves around God. There is a great divide between man and God, which man can never cross. Any effort by man to ascend to divinity is not only impossible but also considered titanic arrogance, even sacrilege. Man, by his own powers, has no chance of reaching

divinity. Thus, it is God who makes this connection with man. Man, through eros, cannot reach God to restore the relationship with divinity. Only through agape can this communion with God be restored, by God descending to man, divinizing him. In the history of religions, the egocentric model has been dominant. The opposite, theocentric direction is affirmed only in Christianity, and the specific nature of this fundamental orientation involves the reevaluation of all human values (Nygren 1953, 206 - 207).

While Eros and Agape represent different dimensions of love, they are not entirely opposed. I want to emphasize both involve a form of transcendence — Eros in its ascent from the physical to the spiritual, and Agape in its call to selfless service and divine imitation. However, the motivations and expressions of these loves differ significantly. Eros is driven by desire and the pursuit of beauty and wisdom, while Agape is motivated by a commitment to the other and a reflection of divine love.

## Conclusion

The concepts of Eros and Agape offer profound insights into the nature of love, desire, and human fulfillment. In Plato's philosophy, Eros represents a powerful force that drives individuals towards the pursuit of beauty, wisdom, and the divine. In Christian thought, Agape embodies a selfless, unconditional love that reflects God's love for humanity and serves as a model for ethical behavior. While distinct in their origins and expressions, both Eros and Agape highlight the transformative potential of love, encouraging individuals to transcend their immediate desires and strive for higher ideals. The ongoing dialogue between these two concepts continues to enrich our understanding of love and its role in the human experience.

The relationship between Eros and Agape is complex, with both concepts offering unique yet complementary perspectives on love. Eros, with its focus on desire and the pursuit of beauty, challenges individuals to seek something beyond themselves, aspiring toward a higher understanding and connection with the divine. This journey, as described by Plato, involves an ascent from physical attraction to a profound appreciation of the eternal Forms, particularly the Form of Beauty. Through this process, Eros acts as a catalyst for personal growth, intellectual development, and spiritual awakening. Agape, in contrast, shifts the focus from personal fulfillment to the welfare of others. Rooted in Christian theology, Agape is characterized by its selfless nature and unconditional commitment to the well-being of others. It is a love that mirrors divine compassion and forgiveness, emphasizing the importance of altruism, empathy, and sacrificial service. Agape calls individuals to transcend their self-interest, embodying a love that is not dependent on reciprocation but is freely given, reflecting the boundless love of God for humanity.

The historical and cultural impact of Eros and Agape is evident in their enduring presence in Western thought. Throughout history, philosophers, theologians, and artists have grappled with these concepts, seeking to understand their implications for human relationships and society. In contemporary discourse, these concepts continue to inform debates on love, ethics, and human flourishing. The distinction between Eros and Agape serves as a framework for analyzing different forms of love and their respective roles in personal and communal life. It also provides a lens through which to examine contemporary issues, such as the balance between self-fulfillment and social responsibility, the nature of romantic relationships, and the ethical implications of love in various contexts.

Ultimately, the exploration of Eros and Agape underscores the multifaceted nature of love. Both concepts challenge individuals to look beyond immediate desires and embrace a more expansive vision of love that encompasses both personal growth and selfless devotion. By synthesizing the insights of Plato's philosophy and Christian theology, we can arrive at a holistic understanding of love that recognizes its power to transform individuals and societies. The recognition of the interplay between Eros and Agape, serves as a reminder of the potential for love to inspire and elevate the human spirit. Eros, with its yearning for beauty

and transcendence, and Agape, with its commitment to selfless service, together offer a comprehensive vision of love that is both deeply personal and universally relevant. This ongoing dialogue between Eros and Agape not only enriches our philosophical and theological understanding but also provides practical guidance for living a life grounded in love, wisdom, and compassion.

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