

Agápē and the “Woke” Revolution: Virtues and Vices in Opposition

There is a peculiar tension in the modern world between the ancient Greek ideal of *agape*, a love that transcends personal interest, erotic attraction, or even rational comprehension, and the twenty-first century phenomenon loosely described as the “woke” revolution. The former is rooted in openness, generosity, and the willingness to embrace the other without suspicion. The latter is animated by a desire for justice, inclusivity, and the exposure of hidden oppressions, but it often carries with it the vice of suspicion, the policing of speech, and the temptation towards derision. This essay explores the apparent opposition between *agápē* and “wokeness” by considering both their virtues and their vices. It argues that while both arise from a concern for human dignity, they represent different modes of relation: *agápē* as unconditional and hospitable, “wokeness” as conditional and often guarded.

One such instance defining the difference could be: hugging a stranger with no erotic motive yet saying sincerely that I love them for who they are, illustrates the simplicity of *agápē*. Such an act today, however, risks misinterpretation, even disgust. That risk exposes something about our culture’s disposition: a preference for scepticism and negativity over trust and joy, a tendency I have elsewhere described as the “human default.” In Greek thought, *agápē* stood apart from *eros* (desire) and *philia* (friendship). In Christian theology, especially in Paul’s epistles, it came to mean a form of divine love: a love poured out regardless of merit, a love that embraces even enemies. Anders Nygren’s classic study *Agape and Eros* describe it as self-giving and creative, flowing from God and calling humanity to a similar posture of unconditional acceptance.

The virtue of *agápē* is that it enlarges the self by refusing to calculate. It does not ask whether the other is deserving. It does not measure reciprocity. It is, in this sense, an anti-political love, for politics trades in power, suspicion, and reciprocity. In embracing a stranger, telling them sincerely “I love you,” one steps outside the logic of transaction and suspicion. Such gestures, small though they may seem, have the

power to resist the cycles of hostility that define much of human interaction. Philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas also echo this when they suggest that the face of the “Other” calls us to infinite responsibility, an obligation that precedes calculation or suspicion. In this sense, *agápē* aligns with deep traditions of ethical reflection that prioritise generosity over judgement.

The term “woke” originally emerged from African American vernacular as an exhortation to “stay woke”, to remain alert to injustice, particularly racial injustice. It carried the virtue of vigilance: a refusal to be lulled into complacency in the face of oppression. Over time, however, “wokeness” expanded into a broad cultural phenomenon encompassing issues of gender, sexuality, colonialism, disability, and more. Its virtues are clear: attentiveness to marginalised voices, the pursuit of equity, the exposure of hidden structures of domination. But as many commentators have noted, virtues often have shadow sides. The vigilance of “wokeness” can curdle into suspicion. The call for justice can morph into a culture of cancellation, in which missteps of language or thought are punished with social ostracism. Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff, in their study *The Coddling of the American Mind*, argue that these dynamics fosters fragility rather than resilience, mistrust rather than trust.

The “woke” revolution, then, is double-edged: it opens space for long-silenced voices but risks replacing old forms of exclusion with new ones. Its emphasis on safety can foster hypersensitivity; its passion for justice can become zealotry. When considered at their best, *agápē* and “wokeness” are not as far apart as they might seem. Both are animated by a concern for human dignity. *Agápē* affirms the irreducible worth of the stranger; “wokeness” insists on the recognition of those whom society has marginalised. Both resist indifference, both refuses to allow injustice to be normalised.

There is even a resonance in their languages. To be “woke” is to be awake, alert, alive to realities previously denied. To practise *agápē* is to be awake to the dignity of the other in a way that transcends social status or tribal belonging. In this sense, they share a moral imagination that desires something better than the status quo. And yet the vices of the two stands in sharp contrast. *Agápē* is unconditional, overflowing, hospitable. Its vice, if any, is naïveté: it risks being taken advantage of, being abused, being dismissed as sentimental. By contrast, the “woke” posture is

often defensive, suspicious, and even hostile to unconditional gestures. It fears naïveté, precisely because oppression has so often hidden beneath gestures of benevolence.

Here lies the paradox: in a society increasingly shaped by “woke” sensibilities, a simple act of *agape*, hugging a stranger, declaring love without conditions, risks derision. The suspicion is that such an act masks ulterior motives, or is socially inappropriate, or transgresses boundaries. What once was celebrated as warmth is recast as threat. This dynamic illustrates the “human default”: the tendency to prioritise negative interpretations over positive ones. In evolutionary psychology, this is called the “negativity bias,” whereby humans attend more closely to threats than to opportunities, to derision rather than joy. The cultural translation of this bias today is the scepticism with which unconditional love is received.

In my earlier reflections, I described the “human default” as the prioritisation of suspicion, hostility, and negative attribution over the happier and lovelier translations of life. The reception of *agápē* in a “woke” society confirms this. We expect to be deceived, manipulated, or misunderstood; we rarely expect to be loved without condition. Consider again the simple hug of a stranger. In the ancient world, hospitality was sacred, and strangers were often welcomed as potential gods in disguise. Today, by contrast, the stranger is more often coded as threat. The “human default” interprets the gesture of love through the lens of risk. The woke sensibility magnifies this risk by highlighting histories of abuse, exploitation, and oppression, and thus interprets the gesture as potentially complicit in harm. The tragedy is that in protecting against harm, society closes itself to grace. Suspicion, while sometimes justified, becomes corrosive when it is the only lens through which we see.

Historically, we see these dynamics in play across different contexts. Early Christianity itself was accused of naïveté: the insistence on loving enemies, forgiving debts, and welcoming the outcast seemed foolish in a Roman world that prized honour and vengeance. Yet that naïveté transformed the ancient world. By contrast, the French Revolution’s commitment to liberty, equality, and fraternity was accompanied by suspicion, purges, and the guillotine. Here we see the dynamic of “wokeness”: vigilance against oppression curdling into terror. Contemporary debates about public speech illustrate similar patterns. J. K. Rowling’s comments on gender

identity, for instance, provoked immense backlash, revealing the virtue of vigilance (solidarity with trans people) but also the vice of derision (a refusal to imagine goodwill on the part of the speaker). An *agápē*-inflected response would affirm dignity without demanding ideological conformity.

Can society recover *agápē* without discarding the justice-seeking energy of the “woke” revolution? Perhaps the way forward lies in recovering the sense that justice and love are not enemies. Justice without love curdles into suspicion, love without justice risks sentimentality. Augustine of Hippo once described peace as “the tranquillity of order,” a harmony rooted in right relationship. Such harmony demands both justice and love. The challenge for our time is to imagine a society in which vigilance for justice does not eclipse unconditional acceptance, and in which unconditional acceptance does not excuse injustice. *Agápē* must temper “wokeness,” and “wokeness” must sharpen *agápē*.

The apparent opposition between *agápē* and the “woke” revolution reveals deep truths about our age. On one side stands the ancient call to unconditional love, to generosity without suspicion. On the other stands the modern demand for justice, vigilance, and recognition. Both have virtues, both have vices. Their opposition exposes the “human default”: our tendency to interpret love with suspicion rather than joy. Even so, perhaps the very recognition of this opposition can itself be an act of hope. To hug a stranger, to say “I love you” without condition, remains a radical act, not because it is naïve, but because it resists the default. It insists that trust is possible, that grace is real, and that even in a world of suspicion, *agápē* can still surprise.