

## Articles

### THE LOVE RACKET: DEFINING LOVE AND *AGAPE* FOR THE LOVE-AND-SCIENCE RESEARCH PROGRAM

by Thomas Jay Oord

*Abstract.* Scholars of religion and science have generated remarkable scholarship in recent years in their explorations of love. Exactly how scholars involved in this budding field believe that love and science should relate and/or be integrated varies greatly. What they share in common is the belief that issues of love are of paramount importance and that the various scientific disciplines—whether natural, social, or religious—must be brought to bear upon how best to understand love. I briefly introduce the emergence of the love-and-science research program and note that scholars have not done well defining what they mean by love. I suggest that the present surge in love scholarship will fail to produce the positive results that it otherwise might if love is not defined well. I provide and defend a definition of love adequate for those doing love-and-science research: To love is to act intentionally, in sympathetic response to others (including God), to promote well-being. To explain better what this simple definition entails, I explore its three main phrases. Love is said to have many forms, but *agape* is the form to which the love-and-science literature most commonly refers. I comment briefly on the debates about how to best understand *agape*, noting sixteen different definitions proposed by major scholars. I identify weaknesses in many of them and then offer what I argue is a more adequate definition of *agape* as intentional response to promote well-being when confronted by that which generates ill-being. In short, *agape* repays evil with good. While research on love and science requires much more than adequate definitions, I believe that the definitions I proffer can prove useful in furthering the love-and-science research program.

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In 1974, the National Science Foundation awarded Ellen Berscheid and a colleague an \$84,000 research grant to answer better the question, "What is love?" Berscheid had persuaded the foundation to award the money in part by arguing, "We already understand the mating habits of the stickleback fish. It is time to turn to a new species." The species she had in mind was human.

Berscheid's research results may have gone unnoticed if not for the response of Wisconsin Senator William Proxmire. "I'm strongly against this," exclaimed Proxmire, "not only because no one—not even the National Science Foundation—can argue that falling in love is a science; not only because I am sure that even if they spend 84 million or 84 billion they wouldn't get an answer that anyone would believe. I'm also against it because I don't *want* to know the answer!" (Hatfield and Walster 1978, viii)

Proxmire presented Berscheid with the first of his "Golden Fleece" awards. He bestowed the award to this project because he considered the study of love a supreme example of wasteful government spending. His advice to those who funded the grant was simple: "National Science Foundation, get out of the love racket!"

The love *racket*? I find it difficult to think of a better use of money than the study of how well-being might be promoted. Is there any study potentially more worthwhile than the study of love?

A few came to Berscheid's defense in 1974, including *New York Times* writer James Reston, who replied that funding grants to study love "would be the best investment of federal money since Jefferson made the Louisiana Purchase" (Hatfield and Walster 1978, viii). Apparently Reston's retort fell on deaf ears, however, because financial resources for the study of love remained meager. Few scholars would assume the label "love researcher" for decades after the incident.

The idea that scientists ought to study love found perhaps its strongest twentieth-century voice in Pitirim A. Sorokin, the man many consider the father of modern sociology. Sorokin initially came to his convictions about the importance of love studies when jailed as a Russian political prisoner in the century's early decades.

After escaping prison, Sorokin immigrated to the United States in the early 1920s. He taught as sociologist at the University of Minnesota and eventually accepted a professorship at Harvard University. In 1949, Soro-

kin founded the Harvard Research Center in Creative Altruism with the financial help of Eli Lilly and the Lilly Endowment.

Sorokin's major publishing contribution to love research was *The Ways and Power of Love: Types, Factors, and Techniques of Moral Transformation* ([1954] 2002). In the volume's preface he defends the importance of studying love:

At the present juncture of human history an increase in our knowledge of the grace of love has become the paramount need of humanity, and an intensive research in this field should take precedence over almost all other studies and research. . . . Considering the immensity of this task, [my] contribution is very modest in comparison with the total sum of the necessary studies. Since, however, the better brains are busy with other problems, including the invention of means of extermination of human beings . . . [and] many a religious leader is absorbed in the intertribal crusades against various enemies—under these conditions somebody, somehow, must devote himself to a study of the miracle of love. (p. xii)

Throughout the book Sorokin offers insights into the power of love, suggestions about how love research might be done, and uncannily accurate predictions about what would occur should society neglect the study of love.

Sorokin's research on love faded by the end of the 1950s as he retired from teaching and his research center ran out of funding. Although his own contribution to the study of love was exemplary, he inspired no immediate followers to carry his research mantle.<sup>1</sup> Organized research on love from a perspective that integrated science, religion, and philosophy all but vanished for almost five decades.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, organized research on love re-emerged. With funding from the John E. Fetzer Institute and the John Templeton Foundation, biologists, ethicists, sociologists, theologians, psychologists, neurologists, philosophers, and medical caregivers conferred at an MIT conference titled "Empathy, Altruism, and Agape." Of course, a few scholars of various sorts had been researching and writing about love independently for decades prior to this conference. But for the first time, scholars from widely diverse disciplines deliberated together on issues and challenges that arise when studying love.

One among many outcomes of the conference was the establishment in 2001 of the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love. Stephen G. Post, professor of bioethics at the School of Medicine, Case Western Reserve University, was named the institute's president, and the John Templeton Foundation provided multimillion-dollar funding.

Post set several goals for the fledgling institute. He pledged to (1) fund high-level scientific research on altruism and unlimited love, (2) sustain a dialogue between science and religion on love's meaning and significance, (3) disseminate true stories of love as it manifests in the helping behaviors of those whose lives are devoted to serving others, and (4) enhance the

practical manifestations of love across the full spectrum of human experience (Post 2003, vii).

The label “Unlimited Love” in the title of Post’s organization has become a source of curiosity for many. It refers to three related ideas. First and foremost, unlimited love refers to the promotion of well-being for all others in an enduring, intense, effective, and pure manner. “The ultimate expression of love is love for all humanity,” says Post, “and for all that is” (2003, 16). Love should be expressed to those who are near and dear and to those who are enemies as well as to the cognitively and physically impaired. Nothing exists beyond the limits of this love. Unlimited love refers, second, to a hidden reality or energy that underlies all that is good in the universe. Post sometimes calls this energy the “ultimate environment” (p. 72). This environment provides integration, meaning, and purpose to life. Finally, unlimited love refers to divine benevolence. “Unlimited Love is God’s love for us all,” says Post. It is “the ultimate reality that underlies all that is, and which can transform our limited and broken lives into journeys of remarkable generous service” (p. 11).

Research supported by the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love, the Fetzer Institute, and various smaller programs has generated remarkable scholarship in recent years as scholars of religion and science explore love. I call this emergent field of scholarship the love-and-science symbiosis (Oord 2004b). Exactly how scholars involved in this budding field believe that love and science should relate and/or be integrated varies greatly. What they share in common is the belief that issues of love are of paramount importance and that the various scientific disciplines, whether natural, social, or religious, must be brought to bear upon how best to understand love.

The love research program involves the core belief that the world can, all things considered, be made better in some ways. Efforts ought to be made to promote well-being. Individuals who express these loving actions consistently develop the kind of virtues that characterize what we call saints, sages, or mentors. We should imitate these individuals. Communities and societies that in varying ways support this love should be supported and replicated. In many and diverse ways, we must study how we might express love.

#### DEFINING LOVE

Virtually all people act, and often talk, as if they have some inkling about love. We speak about loving food, falling in love, loving God, feeling loved, and loving a type of music. We say that love hurts, love waits, love stinks, and love means never having to say you’re sorry. We use the word and its derivatives in a wide variety of ways. The fact that people talk of love in such varied ways prompted Sigmund Freud to note that “‘love’ is

employed in language” in an “undifferentiated way” (1994, 49). Theologian Mildred Bangs Wynkoop concurs, saying that love is an ambiguous, multifarious “weasel-word” (1972, 9).

Although we talk about love often, few of us spell out what we really mean by the word. It may be that resources for love research have been scanty and researchers generally have been reluctant to pursue love studies in part because so few of us have given time and energy to provide an adequate definition of love. Why focus one’s scholarship upon or financially support something vague, bewildering, and unspecified?

Sometimes in reflective moments we wonder what love actually is. Is love a decision or a feeling? blind or universally aware? sexual, nonsexual, or asexual? self-sacrificial or self-authenticating? unconditional or object-specific? Is love best understood as *agape*, *eros*, *philia*, something else, or all of these and more? Is love something only God expresses, or are creatures capable of loving? In the final analysis, can we comprehend anything about love?

Judging by the literature, even scholars find defining love difficult. “Even those who write best about love,” noted Jules Toner, “devote very little space to considering what love is” (1968, 8). The dearth of definitions prompts theologian Edward Vacek to observe that “most philosophical and theological writing, when it speaks of ‘love,’ does not analyze what love is, but rather assumes it has an evident meaning” (1994, 34). Irving Singer argues that “the analysis of love has been neglected more than almost any other subject in philosophy” (1987, xi).

Many who consider love abandon any attempt to provide a normative definition. They rest content instead in simply trying to figure out what love means given the context, or language game, in which it is used. But this practice leaves central assumptions about the nature of love unacknowledged, which in turn leads to incoherence and further ambiguity. Confusion reigns.

At present, a small but growing number of scholars are offering hypotheses pertaining to love as it relates to their particular fields of inquiry. For instance, neuroscientists suggest that specific brain regions must function for creatures to be able to express love. Biologists explore the social interaction of species and suggest hypotheses about the altruistic or egoistic motivations and/or impetuses behind such interaction. Religious scholars in the theistic traditions suggest hypotheses and creeds about divine action as these pertain to love. And a few philosophers classify various types of love according to their motivations and/or objects.

If scholars and researchers fail to define love clearly, however, the present surge in the study of love will fail to produce the positive results that it otherwise might. At present, the love-and-science research often proceeds without a clear definition of love. At a recent love-and-science research conference, none of the granted projects offered a clear concept of love,

and one researcher scorned the idea that an agreed-upon definition might be helpful. When we are not clear about what love is, however, it becomes difficult to judge the value or contribution of any particular investigation of love. And if widely divergent definitions of love are employed, it is difficult to compare the theories and research of one discipline with another.

In light of this, I want to provide and defend a definition of love adequate for those doing research in the love-and-science symbiosis. My own definition of love is this:

*To love is to act intentionally, in sympathetic response to others (including God), to promote well-being.*

To say the same thing differently, loving actions are influenced by the previous actions of others, oneself, and God, and these actions are executed in the hope of encouraging flourishing.<sup>2</sup> To explain better what this simple definition entails, I explore its three main phrases.

... *to act intentionally.* The word *intentionally* refers to three aspects of love: deliberateness, motive, and self-determination. With regard to deliberateness, I mean that love involves a decisional aspect. This decisional aspect need not entail long and drawn-out contemplation; we often express love based upon split-second decisions. But a degree of mentality accompanies action that we should regard as loving. The decisional aspect also does not mean that those who endeavor to love repeatedly step back to survey the widest range of possible alternatives before deciding the best action to take. While lovers occasionally reflect on an array of options, they most often deliberate between the few options of which they are immediately aware. And one or more of those options may seem much more compelling than others.

This decisional aspect in my definition of love opposes the idea that a person loves when, by coincidence, a positive outcome results from that person's actions. It opposes the idea that actions done without any judgment whatsoever, even when those actions result in good, should be regarded as loving. Of course, the good that results from unconscious or inadvertent activity is still valuable, but I reserve the label *loving action* for deeds *purposefully* done to promote well-being.

With regard to the motive aspect of acting intentionally, I mean that we should not say that a person has acted lovingly when a positive outcome results from actions that the actor meant for harm.<sup>3</sup> Motives matter, even though actions done with good motives can sometimes produce ill-being and actions done with evil motives can inadvertently produce well-being. In emphasizing the importance of motives, I am rejecting consequentialist theories that judge actions as good or evil solely by their consequences. Love as I understand it assesses prospectively what actions promise to do rather than retrospectively which actions actually yielded the greatest good.

Admittedly, being certain of another individual's motives may be impossible, and discerning one's own true motives can sometimes be difficult. Only the ideal observer who knows all that can be known can accurately adjudicate motives. While more should be said about such an observer, the weight of scientific research on love does not depend on our flawless discernment of motives. I am simply claiming that love requires good motives so as to remind us of what seems obvious: actions done with wrong motives should not be considered acts of love.

Third, I use the phrase *to act intentionally* to account for the self-determination inherent in love. Love is meaningless if individuals are not free to choose one action rather than others. To be free is to make choices that are not entirely dependent upon external conditions that make it the case that one cannot do otherwise. Coercion, in the sense of unilateral determination, is antithetical to love.

Freedom does not, however, involve total spontaneity and completely random choice. Rather, concrete circumstances limit what is genuinely possible as options for action. Theologian Daniel Day Williams put it well when he said that "freedom is never absent from love, neither is it ever unconditional freedom" (1968, 116). Freedom to love includes being impelled to choose between a limited number of possibilities that pertain to the chooser's immediate context. I call this limited freedom.

To call love an action is not to claim that love is always an imposition or intervention into the affairs of others. Sometimes love entails acting in ways that do not greatly influence others. Nor is calling love an action a claim that acts of love are always demonstrable deeds perceptible to our five senses. Thinking and praying, for instance, can be acts of love. I use the word *act* to cover a broad range of activities, both seen and unseen.

Many factors influence one's perception of and reflection upon objects in the world. I suppose that these factors influence but do not entirely determine intentional actions. For instance, one's bodily characteristics, emotions, neural substrates, hormonal constitution, genetic framework, and other factors influence greatly but do not entirely control one's intentional actions. Environmental dynamics beyond the lover's own body, such as political, communal, and ecological relationships, also greatly shape intentional activity. The vast majority of recent scientific research strengthens the claim that the forms of love possible for any individual are partly dependent upon physical and emotional factors both within and beyond a lover's body.

*. . . in sympathetic response to others (including God).* Love requires actual relations with others. Entirely isolated individuals, if such existed, could not love. To say that love involves sympathetic response is to presuppose that individuals are mutually influencing. It is to assume that others—whether those others are people, nonhumans, one's own past actions, or God—have influenced the one who loves.

I use *sympathy* in my definition of love as a technical word to refer to the internal, constituting influence of one or more objects or individuals upon the loving actor. Many twentieth-century philosophers use the word in this way.<sup>4</sup>

I should note that in some disciplines, what I have described as sympathy—feeling with—is instead called empathy. In these disciplines, sympathy carries overtones of pity and condescension rather than feeling the feelings of others. For instance, sociologists Pearl and Samuel Oliner suggest that sympathy “means pity or commiseration *for* another’s condition.” It implies looking at another person “at a distance.” According to the Oliners, “empathy means feeling *with* the other person” (1995, 32).

In congruence with my use of sympathy, however, social psychologist L. G. Wispe suggests that “sympathy refers to the heightened awareness of the suffering of another person.” Wispe argues that “empathy, on the other hand, refers to the attempt by one self-aware self to comprehend unjudgmentally the positive and negative experiences of another self” (1986, 318).

My use of sympathy is not meant to be equated with looking at the other from afar. Rather, to sympathize is to be internally influenced by the other such that one’s own experience is partially constituted by the other. One’s sympathetic response to others entails reaction to what has occurred in both the immediate and distant past. The one who loves is internally related to what has happened in the past, as past actions influence that individual’s moment-by-moment identity as a lover. The actions of those in the present will influence those who arise in the future. The interdependence of sympathy, in this sense of the word, is essential to what it means to love.<sup>5</sup>

Just as one’s intentional actions are influenced by many factors, many factors also influence the nature of one’s sympathetic response. Our sympathies to our environment are partly dependent upon the makeup of our brains, bodies, and causes beyond ourselves. Just as bodily and environmental factors greatly shape our intentions, these same factors also greatly shape our sympathetic responses. This shaping is discussed frequently in contemporary discussions of emotions, biological constraints, and affect.

An important feature of the phrase *in sympathetic response to others (including God)* is the parenthetical acknowledgment of divine influence. A full explanation of the causal role that God plays is beyond the scope of this essay. Here I simply note that I consider God an actual, causal agent to whose noncoercive inspiration, or “call,” creatures respond appropriately when expressing love (see Stone and Oord 2001, chap. 9).

The phrases of my love definition we have explored thus far, *to act intentionally* and *in sympathetic response*, reflect the two dominant ways philosophers, theologians, scientists, and poets throughout history have thought about the nature of love. Robert Hazo in his classic study *The Idea of Love* (1967) refers to these two ways as “tendency” and “judgment.”

Those who understand love primarily or exclusively as tendency identify love with feeling or emotion. They use words like *instinct* and *impulse* when referring to love. Lovers might say that they “fell in love,” that they feel as though they have been “overwhelmed by love,” or that some object or person is “just *so* lovable.” Neurologist Antonio Damasio (2003) argues eloquently for this understanding of love today, and he follows a line of argumentation that philosopher Baruch Spinoza proposed centuries ago.

Those who understand love primarily or exclusively as judgment typically use the words *will*, *choice*, or *cognition* when talking about love. Love is a decision, they say, and we must choose to love no matter what emotions we feel. Reflecting the idea that love is a matter of the will, psychologists Robert Hemfelt, Frank Minirth, and Paul Meier title their bestselling book *Love is a Choice* (1996). They argue that we must choose to break free from addictive or unhealthy codependent relationships if we are to love as we ought.

After examining a wide variety of philosophical, theological, and scientific literature, Hazo concludes that “the division between the sphere or order of tendency and the sphere or order of judgment is the most basic in the literature.” In fact, he argues, “All of the critical notions and terms we use in dealing with theories of love fall under one or the other of these two headings” (1967, 11).

My own definition of love is apparently unlike the love theories and definitions with which Hazo deals. I define love as necessarily involving both spheres, tendential and judgmental, or, as I put it, sympathetic and intentional. Love has both a passive and an active element.

As I see it, sympathetic feeling logically precedes decisional intentionality. But both sympathy and intentionality are present in a single responsive act of love. Martha Nussbaum (2001) gets at this when she argues that emotions are essential elements of human intelligence and choice when humans love. I argue that an act of love logically begins with an individual’s feeling of being influenced by past actualities and the relevant possibilities arising from that past. The love act is consummated, however, by the lover’s decision about exactly how that past will be appropriated in light of expected contribution to the future.<sup>6</sup> My definition is consonant with Post’s proposal: “An even balance or co-primacy between emotion and reason is the fitting alternative to those who would diminish the importance of either capacity” (2003, 67). In sum, an act of love requires both sympathy and intentionality.

... *to promote well-being.* The emphasis on promoting well-being requires an explanation of what well-being entails. It is related to health, happiness, wholeness, and flourishing. Aristotle called it *eudaimonia*. Theistic traditions have sometimes used *blessedness* when speaking of well-being. Moral philosopher James Griffin succinctly defines well-being as “the level to which basic needs are met” (1986, 42).

Promoting well-being involves enhancing mental and physical aspects. It may involve acting to secure sufficient food, clean air and water, adequate clothing and living conditions, personal security, and opportunity for intellectual development. It may involve attaining the satisfaction of being cared for and sense of belonging, diversity of life forms and cultural expressions, appropriate level of leisure and entertainment, and economic stability. Promoting well-being may involve acting responsively to secure a feeling of worth, medical soundness and physical fitness, deep personal relationships, social and political harmony, and the opportunity to develop spiritual/religious sensibilities and practices. Acting responsively to increase well-being may involve acting in ways that develop the actor into a person with virtuous dispositions, habits, and character.

To act for well-being is to act to increase flourishing in at least one but often many of these dimensions of existence. Love takes into account, to varying degrees, the life of the individual, local community, and global community. As far as they apply, acting to promote well-being includes considering the flourishing of nonhuman organisms and ecological systems. It even includes increasing God's own happiness. In all of this, an act of love maximizes well-being.

Part of the reason that defining love can be so difficult is that at least three different linguistic traditions influence our love vocabulary. I call these (1) the proper/improper tradition, (2) the mutuality tradition, and (3) the *hesed* tradition.

What I call the proper/improper love linguistic tradition, identified initially with the ancient Greeks, has primarily affected the way that Westerners use the word *love*. We see its influence in the earliest Western philosophers, the Christian New Testament, the Qur'an, and common language use. What is distinctive about the proper/improper linguistic tradition is that in it *love* describes any purposive action whatsoever. Philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas, who was greatly influenced by Aristotle's work, expresses the proper/improper tradition's understanding of love well when he argues that "every agent, whatever it be, does every action from love of some kind" (1981, Part I-II, Q.28 Art. 6). We see it in Augustine's famous directive "Love, but see to it what you love" (1961, 90:31:5). In short, merely to act intentionally, according to this linguistic tradition, is to love.

When someone from the proper/improper tradition speaks of love, a qualifier of some sort typically is employed. An adjective such as proper or improper, perfect or imperfect, appropriate or inappropriate, fitting or unfitting precedes the word *love*. Saints love properly; sinners love improperly. *Love* requires a qualifier if laden with moral connotations, because by itself it can refer to action that is either good or evil.

We often find the second linguistic tradition, the mutuality one, in the philosophies of the East, and it is more evident in the West's amorous

literature. According to the mutuality tradition, to love is to engage in personal interaction. The reciprocity and mutuality inherent in such relationships is itself love. For instance, contemporary theologian Vincent Brummer calls love “a reciprocal relation,” and he claims that love “must by its very nature be a relationship of free mutual give and take” (1993, 161–62). Wherever we see reciprocal relationships, says the mutuality tradition, love is present. To be related is to love.

I find unhelpful the way *love* is used in both the mutuality and the proper/improper linguistic traditions. Although the mutuality tradition rightly emphasizes the importance of relationships, few of us, myself included, would describe *all* relationships as loving. Some relationships generate evil. While the proper/improper tradition rightly emphasizes the idea that love is an action, it strikes most people, myself included, as odd to talk of improper love, inappropriate love, inauthentic love, or even—as would be justified in the proper/improper tradition—evil love. While we can make some sense out of what a speaker means when using *love* in these ways, such uses tend to confuse.

In my love definition, the phrase *to promote well-being* places my understanding of how we best use the word *love* in the third linguistic tradition, what I call the *hesed* tradition. The word *hesed* derives from Judaism, and we find it often translated in Hebrew scriptures as “steadfast love.” In this linguistic tradition, the word *love* is reserved for descriptions of ideal ethical actions, or what the Hebrew authors called *righteousness*. Such loving actions promote well-being. When I use the word *love*, therefore, I follow the practice of the *hesed* tradition and mean action that engenders well-being.

To speak of well-being is to implicate many versions of metaethics and moral theory. As is appropriate, ethicists, theologians, and moral philosophers debate the value of a variety of ethical theories when deciding how to best understand morality and the pursuit of well-being. I mean for my definition of love to fit comfortably within most of the dominant metaethical frameworks. Advocates of these differing theories may find my definition helpful even as they employ it in differing ways. For instance, advocates of feminist ethics will undoubtedly appreciate the central role of relational sympathy/empathy in my definition of love. Advocates of divine command ethics may find my reference to divine action helpful as they consider love as response to God’s will.<sup>7</sup> Those who propose various ethics of care theories should find helpful my emphasis upon relationality and response for love. Advocates of metaethical theories such as natural-law ethics, virtue ethics, and Kantianism, among others, may find this definition helpful in various ways for their own deliberations.

To be both adequate to a wide range of specific activities that should rightly be regarded as loving and also fruitful for a wide variety of metaethical theories, an acceptable definition of love must be sufficiently

abstract. A helpful abstraction should not be so general as to allow for any action or theory, but it must be able to account for those actions that, after careful reflection, we justifiably deem loving while excluding those actions that we justifiably deem unloving.

#### DEFINING *AGAPE*

The fifteenth-century French philosopher François de La Rochefoucauld wisely said, “There is only one kind of love, but there are a thousand different versions.” Today we might say that love has millions, billions, even trillions of versions. Love is pluralistic in the sense that many actions, depending on their motives and circumstances, can be acts of love. In thinking about how best to understand love in light of the recent interest in scientific research on the subject, it seems wise to consider love’s “versions.” It has become increasingly common to place the versions of love under three general forms: *agape*, *eros*, and *philia*.<sup>8</sup> I want to look closely at one of these versions—*agape*.

By far, *agape* is the form of love to which the love-and-science symbiosis literature most commonly refers. Philip Hefner, for instance, argues that “the theological elaboration of *agape* should not shy away from identifying it with altruism,” which means in part that “the most pressing question that arises in conversation with the sciences is . . . Can we entertain the hypothesis that altruistic love is rooted in the fundamental nature of reality, including the reality we call nature?” (1993, 208–9) Post also often employs the word *agape* as he oversees scientific and religious investigations sponsored by the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love.

Those who use the word *agape* believe that it entails meanings and connotations beyond what the simple word *love* entails. Many apparently adopt *agape* as a way to distinguish their theories of love from romantic or popular understandings. Some adopt *agape* because it entails for them special reference to divine action. And scholars frequently use *agape* to distinguish some actions from others that might also promote well-being.

Widespread contemporary use of *agape* should be credited to the influential writings of theologian Anders Nygren, although the word itself dates to antiquity. Nygren’s mid-twentieth-century book, *Agape and Eros* [1930] (1957), set off wide-ranging debate in its time. That debate placed the word at the center of attention in love scholarship. Nygren “so effectively posed issues about love,” ethicist Gene Outka claimed more than thirty years ago, “that they have had a prominence in theology and ethics they never had before. . . . Thus, whatever the reader may think of it, one may justifiably regard his work as the beginning of the modern treatment of the subject” (1972, 1). More recently, Vacek acknowledged that Nygren’s “insights are splendid, his mistakes are instructive, and his views are still very much alive” (1994, 159). Colin Grant, a contemporary advocate of Nygren’s general *agape* scheme, calls Nygren’s altruistic *agape* “indispensable,” say-

ing that he “deserves to be heard clearly in his insistence on the distinctively theological significance of *agape*” (1996, 21).<sup>9</sup>

Despite the objections that Nygren’s critics raise and despite the diverse meanings of *agape* in Christian scripture, many contemporary scholars—excluding biblical researchers—consider this love word to have privileged status or unique meaning. Those aligned with the Christian tradition are especially prone to afford *agape* such high honor. The meanings that scholars afford *agape*, however, vary greatly. Here are examples of this great variety: *Agape* is . . .

- to act “for the sake of the beloved” (Vacek 1993, 157).<sup>10</sup>
- “equal regard” or “the attribution to everyone alike of an irreducible worth and dignity” (Outka 1972, 9, 260).
- self-sacrifice (Niebuhr 1964, 82).
- “God giving himself” or “divine bestowal” (Singer 1987, 269).
- “the principle of benevolence, that is, of doing good” (Frankena 1989, 44).
- “the overriding, unconditional claim of God’s utterly gracious yet utterly demanding rule of righteous love” (Robinson 1964, 12).
- “x loves y independently of y’s merit, and any merit of y’s that plays a role in x’s love is value that x attributes to or creates in y as a result of x’s love” (Soble 1989, xxiv).
- “understanding, redeeming good will for all men” (King 1986, 19).
- “simple yet profound recognition of the worthiness of and goodness in persons” (Brady 2003, 268).
- “self-giving” or “a person’s spending himself freely and carelessly for the other person” (Fiddes 1988, 170).
- “unconditional willing of the good” (Jackson 1999, 15).<sup>11</sup>
- “identification with the neighbor and meeting his needs” (Williams 1968, 262).
- “self-less altruism” (Martin 1996, 14).
- “letting-be” (Macquarrie 1977, 349).
- “ordinary human affection and compassion” (Cupitt 1988, 57).
- “[a representation of] the divine extravagance of giving that does not take the self into account” (Grant 2001, 188).

The foregoing illustrates well Outka’s observation that “the meaning ascribed in the literature to love, in general, and to *agape*, in particular, is often characterized by both variance and ambiguity” (1972, 257–58). Robert Adams notes the diverse understandings of *agape* that have been offered and concludes that “*agape* is a blank canvas on which one can paint whatever ideal of Christian love one favors” (1999, 136). I suggest that the

reasons for this variance and ambiguity have a great deal to do with the theological, ethical, anthropological, scientific, and metaphysical commitments of those who use *agape* to identify something unique about one form of love compared with others.

So is the word *agape* redeemable, or should we toss it in the garbage pile of overused and ambiguous words?

Given that scriptures offer no uniform meaning of *agape* and scholars of love offer divergent definitions, one might be tempted to pass over the word altogether in an attempt to step beyond the variance and discord. This is the same temptation, however, to which many have fallen when deciding to avoid using the even more general word *love*. Yet love remains a uniquely powerful word. Despite the divergent meanings of *agape* that have been identified, it carries similarly significant rhetorical weight. It seems unwise to toss aside the great “cash value” that the word has accumulated upon finding that it has been defined variously.

Those who use the word *agape*, and I count myself among them, need to be careful about their use of it. They should (1) define clearly what they mean by it and then employ that meaning consistently, (2) show how this meaning differs from the meanings of other love forms (such as *philia* and *eros*), and (3) show how their definition of *agape* fits with and does not contradict their definition of love in general.

I find that all of the definitions of *agape* I listed above have merit but that few are finally adequate. Many are not adequate because they add to the confusion by failing to meet the three obligations I have suggested.

Some definitions of *agape* are inadequate because they make it difficult for us to see how these definitions allow for other versions of love to really be loves. For instance, some equate *agape* with doing what is good or promoting the good. I also believe that *agape* should be understood as promoting good. But when *agape* is equated with acting for the good, this implies that the other forms of love (*philia*, *eros*, and so on) are not actions that promote good. In this case these other words are not forms of love—at least not love as I have defined it and as it is usually understood.<sup>12</sup>

Some definitions of *agape* are inadequate because they equate this love form with self-sacrifice or altruism. In fact, this is the most common use of *agape* in love-and-science research. There are a host of problems with this equivalence. First, if two persons tried always to act self-sacrificially toward one another, neither could act self-sacrificially. “In a completely self-sacrificing community,” argues Vacek, “we would want to give to and not receive from persons who would want to give to and not receive from us” (1993, 184).

Neil Cooper illustrates this problem by imagining two altruists in the desert who find a cup of water. The two pass the cup back and forth, each insisting that the other drink first, until the water evaporates and both die of thirst (1981, 274). Love sometimes eschews altruism. Just as we want

others to satisfy themselves by receiving our gifts, so we ought also to receive gifts given to us. If the satisfaction that comes from such give-and-take relations is thwarted because all parties insist on acting altruistically, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's retort seems appropriate: "too much altruism is a bore" (1953, 96).

Second, equating *agape* with self-sacrifice or altruism denies what seems obvious—that sometimes we must not sacrifice ourselves so that in the long run we can provide more benefits to others. Love sometimes requires self-realization, a form of self-affirmation. In addition, feminists in many disciplines have brought to our awareness the fact that love sometimes demands that the individual eschew self-sacrifice and instead act in self-authenticating ways for the good of the individual and the whole.<sup>13</sup> Becoming a doormat on whom others can walk, for instance, is an enabling act that fails to promote well-being.

Third, the idea that a loving person always engages in self-sacrifice may actually keep those at the margins or bottom of society from experiencing justice. If the poor and oppressed were always to act self-sacrificially, they would likely remain in their impoverished state of existence. To think that all people, even the poorest of the poor, ought always to be acting self-sacrificially is to fall victim to what Arthur McGill calls "the illusion of perpetual affluence" (1987, 89). If *agape* is a form of love, it must be an action that promotes rather than prevents the attainment of well-being. While I believe that self-sacrificial, self-subordinating, or altruistic actions can be and often are expressions of love, these actions can also be actions that generate overall ill-being. *Agape*, if it is to be understood as a form of love, does not generate overall ill-being.

Still others place a great deal of emphasis upon *agape* as having some unique identification with God, and this emphasis typically results in a less-than-adequate definition. Some argue that only God can express *agape*. Others contend that *agape* is the recognition that God gives love to the world. The first argument places into jeopardy the biblical claim that God wants us to love God, others, and ourselves. How can we love with *agape* if only God can express this type of love? The second argument, that *agape* should be defined as God's bestowal of love upon creatures, suggests that other forms of love are not the loves God gives or expresses. According to the Christian scriptures, however, God both inspires creatures to love with *philia* and *eros* and expresses these forms of love for creation.

All of the *agape* definitions I have mentioned fail to meet the three obligations that I have suggested are necessary in order to be adequate. I intend for my own definition to meet my own demands. Before looking at it, however, I should note that I do not claim that mine is the only definition that could possibly be adequate. Others could meet the three obligations. I also should note that, although I believe my definition fits well with some ways that biblical authors employ the word *agape* and reflects

important themes in Christian ethics, I do not claim that my definition is *the* biblical or *the* Christian understanding of the word.

Having made these qualifications, I offer my definition. I define *agape* as acting intentionally, in sympathetic response to others (including God), to promote well-being when responding to acts or structures of existence that promote ill-being. Or, to put it more concisely,

*Agape is intentional response to promote well-being when confronted by that which generates ill-being.*

*Agape* repays evil with good, to use a phrase from Christian scripture. When we love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, we express *agape*. In an effort to promote well-being, *agape* turns the other cheek. *Agape* acts to promote well-being in spite of the ill-being or evil (whether directed toward the lover or the larger society) that it confronts.

Acts that rightfully bear the label *agape* can range from those we deem exceptional to those we consider mundane. Many who risked their lives to save Jews during the Nazi Holocaust expressed *agape*. They acted intentionally in response to others to promote well-being when confronted with the ill-being generated by Nazi ideals, structures, and activity. A mother who bandages her child's paper cut also responds intentionally to promote well-being when confronted by her offspring's pain. The teacher who refuses to retaliate when a student unjustly accuses her is also likely expressing *agape*.

As soon as we offer concrete examples, of course, we wonder about the intentions of the ones deemed loving. These questions are legitimate, because, as I pointed out when explaining what I meant by love, motives matter. Instead of responding intentionally to promote well-being, perhaps the rescuers of Jews were motivated more by reputational gain or wished to avoid divine wrath. Perhaps the mother responding with aid merely wants her child healthy so that her genetic lineage will continue. Perhaps the teacher refuses to retaliate because she relishes being the abused authority figure. These all are possible motives. We typically judge on a case-by-case basis, given the information we have, what a person's motives might be. Unless one is prepared to accept the claim that no one acts to promote well-being when confronted by ill-being, it seems quite plausible that at least some if not most rescuers, mothers, and teachers in the situations noted above express *agape*. Those acting in these ways probably have a good idea what their motives are, and we onlookers can come to plausible judgments given a reasonable amount of observational data.

I believe that my definition fulfills the three obligations necessary for an adequate notion of *agape*. First, I offer what I hope is a reasonably clear definition of *agape*. There are surely additional questions to resolve (What motivates one to express *agape*, or is it unmotivated? What role, if any, does God play in expressing or inspiring *agape*? What kind of person ex-

presses *agape*?). But that *agape* promotes well-being in response to that which generates ill-being should be a reasonably clear definition of what I believe is the best understanding of *agape*.

Second, it would become clearer in an examination of *philia* and *eros* that what makes *agape* unique is its response to ill-being. The other forms of love are not necessarily responses to ill-being; they are intentional responses to something else. I would define *eros*, for instance, as intentional response to promote well-being when affirming what is valuable. And *philia* might best be defined as intentional response to promote well-being when acting to establish deeper levels of cooperation. Love-and-science researchers have not often employed these other love words in their explorations.

As for the third obligation, *agape* is a form of love—one way in which we might respond intentionally to others (including God) to promote overall well-being. *Agape* is a form of love, not love itself. *Eros* and *philia* are other ways in which we might respond intentionally to promote well-being.

#### CONCLUSION

I believe that my definition of love—to act intentionally, in sympathetic response to others (including God), to promote well-being—can provide the practical benefit and intellectual satisfaction needed of a definition helpful for the love-and-science research program. And defining *agape* as intentional response that promotes well-being when confronted by that which generates ill-being can be helpful for those who affirm that *agape* is a particular form of love. While research on love and science requires much more than adequate definitions, and we can express love powerfully without having a well-conceived definition of love, my hope is that these definitions may be useful in furthering research programs in the love-and-science symbiosis.

#### NOTES

1. In his authoritative biography of Sorokin, Barry Johnson tells of an anonymous note found in the records kept by Eli Lilly. The note, apparently written by Lilly, reads: "One of the constantly interesting things about Sorokin is that he is an intellectual genius, who has arrived at truth about love and altruism via this route and has wound up his life a bitter old man with no young disciples. His interpreters are all old men, and as he once told me, 'Sorokin will be rediscovered 100 years hence—'" (Johnson 1995, 268).

2. Post provides this definition: "The essence of love is to affectively affirm as well as to unselfishly delight in the well-being of others, and to engage in acts of care and service on their behalf; unlimited love extends this love to all others without exception, in an enduring and constant way. Widely considered the highest form of virtue, unlimited love is often deemed a Creative Presence underlying and integral to all of reality: participation in unlimited love constitutes the fullest experience of spirituality. Unlimited love may result in new relationships, and deep community may emerge around helping behavior, but this is secondary. Even if connections and relations do not emerge, love endures" (2003, vii.). Post's definition provides helpful language and amplification. My own definition is more concise, although it shares many similarities with Post's.

3. It also makes little sense to say that someone loves if his or her motives are neutral.

4. Charles Hartshorne, for instance, explains what sympathy entails by saying that “the doctrine of sympathy . . . is that all feeling feels other feeling, all reaction has an object which itself is reactive, [and] that we have objects at all is due entirely to the . . . immanent sociality of experience” (1937, 185). Alfred North Whitehead refers to sympathy as “prehension” ([1929] 1978, 19), and other philosophers, such as Herbert Spencer, have called it “fellow feeling” (1881, 563). Because of this sympathy, or what Hartshorne calls “the social nature of reality,” to be decided in part by others is essential to what it means to be (1951, 527).

5. I find Whitehead’s thought on internal and external relations most helpful when proposing a theory of relatedness. See also my own work on the importance of internal and external relations (Oord 2004a).

6. My speculations here have been influenced by Whitehead and other process philosophers and theologians such as John B. Cobb Jr. and David Ray Griffin.

7. For a discussion of God’s love, see Oord 2003.

8. There are other words in the Greek language that are sometimes translated “love,” but I, like most scholars, do not consider them to have archetypal status. Instead, they are expressions of one or more of the three archetypes I list.

9. Two features of Nygren’s understanding of *agape* greatly influence both the scholarly and popular notion of *agape* love. The first feature is his complex theological and philosophical understanding of *agape*. According to him, *agape* is rightly understood as (1) unconditioned, spontaneous, groundless, or unmotivated, (2) indifferent to, but creative of, value, (3) directed toward sinners, (4) the sole initiator of creaturely fellowship with God, (5) in opposition to all that can be called self-love, (6), sacrificial giving to others, and (7) expressed only by God ([1930] 1957, 27–240). Despite the widespread influence of these *agape* assertions, critics have rejected, for one reason or another, every one of his major claims. Some reject his argument that *agape* is opposed to all that can be called self-love. Others reject his understanding of *agape* because, if genuine love entails only sacrificial giving, Christians cannot act lovingly when receiving gifts from others. Some note that his understanding of *agape* as exclusively divine love implies some form of predestination. Nygren’s emphasis upon *agape* as the only appropriate Christian love, say many critics, neglects legitimate Christian *philia* and Christian *eros*.

Those familiar with the *agape* debate are typically aware of these and similar criticisms. They are typically less familiar with the criticisms of the second feature of Nygren’s concept of *agape* that influences love scholarship. That feature is Nygren’s claim that *agape* is *the* distinctively Christian understanding of love, because, as he believes, the Bible proposes a relatively unique and uniform understanding of *agape*.

An examination of Christian scripture reveals that, contrary to Nygren’s argument, biblical writers use the word *agape* to convey a wide variety and sometimes contradictory set of meanings. For instance, they sometimes use *agape* to refer to ideal ethical action and other times to refer to sinful action (for example, 2 Timothy 4:10; Romans 12:9; 2 Corinthians 8:8; Luke 11:43; John 3:19 and 12:43; 2 Peter 2:15; 1 John 2:15). They use *agape* to talk about both unconditional love and conditioned, response-dependent love. We also find biblical authors using *agape* to talk about non-self-sacrificial love. The apostle Paul, whom Nygren believes most supports his own *agape* theories, even uses *agape* to talk about self-love (Ephesians 5:28, 33). Because the context suggests it, biblical scholars translate *agape* in ways that we typically think the word *eros* or *philia* would be translated. For instance, *agape* is translated in ways that connote *eros*; it is rendered “to long for,” “to prefer,” “to desire,” “to prize,” “to value,” and “to be fond of” (2 Timothy 4:8,10; John 3:19 and 12:43; Hebrews 1:9; Revelation 12:11; Luke 7:5). Sometimes *agape* is used to convey meanings traditionally assigned to *philia*, and, in many contexts, the two words seem interchangeable (Moffatt 1929, 51–56). In sum, the Bible is far from uniform in its understanding of *agape*. Neither the narrow claim that *agape* possesses a single meaning in the Bible nor the broader claim that one meaning of *agape* predominates in Christian scripture finds textual support. To be true to Christian scripture, we cannot talk about *the* biblical understanding of *agape*.

10. Vacek writes elsewhere, “Agape is directed to the beloved’s full value for the beloved’s own sake” (1994, 179).

11. Timothy Jackson develops this explanation and refers to what he calls “strong *agape*” in *Love Disconsolated* (1999, chap. 5). He summarizes what he means by strong *agape* in his introduction to his book *The Priority of Love* (2003). Jackson writes in the latter book, “I defend a position I call ‘strong *agapè* . . . [and it] involves three features: (1) unconditional willing of the

good of the other, (2) equal regard for the well-being of the other, and (3) passionate service open to self-sacrifice for the sake of the other" (2003, 10).

12. One response to my criticism might be that *love* is best defined simply as acting (proper/improper tradition) or being in relation (mutuality tradition). What makes *agape* unique, one might contend, is that *agape* promotes what is good. As I argued, however, this use of the word is counterintuitive and contributes to the general confusion pertaining to the meaning of *love*. When we say that Mother Teresa expressed love, we do not typically mean that she simply acted or was related to someone else. We mean that what she did was good; her actions promoted well-being. And to say that only *agape* promotes good is to disparage other forms of action, such as friendship (*philia*), that also promote good.

13. One of the first to make this claim was Valerie Saiving, and her article is perhaps the most cited on this point (1960, 100–112).

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