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A NOTE ON EROS, AGAPE, & ESSE: PERSONAL REFLECTIONS OF A THOMIST

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In the western philosophical tradition, eros and agape have been seen as two types of love which oppose one another. In this article, Dr. Wilhelmsen gives an analysis of the act of loving and examines the roles played by these two loves. Applying the principles of Thomistic metaphysics, he attempts to unite the two in a “transcendental Unity.”



AMONG THE MORE ANNOYING QUESTIONS THAT A YOUNG (OR NOT SO YOUNG) man can receive in this life is the following: why do you love this young (or not so young) woman? What do you see in her? Precending from the indelicacy of the question, those of us who dedicate our lives to philosophy can find in it some serious metaphysical problems. Should the young (or not so young) man attempt to attend to the admittedly indelicate inquiry of his insensitive friend, he will find himself at a loss. He can tick off a number of characteristics, physical, intellectual, moral; he can dilate on her splendid sense of humour; her solid status in the community; her deep religiosity; even her obvious affection for him; and he can thus go on - and on - and on! and when he finishes his delineation of the lovely qualities of his lady he will have in his hands the dust of a love that has disappeared under the lense of an analysis that destroys even as it would understand. The butterfly would have been pinned to the screen and like all such butterflies would be dead. “We dissect in order to murder”, as Wordsworth put it.

I suggest that this experience is universally common. When asked why we love whatever it is we love, we oblige to the best of our abilities but we always end by losing the very love we set out to explain. Everything predicated of the beloved could be predicated of any number of other subjects of being. This truth is most pointed when it refers to human love but it extends to the inferior objects surrounding us and forming part of the daily furniture of our lives: an old pipe with a stem half broken; a battered walking stick; an ancient pair of shoes worn weary with years; a suit run thin and cleaned and pressed beyond its normal span of life. We love even when reason dictates that we ought not to. At bottom most of us are pack rats.

We give of our substance sometimes to such an absurd degree that we approximate the insane generosity of Don Quixote and we beg for affection and acceptance often with the gross carnality of Sancho Panza. And in neither case do we really understand what is going on. Human nature is just that way. The western tradition, in attempting to understand what is not understanding but love, has conventionally distinguished a love of agape and a love of eros and has added, thanks to Aristotle’s splendid treatise, a love of filia or friendship. I intend to probe these loves, if but briefly, and then indicate what seems to me to be a serious problem in any effort at synthesizing them.

Eros - a divinity for the Greeks - bespeaks the restlessness, the *Unruh*, that haunts and even forms the heart of the world. Eros is imperfection dissatisfied with its own imperfection; a lack seeking to erase itself into a fullness;

a potency striving to achieve actuality; a nature somehow aware, consciously or unconsciously, of an unfulfilled promise written into the heart of its essence. Eros is need. Has not Aristotle taught that the final cause is the cause of all the causes, that without a march towards finality and fulfillment the world would be a camp of soldiers forever on bivouac, a sterile and motionless cosmos reminiscent of what our astronauts discovered on the moon? Transposing the business to the level of the specifically human, a man without eros is a burnt-out case, a candidate for a coffin.

Although the erotic in cosmic and human existence can be articulated in more than one way, it does seem to be that a Thomist might well understand the business by noting the distinction between nature and being and the primacy of being over nature. At least such is the conviction of this Thomist. If nature structures being and indeed is its very configuration; if nature lies on the side of a potency limiting even as it directs the fundamental act of existing; if being - in turn - is the act of all acts and in no sense a potency, then it follows that all eros - that groaning of the real to come into its own - must lie on the side of nature. Nature is structurally erotic both in being cosmic and in being human. Were it otherwise, to repeat Aristotle's thesis, this world would indeed be a quiet and silent tomb in which reposed the corpse of being. But this is not our world. Given that nature is composed of the four Aristotelian causes, we can conclude that eros is causality itself: matter seeking form; form seeking finality; the whole composition erupting into being through a network of efficient causes that finds itself even in structuring the other into existence. The music of the real is one with potency attempting to strike the chord of being. This is our world: crops seeking water; lions and tigers seeking food in the jungle; men and women seeking each other; the scholar seeking truth; the contemplative seeking God. The order of being is a symphony of eros. And - to repeat the Thomistic thesis - all of this lies on the side of potency, a potency that ultimately is a configuring into being of the primal act, existence, without which the very configuring would be nothing at all.

The western tradition has looked largely upon agape as the counterpart to eros. Agape bespeaks a fullness of being that overflows and perfects the impoverishment of eros. In an analogy drawn from Saint Bonaventure, agape can be compared to a spring fed from an underground source reaching to the sea, a spring that

forever spills its waters on both shores and thus nourishes the land, but a spring that is never exhausted. This is the good that diffuses itself according to the mystical tradition. *Bonum est diffusivum sui*. Agape exists on more than one level and indeed is a staggered perfection: the more a reality is enmeshed in matter, the more agape exhausts itself as does the food I eat cease being itself even as it nourishes me; the less a reality is enmeshed in matter, the more agape can give without ceasing to be itself, as does a teacher give of his learning to his students without losing it himself. Agape at its highest is a free gift but even in its lower levels agape represents and indeed is the generosity of being. The worker who is fatigued and who grumbles but who still does his job perfects the world. Pius XI complained that the industrialized worker left the factory dehumanized but the matter he crafted into art left the factory ennobled. When I give a gift to a friend, the gift ceases to be mine but the love which moved me to gift-giving remains mine even as I deprive myself of some material object in order to manifest my affection.

The order of being is a symbiosis of eros and agape. Without eros, agape (we prescind from the Divine Agape) would have no reality upon which it might lavish its superabundance. Thus the higher love depends on the lower. If we would seek the source of agape, we might well find it in St. Thomas' teaching on the good. His reasoning is remarkably swift and ineluctably convincing. Denying that there is any privileged "idea" a la Plato, of goodness, asserting that every understanding we have of the good is of some concrete good, asserting thus an analogy of goods, St. Thomas begins the march of his reasoning by noting what all men mean by the word "good" when they use it. I call those things - acts, persons, situations, places - good which I desire. (The reasoning remains strictly on the metaphysical level: often what is desire is morally wrong but it is still perfective in some way. Otherwise nobody would ever commit sin). In turn, things are desirable to the degree of their capacity to perfect. Perfectability bespeaks perfection here and now realized. Perfection bespeaks actuality. Esse is the act of all acts, hence the perfection of all perfections. It follows that things are good to the degree to which they are. Being is desirable, lovable in itself. This ecstatic dimension of existence does not add to being: it is being. Even the most impoverished and pitiful of realities can perfect something, somehow, some way. The order of being emerges as a communion of existents each one of which is called to pour out its metaphysical heart in

fulfilling what is lacking in the other. Each being does this in the measure of its nature, the configuration of its existence.

Since *esse* is the being of the concrete, it follows that only concrete being is desirable, lovable. (The desire we have to know the abstract is our desire and hence the principle is not violated). The lovable or desirable is the whole *ens*, the thing itself in being. Here a word of caution is demanded. Although the existent becomes lovable because it is existent, neither the love of *eros* nor the love of *agape* precisely achieves *esse* as though *esse* were a “thing” capable of being loved. The only *Esse* that can be loved is Subsistent *Esse*, God, because Subsisting *Esse* is the only *Esse* that is. Our acts of existing do not exist; we exist in virtue of “them”. Participating in being as they do, creatures are lovable in the measure of the being they possess and that measure is the mode of being, nature. Things themselves, in all their concretized individuality and peculiarity elicit both the love of *eros* and the love of *agape*. Although the Thomistic essence is truly the limit of being, this limit is a positive limit: the reality that subsists in being is good, is perfective, is lovable.

St. Thomas emphasizes the lovability of being as rooted in existence in a rather curious article in the *Summa Theologiae* which asks whether or not “mathematicals” are good. His answer: “mathematicals” are not good (which does not mean that they are bad) because they abstract from *esse* and since only the existent is good they cannot be loved. We can only love to know them. But we can dupe ourselves. A trick of the imagination, explored delicately by Gabriel Marcel, often permits us to convert abstractions in quasi-realities and this produces what Marcel called “the fanaticized consciousness”, the consciousness that loves not things or persons, but abstractions frozen into sense images, usually visual, that are taken to be realities. To Marcel’s observations -I add the following; beware the man who constantly capitalizes Truth, Justice, Beauty (unless, of course, he is talking about God). He falls into the pagan fallacy, so excoriated by St. Augustine in *The City of God*: the attempt to love Virtue and Excellence “in themselves” as though they were concrete realities. This fallacy, according to St. Thomas in his treatise on the virtues, consists in treating the abstract as though it were concrete. It is in being that we find lovability and love is the answer to being, an answer itself which is an act of being.

Precisely here the intelligence flounders in its ef-

fort to understand love. Every human act of cognition is principiated into being by some form of the real originally abstracted from sensation, engendering an intelligible species caused by the abstractive illumination of the agent intellect. All forms are finite, limited, and thus every act of understanding is so structured that it captures “so much and no more” of the subject understood. Has not Jacques Maritain taught us that any object and even all objects are incapable of totally revealing the richness of any one subject of being, most especially a personal subject? Since forms pertain to the order of essence and since essence is the limit placed on being, it follows that our concepts are as limited as are their objects. It is important to note, however, that the affirmation of existence in judgement is a genuine and direct understanding of being but nonetheless it cannot be distilled into any direct concept whatsoever. It follows that we are looking at “the back side” of being every time we fashion our experience of the real into concepts. The fullness of being, although affirmed directly, is understood only indirectly.

Yet the act of love goes out to being as good and the goodness of being is one with its proportioned *esse*. It follows that love always passes beyond understanding. Here we find the metaphysics behind the experience indicated at the beginning of this essay. We can never explain adequately why it is that we love anything at all, be it a person or even some reality lying below the person. The explanation consists in ticking off qualities abstracted conceptually which often enough can be predicated of other persons or things, and thus the concreteness of the beloved is lost. Our love always surpasses our understanding. The person who would be totally understood in order to be loved will never be loved at all. More accurately: that person will tend to reject any love offered him or her.



A kind of “plus” or “excess” pertains to being itself. The tradition stems from the *De Divinis Nominibus* of the Pseudo Denis. *Esse* is not exhausted in actualizing the totality of essence. It follows that the act of being can be understood, stated St. Thomas, as being in the thing as its very being or as being in God, its Cause. When we love, even trivially but most powerfully when we love nobly, we touch the Divine.

But with so much said and done, we still confront the problem of the relations between eros and agape. Abstracting from God who is pure agape, there would seem to be within the order of being no reality that is purely erotic or purely agathonic. A pure eros would be a metaphysical monster bent entirely upon personal satisfaction, the tyrant of Plato's *Republic*. But that tyrant is a paradigm. Even Hitler loved dogs and small children. Although some men approach the deplorable state of Plato's tyrant, probably no man ever really achieves that pit of degradation. On the other hand, a pure agape would be some angelic personality that needed nothing outside of himself; indeed, he would be almost as repulsive as the first alternative. Who of us, says Saint Augustine in his attack on Aristotelian magnanimity, is so virtuous that he needs nothing or nobody? This truth is best known in the love of filia or friendship which involves a giving and a receiving, but a giving not for the sake of receiving. But if eros lies on the side of potency and agape on the side of act, how indeed are they coordinated into unity?

Even a superficial view of the issue reveals the impossibility, not of distinguishing, but of separating eros and agape in human life. The very need to give is itself a kind of eros smuggled into agape. When it degenerates into a pure eros this love becomes a kind of corrupt philanthropy which is simply selfish. The recipient of this fake generosity is little more than the object of an obsession. But when encountered in reasonably normal men, this mingling of eros and agape is metaphysically and psychologically beneficent.

I think that the key to the resolution of this problem lies in the role that the act of existing exercises as synthesizing act. Let the reader recall that judgements of the second and third adjacent reflect diverse facets of being. In the affirmation that "A is" no predicate is posited. In the judgement that "A is being" or "existing", the semantic predicate adds nothing to the verbal copula "is". The author is in total agreement here with what has been called "the Hume/ Brentano / Gilson" theory of judgement. St. Thomas insisted that this type of affirmation simply asserts being as absolute act, adding nothing thereto after the manner of a determination or specification of being. The judgement of the third adjacent, involving a genuine and not a pseudo predicate, is a composing act in which the mind, placing before itself a subject by way of sensorial experience - direct or indirect - applies a formality to which it is in act thanks to the intelligible species: the thing not only is absolutely

but it is in this or that manner: "A is B." This composing act - within Thomistic direct realism - reiterates an active composing which is here and now being done in the real. The judgement that "John is walking" intentionally does in the intelligence what John is doing right now in the real: walking! Being is never an over-and-done-with. The over-and-done-with, as Ortega y Gasset pointed out, is biography and biography is death. Being, returning to the metaphysics of St. Thomas, is an active composing and here we move to the second facet, if I may be permitted the term, of the role that *esse* plays in the real. Not only is *esse* absolute and first act, that without which there would be nothing, but even as *esse* posits that which is by constituting its very being, *esse* synthesizes into unity everything going into the formation of the real. *Esse* is not a reality but the being of every reality and reality is composed of an amazing multitude of principles, substantial and accidental, annealed into the unity of being through the catalyst of existence. *Esse* is the being of form in matter, accident in substance, activity in the acting subject. The Thomistic act of being is the fact of being itself, subsequently known as act, and later - through "consignification" as the "being together" of the principles of nature.

Perhaps this metaphysics is best expressed in terms of the transcendental Unity. Unity adds nothing in reality to being. Unity, the indivision of a being from its *esse*, is a judgement we make when we note, indeed form, this truth. Although composed of a multitude of principles, all lying on the side of nature, this multitude is melted into the unity of existence thanks to the composing role of being.

If eros be rooted in the dynamism of nature attempting to achieve its fullness; and if nature is actively composed by *esse*; if agape is rooted in the goodness of *esse*, then it follows that agape synthesizes eros into a unity which transcends even while englobing all of its constituent elements. The metaphysics suggested here squares with human experience in one of its highest manifestations: the love between a man and a woman. Setting aside the romantic superstition of "love at first sight" (which is probably infatuation), experience does point out that the initial attraction a man senses for a woman almost always zeros in on some aspect of her individualized nature - her manners, her intelligence, her physical charms, etc. These initial reactions belong to the order of concupiscence: she can fulfill me in this or that fashion. But if the relationship deepens into a love of

agape (“I can fulfill her”), the love of eros is swept into a higher love just as the multiplicity of nature is baked in the oven of existence. Eros is not destroyed or even bypassed as in a subtle Manicheanism. Eros is synthesized or “composed” by the act of being to which agape is its highest response. Nor is agape a total transcendence of the erotic given that agape is itself the active bringing into unity of the entire spectrum of the erotic order.

The paradox of being unable to resolve any love of agape into its analytic or erotic components, to reduce to the order of passion or need any generosity in love, finds here within the Thomistic metaphysics of being an explanation. The eros is not eliminated. Even as the lover gives freely, he can be fulfilled by the beloved thus verifying Aristotle’s understanding of filia. The composition making up the beloved, her concrete individualized nature in being, is preserved as a whole within a multiplicity of principles, but this whole is now cherished as a unity in being and that being is reducible neither to the whole in isolation from the parts or to the parts in isolation from the whole. Not only is the whole greater than its parts but the being of the whole is greater than the whole, its “plus” in existence. Therefore, as indicated, love of this higher type transcends any possible understanding, as exhaustive as it might be, of the beloved. To respond generously to the goodness of being is indeed to respond to the desirable, to the lovable, to what or who can fulfill me, but it is a response which points to a “beyond” the analytically resolvable data of any person or even thing.

The beloved is not exhausted in any phenomenology of its givenness. Being posits the given but is not identified with it. Expressing the point in another fashion, essences in themselves are neither good nor bad because essences, as highly individualized as they might be, are not beings. Beings have essences and the goodness and lovability of the real is one with the synthesizing of everything going into that being thanks to the primal act of existing. Eros and agape, distinct as ecstatic drives in the real, become one existentially. A very high type of pure sacrificial love, the love of the martyr, is willing to abandon all erotic desire on the high altar of self abnegation but it can do so only if there is something there to sacrifice, eros itself. The very concept of sacrifice forbids our isolating eros from agape. What would sacrifice be sacrificing?

Thus it is that a man who loves a woman genuinely loves all of her, not this quality or that aspect but also not in isolation from this quality or that aspect. Hence natural attraction, admiration, and anything else that a man finds in a given woman, is transmuted but not annulled in his giving of himself to her out of a superabundance of being that responds to another superabundance of being. The “plus” or “excess” which is existence thus produces a unity of eros and agape which is a reflection of, indeed an instance of, potency and act, nature and being. The result is neither eros nor agape but eros in agape. The curve of human experience in this matter follows the curve of the philosophy of being of The Common Doctor of the Catholic Church.

