

Agape versus Eros

C. S. Lewis and Anders Nygren on the Meaning of Love

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“Even the unhappy lover is happier than the nonlover,
with whom the lover would never change place.”

—Josef Pieper

- Lewis versus Nygren – a conscious showdown
- Nygren (1930): Eros aims at happiness
- Lewis (1960): No, it doesn't
- Two kinds of happiness: conventional and meaningful
- “We Have ‘No Right to Happiness’” (1963) – a contradiction?
- Eros's agapic opening (and “the key”)
- Conclusion

Three main characteristics of *eros*, according to Nygren (*Agape and Eros*, p. 175):

1. Eros is the “love of desire”, or acquisitive love.
2. Eros is man’s way to the Divine.
3. Eros is egocentric love.

The “eudæmonistic accusation”:

1. Eros always seeks the happiness of the lover, and
2. this happiness-seeking character is morally tainted
3. because it entails selfish incapability of *agapic* sacrifice
4. and calculatingly demotes the Beloved to a means to this end.

C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (1960)

“Eros does not aim at happiness. We may think he does, but when he is brought to the test it proves otherwise. Everyone knows that it is useless to try to separate lovers by proving to them that their marriage will be an unhappy one. This is not only because they will disbelieve you. They usually will, no doubt. But even if they believed, they would not be dissuaded. For it is the very mark of Eros that when he is in us we had rather share unhappiness with the Beloved than be happy on any other terms.”

“Even if the two lovers are mature and experienced people who know that broken hearts heal in the end and can clearly foresee that, if they once steeled themselves to go through the agony of parting, they would almost certainly be happier ten years hence than marriage is at all likely to make them—even then, they would not part. To Eros all these calculations are irrelevant—just as coolly brutal judgment of Lucretius is irrelevant to Venus. Even when it becomes clear beyond all evasion that marriage with the Beloved cannot possibly lead to happiness—when it cannot even profess to offer any other life than that of tending to an incurable invalid, of hopeless poverty, of exile, or of disgrace—Eros never hesitates to say, ‘Better this than parting. Better to be miserable with her than happy without her. Let our hearts break provided they break together.’”

C. S. Lewis, “We Have No ‘Right to Happiness’” (1963)

“Mr A. had deserted Mrs A. and got his divorce in order to marry Mrs B., who had likewise got her divorce in order to marry Mr A. And there was certainly no doubt that Mr A. and Mrs B. were very much in love with one another. If they continued to be in love, and if nothing went wrong with their health or their income, they might reasonable expect to be very happy.”

“Mrs B. had adored her husband at the outset. But then he got smashed up in the war. It was thought that he had lost his virility, and it was known that he had lost his job. Life with him was no longer what Mrs B. had bargained for. Poor Mrs A., too. She had lost her looks—and all her liveliness. It might be true, as some said, that she consumed herself by bearing his children and nursing him through the long illness that overshadowed their earlier married life.”

“It is part of the nature of a strong erotic passion—as distinct from a transient fit of appetite—that it makes more towering promises than any other emotion. No doubt all our desires make promises, but not so impressively. To be in love involves the almost irresistible conviction that one will go on being in love until one dies, and that possession of the beloved will confer, not merely frequent ecstasies, but settled, fruitful, deep-rooted, lifelong happiness. Hence *all* seems to be at stake. If we miss this chance we shall have lived in vain. At the very thought of such doom we sink into fathomless depths of self-pity.”