

## **Agape Love and the Problem of Respect**

**Abstract:** Discussions of agape love are mostly about whether it compromises self-love or whether it is politically beneficial in fighting injustice. However, this essay focused on a different moral issue of agape love, arguing that agape love for one's enemies could be inconsistent with respect for them. By demonstrating agape love through acting in a way that is good for their enemies, one inadvertently shows disrespect to the enemy, as they prioritise their own values over the well-being of the person they claim to love. This problem is difficult to avoid due to agape love's unidirectional features, a feature that characterises agape love and distinguishes it from other forms of love like *philia* and *eros*. Even if agape love is considered to be the self-refrain of the one who loves to prevent the charge of disrespect, agape love's active power of restoring community and fostering political changes would be diminished.

Usually, when people speak about love, they perceive love as selective. In selective love, it seems important for us to be able to justify why we love certain people rather than others. But luminaries like Martin Luther King, Jr. suggest we can love more people than merely the selected few; in fact, we can aspire to agape love – to love everyone, including our enemies. This inclusive love, with its purpose to make the world better, is often associated with the politics of non-violence. Many discussions on agape love revolve around practical and moral considerations. These discussions explore whether agape love can be effectively applied to achieve political goals and whether the demands of such love pose a challenge for the individual, potentially compromising self-love and self-respect. This essay, however, focuses on another aspect of the moral issue in agape love, which is whether it is inconsistent with respect for the one being loved. When one practices agape love by engaging in actions

that benefit their enemy, he inadvertently disrespects the enemy by prioritising his own values over the person he loves. This problem is difficult to overcome, given that agape love is characterised by its unidirectional nature. Even if agape love is understood as the self-refrain of the one who loves rather than a love that motivates him to act in the interest of the one being loved to prevent the possibility of disrespect, the dynamic ability to actively restore community and drive change towards achieving political goals is diminished. This essay will begin by introducing the concept of agape love and distinguishing it from other forms of love. Next, I will address the challenge of expressing agape love by fulfilling the desires of one's enemy. Another perspective will be examined, specifically, demonstrating love by contributing to the well-being and flourishing of the one being loved. After that, I will argue that such demonstrations of agape love are inconsistent with respect, and the challenges posed by this inconsistency cannot be resolved by adopting schemas that are effective in close relationships. Finally, I will present one approach to reconcile this tension, but I propose that it involves diminishing the constructive power of agape love, essentially reducing it to a positive attitude.

Ancient Greek philosophers distinguish three kinds of love: eros, philia, and agape. Eros denotes the expression of sexual love within romantic relationships. Philia is a brotherly love one experiencing in friendship. Agape refers to God's love for humanity.<sup>1</sup> However, divine conditions are not necessary for us to accept the notion of agape love. As Myisha Cherry suggests, agape love, in an atheist interpretation, can be understood as unconditional love.<sup>2</sup> One can love others not because they meet certain conditions, but rather, he loves them for who they are, loving them for their own sake. This notion of love sharply contrasts with

---

<sup>1</sup>Bennett Helm, "Love," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/love/>.

<sup>2</sup>Myisha Cherry, "Love, Anger, and Racial Injustice," *The Routledge Handbook of Love in Philosophy*, 2019, 158, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315645209-14>.

eros and philia, which are highly selective. Agape love is universal and impartial, and it aims at everyone, including one's enemies. Moreover, unlike philia love, which entails mutuality,<sup>3</sup> agape love can be demonstrated even unidirectionally. One can have philia to someone only when a reciprocal loving relationship with that person is formed. Thus, if interpreting love in terms of philia, there is no possibility for one to love his enemies who would not love them back. Agape enables such a possibility, for it is not contingent on reciprocity or mutual affection. My demonstration of agape love to my enemies does not require them to love me back. Besides this, agape love is consistent with disliking someone. When loving someone (in an agape sense), we do not need to identify with the values that he identifies with, or like his actions, because agape love is not affectionate like liking; agape love is, as King puts, 'creative, understanding goodwill for all men.'<sup>4</sup> It is an attitude which we choose to adopt towards others.

Having goodwill for others seems to involve wanting what is good for them. But what constitutes "good" for a person? One interpretation suggests that seeking what is good involves acting in their best interest. Love entails the lover being motivated to act in the loved one's interests.<sup>5</sup> One's demonstration of agape love toward another person includes acting in his interests. The question is defining the interests of the one who is loved. Such interests could be linked to one's desires. This interpretation holds when extending agape love to someone without animosity, like a neighbour. However, it becomes complex when dealing with enemies, as their desires might involve morally unacceptable intentions, such as harming the one who loves and his close ones. If agape love requires fulfilling such problematic desires, it becomes inconsistent with both self-respect and our moral doctrines.

---

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 158.

<sup>4</sup>Martin Luther King, "'Loving Your Enemies,' Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church," *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute*, 1957, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/loving-your-enemies-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church?ref=nathanheintz.com>.

<sup>5</sup>Harry Frankfurt, "Autonomy Necessity, and Love," in *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 166.

Therefore, in order to love our enemies, interests cannot be understood as the desires of the one being loved.

Another way to read interest is to think of it as the flourishing of the beloved. In demonstrating agape love to someone, I concern about his well-being, and my love towards him motivates me to act in a way that will advance his well-being. This is in line with Frankfurt's picture of love, where love is a robust concern of the beloved, and the lover acts to promote the well-being of the beloved in the manifestation of love.<sup>6</sup> Love as the concern of the beloved's happiness and flourishing involves a sense of selflessness. Frankfurt thinks parents' love for their children is a paradigm of love.<sup>7</sup> This love is unidirectional in the sense that it does not require beloved children to love their parents back, and it persists even if the beloved harms the parents.<sup>8</sup> A parent, as the lover, wishes the child as the beloved to flourish, and he acts to advance the beloved's well-being. In demonstrating agape love towards one's enemies, where love is also unidirectional, one wishes the well-being of them, and he acts to restore a loving community where they both exist. As King states, hate will corrupt the hater, and hatred distorts the world for the hater.<sup>9</sup> The enemy who persecutes the lover, is indeed corrupted by hatred. Thus, in wishing their flourishing, the lover acts to save them from such corruption through establishing a loving and inclusive community, and there is no need to fulfil the enemy's hateful desires such as the destruction of the lover. In the case of fighting racial injustice, the lover, who belongs to the racial group that is being discriminated against, in his effort to advocate for racial equality and build an inclusive community, also eliminates the hatred that corrupts the racists; he acts in a way that advances his enemies well-being.

---

<sup>6</sup>Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2006), 59.

<sup>7</sup>Frankfurt, "Autonomy Necessity, and Love," 166.

<sup>8</sup>Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, 39-41.

<sup>9</sup>Martin Luther King, "'Loving Your Enemies,' Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church," *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute*, 1957, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/loving-your-enemies-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church?ref=nathanheintz.com>.

However, understanding the demonstration of agape love as acting in a way that advances the well-being of the beloved makes agape love inconsistent with respect. This time, what is put into question by such demonstration of agape love is not the self-respect of the one who loves, but the respect that the person being loved deserves as a human being since the power to interpret what is good for the prosperity of the one being loved is held by the lover. The lover acts as the benefactor of the one being loved based on the lover's idea of the constitution of well-being, and the one being loved is treated as a passive object of care with no active role in determining what is good by himself.<sup>10</sup> The person being loved is deemed incompetent in judging what is central to his well-being while in fact he is a full-fledged agent whose autonomy should be respected. Whether the one being loved is making the right judgements or not depends on the lover's judgement. In acting as the benefactor, the lover places himself in a higher cognitive position than the one being loved, meaning the lover believes he has a clearer understanding of what is beneficial for the happiness of the one being loved. Thus, such demonstrations of love imply a condescending and disrespectful attitude. In showing agape love towards one's enemies, the lover might think the well-being of the enemy consists in the elimination of his hate, and in building a loving community which adopts the value of equality, he acts in a way that advances his enemy's well-being. However, the enemy is likely to disagree with the lover regarding what constitutes his own well-being. In the situation of such disagreement, when the lover acts to enhance his enemy's well-being, he prioritises his own value and judgement over his enemy. In his demonstration of agape love, the lover implicitly suggests a more insightful understanding of what constitutes his enemy's well-being. The implication of disrespect might not be so obvious

---

<sup>10</sup>Kyla Ebels-Duggan, "Against Beneficence: A Normative Account of Love," *Ethics* 119, no. 1 (2008): 145, <https://doi.org/10.1086/592310>.

when we consider agape love in fighting racial injustice. We can think of another case to make it clear:

Imagine a small community with a notably increasing acceptance of homosexuality. Amidst this acceptance, a conservative Christian named Mark holds firm beliefs against homosexual behaviours, viewing them as sinful and consequential to eternal damnation. Mark is kind and friendly to others because he wants to love everyone, as God loves every human being. Witnessing the growing acceptance of same-sex couples, Mark feels compelled to save the community from the path to destruction. He embarks on a mission to persuade gay people about their actions and to convince the heterosexual majority to reconsider their viewpoints. Jason, a gay man with a volatile temper who feels violated by Mark's attempts, verbally abuses Mark, physically harms him, and spreads damaging rumours about him. Undeterred, Mark, driven by his belief in redemption, continues his work. Despite the harm Jason caused him, Mark still loves Jason and tries hard to make him change his sexuality.

Mark demonstrates agape love for the community members, including his enemies, by acting as their benefactor. He cares about the fundamental well-being of everyone – their eternal happiness in heaven. This religious sense of well-being is crucial to Mark, and in the light of his agape love, he acts not for his personal flourishing but to advance what he perceives as vital to everyone's well-being. Jason's resentment against Mark fails to stop Mark's agape love from extending to him. However, Mark's action of love is motivated by his religious values and his judgement of the constitution of well-being that is based on it. In his view, Jason and others in the community fail to see what *really* contributes to their well-being; what they perceive as good is, in fact, destructive. The recipients of Mark's love, who disagree with his values and judgments, would perceive Mark's demonstration of love as an imposition of values they do not share and an inappropriate interference in their lives. What

they deemed to be crucial for their happiness is a community with high acceptance of homosexuality, which conflicts with Mark's idea. Jason's feeling of being violated, though it can never justify his harm to Mark, points towards the oppression of his values and subsequent judgments. Mark's manifestation of agape love, therefore, carries an undertone of disrespect towards community members who do not share his views, as it underscores a disregard for their perspectives and autonomy in matters pertaining to their own welfare.

In responding to problems that arise in acting as the benefactor of the loved one, Ebels-Duggan believes it is better for the lover to share the end of the loved one. Instead of acting to advance the happiness of the one being loved based on the lover's personal values, by sharing the loved one's end, the lover gives weight to the loved one's own opinion.<sup>11</sup> For Ebels-Duggan, the shared-end view overcomes the condescension displayed by the lover in unilaterally making decisions without asking for the loved one's opinion. The demonstration of love requires the lover to acknowledge two authorities in the loved one: selection authority and authority in judgment. Selection authority requires the lover to pursue the purpose of the loved one together and to assist them in achieving it. And by endowing another with the authority of judgment, the lover regards the loved one's judgement as indicative of its worth. This does not necessitate viewing their judgment as flawless, but it entails operating under the presumption that their choices are good.<sup>12</sup> Thus, in acknowledging these two authorities in the loved one, the lover shows respect to the one he loves. Furthermore, the superiority of the shared-end view compared to the benefactor view lies in the recognition of the importance of interaction between the lover and the loved one. For the loved one's end to be successfully shared with the lover, reciprocal interaction is required, as Ebels-Duggan points out, 'neither party should unilaterally adopt ends that will place significant demands on the

---

<sup>11</sup>Ebels-Duggan, "Against Beneficence," 157-158.

<sup>12</sup>Ebels-Duggan, "Against Beneficence," 158-159.



other', or it would be the case that one person's authority is overestimated.<sup>13</sup> However, the shared-end view cannot be adopted when discussing agape love. Agape love is featured in unidirectional love from the lover. It is one way to respond to the hate the lover receives from his enemy, the lover cuts off the chain of hate and increases the total amount of love in the community.<sup>14</sup> One who demonstrates agape love to his enemy should not expect reciprocal love from his enemy. Even if the possibility that the one being loved loves back exists, this should not be what the lover aims for when demonstrating agape love. In concerning the well-being of his enemies, the lover expresses love without the formation of mutual relationships. So, the shared-end schema which insists the necessity of reciprocal love cannot apply to agape love where love is expressed unidirectional. Moreover, the requirement of acknowledging selection authority and judgement authority to prevent the problem of disrespect is incompatible with agape love, too. The hater's end is likely to involve things that are morally unacceptable for the lover. Since the lover is the one who 'begins' to love his hater, the chance to negotiate the hater's purpose is nearly impossible. In this case, if the lover still recognises the authority of the one being loved, then this inevitably leads to an overestimation of the latter's authority.

Hence, for one to express agape love to his enemy, the problem of respect always exists. On the one hand, wanting the good for the other in terms of acting in that person's desire risks violating the lover's moral doctrine and threatens his self-respect. On the other hand, wanting the good for the other in terms of acting to advance that person's well-being, although preventing the previous issue, is inconsistent with respect to that person. Since what motivates the lover to act depends on what he believes is in the well-being of the loved one,

---

<sup>13</sup>Ebels-Duggan, "Against Beneficence," 157.

<sup>14</sup>Martin Luther King, "'Loving Your Enemies,' Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church," *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute*, 1957, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/loving-your-enemies-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church?ref=nathanheintz.com>.

the lover prioritises his personal values over others and fails to respect the autonomy of the one being loved.

In order to prevent the charge of being disrespectful, the demonstration of agape love should be understood as motivating the lover NOT to do certain things, instead of actively doing things in wishing the good of the one being loved. Agape love is 'the refusal to defeat any individuals'.<sup>15</sup> In loving his enemies, one refrains from any attempts to attack and harm them, actions he might otherwise engage in. The only active behaviour that is needed is a kind attitude toward enemies. A person who is discriminated against by others because of his race and chooses to love his enemies means that he does not hurt or defeat them. In this way, he upholds his values while not oppressing others with his own. In Mark's case, his love for Jason should not be shown as acting for his happiness, but rather as an abstention from seeking revenge or trying to defeat Jason in any way, coupled with a kind attitude. Thus, understanding agape love as the self-restraint of the lover makes such love compatible with respect.

However, this interpretation robs agape love of its constructive power, reducing it to an ordinary attitude of goodness. As Cherry suggests, agape love has the power to restore the community, which makes it a strong and active force in fighting racial injustice.<sup>16</sup> The power of this restoration comes from the lover's action, directed by his belief about what is good for others. However, if agape love is understood as the self-restraint of hate, the activeness of agape love is removed, and what the lover can do is merely prevent the increase of hate rather than actively shaping the community based on his desire for the good of everyone. It is hard to imagine restoring a community with merely kind attitudes and inaction.

---

<sup>15</sup>Martin Luther King, "Loving Your Enemies," Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church," *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute*, 1957, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/loving-your-enemies-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church?ref=nathanheintz.com>.

<sup>16</sup>Cherry, "Love, Anger, and Racial Injustice," 158.

In conclusion, the demonstration of agape love in acting to promote one's enemy inadvertently leads to disrespect, as it involves prioritising the lover's personal values over the well-being of the one being loved. Overcoming this challenge proves daunting due to the inherent unidirectional nature of agape love. Even if agape love is viewed as the self-restraint of the lover rather than a motivation to act in the interest of the one being loved and prevent potential disrespect, this understanding diminishes the dynamic ability to actively restore community and drive political change.

## Bibliography

- Cherry, Myisha. "Love, Anger, and Racial Injustice." *The Routledge Handbook of Love in Philosophy*, 2019, 157–68. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315645209-14>.
- Ebels-Duggan, Kyla. "Against Beneficence: A Normative Account of Love." *Ethics* 119, no. 1 (2008): 142–70. <https://doi.org/10.1086/592310>.
- Frankfurt, Harry. "Autonomy Necessity, and Love." In *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, 129–41. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Frankfurt, Harry. *The reasons of Love*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Helm, Bennett. "Love." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, September 1, 2021. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/love/>.
- King, Martin Luther. "'Loving Your Enemies,' Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church." The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, 1957. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/loving-your-enemies-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church?ref=nathanheintz.com>.