# What Greek mythology teaches us about love in organisations

In a letter written in 1856, the Russian writer Lev Tolstoy wrote, "One can live magnificently in this world if one knows how to work and how to love." Love is crucial in everyday people's life, work and business experiences. However, our common understanding of organisational life tends to treat *work* and *love* largely as non-overlapping fields, fuelling the 'myth of separate worlds.' What are the reasons of this neglect of love? And how shall we incorporate love in the study of organisations?

In a recent paper, I suggest that love is neglected because it is personal and passionate, whereas organisational life builds on control and authority; love is subjective, whereas management claims to be public and generalisable. However, the multiplicity of the meanings of love also provides the opportunity to search for its traces at work looking at closely related constructs. Building from the partition suggested by ancient Greek philosophy, I talk of love in organisations from the micro to the macro, in terms of *Eros* (or a tale of the *self*), *Philia* (or a tale of *trust*) and *Agape* (or a tale of *compassion*). The link among these constructs and organisational life is summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The links between Eros, philia and agape
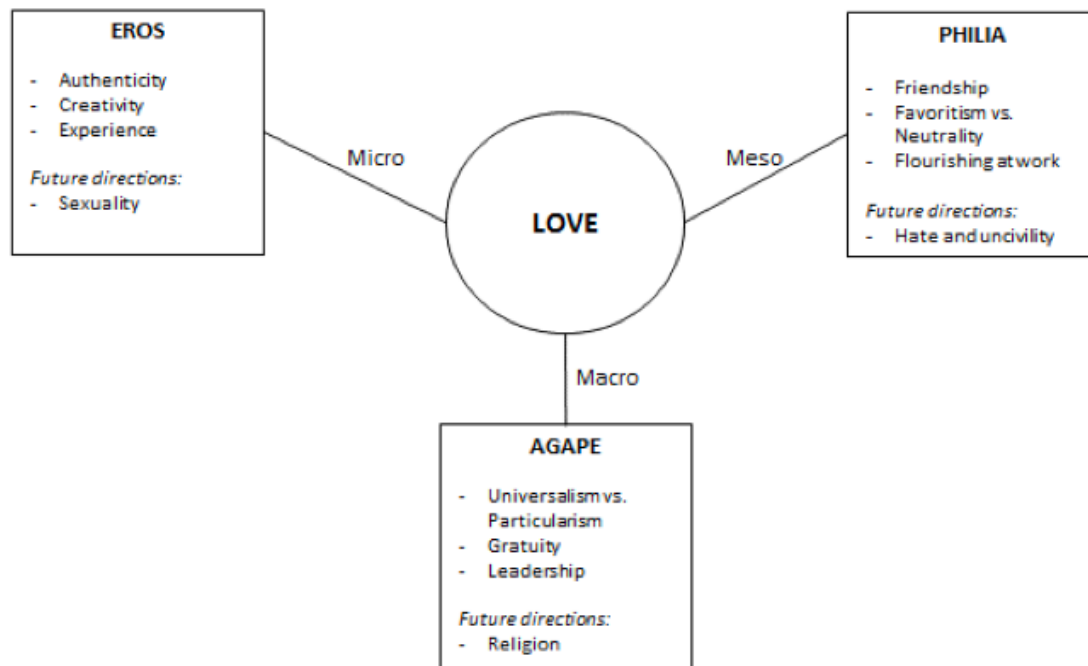
Eros is relevant for work and organisational life because, in its inner meaning, it represents the realisation of the individual's *self* beyond social and organisational norms. Eros can be seen as a social and aesthetic force that drives the individual towards *authenticity,* forcing the person to the expression of the authentic self even while pressured by organisational tasks and constraints. Considering its focus on self-expression, Eros can also help explain other organisational phenomena, including *creativity* and *sense making*. It is from the response to erotic occasions that creative ideas can emerge. Creativity is, indeed, essentially a cognitive phenomenon that expressive the perceptual tension arising from Eros. And Eros also provides that 'light touch' that enlightens the personal experience by which people make sense of their life within the organisation.

Philia is the strength of *trust* that smooths the barriers between individuals in organisations. Philia allows looking at interpersonal relationships as embedded in larger structures of trust that involve not just the single person, but also the overall community. Philia, therefore, reinforces the *personal meaning* that people assign to their organisations. By welcoming others, people render themselves less of strangers to their own organisational experiences.

However, Philia also entails a possible dark side. What are the boundaries between the neutrality imposed by organisational norms and the favouritism fuelled by Philia? Philia risks turning into logics *favouritism* inside close-knit cliques of trustworthy colleagues or friends, to the detriment of the rest of the organisation. Despite this concern, it is undeniable that individuals *flourish in the workplace* when they engage in positive relationships with their co-workers. From this perspective, Philia can even be seen as a dimension of individual personality, a 'system of construing by which the individual uniqueness emerges from interactions with others'.

Differently from Eros, with its focus on Ego, and from Philia, focused on the relation between Ego and Alter, Agape defines more broadly the love arising from the feeling of *compassion* for the whole humanity. Agape implies a kind of love that is *universalistic*, *inclusive,* and built on *gratuity.* Agape is thus a challenge to a world built on the principles of economic rationality. In this sense, it helps enlighten a new way of interpreting *leadership*, based on compassion and even self-sacrifice. For compassionate leaders, the experience of love shifts from 'belonging to you' to 'belonging to all.' There is increasing interest in leaders who promote *compassion*, and contribute to the well-being of the individuals, groups, or organisations that they lead. And there is evidence that, under such form of leadership, people also tend increase their commitment to the organisation.

Open questions concern whether we can conceive the organisation *as* love, and love *as* the organisation. Work bridges with love when people search for a meaning, for a call that transcends the job itself and puts the individual in contact with a more compelling life purpose. This is the case of people who risk their lives every day for the community where they live and work (let's think of firefighters). This is the case of people who save others' lives often working under enormous pressure (let's think of doctors and nurses in complex work environments). But it is also the case, more broadly, of all those people who try to make the difference for others' lives through their different, and apparently modest, working activities. As said by psychologist Gordon Allport, "Love received and love given comprise the best form of therapy." Hence, the final question that calls for further reflection and empirical research on love in organisations. Does love ultimately help re-define the boundaries and the meaning of what we call 'work'?

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Notes:

- *This blog post is based on the author's paper [Love and Organization Studies: Moving beyond the Perspective of Avoidance](#), Organization Studies, January 2018.*
- *The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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