

Loving the good life

According to Oxford philosopher Richard Swinburne: ‘The greatest human well-being is to be found in friendship with good and interesting people in the pursuit of worthy aims.’¹ People of all faiths and none can probably find something in Swinburne’s description of ‘the good life’ to agree with, although as Christian Pastor Timothy Keller tweeted: ‘Everyone says they want community and friendship. But mention accountability or commitment to people, and they run the other way.’²

Swinburne’s vision of ‘the good life’ stands in stark contrast to individualistic beliefs such as hedonism and so-called ‘ethical egoism’, as well as to the rejection of objective value one finds in postmodernism and certain atheistic thinkers.

Swinburne writes as a Christian, and within the Christian tradition the best and most interesting personal being is God (we can’t call the Trinitarian God ‘a’ person without qualification). Therefore, God must be included within (indeed, must be the foundation of) the Christian description of ‘the good life’ that brings ‘the greatest human well-being’.

One might wonder why Swinburne puts an emphasis upon *friendship* rather than *love*, but the English word ‘love’ may be too vague for Swinburne’s purposes. According to *The Guardian*, the question ‘what is love?’ was the most searched for phrase on google in 2012.³ Psychologist Philippa Perry responds to the question:

Unlike us, the ancients did not lump all the various emotions that we label ‘love’ under the one word. They had several variations, including: *Philia* which they saw as a deep but usually non-sexual intimacy between close friends and family members or as a deep bond forged by soldiers as they fought alongside each other in battle. *Ludus* describes a more playful affection found in fooling around or flirting. *Pragma* is the mature love that develops over a long period of time between long-term couples and involves actively practising goodwill, commitment, compromise and understanding. *Agape* is a more generalised love, it’s not about exclusivity but about love for all of humanity. *Philautia* is self-love, which isn’t as selfish as it sounds. As Aristotle discovered and as any psychotherapist will tell you, in order to care for others you need to be able to care about yourself. Last, and probably least even though it causes the most trouble, *eros* is about sexual passion and desire. Unless it morphs into *philia* and/or *pragma*, *eros* will burn itself out. Love is all of the above. But is it possibly unrealistic to expect to experience all six types with only one person. This is why family and community are important.⁴

For Swinburne to simply say that the greatest human well-being is found in ‘love’ would readily bring to mind the romantic and/or exclusive sort of love the ancient Greeks referred to as *eros/pragma*. Whilst valuing these loves, the Christian tradition has always put the self-giving kind of love the ancient Greeks called ‘*agape*’ (i.e. charity) at the centre of its vision of ‘the good life’ (see 1 Corinthians 13:4-8).

It’s worth noting that people who lack any romantic relationship can enjoy ‘the good life’ as Swinburne defines it, for it is *two way relationships characterised by self-*

giving charitable concern for the good of the other person that he highlights by talking about friendship with ‘good’ people. The friendship of a *good* person is characterised by *agape* love.

Other kinds of love, including romantic relationships, find their proper place within this overarching vision of *agapistic love*. As Benedictine nun Catherine Wybourne writes:

Love is more easily experienced than defined. As a theological virtue, by which we love God above all things and our neighbours as ourselves for his sake, it seems remote until we encounter it enfleshed, so to say, in the life of another – in acts of kindness, generosity and self-sacrifice . . . love is life's greatest blessing.⁵

Recommended Resources

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

Philippa Perry, ‘What is love? Five theories on the greatest emotion of all’ (13th December 2012), www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/dec/13/what-is-love-five-theories

¹ Richard Swinburne, ‘The Christian Scheme of Salvation’ in Michael Rea, ed. *Oxford Readings in Philosophical Theology* vol. 1: *Trinity, Incarnation, Atonement* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 294-307.

² Timothy Keller, Tweet 4:21 PM - 30 Apr 2014.

³ Philippa Perry, ‘What is love? Five theories on the greatest emotion of all’ *The Guardian* (13th December 2012), www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/dec/13/what-is-love-five-theories

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

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