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# Does Eros Seek Happiness?

## A Critical Analysis of C. S. Lewis's Reply to Anders Nygren

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### I. Introduction: A Conscious Showdown

C. S. Lewis first learned of the Swedish theologian Anders Nygren's *Eros och Agape* through a female colleague, Dr Janet Spens. Lewis responded with immediate interest. In a letter dated 16 November 1934, Lewis asks her, 'Can you tell me something more about Professor Nygren's *Eros and Agape*? I haven't heard of it.'<sup>1</sup> Spens then lends Lewis her copy of the first English translation *Agape and Eros: A Study of the Christian Idea of Love*.<sup>2</sup> On 8 January 1935, Lewis writes again: 'You will have begun to wonder if your *Agape & Eros* was lost forever! It is an intensely interesting book. I am inclined to think I disagree with him. [...] However, I must tackle him again. He has shaken me up extremely.'<sup>3</sup>

Lewis was not the first, nor would he be the last, to be shaken up by this seminal work. As Eric Gregory, a former president of the Oxford C. S. Lewis Society, rightly notes, Nygren 'set off a firestorm of scholarly debate that preoccupied much of twentieth century Protestant and Roman Catholic thought'.<sup>4</sup> During Lewis's lifetime, two influential books were written in response to Nygren's theses: John Burnaby's *Amor Dei* (1938) and the

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. LEWIS, *Collected Letters*, vol. II, ed. by Walter HOOPER (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004), 147.

<sup>2</sup> The Swedish original, *Den kristna kärlekstanken genom tiderna: Eros och Agape*, was published in two parts in 1930 and 1936. The English translation was first published in three volumes in England by SPCK in 1932 (Part I), 1938 (Part II, vol. I), and 1939 (Part II, vol. II), and as a revised, in part retranslated, one-volume edition in 1953. In their correspondence, Lewis and Spens must be referring to Part I of the work, since Part II had not been published in English. Part I, which in terms of length accounts for roughly one-third of the entire work, 'consists of a study of the Christian idea of love as it appears in the New Testament and in contrast to the Hellenistic idea,' and Part II describes this history 'up to the point where the problem of "Agape and Eros" finds its natural solution in the Reformation.' See the translator Philip WATSON's preface to *Agape and Eros* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1969), xv. Hereafter all citations of *Agape and Eros*, using *AE* for its abbreviation, are from this edition.

<sup>3</sup> LEWIS, *Collected Letters*, vol. II (see above, n. 1), 153, 154.

<sup>4</sup> Eric GREGORY, *Politics and the Order of Love* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 3–4.

English Jesuit Martin D'Arcy's *The Mind and Heart of Love* (1945). By this time, *The Four Loves* (1960) had not been published, but D'Arcy had read Lewis's earlier scholarly study of medieval love, *The Allegory of Love* (1936), describing it as 'very important', 'magisterial', and in some historical analyses, 'definitive'.<sup>5</sup>

Anders Nygren notes Burnaby and D'Arcy's works in the preface to the revised English edition of *Agape and Eros* (1953). He insists that 'the reason why these important and interesting works come to different conclusions from my own, is essentially that they start from different premises. [...] I have found no reason to abandon my original position at any point, and my work is therefore being republished without alteration.'<sup>6</sup> Indeed, despite these Roman Catholic and also Protestant critiques, Nygren's antithetical juxtaposition of the 'selfish pagan *eros*' and the 'unselfish Christian *agape*' became, if not normative, at least enormously influential in twentieth-century Protestant theology. Although this model has since proven to be somewhat a caricature, Nygren's theology of love 'continues to be discussed and disputed today, in works ranging from doctoral theses to papal encyclicals'.<sup>7</sup> Pope Benedict XVI's *Deus Caritas Est* (2006) explicitly analyses the relationship of *eros* and *agape* in the Nygrenian sense of the words – without explicitly mentioning Nygren himself, as is customary in Papal encyclicals when criticism is offered.<sup>8</sup>

Walter Hooper, the editor of Lewis's posthumously published works and the literary advisor to the C. S. Lewis Estate, notes that Lewis went on to spend years 'thinking his way towards the conclusions he reached regarding the various natural loves and their relation to Agape in *The Four Loves*'.<sup>9</sup> To say, as Will Vaus does, that 'Lewis would not, in the end, agree with all of Nygren's views'<sup>10</sup> is true but perhaps an understatement. Although in 1958, just two years before the publication of *The Four Loves*, Lewis names Nygren's *Agape and Eros* among the theological books that had influenced him,<sup>11</sup> significant points of agreement between

<sup>5</sup> Martin D'ARCY (S.J.), *The Mind and Heart of Love: Lion and Unicorn. A Study in Eros and Agape* (New York: Henry Holt, 1947, 1st ed. 1945), 12, 54, 28. As far as I can see, Nygren is not mentioned in *The Allegory of Love* (1936).

<sup>6</sup> NYGREN, *Agape and Eros* (see above, n. 2), xiii-xiv.

<sup>7</sup> Brendan WOLFE, 'Editorial', in *The Chronicle of the University of Oxford C. S. Lewis Society*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2010), 1.

<sup>8</sup> For a brief yet insightful analysis of *Deus Caritas Est*, see Werner G. JEANROND, *A Theology of Love* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2010), 161–169.

<sup>9</sup> LEWIS, *Collected Letters*, vol. II (see above, n. 1), 154 n. 3, 538 n. 392.

<sup>10</sup> Will VAUS, 'Lewis in Oxford: The Early Tutorial Years (1924–1939)', in *C. S. Lewis: Life, Works, and Legacy*, vol. I, ed. by Bruce L. EDWARDS (Westport: Praeger, 2007), 164.

<sup>11</sup> This he relates to Corbin Carnell in a letter dated 13 Oct. 1958. See Corbin CARNELL, *Bright Shadow of Reality: Spiritual Longing in C. S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999, 1st ed. 1974), 69. Lewis must have been quite conscious of Nygren at the time of his letter to Carnell in October 1958. In August that same year, Lewis had recorded the radio talks that later, in June 1959, formed the completed manuscript for *The Four Loves* which, in turn, was finally

Lewis and Nygren – whether on theological anthropology, soteriology, the doctrine of sin, or the relationship between nature and grace – are scant. Like Pope Benedict XVI in *Deus Caritas Est*, Lewis never targets Nygren explicitly in *The Four Loves*, but it would eventually include an implicit and tactful criticism of the heart of Nygren’s project, the denigration of *eros* and its separation from *agape*.<sup>12</sup> Lewis also preoccupied himself with very Nygrenian themes elsewhere in his oeuvre, sometimes in surprising locations. For instance, Risto Saarinen thinks that Lewis’s mythopoeic novel *Till We Have Faces* (1956) is even more critical of Nygren than *The Four Loves*.<sup>13</sup>

C. S. Lewis also had good things to say about Nygren. In May 1935, when one letter correspondent, the American literary critic and philosopher Paul More, had called Nygren’s *magnum opus* ‘the last word of the most abominable form of Protestantism in a straight line from Luther through Barth’, Lewis felt compelled to object, ‘I don’t fully agree – Protestant is not for me a dyslogistic term’.<sup>14</sup> Writing nearly two decades later, in December 1954, Lewis is able to show candid appreciation of Nygren’s work in a letter to Mary Van Deusen: ‘The great merit of Nygren, so far as I’m concerned, was that he gave one a new *tool of thought*: it is so v. [very] convenient and illuminating to be able to talk (and therefore to think) about the two elements of love as *Eros & Agape*.’<sup>15</sup> Lewis explains that he

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published in March 1960. See Roger Lancelyn GREEN and Walter HOOPER, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography* (London: HarperCollins, 2002, 1st ed. 1974), 387–389.

<sup>12</sup> For an outline of C. S. Lewis’s position in ‘the Nygren debate’, see Jason LEPOJÄRVI, ‘C. S. Lewis and “the Nygren Debate”’, in *The Chronicle of the University of Oxford C. S. Lewis Society*, vol. 7, no. 2, (2010), 25–42. See also Gilbert MEILAENDER, *The Taste for the Other: The Social and Ethical Thought of C. S. Lewis* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2003, 1st ed. 1978), 56–57, 122–123; and Caroline SIMON, ‘On Love’, in *The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis*, ed. by Robert MACSWAIN and Michael WARD (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 154–155.

<sup>13</sup> According to Saarinen, need-love and altruism remain properly separate in the mind of Orual, the heroine of the story. But Saarinen argues that Orual is wrong – in other words, that the author of *Orual* is right – for ‘true love does not arise from their separation, but from their fusion’. Given this, Nygren’s theological position resembles more the ‘Puritan-minded pagan perspective of Orual’ than Christianity. In fact, Saarinen thinks *Till We Have Faces* is helpful in attempting to outline ‘a constructive Protestant alternative to Nygren’s *Agape and Eros*’. See Risto SAARINEN, ‘Eros and Protestantism: From Nygren to Milbank’, in *Gudstankens aktualitet: Bidrag om teologiens opgave og indhold og protestantismens indre spændinger*, ed. by E. Wiberg PEDERSEN (Copenhagen: Anis, 2010), 344–346. Corbin Carnell, making no note of Nygren, agrees in general: the purification of Orual’s loves and longings is ‘the burden of the story’ (CARNELL, *Bright Shadow* [see above, n. 11], 116).

<sup>14</sup> LEWIS, *Collected Letters*, vol. II (see above, n. 1), 165.

<sup>15</sup> LEWIS, *Collected Letters*, vol. III, ed. by Walter HOOPER (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 538. In a later letter to Mary Van Deusen (555), Lewis writes: ‘Is it by some [...] *confusion* N. [Nygren] has got where he is? Still his book was well worth reading: we both have the v. [very] important idea of Eros and Agape now clearly in our minds, and can keep it after we have let all his exaggerations fade out of our minds.’ Mary Van Deusen’s letters from Lewis

is nonetheless forced to say ‘elements’, because he thinks Nygren drove his contrast too hard, believing them to be mutually exclusive.<sup>16</sup>

The main purpose of this article is to discuss *eros*’s relationship to happiness. This is a theme that has received barely cursory attention in scholarship on Lewis. Nygren promulgated the idea that *eros* is by nature always eudæmonistic, i.e. always seeking the happiness of the lover. In *The Four Loves*, Lewis vehemently denies this. Risto Saarinen believes that Lewis’s use of the word ‘happiness’ in *The Four Loves* is so close to Nygren’s *eudæmonism* that ‘the showdown must be conscious’.<sup>17</sup> I agree with Saarinen on both counts: the engagement is conscious, and, given its passionate nature, is best described as a showdown. However, after presenting and deconstructing it, I shall challenge Lewis’s argument. I will argue that *eros* does, as Nygren suggests it does, seek happiness – although not only this. Perhaps surprisingly, Lewis, despite all appearances, may actually agree with Nygren on this point. But not on every point. The final analysis will reveal what I take to be Lewis’s true concern.

## II. Does Eros Aim at Happiness?

The three main characteristics that, for Nygren, define the *eros* motif are: ‘(1) Eros is the “love of desire”, or acquisitive love; (2) Eros is man’s way to the Divine; (3) Eros is egocentric love’ (*AE*, 175). A ‘eudæmonistic scheme’ which is ‘decidedly egocentric’ underlies them all (530). According to Nygren, ‘all desire, or appetite, and longing is more or less egocentric’, but ‘the clearest proof of the egocentric nature of Eros is its intimate connection with *eudæmonia*,’ the individualistic pursuit of happiness (180). ‘Christian love,’ on the other hand, ‘is *spontaneous in contrast to all activity with a eudæmonistic motive*,’ that is to say, ‘is free from all selfish calculations or ulterior motive’ (726).<sup>18</sup> For our purposes here, Nygren’s ‘eudæmonistic scheme’ can be broken down into four interconnected claims: (1) *Eros* always seeks the happiness of the lover, and (2) this happiness-seeking character is morally culpable, because (3) it entails selfish incapability of *agapistic* sacrifice, and (4) calculatingly demotes the Beloved to a means to this end.

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only came to light in 2000. See GREEN and HOOPER, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography* (see above, n. 11), 297.

<sup>16</sup> LEWIS, *Collected Letters*, vol. III (see above, n. 15), 538: ‘But surely in any good friendship of good marriage, tho’ Eros may have been the starting point, the two are always mixed and one slips out of one into the other a dozen times a day?’

<sup>17</sup> RISTO SAARINEN, ‘Eros, leikki ja normi: Rakkauden fundamentaaliteologiaa’, *Teologinen aikakauskirja* (Finnish Theological Journal), vol. 2 (2006), 172 n. 15.

<sup>18</sup> The ‘eudæmonistic way’ is to have one’s own ‘concerns and interests guaranteed’ (736).

C. S. Lewis disagrees with all four. In *The Four Loves*, Lewis means by *eros* ‘a state which we call “being in love”; or, if you prefer, that kind of love which lovers are “in”’ (87),<sup>19</sup> a state that Sheldon Vanauken named ‘inloveness’.<sup>20</sup> Lewis’s concept of *eros* is, thus, not synonymous to Nygren’s.<sup>21</sup> However, the comparison of their *eros* loves is possible, justified, and fruitful, because Nygren’s denouncement of the happiness-seeking character of *eros* is simultaneously a denouncement of the happiness-seeking character of all human love in general – including Lewis’s *eros*. And Lewis is quite conscious of this.

To lay the foundation for the following analysis, we are forced to quote Lewis at length. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, I wish to show that to a certain – minimal but important – extent Lewis’s argument depends on rhetoric rather than on logic. Secondly and more importantly, the question of whether or not *eros* seeks happiness is complex and multi-layered, making simple paraphrases of Lewis’s ideas less helpful – and certainly less interesting.<sup>22</sup> Lewis’s argument in *The Four Loves* is as follows:

‘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

<sup>19</sup> C. S. LEWIS, *The Four Loves* (London: HarperCollins, 1998, 1st ed. 1969). Hereafter all in-text citations of *The Four Loves*, using *FL* for its abbreviation, are from this edition.

<sup>20</sup> Sheldon VANAUKEN, *A Severe Mercy: With Eighteen Letters by C. S. Lewis* (New York: HarperCollins, 1980, 1st ed. 1977), 29; and its unofficial sequel, *Under the Mercy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988, 1st ed. 1985), 141, 143, 149.

<sup>21</sup> Several scholars have noted the similarity of Lewis’s ‘need-love’ and Nygren’s *eros*. See Walter Hooper’s remark in LEWIS, *Collected Letters*, vol. II (see above, n. 1), 154 n. 3; Josef PIEPER, *Faith, Hope, Love* (German original: *Lieben, Hoffen, Glauben* [1986]), transl. by Richard and Clara WINSTON (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 209–210, 221–222; SIMON, ‘On Love’ (see above, n. 12), 154–155; and MEILAENDER, *Taste for the Other* (see above, n. 12), 55–56. Meilaender is right to remind that to contrast Nygren’s *eros* and *agape* with Lewis’s ‘need-love’ and ‘gift-love’ is not entirely accurate for, unlike Nygren, Lewis ‘is not making a simple contrast between human love and divine love. [...] Both need-love and gift-love are natural components of human love’ (57). (I would add that ‘need’ encapsules only *one* element of Nygren’s multidimensional *eros*, of which a more comprehensive ‘translation’ would, in fact, be Lewis’s concept of *Sehnsucht*, which he calls *Joy*. Another profitable undertaking would be to compare *Joy* with Nygren’s *eros* vis-à-vis happiness.) In any case, by the helpful ‘new tool of thought’ that Lewis mentions to Mary Van Deusen (see above, n. 15), he most certainly meant the ‘need’ and ‘gift’ elements in Nygren’s *eros* and *agape* respectively.

<sup>22</sup> Lewis’s outspoken critic, John Beverluis, observes that paraphrasing Lewis is always problematic, not only on points of love. See John BEVERLUIS, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, 2nd ed. (Prometheus Books: Amherst, NY, 2007, 1st ed. 1986), 19–20. Beverluis is one of the first scholars to bring up the name of Anders Nygren in connection with Lewis (59–61) and for this he deserves credit. However, he seems wholly unaware of the historical connection between Lewis and Nygren. He simply summons Nygren to the arena to refute some of Lewis’s ideas, unconscious of Lewis’s acquaintance with (and rejection of) Nygren’s position.



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.' (101–102)

Lewis makes a very strong claim. Not only does *eros* not aim at happiness, it prefers unhappiness with the Beloved than happiness on any other terms. Lewis continues:

'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 the 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.' (102)

Lewis is adamant: 'If the voice within us does not say this, it is not the voice of Eros.'

How can we respond to this? Is Lewis right about the nature of *eros*? It must be noted that Lewis does not claim that a life of *eros* is necessarily free of good things – although he consistently refuses to call these good things 'happiness'. For instance, speaking of the 'playfulness of Eros', he writes: 'And even when the circumstances of the two lovers are so tragic that no bystander could keep back his tears, they themselves – in want, in hospital wards, on visitors' days in jail – will sometimes be surprised by a merriment which strikes the onlooker (but not them) as unbearably pathetic' (102). Some merriment, at least, may be involved.

We might ask, is not merriment somehow congenial to happiness? Even if Lewis thought it was, the passage only shows that merriment can be a happy by-product of *eros*, not the thing sought for in itself, not the force by which *eros* is driven.<sup>23</sup> That the eventual life of *eros* is not completely free of merriment does not mean that merriment is what *eros* was aiming at. The distinction is very important. On the very next page Lewis yet again denies the happiness-seeking character of *eros*: '[its] reckless disregard of happiness' (103). It is one thing to seek something, and another to stumble upon it. Another important distinction is between 'happiness' and 'unhappiness'. A closer examination of how Lewis uses these words in the chapter on *eros* suggests possible confusion on Lewis's part.

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<sup>23</sup> In fact earlier Lewis had said something to this effect when speaking of pleasure: 'Eros, although the king of pleasures, always (at his height) has the air of regarding pleasure as a by-product' (LEWIS, *Four Loves* [see above, n. 19], 91). We return to the element of pleasure at the very end of this article.

### III. *Conventional and Meaningful Happiness*

What does the ‘unhappiness’ that Lewis says *eros* favours over ‘happiness’ look like? Lewis offers a list of characteristics: ‘[a life] of tending an incurable invalid, of hopeless poverty, of exile, or of disgrace’ (*FL*, 102). Admittedly, the list is grim. Even within these unfortunate circumstances some good, in the form of merriment, may and often does prevail. Merriment in tending an incurable invalid (‘in hospital wards’), in hopeless poverty (‘in want’), in exile or in disgrace (‘on visitors’ days in jail’). Nonetheless, these are all different states of want. Important factors normally connected with well-being are lacking: health, wealth, home, and honour. Or it would be more accurate to say happiness, not simply well-being, involves health, wealth, home, and honour – since unhappiness involves their opposites.

Health, wealth, home, and honour – is this a sufficient list of elements congenial to happiness? I will argue that this is not an exhaustive definition of happiness – and Lewis himself probably never intended it to be. This is, however, Lewis’s *explicit* definition of happiness. As a technical term, for now, we may call this kind of happiness ‘conventional happiness’. The implicit rationale of his argument, however, betrays that he is simultaneously operating with yet another definition of happiness. His *eros* does not seek conventional happiness. But despite all appearances, even his *eros* aims at happiness of another, perhaps deeper, kind.

Many details in Lewis’s argument come together to suggest that *eros*’s relation to happiness (or purported lack thereof) is not as simple as Lewis presents it to be. Some of these details are noted almost in passing. Firstly, Lewis admits that most lovers would disbelieve the claim that ‘their marriage will be an unhappy one’ (102). Why would they disbelieve it, if *eros* makes no promises of happiness? Secondly, Lewis speaks of ‘the agony of parting’ (102). Whence comes the agony, if not, in part at least, from an *unhappy* prospect of a life without the Beloved? Thirdly, *eros*, according to Lewis, says, ‘Better this than parting. Better to be miserable with her than happy without her. Let our hearts break provided they break together’ (102). By ‘this’, Lewis means unhappiness – unhappiness understood as loss of conventional happiness as described above. Lewis’s use of the word ‘better’ here is revealing. It is a comparative, posited between two competing states of affairs. Why is one state of affairs ‘better’ than the other? Is not ‘better’ somehow congenial to happiness? I think it would be difficult for Lewis to deny that it is. In many of his works, Lewis himself ridicules attempts at rooting value judgments in anything but goodness.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> See, for instance, LEWIS, ‘The Poison of Subjectivism’ (1943), in *C. S. Lewis: Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces*, ed. by Lesley WALMSLEY (London: HarperCollins, 2000), especially 658–660; and the chapter ‘Invasion’ in *Mere Christianity*. I thank Grayson Carter for directing my attention to these.



I spoke of a second kind of happiness that Lewis (somewhat subtly) operates with. The answer, whatever it is, to the question ‘In *what* way better?’ points the way to a definition of the second kind of happiness. We may safely assume that in some way it is *more meaningful* than the conventional kind. This ‘meaningful happiness’ consists of, above all, a life spent with the Beloved. The prospect of losing *this* good, the Beloved and a life spent with the Beloved, is worse than losing *other* kinds of goods – like wealth, health, home, and honour.

Lewis says 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’ (102). Understood as conventional happiness, the statement is unproblematic: ‘We would rather share [conventional] unhappiness with the Beloved than be [conventionally] happy on any other terms.’ But based on our analysis above, in light of the more meaningful happiness which is the hidden backdrop of Lewis’s argument, it would be just as truthful to say something strikingly different: ‘We would rather share [meaningful happiness] with the Beloved than be [conveniently] happy on any other terms.’ The profound implication being: ‘We would rather share [meaningful happiness] with the Beloved than be [meaningfully unhappy] on any other terms.’

It would be tempting to call these two kinds (or levels) of happiness simply *hedonism* and *eudæmonism*.<sup>25</sup> Other possible names could be ‘short-term’ and ‘long-term’ happiness, or ‘material’ and ‘spiritual’ happiness, or ‘external’ and ‘internal’ happiness, or ‘acquisitive’ and ‘self-giving’ happiness. These all have their strengths but equally their limits, as some are obviously misleading and others too vague. We must also accept that *The Four Loves* offers no perfectly unambiguous definition. For these reasons I have preferred the more temperate ‘conventional’ and ‘meaningful’ happiness. They are suggestive enough without being rigid.

Nygren is aware that ‘happiness’ is understood in many ways. Speaking of ancient Greek ethics, for instance, he writes: ‘The dominant question was that of *eudæmonia*, happiness; and although different answers might be given – the answer of Hedonism, that happiness is the pleasure of the moment; or of Aristotle, that it consists in activity and the attainment of perfection; or of Stoicism, that it is *ataraxia*, independence and indifference towards the external vicissitudes of life – yet the statement of the question remains always the same’ (AE, 44).<sup>26</sup> Unsatisfied with these answers, Augustine, Nygren explains, sought for happiness in something more endur-

<sup>25</sup> For an etymological and philosophical study of *eudæmonia*, see Marcel SAROT, ‘Happiness, Well-being, and the Meaning of Life’, in *Happiness, Well-being, and the Meaning of Life: A Dialogue of Social Science and Religion*, ed. by Vincent BRÜMMEL and Marcel SAROT (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing, 1996), 1–23.

<sup>26</sup> See also 501: ‘To this question different philosophical schools had given different answers: the highest good is the momentary pleasure of the senses; or it is a spiritualised enjoyment of life;

ing and dependable. This he eventually found in God. In Augustine's words: 'He is the source of our happiness, He is the end of all desire.'<sup>27</sup>

This famous 'rest in God' is not, however, unproblematic. 'Antiquity taught Augustine to ask the eudæmonistic question,' so his answer is 'simply a continuation of the endless discussion of ancient philosophy about what is the "highest good"' (AE, 501). In other words, Augustine simply substituted a heavenly bribe for an earthly one, which is unfortunate because it 'implies no condemnation of this egocentric and eudæmonistic question' (503). 'Christianity,' on the other hand, 'makes a revolutionary change [...] Agape, or love, is a social idea which as such has nothing in common with individualistic and eudæmonistic ethics.' Instead of an individualistic quest for one's 'Highest Good', it becomes a question of 'the Good-in-itself' (44–45).

For these reasons, Nygren is less interested in what *kind* of happiness is at stake. It makes no difference, and he commits himself to none in particular. The problem for him is the *pursuit* of happiness itself, which as a necessary constituent of human love is essentially flawed and morally culpable. Despite his protestations, incredibly enough, Lewis in fact agrees – or is compelled to agree – with part of this claim. Lewis's *eros* pursues happiness, insofar as we mean a truly 'meaningful' kind.

#### IV. We Have No 'Right to Happiness'

*The Four Loves* was published in 1960, three years before Lewis's death in November 1963. The last thing he wrote is an aptly titled essay 'We Have No "Right to Happiness"', published posthumously in December 1963. The title itself speaks volumes. I hope that the following analysis will persuade those who remain unconvinced by my analysis of *The Four Loves*, that even Lewis's *eros* aims at happiness. We will also address the question of whether this pursuit is essentially flawed and morally culpable. Later, we will be able to return to, and conclude with, Nygren and what I take is the heart of Lewis's real dispute with him.

In his essay Lewis refutes the claim that people have a 'right to happiness'. This, to him, sounds as odd as a right to good luck.<sup>28</sup> As the back-

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or it is the independence of the self, its exaltation above the vicissitudes of fortune; and so forth.'

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in NYGREN, *Agape and Eros* (see above, n. 2), 502.

<sup>28</sup> LEWIS, 'We Have No "Right to Happiness"', in *God in the Dock*, ed. by Walter HOOPER (London: HarperCollins, 1998, 1st ed. 1971), 96: 'For I believe – whatever one school of moralists may say – that we depend for a very great deal of our happiness or misery on circumstances outside all human control. A right to happiness doesn't, for me, make much more sense than a right to be six feet tall, or to have a millionaire for your father, or to get good weather whenever you want to have a picnic.' Hereafter all in-text citations of this essay are from this edition of *God in the Dock*, using *GiD* for its abbreviation.

drop for his analysis of a ‘right to happiness’ Lewis shares a story of a certain marital drama ‘that once happened in [my] own neighbourhood’ (*GiD*, 95).

‘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.’ (*GiD*, 95)

The details of this drama are illuminating, whether truly historical or crafted to meet Lewis’s purposes. Lewis says that Mr A. and Mrs B. were ‘very much in love’. This is Lewis’s exact definition of *eros* in *The Four Loves*.<sup>29</sup> *Eros* is present. In this case the couple could ‘expect to be very happy’. This implies, but does not necessarily prove, that happiness was sought for. However, the rationale that Mr A. later offers as a moral alibi for deserting his wife is telling: ‘But what could I do?’ he said. ‘A man has the right to happiness. I had to take my one chance when it came’ (*GiD*, 96). Mr A. did what he did, because he wanted to be happy.

Not only this. It was clear that Mr A. and Mrs B. had not been happy with their old partners.

‘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.’ (95)

Loss of health, income, beauty, virility – we are reminded of the grim list of want mentioned above. The first couple, the couple in *The Four Loves*, would risk all just to be together. Lewis denied that they were seeking happiness. Mr A. and Mrs B., however, cannot bear their current state of affairs – quite literally their affairs. They are unhappy. If the first couple would ‘rather share unhappiness with the Beloved than be happy on any other terms’, we might be well justified in saying that Mr A. and Mrs B. would ‘rather share happiness with each other than remain unhappy on the prevailing terms’.

Lewis laments the fact that, in the pursuit of happiness, especially sexual happiness, ‘every unkindness and breach of faith seems to be condoned’ (*GiD*, 99). Although he sees no good reason for giving erotic passion this privilege, he does see a strong cause.

‘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

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<sup>29</sup> LEWIS, *Four Loves* (see above, n. 19), 87.

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.' (100, italics mine, except *all*)

Later Lewis acknowledges the obvious. The so-called 'towering promises' of happiness are often found to be untrue. Disillusion awaits further down the road.<sup>30</sup> But this is irrelevant to our discussion. What concerns us here is Lewis's candid acceptance of happiness, not only as a driving force of *eros*, but as a dramatically powerful one.

Does Lewis here flatly contradict what he claimed in *The Four Loves*? Certainly something odd is going on. We could defend Lewis against the charge of contradiction if we could establish the two cases as incomparable. They could be incomparable for two reasons: the two stories might involve either different ideas of happiness, or different ideas of love.

What kind of happiness is at stake, conventional happiness or meaningful happiness? Elements of conventional happiness are not difficult to spot. We remember that the unhappiness with their previous spouses was largely due to such misfortunes. Mrs B.'s husband had lost his job, perhaps his virility, and Mr A.'s wife her looks and liveliness. To say 'if nothing went wrong with their health or their income' (*GiD*, 95) implies that loss of health and income would probably also dent the new happiness. Their new-found happiness is fragile, but ironically phenomenologically experienced as enduring. Indeed, side by side with the conventional streak a deeper undercurrent is also detectable. In fact the two are hardly separable. The lover believes that the possession of the beloved will confer 'not merely frequent ecstasies', but also 'settled, fruitful, deep-rooted, life-long happiness' (100) – clearly a meaningful kind of happiness.

This must be why 'all' seems to be at stake. Both conventional and meaningful happiness are at stake. To miss *this* is to have lived 'in vain' (100). Thus, the two cases are dissimilar only insofar as the first cares less for conventional happiness, a dissimilarity that is not enough to constitute any significant contradiction. The weightier common denominator shared by both is the fact that 'meaningful happiness' is sought for.

What, then, of love? We might, for instance, note the dissimilarities between the descriptions of what 'love' in each case looks like. Is not the second couple's love closer to *lust*, mere sexual appetite, than to *eros*? Lewis speaks of 'a strong erotic passion' (*GiD*, 100), and what is aimed at is a certain kind of happiness, 'four bare legs in a bed' (99). This kind of lust, so goes the argument, can be directed to happiness, whereas true *eros* cannot. I find this explanation doubtful on several grounds. Although the centre of gravity admittedly falls on the Venus element of *eros*,<sup>31</sup> the love in

<sup>30</sup> See LEWIS, *God in the Dock* (see above, n. 28), 100–101.

<sup>31</sup> 'The carnal and animally sexual element in Eros, I intend (following an old usage) to call Venus' (LEWIS, *Four Loves* [see above, n. 19], 87). Lewis is referring to a medieval allegorical

question is still closer to *eros* than to mere lust. Firstly, as noted above, the couple was ‘very much in love’ (95), which is Lewis’s precise definition of *eros* in *The Four Loves*.<sup>32</sup> Secondly, the narrative flows organically from ‘being in love’, to ‘a strong erotic passion’, to ‘emotion’, to ‘desire’, and finally back to ‘being in love’ (100) – implying no division of or radical impurity in love.<sup>33</sup> Thirdly, the strong erotic passion carries an ‘almost irresistible conviction’ of permanence (100) – exactly what in *The Four Loves* Lewis argues *eros* does, although what ‘is baffling is the combination of fickleness with his protestations of permanence’ (*FL*, 108). Lastly, the passion is self-sacrificial. This last observation merits special attention.

### V. *Eros’s Agapistic Opening*

The passion’s self-sacrificing nature rules out another possible attempt at classifying the loves as different in quality. I mean the suggestion that whereas the first couple’s love leads to sacrifice, the second egocentrically does not. I do not think this is true. Both involve sacrifice. Even *what* is sacrificed is nearly identical in both. In the first case, love trumps the sacrifice of health, wealth, home, and honour – everything except the sacrifice of the Beloved. In the second case, love trumps the sacrifice of the previous marriage, perhaps parental relationships, and social reputation – everything except the sacrifice of the *new* Beloved. In both cases to be with the Beloved is ‘better’ than to be without her on any other terms. Indeed, this is exactly what according to Lewis *eros* is apt to do if given free reign. *Eros* is ‘ready for every sacrifice except renunciation’ (*FL*, 103). By renunciation is meant the sacrifice of *eros* itself.

Mr A. left his wife in order to marry Mrs B., because he had the right to happiness. Lewis argues that the doubtful maxim ‘Everyone has the right to happiness’ is really a misconstrual of the more correct ‘Everyone has the right to *pursue* happiness *by all lawful means*’ (*GiD*, 97). The additions *pursue* and *by all lawful means* are crucial. Lewis is not arguing that Mr A.’s action is wrong because he pursued happiness. There is nothing morally culpable in pursuing happiness, no matter what Nygren thinks. If Mr A.’s action was condemnable, as Lewis thinks it was, it was so for other reasons. He addresses the heart of the problem: ‘Mr A.’s action is an offence against good faith (to solemn promises), against gratitude (towards

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distinction between Venus (sexual appetite) and Cupid (love), mentioned in his *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (London: Oxford, 1958), 142.

<sup>32</sup> LEWIS, *Four Loves* (see above, n. 19), 87.

<sup>33</sup> Besides, Lewis objects strongly to the ‘popular idea that it is the absence or presence of Eros which makes the sexual act “impure” or “pure”, degraded or fine, unlawful or lawful’ (LEWIS, *Four Loves* [see above, n. 19], 88), or alternatively that ‘Eros is “noblest” or “purest” when Venus is reduced to the minimum’ (92).



one to whom he was deeply indebted) and against common humanity' (99).

The first couple is in love, apparently free to marry, and thus their love is innocent. The second couple is also in love, married but not to each other, and hence their love involves injustice – offence against good faith, gratitude, and common humanity. I think this difference is insightful. It provides the key to understanding the difference between the two couples that brings clarity to the apparent confusion.

Here Lewis disagrees with yet another of Nygren's claims, theologically perhaps the most important of all. *Eros*, contrary to what Nygren thought, can be *agapistic*, can be self-sacrificing. The love of the first couple shows this admirably. Their love is willing to make towering sacrifices to be together. And here lies, I believe, Lewis's main concern in his reply to Nygren in the *The Four Loves*. The love of the first couple shows *eros*'s agapistic potential admirably – *and is meant to show it*. What Lewis found revoltingly untrue is the concept of a 'calculating' *eros* that demotes the Beloved simply to a *means* by which happiness is sought.<sup>34</sup> To calculate thus is to step outside the world of *eros*. 'To Eros all these calculations are irrelevant – just as the coolly brutal judgment of Lucretius is irrelevant to Venus' (*FL*, 102). Readers of Lewis must stress this irrelevancy of *calculations* of happiness, not the irrelevancy of happiness. While getting his points across (to Sweden, perhaps), Lewis was driven to exaggeration in denying *eros*'s happiness-seeking character altogether. As we have seen, only 'conventional happiness' is irrelevant to his *eros*, not 'meaningful happiness'.

By 'the coolly brutal judgment of Lucretius' Lewis is alluding to his earlier account of *eros*'s relationship to pleasure. It is worth reproducing here, because its logic applies well to happiness as well.

'In some mysterious but quite indisputable fashion the lover desires the Beloved herself, not the pleasure [*or happiness*] she can give. No lover in the world ever sought the embraces of the woman he loved [*or happiness*] as a result of calculation, however unconscious, that they would be more pleasurable than those of any other woman. If he raised the question he would, no doubt, expect that this would be so. But to raise it would be to step outside the world of Eros altogether. The only man I know of who ever did raise it was Lucretius, and he was certainly not in love when he did.' (*FL*, 90)

*Eros* does not instrumentalize the Beloved. That is part of what makes it the most god-like of all the natural loves. 'In one high bound it has overleaped the massive wall of our selfhood; it has made appetite itself altruistic, tossed personal happiness aside as a triviality and planted the interests of another in the centre of our being' (108). 'If you asked [a man in love]

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<sup>34</sup> According to John Burnaby, such suspicion of *eros*, so strong in Nygren, is a result of 'a complete misunderstanding of Augustine's definition of *frui*'. See John BURNABY, *Amor Dei: A Study of the Religion of St. Augustine* (London: The Hulsean Lectures, 1947, 1st ed. 1938), 109.



what he wanted, the true reply would often be, “To go on thinking of her” (89). That is, he most certainly would not reply, ‘I have coolly calculated that, in pursuit of personal happiness, my best bet is to go on thinking about her.’ If he did answer thus, we could rightly question whether he was in love at all. In addition to pleasure and happiness, Lewis discusses a third possible ground for loving, namely, security. Of the three, this is the least plausible. In ‘Charity’, the last chapter of *The Four Loves*, Lewis explains:

[W]ho could conceivably begin to love God on such prudential ground – because the security (so to speak) is better? Who could even include it among the grounds for loving? Would you choose a wife or a Friend – if it comes to that, would you choose a dog – in this spirit? One must be outside of the world of love, of all, loves, before one thus calculates. Eros, lawless Eros, preferring the Beloved to happiness, is more like Love Himself than this.’ (115)

Lawless *eros*. With this we return to the second couple. *Eros* has an agapistic opening. However, Lewis warns that in this opening lies its danger, too. He writes: ‘Of all the loves he is, at his height, most god-like; therefore most prone to demand our worship. Of himself he always tends to turn “being in love” into a sort of religion’ (*FL*, 105). ‘We must not give unconditional obedience to the voice of Eros when he speaks most like a god’ (104). ‘Eros, honoured without reservation and obeyed unconditionally, becomes a demon’ (105). ‘Eros extenuates – almost sanctifies – any actions it leads to’ (106), and ‘speaking with that very grandeur and displaying that very transcendence of self, may urge to evil as well as to good’ (102). The second couple exemplifies this danger – *and is meant to exemplify it*. *Eros* has become a demon, and in promise of happiness, it has lured Mr A. and Mrs B. into an act of injustice, into sin.<sup>35</sup>

## VI. Conclusion

The four claims of Nygren’s ‘eudæmonistic scheme’ were: (1) *Eros* always seeks the happiness of the lover, and (2) this happiness-seeking character is morally culpable, because (3) it entails selfish incapability of *agapistic* sacrifice, and (4) calculatingly demotes the Beloved to a means to this end. C. S. Lewis explicitly disagrees with all of them, although he is finally compelled to refine his objection to the first. In Nygren’s mind, these four claims are not only interconnected but also organic: they stand or wither together. Not so for Lewis. The jump from (1) to (2) is precisely

<sup>35</sup> ‘But what could I do?’ asked Mr A. (LEWIS, *God in the Dock* [see above, n. 28], 96). Zealous for *eros*, lovers sometimes even ‘feel like martyrs’ (LEWIS, *Four Loves* [see above, n. 19], 107), and ‘can say to one another in an almost sacrificial spirit, “It is for love’s sake that I have neglected my parents – left my children – cheated my partner – failed my friend at his greatest need”. [...] The votaries may even come to feel a particular merit in such sacrifices; what costlier offering can be laid on love’s altar than one’s conscience?’ (108)

that: a jump. Only a conviction that believed all human inclinations are ‘tainted by selfishness’ could allow it.<sup>36</sup> Such a conviction (which could be called ‘pretheological’<sup>37</sup>) Lewis simply does not share. Thus, by accepting the first claim, he is not committed to the second which in turn has natural affinities with the third and fourth.

Nonetheless, I think we must confess that in arguing against Nygren, Lewis was driven to hyperbole (a habit that in all fairness Nygren was not impervious to either). What remained amiss in *The Four Loves* is luckily corrected by the overall argument in ‘We Have No “Right to Happiness”’. Whether this was done intentionally or not, we cannot be sure. Although only three years separate the publication of the two, my reading of the essay reveals no *deliberate* reference to *The Four Loves*. I am inclined to believe that Lewis’s corrective was inadvertent. His conscious motives lay entirely elsewhere. The undertone of his essay suggests latent frustration with the ‘hijacking’ of *eros* as a moral alibi in shirking responsibility.<sup>38</sup> But we must add a caveat: It might be uncharitable to say that something was ‘amiss’ in *The Four Loves*. ‘Happiness’ in English is used in so many ways that it almost inevitably raises some of the issues we have taken up. This may be seen less as evidence of confusion, much less of possible contradiction, on Lewis’s part than just built into the notion. Nobody, after all, knows how to translate Aristotle’s *eudæmonia*.

In his book on love, the German Thomist philosopher Josef Pieper offers an instructive account of the relationship of *eros* to both happiness and unhappiness. Reading Nygren’s *Agape and Eros* left also Pieper very ‘much perplexed’; of all the defamations of *eros* it is ‘the most radical’.<sup>39</sup> Pieper calls C. S. Lewis ‘the great lay theologian of the present day’ (218) and summons him to the arena repeatedly to answer Nygren with his ‘magnificent metaphysical common sense’ (258).<sup>40</sup> For instance, love’s intimate connection to sorrow has been known and expressed, ‘of course, in C. S. Lewis’s book on love [*The Four Loves*], which we have already

<sup>36</sup> According to William O’Connor, a strict Kantian deontology accounts for this conviction in Nygren’s thought. See William O’CONNOR, ‘The *utilfrui* Distinction in Augustinian Ethics’, in *Augustinian Studies* (1983), 49.

<sup>37</sup> According to Josef Pieper, defamators of *eros* bring a ‘pretheological conception of man’ to the discussion. By this he means that they bring a fixed anthropology to the study of Scripture instead of finding Scripture’s anthropology. See PIEPER, *Love* (see above, n. 21), 210–211.

<sup>38</sup> What is more, Lewis worries that in a society where conjugal infidelity is tolerated, women will more often be the victims than the culprits: ‘I have no sympathy with moralists who frown at the increasing crudity of female provocativeness. These signs of desperate competition fill me with pity’ (*GiD*, 101). For a discussion on the problem of ‘hijacking’ love, see Olli-Pekka VAINIO, ‘The Aporia of Using “Love” as an Argument: A Meditation on C. S. Lewis’s *The Four Loves*’, in *The Chronicle of the University of Oxford C. S. Lewis Society*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2007), 21–30.

<sup>39</sup> PIEPER, *Love* (see above, n. 21), 214, 211.

<sup>40</sup> As far as the Catholic Pieper is concerned, Lewis belongs to the ‘orthodox tradition’ with such giants as Augustine and Aquinas (208).

quoted several times' (229). Curiously enough, however, Pieper does not mention Lewis's denial of *eros*'s happiness-seeking character. Pieper takes for granted the 'essential relationship that connects happiness and joy with love', although joy 'is by nature something secondary', because it would be 'of course foolish to ask someone "why" he wants to rejoice' (224). The most truthful answer would be: 'Because we love to love!' (226).

If the indivisibility of love and happiness is not a delusion, neither is the indivisibility of love and unhappiness. In fact, lovers alone can be unhappy, due to the vulnerability of love as expressed by Lewis above. Pieper asks the obvious question: 'Then where do we stand? Do both principles apply simultaneously: love and joy belong together, but love and sorrow likewise – just as Thomas Aquinas says with his cool objectivity: "Ex amore procedit et gaudium et tristitia", "out of loves comes both joy and sadness"?' (229). Pieper's answer to this seeming paradox summarizes our whole discussion rather charmingly: 'Even the unhappy lover is happier than the nonlover, with whom the lover would never change place' (230).<sup>41</sup>

#### SUMMARY

Anders Nygren's antithetical juxtaposition of *eros* and *agape* became enormously influential in twentieth-century Protestant theology. Among other interconnected tenets, Nygren promulgated the idea that *eros* is eudæmonistic, i.e. always seeking the happiness of the lover. In *The Four Loves* (1960), C. S. Lewis vehemently denies this. Lewis's use of the word 'happiness' in *The Four Loves* is so close to Nygren's *eudæmonism* that Risto Saarinen has called it 'a conscious showdown'. In this article I evaluate this engagement. After presenting and deconstructing it, I challenge Lewis's argument. I argue that *eros* does, as Nygren claims it does, seek happiness – although not only this. Perhaps surprisingly, Lewis, despite all appearances, may actually be compelled to agree with Nygren on this point. But not on every point. The final analysis reveals what I take to be Lewis's true concern. Contrary to what Nygren thought, for Lewis, the pursuit of happiness is not morally culpable and even *eros* has an *agapistic* opening. While getting these points across, Lewis was driven to exaggeration in denying *eros*'s happiness-seeking character altogether. This exaggeration is corrected (probably inadvertently) by the overall argument of his last, posthumously published essay, 'We Have No "Right to Happiness"' (1963).

#### ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Anders Nygren's antithetische Gegenüberstellung von Eros und Agape beeinflusste die protestantische Theologie des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts enorm. Nygren verbreitete, neben weiteren im Zusammenhang stehenden Lehren, den Gedanken, dass Eros eudämonistisch sei, d.h. ständig auf der Suche nach dem Glück des Liebenden. C. S. Lewis bestreitet dies in *The Four Loves* (1960) vehement. Lewis' Verwendung des Wortes "Glück" in *The Four Loves* kommt der Bedeutung von Nygrens *Eudämonismus* so nahe, dass Risto Saarinen dies als "eine bewusste Macht-

<sup>41</sup> I would like to thank Risto Saarinen and Gilbert Meilaender for helpful conversations in working out *eros*'s relation to happiness in Lewis.

probe” bezeichnet. In diesem Artikel werde ich dieses Unterfangen näher untersuchen. Nach Darlegung und Auswertung der Behauptung von Lewis, stelle ich diese in Frage. Ich behaupte, dass Eros, wie Nygren ebenfalls anführt, auf der Suche nach dem Glück ist – und nicht nur das. Es überrascht vielleicht, dass Lewis Trotz allem Anschein gezwungen ist Nygren in diesem Punkt beizupflichten. Aber nicht in jedem Punkt. Erst die endgültige Auswertung zeigt, was ich als das wahre Anliegen von Lewis betrachte. Im Gegensatz zu Nygren, ist für Lewis das Streben nach Glück moralisch nicht sträflich und selbst Eros hat eine agapistische Öffnung. Beim Versuch den Standpunkt klar zu machen wurde Lewis zur Übertreibung angetrieben den Glück suchenden Charakter von Eros zu leugnen. Diese Übertreibung wird (vermutlich versehentlich) durch die gesamte Argumentation seines letzten, nach dem Tod veröffentlichten Aufsatz ‘We Have No “Right to Happiness”’ (1963) berichtigt.