

Christian Theological Perspectives on Love and Their Relationship to Scientific Understandings

Li Tianyi

*JPED Academy, District 4, Anzhenxili, Chaoyang District, Beijing, China
15618517686@163.com*

Keywords: Agape, Selflessness, Eros, Societal cohesion, Biological phenomenon

Abstract: Love has been studied across literature, religion, and science, yet no single definition is universally accepted. Christian theology categorizes love into Agape (unconditional love), Phileo (brotherly love), Eros (sensual love), and Storge (familial love), each with different societal and moral implications. Christian love emphasizes selflessness, charity, and societal cohesion, particularly within marriage. Science, meanwhile, examines love as a biological and psychological phenomenon. Despite differing approaches, both Christianity and science highlight love's significant role in shaping individual relationships and maintaining social order, making it central to human fulfillment and cultural development.

1. Introduction

From ancient texts to modern studies, scholars, scientists, and ordinary individuals alike have devoted significant attention to understanding what love is, although they have not ever agreed on a single definition [1]. In Homer's epics, love is complicated, involving relationships between both gods and humans, and having significant consequences for the fates of both individuals and states. In Buddhism, love is connected to ideas of compassion and enlightenment. In science, love is a subject of study that spans across biology, psychology, and sociology. The concept of 'romantic love' has been popular since the late nineteenth century. This concept was meant to point to a completely different idea than family love, divine love, or love among members of a society [2]. Though Christians and scientists (and Christian scientists, one presumes) have debated its definition up to the present day, romantic love emerged in expressions as a distinct and powerful emotion, emphasizing personal connection and individual passion that differs from other forms of love.

The intersection of Christian theological concepts and scientific understandings of love reveal profound insights into love's role in shaping social structures and human relationships. In particular, scientists working in biology, social sciences, and psychology have studied love in order to understand it as a cause or a result of physiological and psychological processes. Christians, on the other hand, have defined love in multiple ways, from the “macro” love that binds social groups together to the “micro” or romantic or familial love between individuals.

These different frameworks contribute to our understanding of love in its many forms, its impact on human relationships, and its potential for helping people achieve personal fulfillment. However, despite their different approaches and conclusions about love there are significant correlations

between the scientific and Christian perspectives, and their impact on society and individuals' perception of love is profound, shaping both cultural norms and personal relationships.

2. Christianity and Love

Christian theologians and scriptures have had profound influence on the ways that people have understood the concept of love for about 2000 years. Christianity texts regard love as a more general concept that can be explained in various ways, using it as a concrete conceptual tool to help maintain social order and promote social norms. Agape, or God's love, is characterized as "unconditional love." [3] Agape is the kind of love expressed in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." [4] This kind of love involves sacrificing or giving oneself for the benefit of others. The second kind of love is Phileo, which represents a higher level of human affection and brotherly love. The third is Eros, which is generally considered physical and sensual love. Eros can sometimes involve sacrificing others to satisfy oneself rather than focusing on selfless giving [5]. Storge is a more "natural" and familial love, often characterized by its enduring and one-sided nature. These four kinds of love each have their unique expressions. They do not conflict with one another; instead, they reveal and release different aspects of the human heart. Although they share some similarities, they primarily serve to express various facets of love and affection.

Each of these understandings of love, however, have had different or deeper nuances or emphases depended on the historical context.

In the Old Testament, the word "Eros" is used to describe the physical and sensual intimacy between a husband and wife. In the *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas (years) shared his view on Eros and its relationship to God. Aquinas wrote that sometimes we love people because we want something from them, for example, money, property, or certain value. Therefore, passion is one of the reasons loves happens. Aquinas explained that love can come from joy, desire, and hope. He argued that this desire for union and intimacy is a very natural part of being human and is not sinful by itself. Instead, it represents a natural tendency toward goodness. Aquinas also argued that Eros can be improved and made more perfect when it aligns with virtue. Both Eros and Phileo can eventually find their true fulfillment in Divine love [6].

Christian Theologians considered Love as a central virtue that support the mores and social interactions within the Christian society. Whether love to God, to world, or to human, it reflects the core teachings of Jesus Christ. Matthew 22:37-40 states that people should, "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment." [7] According to Jesus Christ, the first commandment is then followed by a second and equally important commandment, "love your neighbor as yourself," which is often referred to as "The Golden Rule." [8] These two commandments together are the foundation for much of Christian ethics, emphasizing not only the love that is owed to God, but that which is extended to others [9]. Jesus Christ taught that selfless, and unconditional love is the most ideal love for Christians, as it blesses the happiness of others, without expecting anything in return, and to help others at the expense of self [10]. It also reflects human piety and love for God. Furthermore, Christian love is not just a feeling or a verbal commitment; it is a practice and a genuine commitment to taking action for others. For instance, Christ taught that acts of charity and generosity are often seen as expressions of love. Christians are called to help the poor and those in need, as highlighted in 1 John 3:17, "If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?" This demonstrates that love, as a Christian virtue, prompts individuals to adhere to moral behavior and standards, which is one of the functions of love within Christian society.

From a micro or more individual perspective, Christian ideas about romantic love between two

people also could serve as a means for maintaining a particular kind of social order and ensuring certain virtues. In the Catholicism sacraments, marriage is viewed as a Catholic sacrament between men and women [11]. According to Protestant theologian William Lillie, marriage creates bond and lifelong commitment between humans and God. In Lillie's interpretation, the Agape love in marriage should be strong and lasting, serving as the foundation for nurturing good relationships. Love guides relationships, foster forgiveness, and establish a nurturing family environment [12]. At the same time, according to Lillie, Christianity proposes that love in marriage should involve mutual sacrifice and selflessness, aimed at respect and understanding [13]. For example, Ephesians 5:25 emphasizes, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her," highlighting the concept of sacrificial love [14].

Agape, characterized by unconditional commitment, is also integrated into marriage. While this unconditional love is emphasized, Christians view marriage as a relationship blessed by God [15]. Additionally, Eros ideally could play a role, as people sometimes fall in love due to sensual and physical attraction, which today, at least, can lead to marriage. In marriage, expression and intimacy may act as factors to sustain the relationship. Moreover, Phileo and Storge can be present within the marriage relationship. When the novelty or physical attraction wanes, couples often come to treat each other more like family, reflecting a deeper, more spiritual level of love that persists into the later stages of marriage [16]. As a component of society, the virtues between families maintain the mores of society, thus creating stable and harmonious development. If there are problems and immorality in love within the family, the micro romantic love between two people is likely to breed corruption at the social level. Therefore, macro level love, for Christ and society, consolidates micro level romantic love, and micro level romantic love also mutually strengthens the stability of macro level love, thereby ensuring the sustained stability and development of the entire society.

Christian literature, like other literature, has reflected the historical and cultural contexts in which it was written, which means that the way that a society enshrines its ideas of love in religious, romantic, or marital relationships is also specific to that society. For example, in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, some kinds of love are condemned and others valorized. In the fifth canto of the *Comedy*, "Inferno," Dante and Virgil venture into the second level of hell, a place of punishment for the souls consumed by lust. There they encounter Francesca who betrayed her marriage vows by having an extramarital affair with her brother-in-law Paolo. Having given into their lust for each other, the two embarked on a forbidden love affair, and were killed by Francesca's husband in the Inferno part, which ultimately led them to be condemned to the second level of hell, where they were tormented by ceaseless winds. Dante, the writer of *The Divine Comedy* (not to be confused with the poet Dante within the book), uses love to highlight the inevitability of this powerful emotion. It serves to underscore the tragic fate of Francesca and Paolo, portraying the consequences of uncontrolled love and lust. Dante lamented that, "Alas, how many sweet thoughts, how much yearning led them to the grievous pass!" [17] Love, although beautiful, becomes destructive when it is unrestrained, as exemplified by the punishment endured by Francesca and Paolo even after death [18]. "Amor, ch'al cor gentil ratto s'apprende." After translation, it means that Love, can quickly takes hold of the gentle heart. This quote underscores the significance of love in contexts. Therefore, Dante aims to emphasize the importance of maintaining virtue within romantic love.

Christian's love involves macro love and micro love, as expansive as to the broad and inclusive love for God and the world, as narrow as the personal and immediate love for fellow humans. Christian theology emphasizes selfless devotion and love, which manifests in both grand and small acts. This form of love is supposed to be presented in every corner of society, and well support and build a foundation for the moral standards, behaviors, and cultural norms that shape the whole community. Christian love encourages individuals to act compassionately and ethically in their daily interactions, fostering a society where love is not just an ideal but a practical force for good.

3. Science and Love

Scientists have also offered explanations of what love is, and why it is important to humanity. Scientists examining the psychological and physiological sources of love tend to focus on the questions of why love arises and what kind of impact it has. Evolutionary psychologists, such as Steven Pinker suggests that human love and mate selection are designed to increase the chances of reproductive success and enhance the continuation of civilization [19]. Primarily, human language, physical behavior, and other expressive abilities have demonstrated the advantages and necessity of social interaction and cooperation. Therefore, individuals tend to form cooperative relationships, form groups, and even gradually develop into societies [20]. On the basis of achieving cooperation, Thomas Malthus emphasized the importance of ensuring the reproduction and continuation of humanity.[9] Humans tend to focus on different characteristics when selecting a mate, such as appearance, resources, protection, health, and fertility. These characteristics are often closely related to the ability to raise offspring. Some scholars, like E.O. Wilson, suggests that humans form long-term partnerships due to the stability provided by shared resources. In order to ensure the stability of cooperative relationships and encourage their establishment, the emotion of love plays a role as a social glue. People cooperate in marriage, sharing economic responsibilities and protecting their children, which improves the survival and health of future generations. In this way, they prioritize family and the interests of themselves and their offspring, rather than solely relying on emotional considerations.

Emotions obviously also occupy a huge impact in love, and these triggers emotions may be related to a person's biology, as well as a scientific and cultural aspect to the way they are understood. Hormonal plays a significant role in establishing and maintaining intimate relationships. According to the triangular theory of love developed by psychologist Robert Sternberg, love unfolds through several stages in the mind. The formation of love typically begins with sensory stimulation and cognition. For example, when a person encounters someone, they are attracted to, their five senses—such as sight, hearing, and smell—transmit this information to the brain. The brain's amygdala and prefrontal cortex then process this information and generate an emotional response. When a positive emotional reaction occurs, hormones and neurotransmitters become active in the brain. Hormone production primarily depends on the secretion of endocrine glands, which regulate the hypothalamus and pituitary glands. This regulation results in the release of hormones, including oxytocin and others often referred to as "love hormones." These hormones are released during physical contact, such as kissing and hugging, and they enhance feelings of trust and emotional bonding, thus improving intimacy. In addition to oxytocin, dopamine is also secreted when one is in love. Dopamine activates the brain's reward center, fostering a strong interest in and desire for the loved one. Norepinephrine and endorphins are also released, contributing to feelings of happiness and satisfaction, and enhancing emotional experiences. Therefore, the process of falling in love involves the coordinated activity of the nervous system and endocrine system. The brain's reward system, emotional processing centers, and social cognitive areas interact to shape emotions and social behaviors. As a result, according to the theory, love is the result of interactions between neuroscience and endocrinology, which together influence emotional experiences. This scientific theory may help to form an understanding to how love can be formed in brain, by understanding this, people can be more rational when they feel about love, this also can be applied into society, which people can better develop strategies for manage their emotions and feeling.

4. Society and Love

With the rise of philosophy and social sciences, certain humans also tend to view the role of love through culture and rationality. Aristotle's political philosophy contains some of the foundational arguments for understanding marriage between men and women as the basis for stable societies. In

Politics, chapter 2, he explained that "Interdependent affairs necessarily require a union, marriage between men and women, and the continuation of race. This union is not intentional by humans, but is a natural instinct, like other animals and plants, to leave individuals who resemble themselves." [3] In Aristotle's view, love between men and women leads to the formation of the most basic unit of society - the family. Therefore, Aristotle's viewpoint can be seen as practical, but he also emphasized the importance of love. That is, in another view, the public system proposed by Plato, who was inspired by Aristotle's view, this is the system explained in Plato's *Republic*, explained that ruling class should live communally, not having their private property or families, they should share everything including their spouses. Though this theory might be limited or even impossible to achieve, because the public wife system prevented the development of intimate relationships; not only that, the public wife system was also not conducive to social development because it violated the principle of cooperation.

A thousand years later, Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1762, in his book *Emile*, also argued for the importance of love between men and women. In *Emile*, the eponymous male protagonist and the female protagonist Sophie come to Paris after growing up, but unfortunately, the two who were originally close parted ways due to the impact of the big city. Sophie witnessed the charm of Paris, experienced the pleasure and joy that other men gave her, and abandoned Emile. As Sophie indulged in pleasure and desires, she was gradually abandoned by men, and in the end, no one was willing to be with Sophie. Sophie reluctantly returned to Emile's side and asked for her forgiveness. Rousseau used this plot to depict the emergence and transformation of love into lust, where love is created through stimulation and pleasure. However, the maintenance of love does not only rely on pleasure and stimulation, but also on stable development and mutual cooperation. When Sophie is unable to provide help to Emile, in the end, Emile refuses to forgive her and allows her to survive alone in Paris.

Another political vision of love comes from communism. In his book *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Friedrich Engels in year 1884 focused on the importance of romantic love, rather than love or economic considerations that serve the family or society. Engels described the communist family as follows:

The men of this generation will not use money or other forms of social power to buy the devotion of the women in their lives, and the women of this generation will be driven solely by true love—neither committing to a man for any other reason nor refusing to commit out of fear of economic consequences.

According to Engels, if love is individualized and allowed to be acted on at will, then concept of monogamy will be abandoned, along with the principles of male dominance and the indissolubility of marriage. People would have the freedom to choose their life partners solely based on love, without any external pressures from societal norms, family expectations, or concerns about children. Engel also argued that with the rapid development of science, human society that satisfies material needs becomes more inclined towards this kind of love, but human society is still bounded by social contracts, which are similar to those mentioned by Rousseau. However, Engel's ideas are at odds with evolutionary scientific explanations of love, which describe love as arising from biological instincts that promote human cooperation, reproduction, and even ultimately help civilizations develop. During the development of European civilization, thinkers like Rousseau explored the romantic and pleasurable aspects of love. In contrast, Engels envisioned a future communist society, where technology might fulfill human needs and desires. In such a society, love and pleasure would unite people, transcending the need for cooperation or personal interests.

5. Conclusion

Previous analysis, comparison, and discussion lead to the conclusion that both Christian theology

and science offer explanations of the source and qualities of love can contribute to social stability in different ways. Some Christian theologians have viewed love as a sacred force, emphasizing its central role in building and maintaining families and promoting social harmony. In addition, in the Bible, love is also described as selfless care and devotion to others. This theology helps to foster a stable family structure, as well as relationships of responsibility between people outside of family structures, which in turn can enhance social cohesion and stability, encourage individuals to behave morally and ethically, and provide spiritual support. Love in this light can make people more committed and present in their relationships.

In contrast, scientists have largely studied the biological and psychological mechanisms of love to understand how it might impact human behavior and society. Biological science has found that love is not only an emotional experience, but also involves brain chemicals and physiological responses that can affect an individual's mental health and social interactions. These studies suggest that stable love relationships contribute to an individual's psychological well-being, which in turn promotes social stability. By understanding the scientific basis of love, which include the aspects of biological and psychological, society can better to create healthy emotional relationships, by supporting a stabilized society, empathy, connection, mutual support may be promoted. Awareness of how love and emotions bond can increase individual's self-awareness and empathy, thus leading to more supportive and understanding relationships.

Taken together, religion and science attach importance to love from an ethical and empirical perspective respectively, reflecting the important role of love in promoting social stability, and together they promote the health and harmony of individuals and societies. By examining love from ethical and empirical perspectives, we see how various conceptions of love influence the stability of societies and the fulfillment of interpersonal relationships.

References

- [1] de Boer, E.M. van Buel, G.J. Ter Horst, *Love is more than just a kiss: a neurobiological perspective on love and affection*, *Neuroscience*, Volume 201, 2012, Pages 114-124, ISSN 0306-4522, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroscience.2011.11.017>.
- [2] Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Benziger Brothers, 1947.
- [3] Aristotle. *Politics*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett, Dover Publications, 2000.
- [4] Barclay, Katie, and Sally Holloway. 2020. "Interrogating Romantic Love." *Cultural and Social History* 17 (3): 271–277. doi:10.1080/14780038.2019.1685839.
- [5] "Catechism of the Catholic Church." Vatican Press, 2nd ed., 1997.
- [6] Fidyk, Alexandra. "A 'Rehabilitation of Eros': Cultivating a Conscious Relation with Love." *Jung Journal: Culture & Psyche*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2009, pp. 59–68. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jung.2009.3.4.59>. Accessed 19 Aug. 2024.
- [7] Hare, Edward. "Sociobiology, the New Synthesis: Edward O. Wilson." *British Journal of Psychiatry* 150.5 (1987): 709–711. Web.
- [8] Kanekar, Suresh. "Toward a Scientific Understanding of Romantic Love." *Science Progress (1933-)*, vol. 73, no. 4 (292), 1989, pp. 501–519. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43421050>. Accessed 30 July 2024.
- [9] Malthus, Thomas. *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. Edited by Geoffrey Gilbert, Oxford University Press, 1993.
- [10] Majdic, Gregor, and Ohio Library and Information Network. *Soul Mate Biology: Science of Attachment and Love*. Springer, Cham, 2021, doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-67212-6.
- [11] Plato. *The Republic*. Translated by Allan Bloom, Basic Books, 1968.
- [12] Seis, Harry T., and Arthur Aron. "Love: What Is It, Why Does It Matter, and How Does It Operate?" *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2008, pp. 80–86. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40212231>. Accessed 30 July 2024.
- [13] Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Émile*. Translated by Barbara Foxley, Dover Publications, 2005.
- [14] Sternberg, Robert J. *The Triangular Theory of Love*. Harvard University Press, 1986.
- [15] *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. Biblica, 2011. Bible Gateway, www.biblegateway.com.
- [16] Grant, Colin. "For the Love of God: Agape." *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1996, pp. 3–21. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40016679>. Accessed 9 Sept. 2024.

- [17] Lillie, William. "The Christian Conception of Love." *Scottish Journal of Theology* 12.3 (1959): 225–242. Web.
- [18] Ryan, Laurence. "Christian Marriage: Ideal and Reality." *The Furrow*, vol. 39, no. 2, 1988, pp. 67–77. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27678644>. Accessed 19 Aug. 2024.
- [19] Dante Alighieri. *Inferno*. Translated by John Ciardi, New American Library, 1954.
- [20] Engels, Frederick. Trans. by Alick West, *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, 1884, www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/index.htm.