

Compassion Across Strangers: Exploring the Multidimensional Nature of Love

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In

Philosophy

Submitted to the

Department of Philosophy

Hanover College

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2024

As our world gets more connected through social media and the internet, yet, more disjointed due to our political beliefs, our compassion for strangers comes as a social and philosophical question I have yet to see answered. My senior thesis will be going into my personal beliefs, along with Max Scheler and Plato to explore the casualty for this anomaly that us human social creatures have. While it is an academic research project, it will also talk about love and moral values that individuals have.

Going forward the main question I will be answering is what is it in our society that gives us compassion for strangers and what can this do for us going forward. Like I said before, our world is socially connected more than ever but we are still split by political powers. This question will help explain philosophical understandings of love (mainly agape) and its ideas in our interactions with strangers. Understanding our nature of love is important because our human relationships are built on these feelings that we have, at the end of the day, humans are social creatures.

The nature of love cannot be a singular definition. While being a feeling, it also holds weight in our emotions and actions that can either build or destroy someone. We see in art and writing all the time that love can be a great thing or turn one mad. In philosophy, it can be seen as a moral force that can change someone's morality on how it is applied. It also allows us to be interconnected to other humans. It is giving us a bridge to other people which gives us greater engagement with people around us. This bridge is also what I am trying to explain in this thesis.

The idea that came forth first was the roots and foundations of love that humans have. What I believe gives a strong foundation is Plato on how he explains love. Classical Greek philosophers do not believe it is a singular object, but a spectrum. Love on this spectrum can be explained easily with three different types of love- Eros, Phila, and Agape- which I plan to explain. This spectrum of love allows us to have a foundation to attack the confusing system of human emotions. By exploring these ideas, we can first explain the nature of love in these ancient times.

First is Eros, which is understood mainly as love that embodies passion, desire and a personal attachment. This love is talked about for someone's significant other. To an extent it is about the sensual or sexual aspects of love, Eros mainly talks about finding the truth and beauty which is beyond physical appearances. This can be seen as a spiritual encounter once someone is feeling Eros.

White people may see this type of love as lust or egotistical, it is more a way for someone to transform into the spiritual self. This is pushing a higher knowledge that we do not know without experiencing it. While it is personal, it takes two to understand this feeling. It must be understood to have value in elevating the self.

Philia which is deemed as friendship love. This can be seen as love for a person you grew up with. While this love is weaker than Eros it is still important, it shows the mutual relationship between two humans. Values that can be found in this love include

trust, same virtues, and honesty. Another Greek philosopher that talks about this is Aristotle which he says is one of the key elements of social ethics. This type of love gives us a sense of community and belonging to something that is more than just the self. Philia extends to things that are beyond our personal relationships, and talks about more of our society. It gives us love for our community and thy neighbor. This can give us better values like cleaning up our neighborhood or helping the community's soup kitchen.

Lastly, Agape is a universal love that is unconditional. This love is inclusive to all and extends to people regardless of what your relationship is to them. What makes this love nice is that it is selfless and seeks good without getting any good or thing in return. A correlation that we can see is that this type of love is seen in Christianity in which Agape would be the unconditional love that God has for humankind in which we are called to have for one another.

Agape definitely transcends our personal level and becomes universal because of the social idea that we must love one another. It is the kind of love that explains random acts of charity and what helps us forgive unconditionally, which could also explain why we show compassion to strangers. Agape shows that love promotes a universal solidarity.

When we think of this love, it closely correlates to Christian phenomenology of loving one another. This is a perfect example of why we may have this compassion to

help others. While we may have enemies on this planet, we must understand that there is a higher being. This higher being gives us the love which is unconditional to love another. While I may not like my enemy, we are still connected to the higher power which gives us the ability to love each other. We must understand for humankind to move forward that being enemies while being related by God, destroys our race instead of building it.

While understanding this foundation of love, I had turned to another source who dedicated a lot of his life to answering my question and talking about feelings in humankind. A philosopher named Max Scheler (1874-1928) was a German intellectual who answered unknown questions about phenomenology at the time. Some of his work I used to help understand what I was trying to answer and how to do so. Scheler has a lot of work that helps explore the universal applicability to use moral values and stating that love and ethics are not just to who we know but, strangers. What brought me toward his work is that he first talks about the nature of love then explains Agape, highlighting that love is universal to all humans, and does not relate to personal connection. This basic framework is what helped me get on the right path.

By using his work I plan on finding the understanding of compassion for other people. Scheler knows that feelings can be categorized and he explains them in different types of feelings such as Feeling for another, Vicarious Feeling, Psychic Contagion, Fellow feeling, and Identification. Briefly explaining each one:

Feeling With Another - Sharing a direct and emotional feeling with individuals, where people experience each other's emotions mutually.

Vicarious Feeling - Represents an understanding of another person's feelings without sharing them. This can be explained like understanding how someone's emotional mental state is, which creates an emotional solidarity.

Psychic Contagion - Describing a participation of emotions in a group, which can be a collective feeling between a group of people.

Identification - Deepest form of all of these feelings, which an individual loses their own emotional state and fully empathizes with another person as if they are feeling it themselves.

Fellow Feeling - Sympathy for one another, compassion that is concerned with another's well-being.

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Out of all of these feelings, fellow feelings are the idea that struck me most. This is perfect for answering my question and can help explain the development of compassion we have for others including strangers on why we may help them. This feeling is giving us concern for another person's well being, for example, if someone is homeless and it is cold outside, we can understand that feeling of cold and want to help

¹ Entries are referred from: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/scheler/>

warm them up by giving them a blanket. Fellow feeling requires us to be conscious and be engaged in feelings with others. It is recognizing someone's suffering or joy and sympathizing with them.

Scheler says that this is a cornerstone of moral behavior. It gives us the chance to once again transcend our own interest and give us the chance to bring up others. Scheler talks about linking this to another one of his concepts, Collective Person, which gives us shared moral responsibilities in our community. By experiencing this idea of fellow feeling, we can recognize that our actions and other people's actions are connected in our moral world. Which then we are given a sense of responsibility for not just our actions but other peoples actions.

Fellow feeling is important for us to understand building society going forward so we can create a universal compassion for others instead of fighting one another. It gives us motivation to help others because by definition, others will help us without expecting anything in return. While we are fighting this social media problem of being better than everyone else, we can encourage a more empathic world by using fellow feelings.

To furthermore explain what a collective person is, we must understand that it is not just the individual in our society, but the collective intentions of everyone in a community. Scheler states that everyone is connected to this collective through our various social interactions we have daily. This transcends our physical interactions into our mental emotional experiences. Social acts which are promises and agreements give

us more of a clear definition of a collective person. These social “contracts” that we create give us better connection to one another in a community. Scheler says that this agreement is not just a contract but a reaffirmation of mutual responsibility in our community that will make it stronger. Which then gives power in the respect of one another and not the authoritative power in place, for example government.

These social acts will give us a better purpose in life, helping us give compassion for others knowing that each time we do good for one another, we are creating a stronger bond between us in our society to make us better. This is important for us to understand in our society because it will create compassion and responsibility towards everyone including the strangers we encounter. This is now a shared moral that we have and will be seen as needs and sufferings that will not just be in our close ones but the strangers we encounter as well.

Now to use these ideas in our society we must promote and understand each and one another's emotional states. Fellow feeling allows and encourages us to act with kindness and consideration for what we do. This will in theory create a cultural norm to help people that we may not even know. This is going to bring our community closer and other communities together which will create larger networks that are guided by care. This moral responsibility that everyone will care for should encourage an idea of solidarity and collective morals where our welfare will matter but the welfare of others is in the same need. A perfect idea to implement this would be to put this in our

educational systems in primary school to let our new generations know that caring for another will then cause care for you.

This universal responsibility that we will have gives every individual, regardless of their relationship to another is wider than what we can comprehend. This will be challenging for us and will rethink our role in issues that are bigger than us like global warming. Humanitarian acts will increase due to our role of being bigger than yourself. Our commitment to fellow feelings will give everyone a commitment to compassion. This will be the driving passion to be genuine and fix suffering and our poor quality of life.

This thesis is guided by the universal love of Agape and being a collective person in our community to play a bigger role in humanity. Plato and Max Scheler have given a unique multidimensional nature of love that plays into ethical behavior and how society could work. I have found that emotions that are confined to personal relationships can be expanded to strangers which will make a stronger community. The idea of Agape being a universal, unconditional love and Scheler's collective person have given us insight on how individuals should relate to each other.

Reflecting on these ideas it has become evident that when I started this, I may need God to connect this love to strangers. But while writing, I have found that it is in ourselves to give this love to one another. We have the mental capacity to think of this love, so we can apply it. If we can think of this love, we can share this love, it just takes the commitment of people to expand this idea. It makes it difficult for us to look beyond

our own safe place and consider the well-being of others that we may have never thought about. This love can give us a global citizenship of morality.

Moving forward this understanding of love can be significant and provide implications for personal actions to give us new ideas on how to tackle global issues. We must think in this way to help build mutual respect, solidarity and Agape love for one another. As we move forward, we must implement these ideas to create compassion for strangers which can create a loving world. In conclusion, this thesis does not answer my question, but gives an example of how we can have compassion for a stranger that can build a society that will build universal compassion.