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THE BROKEN WINGS OF EROS: CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND THE DENIAL OF DESIRE

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[In this segment of the Notes on Moral Theology, *the author argues that overcoming one's suspicion of eros in Christian ethics would lead to a more integrated vision of the human person, moving beyond the dichotomies between rational knowledge and emotional cognition, spirituality and sexuality, agape and self-love. At the same time, positive recognition of eros would help oust the eroticization of power.]*

PERHAPS THE EARLY accounts of the origins and functions of eros in the ancient Greek tradition which are varied and confusing explain the lingering suspicion and denial of eros in the Christian ethical tradition. Such an explanation would be consoling but obviously too simplistic.[1] Contemporary reflections on relationships, spirituality, art and the moral life are beginning to question this Christian breaking of eros' wings. Such questioning is exemplified in the writing of Mark Doty. "As if desire is our enemy, instead of the eradicable force that binds us to the world."[2] "I am certain that the part of us that desires, that loves, that longs for encounter and connection—physical and psychic and every other way—is also the part of us that knows something about God."[3] Doty, admitting that there was no sustenance for him in a religion of explanations and prohibitions, proposes that such a religion "suggested that the divinity had constructed

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[1] "To prevent some common misunderstandings, it is necessary to say here that Platonism is not the origin of that neurotic obsession with sexual sin, with all its pruderies, repressions and perversions, which is so common and unattractive a feature of puritanical, ascetic and other worldly interpretations of Christianity" (A. H. Armstrong and R. A. Markus, *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy* [London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1960] 51).

[2] Mark Doty, "Sweet Chariot," in *Wrestling with the Angel: Faith and Religion in the Lives of Gay Men,* ed. Brian Bouldrey (New York: Riverhead, 1995) 6.

[3] Ibid. 7.

the earth as a kind of spiritual minefield, a chutes and ladders game of snares and traps and seductions, all of them fueled by the engines of our longing."[4]

FIVE QUESTIONS CONCERNING EROS

Any attempt to recover eros will eventually lead the inquirer to ask James B. Nelson's three penetrating questions: "What is it? Why has it been so difficult to incorporate it into Christian sexual ethics, and what is the importance of doing so?"[5] Two additional questions seem appropriate. Why has it been forgotten or denied, and who is leading the rediscovery? In fact, these five questions, arranged in a slightly different order, will map the course for my article. The "what is it" will take us from ancient Greek mythology and philosophy to some of the early Fathers, and on to a sample of contemporary theological writers. The "why has it been forgotten" will lead us to consider the false dichotomy that has often been constructed between eros and agape and the deceptive eroticization of power enshrined by patriarchy.[6] As for the difficulty of incorporating the erotic into Christian ethics, I suggest that the narrowing of the erotic to the body and to its sexual desire and pleasure, as well as the characterizing of it as selfish, and thus in opposition to agape love constitute part of the problem.

It will also become evident that feminist writers now seem to be leading the way in the recovery of the erotic in ethics. This recovery calls for a committed erotic justice characterized by passion and compassion. Erotic justice, unlike an ethic based on control and certain interpretations of detachment, does not subdue its adherers so that they become fearful, passive, secretive, uncreative, and passionless. Being fearful, passive, secretive, uncreative, and passionless are the signs of the victims of erotized power. Of course, it is not difficult to embrace such a restrictive ethic if one accepts either the premise that being controlled is better than running the risk of letting desire and longing and even justice get out of control, or if one accepts the conviction that controlling is the ultimate pleasure of our desiring anyway, even though such pleasure needs to be vested with religious sentiment or outrightly denied.

[4] Ibid. 6.

[5] James B. Nelson, "Love, Power, and Justice in Sexual Ethics," in *Christian Ethics: Problems and Prospects,* ed. Lisa Cahill and James F. Childress (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1996) 284.

[6] "For Plato and Plotinus sexual passion is a first manifestation of an *eros* which, rightly directed, can lead us onto God, and in no way something to be merely repressed and condemned. Avarice and greed for power which makes men tyrants are far more deadly manifestations of body-dominated worldliness than lust" (Armstrong and Markus, *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy* 52).

THE TRADITIONAL ROOTS OF EROS

The nature and function of eros necessitates a backward glance to traditional Greek mythology as transmitted by Hesiod in particular, and poets and philosophers in general. Plato's *Symposium,* with its six characters all praising eros, although disagreeing among themselves about its origin and function, serves this purpose well, for the dialogue summarizes the different strands of the myth in the philosophical and poetic Greek tradition and expresses most of what Plato has to say about eros.[7]

The characters Phaedrus and Agathon refer to the primordial Eros who appears after Chaos and Gaea (Earth) as one of the three divinities (in accord with Hesiod's account in his *Theogany*). Pausanias and Eryximachus hold that Eros accompanies the Ouranian Aphrodite who arose from the sperm that flowed into the sea from the amputated genitals of Ouranus. They also offer the alternative, namely, that Eros is inseparable from the Pandemian Aphrodite, that is, the daughter of Zeus and Dione. Aristophanes has Eros born from an egg laid by the sable-plumed Night. Eros is enchanting, brilliant, and bold with his pinions of gold (Aristophanes *Birds* 693–703). Finally, Socrates speaks of another Eros, who is in fact not a god but rather a demon, an intermediary between the gods and humans, the son of Expedient and Poverty. Expedient, the son of Invention, according to legend, was intoxicated at a party of the gods, and fell asleep in the garden of Zeus. Poverty took advantage of this situation and lay beside him, and thus Eros was conceived.[8]

The first thing to note about eros in the *Symposium* is its naturalness, that is, it is that power in each person which determines the way that person will be inclined to other things. We desire what is natural to us but strangely also what is lacking in us. According to the speech that Plato puts on the lips of Aristophanes, we humans are always desiring and pursuing the whole which we are not, ever since we were cut in half by Zeus and only patched up by Apollo.[9] This is in fact what love is, the desire for self-

[7] Brian Mooney argues that Plato's *Lysis* is a kind of prolegomena to the theory of love that we find in the *Symposium.* See "Plato and the Love of Individuals," *Heythrop Journal* 43 (2002) 311–27.

[8] Mythologies, translated by Gerard Honigsbaum et al. from *Dictionnaire des mythologies et des religions des sociétés traditionelles et du monde antique,* ed. Yves Bonnefoy (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981) 1.469.

[9] For a recent psychological interpretation, see Mark Patrick Hederman, *Eros: Mad, Crazy Love* (Dublin: Veritas, 2001). The author argues that desire has its origin in our birth, which is the primordial experience of separation from the unity and harmony of the womb. James A. Wallace, C.Ss.R., treats eros and preaching in *Imaginal Preaching: An Archetypal Perspective* (New York: Paulist, 1995) 36–47; see also Jean Bastaire, *Eros sauvé: ou le jeu de l'ascèse et de l'amour* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1990).

completion by the desired or loved object. In other words, it is because of our incompleteness that we desire, and we desire another object or person to complete us, and such a desire can be love. "The lover desires the object of his/her love and thus lacks that object, but it is the lack that explains the very phenomenon of desire."[10] Now we can desire with a physical passion or a sensual love which is closely linked to the body, and sensual love is certainly part of eros. However, since the soul is always attempting to quench the lack, it needs to ascend from the desire of beautiful material things to complete us to the desire of spiritual things "until it ultimately comes to rest where alone it can find its complete and final satisfaction, in the contemplation of the absolutely Beautiful itself."[11]

In this sense, desire seems to have a life of its own, for one might start with desiring the beautiful body of another, but the body alone will not satisfy and so the spirit of the person is desired and loved also, and in turn, this desire for the other leads to the desire of Beauty itself. So Eros, with his golden pinions and arrow, not only wounds us with desire but also gives us the wings to fly up the *scala amoris,* to become the authentic lover, the *erotikos,* the lover of Beauty itself. With the help of Eros, the intermediary, we fly from poverty to possession, from ignorance to knowledge, from the material to the spiritual and to the contemplation of Beauty itself.

Naturally we expect more from Plato than simply equating eros with the desiring of objects or persons to fulfill ourselves. Lovers, with their passions, desires, and impulses, in search of the other half and longing for wholeness, are only true lovers and under the power of Eros, according to Plato, when what they seek is good (*Symposium* 206B).[12] With this qualification, namely, that what is longed for and desired must be good, and with the Platonic stress on the transition from the love of material things to the spiritual, and ultimately, Beauty and Goodness itself, it is not surprising that some of the early Christian writers turned their attention to eros.

Eros and Agape in Origen and Gregory of Nyssa

While the term eros never appears in the New Testament, it is used twice in the Septuagint, namely in Proverbs where it refers to erotic desire. An adulterous woman says to a young man she is trying to seduce: "Come let us feast ourselves in pleasure until morning. Let us delight together in love (*eroti*)" (Proverbs 7:18). The second occurrence has a similar negative tone: "Three things are insatiable (never satisfied), four never say enough: Ha-

[10] Mooney, "Plato and the Love of Individuals" 316.
[11] Armstrong and Markus, *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy* 84.
[12] Mooney rightly insists that love and desire are not the same. Love is characterized partly in terms of desire, but it is more since it includes active valuation. See his "Plato and the Love of Individuals."

des, feminine eros ("the barren womb" in NRSV), the earth never saturated with water, and the fire that never says 'enough' " (Proverbs 30:16). With only two direct references, and not very inspiring ones at that in the Old Testament it is not surprising that early writers often suggested that the absence of the specific word in the Scriptures does not necessarily infer that the reality is not considered.[13]

Origen, in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs,* attempts to explain why eros is so infrequently used. "Nevertheless, it seems to me that the divine Scripture wishes to warn us, lest the word *love* should provide an occasion of falling for the readers; and so for those who are weak Scripture uses the words *loving affection* or *affectionate love* as more honorable for what is called by the wise of this world *desire* or *love.*"[14]

For Origen, so captivated by the Platonic eros, whatever is said about agape in the Scriptures can be said about eros. The two words mean the same for Origen, since the Scriptures only substitutes agape for eros to prevent the weak and uninformed from thinking about carnal desire and passion. Origen even goes so far as to interpret the famous phrase of St. Ignatius of Antioch, "My eros is crucified," to mean "[Christ] my love is crucified." He infers that we can call God eros just as John in the Fourth Gospel calls God agape.

Gregory of Nyssa, who praises the work of Origen in his *Homilies on the Song of Songs,* attempts to explain why eros translates better than agape the excess of love that the soul can have when its eyes are fixed upon the inaccessible Beauty of the divine nature.[15] It is all to do with an excess of love that is almost violent, similar to carnal erotic passion that can be experienced when a body is intensely desired. "Human nature cannot express this surplus (that is divine love). Thus has it taken as a symbol, in order to make us understand its teaching what there is that is most violent in the passions that act upon us—I am talking about the passion of love (*erotikon pathos*)" (*Oratio* 1.773 b–c). According to Gregory of Nyssa, this desire for divine Beauty burns with the single flame of the Spirit because it has been wounded in the soul by an arrow of love (*tou erotos*).

[13] For a contemporary discussion of *eros* in the Book of Daniel, see John S. Custer, "Man of Desires: Eros in The Book of Daniel," *Downside Review* 119 (2001) 217–27.

[14] Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs,* in *Origen: An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer and Selected Works* (New York: Paulist, 1979). The translator notes the following: that love = amor = eros; loving affection = caritas = agape; affectionate love = dilectio; desire = cupido = epithumía.

[15] For a more detailed discussion of eros in the thought of Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and Denys the Areopagite, see Ysabel de Andia, "Eros and Agape: The Divine Passion of Love," *Communio* 24 (1997) 29–50.

The Contemporary Whipping Boy for the Agape/Eros Tension

In contrast to the works of Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, the book of Anders Nygren epitomizes the setting of eros and agape against one another in recent theological reflection.[16] One writer comments in her footnote that: "It is not a question here of mounting a critique of Nygren's book, whose thesis, setting eros in opposition to agape, has been sufficiently refuted, but rather of taking up this theme once again within a limited framework.[17] Catherine Osborne, on the other hand, observes that: "Two writers have been particularly influential in building up a popular prejudice against Plato, and against the 'Platonic love' that is essential to true philosophy for Plato. One of these is Anders Nygren, whose claims about the difference between Platonic eros and Christian agape have become widely and uncritically accepted in much popular Christian teaching."[18] Osborne is obviously concerned that Nygren's bifurcation of love into eros (which is pagan, human passion, Platonic) and agape (which is biblical, divine love and Christian) is still causing distortion in the popular mind despite the critiques of other academics. Nygren has not been alone in his negative evaluation of eros. Karl Barth portrayed eros as a ravenous desire, a rapacious intensification and strengthening of natural self-assertion, to be contrasted with Christian love.[19] Philosophers have continued to argue among themselves as to whether Platonic eros is acquisitive, egocentric, and devaluing of persons.[20] While attempting to remain open to what both sides of the debate have to offer, let us explore some contemporary attempts to abandon Nygren's caricature of eros.

[16] Anders Nygren, *Eros et Agape: la notion chrétienne de l'amour et ses transformations,* 3 vols. (Paris: Aubier, 1944); English translation in one volume by Philip S. Watson, *Agape and Eros* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

[17] Ysabel de Andia, "Eros and Agape" 34, n. 8.

[18] Catherine Osborne, *Eros Unveiled: Plato and the God of Love* (New York: Oxford University, 1994) appendix, 222. The other writer referred to is Gregory Vlastos, who wrote "The Individual as Object of Love in Plato," in *Platonic Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1981) 1–34.

[19] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV.2: *The Doctrine of Reconciliation,* trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clarke, 1958) 734.

[20] For a positive evaluation of Platonic eros, see R. A. Markus, "The Dialectic of Eros in Plato's Symposium," in *Plato,* ed. Gregory Vlastos, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1970); F. M. Cornford, "The Doctrine of Eros in Plato's Symposium," in *The Unwritten Philosophy and Other Essays,* ed. W. K. C. Guthrie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950); L. A. Kosman, "Platonic Love," in *Eros, Agape and Philia: Readings in the Philosophy of Love,* ed. Alan Soble (New York: Paragon House, 1989). For a more critical approach see Robert C. Soloman, *Love: Emotion, Myth, and Metaphor* (New York: Doubleday, 1981).

The Four Loves

The classic work of C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves,* states at the outset what the author means by eros. "By Eros I mean of course that state which we call 'being in love.' "[21] A central distinction is then drawn by Lewis, namely: "That sexual pleasure can occur without Eros, without 'being in love,' and that Eros includes other things besides sexual activity, I take for granted."[22] He opts to speak not of sexual pleasure without eros, nor of the other forms of eros besides sexual activity, but eros, "being in love," as it is related to human sexuality and sexual activity. Most people, Lewis claims, do not start with raw sexuality, a desire or appetite for a man or a woman and the pleasure they can give, and then go on at a latter stage to fall in love with that man or woman. Rather, there is a delight, a preoccupation with the beloved, there is desire no doubt, a strong desire, but it is for the other in his or her totality. The sexual element normally only awakens after this broader desire has been aroused.

So, according to Lewis, we can have someone in love or falling in love with another (eros) and part of that being in love is sexual, what he refers to as the Venus aspect or ingredient of eros. Furthermore, he argues that eros does not really aim at happiness, as is sometimes commonly held. Equally surprising, it promotes selflessness. For example, if you are in love with another, you would rather be unhappy with your beloved than happy without them. Being in love, propels lovers to forget about themselves and to do all things for the other. Eros in his splendor can be ready for every sacrifice except renunciation of the beloved. This is the grandeur and the terror of being in love.

A crucial step is taken by Lewis, in terms of the meaning and function of eros for the believer. This love is really and truly like Love Himself. This experience of total preoccupation and commitment is a paradigm or example built into our natures, a glimpse of the love we ought to have toward our God and our neighbor.[23] Unfortunately, the experience, to use Plato's expression, of being carried on the wings of Eros, is fleeting, for Eros is full of fickleness. He is not permanent, he carries us just for a time, and moves on, so that the overpowering urge to be selfless and the élan that goes with it, withers or even dies.[24] When he does his stuff and moves on: "It is we who must labour to bring our daily life into even close accordance with

[21] C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1960) 131.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid. 153.
[24] Lewis argues that eros transforms desire that is preoccupied with its own selfish needs into a need. "But in Eros, a Need, at its most intense sees the object most intensely as a thing admirable in herself, important far beyond her relation to the love's need" (ibid. 136).

what the glimpses have revealed. We must do the work of Eros when Eros is not present."[25]

Interestingly, Lewis mentions some false fears about eros. Our main concern should not be that eros will lead to wanton sexual license. Lewis suggests that we overestimate the power of sex and its seriousness. Nor should we worry that the lovers may idolize each other, for enough time together will solve that temptation. While there is the real possibility that lovers will neglect their duties to others and their responsibilities, all in the name of love, the real danger is that lovers may idolize eros. "The real danger seems to me not that lovers will idolise each other but that they will idolise Eros himself."[26] Perhaps Socrates's belief, as portrayed by Plato, was right. Eros is not a god, but an intermediary. Eros needs help, for he is there only from time to time to give us a glimpse and to let us fly for a moment. When he soon leaves us, at least we are left knowing there is something more to be, to give, and to have. In the Christian scheme of things, the help will come, according to Lewis, by our efforts, our humility, divine grace and charity.

Lewis's description of this one love eros (the other three are affection, friendship, and charity) reminds one of certain science fiction productions on television. In these popular television shows, Earthlings, at certain rare times, are given the opportunity to travel through a "stargate" or a "worm hole" to another world. These strange worlds are light years away so that the distance can never be travelled in a lifetime without such opportune openings. The adventurers are taken at great speed to their destination and catch a glimpse of the new world in which they find themselves. Once there, they have tasks to do, truths to discover, difficulties to overcome, and lessons to learn. The time is always short and then they must come back to earth, usually richer for the experience and the risk, prepared to put the new insights to good purpose.

Paul Tillich: More than Desire

Alexander Irwin, examining passages drawn from all the periods of Tillich's career, argues convincingly that Tillich had a persistent concern with eros and its impact on human life.[27] Once during convocation ceremonies at Union Theological Seminary, New York City, Tillich stated that "each person is locked up within himself, and each desires to transcend himself through the power of eros." Indeed, for Tillich, eros seems to be a power in every being that strives and yearns for perfection. It is the source of every movement in the world because all finite beings have a desire for the

[25] Ibid. 159.
[26] Ibid. 155.
[27] Alexander C. Irwin, *Eros Toward the World: Paul Tillich and the Theology of the Erotic* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

infinite reality.[28] Reflecting on the "primal powers of existence," Tillich proposes that eros is intimately bound up with the drives and powers that are a part of the depths of the human person, and since human persons are sexual, eros, though not to be equated with the sexual drive and sex itself, is closely connected with our sexuality.[29] Tillich's further observation that the impulse for eros and the impulse for power are the two fundamental polar, yet related, forces of the subconscious, will be of particular interest to us in the concluding section of this survey on eros.

Although closely linked to our sexuality, or perhaps to be more precise, because these erotic energies and drives are linked to our sexuality, they can also be united with the highest functions of the human mind. Eros, according to Tillich, propels us not only to pursue physical beauty and the pleasure of sexual expression, but also the truth and beauty of the intellectual and spiritual goods. The underlying assumption is that our emotional life is not irrational in itself and in fact cannot be separated from our intellectual life. Tillich argues that an emotional element is present in every rational act, and that eros in fact provides the philosopher with a passion for wisdom.[30]

Both Paul Tillich and Edward Farley examine the knowledge that comes from eros or is influenced by eros. Tillich speaks of "cognitive eros" as opposed to "intellectualism," that is, the use of the cognitive intellect without eros.[31] Farley refers to the "elemental passions" that are different from mere passing desires, since the desire of the elemental passions always goes beyond their present realizations.[32]

At the risk of oversimplifying a common thread in their approach to knowledge, it seems that both assert that there is a type of knowledge that reduces the world and its inhabitants to objectified "things." With such an approach to knowledge, we can often presume that the thing is fully known. Furthermore, our knowledge is for utilitarian purposes and the relationship between the knower and the known is one of a master in control of an objectified "thing" or object. This type of knowledge, divorced from eros or the elemental passions, is "intellectualism" for Tillich,[33] or one of the extremes of a pretense to absolute knowledge or cynicism for Wendy Farley.[34]

In contrast, there is another form of knowledge that is not for controlling

[28] Ibid. 44.

[29] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology,* 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951–1963) 2.54.

[30] Ibid. 1.72, 77.

[31] Ibid. 1.90.

[32] Edward Farley, *Good and Evil: Interpreting a Human Condition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

[33] See Alexander Irwin, *Eros toward the World* 55–61.

[34] See Wendy Farley, "Eros and the Truth," in *Theology and the Interhuman:*

and does not use the world and people as objects, but is rather, primarily for uniting the knower with the known. Farley refers to a relating to the world that is mysterious, beautiful, and perplexing. There is an acknowledgment that the world and other people remain always more than we can ever know. Eros knowledge, rather than simply using the known, takes a delight and a joy in the other known. For Tillich, the outcome of such an erotic knowing is an involved knower, with a dynamic relationship with the known, and such a dynamic relationship transforms and heals. Farley adds an interesting dimension to this eros knowledge. Such knowledge not only reveals the mystery and the beauty of the known but also their vulnerability to pain and suffering. There does seem to be a consistency to Farley's approach, for since objectifying knowledge reduces the other to a "thing," a useful "thing" at that, and things do not suffer, it stands to reason that one does not feel any obligation to them in justice. This obviously will have direct bearing on the ethical aspects of eros, for as Wendy Farley comments, "erotic relation to others permits a proximity in which a deeper understanding of them and their situation is possible."[35]

In summary, the knowing that comes from eros strives for a form of union, to be part of, in proximity to the other, while cognitive knowledge, attempting to divorce itself from eros, focuses on the control of the other known and its usefulness.

Edward Vacek and the Three Loves

"A life solely of selfless, self-forgetting, self-sacrificial agape would be seriously deficient."[36] Vacek certainly knows how to draw the reader's attention to the eros / agape tension exemplified in Nygren's work. It is not that he diminishes the significance of agape, for the word agape certainly appears more often in the Old Testament than does eros (the Hebrew word *ahaba* is translated in the Septuagint as agape),[37] and no one would dispute the centrality of *agape* in the New Testament.[38] The issue at hand is the positive value of eros in every human life. How one understands this posi-

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Essays in Honor of Edward Farley, ed. Robert R. Williams (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity, 1995) 2–39.

[35] Wendy Farley, "Eros and the Truth" 32.

[36] Edward Collins Vacek, S.J., *Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics* (Washington: Georgetown University, 1994) 247.

[37] 2 Kings 1:26; 13:15; Ecclesiastes 9:1; 9:6; Song of Songs 2:4, 5, 7; 5:8; 7:5; 8:4, 6, and 7; Wisdom 3:8; 6:18; Sirach 48:11; Jeremiah 2:2.

[38] Ceslas Spicq, *Agape in the New Testament,* 3 vols. (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Company, 1963); Gene Outka, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis* (New Haven: Yale University, 1972); James Hanigan, *As I Have Loved You: The Challenge of Christian Ethics* (New York: Paulist, 1986).

tive and indispensable dynamic of eros will determine one's approach to anthropology, human sexuality, spirituality, and justice.

Vacek gives us three useful distinctions concerning (a) agape (b) agape for self, and (c) eros. He argues, I think convincingly, that all three are vital to the Christian life. There are two forms of self-love, namely, agape for self and eros. Eros is what he calls an indirect love of self. "In the first, the immediate object of love is our own self; in the second the immediate object is something other than ourselves, which we love as a way of loving ourselves. With the first, we love ourselves for our own sake: agapic self-love. With the second, we love another for our own sake: eros."[39]

Direct self-love overcomes an unhealthy self-hate or loathing and can integrate our good tendencies into a positive direction for our lives. It affirms dynamisms in ourselves that foster our identity and helps us reject those dynamisms that lead to disintegration. We have a duty in fact of self-love because what is at stake is our positive self-identity. A consequence of such a healthy self-love is that: "You do not have to denigrate, use or parasitically identify with the goodness of others as ways of bolstering a sense of our own worth."[40] Also out of self-love we affirm our natural tendencies to preserve our lives and to actualize ourselves. In fact self-love lies behind our concern for our own personal integrity and identity.

When he comes to consider the nature of eros, Vacek begins with the Thomistic axiom: "Every nature desires its own being and its own perfection."[41] Aquinas suggests that we actually love something insofar as it is for our own good. Vacek quotes Aquinas as stating that, when it comes even to our love of God, if God did not fulfill our need then there would be no reason to love Him. Having thus jolted us into the mind of Aquinas on the love of concupiscence, Vacek offers a definition of eros. "Here I understand it as love for other persons or things not for their sakes, but *for the lover's sake.*"[42] So while eros is a form of self-love, it is to be distinguished from agapic self-love because its proceeds by way of love for the other. Vacek stresses that eros is a real love for others. It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that we love others partly for what they can do for us. What other people can do for us when we love them does not have to be our primary reason or goal for loving, for the dynamic of self-love is often tacit.[43]

Vacek further clarifies what he means by eros when he states that not every desire is love. Eros, however, is an objective love that emotionally

[39] Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine* 240.
[40] Ibid. 244.
[41] *Summa theologiae* 1, q. 48, art. 1.
[42] Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine* 247.
[43] Ibid. 248.

unites the lover with the beloved even though that love will involve self-love. Eros also values the good in the other. We are now in a position to distinguish some of the forms of eros. There is the sensual *epithymic* form, where the loved one gives us sexual sense pleasure. In the *psychological* form eros seeks the other because they make us comfortable and cheerful. With *spiritual* form of eros, we hope to share in the sublimity of the beautiful object and its *religious* form: "[E]ros wants God to be perfect because otherwise our quest for the perfectly fulfilling good would seem thwarted."[44]

So while we can and should give and receive without consideration of what that giving and receiving will do for us (agape love), there is a legitimate place for eros where we affirm and delight in others insofar as they bring us growth, joy, and reward. Like C. S. Lewis, Vacek is also aware of the possible dangers associated with eros, mainly that we could affirm only part of the other's value, that part which promotes our self-interest, but he also agrees with Outka's conclusion that a human life without eros is a life devoid of some of the major features of our human identity or personhood.[45]

THE DENIAL OF EROS

Even a rudimentary knowledge of the history of Christian theological reflection reveals a resistance to the incorporation of eros into the Christian tradition, especially in regard to Christology, spirituality, and ethics. James Nelson throws down the gauntlet here when he maintains that it is the patriarchal rejection of eros that has distorted theological reflection on sexuality, the experience of gender, the nature of pleasure, and the image of God. "Men project onto God the separation they learned as essential to manhood, and God is imaged having exaggerated qualities of otherness and self-sufficiency. Moreover, men's phallic genitalization of sexual feeling and value accents those phallic values in the holy. That which is most valuable (in sex, in culture, or in faith) is big, hard and up. God is sovereign in power, righteous in judgement, wholly other in transcendence."[46]

Nelson's point revolves around men's erotic anxiety. Eros, according to Nelson, is that dimension of love born of desire. It is the yearning for fulfilment and deep connection and it cannot be reduced to mere genital sexual urge. He argues that boys soon learn to separate from the erotic bonding with their mothers and they come to reject all things feminine, including the erotic, for eros seems to contradict the manly virtues of

[44] Ibid. 249.
[45] Outka, *Agape* 267.
[46] James B. Nelson, "Love, Power, and Justice in Sexual Ethics" 289.

self-sufficiency and the rational control of all things, especially the bodily. Male-dominated theology has naturally also rejected eros, with the resulting image of God tending to be lacking in mutuality, more a non-relational power glorified by the dependency of humanity. Realizing that such an image is deficient and indeed threatening, Nelson seems to be suggesting that there is some kind of overcompensating on the part of patriarchal theology, so that God now becomes sheer agape and utter self-giving.

This seems to be at the heart of the agape/eros split. Eros is viewed with suspicion because theology has been uneasy about desire, deep connection (such connection with other human beings), and anything that smacks of self-love. Anne Gilson speaks of a pervading split caused by "malestream" reflections, "a split in us that does not exist between, for example, spirit and body, spirituality and sexuality, male and female, agape and eros."[47] I now wish to explore some of the more concrete expressions of this split and denial of eros in the Christian tradition.

Denial and Christology

It has been argued that the cross of Christ has not freed us from a history of systematic distrust and suppression of desire but endorsed such repression.[48] How is this so? We suffer because of our sins, and our sins are based on following our desires. Jesus, by contrast, did not follow his own desires but rather did the will of the Father. Moore challenges this simplistic approach to desire, Christ, and ourselves. In fact, contends Moore, it is the men and women who have the courage to follow their desires who really suffer, not because they sin, but because they are involved and speak for the desires of others. It is good to desire, to know and say what you want, to see the difference between just staying where you are, merely repeating past and safe satisfactions, and saying, "I want more."[49] Moore, I am convinced, makes a valid distinction between liberation from desire and liberation of desire. The former is insatiable self-promoting ego, compulsive, addictive, and gives desire a bad name. The latter gives one's story a chance to move on. Risk, in fact, is the refusal to forget desire.[50]

Does the cross of Christ have to mean the negation of desire, élan, vitality, and creativity? Obviously not. In Moore's view the cross is really about transformation and not just denial. "Real desire, what I really want and have always wanted, is to be more and more myself in the mystery in

[47] Anne Bathurst Gilson, *Eros Breaking Free: Interpreting Sexual Theo-Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1995) 59.

[48] Sebastian Moore, *Jesus the Liberator of Desire* (New York: Crossroad, 1989) especially chap. 6, "The Crisis of an Ethic Without Desire."

[49] Ibid. 91.

[50] Ibid. 92.

which I am. . . . It is the love that permeates all the universe, trying to happen I me."[51] In fact, argues Moore, to be embarrassed by one's own animality and desire is the result of the Fall. After the Fall the higher powers wish to disown the lower. Thus, the task before us is not to keep curbing desire, but rather to keep growing and deepening desire. "The task before us is not to subject sexual passion to the will, but to restore it to desire."[52]

Commenting on the theologies of Jesus as the Christ and the Christ as God—where one expects love to be the path of imitation—Joan Timmerman notes: "What is surprising is that love modeled by the archetypal figure of Christ should emphasize the commitments of parent and neighbor to the practical exclusion of conjugal, erotic love."[53] Her point is that Jesus' humanity, as constructed in various theologies, depends on our own ideas and aspirations about what it means to be human. If a cultural and social system considers the clandestine as the only proper arena for human sexuality and sex, this in turn will be reflected in its Christology.[54] So little has been said about Jesus' sexuality because, she contends, we deny the erotic. She argues that "an element of Christology is lacking until we can allow ourselves to formulate images of Jesus entering as deeply into the passion of his sexuality as we have done regarding the passion of his suffering."[55]

While the vast area of the erotic and art is beyond the scope of my survey, I note several observations about the erotic and Christian art, specifically about how art depicts Christ. Art often touches the power of the erotic where words fear to go. This certainly seems to be true about Christ and the erotic. Art historian Leo Steinberg argues that Renaissance artists in Italy and in the Northern Europe stressed the full humanity of Jesus, including his sex and sexuality.[56] The child Jesus in his mother's arms is not only naked but his mother usually points to his genitals in an *ostentatio genitalium.* Even in depictions of the dead Christ his hand usually covers his genitals, a sign of his full humanity and a symbol of his modesty even in death. Some artists, argues Steinberg, even went so far as to indicate the *testimonium fortitudinis* in the depictions of the resurrected Christ.[57] It has been argued that "[u]p until the time of Rubens the erotic

[51] Ibid. 93.
[52] Ibid. 106.
[53] Joan H. Timmerman, *Sexuality and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) chap. 2, "The Sexuality of Jesus and the Human Vocation," 26.
[54] See Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1988).
[55] Ibid. 28.
[56] Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (New York: Pantheon, 1983).
[57] Ibid. 91. Note that when Steinberg speaks of the "mortification of the penis" he is referring to the circumcision of Christ.

was entirely acceptable as the content of church art. From the nineteenth century onwards, the erotic has been judged unseemly for the house of God."[58] Thus, it would seem that the only remaining medium for expressing the erotic dimensions of Christology has been denied us in these last centuries.[59] Such a denial has had consequences for various forms of Christian spirituality.

The Denial of Eros and Spirituality

It has been stated too that "[i]n its fundamental truth, eroticism is holy; eroticism is divine. On the other hand, the holy, the divine, which distances itself from the erotic, is founded upon the power and intensity of eroticism and shares at a fundamental level the same impulse."[60] The publication of *Sexuality and the Sacred* perhaps for the first time drew the attention of many readers to the connection between eros and spirituality. The book's editors, through their choice of articles, were obviously convinced that our sexuality is intended by God as neither incidental nor detrimental to our spirituality.[61] In fact, sexuality is portrayed as a basic dimension of spirituality. It follows that the same can be said of the sexual dimension of eros. While the meaning of spirituality may be broadly or specifically defined,[62] the common quest of spirituality seeks to find what is ultimately real (even though the levels of reality are not always immediately apparent) and to search for a personal integration or wholeness in a climate of fragmenta-

[58] Timmerman, *The Sexuality of Jesus* 29.

[59] This denial did not occur in all secular art. See e.g. Ghislaine Wood, *Art Nouveau and the Erotic* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000). "Eroticism is one of the determining features of Art Nouveau, and can be seen both in the overt use of erotic forms and imagery and in a symbolic use of myth and religion" (7).

[60] Georges Bataille, *The Meaning of Eroticism* as quoted in *Art Nouveau and the Erotic* 72.

[61] James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow, *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994) xiv.

[62] For example: "By it we mean the ways and patterns by which persons relate to that which is ultimately real and worthwhile to them. With this term we signify the response of the whole person—mind and body, feelings and relationships—to the presence of whatever is held to be sacred, of ultimate worth" (Nelson and Longfellow, *Sexuality and the Sacred* 71). "Christian spirituality is the lived experience of Christian belief in both its general and more specialized forms . . . it is possible to distinguish spirituality from doctrine in that it concentrates not on faith itself, but on the reaction that faith arouses in religious consciousness and practice. It can likewise be distinguished from Christian ethics in that it treats not all human actions in their relation to God, but those acts in which the relation to God is immediate and explicit" (Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorf, and Jean Leclercq, *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century* [New York: Crossroad, 1985] xv-xvi).

tion.[63] I now consider two different approaches toward the real, the sacred or the holy, and personal wholeness or holiness.

One approach seems highly suspicious of eros whereas the other seems to embrace eros. The former places the stress on detachment, denial of desire, and the power of the intellect. The latter emphasizes attachment, the release of desire, feeling, and the body. Timmerman reflects on this division in relation to grace. "It is not the renunciatory lifestyle that produces grace, but the response to grace that takes forms sometimes of detachment and sometimes of attachment. In the history of spirituality, perhaps because it was largely written or censored by men, perhaps because of the exegetical tradition, letting go, detachment, has been interpreted to have greater intrinsic value. But the movements of the Spirit toward embodiment, engagement, of taking hold are fruit equally of grace."[64] Regarding the body, Timmerman observes: "Those who deny their bodies and their feelings, thinking that the real self is the mental subject, are never wholly available. Some part, the vital, spontaneous part, is always under constraint. Touch is always feared."[65]

Certain approaches to spirituality, those stressing detachment, control, the rational, and suspicion of the body and emotions have also helped to clip the wings of eros. Contrasting French and German spirituality, Emmanuel Levinas suggests that German spirituality draws on eros while French spirituality does not. "To the contrary, a German, with his sensitivity, is interested in this inner drama, this blind-to-reason, unyielding restlessness. Germans see in it the richness and the depth of the human spirit. Understanding the spirit of man does not mean knowing the soul of man by reason, but rather living without trying to escape from life."[66] Does a spirituality that escapes the arrow of eros also aim to escape life?[67] Or are

[63] See Michael Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality* (New York: Paulist, 1996).

[64] Timmerman, *Sexuality and Spiritual Growth* 33.

[65] Ibid. 37.

[66] Emmanuel Levinas, "The Understanding of Spirituality in French and German Culture," *Continental Philosophy Review* 31 (1998) 4. Levinas took up the phenomenology of eros as the true site of transcendence. In his earlier writing he virtually equated the face-to-face relationship with eros, while in later writing he began to speak of "voluptuosity" which is not love of the other, but love of the love of the other, which is really love of oneself. All erotic love includes this "voluptuosity." See Stella Sandford, "Writing as a Man: Levinas and the Phenomenology of Eros," *Radical Philosophy* (1998) 6–17.

[67] Carter Heyward argues that eros is the source of our capacity for transcendence, that is, transcendence not understood as a spiritual flight from the world but rather a "crossing over" between ourselves, a connecting with each other. See her *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).

such spiritualities embraced so as to be spared the wound of eros? A Jewish writer argues that the two cannot really be separated or pitted against one another. He lists eight qualities of the sexual expression of our erotic drive that highlight the demarcating characteristics of the holy: *intensity,* the opposite of the superficial which, while not a constant, is an enlivening experience; *pleasurable,* common to both the experience of the erotic and the holy; *the infinity of the moment,* being fully present in the moment; *other as subject not object,* genuine experience of the erotic and the holy rules out relating to the other as the object of my manipulation; *radical giving and receiving,* the desire to give fully without thought of quid pro quo; *the defining of self,* the eros of sex and the experience of the holy are the contexts where we learn to give up control and to find ourselves in the letting go; *overcoming alienation* through a merging with the other or the Other; and *engagement of the human imagination,* to be able fly beyond the oppression of daily life.[68]

Why do I allude, even briefly to spirituality and eros? The last two decades reveal a feeding frenzy on spirituality by moral theologians, and rightly so. If the influence of one discipline on the other is so formative and so determinative, it stands to reason that the denial of eros in spirituality may well be a cause in Christian ethics of it being "grounded" (as in not being able to fly). The other possibility is that Christian ethics has not culled the insights of certain spiritualities into the power of desire because it has insisted on its own autonomy. Perhaps it is time for Christian ethics to reap the riches of the masters of spirituality's passion.

Erotic Justice and Eroticized Power

Eros, besides being a source of knowledge, is also a source of power, a power that can provide energy for integration, change, and challenge. This erotic power, some suggest, derives from our often unexpressed and unrecognized depth of feeling. Women who consciously tap into this power, maintains Audre Lorde, are regarded as dangerous. "For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering, and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society. Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within. In touch with the erotic I become less willing to accept powerless-

[68] Mordechai Gafni, "The Eros of the Holy," *Tikkun* [Oakland, Calif.] 14 (1999) 65–68.

ness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial."[69]

The experience of this erotic power, according to Lorde, can be triggered by sharing and connecting deeply in any pursuit with another person. This in turn puts us in touch with our deep capacity for joy. Lorde's insights supply us with the bare bones of an introduction to the role of the erotic in feminist writing.[70] Anne Bathurst Gilson elaborates how feminists have responded to the denial or denigration of eros in the patriarchal vision of reality.[71] The feminist's first move is to redefine eros and free it from the negative patriarchal definitions. (As we have noted the patriarchal definitions will always pit agape against eros so that we have self-denying agape in contrast to acquisitive self-love exemplified in the sexually erotic.) In fact, once redefined and understood eros becomes an analytic tool to help decode social power relationships and it reveals the often hidden relation of sexuality to issues of power and community. Gilson insists that eros is a positive source of knowledge and power that leads to justice rather than to oppression. Eros is "a body-centred love marked by a yearning, a pushing and pulling toward erotic mutuality, a movement toward embodied justice."[72] This type of love is not disinterested, remote, without feeling and bent on control, but is rather "a compassionate erotic love, which fuels our desire for justice, arises from particular (subjective) experiences and does not hesitate to make judgments about that which is not compassionate and does not promote justice."[73] Such a love is not afraid to take risks, and risks are essential for justice. It is not afraid because, according to feminist writers, eros is a source of energy for revolt against oppressive political and

[69] Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sexuality and the Sacred* 78.

[70] A significant number of feminist writers have turned their attention to the centrality of eros in personal identity, relationships, social ethics and politics. For example, Haunani-Kay Trask, *Eros and Power: The Promise of Feminist Theory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1986); Dorothee Solle, *The Strength of the Weak: Toward a Christian Feminist Identity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984); Beverly Wildung Harrison with Carol S. Robb, "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love," in *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Ethics* (Boston: Beacon, 1985). See also the cited works of Audre Lorde, Heyward Carter, Rita Nakashima Brock, and Wendy Farley. For a helpful overview, see Sandra Friedman and Alexander Irwin, "Christian Feminism, Eros and Power in Right Relation," in *Christian Perspectives on Sexuality and Gender,* ed. Elizabeth Stuart and Adrian Thatcher (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

[71] See Darlene Fozard Weaver's review of Anne Bathurst Gilson, *Eros Breaking Free* together with her reviews of the works of Christine Gudorf, Kathy Rudy and Joseph Monti, in *Religious Studies Review* 26 (2000) 165–70.

[72] Gilson, *Eros Breaking Free* 110.

[73] Ibid. 73.

social structures. One of the deep feelings tapped through eros is anger or rage that revolts against oppression, whereas: "When anger is hidden or goes unattended, masking itself, there the power of love, the power to act, deepen relation, atrophies and dies."[74]

Of particular interest to the feminist writers is the contrast drawn between true erotic love that draws healthily on the power of eros and leads to justice, and the twisted suppressed eroticization of power. Eros cannot be eliminated in any of us. It simply assumes different forms, some more twisted than others. It is the overpowering of another, their subjugation, having others under our control that to many can give more pleasure and feeling than any sexual expression of erotic love (though this will often be denied by them). Relating to others as non-engaging objects to be controlled is a variety of deformed eros aimed at our own self-interest and promotion. Marvin Ellison who expresses subtle realities in confronting language, has stated: "Status inequalities turn people on. Mutual respect or sharing power is not considered very sexy."[75] He continues: "Injustices, including sexism and racism, are eroticized, so that what stirs many people is not a passion for justice as right-relations and mutual regard, but rather a perverse desire to exercise power over someone else, especially someone not their kind."[76]

Feminist insights into eros and justice are confronting Christian ethics and Christian institutions that have a heightened sensitivity to the dangers of erotic love, especially as it is linked to sexual pleasure, yet that seem to have a high tolerance of twisted eros as expressed in power abuse. Eugene Kennedy employs his own "power of anger" to confront both the reader and the institutions.[77] His reflections suggest that while an institution may react immediately and with passion against any theological opinions that might be judged as unorthodox or possibly unorthodox—especially in the area of sexual ethics—the same passion may often not be evident when it comes to issues of justice. The irony is that in fact many of his anecdotes suggest that justice for the offending theologian is sometimes forgotten or viewed as optional in the bid to defend orthodox teaching especially on sexuality.

Reflecting on ecclesiastical punishment for suspect theologians, Kennedy suggests: "This profound humiliation is sexual in its intent and erotic in its gratification, as it aims not just to correct but to wound of-

[74] Beverly Wildung Harrison, *The Power of Anger* 14–15.

[75] Marvin Mahan Ellison, *Erotic Justice: A Liberating Ethic of Sexuality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996) 51.

[76] Ibid. 45.

[77] Eugene Kennedy, *The Unhealed Wound: The Church and Human Sexuality* (New York: St. Martin's, 2001).

fenders in their generativity."[78] He indirectly asks a further question. Why is it that the careerist element in the Church, with its drive for power and control, that vicariously expresses an underdeveloped or suppressed sexuality, is rarely confronted? James Keenan partly supplies the answer. "Unlike lessons we received about chastity and homosexuality, we were never taught much about power."[79] What were we taught about chastity and why were we not taught about the dangers of power? Is the denial of eros coming home to roost and the eroticization of power at last being outed? Readers may disagree with Kennedy's examples but be able to point to other disturbing signs and examples of twisted eros at work in individuals and institutions in the recent past and the present.

SINS AGAINST EROS AND CONCLUSION

There is no final word to have on eros for it cannot be captured. While eros is not a god of Christian ethics beyond all dangers, limitations, and criticism, it does deserve to fly.[80] The sins against eros seem to be as varied as the definitions of eros. If eros is primarily understood in terms of the power of feelings and desire then perhaps Aquinas' *insensibilitas* is one vice arising from the denial of eros.[81] While for Vacek, it would seem that the fault can be found in not loving ourselves all be it through loving another, for eros is more than just desire and a depth of feeling, it is a real love of another linked to love of self. C. S. Lewis warns us on the other hand of the danger of making too much of eros, in the sense that it becomes the measure of all things, for the grandeur and terror of being in love can be fleeting and we must continue to love when eros drops us off his wings. Ultimately, it is the sins in our relating that are really sins against eros. To relate to a world and to others in a way that gives recognition to their vulnerability, mystery and beauty, and to fight for that recognition, is the humanizing and joyful contribution of eros. The major sins against eros are the sins against justice, namely, right relationships. All too often the sins of eros have been reduced to sexual sins. While such sins certainly offend right relationships, a preoccupation with these sins, has obscured those forms of objectifying the other through power abuse, preoccupation with

[78] Ibid. 41.

[79] James Keenan, "Sex Abuse: Power Abuse," *The Tablet* [London] 256 (May 11, 2002) 10.

[80] See Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, "Whose Sexuality? Whose Tradition? Woman Experience, and Roman Catholic Sexual Ethics," in *Feminist Ethics and the Catholic Moral Tradition,* Readings in Moral Theology no. 9, ed. Charles E. Curran et al. (New York: Paulist, 1996) 233; and Sandra Friedman and Alexander Irwin, "Christian Feminism" 162–64.

[81] *Summa theologiae* 2–2, q. 142, a. 1.

personal advancement and lack of compassion. This particularly twisted form of eros has often gone unheeded.

The renewed flight of eros in certain quarters of ethics invites us to reconsider issues concerning power and knowledge, self-love and self-giving, the sexual and the sacred and the many guises of desire and pleasure. The experience of and reflection on eros connects humans to the mysterious, the perplexing, the vulnerable and attractive dimensions of the other. It not only informs and connects but also empowers one to reject the reduction of persons to the objectified, the fully known and the subjugated. As in the myth of Eros and Psyche, eros awakens our imagination, opens us to new possibilities and enables joy to accompany our living and relating. Just as Eros once accidentally pricked his own foot with his powerful arrow, the denial of eros is not really possible. Recognition of eros brings life, and running away in denial of the love born of desire, breeds strife.