

THE REDEMPTION OF *EROS*:
PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS
ON BENEDICT XVI'S FIRST
ENCYCLICAL¹

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“God is charity, then,
because the world is *dear* to him.
It represents, in some respect,
a goodness and beauty that
God himself ‘desires.’”

1. *Introduction: Christian novelty*

“By love, God has revealed himself and given himself to man. He has thus provided the definitive, superabundant answer to the questions that man asks himself about the meaning and purpose of his life” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 68). According to the text of *Gaudium et spes*, 22, Jesus Christ reveals man to himself—i.e., reveals the ultimate meaning of human existence—precisely by revealing the love of the Father. It is in Christ that we discover that

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“God is love” (1 Jn 4:16), and therefore that human beings, who are made in the image of God, are made in the image of love. But if human life finds its supernatural completion in the gift of God’s love as grace, it is only because love expresses the meaning of human nature. In the prologue to his first encyclical, *Deus caritas est*, Pope Benedict XVI explains that one of his primary intentions in this letter is to clarify the “link” between the supernatural Love offered gratuitously to man and the human love that constitutes as it were the very substance of existence.

Rather than give an account of the whole document and attempt to discuss the rich array of themes it presents, I wish to limit my focus in this paper to the issue that represents the main topic of the first part of the encyclical, namely, the relationship between *eros* and *agape*. While it would be too much to claim that the position Benedict unfolds in the encyclical is revolutionary, I would nevertheless suggest that what he says about this relationship upsets some of our common assumptions about the meaning of love. Perhaps it would be best to say that this encyclical vindicates a view of love that, however centrally it may have figured in several of the great theologians and philosophers of the past,² has often had to struggle against various temptations to reduce this complex mystery to some simplified form. These reductions and simplifications have invariably proved to be destructive of the reality of human being in its integrity, and thus, as I hope to show, the encyclical’s defense of the wholeness of love can also be read as a defense of the wholeness

²On the significance of *eros* in Christian thought, see Ysabel de Andia, “*Eros* and *Agape*: The Divine Passion of Love,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 24, no. 1 (Spring, 1997): 29–50. The first linking of *eros* and *agape* in Christian thought can be found in Origen’s prologue to his commentary on the Song of Songs, in which he insists that *amor* (*eros*) can be substituted for *caritas* (*agape*) in John’s affirmation that “God is Love.” To be sure, he cites as an authority Ignatius of Antioch’s remark that “my *eros* has been crucified” (*Letter to the Romans*, 7, 2), which is likely a willful misreading of Ignatius’s meaning. Nevertheless, Origen also offers reasons for the linking of these two terms, which are echoed by other major Fathers: Gregory of Nyssa, in *Homily* xiii, P. 1048C, proposes that *eros* is an intensified *agape* (ἐπιτεταμένη γὰρ ἀγάπη ἔρωσ λέγεται); Dionysius the Areopagite claims in fact that, in a certain respect, *eros* is even more divine than *agape*: *Divine Names*, ch. 4; Maximus the Confessor follows this same tradition in *Scholia in lib. de divinis nominibus*, ch. 4 §§ 12, 15; Augustine, like Dionysius, observes that some people object to thinking of God’s love in “erotic” terms, but that this objection is not warranted: see *City of God*, bk. xiv, ch. 7.

of human life. The main purpose of my paper, then, is to think through philosophically a few of the implications of the view of love Benedict XVI articulates in Part 1 of *Deus caritas est* in the hope of deriving some insights into our own human experience of love.

The problem in determining the nature of the relationship between *eros* and *agape* is in fact just one instance of a more fundamental and universal problem in the human appropriation of Christian revelation, a problem we can sketch as a basic dilemma. On the one hand, if Christian revelation did not bring anything *new* to the realities of human existence, if it represented nothing more than yet another, perhaps particularly compelling, articulation of an ancient human wisdom, then Christianity, and indeed the Incarnation itself, would have at best only an instrumental value. It might help lead us to certain truths, but these would be truths we could have possessed in principle on our own. On the other hand, if the novelty of Christianity had no continuity at all with what we already are simply as human beings, then it would be utterly foreign to us. The transformation it promises would not be a redemption of our human nature, but a violence to it. Thus, the novelty of Christianity must be a novelty that heals and fulfills even as it raises up; as the old scholastic dictum has it, grace perfects and elevates nature, it does not destroy it. What this means is that the redemption brought by grace must bring to light the deepest truth of nature in its essence, and not simply add something to it that was not previously there. If we emphasize the discontinuity of grace without continuity, or we emphasize continuity with nature without any discontinuity, we will have falsified what is essential about Christianity.

Now, it seems to me that Benedict seeks to trace a path between these dual temptations in his interpretation of love. The first section of Part I, after a brief mention of the problem of terminology in a discussion of love, is entitled “‘Eros’ and ‘Agape’—Difference and Unity.” If *eros* stands for the main human experience of love (*eros* is passionate desire, often associated with sexuality but not limited to this association), it is significant that the term scarcely appears at all in the Bible.³ Instead, the New Testament prefers the

³According to de Andia (“Eros and Agape,” 29–32), it appears only twice, and both times in the Septuagint, more specifically in the book of Proverbs: Prv 7:18, and 30:16. Both instances suggest disordered sexual desire.

word “*agape*” (which we tend to associate with a kind of benevolent generosity⁴), a term much more modestly present in classical Greek literature.⁵ The new language and the new vision of love it implies, the pope says, “clearly point to something new and distinct about the Christian understanding of love” (DCE, 3). At the same time, however, one of the primary models the Bible uses to convey the paradigmatic love, namely, that between God and his people, is specifically *spousal* love, which of course is not a model that contradicts *eros* but rather represents its perfection. The point of this early section of the encyclical is to insist that, although the terms *eros* and *agape* may set into relief different aspects of love, in the end *they do not represent different kinds of love*. Rather, as the pope states forcefully at the outset of the encyclical, *there is ultimately just one love*, with a variety of dimensions that are all necessary in order to sustain the full meaning of love. If we separate these dimensions from one another, however pure or laudable our motives may be, we will end up distorting love and, at the very least, depriving it of its vitality. “Fundamentally,” the pope writes, “‘love’ is a single reality, but with different dimensions; at different times, one or [an]other dimension may emerge more clearly. Yet when the two dimensions are totally cut off from one another, the result is a caricature or at least an

⁴According to Liddell and Scott, the verb ἀγαπάω (att., ἀγαπάω) means “to treat with affection, to caress, love, be fond of, be well pleased or contented at or with,” or, in the New Testament, “to regard with brotherly love.” But it has to be pointed out that, in the New Testament, ἀγαπάω can also mean the sort of desirous love, and even disordered attachment, that we might sooner connect with *eros*. For example, John’s Gospel condemns those who loved (ἠγάπησαν) darkness rather than the light. In *City of God*, xiv, 7, Augustine points to just this ambiguity in *agape* (or, in his language, *caritas*), which mirrors the ambiguity we more commonly associate with *eros* (*amor*), clearly with the intention of showing that the important thing is the *object* of love. Anders Nygren, whom we will discuss below, suggests that St. John was influenced by the non-Christian elements of his Hellenistic milieu, which tainted his conception of *agape*: see *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip Watson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 151–158.

⁵The only apparent recorded use of the noun ἀγάπη in ancient literature outside of Scripture is in reference to the Egyptian goddess Isis, who was the affectionately beloved mate of several gods. Interestingly, the noun here has the sexual overtones we would normally associate with *eros*. The verb form is more common in Greek literature, found for example in Homer (quite often in the *Odyssey*; in the *Iliad* it appears in the compound epithet “ἀγαπήνωρ”—ἀγαπάω-άνηρ—i.e., a man who shows kindness and courtesy to others) and in Plato, though of course his philosophical dialogues are focused on *eros* or *philia*.

impoverished form of love” (DCE, 8). This may seem obvious, but let us consider what it implies: if the dimensions of love are intrinsically necessary to one another, it is not enough simply to say that the desire we associate with *eros* and the generosity we associate with *agape* need to be balanced against one another. Instead, it means that desire is not truly desire unless it is also generous, and generosity is not truly generous unless it is also filled with desire.

2. Eros vilified

In order to flesh out the significance of this affirmation, it will be helpful to consider the implications of denying it, that is, the caricatures and impoverishments that result when these dimensions are separated into two different “types” of love. Early on in the document, the well-known adversary of Christianity, Friedrich Nietzsche, receives the honor of being cited in a papal encyclical (DCE, 3). In his book, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche wrote: “Christianity gave *Eros* poison to drink; he did not die of it, to be sure, but degenerated [*entartet*] into a vice.”⁶ The attempt to poison obviously indicates a hostile attitude, and we can presume that the hostility is generated by the perception of a threat. Two questions thus present themselves: Why would *eros* seem to present a threat to Christianity? And why does it degenerate into a vice rather than dying outright from its intake of poison? Let us start with the second question. If we associate *eros* with desire, the reason for its resilience quickly becomes clear. Desire is notoriously difficult to subdue in any complete sense; to borrow an image from Etienne Gilson, it invariably buries its own undertakers. The attempt to eliminate desire presupposes a motivation for doing so, which means of course that this attempt itself is moved by desire. One cannot kill desire altogether, for even the radical forms of non-willing that one sees, for example, in certain interpretations of Buddhism, in certain strains of mysticism, and in certain philosophers such as Schopenhauer or Heidegger, arguably turn out to be an expansion or modification of will. Instead of killing desire, we simply substitute one desire for another. When Nietzsche says that Christianity sickened *eros* until it

⁶Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse: Zur Genealogie der Moral*, KSA 5, ed. Colli and Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999), 102.

withered into a vice, he seems to mean that this fundamental aspiration of our nature has been eclipsed by some other force of desire that runs contrary to human life. In other words, the poisoning of *eros* is, in Nietzsche's eyes, a particular strategy of the *ressentiment* that represents for him the only real evil: namely, the will to belittle or vilify that which one cannot control, that which is therefore in some sense greater than oneself. The sickening of *eros* is thus a form of the will to *level* that Nietzsche takes to be a primary symptom of the decline of the West.

Before addressing the second question, let us dwell for a moment on the implications of the vilification of *eros*. It may seem initially that *eros* concerns only one sphere of human life, albeit a particularly powerful one: the sphere of sexuality. But while identifying sexuality with sin is in itself deeply problematic, to feel the full weight of Nietzsche's critique we need to see that *eros* embraces far more than sexuality alone. Drawing on the Platonic philosophical tradition in particular, the pope describes *eros* as an "ecstasy," a "divine madness," in which we human beings are driven almost violently outside and beyond ourselves through a glimpse of beauty that offers a foretaste of the experience of God that is our ultimate destiny.⁷ In this respect, *eros* is a promise of "infinity, eternity—a reality far greater and totally other than our everyday existence" (*DCE*, 5). It represents, the pope says, the "pinnacle of our existence" and "the most precious thing in life." We can say this about *eros* because it is ultimately, according to Plato, the way human beings respond to goodness and beauty.⁸ The intensity and apparent violence of it, then, the depth of its hold on us, is nothing but an expression of the genuine *goodness* of the good, the fact that it is the *value* in all that is valuable and therefore that which ultimately makes sense of life. Indeed, for Plato, goodness is *essentially* eternal, and the desire for goodness is *essentially* a desire for eternal life: it is the governing desire of human existence, the ultimate truth of the human being that comes to expression, however partially, in every

⁷On this same theme, see the remarks Cardinal Ratzinger sent to the members of Communion and Liberation in 2002: <http://www.ewtn.com/library/Theology/RATZBEAU.HTM>.

⁸Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 249c–252b; *Symposium*, 206a. On the experience of *eros* in Plato, cf. Josef Pieper, "Divine Madness": *Plato's Case Against Secular Humanism*, trans. L. Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 37–55.

other desire.⁹ In this case, we see that sexuality is not the same thing as *eros*, which is a more universal and thus comprehensive desire, but is rather a physical image of *eros*; we might say that sexuality presents in a paradigmatic way the physical truth of *eros*. If Plato, and indeed the Christian tradition itself, resists the reduction of love to its physical expression, it is not necessarily because of a contempt for *eros*, as some charge, but is rather an insistence that it be accorded its integral significance.

If *eros* is indeed the human response to goodness and beauty, as the Platonic tradition has it, we see immediately how disastrous its rejection would be. To vilify *eros* would be to cast a shadow of suspicion over all of the greatest human aspirations, to the extent that these aspirations are inspired by the beautiful and good. The pope explains that *eros* is “somehow rooted in man’s nature,” and is precisely what allows us to see Adam as a “seeker” (*DCE*, 11). There is no doubt a connection between this affirmation and his suggestion later on in the encyclical that “[w]hoever wants to eliminate love is preparing to eliminate man as such” (*DCE*, 28).¹⁰ If *eros* is indeed rooted essentially in man’s nature, then to make *eros* fundamentally vicious would be to identify human nature with sin. To avoid the obvious trouble one would have in attempting to harmonize this identification with the notion of a good Creator, it is not even adequate to look at *eros*, as some do, as an essentially *imperfect* kind of love that will then need to be supplemented by a purer and more perfect form (i.e., by *agape*). The importance of this point cannot be overstated because of the near ubiquity of the assumption. Taking *eros* to be an *essentially* imperfect love would imply that human nature is *essentially* imperfect, that is, imperfect precisely as human nature, which is no less difficult to justify within a sound doctrine of creation. God pronounced the world—and, with it, human nature—“good,” indeed, “very good,” when he created it, and to be good means to be inwardly complete. Needless to say, to affirm the intrinsic goodness of nature, and thus its internal completion or perfection,

⁹As Plato shows in the *Republic*, everything we desire, we desire for the sake of the good, which is the transcendent first principle, or source, of all that exists: see *Republic*, 504d–509c.

¹⁰To be sure, when the pope says “love” here, he is speaking most specifically of *caritas*, but what he says clearly applies just as well to *eros*.

does not exclude the possibility of its being elevated to a new and unanticipated perfection by grace. In other words, in order to insist on the absolute significance of grace, it is not necessary to insist on the imperfection of nature.

But there is an even deeper set of problems that arise with the vilification of *eros*, which have both a subjective and an objective dimension. Subjectively considered, if there were something essentially sinful about *eros*, there could be no experience of joy that would not immediately be tinged with guilt, because joy is inconceivable without a desire for what is good and beautiful. In this sense, there could be no genuine celebration of the realities of the world. Allan Bloom describes the boredom, the self-protectiveness, the banality, the absence of a sense of mystery and adventure, and the general disenchantment, that characterize a “de-eroticized” world such as that of contemporary America.¹¹ Joy is not simply a pleasant experience, it is an *essential* element of Christian life; it is indeed the presence of God’s life among us.¹² Paul Claudel used to say that the first obligation of Christians is to be joyful. But most significantly there is the objective implication. If it is true that *eros* is the human response to goodness and beauty, then to reject *eros* is to deny that anything at all in the world has any worth, at least as far as we are concerned. What would it mean to *say* the world is good without feeling a deep attraction to it? A world without *eros* is simply a world that is utterly absent of goodness and beauty. Indeed, it is in fact a world without any experience of God, insofar as God is man’s greatest good and the source of all beauty. Benedict asserts in this encyclical that “[o]ften the deepest cause of suffering is the absence of God” (*DCE*, 31). In light of what we have seen, it would be possible to suggest that the elimination of *eros* is one source of that particular suffering.

¹¹See Allan Bloom, *Love and Friendship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 13–35. It should be noted, in the light of Bloom’s observations, that the typical complaint that contemporary culture is “over-eroticized” has confused *eros* with sex. Indeed, given his analysis in the encyclical, Benedict XVI would likely argue that the ubiquitous presence of explicit sexuality is precisely a symptom of the *loss* of *eros*.

¹²On this importance of joy in Christian life, see Michael Hanby, “The Culture of Death, the Ontology of Boredom, and the Resistance of Joy,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 31, no. 2 (Summer, 2004): 181–199.

3. Generous desire and desirous generosity

So, having considered briefly the implications of rejecting *eros* as vicious, let us now address the earlier question that is prompted by Nietzsche's critique. Is *eros* indeed a threat to Christianity? A number of things need to be said in response to this question. It might initially seem to be a threat for essentially two reasons. In the first place, the pope speaks of the various ways that certain cultural expressions of *eros* have failed to do justice to the full human reality. On the one hand, there was what he calls the "counterfeit divinization" (*DCE*, 4) of *eros* in the pre-Christian world, in which *eros* was cultivated as a divine madness that tore the human being from his finitude and gave him a direct experience of the happiness of the gods. Associated with such a divine erotic ecstasy, he says, was the use of temple prostitutes. Although Benedict affirms the transcendence sought by these sorts of practices, he nevertheless claims that this divinization of *eros* is in fact a "degradation" of humanity: not only does it exploit women, but, because the practice aims at an immediate divinization that leaves one's human condition behind, it implies a rejection of the finitude that God pronounced good at creation. To idolize an "out of body" experience is, however unwittingly, to hold in contempt the body that makes us human. If we cultivate the "divine spark," the presence of God, the immortal self, etc., as the truth of our being, a truth that does not include the rest of our life but lies in some sense beyond or outside of it, we thereby condemn our flesh and our finitude as a falsehood.

On the other hand, if certain religious forms condemn the body in their worship of *eros*, certain other cultural habits paradoxically dismiss everything but the body in their reduction of *eros* to the pursuit of physical pleasure. Here, the pope speaks of the tendency to separate sex from its more encompassing human reality, which invariably leads to the "commodification" of sex and indeed the commodification of the human being himself (*DCE*, 5). What looks like an exaltation of the bodily dimension of human experience turns out in the end to be a new form of contempt for the body: if the body is nothing more than matter, nothing more than a mere biological "thing," then it no longer bears within itself the human meaning, the deep personal significance, that warrants genuine respect. From the beginning of recorded history, we see that the most important human activities have always been ritualized in some way; in other words, particular acts and modes of behaviors have

always been either required or prohibited whenever something has a meaning that must be preserved in some sense above the immediate demands of the moment.¹³ While the casting off of regulations of whatever sort might offer the immediate appearance of liberation, in fact the formlessness that results condemns what has been ostensibly freed to the far more restrictive chains of triviality. It is precisely thus that sex “freed” from its integral place within human life becomes vulnerable to the claims of the market, both literally and metaphorically. The pope’s insistence on the *wholeness* of the human person is a resistance to both forms of fragmentation—both the pseudo-divinization that treats man as nothing but soul and the pseudo-liberation that treats man as nothing but body. Either man has meaning *as a whole*, or in the end he has no meaning at all.

So we see, in this first case, that the answer to the question we posed above is by necessity complex: the sorts of practices that have at times been associated with *eros* may indeed run counter to the Christian ethos, but it is not because *eros qua eros* poses a threat to Christianity. To the contrary, the practices described are themselves distortions of *eros*; they are partial expressions of *eros* that become exaggerated and thus perverted precisely in their partiality. In this sense, if it is true that Christianity defends the unity of the human being, and if it is also true, as the pope claims, that *eros* is “able to mature and attain its authentic grandeur” (*DCE*, 5) only if the whole person, who is a body-soul unity, is kept in sight, then Christianity, *pace* Nietzsche, is a defender of *eros*. To be sure, the pope admits at one point in the encyclical that there have always been in the Church certain tendencies toward a hostility to the body (*DCE*, 5). Nevertheless, such tendencies have been condemned at various points in history as heretical for failing to do justice to the radical implications of Church teachings such as the Incarnation and

¹³To be sure, it is also an aberration to reduce the activity to its regulations. The most appropriate disposition that one can have toward the highest things, according to Plato, is a playful seriousness or a serious play: *Letter VI*, 323d. (Xenophon records that, when Socrates spoke about important things, he was always “both playing and serious,” *Memorabilia*, I, 3, 8.) According to Friedrich Schiller, there is a connection between *play* and *wholeness*: “Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and *he is only wholly Man when he is playing*”: see his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. R. Snell (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 2004); here, 80.

the resurrection of the body.¹⁴ Such teachings would make no sense if the body were not an integral dimension of the human being.

But there is another aspect to the question of whether *eros* poses a threat to Christianity, an aspect that is to my mind far more subtle and therefore requires more careful attention. In no. 7 in the encyclical, Benedict describes a common way of viewing love that would draw a distinction between acquisitive or “possessive” love, and sacrificial or “oblative” love, identifying the former with *eros* and the latter with *agape*. One also finds *eros* referred to as a “worldly” form of love, which is opposed to the *agape* that grows specifically out of faith. Benedict observes: “In philosophical and theological debate, these distinctions have often been radicalized to the point of establishing a clear antithesis between them: descending, oblativ love—*agape*—would be typically Christian, while on the other hand ascending, possessive or covetous love—*eros*—would be typical of non-Christian, and particularly Greek culture” (*DCE*, 7). Benedict is no doubt thinking of the thesis argued by Anders Nygren in one of the most influential books on love and its relation to Christianity to be written in the twentieth century, a book called *Agape and Eros*. We find in this book an extraordinarily lucid and carefully argued expression of precisely the vilification of *eros* that Nietzsche had criticized. According to Nygren, Christianity represents a radical “transvaluation of values” that affects every significant sphere of human life, and thus transforms the meaning of love.¹⁵ Outside of Christianity, love is understood to be an acquisitive desire for goodness and beauty, which leads human beings to ascend toward the divine and thus bring to realization their own inner divinity: this is *eros*, a love that is *essentially* egocentric.¹⁶ Christianity, by contrast, presents an utterly different form of love. When God created the world and sacrificed his Son in order to save it, he was not in any sense responding with acquisitive desire to goodness and beauty. Instead, his act of love was totally *gratuitous*; it was not loving something good in order to acquire it, but rather making a goodness

¹⁴Such a theme has been insisted on from the beginning of Christian theology: among the most powerful attacks on gnosticism’s degradation of the flesh, see Irenaeus, for example, in the texts collected by Balthasar: *The Scandal of the Incarnation: Irenaeus Against the Heresies* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990).

¹⁵Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 200–205.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 175–181.

be that was not previously there.¹⁷ It thus represents sheer generosity without need or desire for recompense. This love is *agape*. Such a love, Nygren claims, was essentially unknown in the pagan world, which, because of its view of love, could think of God only as turned away from the world, because of course there is nothing in the world for a God to desire.

Nygren goes on to explain that this Christian difference is so radically different that human beings were not able to sustain it in its purity. Thus, the old pagan view of love gradually crept back in. St. Augustine, as it turns out, is the decisive character, if not the sole “protagonist,” in Nygren’s story of the corruption of the Christian tradition, for he managed to incorporate in an admirably consistent manner many of the most provocative Christian revelations about love into the essentially egotistical form of love he took over from the Platonic tradition, and, in doing so, he received the Church’s full approbation.¹⁸ In what Nygren refers to as the “*caritas*-synthesis”¹⁹ (his name for the absorption of *agape* into *eros* that, he claims, occurs in the Catholic tradition), the sting of the Christian revaluation gets dulled to the point of imperceptibility, and we are left with a shadow of true Christian love that collapses easily into the bourgeois ideal of enlightened self-interest. Nygren therefore champions Martin Luther’s ostensible “recovery” of the original Pauline understanding of love as wholly gratuitous, and wholly unmotivated, a love that does not *seek* God as one’s highest good, but is rather compelled by God to practice selfless acts of kindness to the poor and suffering. According to Nygren, Luther’s view of love “smashes to pieces” the *caritas*-synthesis²⁰; he aims “to destroy [*eros*] to make room for Christian love.”²¹ In a Kierkegaardian vein, Nygren thus sets into shocking relief the unbridgeable gap between human and divine love, between the *eros* that ascends because it is acquisitive, and the

¹⁷While *eros* “recognizes value in its object—and loves it,” *agape*, by contrast, “loves—and creates value in its object” (ibid., 210). In this sense, *eros* is essentially receptive and responsive, while *agape* is essentially productive and spontaneous. It may be the case that the loss of a sense of receptivity as a perfection coincides with a loss of a sense of *eros* as a perfection.

¹⁸Ibid., 559–560.

¹⁹Ibid., 451–452.

²⁰Ibid., 560.

²¹Ibid., 721.

agape that descends because it is generous. *Eros* is egocentric and *agape* is theocentric. It is important to see that, for Nygren, these represent not only two *different* kinds of love, but they are in fact strictly opposed to one another. In other words, the desire for fulfillment adulterates generosity, and a truly generous love must therefore be one that purifies itself from any self-seeking motivation:

We must not, of course, overlook the fact that when a place is sought [within the *caritas*-synthesis] for self-love within the context of Agape, it is always a higher, refined and spiritualised self-love, a love for one's "ideal self" that is intended, and that a distinction is therefore drawn between a legitimate and a sinful self-love. But not even this distinction can prevent the love from losing its Agape-character. Agape recognises no kind of self-love as legitimate.²²

If this is a proper characterization of love, it would be clear that *eros* would indeed represent a threat to Christianity, because of its capacity to sully the purity of Christian love of neighbor. But it is also clear that this opposition between *eros* and *agape* is, as it were, one of the pope's primary targets in writing the encyclical, and this may in fact be one of the reasons he felt it necessary personally to add the first part, which describes the unity of human and divine love, to the second part, which deals more concretely with the institution of charity.²³ As we recall, Benedict affirmed that, in the end, there is ultimately only *one love*, and that *eros* and *agape* are inseparable dimensions of that single love. But in order to grasp the full significance of this insistence on the oneness of love, it is important to consider how widespread is the tendency to set these

²²Ibid., 217.

²³Of course, Benedict is by no means the first to criticize Nygren's view of love: we may think, for example, of de Lubac's book review of the French translation that appeared in 1944 (see "Eros and Agape," in *Theological Fragments*, trans. R. H. Balinski [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989], 89), or the classic criticism by Josef Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 207–233. Nevertheless, the critique of the "Nygrenian" antithesis of *eros* and *agape* in this encyclical is significant for two reasons: first of all, it makes the insistence on the *unity* of love part of the official magisterial teaching of the Church; and, second, the fact that this criticism is offered again after so many others suggests that the problem it identifies is still very much with us. As we will propose below, once we see that the different dimensions of love need not explicitly take the names of *eros* and *agape*, we discover that the separation shows up in different "versions" everywhere.

dimensions in opposition to each other. The view that considers the passionate interest in possessing what is good to be an adulteration of the purity of love does not belong solely to a particular interpretation of Scripture, but has entered more generally, even anonymously, into our patterns of thinking. In the first place, we see varieties of the radicalization of selflessness in postmodern thinkers: there is, for example, the absolute claim of the Other in Levinas that takes for granted an essentially egocentric notion of the self, which must for this very reason suffer the claim of the Other as violence.²⁴ There is also the titanic “gratuity” in Derrida’s notion of the impossibility of gift, and the death that it necessarily implies: to the extent that a gift is gratefully received, he claims its gratuity is compromised, and it thus ceases to be a genuine gift.²⁵ What are these claims other than a reflection of the same opposition between desire and generosity that we see in Nygren, an opposition that entails an utterly inhuman, not to say inhumane, anxiety about purity? As one might expect, this anxiety simultaneously rarefies its object to the point of unreality and bitterly rejects it as a burden that cannot possibly be borne. As a result, it both darkens what would otherwise be natural and cynically celebrates this distorted nature.

But a far more common echo of what we might call the contempt for *eros* can be seen in the ubiquity of the term “altruism,” and the assumption that what it designates is one of the loftiest expressions of humanity. Altruism is, as it were, the secularized form of what Nygren calls *agape*; what both notions share is an opposition to the natural, human experience of love, which is preferential, full of feeling and desire, and, as we see for example in the *ordo caritatis* that Aquinas presents in the *Summa*, ordered first, though of course not exclusively, to what is closest to one.²⁶ We tend to contrast

²⁴The Other is experienced as a “no” that condemns one’s freedom (i.e., one’s autonomy or one’s being oneself) as inherently *guilty*: see Emmanuel Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite,” in *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, by Adriaan Peperzak (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1993), 99, 109. Levinas takes love, by contrast, to possess a “sentimental complacency” (119).

²⁵See Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

²⁶*ST II-II*, 26, 7. We ought to note that Aquinas calls *caritas*, rather than *amor*, essentially preferential, and roots it in the natural structure, as it were, of human being. For Aquinas, *caritas* necessarily bears an analogy to “natural” human love,

altruism with selfishness, attributing to this latter any “motivated” desire for what is good or beautiful. Altruism is pure, then, when such desires are lacking. It is interesting to note that the term “altruism” was coined by the founder of positivism, Auguste Comte.²⁷ The term arises specifically as an alternative to the more traditional term, “love.” What accounts for this substitution? According to Max Scheler, who generally affirms Nietzsche’s critique (although he addresses it, not to Christianity *per se*, but to a late, degenerate form of Christianity), the eclipse of the word “love” by the word “altruism” coincides with a loss of a sense of the eschatological destiny of the human being, and therefore a radical reduction of the meaning of human life.²⁸ He claims that a kind of despair lurks within the institution of altruism. In its exaltation of the “other” simply because of his “otherness,” there is a logic of a hatred for the self hidden in the very structure of altruism. And if altruistic acts are founded in self-hatred, it is impossible that they give expression to a truly fruitful generosity to others, no matter what immediate impression they might give. Instead, in subtle but pervasive ways, humanitarian altruism enacts a kind of *ressentiment*. It is not an accident, in Scheler’s view, that altruism tends to take primarily *institutional*, and therefore essentially impersonal, forms. We ought to note that Benedict XVI himself expresses a particular concern for this tendency in the practice of charity in the second

even if it transforms it. Of course, such an analogy would be “unholy” for Nygren, but Nygren would be correct in this judgment only given the assumption that the pagan or the natural is *opposed* to the Christian, and that Christianity is therefore without *any* continuity to the human.

²⁷Comte coined the term in his *System of Positive Polity*, vol. 1, published in 1851 (English translation: London, 1875). Interestingly, the term arises in connection with the “social” as the contrary to egoism, which is connected with the “personal.” This discussion takes place in Comte’s development of “cerebral theories”—in other words, it is behavior based on the artificial manipulation of biology (see the chart on page 595). Comte is thus a “sociobiologist” before his time, an E. O. Wilson, as it were, with a more naive moral scrupulosity. According to Comte, Positivism, with its motto “*Live for Others*,” brings to realization the “universal Love,” which is a “feeling imperfectly represented by theologians under the name of Christian Charity” (566). Indeed, the “religion of Humanity” that Comte elaborates in his system is “the successor of Christianity, and surpasses it” (280–283). Thus, altruism is offered explicitly as an alternative to Christian love.

²⁸See Max Scheler, *Ressentiment*, trans. William Holdheim (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961), 116–119.

part of his encyclical (cf. *DCE*, 31). One of the effects of having the first part of the encyclical on the unity between *eros* and *agape*, which the pope composed personally, precede the second part, which he largely inherited (based on a report prepared by the pontifical council *Cor Unum*), is to ensure that what we mean by Christian love be deeply rooted in and thus always intrinsically related to the authentic human experience of love. In other words, *agape* must bear some intrinsic relation to *eros*.

Regarding the tendency of altruistic activities to take institutional—and non-personal—forms, it is important to see that it arises from the very logic of the activities, and so may in fact run contrary to the intentions of the agents. To do something for “altruistic” reasons means that one is not doing it for the enjoyment of it. But enjoyment is the way the soul relates to something that is good in itself. If one eliminates the enjoyment, if one fails to desire the act in itself, one necessarily instrumentalizes that act for the sake of some good that is *extrinsic* to it, insofar as one cannot act at all except in relation to *some* good. In this respect, there is nothing surprising about the fact that “humanitarian” activities frequently become political tools or means for students to pad their resumes. The true contrast to the student, for example, who engages in a humanitarian service project simply to pad his resume is *not* the one who does it merely to help others rather than for his own good, but most profoundly the one who *loves* helping others. It is this person who will be *personally* involved in the activity, i.e., who will give the gift of his person along with whatever else he may give. As we will see more fully below, the enjoyment of a real good for its own sake will be naturally generous or other-centered.

To understand better why they require one another, let us think through more directly, for a moment, some of the consequences of separating the two dimensions of desire and generosity. At the outset, we made the claim that the oneness of love implies that generosity cannot be true generosity without desire, and that desire cannot be true desire without generosity. If we reflect on the meaning of each, we can see why these two aspects of love are reciprocally dependent on one another. On the one hand, desire requires generosity precisely in order to be desire. This need becomes apparent in the common psychological observation that the immediate and unrestrained gratification of appetites inevitably leads to a general lethargy; if one snacks constantly one never manages to

work up a desire truly to *eat*.²⁹ Assuming that generosity indicates a kind of respect for the otherness of the other, and thus a reluctance simply to make the other—be it a person or a thing—an automatic function of one’s own needs, the deepening of desire cannot take place without generosity. It is often said that *eros* can best be preserved within a marriage if the spouses learn to respect one another and resist the temptation to turn the other simply into an object of immediate gratification, whether it be emotional or physical. Entering more profoundly into the philosophy of desire, as expressed, for example, in the various strains of the great Platonic tradition, we may observe that the ascent of *eros* necessarily entails a kind of expansion and purification of desire: from an instance of physical beauty, to physical beauty universally, to the beauty of soul, and so forth.³⁰ In this ascent, the soul travels, as it were, increasingly beyond itself, it becomes increasingly concerned with the objectivity of what *is* and less concerned with what simply pertains to itself in its particularity. At the same time, if it is the case that desire is always ordered to the *good*,³¹ and that the ladder indicates a gradual increase in *goodness*, then this ascent would represent an incremental intensification of desire. The truth of desire, in other words, does not lie in the dissolution of immediate gratification but in an ordered pursuit of what is truly good, a pursuit that will invariably involve some asceticism. Thus, desire can grow only with the concomitant growth of generosity. *Eros* becomes more erotic the less it is self-preoccupied.

It is almost universally taken for granted that desire is inherently selfish or egotistical. But the foregoing reflections suggest that it would be truer to affirm the contrary.³² To desire is to be

²⁹A couple of years ago, there was an article in the *New York Times* on the dangers of addiction to pornography. While one might assume that the greatest danger would be the hypertrophy of the libido, the article suggested that the more common result was a flattening of desire.

³⁰See Plato, *Symposium*, 210a–212a.

³¹To say this, as Plato does (*Symposium*, 206a, *Republic*, 505e), does not imply that all desires are good simply, but only that *bad* desires are always perversions or distortions of what is good: to be desirable is to *appear* good in some respect, even though the appearance can of course be deceptive.

³²Nygren assumes that Phaedrus’s interpretation of self-seeking desire as the motivation for self-sacrifice in the speech he gives at the *Symposium* is representative of Plato’s view (Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 180–181), but Socrates *clearly* reverses the conventional eudaimonia by explicitly making the *good*, rather than the self, the

open to the world. There is something humbling about desire, because it is, as it were, a reminder built into both our body and our soul that we are dependent on what is other than ourselves. But this very dependence is the place of all the relationships, the loves, that fill human life with meaning. To see that desire is not in itself selfish, it is enough to try to imagine what a person who had absolutely no desire of any kind would be like, if such an entity were at all possible: he would be utterly indifferent to the world, utterly self-contained; he would never for a moment find himself outside of himself because of the transporting attraction of goodness and beauty; he would never discover his own being in another, which can occur only if one has a constitutive need for the other. In short, he would be perfectly egocentric. It is thus not desire that makes a person selfish, but the lack of desire that would make a person selfish. Even if it essentially includes the aim of fulfilling the self, desire in itself is structurally other-centered, insofar as its very existence implies need: to desire is in some way to subordinate oneself to that which one desires, to place the other in some sense above oneself, and at the same time to aspire, as it were, to the other. Here we come upon a significant difference between the suspicion of desire that one finds in the ancient world and among the Fathers and the thinkers of the Middle Ages, and the suspicion that one finds in the idolizing of a Nygrenian form of *agape*: in the classical world, the subordination implied in desire was a reason to be cautious about it³³; for the champions of altruism, desire is a problem because of the selfishness it seems to imply. Those who would point an accusing finger at the classical sources in their search for a culprit for modern *ressentiment* need to contend with this difference, which in fact grows the longer one thinks on it. The tendency to vilify the body in the ancient world raises a number of serious questions of its own, but it is worlds away from the degener-

object of love (*Symposium*, 205e–206a). To be sure, even such an interpretation would not satisfy Nygren, who rejects a similar view he finds in Augustine (532–548), insofar as the purity of *agape*, for Nygren, excludes the self from *any* part in love. For a recent discussion of the essentially *other-centered*, i.e., *ecstatic*, nature of desire, see G. J. McAleer, *Ecstatic Morality and Sexual Politics: A Catholic and Antitotalitarian Theory of the Body* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

³³For example, matter, for Plotinus, becomes “ugly” to the extent that it drags the soul *down* (κάτω), because the soul is by nature “related to the higher kind of reality” (*Ennead* I, 6).

ate moralism in the modern preaching of *agape* and altruism. There is a self-contempt in modern altruism where one would find instead in ancient *eros* an affirmation of the dignity of the self. It is precisely this contempt for the self that drove Nietzsche's critique, which ought to be directed, we can say now, not to Christianity itself, but to its perversion. If it is true that Christianity "complicates" the ascent expressed in the ancient view of love by revealing that God has a kind of desirous love for the world, and thus that *eros* also descends, nevertheless, this self-outpouring is reconcilable with a view of the dignity of the self and its desire and ought not to be reduced to altruism.

The notion that desire has an inwardly other-centered character leads us rather directly to the other side of our original claim: generosity cannot be generosity without desire. It may indeed be true in some sense that it is more blessed to give than to receive; but let us consider what a gift looks like that has no intrinsic receptivity, a giving that understands itself to stand simply in opposition to receiving. In the first place, a giving that is made absolute in the sense that it does not take into consideration any aspect of the person to whom it gives turns into a kind of violence. Unconditional love, understood in this specific way, has no room for any particular love. According to Anders Nygren, *agape* does not recognize value in the one loved; instead, it *gives* the value, it is what makes the person valuable. This affirmation may initially seem to be an expression of generosity, but in fact a deep indifference and disregard lurks within its selflessness. If there is nothing in the person that attracts us, that draws our love out of us, nothing that warrants our regard, if, in other words, our love were purely spontaneous, there would of course be no reason to love this person as opposed to any other. The love would be unmotivated, and for that reason, its actualization would be arbitrary.³⁴ If I create value with my love, rather than recognize value in some respect and respond to it, I can love anyone or anything equally. Kierkegaard joked about Luther's disregard for *eros*, saying that, if he married Catherine von Bora, not out of desirous love, but in order "to defy Satan, the pope, and the world at large," it would make just as much sense to "marry a

³⁴See L. A. Kosman's compelling criticism of the "arbitrariness" of unconditional love: L. A. Kosman, "Platonic Love," in *Facets of Plato's Philosophy*, ed. W. H. Werkmeister (Assen, Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1976), 53–69.

doorpost.”³⁵ The point is that, if love does not receive anything from that which it loves, if it is therefore wholly unmotivated and without desire, it becomes absurd.³⁶

The violence of a “generosity without desire” is even more apparent when we consider the implications of Nygren’s understanding of *agape*. If it is the case that *agape* does not recognize and respond to the good it discovers in its object (since a response to goodness necessarily implies desire), and if desire is inherently selfish and thus sinful, as Nygren presumes, then *agape* becomes destructive in two ways. The act of loving *agapically* in the first place not only fails to recognize value but in fact cannot even bestow value on that which it loves. It is meaningless to bestow a value that cannot subsequently be recognized, because a good that categorically ought not to be desired—even, for example, by the person himself on whom the good is bestowed—is in fact not a good at all. In this regard, *agape* would not be generous because it would not in fact succeed in bestowing the goodness it intends. But even more problematically, if desire were sinful, and if receiving were therefore not only less than giving, but in fact were necessarily bound up with the evils of egoism, then it would follow that the bestowal of *agapic* love on another would amount to the condemnation of that other. For me to love in a pure way, you have to sin. We can meditate here on the recipients of the extraordinary feast Babette prepared in Isak Dinesen’s short story: made uneasy by the extravagance of her erotic gift, into which she poured her very substance, they did their best to eat and drink without tasting a thing.³⁷ W. H. Auden once said, “We are here on earth to do good to others. What the others are here for, I don’t know.” Altruism is paradoxically centered rather fixedly on the self. Generosity cannot exist without some reception, but insofar as we understand generosity itself as purely spontaneous and unmotivated, it by the same token vilifies the very receptivity it

³⁵Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals: A Selection*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 528.

³⁶And it leads to the suggestion, for example, that one has even more obligations toward animals, because they are even more “other” than other human beings: see Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 69.

³⁷When the two sisters learned that Babette had spent the whole of her lottery winnings on the single dinner, one of them significantly recalled, with horror, a story she had once heard of an Indian chief who served his grandson to esteemed guests for dinner. The image is clearly meant to be eucharistic.

requires to be itself. It would therefore be easy to become cynical about this pure *agape*: it seems in fact to exploit the poor and vulnerable as a means of expressing its own virtue, and thus it betrays just the sort of *ressentiment* that Scheler attributed to it.

We thus see quite clearly that some desire, some receptivity, is required for generosity to be true generosity. But we can take this reflection one step further and see how, in love, not only is desire essential to generosity, but it can in fact be itself the most perfect gift one can give. As any lover knows, one of the greatest gifts a person can receive from another is the gift of being desired. If I desire you, my love for you is not simply the fulfillment of an abstract duty to do good unto you regardless of who you are. Here we would have what Kant called benevolence, which he regarded as superior to love, because this latter in his view, as in Nygren's, does not possess an inherent *respect* but is essentially acquisitive.³⁸ Instead, to desire another is to affirm, not just in one's words, not just in one's mind and will, but in fact in one's comprehensive *being*, that this other is *good* precisely in his or her own being as well. Viewed from the vantage of the recipient, it is certainly better to be affirmed as good in oneself, than merely to be given good things. If the gift of things is made without such an affirmation, a person is humiliated precisely to the extent that he is enriched. The difference is easy to intuit: imagine a handicapped person receiving an act of charity from someone who has no need of this person, but carries out this act simply out of a sense of Christian duty. Compare his experience of being "loved" to that of a handicapped person who receives a visit from someone like Jean Vanier, for example, a man who feels that he has more to receive from the person than he has to give. Which of these is the more radiant instance of generosity?

These reflections on what we might call the mutual dependence of desire and generosity put the question of the Christian transformation of the meaning of love in a new light. While it is commonly suggested that the pagan view of love is based primarily on a eudaimonistic pursuit of fulfillment while the Christian notion thinks first of giving rather than receiving, this way of drawing the

³⁸Consider the opposite movements he attributes to the affections of love and respect, which of course makes the affections themselves opposites: Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 568–569.

distinction proves to be seriously inadequate. It is no doubt dangerous to attempt to identify, once and for all, the precise difference Christianity makes in such a fundamental matter, the “novelty” it introduces into the reality of love, but the last example especially offers at least a suggestion of one important element. The Christian difference is not descending generosity *rather than* acquisitive desire, but rather the surprising expansion of desire to include even those objects or persons that might not immediately, or one might say, *naturally*, be attractive. While ancient *eros*, as Plotinus so clearly illustrates, aims properly only at what is superior, Christian *eros* discovers that even the helpless, the vulnerable, the imperfect, and the broken can inspire desire when they reveal to the eyes of faith that they bear the presence of the “one my heart desires” above all other things: Christ himself.

4. Self-full Love

We began by asking whether the desire implied by *eros* represents any sort of threat to Christianity, and our reflections have shown that, far from threatening it, *eros* is an indispensable element in what Christianity has revealed to be the true nature of love. The greatest sacrifice that God the Father makes, we learn, is not “unmotivated”; it is not a pure spontaneity that is devoid of desire. Rather, as John’s Gospel tells us, “God so loved the world that he sent his Son” (Jn 3:26): the world has in some sense *evoked* love from God; his sending of the Son, though of course utterly gratuitous, was not arbitrary or senseless, but rather *good*, i.e., *desirable*. Pope Benedict XVI has recovered this *erotic* element in the most decisive manner it has yet received in the Christian tradition: in *Deus caritas est*, the unity of *eros* and *agape* has passed from an occasional theological opinion into magisterial teaching. Benedict here presents the redemption of *eros* not only from the perverse forms it has tended to take outside of the Christian world, but perhaps even more from the perverse forms it has sometimes taken *within* the Christian tradition, a perversion that is all the more dangerous for its being sanctioned by the biblical word *agape*. Let us end with a summary reflection, prompted by this encyclical, on what might be a proper way to think about love, a love that is the fullest blossoming of the human precisely because it is Christian.

If love is self-gift, and if “selfless” means literally the “absence of self,” then “selfless love” is an oxymoron; selflessness and love are, strictly speaking, incompatible. This incompatibility becomes perhaps more immediately transparent if we substitute a more classical term for “self,” namely, *ψυχή*, the “soul.” Who would wish to be the recipient of a *soulless* love? Certainly not God, certainly not one’s neighbor. It is true that Jesus speaks (Mt 16:25) of losing one’s *ψυχή*, that is, losing one’s soul (or as it is often [e.g., in the RSV], less literally, translated, “losing one’s life”) for his sake, but he then adds: whoever loses his soul will preserve it. To speak of selfless or soulless love, then, is to view love wholly from within the limited perspective of the sinner; it is to identify the miracle of love simply with what it costs *me*, rather than looking at it in its completion or perfection, and thus from the more comprehensive and objective perspective of God’s own goodness and thus the goodness of the world. There would seem to be grounds, here, to speculate that the growth of the language of *selflessness* in relation to love coincides with the degeneration of Christianity into the ugly distortions of gnosticism and moralism—which are harsh because they are fragmentary, and fail to do justice to the human wholeness that Benedict XVI emphasizes again and again as indispensable for a proper notion of love. It would be ultimately truer to reality to speak of the perfection of love, not as “selfless,” but as “self-full.” A radical sterility clings to the kind of other-centeredness that warrants the modifier “selfless.”

Moreover, the *self* cannot be present in a gift without desire, because desire represents the self’s being drawn out of itself toward that which elicits its appetite and thus that which it takes to be good and beautiful. The very word “appetite,” in fact, indicates this “movement toward.”³⁹ If this is indeed the case, then there can be no love without desire. A love that seeks to move beyond desire (rather than, say, to deepen and transform it), is a love that aims at its own elimination. As we saw above, without desire, one can give anything that belongs to one, but one can never give one’s *self*. One

³⁹José Ortega y Gasset explains the etymology of “appetite,” but rejects what it implies since he wishes to insist on the more conventional modern view of desire as acquisitive—not as a self-transcendence outward, but as a “taking in”: see “Toward a Psychology of the Interesting Man,” in *On Love: Aspects of a Single Theme*, trans. Tony Talbot (New York: Signet, 1976), 177, fn.

can complete a transaction that serves some practical and perhaps very noble and well-intentioned aim; one can, that is, perform what is generally taken today to be an act of “charity,” but one cannot *love*. When Benedict quotes the Vulgate translation of St. John’s letter at the beginning of the encyclical, “Deus caritas est,” “God is charity,” he does not mean to say that God performs “selfless” acts of goodwill to help others. In fact, in his discussion of the practical work of charitable institutions in the second half of the encyclical, the pope *insists* that this activity not be divorced from a genuine gift of self, a gift that, as we have been arguing, *requires* desire. Again, the addition of the first part of the encyclical stands as a reminder that Christian love may never be dissociated from human love, and that human love may never be dissociated from the desire that is natural to it. The roots of the word “caritas” reveal that it has nothing to do with the sterility of altruism: *caritas* comes from the word “carus,” which is an adjective meaning “precious, dear.” God is charity, then, because the world is *dear* to him. It represents, in *some* respect, a goodness and beauty that God himself “desires.”⁴⁰ As paradoxical as the affirmation may appear—and I would argue that the affirmation ultimately requires an understanding of God as Trinity—Benedict does not hesitate to cite in this regard one of the boldest and most revolutionary statements on love in the history of thought: Dionysius the Areopagite’s assertion in his book the *Divine Names* that “God is *eros*” (cf. *DCE*, 9).

Rather than speaking of selfless love, it would seem better, in light of the unity between *eros* and *agape* that the pope insists on in this encyclical, to speak of wholly *generous* love. *Generosity*, as the word itself suggests, is the very opposite of sterility: it generates, it conceives and gives birth, it gives life, and thus it celebrates everything that is essential to the giving of life. For this reason it goes

⁴⁰Of course, God’s “desire” is *analogous* to human desire, which means it bears an infinite difference within its unity. God’s “desire” cannot imply any sort of necessary dependence on the world. There is no room in this context to enter into the extraordinarily delicate—and important—question of how to reconcile God’s absolute transcendence and freedom with a genuine *love* for the world, which arguably requires *some* receptivity on God’s part toward the world. It is, to be sure, a hotly contested point. See Gerard F. O’Hanlon, *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and David L. Schindler, “Review of ‘The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar,’ by Gerard F. O’Hanlon,” *The Thomist* 58 (April 1994): 335–342.

without saying that it therefore celebrates the desirous self-gift, the *eros*, the fruitful unity of lover and beloved, that represents what the pope affirms is the paradigm of human love (*DCE*, 2). It is also the heart of the biblical understanding of God's relationship to his Church, the Bride who gathers up all that she has been given, and ultimately every last bit of the world itself, in her desirous gift of self in response to his love. In the end, as the pope says, there is only *one* love, which must thus be comprehensive enough to include body and soul, the human and the divine, desire and generosity, all together at once. If the encyclical is correct to affirm that God's love is the measure of all human love (*DCE*, 11), and if it is also correct to say that God *is eros* and at the same time *wholly agape*, that God's very self is love, which means that his love is as perfectly full of self as can be conceived, then this self-full identity of *eros* and *agape* reveals the perfection that all our attempts at loving, however grand, however weak or half-hearted, ultimately strive after. God is perfect *agape* because he is perfect *eros*, and this is because God is, in a word, the perfection of love in its totality. □

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