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Eros – What’s Love Got To Do With It?

by Dr Alan Branford (© 22 June 2017)

Prologue

This paper is intended to ignite discussion. Consider its arguments. Do you agree with its conclusions? If you do not, what are your arguments for your dissent?

The Four Loves

Ancient Greek has four distinct words for “love”, depending on the sense in which the word is meant: **στοργή** (*storgē*), **φιλία** (*philia*), **ἔρως** (*érōs*) and **ἀγάπη** (*agápē*).

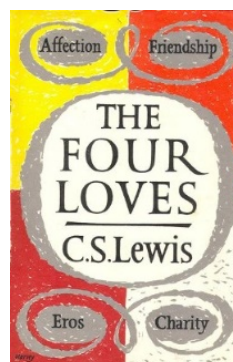
Storge (**στοργή**, *storgē*) (/ˈstɔːrɡiː/) means “love” in the sense of “affection”. It was used to express affection within a family, and also it could be used to express love for one’s country or a favourite sporting team.

Philia (**φιλία**, *philia*) (/ˈfɪljə/ or /ˈfɪliə/) means “love” in the sense of “friendship”. The philosopher [Aristotle](#) developed the theory of **φιλία** in his writings.

Eros (**ἔρως**, *érōs*) (/ˈɪrɒs/ or /ˈɛrɒs/) means “love” in the sense of “sexual passion”. The philosophers [Socrates](#) and [Plato](#) developed quite extensive theories of **ἔρως**.

Agape (**ἀγάπη**, *agápē*) (/ˈæɡ əˌpeɪ/ or /ˈɑːɡəˌpeɪ/ or /ɑːˈɡɑːpeɪ/) is the highest and purest form of “love”: unconditional, non-sexual love. The most eloquent description of **ἀγάπη** may be found in Chapter 13 of the Apostle Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians.

In modern times, the notion of these four types of love was the subject of a book, “The Four Loves”, by C.S. Lewis, the Christian moral philosopher and author.



The Love Hierarchy

In reality we all have a different love for different people, if we love them at all. Towards many people, we may show **στοργή**. To our inner circle of friends we would have **φιλία**. Hopefully, we would express **ἀγάπη** to our spouses and our children, and possibly to no others.

So, where does **ἔρως** fit into this hierarchy?

If we take the stance that sexual passion should be reserved for one's spouse, for whom one should also possess **ἀγάπη**, then this would imply that the fourth "love" was not **ἔρως** itself, but rather **ἀγάπη** plus **ἔρως**, "**ἀγάπη** premium" as it were!

As it stands, the classification of "love" countenances **ἔρως** even in the absence of any of the other forms of love: love, as in sexual passion, with an anonymous individual!

There is, however, another interpretation altogether: **ἔρως** is not a "love" at all! It is not even a component of the "love hierarchy".

So what, then, is **ἔρως**?

The Biological Evolution of Monogamy

We now know that people are a species of animal, *Homo sapiens*. This species evolved from the great apes, as did many other hominim species, although *Homo sapiens* is the only to have survived to the present day.

Critically, the evolution of *Homo sapiens* crossed a threshold: we developed a brain capable of abstract thought and the means to communicate these thoughts between one another.

Uniquely among the species of the Animal Kingdom, we have concepts of "soul", "conscience" and "empathy". From this, we alone are capable of love, **στοργή**, **φιλία** and **ἀγάπη**.

Evolutionary biologists identify three types of monogamy:

- **social monogamy** – two individuals mate to the exclusion of others in the sense of social interactions such as cohabitation, foraging and child rearing
- **sexual monogamy** – two individuals mate in the sense of engaging in sexual relations to the exclusion of others
- **genetic monogamy** – two individuals raise only off-spring for which there is genetic evidence of joint parenthood

These concepts may be practised by any given pair of individuals in any combination.

Monogamy in any form is extremely rare in mammal species, estimated at somewhere between 3% and 5% of mammal species. There is, however, a much higher incidence of social monogamy in primate species. Research^[1] by Christopher Opie, Department of **Anthropology**, University College London, Quentin D. Atkinson, School of **Psychology**,

University of Auckland, Robin I. M. Dunbar, Department of **Experimental Psychology**, University of Oxford and Susanne Shultz, **Computational and Evolutionary Biology** Research Group, Faculty of Life Sciences, University of Manchester in 2013 established that **social** monogamy evolved in primates as a defence against infanticide by other males, and that the benefits of male mate-guarding and the benefits of biparental care followed as a consequence of this evolutionary trait.

In the case of Western human civilization, the benefits of **social** monogamy ultimately became enshrined in our social mores, and sexual monogamy and genetic monogamy “came along for the ride” as it were.

There is strong evidence that the *Homo sapiens* never evolved **sexual** monogamy. Biologically, humans are not programmed to be sexually monogamous!

Eros as a Primal Passion

Now, human history teaches us repeatedly that base animal instincts lie just below the surface. For example, **tribalism** is the root cause of human conflict from mistrust and prejudice through to wars. Have you ever read the 1954 novel “Lord of the Flies” by William Golding? It is very chilling and very disturbing.

Is **ἔρως** just a passion that arises from the animal beneath, an evolutionary urge to encourage procreation and the preservation of one’s own genes? One could view **ἔρως** as simply a physical need, such as eating, urinating and defecating.

Should our society disentangle sexual monogamy from social monogamy in its mores? We could be ambivalent to sexual acts between any consenting adults completely irrespective of their standing in the “love hierarchy”.

We feel no guilt or shame in allowing a masseur unknown to us to conduct a massage. Should we likewise feel no guilt or shame in satisfying sexual urges with consenting adults unknown to us, even in exchange for money?

Some people with disabilities may be unable to enter into normal spousal relationships and yet will still have sexual needs. Why can their sexual needs not be met through the employment of sex workers? (Indeed, in many disability sectors, this practice actually occurs “under the radar”, as it were.)

In some spousal relationships in which **ἀγάπη** is unquestionably present, one of the partners may be unable to engage in sexual acts due to some medical incapacity. What is wrong with the other partner seeking sexual gratification elsewhere from other consenting adults “with no strings attached”, so long as the partner is aware and consenting?

Even in a spousal relationship in which **ἀγάπη** is unquestionably present, why should each partner not be able to engage in sexual acts with other consenting adults “with no strings attached”, again so long as the partner is aware and consenting?

So long as all people concerned are aware of the “rules”, and only consenting adults participate, why not engage in ἔρως wherever we please?

Welcome back to the era of the hippie – free love!



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Reference

- [1] Christopher Opie, Quentin D. Atkinson, Robin I. M. Dunbar, and Susanne Shultz (2013), “Male infanticide leads to social monogamy in primates”, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, **110**, No. 33, 13328–13332
[doi: 10.1073/pnas.1307903110]