The Philosophy and Social Science of *Agape* Love

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Public Significance of the Work

Agape love is a moral virtue in which a person willingly and unconditionally offers goodness, at a cost to the giver, to another or others in need. Because this under-researched ancient concept has implications for harmonious relationships and for good mental health, accurate measures of *agape* are needed to assess the degree to which a person understands and practices it.

Abstract

The moral virtues have had prominence in social scientific research ever since Piaget's (1932/1965) and Kohlberg's (1969) pioneering work on the cognitive developmental stages of justice reasoning. A less explored moral virtue is the ancient idea of *agape*, or love that is in

service to others which includes effort and even pain on the part of the one expressing the virtue. In this work, we attempt a precise definition of *agape* using Aristotelian philosophical views of virtue ethics and his principles of analyzing constructs for their essences and their specific differences with related but distinct constructs. From this Aristotelian philosophical framework, we then critique existing social scientific measures of love and of *agape* in particular. We then provide guidelines for the development of construct-valid measures of *agape* that are philosophically coherent. Possible research questions to expand the scientific study of *agape* are presented as a way forward with this important construct that could bring psychological health to individuals and peace and unity to families and communities.

Keywords: *agape*, love, Aristotle, Essence and Specific Difference, psychological test construction

The Philosophy and Social Science of *Agape* Love

The purpose of this article is to explore what *agape* love is and what it is not, toward the goal of outlining the possibility of accurate measures of *agape* for social scientific exploration. We are not the pioneers in this effort to scientifically study *agape*. That distinction in the social sciences belongs to Lee (1973) and Hendricks and Hendricks (1986) who focused on *agape* exclusively within the context of romantic relationships. In this work, we attempt a precise definition of *agape* beyond the context of romantic relationships*,* using Aristotelian philosophical views of virtue ethics and his principles of analyzing constructs as our theoretical framework. Aristotle's virtue ethics framework is guided by an objectivist epistemology. Objectivism is the belief that there is truth, which can be discovered, to a given question about an entity. When

exploring the universal essence of *agape,* which is the goal of this analysis, we assume that there is a truth about how all humans throughout time and culture experience *agape*. At the same time, Aristotle makes room for nuances of individuality and culture.

Agape love is worth studying because, as a moral virtue, it challenges people to strive for betterment in their humanity. Virtue ethicists make a distinction between all people being equal in the sense that all have inherent worth (see, for example, Kant, 1785/1993) and all people not being equal in terms of their growth in becoming fully developed as persons (see Kreeft, 1992, particularly page 45 and Boethius. 524/1999). As we will see, *agape* requires heroic commitment to the betterment of others. As such, *agape* may aid humanity in reaching its highest level when people begin to deliberately, consciously, and willingly cultivate this moral virtue toward one another.

It is important to examine in detail the meaning of *agape* because there are wide differences in understanding what it is. For example, Post, Underwood, Schloss, and Hurlbut (2002) define *agape* as altruistic love that is offered universally to all people. In contrast, Kreeft (1988) sees *agape* as concretely and specifically given, with considerable effort, to particular people, without excluding or being cruel to others. Andolsen (1981), in contrast to both Post et al. (2002) and Kreeft (1988), argues that *agape* is too other-focused with too much cost and calls for a reciprocity that is mutually uplifting rather than *agape* as a central theme of love. Is *agape* a form of altruism? Is *agape* so other-focused that it leads to burnout and a lack of self-regard? A deep philosophical analysis of the term *agape* may shed light on the answers to these questions. We have chosen the Aristotelian framework to analyze the *agape* construct and then to offer

ways of constructing psychometrically-sound psychological scales of *agape*. We have chosen Aristotle because of his thorough exposition of what constitutes a moral virtue. We have yet to find another philosopher who offers a more accurate and comprehensive approach to understanding morals.

Our first step in the examination of *agape*, then, is to define the construct and eventually, but not in this work, to develop a psychometrically-sound measure of *agape* for children and adults that can be used in applied work.

Virtue Ethics within Aristotelian Realism

Understanding love as a virtue leads to three important assumptions based on Aristotelian realism (see Kreeft, 1990, chapter 3):

1. There is an **objective** understanding of love that is real and outside any given person's understanding of what love is. The challenge is to find the truth about love that transcends the subjective mind of any given person. In other words, we discover the meaning of love, we do not each invent it within ourselves. There is a subjective aspect to love in that each scholar may have somewhat different views, but these differences in thought are not central to the definition of what love is.

2. There is an **absolute** nature to the moral virtue of love in that its meaning does not vary by one's current circumstance. There can be relativity in when and how to offer love to certain people at certain times, but this does not alter the essence of love, what it is by definition.

3. There is a **universal** quality to what love is that transcends culture. At the same time, there can be wide cultural nuances in the norms of how love is expressed or in the value placed on this virtue, but these do not alter the essence of what love is.

Virtue Ethics from the Ancient Greeks

As a central author of what virtue ethics are, the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, upon beginning his dialogues, usually asked this question: What is it? His key point was to first define the term of interest. Aristotle (2013, 2016), in following Plato, distinguished five categories when explicating a construct: a) **Species** or what the **essence** of the construct is; b) **Genus**, or what it has in common with other related concepts; c) **Specific Difference**, or how the construct of interest differs from all other, related ideas; d) **Accident**, or that which is atypical of the Essence or Species but still is part of the Species; and e) **Property**, or something that the construct possesses that is not essential to the essence of the construct. As an example, consider the human person. The Species or Essence is that a person is a rational animal according to Aristotle. The Genus is that a person shares animality with other primates. Specific Difference is that humans are rational, and possess free will, as added by the medieval philosophers, particularly Aquinas (1948). Accident would include a person born with no legs. This is atypical, but does not take away from the fact of human personhood for this particular person. Property would include humanity's sense of humor. Humor is part of the Essence or Species, but not essential to its definition as a rational animal with free will.

More on the Qualities of All Moral Virtues

Before defining *agape*, let us take a more detailed look at the qualities of all moral virtues, such as justice, courage, temperance, forgiveness, and *agape* itself. Yves Simon (1986),

following Aristotle, identifies seven qualities to any moral virtue. These seven characteristics are as follows:

1. All moral virtues are good. They originate within the person and then are brought forth to others for good. This suggests that people grow, perhaps slowly, in their perfection of the virtues. One implication is that training in the virtues, including education, may be important.

2. The person expressing the virtue is motivated to deliberately effect moral goodness. This characteristic points to the inner quality of the virtue, including **motivation** (I want to do this), **free wil**l (I will do this), and **affect** (the moral emotions, such as compassion or an emotional suffering along with hurting people).

3. At least to a degree, the one expressing the virtue knows that it is good, even though the person may not be able to articulate a precise rule or principle about why it is good. This characteristic points to the **cognitive** quality of the virtue.

4. The expression of the moral virtue requires **practice** for greater proficiency in the development of that virtue. This characteristic points to the **behavioral** quality of the virtue. It also, as with the first point above, suggests the importance of education in the growth of the virtues within people.

5. The person need not be perfect in the expression of the virtue. This probably includes the inner and behavioral (outward) expression of the virtue.

6. The one who is practicing the virtue tries to do so as consistently as possible.

7. Different people demonstrate different degrees of the virtue.

Agape Love Examined Philosophically

We now propose a philosophically-defensible definition of *agape* love, based on virtue-ethics, with the eventual goal of building a psychological scale or scales to accurately reflect that construct, showing scientific reliability and validity.

What is *agape*? From a virtue-ethics position, the **Essence or Species** is this: *Agape* love is a moral virtue in which a person willingly and unconditionally offers goodness, at a cost to the giver, to another or others in need. There is a giving of the self to the other(s) that is: a) understood (conscious awareness of what this is and so *agape* can occur toward many across time), b) motivated (I want to do this and for the good of the other), c) willed (I will do this, again for the good of the other), and d) acted upon (behavior) toward other people in such a way that the actions cost the one expressing that love. Because so much is given in *agape*, it follows that something is taken away from the one who engages in this form of love and such taking away might be needed energy, needed material possessions, needed comfort, and/or even needed safety. Yet, there is a paradox to *agape*: In the giving, there is psychological gain for the giver, including a sense of joy in the giving.

This definition is not meant to imply that the "cost" to the one practicing agape is only of a material nature, such as losing possessions, time, or energy. Instead, the *agape*-practitioner might risk rebuke when taking an opposing position in a religious argument. The *agape*-practitioner might experience rejection by one's support group by going against unjust laws, as likely happened when abolitionists went against laws of slavery for the sake of the enslaved. Further, the definition is not meant to imply that the service is centered only on material needs of the receiver (such as receiving money, having a wounded leg disinfected, or being offered shelter). The receiver might obtain emotional support when grieving or kind understanding when

depressed. As one more clarification, the joy may not derive principally from achieving a material goal (binding the wounded leg of the other), but instead because the *agape*-practitioner realizes that exercising this virtue as an end in and of itself, regardless of consequences, is worthwhile and satisfying. It also may give joy for those whose *agape* aligns with transcendent religious or philosophical beliefs.

The philosopher Peter Kreeft (1988, n.d.) further clarifies that it is not just the giving of energy or material possessions to the other, but instead is the giving of the self to the other for that person's good. This is a giving of the whole self and not just possessions or a part of the self. The **Genus** is that *agape* is a moral virtue, in the same class as the concepts of justice, courage, temperance, and forgiveness. *Agape* also shares common characteristics with all of the other qualities of love defined in ancient Greece (*eros, storge, philia*):

1.*storge*, or the natural love between a parent and child;

2. *philia*, or brotherly love, from which we get the name of the city, Philadelphia. It also implies the mutuality of friendship;

3. *eros*, or romantic love. This is a love of desire. As with the other two loves, eros is mutually satisfying when two people are involved and committed to the other's good.

The similarities across the four aspects of love (including *agape*) are these: a) all of the loves are concerned for the good of the other; b) all have the quality of affection (as we will see below, this is as a **Property**, not the **Essence** in *agape*); c) there is a certain delight in the other as a person who is special, unique, and irreplaceable; and d) there is an investment of time given to the other.

The **Specific Difference** is this: No other form of love is as deliberately self-giving and deliberately costly in terms of consciously, willingly, and actively giving up energy, material possessions, comfort, and/or safety for the good of another or others. *Agape* does not necessarily share the mutuality that is embedded in the other forms of love, although it certainly can be mutual as in a partnering relationship in which each gives to the other. *Agape* is not mutual when a person gives of the self to aid a person without a home, who is unconscious and therefore cannot give *agape* mutually. *Agape*, thus, is the unconditional form of love in which others are not necessarily loving back, as in *storge*, *philia*, and *eros*. In *agape*, the one who loves does so out of the other's need and not out of self-interest or selfishness. *Agape* is deliberate and concrete in that it is not focused on a general or abstract feeling of love toward all of humanity, as is the case with the psychological construct of compassionate love (Sprecher & Fehr 2005). Instead, *agape* occurs in concrete action toward specific other persons.

To summarize the important differences**,** *agape*: a) is focused specifically on those in need; b) with a disinterest in whether or not mutuality of interests are achieved; c) at a cost to the one who is loving in this way; and d) with a giving of self to the other. **Accident** in *agape* would be a person who dies in service to others. Not all who exhibit *agape* give their lives to those served. **Property** is a feeling of softness toward the one who is the recipient of *agape*, or what the philosopher North (1987) calls a softened heart. While a softened heart is part of *agape*, the essence of *agape* does not have to include such affect, but instead the cognition, motivation, will, and action to serve. This is the case because we are not necessarily in full control of our emotions and so if, for example, deep feelings of compassion toward another are not forthcoming, a person

still can offer *agape* out of a decision to do so, a motivation to move forward, a free will to act, and behaviors flowing from these characteristics.

The Moral Virtue Quality of *Agape*:

What Kind of Characteristics Does *Agape* Have?

Based on Simon's (1986) exposition of Aristotle discussed above, we can identify seven important qualities to the moral virtue of *agape* as follows:

1. People who are more highly developed in *agape* know it is **good**. In other words, they do not adhere to philosophically incorrect views that are critical of this virtue.

2. More highly developed people in this virtue will be **motivated** to exercise *agape*, have plans to appropriate it (**free will**) and, as a Property of *agape*, will experience the **moral emotions** of compassion and empathy specifically toward those who need help.

3. People highly developed in *agape* will have a deeper **cognitive insight** into what it actually is: a) a moral virtue, b) in service to others, c) for the other's own good, d) at a cost to the one so serving, and e) the one serving gives of the self to the other.

4. People highly developed in *agape* will **deliberately practice** it in different situations with different people over a longer period of their life.

5. The more highly developed people will exhibit the qualities in #1-4 above to a more **accurate and deeper degree** across different situations and persons than the less developed people.

6. The more highly developed people will **deliberately strive for consistency** in understanding what *agape* is and in the practice of it across situations, persons, and time. In other words, *agape* will become part of the person's **identity.**

7. From a scientific viewpoint, we will see **individual differences** in the development of *agape*. It remains to be seen which social scientific variables support the growth in this virtue.

As a final point not in Simon (1986), in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (340BC/2013) talks about what has come to be labeled as "the doctrine of the mean." Each moral virtue is bounded by two vices, one of which is an under-representation of the virtue and the other is an excess of the virtue. For example, justice is the mean between acquiescence and excessive demand. *Agape* love's vices seem to be passivity as the under-representation of the virtue and exhaustion, both physical and psychological, as its excessive representation.

What *Agape* Is Not

From a philosophical perspective it is vital not only to address what *agape* is but also to explore what it is not. We do so in this section to further sharpen our understanding of *agape*, with a focus on the Aristotelian category of Specific Difference.

Compassion or Love Burnout. In the popular literature there is an expression: compassion or love burnout. It implies that as a person gives of the self to others, then eventually the giver becomes exhausted, damaging the self (Corrigan, 2019). Often this occurs because the person is not willingly engaged in the effort. There is no sense of the endpoint of the work. In *agape*, the person advanced in this moral virtue sees the endpoint of the activity (the Final Cause in Aristotle) as service to others. The paradox, then, emerges: The self is revitalized rather than torn down by the actions.

Abandoning Temperance. Temperance is one of the Cardinal Virtues discussed by Plato (2015) and accepted by Aristotle (2013). Temperance is balance and the deliberate avoidance of extremes. As Aristotle instructed, a person does not practice any moral virtue in the absence of

other moral virtues. Thus, as one engages in *agape*, it is important to take breaks, refresh, and start again by incorporating the moral virtue of temperance into the activity.

Abandoning Justice. As in the above case with temperance, a person does not isolate *agape*. Instead, a person can and should ask for fairness when giving of the self in *agape* to others.

Abandoning Wisdom. One does not abandon wisdom, but utilizes it when practicing *agape*. Wisdom is the insight of when to act and to what degree one should act in a given situation. Wisdom, then, helps people know the extent of offering *agape* and when to do so.

Abandoning Self-Care. This is another issue of temperance and wisdom. Those practicing *agape* need to take time to care for the self as a way of persevering in offering *agape* without burnout. This is in contrast to Hilkert Andolsen (1981) who referred to *agape* as a "denigration of self-love" (p. 69). This view is philosophical reductionism in that it sees the traditional meaning of *agape* in an "either/or" sense of serving others or the self, without a consideration of both the paradox of *agape* (as one serves others, the self can be refreshed) and the Aristotelian doctrine of the mean in which unnecessary extremes need to be avoided.

***Agape* is not naive self-abuse**. A critique of *agape* is that it involves a certain pathological naivete because of the element of self-sacrifice (Levy and Davis, 1988). Yet, according to Aristotle, one should never practice any of the virtues in isolation. Therefore, as one practices *agape*, one should practice wisdom so as not to harm the self from the actions and should also practice justice so that the other does not take advantage of the self-sacrificial actions (see also Outka,1972, especially chapter 8 on this point). Similar to Levy and Davis (1988), Nietzsche (1887/2009) saw *agape* as going against what he considered to be our natural will to power. If Nietzsche is correct that our nature is to exert power over others, then wars and family

discord are inevitable. After all, to continually exert power over others is not necessarily to see their dignity and worth. Yet, if our highest Essence is to love, as Enright (2012) argues, then Nietzsche has chosen a lower part of human nature on which to focus.

***Agape* contrasted with compassionate love**. Compassionate love is a general tenderness (including affective, cognitive, and behavioral attitudes) toward all people (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005). According to Fehr, Harasymchuk, and Sprecher (2014), compassionate love is more broad-based than *agape* love because, in their view, *agape* is only within romantic relationships. However, other philosophers argue that *agape* can apply to all persons (see, for example, Lewis, 1960; Outka, 1972). *Agape* love differs from compassionate love in two ways: first, it is more costly in that the one offering it is willing to suffer for the good of others; second, *agape* is focused on particular persons. Thus, it must be expressed within a specific person-to-person(s) context (not on humanity in some abstract or general way). An example is an extremely exhausted mother, who is up all night with a sick child for that child's sake, and she is feeling the pain of fatigue. *Agape* comes from a free will (we choose it), a good will (we are concerned for others' needs and welfare), and a strong will (we carry on despite the difficulty). See Enright (2012) on these points. *Agape* is a character virtue because it is concerned about the other's welfare as an end in and of itself, not a strategy of self-reward. *Agape* acknowledges all people's inherent worth and transforms into actions of serving particular others.

***Agape* contrasted with altruism**. Altruism is commonly defined as "social behavior that achieves positive outcomes for another" (Krebs, 1982, p. 449). *Agape* goes beyond altruism because altruism does not necessarily involve effort and pain for the good of the other. For example, when a millionaire, who has no current struggles, gives $100 to someone who currently

is without a home, this act of altruism is not a self-sacrificial issue because it does not cost the giver in terms of time, effort, or funds. As another example, a child, who has many toys, gives one of those toys to another child. This is a display of altruism. In contrast, when a child willingly gives an infant, for the baby's sake, the child's favorite teddy bear, this is an act of *agape* because it involves both emotional effort as well the giving up of a prized physical object. Giving (altruism) and giving through cost to oneself (*agape*) are not the same. Yet, there is a counter-argument in a philosophical thought-experiment called the Trolley Problem in which a run-away trolley might kill five people or one, and in a newer variant, the one sacrificed would be the self. If participants in this thought-experiment show altruism by sacrificing the self rather than the five others, this is labelled as altruistic self-sacrifice (Huebner & Hauser, 2011). Although such an experiment might equate *agape* and altruism, we disagree for this reason: A hypothetical thought-experiment done in the safety of a laboratory is far different than a real-life, painful encounter with others for their own good.

***Agape* contrasted with kindness**. Kindness is a desire to remove suffering from others (Kreeft, 2011) . Yet, sometimes people grow in their suffering. Thus, those who exhibit *agape* as a gift to another will not necessarily take away the other's suffering if it is seen as necessary, at least temporarily, for that person's growth as a person (Kreeft, 1988, n.d).

***Agape* contrasted with respect**. One can show respect to others out of a sense of duty. Kant (1785/1993) argued that duty is the key to ethics. Yet, a person can be dutiful, showing respect, to an abusive father because he is the parent. This duty and respect, then, can be offered with more resentment than love. See also, Ramsey (1965) for his ideas that *agape* might be a form of deontology or duty, which to us would contradict the Essence of *agape* as a free-will

motivation to assist others for their good. In other words, people are drawn to *agape*, not compelled into it by duty.

***Agape* contrasted with gratitude**. One can feel very grateful to a boss who offers a raise, but there is not necessarily a sense of *philia, eros, storge*, or *agape* associated with the thankfulness. The person can feel thankful and then move on without another thought about the boss.

***Agape* contrasted with helpfulness**. As C.S. Lewis points out, *agape* has a certain indifference with regard to the outcome for oneself when assisting others. Yet, helpfulness, at least in some cases, can be motivated by an expected payback.

***Agape* contrasted with empathy.** Empathy is the ability to understand another's emotional state and feel with that person or respond emotionally in a similar way. Unlike *agape* which involves an other-focused behavioral response, empathy, as an interior psychological response, does not necessarily lead to prosocial behavior. When empathizing with another person leads to personal distress, people may focus on their own needs rather than the needs of the other person. *Agape*, on the other hand, involves focus on the other's needs for the other's sake.

***Agape* contrasted with unconditional positive regard**. The psychotherapist Carl Rogers (1951) used the term unconditional positive regard as his response to clients. This is a form of seeing and acknowledging the inherent worth of the client despite current challenges faced by the client. This is not *agape* precisely because the psychotherapist is not, in the therapeutic session, engaging in suffering directly for the client. The therapist needs a certain detachment from the pain in order to reflect back as accurately as possible the client's own feelings and struggles.

A Possible Philosophical Concern

A potential problem with such detailed analyses of *agape* is this: A new definition of *agape* might draw too hard a distinction between *agape* and other forms of love and related constructs as we have examined above. This is an important challenge because, if we did not put *agape* under the Aristotelian microscope, then we might so rigidly define *agape* that it would end up sharing nothing with the other loves and similar constructs discussed above. In doing so, we then would distort the definition of *agape*. Yet, with the Aristotelian perspective, we are aware not only of the **Species** or **Essence** of the construct but also of the **Genus** in which *agape* is situated: sharing important commonalities with all other concepts of love and even with all other moral virtues. What is the shared commonality with the other forms of love. It is this: a deep concern for the other as person. What is the shared commonality with all other moral virtues? It is this: an awareness of and expression of goodness (such as fairness in the moral virtue of justice or being slow to anger in the moral virtue of patience) toward others. At the same time, because we also seek out the **Specific Difference**, we can be more clear on what, exactly, *agape* is and is not relative to these other forms of love and the other moral virtues. Those differences already have been discussed above.

Our seeing the similarities with and the differences among *agape* and all other forms of love and the other moral virtues aids us in more clearly understanding *agape* and preparing us for accurate social scientific assessments of this construct. We further avoid the relativism of accepting as equally true a host of definitions of *agape* that could emerge in the published literature in the future. We now turn to a deeper discussion of *agape* across historical time. As we

will see, there has been consistency in ascertaining what *agape* is from medieval times to the present.

Philosophical History of *Agape* Love

Ancient Greece

We already have discussed the delineation of love into four different constructs by the ancient Greek philosophers. The other three forms of love (*storge, eros, and philia*) are natural in that they can come to most people under the circumstance that the other person, who is the recipient of the love, also loves. These forms of love are not particularly challenging. *Agape*, in contrast, was a rather vague concept for the ancient Greeks. The noun *agape* does not appear in Plato's or Aristotle's writings, although the verb *agapeo* and its variants does appear about 100 times across the Platonic and Aristotelian writings. Two representative examples are: 1) In Plato's Phaedrus (233e) we read, "...at private entertainments you ought not to invite your friends, but beggars and those who need a meal; for they will love you (ἀγαπήσουσιν/ agapesousi) and attend you and come to your doors and be most pleased and grateful, and will call down many blessings upon your head." The "beggars" show an intense enthusiasm for those who did the inviting. This is not a mutual intense love as occurs in *eros* when *eros* is centered on another person (*eros* also can be centered on virtue, for example, on wisdom as its object of beauty); 2) In contrast, we see this quotation from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics (*1095b17*)* that is not focused on a person, but instead shows this intense enthusiasm for a lifestyle, which the philosopher does not even see as honorable: "...to judge from men's lives, the more or less reasoned conceptions of the Good or Happiness that seem to prevail are the following. On the one hand the generality of men and the most vulgar identify the Good with pleasure, and

accordingly are content [the verb here is *agaposi*, meaning "they loved"] with the Life of Enjoyment—for there are three specially prominent Lives, the one just mentioned, the Life of Politics, and thirdly, the Life of Contemplation." Here the love as intense enthusiasm is not centered on the pursuit of beauty, as *eros* is (when focused either on a virtue or another person). Instead, *agaposi* in this case is centered on a lower issue of pleasure as an end in itself.

The lack of much dialogue concerning *agape* and a lack of precise definition gives the impression that their wisdom led them to realize that there is another form of love waiting to be discovered, but as yet not well understood. It took the medieval philosophers to explicate this other form of love, *agape*.

Aquinas and Subsequent Christian Thinkers

One of the first detailed discussions of *agape* as a moral virtue is in Aquinas (1948), who used the word charity. Charity is to will the good of the other person (ST I-II 26.4). Thus, as Silverman (2019) clarifies, the Thomistic project emphasizes first the interior issue of motivation (willing the good of the other) and then comes the emphasis on the emotions and actions. Again, as Silverman (2019) clarifies, actions, as part of *agape,* are so important that they can lead to a revision of Aristotle's idea of humanity's Essence as rational animals. Instead, humans are rational *relational* animals.

Aquinas distinguishes between the natural virtues, open to all persons, and the theological virtues, which can be understood and willed only by the grace of God. Charity or *agape* is one of the theological or infused virtues. Charity starts with love of God, which is self-giving, toward the person. The person who now possesses this theological virtue, then gives the love to God and subsequently to others. As God is self-giving even to the point of suffering for others in Christ,

persons who develop charity or *agape* do the same (Aquinas, 1948). This idea of self-giving sacrificial love has been developed in many Christian writings. As one example, Pope John Paul II, following the assassination attempt on his life, wrote *Salvifici Doloris* (1984), discussing how love in its highest sense is to suffer with Christ for the good of others. Such suffering can be redemptive or soul-saving for those others. *Agape*, in other words, is self-sacrificial for the ultimate good of the other, sharing in the beatific vision.

C.S. Lewis

In his book, *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis (1960) makes the compelling distinction between what he calls Gift-Love and Need-Love, the former being a higher form of love than the latter. An example of Gift-Love is a father who toils to work hard and denies himself pleasures so that he can save enough money for a secure future for his children even though he will not live long enough to see them prosper or to share in that prosperity. An example of Need-Love is a child who falls down, hurts his knee, and runs to his mother for comfort. This is not at all a selfish act, but one of mutual love. Gift-Love may be mutual, but on its highest level it is entirely self-giving for the sake of others. This is *agape* or what he calls charity. This *agape* love is more than altruism, as already discussed. In altruism, when the sympathetic millionaire, who is not suffering nor has any major concerns right now, gives $100 to the poor, this may be done out of selfless love, but it does not actually cost the giver, who does not struggle in such an act. As C.S. Lewis explains, the highest form of Gift-Love willingly offers service to enemies, criminals, and those who even sneer at the gift-giver. Forgiveness, he says, on its highest level is a form of Gift-Love as the forgiver struggles to offer goodness to those who have been cruel. As an example, after deep conflict with a mother-in-law, a son-in-law who answers the phone, offers kindness

and help to his mother-in-law by taking the call although it can be emotionally painful for him. From the Aristotelian perspective, even the idea of struggling to offer goodness can lessen with practice, as the gift-giver becomes more proficient in the virtue (Kim & Enright, 2016). Gift-Love is a deliberately willed action. It also is a specific, concrete form of love toward particular others. After all, we do not just throw monetary gifts up in the air and say, "There you go, humanity." Gifts are tangible and given to particular persons. *Agape* as the highest form of Gift-Love, thus, is willingly directed toward specific persons in a concrete way and for the receiver's benefit.

Gene Outka

Perhaps the leading modern philosopher on the topic of *agape* is Gene Outka (1972), with his philosophy book, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis*. He has identified three features of *agape* as follows:

1. equal regard for all persons regardless of certain personal characteristics (attractiveness, wealth, and so forth);

2. self-sacrifice in that the ones who love give of their own resources (such as time, energy, and even material goods) to meet the needs of others. This giving of resources costs the giver. For example, if someone is hungry and gives her left-overs from dinner to a homeless person on the street, this is different from the person who is hungry, has only one sandwich, and shares half of it with the person without a home. The latter is an the example of *agape*;

3. concern for the other without necessarily expecting reciprocity.

Peter Kreeft

Because we are not in full control of our emotions, then it follows that *agape* is not centered in our feelings. Instead, following Aquinas, Kreeft (1988) reasons that *agape* is a willed response to others. Even if we do not feel like it, we seek the good of the other. This comes from both motivation (the will) and understanding this as important (reason). *Agape* is focused on specific others. A general love of humanity is much easier because humanity in general does not surprise us or betray us. Gifts have particular names of people, the recipients of the gift, associated with the gift-giving and so *agape* is concrete, specific, and focused on specific persons. The paradox is this: The more of yourself you give away, the more you get back. As an analogy, in a game of catch, as you give up the ball, it is only then that you get the ball back. Keep the ball to yourself and the game ends at that point.

Modern Views of Love from the Social Sciences

Sternberg (1986), in his classic work on what he calls the Triangle of Love, offers three components to love: intimacy, commitment, and passion. Intimacy is equated with the affect of being close to another. Passion is the feeling that leads to romance. Commitment can involve staying with another either short-term or long-term. These three components, Sternberg instructs, can occur in friendships, casual dating, and the long-term commitment of marriage. In every case, he is describing either *philia* (friendship love) or *eros* in its varied forms of short-term passion and/or long-term commitment. In none of his discussions does he bring in *agape* as part of the triangle.

Elliott (2012) finds it dangerous to dichotomize rationality and feelings in our attempt to understand *agape* because feelings then might be pushed to the background. As Elliott warns, some people conclude that their feelings just do not matter as *agape* is equated with the will to

action and rationality. Elliott is correct if *agape* is not seen as a moral virtue, but only a command from God. Feelings do not then guide our response or duty to this command because we are not always in full control of our affect, especially when people are being cruel to us or asking us to suffer for them. Yet, when we take a full virtue-ethics look at *agape*, we see that this dichotomizing of cognition and affect is to engage in reductionism. Affect, as seen above in the five ways to define a construct from Greek philosophy, makes room for **Property** and feelings are part of, though not essential to, *agape*. Further, as explained by Simon (1986), all moral virtues, according to Aristotle, have an affective or motivational dimension. Thus, affect does have a proper place within *agape*, although as a **Property** only, it does not define what *agape* is.

To illustrate how the definition of love can become too broad, consider Oord's (2012) view from the Wesleyan tradition. He first admits that John Wesley, in using the word love, does not actually define it. Oord, in then trying to fill that void, defines love as an intentional act, done with sympathy and empathy, toward others for overall wellbeing. Because the Aristotelian categories (Species, Genus, Specific Difference, and so forth) are not applied to the definitional analysis, this definition could encompass *eros, storge, philia,* compassionate love, and *agape*. It could encompass altruism and even pity, but without the philosophical challenge to make important distinctions, we are not sure which of these love categories precisely fit the definition. In his most recent work, Oord (2022) more directly specifies *agape* as seeking good despite obstacles and difficulties.

Both Batson, Early & Salvarini (1997) and Preston and Simpson (2012) equate love with altruism, or a focus on the other, with a de-emphasis on the self. This self-giving, then, is coming closer to a fuller definition of *agape* than an emotion-focused approach does, but it still is

incomplete because no **Specific Difference** between *agape* and altruism is forthcoming. In other words, and to use our earlier example, this kind of love might be easy for the sympathetic millionaire, not under any pressure or suffering right now, who gives $100 to charity. There must be more to *agape* than this, otherwise, why not just use the popular word altruism rather than adding more to our vocabulary?

Sutton and Mittelstadt (2012) avoid the reductionism of placing *agape* primarily into one central category such as the emotions or altruism. They posit six dimensions to love: spiritual, cognitive, observable behavior, physiological, emotional, and social. Yet, in explaining these, they fall back to the psychological construct of attachment, rendering love closer to *storge* than to *eros, philia, agape*, or compassionate love. In other words, it now is not clear how *storge* and *agape* differ. Johnson (2006) in using the word love in the context of romantic relationships also equates the construct of love with attachment and thus focuses on *eros* rather than *agape* without specifying this directly.

Titus and Scrofani (2012) agree with the above philosophical analyses by Outka and Kreeft as they describe *agape*. The highest form of love, they argue, transcends the self and attends to others, particularly those who are suffering. The greatest challenge is to love one's enemies, those who are not loving you in return.

As we can see, when social scientists use the term love, most do not focus on the Specific Difference between their construct and other love constructs (*eros, storge, phila, agape*). Most do not focus on the Specific Difference of any form of love and such psychological constructs as attachment or altruism. We, thus, have myriad definitions of love that might confuse the reader unless an Aristotelian lens is used to dissect the Specific Differences that are implicit in the

definitions. We now turn to social scientific attempts to operationalize love into psychological measures.

A Critique of the Existing Love Scales

*Agap*e must not be confused with The Love Scale, the SMILE inventory, or the Compassionate Love scale, constructed in the past 15 years within psychology. There are important Specific Differences between *agap*e and all of these scales. To reiterate from the section entitled, ***Agape* Love Examined Philosophically**, *agape* unconditionally offers goodness, for their sake, to those in need such that this moral virtue is understood, motivated, willed, and acted upon in a way that costs the one expressing that love.

Love Scale. McCullough, Bono, and Post (2005) proposed the Love Scale as an attempt at a comprehensive assessment of love. They reasoned that love consists of 10 related but independent constructs: gratitude, attentiveness, compassion, helpfulness, loyalty, respect, creativity, humor, courage, and forgiveness. As already stated in the philosophy section above, *agape* cannot be the exact same as gratitude, helpfulness, or respect if one can generate examples of how these other constructs can be manifested with indifference or resentment toward others. *Agape* further is not the same as attentiveness because I can attend to another so that I get something from the person. Courage itself is a moral virtue independent of love, and seen as one of the Cardinal Virtues by the ancient Greeks, who philosophically separated love and courage as distinct. One can courageously march into battle out of a sense of duty and not out of a love for one's country. Humor sometimes can be sarcastic and thus not loving.

The point of this critique is that this scale has far too many constructs within it. Some of the constructs can be seen as not involving any kind of love. Some might be related to love, but

which of the four forms of love (as described by the ancient Greeks) is involved? An analysis of Specific Differences regarding any of the 10 constructs is absent, leaving a confusing picture of what, exactly, is being measured in this 40-item short form scale. This may be why the scale has not generated interest in the scientific community. It is not clear what the exact construct is measuring.

SMILE Scale. Levin and Kaplan (2010) developed the SMILE Scale based on the thinking of Harvard sociologist, Dr. Pitirim Sorokin's views in the 1950's. As with the scale above, this is a multi-construct assessment involving six dimensions of love: Religious love (toward God), Ethical love ("Love is always beautiful" with an emphasis on beauty and goodness in general), Ontological love ("When I feel loved, I feel complete peace of mind," with a focus on what the self gets out of loving), Biological love (again with a focus on self with an emphasis on *eros*, such as, "The purpose of my life is to maximize my pleasure."), Psychological love (again with a self-focus emphasizing affect: "Feeling loved is my greatest source of happiness."), and Social love (which emphasizes philia: "I have always been a devoted friend.").

With so many different constructs involving love (theological, *eros, philia*, self-benefit, and love as an emotion), it is not surprising that this instrument has not gained wide acceptance in the social, clinical, and psychiatric literature. From a philosophical perspective, it is not clear which love construct is the focus.

Compassionate Love Scale. Although compassionate love scales exist (see, for example, Fehr, Harasymchuk, & Sprecher, 2014; Hatfield & Rapson 1996; Sprecher & Fehr, 2005), we will not critique those here because the construct itself already was examined under the What

Agape Is Not section. Yet, it should be noted that even this term, compassionate love, has varying themes such as *eros* or altruism when researchers attempt to operationalize the construct.

An Examination of Current *Agape* Love Scales

Love Attitudes Scale

The most popular instrument to assess *agape* is the Love Attitudes Scale developed by Hendricks and Hendricks (1986) based on Lee's (1973) six love styles of eros (passionate love), lupus (game-playing love), storge (although this is labeled as friendship love, this is not correct relative to ancient Greek use. Storge is the natural love, for example, between mother and child; philia is friendship love), pragma (practical love), mania (possessive, dependent love), and *agape* (specifically described as altruistic love which is not exactly correct because, as we have seen, one can be altruistic without the deep effort and pain of self-service). These are centered exclusively on the romantic partner. There are seven items within each style for a total of 42 items of love. Each item is rated on a Likert scale from 1 to 5. There also is a German version of the scale (Bierhoff, Grau, & Ludwig, 1993).

Let us examine the *agape* subscale from the philosophical viewpoint. First, the scale is strong in this: It centers *agape* on a particular person, in this case the romantic partner. *Agape*, as we saw above, always is centered on a particular person, persons, or a group. Second, this scale cannot be seen as an assessment of the moral virtue of *agape* in general because it is more reductionistic to the partner only. Third, let us now examine each of the seven *agape* items (from items 36 to 42):

36. I try to always help my lover through difficult times. Critique: This does not necessarily show the Aristotelian Specific Difference between altruistic love and *agape* in that the helping may not involve deep effort and pain by the participant.

37. I would rather suffer myself than let my lover suffer. Critique: This appears to be a philosophically-accurate *agape* item in that it involves the effort and pain, discussed above, specifically toward a particular person. It may be missing the theme of Aristotle's "doctrine of the mean" or avoiding an extreme case in which the participant overdoes the suffering.

38. I cannot be happy unless I place my lover's happiness before my own. Critique: As with item 37, this appears to be a philosophically-accurate item.

39. I am usually willing to sacrifice my own wishes to let my lover achieve his/hers. Critique: As with items 37 and 38, this appears to be a philosophically-accurate item at least to a point. The possible philosophical deficit involves Simon's (1986) point 1 in his analysis of the moral virtues in that *agape* involves goodness. What if the partner's goals are not good? For example, what if the partner's goal in life is to be very wealthy which includes excessive hours at work each day. The sacrifice of the participant, in this case, violates Simon's theme of goodness. That this item does not unambiguously differentiate the partner's moral goals and non-moral goals is a cause for concern.

40. Whatever I own is my lover's to use as he/ she chooses. Critique: This is not philosophically-accurate because it does not distinguish altruism and *agape*. There is not necessarily the needed component of suffering on the part of the respondent.

41. When my lover gets angry with me, I still love him/her fully and unconditionally. Critique: This does not necessarily distinguish *agape* from patience, kindness, or compassionate love (a general love that persists regardless of circumstance).

42. I would endure all things for the sake of my lover. Critique: This, as with items 37, 38, and 39 seems to be philosophically-accurate in that a construct which represents a specific difference with *agape* is not confounding the item. Yet, as with item 39, item 42 is not unambiguously clear what the lover's situation is that requires the participant to endure. Could the endurance involve, in some cases, being complicit with non-moral goals of the partner? An enmeshed relationship can too often lead to endurance of that which is not morally appropriate.

In summary, of the seven items only four are assessing *agape* toward a partner and two of these four (items 39 and 42) might be assessing an extreme position by the participant who is violating the "doctrine of the mean." Thus, this scale is in need of revision if it is to more accurately represent the construct of *agape* in particular, while avoiding the conflation of items with those constructs which have Specific Differences with *agape*, and a scale is needed that goes beyond only the romantic relationship.

Love Attitudes Scale Short Form

For the short form of the above scale, Hendricks and Hendricks (1998) created a three-item *agape* love scale including items 37, 38, and 39 above, all of which are consistently assessing *agape* rather than a related but specifically-different construct. Item 37 assesses one's view of behavior; item 38 assesses affect (happiness) or motivation; item 39 also assesses motivation (willingness). Yet, in light of the seven characteristics of a moral virtue (Simon, 1986), this short form does not assess Simon's point 1: Is the respondent consciously aware that

agape is a moral virtue centered in goodness? Is this moral virtue deliberately chosen or simply present within the participant? The short form does not assess Simon's point 3 or one's cognitions relative to *agape*. How is the participant thinking about the other as the *agape* behavior is applied to the situation and the person? The scale does not directly assess the participant's consistency in applying *agape*: Are the responses to items 37-39 typical or variable depending on one's mood or the circumstances of the partner? These items do not address "the doctrine of the mean" between genuine *agape* and overdoing it in love burnout (Corrigan, 2019; Pines, 1996).

The Tension Between Philosophy, Statistics, and the Social Sciences

Given the above critique that the most popular *agape* scale to assess romantic relationships is philosophically under-developed, what then do we make of findings which show this scale to have both convergent and cross-cultural validity? For example, using the Love Attitude Scale, Hammock & Richardson (2011) report that those high in *agape* tend to maintain relationships relative to other love subscales. Salayani et al. (2020) show that those who score high on the *agape* subscale have higher marital satisfaction, whereas Mandal and Latusek (2018) report that those who abandon partners are low on this *agape* subscale. Others demonstrate the cross-cultural validity of the LAS in Peru (Lascurain Wais, Lavender Liria, & Manzanares Medina, 2017), Brazil (Cassepp-Borges & Ferrer (2019), Turkey and Great Britain (Sanri & Goodwin, 2013), and Africa and Europe (Neto, 2000), although Cao, She, and Zhang (2007) recommend a revision of the scale in China. Cramer et al. (2015) report that they could not reproduce the six-factor solution of the different love subscales within the LAS, possibly because

of overlap of meaning across some of these subscales. In other words, has the philosophical Specific Difference been taken into account in the generation of the scale?

It is unfortunate that statistics do not and cannot answer the most critical question: Despite the statistical convergent and cross-cultural validity, for the most part, for this most-popular *agape* love scale, is this an accurate reflection of the Essence of what *agape* actually is? Only philosophical analysis can answer this question and it is not addressed in the current published social science literature. In fact, researchers seem to take for granted that they are assessing *agape* when they use a scale labeled as such. We, thus, need to delve more deeply into an intersection between philosophy and the construction of accurate *agape* love scales for use in future research.

As another tension between philosophy and social science, the accusation of scientism might emerge. By "scientism" we mean this: Researchers, intent on validating *agape* measures as psychometrically sound, might keep trying to find a statistically-significant relationship between *agape* and any other variable that might present *agape* in a favorable light. In other words, and for example, suppose that attempts to correlate *agape* with self-esteem fail to show a significant relationship. What would prevent the researcher from setting aside the self-esteem variable and trying another (the variable of hope, for example) and if that does not work, then empathy or gratitude or altruism, all in the search of statistical victory? This argument can be countered with one word: replication. All important and popular social scientific variables are held up to replication by other scientists. If one social scientist hides the lack of relationship between, say, *agape* and self-esteem, others are likely to take up the cause and, upon finding no relationship between the two, would report this. Replication is a protection against scientism.

As one more point of tension between philosophy and social science, some philosophers might ask the utilitarian question: Why do we even need the epistemology of social science to understand and appreciate *agape* when we have the detailed method of Aristotelian rational analysis, which has been useful for many investigators for thousands of years? Social science can add to the objectivist, Classical philosophical analysis in at least three ways. First, correlations among *agape* and other positive psychology variables, such as self-esteem or harmonious relationships, might peak the interest of readers to now explore what *agape* is and how it practically fits into one's own life.

Second, there never has been a published study within clinical psychology incorporating *agape* into either the diagnosis of a mental health challenge or treatment. For example, suppose an adolescent is consistently bullying others in school. A typical approach is to punish the adolescence (perhaps in after-school detention) and to call the parents. Yet, what if some of those who bully are doing so because they have been bullied by others and have a loving heart that has been damaged by the abuse toward them? Giving *agape* love scales to this adolescent could aid in the diagnosis of this hidden attribute in the adolescent. This young person actually is emotionally sensitive and so hurt that the anger developed and was displaced onto others. In this case, detention might exacerbate the anger whereas a forgiveness intervention, that incorporates principles of *agape*, might be more effective. The mental health professional could give the adolescent insight into the fact that he is a person who loves and this can be appropriated toward those who have hurt him. Thus, his identity, his sense of who he is as a person, can be positively strengthened. A similar approach could be applied to adults in psychotherapy as they work to change their identity based on their willingness to love in the face of life's challenges.

Third, and following upon point 2, the introduction of *agape* interventions in schools may prove to be efficacious in restoring emotional health and preventing emotional compromise. We stated in the introduction that the practice of *agape* might aid in the growth of one's humanity. If this is the case, then might there be, in the future, *agape* educational programs, as there now are forgiveness education programs (see, for example, Rahman, et al., 2018) in which participants learn to love more deeply? If so, then *agape* measures are vital as dependent variables to assess the effectiveness of such educational programs.

As a final point, this one between philosophers, the question could be asked: Might a phenomenological approach to understanding *agape* be more fruitful than the top-down analysis of what *agape* is? After all, the Aristotelian approach defines *agape* without even asking people for their experience with it. In other words, *agape* is a lived encounter among people and we need to ascertain the description of what *agape* is, subjectively, for each person as well as the hermeneutical meaning ascribed to this subjective experience for each person. We do not disagree that qualitative social scientific research into the subjective experience and meaning of *agape* for individuals is of great value. Yet, and this is our Aristotelian emphasis showing, if we want to understand what *agape* is, we do not start with the general public, especially with people who have had limited exposure to thinking about this virtue because most people likely will misunderstand what it is in its Essence. We say this based on the analogous and difficult moral virtue of forgiveness. When Freedman and Chang (2010) asked people what forgiveness is, the majority reduced it to "moving on," which cannot be what forgiveness is, given that it is a merciful response to a particular person or persons who acted unjustly. One can "move on" with cold indifference toward the other. It could be the same with *agape* in that people will lack

wisdom in giving their views on *agape* and this is why we need first to scrutinize, through rational inquiry, the Species, Genus, Specific Difference, Accident, and Property attributes of *agape* before building a scale to assess the degree to which people understand and demonstrate *agape*. In other words, there is a substantial difference between asking the question, "Are you understanding *agape* and to what degree are you practicing it?" and the related question, "What do you *say and experience* what *agape* is from your own inner reality?"

Future Test Construction of *Agape*

Based on the above review of the philosophical and social scientific literature, it is important for researchers to accurately conceptualize what *agape* actually is when developing such scales for children and adults. This includes a philosophical analysis of Specific Differences with other love constructs and related ideas such as altruism or self-pleasure seeking. We then must be careful in item generation so that the wording reflects *agape* without equivocation with other constructs.

We recommend the following in the generation of items for an *agape* scale (or scales) with a focus on philosophical and psychological issues:

1. The items must reflect the first six qualities which all moral virtues possess as defined by Aristotle and described by Simon (1986):

   Being aware that one is deliberately choosing this moral virtue of *agape* because it is good;

   Example of an item: "My actions for the other are worthy of my effort."

   Example of a reverse-scored item: "Regarding what I did for the other person, I am feeling indifferent."

Demonstrating motivation (I want to do this); will (I have the determination to do this); and a softened heart as Property rather than Essence;

Example of an item: "I knew that my actions would cause me pain, but I chose that helping anyway."

Example of a reverse-scored item: "I find no particular reason why I bore the pain."

Cognition toward the other (I am aware of a) the other's suffering, b) who the other is as a person, and c) what this will cost me);

Example of an item in (b); "I understood that the other is a person who is special, unique, and irreplaceable."

Action (toward a particular person or persons and the action costs the giver);

Example of an item: "I acted because the person has value as a person."

The more highly morally developed people will score higher on this scale;

The more highly morally developed people will be more consistent in their expression of agape across different kinds of situations and persons.

2. The scale needs to assess "the doctrine of the mean" to be sure that the participants' decisions and actions are not so extreme as to lead to "love burnout."

Example of an item: "I completely exhausted myself by doing this."

3. Items must be generated to reflect the construct of *agape* in particular that involve:

cost to the participant

Example of an item: "I endured suffering for the other person, not primarily for me."

indifference to reward for the self

Example of an item: "My pain is less important than the outcome for the person."

concern for the welfare of the recipient

Example of an item: "I willingly endure pain if my actions will benefit the other."

have a gift-like quality to it

Example of an item: "I wanted a good outcome for the other and so this is why I acted."

4. The items must be generated with **Specific Difference** in mind and thus not be written in such a way as to overlap with other love constructs or other similar constructs to *agape*:

kindness in particular (only a desire to remove another's suffering without cost to the one who is kind)

Example of an item: "It was important to me to help in spite of my discomfort."

compassionate love (a general love for humanity)

Example of an item: "I did this for a specific person rather than a general concern for all."

philia (friendship only without cost)

Example of an item: "I would bear the pain of helping in this way even if the other does not reciprocate my assistance."

eros (a reciprocal form of passionate love)

Example of an item: "This kind of helping for the other is different from romantic-type feelings."

altruism (helping without necessarily suffering for the other)

Example of an item: "I willingly suffered."

5. The scale needs to go beyond the romantic relationship to include any person toward whom the participant is motivated and wills to assist the other.

6. The newly developed scales should be validated cross-culturally in the United States, South America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia to show generalizability for this universal moral virtue of *agape*.

Conclusion:

Importance of *Agape* within Scientific Psychology

Agape as a research topic likely will attract thousands of researchers and many thousands of mental health professionals. Why do we say this? From both a theological and philosophical perspective, *agape* seems to be one of the most important virtues because it can lead to deep connection between and among people who willingly decide to offer this to one another. Even if it is not mutually reciprocated, *agape* can uplift others so that they have a chance to thrive. The ancient texts unambiguously present *agape* as vital. For example, the Hebrew Scriptures instruct the faithful to love God with all one's heart, soul, and strength (Deuteronomy 6:5) and to love one's neighbor as oneself (Leviticus 19:18). In the Christian New Testament, Jesus instructs that the greatest commandment is to love God above all else and second is to love one's neighbor as oneself (Matthew 22:36-40). We can see some parallels in Islam. For example, the sacrifice of love is seen in the poems of Rumi (1991), "Through love, all pain will turn to medicine" (p. 17). There are also some similarities in Buddhism with the concept of absolute (the highest of three levels) *bodhicitta*, which signifies the willingness to suffer so that others do not suffer (Dipamkara,1997). Philosophically and psychologically, it is far more demanding to love those who challenge us than to give the natural and mutual loves of *storge, eros,* and *philia*. Further, to grow in *agape* is to grow in one's humanity toward greater goodness. Confucius saw a similar path toward a higher humanity in the concept of *jen* (*ren*), which has more of an emphasis on harmony and compassionate love toward all than on suffering in particular for the other (Hung, 2017).

We hypothesize that a direct emphasis on *agape* in families, workplaces, places of worship, and schools will make for more peaceful and healthier communities. This is because the practice of such love: a) focuses more on assisting others than just the self, b) enhances respect for persons and thus possibly would lessen injustices, and c) thus may lessen the deep resentments that could possibly turn into revenge. What might happen in communities which deliberately foster the idea and practice of *agape* among most members of that community? If *agape* then becomes willingly chosen between and among persons, such self-giving mutuality, we hypothesize, will enhance individuals' psychological health and increase cooperation among members of the society. It seems that such a social experiment, the development of the *Agape* Community, has yet to be tried in any contemporary society. These are ideas in need of future scientific investigation. Research questions that could be asked once a reliable and valid *agape* scale has been constructed include these, which could be applied well beyond only romantic partnering relationships:

Do those with a higher sense of *agape* in general have higher quality relationships with fewer conflicts, including in families, workplaces, and other community settings?

Is *agape* associated with physical health? After all, if a person is less angry and has more love, this may be a protection of the cardiovascular and other bodily systems.

Does *agape* correlate with self-actualization and self-esteem? Given that a person who is highly developed in this virtue would be consciously aware of this choice, it could positively impact one's self image.

Is there convergent validity of *agape* with the other forms of love: compassionate love, storge, philia, and eros? If so, which of these others loves shows the stronger relationship with *agape* and why?

Is there convergent validity of *agape* and other moral virtues such as justice, patience, and kindness? As the expression of love requires heroism, might the quest for justice be stronger in those who are high in *agape*?

Is it possible to foster an understanding, appreciation, and self-chosen practice of *agape* through virtues education? If so, what are the results? Can measures of *agape* show improvement, along with positive psychology characteristics (such as hope and resiliency), following such interventions with elementary and secondary students?

In proposing these social scientific questions, requiring the construction of philosophically-accurate scales of *agape*, we are not calling for a reductionism in epistemology, with the false claim that the social scientific method is the major way of understanding *agape*. Instead, we would prefer to see inclusivity among philosophy, theology, and social science, including objective scales with quantitative analysis of *agape* and phenomenological scales with qualitative analyses. The intersection of all of these disciplines may deepen our understanding of *agape*.

In this work we have tried to emphasize four points: a) *agape* is an important moral virtue that is under-researched; b) as researchers begin to explore *agape*, they first should be on a firm philosophical foundation, knowing the Essence of *agape* and its Specific Differences with other moral virtues; c) this should lead both to a coherence in the definition of *agape;* and d) to accuracy in the subsequent development of research instruments which likely will be better than

if researchers strive for novelty in their definitions and measurements that are not on a firm philosophical foundation.

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