

When Plato Meets God: A Symposium on Love

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What a coincidence that you should have found me, an attendee of the symposium in the Garden of Eden, to recount the intellectually stimulating encounter! It all began with a peculiar letter wedged in between the narrow mouth of my mailbox, inviting me to a symposium with God in his Garden of Eden. I was given the choice to bring a guest, and I thought it deemed befitting to invite a philosopher of love, Plato. It would be wise to recount the conversation in the most concise manner:

God greeted Plato and me upon our arrival at the symposium.

GOD: I see that you have successfully made it to the Garden of Eden, bringing a guest, Plato. Although our beliefs may not coincide, I am delighted nonetheless for today's symposium on love. For many years, the ancient Greeks have devised many words to describe the concept of love, including but not limited to *Agápe*, *Éros*, and *Philia*. However, given that I advocate for *Agápe* and Plato *Éros*, let us focus on the former two concepts of love for the sake of today's discussion. Before we begin, shall we differentiate the fundamental concepts between *Agápe* and *Éros*?

ME: I believe the primary difference between *Agápe* and *Éros* lies within the value of their love. *Agápe* can be defined as the "the highest form of

love”, and “the love of [Christian] God for man” regardless of the status of the man. (Liddell 4) *Éros* on the other hand, arises from the love and desire of goodness, an inanimate and subjective term. It can hence be inferred that *Éros* exists for one because of the perceived value and goodness in their beloved, whereas the feeling of *Agápe* is indifferent to such value. In a way, it can also be seen that the feeling of *Éros* is evoked from one’s desire to become a better person as they climb up the “ladder of love”, (Reeve xv) hence the greed to pursue good. Conversely, *Agápe* appears to be more altruistic, as the love of God can be shown “in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”, (Rom. 5:8) epitomizing philanthropy. What do you think of that, Plato?

PLATO: Indeed an interesting comparison has been made. Although, just because *Agápe* appears to be altruistic does not mean it does not contain elements of self-love. I am sure God encourages the love of oneself. Should he not, the famous saying “love your neighbour as yourself” (Mark 12:31) would be paradoxical in itself, for if one has no self-love, one cannot love a neighbour, family, or anyone for that matter. Similarly, the pursuit of beauty in *Éros* does not necessarily have to appear as a selfish deed; not all that “is not good must be bad”, (Plato 202b) and not all that is not selfless must be selfish. An important goal of *Éros* aims at the “permanent possession of the good” (206a) via both “physical and mental” reproduction. (206c) The offspring of both reproduction are cherished and brought up in an altruistic manner, a manner that involves long term commitments and sacrifices for something that may or may not flourish, in hopes that the creators “can taste immortality”. (208b) It can thus be presumed that the *Éros* of love lies between pursuing immortality for themselves and altruistically raising their offspring, between selfishness and selflessness. *Éros* is neither selfless nor selfish.

In Christian *Agápe*, love is also hoped to be immortalized in a physical form. It is evident from the series of events post-crucifixion of Jesus, an act which accentuates Jesus' *Agápe* for us, that miracles including "rising from the dead" (Mark 16:9) and being "taken up to heaven" (16:19) prove immortality to be a crucial concept in *Agápe*. Yet, God you only seem to approve of heterosexual marriage, commanding that men "shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind" for "it is abomination". (Lev. 18:22) Why is this? Does this relationship not limit the outcomes of offspring? You see, both my teacher Socrates and I believe that physical reproduction is inferior to mental reproduction—only those "whose creative urge is physical tend to turn to women", (Plato 208e) whilst those who are creative invent "all other human excellences", (209a) which can only be done by males in a homosexual relationship. This makes *Éros* great, not only for the reproducers, but also for the descendants that benefit from mental reproduction. Our bodies may perish, but our ideas will not.

GOD: My dearest Plato, I am afraid that although there is a degree of truth to what you have suggested, evidently your sexist Athenian assumption holds you back. With what evidence can you suggest that women are intellectually inferior to men?

PLATO: Should you recount the story of Alcestis and Achilles, you can see the difference in which the Greek Gods treat them. Both Alcestis and Achilles sacrificed themselves for their lover and yet the Gods only gifted Alcestis, a woman, the chance to "[bring] her own soul back from the underworld". (179c) Achilles on the other hand was granted the "highest possible honour". (180a) Despite having done the same gallant deed, Alcestis and Achilles were rewarded very differently due to their gender

difference. Does this not show that even the Greek Gods believe women to be inferior to men?

GOD: Do you mean to say that even though Alcestis was given her life again, the Greek Gods favour Achilles more? Many would consider life to be much more valuable than “honour”.

PLATO: I can see why many would think that, but to be given life again means to be a mortal again. Alcestis would have to go through the hardships and suffering of life again—would it not be logical that honour, an immortal title, is much more preferable than life itself? Life cannot be preserved but honour can be. And thus following this logic, the Greek Gods must have believed women to be inferior to men if there is such a disparity in their treatments. If the Greek Gods believe in this disparity, wouldn't it be illogical to disagree?

GOD: From an Athenian perspective, your argument does have its validity. However, in Christianity, all men are equal. I “created man” in my “own image”, “male and female I created them”. (Gen. 1:27) Women and men need to work together to create a better society for their offspring, to work together to give love in the form of *Agápe*, the unconditional sacrificial love I have given all my children. If men are intellectually capable and if women are equal to men, then women and men can just as easily mentally reproduce beautiful captivating offspring in the form of art in “political and domestic economy”. (Plato 209a) Take Socrates's teacher, Diotima of Mantinea for example. Diotima, a woman, was the first to propose the concept of “Platonic love”, a notion that still exists in modern day society. (Reeve 29) Her ideals have been passed on and preserved successfully for

over two thousand years. Mental reproduction of *Éros* takes the form of philosophical creativity but it is most definitely untrue that this beautiful reproduction of *Éros* merely lies within homosexual relationships.

I would like to draw our symposium to the attention of another of *Agápe*'s traits. As opposed to *Éros*, one of the "strongest forms" (Liddell 5) of Christian *Agápe* requires their lover and beloved to be wedded to each other. This formality is a vital bond that manifests the deontological essence of faith and love, for it reflects the altruistic and innate nature of *Agápe* in humans. God is the cause of *Agápe* in men, and so is the marriage of a man who is to "be united to his wife", where "they will become one flesh". (Gen. 2:24) To be married and to have *Agápe* is an empirical thing, as commanded by God. Hence, in *Agápe*, the affection for their partner is the manifestation of love, with God being the cause. *Éros* is merely self-evoked and its affection coincides with *Éros*, desire, itself.

ME: But surely, even when there are so many differences between *Agápe* and *Éros*, there has to be some way in which they co-exist?

PLATO: What do you mean?

ME: If *Éros* only exists because of some perceived value in a beloved/lover, and *Agápe* is indifferent to such a value, could the two feelings not co-exist in a relationship if one loves another because of some perceived value in their beloved in addition to an unconditional *Agápe* love that already exists?

PLATO: But how would that work?

ME: It is not hard to find a common example of such a type of relationship.

To illustrate my point, let us consider the relationship between a mother and her child. As a mother, she will already unconditionally love her child. If what God said was true, then *Agápe* would have already been evoked by him in the mother and manifested in the form of affection for her child. Yet, as her child grows up, the child will be characterized by his or her unique traits, some of which will undoubtedly be beautiful. According to Diotima, *Éros* is the lifelong pursuit of beauty itself, and the climb of the ladder of beauty goes from loving physically to conceptually, and from particulars to general. Therefore, the mother will definitely evoke *Éros* for her own child. In such a relationship, *Éros* and *Agápe* co-exist in the same person of a two-man relationship.

GOD: But don't you think *Éros* must contain a sexual desire? Surely, the word *Éros* doesn't derive from "erotic" for no reason.

ME: You see, I don't quite agree that *Éros* is a kind of love. I agree with Diotima, that *Éros* is neither a God nor a mortal, that *Éros* is a "great spirit" who "acts as an interpreter" in the "communication between gods and men". (Plato 202e) I believe that *Éros* is a self-induced desire that can manifest in various types, including platonic love, where sexual desire is omitted. I believe that *Éros* is not the action of loving, but the lover himself.

Also, your discussion with Plato just now has also brought me to contemplate another belief I have about *Agápe*. Though *Agápe* is seen as a type of love given by God, by using the Socratic method of analysis, it may reveal that perhaps *Agápe* is not a type of love, but rather a feeling that is distinct from love. If God possesses *Agápe* for His children and if *Agápe* is love and is also a sense of longing, then would that mean God longs

for His children? Such a conclusion seems illogical to me, and has hence caused me to question the nature of *Agápe*.

PLATO: That is an insightful contribution to this symposium and a very difficult question has been raised. If *Agápe* is induced by God, then as mortals it is extremely difficult for us to fully understand God's will. If what you have suggested is correct and *Agápe* is a feeling distinct from love, then I understand how *Agápe* and *Éros* can most definitely co-exist in a harmonious relationship.

ME: Yes, and even if I am wrong about *Agápe*, *Éros* and *Agápe* can still co-exist in a functioning relationship, regardless of the erotic or platonic nature of *Éros*. The perfect example would be the relationship between men and God. In this relationship, one side would have *Agápe* and the other *Éros*. Should I follow my original definition of *Éros*, then God cannot possess *Éros* as God is almighty and does not see value in anything that could meet His needs as He has no needs. Therefore, it is safe to assume that God must play the role of the possessing *Agápe* in this relationship. Thus, men must have *Éros*. Men are in every aspect the opposite of God—we depend on God, and we see value in God's divinity as we pursue beauty itself. This is a prime example that even if *Agápe* and *Éros* are different, it is most definitely possible for both to coincide in a relationship.

GOD: That is a very good example of how such two fundamentally different concepts can work hand in hand.

PLATO: Yes indeed. I have never thought about *Agápe* and *Éros* like so

before. New ideas are always refreshing to hear, especially from the young generation. It challenges the way in which I perceive things.

ME: Let us have a toast to this symposium on love.

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Teacher's comment:

When writing on love, many students chose to contrast Platonic *erōs* with Christian *agapē*. In fact, differences between these two conceptions of love are remarkable; they reveal two distinctive traits of human nature: desire and sacrifice, self-centered and universal. In her term paper, Isabella engaged God and Plato in a vivid dialogue on love. Her understanding of Plato and Jesus is good, and the story is cleverly plotted and delightfully

told. The defense of the sexist Athenian assumption Isabella put into Plato's mouth does show certain Socratic-Platonic wit and shrewdness in argumentation. Isabella herself plays a good Platonic facilitator of dialogue, and as the story unfolds, she, going beyond the role of facilitator, discusses, challenges, and attempts a conciliation of the conceptions of love. The story concludes with the confident words: "New ideas are always refreshing to hear, especially from the young generation". Reading Isabella's story is a pleasant and refreshing experience. (Ho Wai Ming)

