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CC.112 The Philosophy of Love

Professor Lee Perlman

Paper Two

Adios to Eros, Away with Agape: Philia as the Highest Form of Love

The words, “I love you,” take on very different meanings when said to a spouse, to a parent, or to a friend. While the English language appointed only one word to the multifaceted concept of “love,” the Greeks invented three words for it: “eros,” “philia,” and “agape.” It comes as little surprise that philosophers across time have debated which the highest form of love is. To answer this question, one must consider the nature of each form of love, what each requires, and what each achieves for the lover and beloved. My view is that philia is the highest form of love, for three reasons. Firstly, unlike erotic and agapic love, philic love treats the beloved not as an object with qualities, but as an actual human being with an essence. Secondly, whereas erotic love and agapic love are unidirectional, philic love is a two-way street that requires the mutual participation of both the lover and beloved. Lastly and most importantly, philia is a relationship between the consciousness of the lover and beloved.

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In order to prove my argument that philia is the highest form of love, I will examine three authors, Scott Peck, Plato, and Martin Buber, who have different views on which form of love is the highest. Peck, a modern psychiatrist, believes that agape is the highest form of love, because it fosters permanent spiritual growth. On the other hand, Plato, an ancient Greek philosopher, argues that eros is the highest form of love, because it gives birth to beauty outside oneself. While examining Peck and Plato's views, I will refute their positions, and then argue why Buber's argument is the most convincing. Buber, a 20th century Jewish philosopher, proposes that philia is the highest form of love, as it entails "I-You" relations in which both the lover and beloved mutually "encounter" (*Buber* p. 59) one another. My aim in this paper will be to prove that philia is the highest form of love, as well demonstrate that it is the dialectic resolution between eros and agape.

In *The Road Less Traveled*, Peck claims that agape is the most important form of love. His argument is based on two reasons: Agapic love is permanent whereas erotic love is temporary, and agape fosters another being's spiritual growth. In Peck's view, "falling in love" is a mundane example of erotic love. Whereas such erotic love is only "invariably temporary" (*Peck* p. 84), agapic love is a "permanently self-enlarging experience" (p. 87). As we see in romantic stories such as the myth *Tristan and Iseult* or

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the Hollywood film *Casablanca*, erotic love is often fleeting. For instance, Tristan's intense love for Iseult of the White Hands "for her goodness and her beauty" (p. 121) instantly evaporates when he remembers Iseult the Fair. Similarly, Ilsa's love for her husband Laszlo immediately falters when she unexpectedly crosses paths with Rick. Unlike the ephemeral nature of erotic love, agapic love is more deep-rooted. Due to its permanent nature, Peck believes that agape is the highest form of love.

Another reason that Peck claims agape is the highest form of love is that its purpose is to foster the "spiritual growth" (Peck p. 81) of oneself and his beloved. Whereas the erotic lover is possessive, the agapic lover does not ask his beloved for anything in return. For example, compare the relationship of a dating couple with that of a mother and child. A person in a romantic relationship, whose love may be swayed by earthly elements such as lust or idealization, may "love" his partner because the partner has something he desires. His erotic love is selfishly obsessed with possessing that quality of his significant other, not necessarily nurturing his partner. On the other hand, a mother may pour agapic love into her child by constantly minding his wellbeing and growth, regardless of the mother's own gain. This example demonstrates Peck's view that agape is a higher form of love than eros, because agape has the power to selflessly nurture another person.

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However, I do not completely agree with Peck's view that agape is the highest form of love, because his agapic love requires a separation between the lover and beloved. In his view, a lover-beloved relationship seems to closely resemble a mentor-mentee relationship. Such a mentorship requires that "the genuine lover always respects... this separateness" (p. 160). The mentor consequently "experiences" his mentee as an "It" entity. For example, a teacher primarily sees a student in terms of relevant qualities such as their work ethic or academic performance. A typical teacher would see a student as a student, not as the "essence" of the human being that the student is. Peck's agapic love requires a separation that involves objectifying the person who is being nurtured. I believe that the truly highest form of love would instead achieve a personal union between the lover and beloved. As Buber says, "the basic word „I-It“ [is] the word of separation" (*Buber* p. 75). Thus, Peck's agape cannot be the highest form of love, as it requires an unnatural separation between the lover and beloved.

Distancing ourselves from the agape end of the spectrum of love brings us to the other end, which entails eros. Plato argues in *The Symposium* that eros is the most important form of love, for two reasons: Unlike an agapic lover who resembles a mentor and is thus superior to his beloved, an erotic lover willingly admits that he is inferior to

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his beloved. Erotic love establishes a dynamic equilibrium between the lover and beloved. Another reason that Plato asserts eros is higher than agape is that eros takes part in the experience of beauty.

In Plato's view, eros is the highest form of love because, unlike the agapic lover, the erotic lover is capable of admitting his inferiority to his beloved. Plato shows this by contrasting Socrates' modest character with that of his more arrogant peers. In the monologues delivered by both *eromenoi* like Phaedrus and *erastai* like Pausanias, each speaker proposes a version of love that paints a flattering picture of himself. For instance, Pausanias, Agathon's *erastes*, claims that Heavenly Love is exhibited by "the elder... [who are] contributing to intellectual and all other excellence [of] the younger" (*Plato* 184d-e). Phaedrus, Eryximachus' *eromenos*, believes that the gods are "more admiring... when the beloved is fond of his lover" (180b). Both men are trapped in the self-conceited belief that they are superior to their significant other. Socrates, on the other hand, resembles the truly erotic lover who openly acknowledges his inferiority to his significant other. His modesty is manifested in the very fact that he does not deliver his own speech, but only acts as a mouthpiece for Diotima. Socrates' humility reflects his well-known principle, "The only thing I know is that I do not know." It is also interesting to note that in *The Symposium*, Socrates reports, "I... understand nothing but

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love matters” (177e). By combining these two statements, we can infer that eros is the art of not knowing. By being able to admit we do not know something, or do not possess something that another person does, we transform our relationship with that person to a dynamic one. Instead of our relationship resembling a pair of compatible but unchanging puzzle pieces, it comes to resemble a teetering seesaw. Both one and one’s significant other are able to appreciate how each is superior and inferior to one another. Plato believes that this dynamic equilibrium can be established only through eros and not through agape, and thus concludes that eros is the highest form of love.

Another reason that Plato believes eros is the highest form of love is that eros is the experience of beauty. Socrates’ speech explains that love is a means to “know the very essence of beauty” (211c-d). Erotic love is a force that drives us to attain the unattainable. Beauty cannot be possessed, yet humans instinctively long to do so. In the midst of our yearning for beauty, we attempt to come as close to it as possible by producing beauty ourselves. On a day-to-day level, I think that fan-fiction and fan-art is an example of the creation of beauty enabled by eros. When an audience reads a novel, they are inspired by its beauty and create their own art, literary or visual. Eros enables us to transform ourselves in the light of our beloved’s beautiful qualities, with the goal of reaching *kalon*, or beauty. In Plato’s view, only eros can provide this driving force,

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and thus eros is the highest form of love.

However, I find that Plato's argument is not completely satisfying, because in his view, love is directed towards the beauty that a person possesses, not towards the person themselves. He advocates love for qualities in their universality, but not for humans themselves in their particularity. In the end of *The Symposium*, Alcibides gives us the sense of how eros looks like in real life, when it is aimed at a particular person and not just their qualities. Socrates shudders at this manifestation of eros, calling it an "amorous frenzy" (203d). Alcibides makes us realize that there must be some higher form of love, which acknowledges the beloved person himself, as well as the qualities he embodies.

As we have seen, Peck and Plato make strong arguments supporting their claims that agape and eros, respectively, is the highest form of love. However, their arguments are unsatisfying in certain aspects. Peck's agape requires a separation between the lover and beloved. Plato's eros does not love the beloved himself but only his qualities. Both eros and agape appear to be incomplete forms of love because they treat the beloved as an object, instead of a real human being. To use Buber's terminology, both eros and agape seem to treat love as an "I-It" relationship, instead of an "I-You" relationship. I believe that philia is the highest form of love, for three

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reasons: philic love treats the beloved as a “You,” it requires mutuality, and involves consciousness of the lover and beloved.

The primary way that philia differs from both eros and agape is that it treats the beloved as a “You.” Both eros and agape are experiential “I-It” relationships. This is because both the erotic lover and agapic lover treat their beloved as a categorized object, not for the beloved’s essence. The erotic lover desires his beloved’s beauty. The agapic lover loves his beloved insofar as the lover can nurture the beloved’s potential. In both cases, the lover experiences his beloved as a “describable, analyzable, classifiable... aggregate of qualities” (*Buber* p. 68-69). Neither the agapic nor erotic lover actually recognizes his beloved for his entire essence. Philia, on the other hand, requires understanding the “whole being” (p. 62) of the beloved. For example, a professional musician may be “loved” erotically by aspiring musicians, for his ability to deliver exceptional performances. The musician may also be “loved” agapically by his instructor, for the musician has the potential to improve even further. However, to be truly loved philically, the musician must be loved not for his musicianship, but for the “entirety” of his being. By treating a beloved as a “You” and not an “It,” philia serves as the highest form of love.

Furthermore, philia is the only form of love that requires the active

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participation of both the lover and beloved. Eros and agape are essentially unidirectional. The erotic lover selfishly takes in the beauty of his beloved, while the agapic lover one-sidedly supports his beloved's growth. In these "I-It" relationships, only the "I" is experiencing the "It," making the relationship unidirectional. Philia, on the other hand, resembles a two-way street. In this "I-You" relationship, both the "I" and the "You" encounter each other. The relationship is "election and electing, passive and active" (p. 62) all at once. An "actual relation" revolves around constant, mutual feedback, since "[You] acts on me as I act on [You]" (p. 61). This "actual relation" is missing from both eros and agape. This is why we hesitate when we are asked the hypothetical question, "Would you rather be loved purely erotically, or purely agapically?" To be loved purely erotically means that your qualities are valued, but you yourself have nothing to gain from the relationship. On the other hand, to be loved purely agapically is like having a trainer obligated to stand by your side. He would bring out your potential, but you yourself are unable to affect him. That is why when asked the aforementioned question, we are inclined to reply, "I want something in between." This "in between" is perhaps philia, the dialectic resolution of eros and agape. Philia is the highest form of love because it is a two-way road, unlike eros and agape.

Saying that philia is the dialectic resolution of eros and agape is not to say that

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philia is simply the combination of the two. This is because philia entails something new, which is consciousness. Throughout *I and Thou*, Buber claims that to love someone does not mean to love the aggregate of the person's qualities, but to see the person "in its entirety" (p. 58). Similar to how clothes are external accessories that hang on a person's body, a person's qualities simply hang on his "essence." For example, consider what would happen if our professional musician were replaced by an equally musically dexterous humanoid robot. Neither the aspiring musicians nor the instructor would probably care. However, somebody who had loved the musician philically, for his "essence," would not love the robot in the same manner, because the robot does not possess the musician's unique consciousness. Philia involves a relation between the consciousness of the lover and beloved, which further cements its power as the highest form of love.

Contrary to modern belief, there is no one thing that defines "real love." Our relationships are interspersed with all three forms of love, eros, agape, and philia. Authors such as Peck argue that agape is the highest form of love because agapic love fosters permanent spiritual growth. On the other hand, philosophers such as Plato assert that eros is the highest form of love because it is the means to experience beauty. However, both forms of love fall short because they are unidirectional, and treat the

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beloved as an objectified “It.” I believe the highest form of love is philia, because it treats the beloved as a “You,” requires mutuality, and recognizes consciousness. When the day comes that I can sincerely say the words, “I love you,” to somebody, I hope to be experiencing a love close to philia. I hope that my lover and I will desire each other’s qualities, nurture each other’s growth, and most importantly, see one another as unique, conscious and irreplaceable human beings.

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