

Sociology of Love

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Chapter 2

What Agape is not

In this chapter, we will trace out the conceptual difference of *agape* from other concepts close to it. Such work is necessary in keeping with the cautiousness of the science, that is, when not necessary, the introduction of new constructs must be reduced. New definitions of love begin to appear, that is, the Platonic eros and the Aristotelian *philia*, to then pause on decisively more sociological concepts, such as that of gift according to the tradition of Mauss and that of solidarity, all in order to put into relief that none are easily assimilated by or in some way express a sense that renders the concept of *agape* superfluous.

2.1 Eros

According to Hellenistic mythology, the god Eros was generated in very ancient times, a time, that is, just following the one in which only Chaos and Gea existed. Indeed, Parmenides considered Eros as the first among the gods. Eros was begotten by his father Poros (Expediency), and mother Penia (Privation, lack of); from Poros he inherited a desire for the good and the beautiful and also the ability to procure them for himself (Poros was the son of Methis, goddess of perspicacity); from his mother he received, instead, the condition of lacking these goods. According to Plato, this tension was the most fitting metaphor of philosophy, tending between aspiration for knowledge and the awareness of a condition of privation, between being conscious of one's lack of knowledge and the inability to fulfill it (*Simposio*, 203 B-206 A (T.6)).

Among his multiple functions, is the task of mediating between mortal and immortal reality, of reducing in such a way the hiatus between the gods and humans; in order to do this he functions as an 'interpreter and messenger for the gods on humans' behalf and for humans on behalf of the gods (*Simposio*, 202e). Therefore, Eros has a hermeneutical function: like Hermes, he also translates the will of the gods, rendering it more intelligible to men, allowing them to transcend themselves and turn their attention towards the divine. The original concept of 'hermeneutics' lies very much in this inter-

pretation/translation of the divine into the human.

But hermeneutics is not only the transposing of a language into another – more or less difficult to do and always interpretative – (Ricoeur, 1999/2001, pp. 51-74). Both Eros and Hermes are messengers who go beyond the confines of two worlds, to put Olympus in touch with humanity, or better – in Platonic terms – the world of ideas and perceivable reality. In other words, hermeneutics is also going beyond the delimitation already given. In Hermes this becomes more evident through his transgressive behavior, breaking with taboos and violating constituted rules (Burkert, 1977/2010, pp. 309 ss). For Eros, instead, going beyond what is ‘normal’ takes on a profile of untamable passion: there is an inexhaustible tension itching to fill the privations of existence; and such tension is wrought even in the search of knowledge, in love and in wisdom (*Simposio, passim*).

The Platonic eros concerns the definition of a criterion of equivalence and of general accountability that is at the base of this type of social tie. Plato expresses his idea of love-eros in *Fedro* and in *Simposio*, in which he shows that within the desire to have something one feels deprived of lies the foundation of its own manifestation. Eros, attracted in the first place by something beautiful and, hence, beautiful bodies, shows himself dependent on the beings he turns to, and therefore he can descend to a lower level: ‘to the urge of pleasure’ (*Platone*, 1993, p. 130). But he can also turn to the heights and lift himself up towards the celestial eros, renouncing immediate possession, to contemplate perfection in the world of ideas. Thus, sense having such a root, it brings this conception of love to build a dualism of sense-ideas, founding in turn a tension that is irreducible in a particular-general relationship. Consequently, to be fulfilled, love-eros must break ties with the particular and rise up to the general; only along this pathway can one adhere to a common superior principle. In this way, Plato substitutes love towards concrete subjects with a general principle of equality between individuals. The theory of Eros is tied to the political theory of justice which should inspire city leaders (*Platone*, 1974). This erotic mania, belonging to Plato’s philosophy, maintains the violence of the first-born of eros, at the foundation of many theogonies, as non-generated, without principle, and therefore ungovernable by reason and by logos.

Eros has to do with market economy. In fact, Georg Simmel, in his *Philosophie des Geldes* of 1900, points out that money is modern

economy's code founded on finance. Money becomes the mediator that has real power and an infinite symbolic meaning. From this moment onward, everything – people, sentiments, aesthetics, morals, space and time – take on a measurable value. In following Simmel's reasoning, we find ourselves realizing that money is indifferent to differences and makes us equal. By reusing the categories of love, we can say that money is erotic, meaning that it allows the appeasing of needs and desires through continuous annexing of properties of things with which we recompose a unity, which in its premise flows from the solitude of significant relationships (Simmel, 1984).

The official tradition of economic science which, from the point of view of expressed sociality is still profoundly Smithsonian, bases itself on the assumptions of mutual indifference: the intention of A's action is completely independent from B: A satisfies B's preferences only as a means to achieve his/her own individual objectives: there is no need to hypothesize any form of belonging to a communitarian reality, to an 'us.'

From this point of view, if we take the classical distinction of love and of human relationships in *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*, economic science of Smithsonian inheritance is all defined by the *eros* concept. That which pushes the entrepreneur towards entrepreneurship is, particularly in the beginning, the force of *eros*, of desire, the will to fill a lack of honor, wealth and power (Bruni, 2009).

The Medieval period has been the great incubator of the market economy. Medieval *fides* and *philia* had finished carrying out their function of mediators in commercial and financial exchanges in Europe with the Protestant Reformation (by Luther but also Calvin and other reformers). In Medieval times and civil humanism, in fact, the market had been a network of personal relationships that were not anonymous ones, amongst people who knew one another. Trust was placed on people made of flesh and bones, upon their identities and histories. This mercantile ethic made Florence, Venice, Marseilles and Bruges great.

From the mid-fifteen hundreds, after the civil and religious wars among Christians, Europe wanted to find a new base for its exchanges, for a new Europe with new social bonds, and *fides* was no longer needed: it was enough to think about one's own interests and the good of the other as well as the common good would emerge indirectly from the interaction of these. The market found thus its universal vocation (typical of Illuminism), and while no longer

limited by *philia* and *fides*, could now open itself to anyone, founding a new egalitarian and liberal humanism, where every individual interacts potentially with all, without truly encountering anyone, if not oneself.

Thus in the sixteen hundreds merchants and states gave life to a new market economy (at least for exchanges between cities and between States) that was increasingly anonymous and financial, where it was no longer the people and their identities to circulate within Europe (as well as in the New World), but, instead, abstractions such as credit titles, paper money and transactions. Starting from there, the market begins to be impersonal and becomes a form of relationship carrying out its function of mediator among unknowns. Capitalism is born in this new season for Europe, where exchanged goods lose any contact with the identity of the people who created them.

The invention of the monetary market has permitted a huge expansion of exchanges and the inclusion of millions to billions of people today, thanks to its disempowerment of human relationships and of any personal element that bespoke of difference, true diversity (religious, ethnic and national...). In order to do an exchange with another, one need not know the other in his deep being: the pricing system imposes itself as a 'third' actor, sterilizing the meaningful relationship founded on recognition. This brings about the ambivalence of the modern and more contemporary market: the disempowering and leveling of human diversity makes possible an exchange with any 'other.' One no longer needs *fides* or *philia*: desires and reciprocal needs are enough, a kind of relationing, even this universal one, that can be similarly associated with *eros*. At the same time, this universalism is not a network of encounters among the diverse, but rather, relationships that are mutually indifferent amongst subjects, as they are rendered homogenous in order to allow the exchange, without difference or one that annuls the diversities. The *eros* of the market allows one to annex and possess through money. The extraordinary innovative and inclusive power of the market and its great ability to produce solitude and anomy are both the result of the invention of modern economy: the erotic exchange that is expressed in our society of debt and consumerism, which consequently brings alienation, solitude and anomy, as well as the insolvency and credit crunch of this time.

The agapic relationship, that is, the bond between different people, has been relegated to the private sphere, an ever tightening one,

or to situations of resistance and to humiliating and degrading conditions.

2.2 Philia

In Aristotle we find a second declination of the love bond, called *philia*, expressed in the *Etica Nicomachea*, in which friendship manifests itself precisely in reciprocity of action (*Aristotele*, 1987). In Aristotle, friendship has a political meaning and is not relegated to private relationships among people. It precedes justice, therefore, because it is founded on the recognition of reciprocal merits, which are interactively communicated (*ibid.*, p. 395): for this reason, the co-presence of friends is important, who cannot remain distant in space and time (*ibid.*, p. 387). The typical element of love-*philia* is reciprocal benevolence, which presupposes a common measuring system, a principle of equivalence, which permits the reciprocity of exchanges, of appreciation and evaluation of merits, according to a shared rule of equality (*ibid.*, p. 400).

Therefore, the Aristotelian conception of *philia* presupposes a principle of accountability which sustains the friendly interaction oscillating between the evaluation of merits and the reciprocity of behaviors, a circle tying one to the other, hence, in *philein* there is intimacy but not the sweeping passion that fogs up or obscures reason and logos, such as in *eros*. Boltanski shows us that love-*agape* is a notion belonging to Christian theological tradition, but in being a sociologist he is interested in looking “at the way in which the regular relationship between men can be regulated” (Boltanski, *op. cit.*, p. 54). In Christian theology the concept of *agape* designates, first of all, God’s relationship with men, but it applies also to relationships that humans have among themselves, which finds a tie with the idea of unmotivated love, given without keeping track of merits or demerits (Nygren, 1990, pp. 93 e 96; Von Balthasar H., 1981).

The notion of love-*agape* is different from love-*eros* and from love-*philia*, because on the one hand, it does not imply the dimension of desiring something that is missing typical of *eros*, while on the other, it is indifferent to merit and to the object’s value in which it finds a resemblance in some way, this last being an element that characterizes *philia*. Along this line, the pure idea of humanity is unknown to *agape*, in the sense of altruism professed by laicized religions of positivism as posited by Comte, because, as Jean Brun

refers to in the French introduction to Kierkegaard, the second theoretical source for Boltanski (Kierkegaard, 1983), *agape* is not born “from an imperative deriving from the universality of a law... [since] it looks towards the neighbour” (Brun, 1980). The concept of neighbor for *agape* is not associated to relationships of familiar proximity, of group or nationality, but to each object whose eye it meets, and for this reason, is detached from any identifying particularity.

A great thinker of Western culture has reasoned on the paradox of *philia*. In fact, Nietzsche points out the quintessence of friendship in a relationship of co-belonging, in which the drama consists of the fact that the distinction, the twosome, is absolutely insurmountable. Distance is safe in absolute co-belonging. This relationship is clear in a passage from *Gaia Scienza* entitled *Star Friendship* (Nietzsche, 1985, p. 279). The friends are two ships, each keeping its own route, but constantly far and near. They protect each other, save each other and love each other. Thus, proximity and distance without ever confusing the other. They are the opposite of equal, of *pares*. The two ships have different routes, yet they never lose each other because friendships guarantees them distance, but a distance that is co-belonging. Therefore, we can fully comprehend the step of love towards one’s neighbor in Zarathustra (Nietzsche, op. cit., pp. 70-1), in which this is a presentiment of the *über* that indicates the need to go beyond man, meaning that Nietzschean image in which is expressed a criticism to all the metaphysical-humanistic traditions. The figure representing fully the trait of ‘beyond-man’ is that of the friend, in this case uprooting all the tradition of the history of philosophy. In the *über* Nietzsche thinks of the absolute negation of any possessive relationship, giving a place to the different and the distinct. In the ‘beyond-man’ one thinks of the radical gift in its absolute gratuitousness, and this is the negation of humanistic tradition and, therefore, also of the tradition that thinks of friendship as a relationship of *inter pares*, as a relationship of equality. Here, the friend is the one who perceives his relationship with the other as that which constitutes their difference. This idea is of the utmost importance because it introduces us to the deep understanding of the meaning of ‘beyond-man’. Nietzsche, however, in recognizing the insufficiency of the concept of *philia* as equality, of the Western philosophical tradition, redefines its contents. On the heuristic plane, it is most useful to transfer these contents to the concept of *agape*. In this way, we can better understand the criticism given on the social level, on the one hand, to Plato’s *eros*, be-

cause eros is the instinct to recompose the one, to be the one to annul any difference that thinks itself originary, while on the other hand, also the philia, as it presupposes a relationship *inter pares*, among equals, is likewise a danger to the emancipation of the subjects. Instead, *agape*, by founding its bonds on overabundance, roots its origin in the otherness of each. This way, one recognizes the distance from the other and in this distance one is together: a *communitas* is created with the emancipation of each one as its premise. Agape creates the communitarian space, meaning those intersubjective bonds of co-belonging that do not confuse, identify, or make equal. Subjects of *agape* are with the other, which is their commonality: one, two, and the common, that which is neither of the one nor of the other. Only in agapic action can we find an idea of *communitas*, but of the ancient star. Since any other idea of love, would throw us once more either into the erotic dimension of desire-annexation, or in the philiac dimension of camaraderie, of that which is equal, annulling the oppositions and the differences, that, instead, *agape* recognizes and in which it roots its essence.

2.3 Gift

To justify introducing *agape*, in our view, we should see whether the social we intend to express could be interpreted by a concept close to *agape*: that of gift. According to us, gift is not able to bring to the fore, describe, or explain that observable reality which instead could be expressed by *agape*, but not because there is a more or a less, but simply because they are interpretative tools, each able to enlighten different aspects of reality.

First of all, we must agree on the concept in question: when we talk about gift we refer, at least in this faculty, to the theoretical tradition that has been consolidated in social sciences beginning with the essay by Mauss (1965, and or. 1923-24). Mauss considered gift as a sort of exchange typical of archaic society. Such an affirmation is not an interpretation of texts by Mauss, but is explicated right in his *Essay on Gift*, whose subtitle declares: *Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Ulterior support for this definition of gift, intended as a form of exchange, is in another paper by Mauss: *Exchanged Gifts and the Obligation to Give in Return*, in which is shown that gift: "...presupposes 1) the obligation to give; 2) the obligation to receive; 3) the obligation to give back" (*op. cit.*,

p.172). The study by Mauss utilizes the concept of exchanged gifts to interpret economic transactions of *Potlach*, that is, of the system of exchanged gifts between pre-literate populations of the Tobriand Islands, which imply not only that the doner gives and the donee receives, but that the social obligation (norm) exists of maintaining the duties of each:

“...the total transaction not only implies the obligation of giving back gifts received; but it also supposes two others equally important: the obligation of giving, on the one hand, and an obligation of receiving, on the other” (*op. cit.*, p.161).

In this instance, the giving connects the giver, the gift, and the donee in a relationship of reciprocity, which, defined or undefined in time, expects restitution according to its logic.

The presence of gratuitousness in this type of relationship doesn't change the model of action.

It is necessary to keep to this logic of exchange if we wish to understand the specificity of the concept of gift. Starting, then, from its original meaning we will show successively how the contradictions of gift, not only stimulate, but give space to the need for defining a concept in *agape* useful to social sciences. For criticism on the concept of gift, we look at work done by Jacques Derrida, *Given Time : Counterfeit Money* (1992). In this essay, the French philosopher shows the contradictions of gift to the point of drawing away giving from any form of gift, meant as exchange, till making it vanish as a phenomenon in its definition of gratuitousness. In the first place, Derrida shows that: “While there is gift, there should be no reciprocity” (*ibid.*, p.14), because giving makes the gift part of an economical regime: one of offering, of paying a debt, of giving back a loan, all according to a calculation mentality, for interest, usefulness, etc. Instead, where there is giving, every exchange should be suspended (*ibid.*, p.14).

The author also shows a second argument for the contradiction of gift:

“While there is giving, the donee should not give back, amortize, reimburse, get rid of debt, enter into a contract with, or never have incurred a debt” (*ibid.*, pp. 15-16).

In this case, Derrida is not talking about an ungrateful person, but refers to the unawareness on the part of the giver of having to give, who doesn't see and doesn't know that a gift has been received. In this sense, Derrida wants to express also the necessity of not making the gift dependent, as a social phenomenon, on the recipient's conscience, affirming in this way that the phenomenon of gift exists also where the recipient is not aware of it. In the third place, Derrida asserts:

“... this unawareness of the gift must be radical not only on the part of the donee, but first of all on the part of the donor.”

That is, Derrida shows how the conscience of gift annuls the gift itself:

“...the gratifying image of the goodness or generosity of the giving being who, knowing himself as such, recognizes himself circularly, speculatively, in a sort of self-recognition, of self-approval, and of narcissistic gratitude” (ibid., pp. 25-26 and pp. 147-148).

In fact, Mauss, in his definition of gift, showed this definition of narcissistic power of gift, of a return of conscience to itself which establishes an immanent economic exchange: “giving equals showing one's superiority, being worth more, being higher up, *magister*; to accept without giving back in excess, equals subordinating oneself, becoming a client or servant, making oneself small, falling lower (*minister*)” (Mauss, *op. cit.*, p. 281). Therefore, for there to be gift, the ego of the giver should be annulled, as giving becomes possible only by losing oneself. In the fourth place, in order for there to be authentic giving, according to Derrida the gift itself should disappear:

“...the subject and the object are the gift's stoppers” (ibid., p. 26).

With this affirmation, Derrida intends to show that the moment in which the gift appears as such, meaning, it is objectified, it would make the giving disappear. This doesn't imply that if the gift did not objectify it would lose its empiricism, but that manifesting itself to the conscience of the recipient and of the giver would make it come into the logic of an economic exchange and would extradite it from the range of donation. This is why he previously affirmed:

“It could be gift, meant as gift, only by not being present
as gift... If it presents itself, it is no longer presented”
(*ibid.*, pp. 16 and 17).

With the four arguments of contradiction of gift by Mauss, Derrida shows two contradictions: the first affirms that, either the gift presents itself as such and thereby disappears because it gets raised to a system of economic exchange (just as Mauss intended it), or the gift is no longer presented, it disappears, but in this case it exists as a phenomenon, intended as an empirical dimension of giving. Therefore, if it appears, the gift is presented as an exchange not belonging to the market; if it doesn't appear, it disappears. In this dimension, giving is lost to social science as a useful concept. In our view, the contradictions shown by Derrida – and so as not to fall in the same – open a breach to the need of introducing the concept of *agape* in social sciences (we can define that gift, in fact, as *agape*, because it is overabundant, it disappears, and in disappearing, since it cares not to be returned and/or for the merits of each one, it is then affirmed). Such a necessity doesn't respond to metaphysical, theological or philosophical reasons, according to which as sociologists we would not have the tools to support these reasons. Rather, the concept of *agape* in social sciences would permit us to interpret all those social phenomenon of absence of calculation, of unconditional action, of non-usefulness, of absence of reciprocity (in the moral conscience of both giver and receiver) and of restitution, of overabundance, without motive or interest, starting from itself, which gift, as understood by Mauss onwards, could not interpret. Therefore, we wish to propose the idea that the possibility of gift is indeed the exchange without mediation of money, and its impossibility or disappearance, discussed by Derrida, is the possibility given by *agape*. In fact, bottomless giving, as intended by Thomas Aquinas:

“... is verily a donation without return ... that which
is given without intention of restitution” (cit. in Marion,
2001, p.102)

since it is not present in the tradition of ethnic-sociological studies (and if it were it would have those same contradictions expressed by Derrida), it is necessary then to use a new concept, such as *agape*, in order to express the action, the relationship and the social interaction that, as such, is without return, restitution, uncaring of merit

or demerit, bottomless, and allow gift to interpret all those realities of economic exchange and reciprocity not mediated by money, or at least not mediated just by money.

2.4 Conclusion

In questioning concept of *agape*, we asked ourselves if it could not be assimilated to close logical constructs and therefore we investigated what *agape* is not, looking at other forms of love such as eros and philia, but we have seen that *agape* does not overlap the concept of gift. Agape is not eros because it is not characterized by the motive of desire. Nor does it resemble philia because this is made typical by the reciprocity of the action. Literature on gift is very abundant and complicated to wean, as it has two traditions: the socio-anthropological and the theological. The two concepts have different meanings and traditions. We have dialogued with that reflection held up by the circuit of giving-receiving-restitution, starting with Mauss, we have found the contradictions contained in Derrida's criticism, and we have defined the heuristic space of *agape*.

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