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Addressing Agape in Relation to Humanity

Obravnava agape v odnosu do človeštva

Abstract: The paper explores the Christian notion of *agape*. The main thesis examines how love for one's neighbour reflects one's comprehension of humanity and highlights the limits of our understanding of humanity. Within the Christian tradition, *agape* is portrayed as a neighbourly love that transcends the social mores or rules of conduct within a given society. In this paper, *agape* is situated in the cognitive theory of emotions and is conceived as universal human love characterized by the preparedness to acknowledge the common shared humanity of fellow human beings and the manifestation of that acknowledgement. The limits of our understanding of humanity will be illustrated through examples of epistemic injustice that demonstrate the failure to recognize someone else's humanity.

Keywords: *agape*, neighbourly love, self-love, universality of love, humanity, epistemic injustice

Povzetek: Prispevek se ukvarja s krščanskim pojmovanjem ljubezni tipa *agape*. V okviru glavne teze raziskujemo, kako ljubezen do bližnjega odraža pojmovanje človečnosti in hkrati tudi meje našega razumevanja človečnosti. Znotraj krščanske tradicije je *agape* predstavljena kot ljubezen do bližnjega, ki presega meje družbenih norm oziroma pravil vedanja znotraj določene družbe. Prispevek *agape* umešča v okvir kognitivne teorije čustev in jo razume kot univerzalno človeško ljubezen. Meje našega razumevanja človečnosti so ponazorjene s primeri, iz katerih je razvidna epistemična nepravilnost, ki izraža neuspeh v prepoznavanju človečnosti drugega.

Ključne besede: *agape*, ljubezen do bližnjega, ljubezen do sebe, univerzalnost ljubezni, človečnost, epistemična nepravilnost

1. Introduction

“One can be a brother only in something. Where there is no tie that binds men, men are not united, but merely lined up.”

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

The basic premise of our discussion affirms Dietrich von Hildebrand’s position that every positive approach to another person as a person contains an element of love (Von Hildebrand 1971). Our focal point will be the notion of *agape*, agapism, and the applicability of *agape* in a broader context that transcends religious communities and reaches society. Discussing the universality of love, the notion of solidarity, understood as “our recognition of one another’s common humanity” (Rorty 1989, 189), cannot be overlooked. The article aims to illustrate that *agape*, or universal love, enables the recognition of another’s common humanity. Solidarity is thus understood as a manifestation of that recognition, fostering a sense of belonging and mutual support among individuals. *Agape* is the Christian notion of love, which defines the relationship between God and humanity and between human beings. It is conceived as universal love, as neighbourly love is not selective and applies to every human (Wolterstorff 2015). Love toward one’s neighbour reflects one’s understanding of humanity and, borrowing from Raimond Gaita’s (2000) terminology, highlights the limits of one’s comprehension of what it means to be human. For Gaita, only (unconditional) love can recognise and affirm the intrinsic worth of every individual, a quality inherent to them by virtue of their existence. This intrinsic worth is not contingent upon external factors but exists simply by being human. In this respect, Gaita’s account of humanity closely aligns with the agapeistic belief in the intrinsic value of every human being.

Furthermore, *agape* plays a crucial role in addressing epistemic injustice. By promoting an inclusive understanding of humanity, *agape* encourages recognising and validating diverse perspectives. Situating epistemic injustice within the larger framework of social injustice, Miranda Fricker (2007) identifies testimonial and hermeneutical injustices as forms of harm inflicted on individuals’ knowledge and understanding due to prejudices and structural biases. The severity of the inflicted harm becomes evident only when it is recognised that the capacity for knowledge is a distinct human trait: “Any epistemic injustice wrongs someone in their capacity as a subject of knowledge, and thus in a capacity essential to human value.” (Fricker 2007, 5) This means that when someone experiences epistemic injustice, it affects not only their understanding but also their value as a person. A person’s inherent worth and dignity are thus compromised.

Through *agape*, we can challenge and eradicate these injustices by promoting an epistemic environment that values everyone’s perspectives and acknowledges the experiences of marginalised groups. *Agape*’s emphasis on humanity encourages us to reflect on our shared existence and the responsibilities that arise from it. It highlights how all people are interconnected and how our everyday experiences and interactions enhance our humanity.

2. *Agape* as Ethical Love Across Traditions

Christians hold that human relations are connected and dependent on religious beliefs, although the principle of neighbourly love has not always been constructed as unique to religious ethics (Outka 1976). The connection to the Golden Rule, which is neither exclusively Christian nor religious but found in some form in almost every ethical tradition, can be made (Blackburn 2001). Usually, agapism is placed within the domain of virtue ethics, even though ethicists have not shown significant interest in the ethics of love. One reason is the founding texts' religious rather than philosophical nature. This is why agapism is often presented as ethics for Christians and not as universal ethics (Wolterstorff 2015). Frankena, in his *Ethics*, places agapism within the utilitarian or deontological domains, understanding it as the rule of love from which the principle of benevolence (doing good) is derived. He argues that this principle can be justified independently of religious beliefs and can be supplemented by principles of distributive justice or equality (Frankena 1973). Outka agrees with Frankena but adds that conceiving benevolence as encouraging good actions and avoiding harm "does not exhaust what *agape* has meant for many in religious contexts" (Outka 1976, 190). Frankena's position is nevertheless essential for our present discussion, as we will defend agapism in a form acceptable to religious and non-religious individuals. According to agapism, seeking someone's good means promoting another's well-being as an end in itself.

Although *agape* highlights the universality of love as revealed in neighbourly love, the term today is mainly used in the Protestant tradition. Catholics are more inclined to use the term *caritas*, which can lead to ambiguities due to its association with charity work. Some Catholic philosophers, like Pieper, Von Hildebrand, and Ortega y Gasset, prefer the term love, aligning with other non-religious philosophers. Our discussion considers philosophers' usage of these terms with an emphasis on the universal meaning of love.

Despite the tendency for a precise, transparent term that denotes perfect love – the love of God – the evolution of its meaning, influenced by various thinkers, has been inevitable. St. Augustine brought *agape* close to Plato's love of Beauty, "which involves an erotic passion, awe, and desire that transcends earthly cares and obstacles. Aquinas, on the other hand, picked up on the Aristotelian theories of friendship and love to proclaim God as the most rational being and hence the most deserving of one's love, respect and consideration." (Moseley 2024) This inclination toward delimitation likely peaked with Nygren's severe polarisation between *agape* and *eros*, leading to irreconcilable exclusion; nowadays, the trend is toward more inclusive conceptions (Stres 2018). Agapists today incorporate various aspects of *eros* and *philia* in their philosophical or theological accounts of *agape* (Wolterstorff 2015).

3. *Agape*: From God to Human and Back to God

The literature on *agape* is abundant. The 20th century was especially marked by vivid discussions on agapism, classified as a movement called modern day agapism

(Wolterstorff 2015). Nygren, one of the most frequently cited agapists, juxtaposes agape to the Platonic conception of eros in his famous book *Agape and Eros*. In his work, he captures the essence of agape, stating: "All love that has any right to be called Agape is nothing else but an outflow from the Divine love. It has its source in God. 'God is Agape.' /.../ Agape is a love that descends freely and generously, giving of its superabundance." (Nygren 1951, 212) *Agape* is defined as spontaneous and unmotivated, meaning it is not directed toward the righteous or toward those who deserve it. It is creative in that it does not recognise the value but creates it.

Nygren's emphasis on the unmotivated and generous nature of agape, which is blind to the value of the object, is a reason for Soble (1990) to reject the concept of love in the agapeic tradition; that *agape* is not rationally comprehensible because it does not respond to the value of its object. Instead, he proposes his own account of erotic, which is reason-dependent and value-responding. He rightly presupposes that "people preferred to love, and to be loved, on the basis of attractive properties" (Soble 1990, 18). We want to be loved for a reason, worthy of love, and worthy of God's love.

The distinction Nygren made between agape and eros is unsurmountable. *Agape* is an unattainable ideal. D'Arcy made this point clear: "God is *Agape*. There is nothing human or personal /.../ nor can be on this interpretation. In the elimination of *Eros* man has been eliminated." (D'Arcy 1947, 71)

Pope Benedict XVI reconciles the tension between agape and eros in his encyclical letter "Deus Caritas Est". God's love toward us is not only giving but also searching:

"Love embraces the whole of existence in each of its dimensions, including the dimension of time. It could hardly be otherwise, since its promise looks towards its definitive goal: love looks to the eternal. Love is indeed 'ecstasy', not in the sense of a moment of intoxication, but rather as a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving." (Benedict XVI, 2005)

In line with Pieper (1997), we could sum up these various expressions in the following definition of love: "To love means to be inclined to rejoice in the perfection, in the goodness or in the happiness of another."

4. Love as an Emotion

This preliminary definition is not far away from Kant's position of love as a matter of fulfilment and not of duty – necessitation: "What is done from constraint, however, is not done from love." (Kant 1991, 203) On the one hand, Kant believes that ethical reasoning should not involve emotions because they are not controllable, as if we were passive bearers of its whims. Kant's notion of emotions is very similar to the Stoic's notion of emotions, which Nussbaum succinctly describes as: "Like

the gusts of wind or the currents of the sea, they move, and move the person, but obtusely, without vision of an object or beliefs about it.” (Nussbaum 2001, 24–25).

On the other hand, Kant believes that emotions should be strived for. How is it possible to strive for something one cannot control? This seems to be a contradiction, but Kant offers an explanation. First, he says that love is worth the struggle because it is good. Second, the fulfilment of duty towards one’s neighbour creates love: “/.../ Do good to your fellow man, and your beneficence will produce love of man in you.” (Kant 1991, 203) It is as though emotions are nevertheless predictable and, under certain circumstances, “producible”. In this case, benevolent conduct is a fertile ground for love to take place.

What, then, are emotions? The scientific community has no universally accepted definition of emotions (Scarantino and de Sousa 2021). However, we can say that they are socially constructed mental states. Emotions play a pivotal and inseparable role in a person’s life, expressing the relationship between oneself, the world, and the transcendent (Centa 2018). Today, emotions are no longer structurally opposed to reason (Scarantino and de Sousa 2021).

Nussbaum, in her analysis of emotions, comes to the following definition: emotions are “intelligent responses to the perception of value” (Nussbaum 2001, 1) and “they are often complex beliefs about an intentional object” (27–28). Emotions link us to items we consider important for our well-being but do not fully control. “The emotion records that sense of vulnerability and imperfect control.” (43) Since emotions express the value and the importance of an external object in a person’s life, they should be part of ethical reasoning. “We cannot plausibly omit them, once we acknowledge that emotions include in their content judgments that can be true or false, and good or bad guides to ethical choice.” (1)

5. Neighbourly Love, Self-Love, and Selfishness

Following the cognitive theory of emotions, love is an expression of the object’s value. Pieper developed the idea that love is the affirmation of the object and excitement over its existence with his analysis of the cheer: “How wonderful that you exist! It’s good that you exist; it’s good that you are in this world! I want you to exist!” (Pieper 1997) Therefore, the beloved one is a chosen one. All this culminates in the recognition of the value of the beloved object. However, speaking of the object’s value, the possibility of an object of no value quickly comes to mind. Pieper is aware of this and argues that preferential love reveals the universal character of love that expands toward all living beings.

Kierkegaard¹ was already aware of the problem of preferential love that contradicts neighbourly love, which is conceived as love that does not know any pre-

¹ Kierkegaard’s ethics is entirely God-oriented, and in this regard, his conception of love toward one’s neighbour is also shaped: “To love someone means to help them love God.” (Žalec 2016, 282)

ferences. Neighbourly love perceives everyone as equal – even ourselves. According to Kierkegaard, love, as a mark of eternity, is unchangeable and devoid of emotions, which are subjected to change. Therefore, there is no place for sentimentality. Kierkegaard introduces the notion of duty because only duty secures love against every change (Kierkegaard 1949). There is only one duty: to love others as we love ourselves. Kierkegaard goes as far as to impose that one should give no preference, for example, to one's spouse over one's neighbour. As though equality is attainable only if all the preferences and emotional attachments in personal relationships are abolished. Wolterstorff (2015, 36) believes that "there is something inhumane about insisting that we must so reform our natural loves that our love overall for any person is equal to that for any other". Furthermore, Cady writes that Kierkegaard's conception of love "requires that individuals voluntarily give up their social and economic superiority if they desire to love God in accordance with the Christian ideal" (Cady 1982, 253).

Kierkegaard has put so much effort into justifying his belief that all men are equal, yet he has a problem demonstrating how love manifests itself in this world. He even claims that the life of love is hidden (Kierkegaard 1949, 7) and that it is absolutely impossible to know with certainty if some deed is done out of selfless love or if there is some other hidden motive beneath it: "/.../ there is nothing, no 'thus', about which it can unconditionally be said that it unconditionally proves the presence of love, or that it unconditionally proves that the love is not present." (12) Not even the self-sacrificial aspect of love leads toward the amelioration of inequalities in the world because it is motivated by the desire to come close to God; or, as Cady (1982, 259–260) puts it: "for Kierkegaard, self-sacrificial love is not aimed at fostering human solidarity; on the contrary, self-sacrifice establishes the proper relationship between the self and God which occurs apart from connections to other humans."

One of the reasons why Kierkegaard rigorously rejects any proof of the presence of love in this world may be his suspicion that self-love is veiled in the garment of love. For Kierkegaard and many others, self-love is denoted as selfish and, therefore, ethically unacceptable or illegitimate.

The awareness of the acquisitive human condition is troublesome for many agapists. It makes it easy to fall into a trap and condemn it as selfishness. Despite the awareness of the second great commandment's affirmation of self-love as a given reality of human nature, Barth insists that love must have someone else or something else to love: "Love must always have an opposite, an object. It is only an illusion that we can be an object of love to ourselves." (Barth 1956, 388) Similarly, Frankfurt approached the issue of self-love and argued that to love anything at all, one must first love oneself. Every love is object-oriented [x loves y] (Frankfurt 2006, 86), yet the discussion on self-love remains disputable: "It is one thing to say that the agent is unable to love others without loving himself, another that loving them is simply a way of loving himself." (Outka 1976, 287)

6. *Agape* as Love for Others

The well-being of others is a prime interest of agapism. Outka (1976, 214) describes neighbourly love as follows:

Identification with the interests of another, regardless of their attractiveness or what they have to offer, and independent of the reciprocity of the relationship.

A particular sense of mutuality as shared meaning within a context of communal intelligibility.

Outka's interpretation of *agape* as a type of love that is indifferent to the value of its object and independent of reciprocity is rooted in the agapeic tradition. A similar point is made by Wolterstorff (2015, 23), who states that neighbourly love "is not about the object of love (neighbour), but a special kind of love". Following Outka, he defines *agape* as care, adding that benevolence is not an appropriate term because its contemporary meaning overlooks the requirements of justice. On the other hand, care incorporates respect for the recipient and does no wrong to anyone. "Care combines seeking to enhance someone's flourishing with seeking to secure their just treatment," but it should not be understood as merely providing for someone's needs (101). Merely thinking about or desiring a person's well-being is insufficient for it to be considered care. The success or failure of promoting a person's good is also irrelevant. It may seem strange to assert that the end result does not matter, but from a deontological perspective, this holds true. A person's effort to promote another's good may fail for two reasons: either all attempts are ineffective, or the attempts produce unwanted or even adverse effects. What matters is "acting": "Only if one actually seeks to her good or seeks her right is one caring about the person." (103) Caring is not a passive deliberation but an active engagement for the good of a person, which may not yield the anticipated results.

Wolterstorff introduces his account of care-agapism, accompanied by a set of rules that enable active concern for another's well-being while adhering to the requirements of justice. A question arises regarding the acceptability of the rules, particularly with the third rule, where Wolterstorff attempts to justify imposing evil on someone without wrongdoing them morally. Is this even possible? We believe it is not. He seems to acknowledge this, as he wrote an additional remark called the Attitudinal corollary: "One is never to take delight in imposing evil (diminution in flourishing) on someone; when necessary to do so, one is to do so with regret" (130). The confusion arises with the question of necessity. When is it necessary to impose evil? Does necessity imply moral justification? Additionally, what role does the feeling of regret play in following this rule? It certainly does not mitigate the evil done. The mere feeling of regret arises from the realisation that evil has occurred. If not anyone else, then at the very least, the evildoer experiences regret, which harms themselves (if not others) because of a guilty conscience. Thus, the diminution of flourishing is imposed on at least oneself (if not others). Agapeic love could not justify evil. It would just not be love anymore.

7. Wrongdoing, Evil and the Role of Remorse

Most ethicists and ordinary people believe that wrongfulness is a fundamental aspect of an evil action. It appears that for an action to be considered evil, it must at least be wrong. However, this perspective is, due to a variety of reasons, not universally agreed upon (Calder 2022). Some understand it merely as a “severe degree of moral condemnation” (Gaita 2004, 11). Some ethicists would like to replace it with a more general expression, free of religious connotations. Others understand it as a basic and unavoidable category that is intrinsically linked to a specific notion of goodness (11). Gaita’s conception of evil “depends on a sense of the preciousness of human life transformed by the love of saints” and “requires a conception of preciousness violated” (XXV). The word “preciousness” denotes a quality similar to “sacred” in a religious context, emphasising the importance of the saintly love that reveals the inherent worth of every human being (XXV). Only saintly love can recognise and treat those who are afflicted, such as persons with severe mental illness or the most monstrous murderers, with dignity, respect and without condescension. It is only through saintly love that their complete humanity can be affirmed. (Gaita 2000). In the Preface of *A Common Humanity*, he writes:

“Although I fully acknowledge that it is our religious tradition that has spoken most simply (and perhaps most deeply) about this when it declared that all human beings are sacred, I think that the conception of the individuality I have been articulating /.../ can stand independently of speculation about supernatural entities. What grew and was nourished in one place, I say, might take root and flourish elsewhere.” (2000, XX)

The understanding of the essence of human existence can be deepened by religious beliefs, but it does not necessarily have to rely on belief in supernatural entities. The concept of the sanctity of human life can be meaningful and applicable in various contexts.

Evil is most clearly evident in remorse, which is an unwelcome companion in human lives; for Gaita,² it is the most lucid recognition of wronging someone, though it is not the only way evil manifests. “*My God, what have I done? How could I have done it?*” Those are typical accents of remorse. They do not express an emotional reaction to what one has done, but a pained, bewildered – or perhaps better, incredulous – realisation of the full meaning of what one has done.” (Gaita 2004, XXI)

“My God, what have I done?” is a cry of pain and anxiety, a poignant expression of shameful confrontation with the profound realisation that one has caused harm to others. There are no words to console a repentant person in that moment. Nevertheless, Gaita offers a few sarcastic self-reproaches:

I have violated the social contract agreed behind the veil of ignorance.

² For further explanation of certain aspects of Gaita’s position on emotions, epistemic, and moral virtues, see Strahovnik 2016; 2018.

- I have ruined my best chances of flourishing.
- I have violated the rational nature of another.
- I have diminished the stock of happiness.
- I have violated my freely chosen principles (2000, XXI).

Gaita highlights a common flaw in major ethical theories with these cynical responses. Often rule- or principle-oriented, these theories emphasise feelings of guilt only when there is a violation of the moral code. They frequently overlook “the individual who has been wronged and who haunts the wrongdoer in his remorse” (XXIII), failing to recognise the intrinsic worth of individuals. In contrast, remorse represents a person-centred form of moral insight that reveals not just the wrongness of the act but also its impact on the intrinsic value of the affected person.

Remorse is not merely an encounter with ethical reality; it embodies the Socratic reality of evil (62). This Socratic perspective suggests that if we truly understand what evil is, we cannot commit it, as doing so would have profound consequences on our sense of self. Gaita underscores this introspective dilemma with the self-examining question: “What becomes of us when we do it?” (62). The Socratic ethical ideal, which posits that it is preferable to suffer evil than to commit it (Plato 1997, 816), closely aligns with Christian ethics, which acknowledges the potential for evil within us. We are aware of our capacity to commit evil and aspire to be free from it, unburdened by its weight. As expressed by Weil: “We are all conscious of evil within ourselves; we all have a horror of it and want to get rid of it. Outside ourselves, we perceive evil in two distinct forms: suffering and sin. But in our feeling about our own nature the distinction no longer appears, except abstractly or through reflection” (Weil 1951, 189). Weil’s acknowledgement of our potential for evil and our rejection of it resonates with Gaita’s emphasis on remorse.

The ability to recognise evil demonstrates the limits of our understanding of what it means to be a human being. Moreover, any attitude that conveys condescension lacks, in his view, the recognition of the other person’s humanity.³

8. Humanity and Epistemic Injustice

Humanity is fundamentally grounded in recognising and respecting each individual’s intrinsic worth and dignity. In this context, epistemic injustice undermines this recognition by marginalising or dismissing people’s knowledge and experiences, denying them their full human value.

Epistemic injustice is situated within the broader framework of social injustice. It concerns one group’s control, power, and dominance over another. Miranda Fricker understands social power as the capacity to control the actions of others, which can be exercised either actively or passively by specific social agents or

³ In this regard, Swanton (2010) would agree with him, as she contrasts grace (conceived as a virtue of universal love) with condescension.

structurally (Fricker 2007, 13). Every instance of epistemic injustice wrongs someone in their capacity as a knower and, consequently, in a capacity that is essential to their human worth (5). Essentially, it is an injustice done to someone explicitly based on their ability as a knower or informant (1). Epistemic injustice degrades and deprives a person of dignity, which can be understood as dehumanisation. Therefore, addressing the issue of epistemic injustice is primarily an ethical and only secondarily a political problem (8).

Fricker distinguishes between testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when testimony is not accepted as credible due to the listener's prejudice against the speaker. Fricker provides an example of racism in the police force, where a black person's testimony is dismissed due to their skin colour. On the other hand, hermeneutical injustice occurs when someone is unfairly disadvantaged due to gaps in collective interpretive resources, which impede the understanding of certain social experiences. This form of injustice relates to how people interpret their lives. Fricker cites the example of a woman experiencing sexual harassment in a culture that lacks a concept for it (Fricker 2007, 1). The victim suffers from something she cannot articulate.⁴

Jose Medina (2013) emphasises the importance of collective resistance against epistemic injustice, advocating for a community-driven approach that amplifies marginalised voices. Regarding Fricker's (2007, 159) account of a purely structural notion of hermeneutical injustice that entails no culprit, he strongly disagrees and highlights the importance of individuals accepting collective epistemic responsibility.

One notable example of not only hermeneutical injustice but also of hermeneutical heroism⁵ is provided by Gaita (2000), who recounts his experience as a young man in the early 1960s working in a psychiatric hospital. The arrival of a nun and her behaviour toward the psychiatric patients not only profoundly moved him but also influenced his perspective on humanity. Some of the patients there were incurable and had lost everything that gives life meaning. Their nearest family members had not visited them for years. The medical personnel often treated them brutally. Only a few psychiatrists strived to improve patients' conditions, appealing to the inalienable dignity of those patients. He admired these doctors, who were considered naïve and foolish in the eyes of their colleagues. That perception changed with the arrival of a nun in the ward:

"In her middle years, only her vivacity made an impression on me until she talked to the patients. Then everything in her demeanour towards them – the way she spoke to them, her facial expressions, the inflexions of her

⁴ Strahovnik (2018) provides an example from Slovenia after the WWII, where the killings and prosecutions prevented the victims and their relatives from being heard or expressing their experiences. These victims were, to some extent, "hermeneutically marginalised" – "that is, they participate unequally in the practices through which social meanings are generated" (Fricker 2007, 6).

⁵ Medina speaks of the importance of hermeneutical heroes as "extremely courageous speakers and listeners who defy well-entrenched communicative expectations and dominant hermeneutical perspectives, and against all odds are lucky enough to change (or at least disrupt) hermeneutical trends as to make room for new meanings and interpretative practices" (Medina 2012, 111).

body – contrasted with and showed up the behaviour of those noble psychiatrists. She showed that they were, despite their best efforts, condescending, as I too had been. She thereby revealed that even such patients were, as the psychiatrists and I had sincerely and generously professed, the equals of those who wanted to help them; but she also revealed that in our hearts we did not believe this.” (Gaita 2000, 18–19)

The nun’s behaviour, which showed no trace of superiority or contempt, revealed that despite their best efforts, Gaita’s and his colleagues’ attitudes toward the patients were corrupted by condescension. There is no place for condescension in genuine human kindness, care, or other forms of love.

Gaita does not know whether the fact that she was a nun was of any importance. What was essential for him was her behaviour – love is the only behaviour that has “the power to reveal the true humanity of those whose affliction had made their humanity invisible” (20). Her loving disposition enabled her to acknowledge their humanity, challenging the prevailing epistemic injustices arising from stereotypes and prejudices. This example shows how *agape* can counteract epistemic injustices and encourage an environment where marginalised voices are validated and respected.

Given that we have mentioned the inability to recognise and acknowledge the humanity of another, let us consider an extreme with the following example, which Gaita uses to illustrate the limits of our understanding of humanity – the case of Eichmann in Jerusalem. Could anybody recognise the humanity of a person guilty of committing a crime against humanity? Gaita is convinced that only saintly love could achieve this. Regardless of the repulsiveness of the thought, recognising Eichmann’s humanity does not diminish the horrors of his actions. This understanding forces us to confront uncomfortable truths about our capacities for moral failure. On the other hand, Gaita wants to assert that the valuation of human preciousness is based on the human ability to bond and is, therefore, only possible if solidarity and compassion are already present in the human community.

9. Universality of Love and the Freedom of Choice

Gaita highlights the fallacy of the major ethical theories. Should they, therefore, be rejected, rearranged, or replaced by a different ethical theory? Ivan Illich offers an interesting perspective on the topic of love in his refusal to be ethically bound by duty. He criticises any attempt to use power, even for socially justifiable reasons, to arrange social relations according to the idea of a good society. In his view, a duty toward one’s neighbour disables the possibility of an ever surprising and personal encounter with another human being. He delivers his exegesis of the Parable of the Good Samaritan to epitomise his account.

The story originates from the New Testament, where the Pharisees come to Jesus to ask him the following question: “Who is my neighbour?” He answered

them with the well-known Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). A man is travelling down Jericho and gets robbed on the way. He lies, beaten, at the side of the road. A priest comes by, and a Levite comes by as well. They both see him, but they cross to the other side of the road and continue on their way. Then comes a Samaritan, an outsider, a stranger, and, even worse, an enemy. He sees the wounded man, takes pity on him, cares for his wounds and brings him to an inn. After finishing his story, Jesus asked the listeners: "Who do you think was a neighbour to the wounded man?" They replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Illich would respond, "The one who chose to be his neighbour."

A typical interpretation is far removed from the freedom of choice. Swanton, for example, claims that "if an enemy or a criminal lies bleeding at one's doorstep, a virtue of universal love (basic human kindness or charity) requires that one come to his aid and not, out of malice, hatred, indifference, or callousness, leave him there bleeding" (Swanton 2010, 156). Illich would likely agree that helping a bleeding person is an act of kindness or charity, but he would not want to regulate it, as it would lack the spontaneous, free, and personal interplay between people. That is why he offers a new perspective on the story: "My neighbour is who I choose, not who I have to choose. There is no way of categorizing who my neighbour ought to be." (Cayley 2005, 81) What is Illich willing to say is that "ought" can be understood only as an invitation. Nothing can guarantee that we will respond to the invitation. Not even strict regulation can ensure we will not look away and neglect our "duty".

The analysis shows that the meaning of the concept of love is not determinately given but is a subject of constant transformation. The aspects of different kinds of love, such as romantic, paternal, and neighbourly love, are embodied in *agape*. Its many layers enable each transformation to highlight the different characteristics. *Agape*, or universal love, fundamentally recognises another human being's worth and dignity. Gaita demonstrated that some quality in the object of love must be recognised as common humanity to be acknowledged. Therefore, we could say that *agape* or universal love is a) a preparedness (in Swanton's meaning of the notion) to acknowledge the shared humanity of another human being and b) a manifestation of that acknowledgement. This acknowledgement (be it care or benevolence) should not be withdrawn based on other merits (such as virtue, attractiveness, or affection) or the lack thereof in the object of love.

10. Conclusion

The notion of *agape* is understood as universal human love. Comparing *agape* with *eros* and *philia* demonstrates that *agape* does not exclude but encompasses all dimensions of human existence and should not be limited to a framework of God's love for humanity. One of the significant issues with the selfless nature of *agape* is its relationship with self-love, as addressed in the *Great Commandment*. There are theologians, such as Barth (1956), who find self-love unacceptable, whi-

le others, like Kierkegaard (1949), justify it within the context of human equality. Frankfurt (2006) argues that self-love should be seen as a fundamental condition for the capacity to love others.

Though agapists generally agree that *agape* should be understood as universal human love, they differ in their definition. Swanton (2010) defines universal love as a) a preparedness to be beneficent and b) the actual manifestation of beneficence. Wolterstorff (2015), on the other hand, defines *agape* as care – an active concern for the well-being of another person, which also considers the demands of justice. He approaches the ethics of love from a deontological perspective, which Gaita (2000) criticises, along with other major ethical theories, for neglecting the notion of remorse in their accounts. Illich (2010; Cayley, 1992) takes a different approach: he rejects the rules that impose obligations and emphasises the essential element of love – freedom. According to his perspective, the perversion of the rules is evident in Wolterstorff's justification of evil, which is argued to be unjustifiable. Evil is viewed as an unavoidable possibility or unwanted outcome in relationships. Illich also discusses vulnerability, noting that the other may not respond to a call or accept an invitation to connect with a stranger. Similarly, Cordner highlights the importance of vulnerability in genuine respect for others: "No attitude of mine can count as genuine respect for another unless I am potentially vulnerable before him or her in certain ways." (Cordner 2002, 158) In Gaita's view, the relationship with a stranger can be understood as an inability to recognise and acknowledge shared humanity, which can be placed in a broader context and serve as an example of epistemic injustice, as extensively discussed by Fricker.

The article discussed *agape* as ethical love, not merely as a personal virtue capable of transcending the impersonal levels of ethical theories but also as a concept that extends beyond individual morality to actively participate in shaping and transforming society.

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