

What is love?

In 2012, Google Zeitgeist revealed that 'What is love?' topped the list of what is ... search queries in no fewer than ten different countries. The popularity of the question reflected a fundamental desire to know what connects us. It was more popular than celebrity gossip, funny pictures, and even breaking news stories. However, the answer to the question is less quantifiable. The elusive thing we call 'love' is often defined by culture, language and personal philosophy. In English, for example, we only have one word for love, and this is strongly associated with one type - the kind we see in Hollywood movies, read about in books, or hear about in popular songs. It's an all-consuming state powered by a heady cocktail of hormones, adrenalin and pheromones - it is, of course, romantic love. According to a UK survey, 94% of young people are obsessed with this idea of love, and dream of finding their soulmate. But is love always romantic? Not according to the ancient Greeks.

The Greeks had many words for love, and romantic love, known as eros (after the Greek god of fertility), was just one. In fact, romantic love was the least regarded of all, the ancient Greeks being wary of the euphoria and loss of control resulting from infatuation. They were right to be circumspect: today, brain imaging has shown us that the highs and lows of this state mirror mania,

obsessive-compulsive disorder and depression. It's no wonder that we refer to it as being madly in love or 'lovesick'. Literature abounds with supreme examples of eros: Romeo and Juliet, Tristan and Isolde, Anna Karenina. And it's no coincidence that most of these relationships end in tragedy. Despite the initial feel-good factor, eros can be reckless, irrational and self-destructive. Fortunately, its long-term prognosis isn't good: the Greeks recognized that eros quickly burns out or is replaced by something different.

Pragma, on the other hand, is a more mature, long-lasting type of love. It resists the temptation to view a loved one through rose-tinted glasses; in short, it's pragmatic. Psychoanalyst Erich Fromm once commented that we spend far too much energy on 'falling in love and instead should learn how to stand in love. Pragma is exactly this: it's about working at a relationship to make it endure. Herbert and Zelmyra Fisher from North Carolina are a case in point: their tolerance, devotion and understanding resulted in a marriage of eighty-five years. The couple's maxim is 'Learn to bend - not break', and experience has taught them that compromise is central to a successful relationship. Today, pragma is less popular than eros, and perhaps unsurprisingly the seven-year itch has become the three-year itch for many. The fact that about 42% of UK marriages end in divorce or separation suggests that

we'd do well to focus on pragma a little more.

Another much-respected type of love was philia. For the Greeks, philia represented the deep bond between friends, family members, or soldiers fighting alongside each other. A good example of this is the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus in The Iliad. This love or amity was more common than the others; it was also balanced rather than distorted, and mutually beneficial. Its traits were cooperation, loyalty and support - being there for someone in their time of need. Shakespeare was right when he wrote, "Keep thy friend/Under thy own life's key." But how much of this comradely philia do we have in our lives today? Most of us experience it with family members, colleagues at work and friends in our school or community - although nowadays the definition of 'friend' is somewhat broader. Would the ancient Greeks have considered relationships with friends on social networks or followers on Twitter to be philia?

Philantia embodies the idea of loving yourself, although it doesn't necessarily have negative connotations of selfishness. While the ancient Greeks recognized the unhealthy self-centeredness of narcissism, philantia was really about a more admirable alternative. According to the philosopher Aristotle, 'In order to care for others you need to be able to care about yourself.' In short, if you feel good about yourself,

you'll feel more confident and secure about giving love to other people. Perhaps, then, the rise of the 'selfie' is not a bad thing?

The final and most desirable type of love identified by the Greeks was agape, or a general love of humanity. This love epitomizes selflessness, and in the West, it is often associated with Christianity, as illustrated in parables such as The Good Samaritan". But the idea of putting someone else first, whether they deserve it or not, also appears in other religious traditions, such as the concept of metta or 'universal loving kindness' in Theravada Buddhism. The ancient Greeks considered it a cornerstone of human behaviour, an innate trait, and the Latin word for agape is caritas, the origin of our word 'charity'. However, according to a recent US study, agape is on the decline. Seventy-five per cent of students in the study rated themselves as less charitable than students who took a similar test thirty years ago.

So what is love? Love is a complex emotion, and different types of love activate different areas of our minds. What type of love is the best is a hotly disputed subject, but the fact is that there is more love in our lives than we suppose. Love isn't just about eros; it's also about philia and spending time with friends and relatives. In terms of long-lasting relationships, eros has a walk-on part, but then often develops into pragma. Perhaps psychotherapist Philippa Perry offers the best answer:

'Love is all of the above,' she explains.
"But it is.... unrealistic to expect to
experience all five types with only one

person. This is why family and
community are so important.'

Glossary

seven-year itch: a term that implies happiness in a relationship declines after seven years * The Good Samaritan: this is a story that encourages people to help others who are in danger