
COMMENTARY - THE VIRTUES TO BE REDISCOVERED AND LIVED/7

AGAPE (THE GREAT DAWN)

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Reciprocity is the golden rule of human sociality. Only the word reciprocity can explain the basic structure of society, even if that society is characterized by indignation, revenge and endless court cases. The DNA of the political being is a twisting helix of **giving and receiving**. Even human love is **essentially a matter of reciprocity** from its first moment to its last. Just think of how often someone departs from this earth holding the hand of their beloved or, in their absence, clasping it in their thoughts with the last strength of their mind and heart. **Reciprocity is the dimension of love** where we love those who love us; there have been **many ways and many words to express this** in different human cultures.

In ancient Greek culture the most famous ways of expressing love were *eros* and *philia*. These were two different forms of love, but they have one thing in common: reciprocity, the basic need for a response from the other. ***Eros* is direct reciprocity**, which is two-way and exclusive; it is where the other is loved because it fills a need and because love satisfies us. It is revived again and again, a vital desire. In the Greek idea of *philia* (which is similar to what we now call friendship), **reciprocity is more complex**: a lack of response from the other is tolerated, giving and receiving are not always kept in balance and forgiveness is possible/necessary many times. That's why ***eros* is not a virtue, but *philia* can be** because it requires loyalty, even from a friend that temporarily betrays us and does not return our love. But the *philia* type of love is not unconditional love as it is cut off when the other - by not returning my feelings - makes me realize that he or she no longer wants to be my friend.

Eros and *philia* are wonderful and **essential for every good life - yet, they are not enough**. The human person is great precisely because the existing greatness of reciprocity is not enough for us; **we want the infinite**. So, at some point in history, when the right time came, **the need was born to find another word** for a dimension of love that is not contained in those two words for love, no matter how rich and elevated they both were. This new word, ***agape***, was not entirely new to Greek vocabulary, but its use and meaning were new. It was used to characterise the people that were commonly called "**those of the road**", the first (beautiful) name of Christians. *Agape* was not an invention, but it was a revelation of a dimension of **power that is present inside every person**, even when it remains buried and is waiting for someone to say "come out". It is not a form of love that begins where the other forms end, and it is not the opposite of either *eros* or *philia* because ***agape* is what makes every love complete and mature**. For it is ***agape*** that gives love the human dimension of graciousness that is not guaranteed by *philia* and, even less so, *eros*. By opening them up, it makes way for the fulfilment of the virtues that without it are subtly selfish. For the same reason, they chose *charitas* when *agape* was translated to Latin, which in earlier times was spelled with the 'h' in it, a very rarely used letter. Its insertion into the word changed everything because it could mean many things.

The first message was that ***charitas*** was neither *amor* (love) nor *amicitia* (friendship), but it was something else. Furthermore, this ***charitas*** was no longer the *caritas* of Roman merchants, who used it to express the value of goods (those that cost a lot are 'caro'). But that letter 'h' also served to remind everyone that ***charitas*** pointed to another great Greek word: ***charis*, grace or gracefulness** ("Hail Mary, full of 'charis'"). There is no ***agape*** without ***charis***, and there is no ***charis*** without ***agape***. While *philia* can forgive up to seven times, ***agape*** will until seventy times seven; *philia* gives the tunic but ***agape*** gives the cloak too, and *philia* walks a mile with his friend but ***agape*** walks two and not only with friends. *Eros* endures, hopes and covers little; *philia* covers, endures, hopes a lot; ***agape* hopes, covers and endures all**.

The form that *agape* love takes provides **great power for action, economic and social change**. Every time a person acts for good, finding the resources for it in the action itself and inside themselves even without the promise of reciprocity, is when *agape* is at work. *Agape* is the **love that is typical of founders** who start a movement or a cooperative without being able to count on the reciprocity of others. They are the ones that act with the fortitude and perseverance necessary to endure the long periods of loneliness. *Agape* does not affect the choice to 'love back' the other, but when unrequited it suffers; *agape* is only complete with reciprocity (<*A new commandment I give you: love one another!*>), but it does not hurt so much as to cut off its love if it remains unrequited. The fullness of reciprocity in *agape* is also expressed in a ternary relationship: A gives himself to B, and B gives himself to C - ***agape* is transitive** unlike *philia* and *eros*. Indeed, this dimension of "impartiality" and openness is essential to bring about *agape*.

Even the maternal and paternal love for a child would not be *agape*, so mature and complete, if it were spent in the relation $A \Rightarrow B$, $B \Rightarrow A$, without the dimension $B \Rightarrow C \dots$, which overcomes every temptation of incestuous or narcissistic love. The need for reciprocity and to keep going even when there is no answer is what makes *agape* a relational experience, which is at once vulnerable and fertile. ***Agape* is a most fertile wound**. It is *agape* that shapes our communities into welcoming and inclusive places with doors wide open that never close. This is what undermines sacred hierarchies, caste systems, and the temptation of power. Furthermore, *agape* is **essential for every common good** because it knows the kind of forgiveness that is able to undo the wrongs done to us. Anyone who has been the victim of evil, of any evil, will know that the evil done and received cannot be fully compensated for or repaired by penalties and paying for damages. It lives on like a wound that is still there. This is the case unless one day it meets **the forgiveness of *agape***, which, unlike the forgiveness of *eros* and *philia*, **is able to heal all wounds**, even the mortal ones, making them **the dawn of a resurrection**.

However, there is a **theory that has been present throughout the history of our culture**. *Agape* - they say - cannot be a civil form of love; to allow such vulnerability would not be prudent. It can only be lived in family life, spiritual life and perhaps in volunteering. In the streets and businesses, however, we should be contented with the different ranges of *eros* (incentives) and, at most, of *philia*. **This thesis is deeply rooted** because, at least partly, it is based on **historical evidence of the many experiences born of *agape* - we return to hierarchy or communitarianism**. It is the story of many communities that started with *agape* and, upon receiving the first wounds, end up transforming themselves into **very hierarchical and formal systems**. It is also the story of **experiences that were born to be open and inclusive but, after their first failures, closed their doors, expelling all that was different**. History is also a succession of these instances of "**stepping back**", but these instances do not reduce the civil value of *agape*. On the contrary, they should motivate us to put more *agape* (and not less) into politics, business and work. For **every time that *agape* makes an appearance in human history**, even if it stays just for a short or very short time, **it never leaves the world unchanged**. The body heat has risen again and again, and a new nail is driven into the rock; the starting point of those who begin their climb tomorrow will be a few meters or, at least, centimeters higher.

Not a drop of *agape* is wasted on the earth. *Agape* broadens the horizon of possibilities for the good of humanity; it is the yeast and salt of every good bread. The world does not die, and life begins again every morning because there are people capable of *agape*: *<And now these three remain: faith, hope and *agape*. But the greatest of these is *agape*>*.