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Chapter 12

Dragon Ball: Love and Renewed Life

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this chapter is to analyse the concept of love—understood in the broad and Christian-inspired sense of love as *agape-charis* love—in relation to the animes *Dragon Ball* and *Dragon Ball Z*. I first comment on the character of Piccolo—and how his friendship with Son Gohan—leads to him losing all his original villainous traits. I argue that the evolution of the character of Piccolo through his friendship with Son Gohan illustrates the philosophical claim that a loving and giving of oneself to the other—far from being a sign of weakness—is a courageous and self-affirming exercise. The result may move the individual to an inner transformative experience that leads to the enjoyment of a renewed and authentic life that is worth living. I then argue that Son Goku’s respectful attitude towards his opponents is ultimately a loving attitude. Last, I argue that it is the inspiring and loving example of Son Goku that ultimately explains why characters such as Vegeta—who are at first presented as villains—end up losing their villainous traits after fighting against Son Goku.

KEYWORDS: *Agape-Charis*, *Dragon Ball*, Love, Piccolo, Son Gohan, Son Goku, Vegeta, Worthy Opponent.

Introduction

The manga series *Dragon Ball* was created, written and illustrated by the Japanese manga author Akira Toriyama. It consists of 519 individual chapters which were first published weekly from 1984 to 1995 in the Japanese magazine *Weekly Shonen Jump*.¹ Given its success, the manga was soon adapted to an animated television series. The anime *Dragon Ball*, produced by the company Toei Animation, is the adaptation of the first 194 chapters of

¹ Akira Toriyama, *Dragon Ball* (Tokyo: Shueisha, 1984-1995), Vols. 1-42.

the original manga.² It is composed of 153 episodes which were first broadcast on the Japanese network Fuji TV from February 1986 to April 1989. *Dragon Ball Z* is the adaptation of the latter 325 chapters of the original manga series.³ It was also produced by Toei Animation and consists of 291 episodes. It was first broadcast on the Japanese channel Fuji TV from April 1989 to January 1996. With an approximate duration of 20 minutes per episode, it takes around 150 hours to watch *Dragon Ball* and *Dragon Ball Z*. Leaving aside the inclusion of some anime-exclusive “filler episodes”—that are not usually considered “canon” by fans of the Dragon Ball franchise—the animes *Dragon Ball* and *Dragon Ball Z* are, in general terms, accurate adaptations of the original manga series. Moreover, it should be noted that, like in the original manga series, there is continuation in the storylines of *Dragon Ball* and *Dragon Ball Z*—with the occasion of the birth of Son Gohan (the son of Son Goku who is the protagonist of *Dragon Ball* and *Dragon Ball Z*)—marking the beginning of the latter series. So their being marketed as two different anime series would appear to be simply a business decision.

Both the original manga and the TV anime series were translated and dubbed into other major languages. They became an immediate international success. Notably, *Dragon Ball* and *Dragon Ball Z* are probably the first Japanese animated TV series that succeeded in attracting people with no previous interest in anime or manga. What is more, the popularity of the Dragon Ball franchise is not restricted to the original audience of *Dragon Ball* and *Dragon Ball Z* from the 1980s and 90s.

A sequel to *Dragon Ball* and *Dragon Ball Z* named *Dragon Ball Super*, consisting of 131 episodes, was first aired in Japan from 2015 to 2018.⁴ This series managed to attract the attention of new (and younger) spectators.

Likewise, a remastered and abridged edition of *Dragon Ball Z*—produced in commemoration of its twentieth anniversary and known as *Dragon Ball Z Kai*—was first aired in Japan from 2009 to 2011 and its latter episodes from 2014 to 2015.⁵ In contrast with the original *Dragon Ball Z*, which has 291 episodes, *Dragon Ball Z Kai* has only 167 episodes. The reason for the difference is because *Dragon Ball Z Kai* sticks to the original storyline of the

² *Dragon Ball*: Directed by Minoru Okazaki and Daisuke Nishio with Screenplay by Toshiki Inoue and Takao Koyama (Fuji TV 1986-1989).

³ *Dragon Ball Z*: Directed by Daisuke Nishio and Shigeyasu Yamauchi with Screenplay by Takao Koyama (Fuji TV 1989-1996).

⁴ *Dragon Ball Super*: Directed by Kimitoshi Chioka et al. with Screenplay by Akira Toriyama et al. (Fuji TV 2015-2018).

⁵ *Dragon Ball Z Kai* is a revised version of *Dragon Ball Z* with updated technology including High Definition picture and sound.

manga series and dispenses with much of the “filler” content of the original anime. *Dragon Ball Z Kai* has a new English dubbing that is more faithful to the original Japanese dialogues. This is why all the literal quotations in this chapter are taken from *Dragon Ball Z Kai*.

Notably, the last two theatrically released animated films set in the Dragon Ball universe have had incredible commercial success. *Dragon Ball Super: Broly* had estimated worldwide box office sales of \$115,000,000.⁶ *Dragon Ball Super: Super Hero*, theatrically released on July 2022, is estimated to have already generated \$80,000,000 worldwide as per October 2022.⁷

The Dragon Ball franchise also expanded into video games. Recently, they have successfully attracted videogame players—receiving good reception among critics and players of the last videogame—based on the anime *Dragon Ball Z*. This game is entitled *Dragon Ball Z: Kakarot* and was developed by CyberConnect2.⁸ The videogame was designed for personal computers and consoles Sony’s PlayStation 4, Microsoft’s XBOX One and the Nintendo Switch.

The Dragon Ball universe and its main characters—Son Goku, Son Gohan, Piccolo and Vegeta—are so widely and well-known that they may be considered a worldwide pop culture phenomenon.

The Plot and Guiding Thread of *Dragon Ball* and *Dragon Ball Z*

The plot and guiding thread of *Dragon Ball* and *Dragon Ball Z* is the quest for the “dragon balls”. The story tells us that there are seven magic balls which are all somewhere on planet Earth. Reuniting the seven dragon balls will summon up a magic creature in dragon form, named Shenron, who will grant one wish to whoever summons him.

Son Goku, the protagonist of *Dragon Ball* and *Dragon Ball Z*, defeats the villains in their attempt to reunite the seven dragon balls for the purpose of getting Shenron to grant them the wish of taking over the world. In all the episodes of *Dragon Ball*, Son Goku is presented as an extremely strong young

⁶ *Dragon Ball Super: Broly*: Directed by Tatsuya Nagamine with Screenplay by Akira Toriyama (20th Century Fox Japan 2018). For the figures, see “Dragon Ball Super: Broly (2018)”, *Box Office Mojo*: <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt7961060>.

⁷ *Dragon Ball Super: Super Hero*: Directed by Tetsuro Kodama with Screenplay by Akira Toriyama (Toei Company 2022). For the figures, see “Dragon Ball Super: Super Hero (2022)”, *Box Office Mojo*: <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt14614892>. This figure is likely to increase, since at the time of writing this chapter, the film is still being shown in theatres worldwide.

⁸ *Dragon Ball Z: Kakarot*: Directed by Akihiro Anai and Written by Yasuhiro Noguchi and Shinsaku Swamura (Bandai Namco Entertainment 2020).

boy, who is exceptionally skilled in martial arts and has the ability to carry out energy attacks. Furthermore, at the beginning of *Dragon Ball Z*, it is discovered that Son Goku is in fact not human but is a member of the extra-terrestrial Saiyan warrior race.⁹

After the death of the villain Freeza,¹⁰ the quest for the dragon balls becomes somewhat secondary in the storyline. The focus becomes almost exclusively on Son Goku and his friends fighting against new and increasingly more powerful evil creatures. From then on, the dragon balls lose their narrative weight. They now simply serve the plot of Son Goku and his friends reversing a villain's actions and their consequences. This mainly involves asking Shenron to bring all those murdered by the villain back to life.

Therefore, despite having a central role in the first episodes, the dragon balls in fact end up becoming nothing more than a sort of *deus ex machina* literary recourse. In this way, the anime is able to easily start over with a clean state after a major villain is defeated.

Analogies with Christian Love (*Agape-Charis*) in *Dragon Ball* and *Dragon Ball Z*

I will analyse the concept of love—understood in the broad and Christian-inspired sense of love as *agape*¹¹ and *charis*¹²—in relation to the animes *Dragon Ball* and *Dragon Ball Z*.¹³

⁹ *Dragon Ball Z*, Episode 2 and *Dragon Ball Z Kai*, Episode 2.

¹⁰ *Dragon Ball Z*, Episodes 120 and 121; *Dragon Ball Z Kai*, Episode 56.

¹¹ From the Greek ἀγάπη, originally was a kind of generic form of love vis-à-vis *phila* love or “fraternal love” and *eros* or “erotic love”. Bennet Helm, “Love”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2017): <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/love>. The term *agape* was used in the Greek New Testament but became embedded with special meaning to refer to a love like God has—a selfless, other-focused and self-sacrificing kind of love—as demonstrated by Jesus Christ. Cf. “Agape”, *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2023): <https://www.britannica.com/topic/agape>. In the King James Bible, the term *agape* is translated as “charity”. Cf. Gene Outka, “Love”, in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, eds. McFarland et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 288-90.

¹² From the Greek χάρις, meaning “grace, kindness, mercy, goodwill”. Kurt Aland et al. eds., *The Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: Biblia-Druck GmbH, 1983), 197. Cf. Ian A. McFarland, “Grace”, in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, eds. McFarland et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 201-03.

I comment first on the character of Piccolo—and how his friendship with Son Gohan—makes him lose all his original villainous traits. I argue that the evolution of the character of Piccolo through his friendship with Son Gohan illustrates the philosophical claim that a loving and giving of oneself to the other—far from being a sign of weakness—is a courageous and self-affirming exercise. The result may move the individual to an inner transformative experience that leads to the enjoyment of a renewed and authentic life that is worth living.

I then argue that Son Goku's respectful attitude towards his opponents is ultimately a loving attitude. Last, I argue that it is the inspiring and loving example of Son Goku that ultimately explains why characters such as Vegeta, who are at first presented as villains, end up losing their villainous traits after fighting against Son Goku.

Some readers may find my claim surprising that love—understood in the broad sense of love as *agape-charis* love—plays a central role in the *Dragon Ball* animes. After all, both *Dragon Ball* and *Dragon Ball Z* appear to ultimately revolve around fighting. Moreover, and especially in *Dragon Ball Z*, the fighting does not involve only punching and kicking but sometimes includes scenes of bloody violence (that may not be suitable for young children or highly sensitive viewers).

At this point, I would like to underline that I am not denying that violent fighting is an essential component of both *Dragon Ball* and *Dragon Ball Z*. My comments here convey the psychological complexity (and philosophical implications thereof) of some of the main characters of the *Dragon Ball* series. They suffice to make the point that neither *Dragon Ball* nor *Dragon Ball Z* can be reduced to nothing more than kicks, punches and energy attacks.

Piccolo and Love

To begin with, let us consider the character of Piccolo. He is presented as a sort of reincarnation of Piccolo Daimao, also referred to as “King Piccolo”. So despite Piccolo and Piccolo Daimao having different personalities, they are still essentially the same being. Piccolo Daimao is the main villain of *Dragon Ball* in episodes 102 to 122, whose only purpose is to plunge Earth into darkness. Later, it is discovered that Piccolo Daimao, and therefore also

¹³ There are often correlations in Christian Theology between *agape* and *charis*—with analogies to the Hebrew חֶסֶד (*chesed*)—often translated “grace” or “loving-kindness”. Cf. Greifswald J. Zobel, “חסד”, in the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, eds. Botterweck et al. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 44-64 but especially 54-64.

Piccolo, is the evil counterpart of Kami-Sama, who is presented as the “guardian” or “god” of planet Earth. Piccolo Daimao and Kami-Sama were originally the same single being—the split having been produced when Kami-Sama expelled the darkness and evil within him—so as to be able to become the “guardian” of planet Earth.¹⁴

After the death of Piccolo Daimao at the hand of Son Goku, Piccolo becomes the main villain and antagonist of the anime.¹⁵ While he is considered a “demon”, later it is discovered that he, and so also Kami-Sama, are not in fact demons but inhabitants of a distant planet named Namek. Piccolo’s main purpose is to take over the world by defeating Son Goku.¹⁶ Following the death of Son Goku at the beginning of *Dragon Ball Z*,¹⁷ and having received the news of more powerful opponents soon to come, Piccolo starts training Son Goku’s son (Son Gohan), who is just four years old when he begins.¹⁸ Piccolo is aware that the new opponents—whose names will later be revealed as Vegeta and Nappa—are stronger than him and Son Goku put together. Son Gohan, for his part, has already shown incredible power; although he is still too young to know how to control it. Realizing Son Gohan’s hidden potential, Piccolo decides to train Son Gohan for an entire year.

Piccolo treats Son Gohan harshly at first, but he soon shows him compassion, ending up sacrificing himself to save Son Gohan from the attack by Nappa.¹⁹ It is then that Piccolo recognizes that Son Gohan’s friendship and love has renewed him. Son Gohan is the first person ever to have seen him as a friend and not as a monster.

“What a sorry excuse I’ve become: me, Piccolo, laying down his life to protect some whiny little pipsqueak. Gohan, you’re the only person I’ve ever known who didn’t treat me like a monster. Truth be told this last year wasn’t so bad. Thank you, Gohan”.²⁰

From then on, Piccolo loses all his original villainous traits and is even willing to fight the evil forces that threaten to destroy the world. To this effect, he plays a relevant role in the fight against the villain Frieza.²¹ Piccolo’s

¹⁴ *Dragon Ball*, Episode 125.

¹⁵ *Dragon Ball*, Episodes 123-148.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Dragon Ball Z*, Episode 5 and *Dragon Ball Z Kai*, Episode 3.

¹⁸ *Dragon Ball Z*, Episodes 6-21 and *Dragon Ball Z Kai*, Episodes 4-8.

¹⁹ *Dragon Ball Z*, Episode 28 and *Dragon Ball Z Kai*, Episode 12.

²⁰ *Dragon Ball Z Kai*, Episode 12.

²¹ *Dragon Ball Z*, Episodes 76-83 and *Dragon Ball Z Kai*, Episodes 37-41.

transformation culminates several episodes later—when he and Kami-Sama merge together to once again become a single being—thereby finally making his own peace and reconciling with himself.²²

It is evident that Son Gohan's friendship has transformed Piccolo. The change is inner and intimate: the world remains the same as it was before, but the way Piccolo sees and approaches the world has dramatically changed. Piccolo's transformation is something far more complex than just saying that he has turned "good". In fact, and despite having ethical implications, it would be more accurate to label Piccolo's transformation as existential rather than ethical. What has occurred is that Piccolo has dispensed with his previous egoistical understanding of the world, thanks to Son Gohan's friendship. Until then, Piccolo saw both others and the world as a whole in a purely egoistical way, as their existing merely for him to take some selfish, private profit from. Others had no value in themselves for Piccolo, seeing them not as *persons* but merely as *objects* he might take control over. In Piccolo's eyes, their only value was the possibility of taking this control over them, which is why his only purpose was to take over the world.

Ultimately, through the friendship with Son Gohan, Piccolo is progressively moved to a loving and generous way of understanding and approaching others and the world as a whole. This generosity dramatically culminates in Piccolo's self-sacrifice to save Son Gohan when Nappa attacks. However, Piccolo's loving attitude is not restricted to the character of Son Gohan but directed to the whole world, as displayed by the fact that from thereon Piccolo overtly renounces his original intention of taking over the world and is always willing to team up with Son Goku and his friends to defeat the evil creatures that threaten to destroy humanity. What has occurred is that Piccolo is now able to recognize the greatness and value that others, and the world as a whole, have in themselves—their value no longer dependent on the egoistical profit he might obtain from them. Once he recognizes the value the world has in itself—he is moved not just to respect it but to defend it against those who try to deny its intrinsic value by converting the world and others into mere objects of their capricious desire.

Moreover, Piccolo's transformation does not just consist of him losing all his previous villainous traits. As just stated, it is more accurate to understand Piccolo's transformation in existential rather than just ethical terms. In this regard, the anime is clear in portraying that Piccolo has not just become a "good" character, but that he is now enjoying a renewed and authentic life that is worth living. It is authentic because, once the rage has subsided—

²² *Dragon Ball Z*, Episode 141 and *Dragon Ball Z Kai*, Episode 68.

thereby allowing him to see the value others have in themselves and by extension the value in itself of the whole world—Piccolo is now free in the sense of enjoying of a self-governed life. Having freed himself from the control of anger and rage, Piccolo is now able to affirm his own singularity and thereby preserve his autonomy and dignity. This self-affirming process is clearly demonstrated in his merging with Kami-Sama so as to once again become the single being they originally were: Piccolo has reconciled with himself and made his own peace.

The evolution of Piccolo illustrates the philosophical claim that those who receive love are transformed by it. Son Gohan's attitude shows Piccolo a loving and generous understanding of the world and others. It is important to emphasize, however, that Son Gohan serves not just as an example for Piccolo, but an opportunity for him adopting a loving attitude. So it is not just Son Gohan's example but Piccolo's own self-giving act of love towards Son Gohan—which as mentioned before dramatically culminates in his self-sacrifice to save Son Gohan from the attack by Nappa—that ultimately accounts for his own inner transformative experience. It is in this sense that the evolution of Piccolo also illustrates the philosophical claim that the one who loves is transformed by the act of loving.

Philosophy and Piccolo's Love

If we turn to the History of Philosophy, we realize that the way of conceiving of love that ultimately drives Piccolo's transformation has been present, in one way or another, throughout all of Christian philosophical tradition. This includes classic thinkers such as Saint Augustine (354-430)²³ and Ramon Llull (1232-1316).²⁴ This theme of love can also be traced in the so-called "Christian

²³ Love drives almost all the philosophical and theological reflections of Saint Augustine. For example, see his *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, where he wrote: "Once for all, then, a short precept is given thee: Love, and do what thou wilt: whether thou hold thy peace, through love hold thy peace; whether thou cry out, through love cry out; whether thou correct, through love correct; whether thou spare, through love do thou spare: let the root of love be within, of this root can nothing spring but what is good". Saint Augustine, *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, in *From Nicene to Post-Nicene Fathers* Vol. 7, ed. P. Schaff and trans. J. Gibb (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888), 504. For an accessible introduction to Saint Augustine's notion of love, see Teodora Prelipcean, "Saint Augustine—The Apologist of Love", *Procedia—Social and Behavioral Sciences* 149 (2014): 765-71.

²⁴ Ramon Llull, *The Book of the Lover and the Beloved*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Cambridge: In Parentheses Publications, 2000). For an overview of Llull's life and works, see Ernesto Riani, "Ramon Llull", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/llull/>.

Existentialism” philosophical movement of the twentieth century which includes thinkers such as Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936),²⁵ Paul Tillich (1886-1965),²⁶ and Joaquim Xirau (1895-1946).²⁷ Despite variations in their arguments, all these authors agree that a loving and giving of oneself to the other—far from being a sign of weakness—is a courageous and self-affirming exercise. The result may move the individual to an inner transformative experience that leads to the enjoyment of a renewed and authentic life that is worth living.

This way of conceiving of love has been criticized by some thinkers, however. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) fiercely argued against it. According to Nietzsche, the attempt to follow a lovingly, *agapeic* way of life is nothing more than a cowardly, insincere attempt to evade oneself. Thus, in his “On Love of the Neighbor” from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche wrote:

You flee to your neighbor from yourselves and would like to make a virtue out of that: but I see through your “selflessness”. The *you* is older than the *I*; the *you* has been pronounced holy, but not yet the *I*; so man crowds towards his neighbor.²⁸

As I previously argued in my article “Nietzsche and Unamuno on *Conatus* and the Agapeic Way of Life”, Nietzsche’s criticisms are contestable.²⁹ I now want to point out that, even if it is obviously not, strictly speaking, a philosophical argument on its own, Piccolo’s transformation has the philosophical value of succinctly illustrating why Nietzsche’s criticisms are misguided. If Nietzsche

²⁵ Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and Nations*, in *The Selected Works of Miguel de Unamuno* Vol. 4, ed. and trans. Anthony Kerrigan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 146-71. For a detailed and systematic analysis of Unamuno’s philosophical proposal, see Alberto Oya, *Unamuno’s Religious Fictionalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

²⁶ Paul Tillich, *Love, Power and Justice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954).

²⁷ Joaquim Xirau, *Amor y mundo*, in *Joaquim Xirau: obras completas (t. 1: ‘Escritos fundamentales’)*, ed. R. Xirau (Barcelona: Anthropos, 1998), 133-262; Joaquim Xirau, *Lo fugaz y lo eterno*, in *Joaquim Xirau: obras completas (t. 1: ‘Escritos fundamentales’)*, ed. R. Xirau (Barcelona: Anthropos, 1998), 263-307. See also Joaquim Xirau, “Being and Objectivity”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 3.2 (1942): 145-61. For a detailed account of Xirau’s philosophy, see Alberto Oya, “Joaquim Xirau: Amor, Persona y Mundo”, *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 99.9 (2022): 835-43.

²⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 172.

²⁹ Alberto Oya, “Nietzsche and Unamuno on *Conatus* and the Agapeic Way of Life”, *Metaphilosophy* 51.2-3 (2020): 303-17.

were right—that a loving and giving of ourselves to the whole world constitutes an antinatural and self-denying exercise—then Piccolo would have had enjoyed an authentic, self-affirming life prior to his friendship with Son Gohan. However, it is clear that this was not the case. Piccolo was so alienated by the rage he suffered to the point that he could not even accept himself, as shown by his split from Kami-Sama.

Until now, I have focused on the character of Piccolo and his transformation after his friendship with Son Gohan. I have argued that the evolution of the character of Piccolo illustrates the philosophical claim that a loving and giving of oneself to others—far from being a sign of weakness—is a courageous and self-affirming exercise. The result may move the individual to an inner transformative experience that leads to the enjoyment of a renewed and authentic life that is worth living. While Piccolo's transformation is the most interesting for comment, it is worth mentioning that a similar analysis could easily be extended to the first-seen form of the character of Majin Buu, also known as “Innocent Buu” or “Fat Buu”. At first, he is presented as the evillest creature imaginable.³⁰ But he ends up losing his villainous traits due to his friendship with the character of Mr. Satan.³¹

Son Goku and the Movement of Love, Respect of Enemies and the Worthy Opponent

Now, I will argue that Son Goku's respectful attitude towards his opponents is ultimately a loving one. In addition, I will argue that it is the inspiring example of Son Goku that ultimately explains why characters such as Vegeta, who are at first presented as villains, end up losing their villainous traits after fighting against Son Goku. Fighting against Son Goku moved Vegeta to an inner transformative experience—which again is not just ethical but primarily existential—changing the way he approaches and relates to the world.

It is true that Son Goku fights against, and on some occasions kills, the villains he encounters. It should be noted, however, that Son Goku's violence is not gratuitous but is ethically justified, at least according to the storyline of the *Dragon Ball* series. The narrative or storyline of both *Dragon Ball* and *Dragon Ball Z* is set in what might be called a “heroic light”. Son Goku is the hero who must face the honourable (and challenging) endeavour of fighting an evil force which threatens to destroy human life. This evil may take different forms. But is always something that threatens human life in a relevant way. Besides, and this is a crucial aspect, Son Goku is presented as

³⁰ *Dragon Ball Z*, Episodes 233-251 and *Dragon Ball Z Kai*, Episodes 123-138.

³¹ *Dragon Ball Z*, Episodes 252-255 and *Dragon Ball Z Kai*, Episodes 139-142.

being the only one who can succeed in overthrowing the evil force. So in the last instance, it is not a matter of free choice but of fulfilling his duty.

It is also true that Son Goku actually enjoys fighting, becoming extremely excited when he encounters a new and stronger opponent. However, the anime is also clear in showing that Son Goku enjoys fighting in terms of “sport”. That is to say, as a way of pushing himself beyond his own limits. Son Goku does not enjoy causing his enemies pain or humiliating or mocking them. In most cases, he shows his enemies mercy and tries to refrain from killing them. In this regard, consider the first fight between Son Goku and Vegeta.³² At the end of the fight, Son Goku stops his friend Krillin from killing Vegeta, even when Vegeta has not (yet) given up his aim to destroy humanity.³³ Son Goku makes his reasons for not wanting Krillin to kill Vegeta explicit.

“I [Son Goku] know how strong he [Vegeta] is, how much damage he can do. . . . As long as he’s alive, nobody on Earth is safe. But you’ve [Krillin] got to listen to me. This might sound crazy, in fact I’m sure it does, but just now when it looked like you were about to kill him, I couldn’t help but thinking. . . . It’d be such a waste. After I finished training with King Kai in the other world, I thought I’d gotten as strong as I could possibly get. Then I saw Vegeta fight, and he’s so much faster, so much more powerful than me, the things he was capable of It was overwhelming. But I’ve got to admit, deep down I was pretty excited. Maybe it’s because I’m a Saiyan too, but when I see somebody who’s that strong, my heart starts racing because I realize I still have farther to go. It makes me want to train myself even harder to push myself to their level. Krillin, I know it’s wrong, but please, let him go, for me. I need to be able to fight him again someday”.³⁴

Ultimately, Son Goku’s attitude towards his opponents—which is not just graciously merciful but consciously respectful—is a loving attitude. Son Goku does not just value his own friends but is able to recognize the intrinsic value of his enemies. The opponents Son Goku fights are worthy of fighting against. This is why he is always excited to find new and powerful opponents to fight against. And because they are “Worthy Opponents”—who make him better at fighting because he fights with them—he shows them respect and mercy. On this understanding, mocking opponents or using dirty tricks to defeat them—

³² *Dragon Ball Z*, Episodes 29-35 and *Dragon Ball Z Kai*, Episodes 13-17.

³³ *Dragon Ball Z*, Episode 35 and *Dragon Ball Z Kai*, Episode 17.

³⁴ *Dragon Ball Z Kai*, Episode 17.

would not just be cowardly—but also dishonest and proof of a wicked character. This explains why Son Goku gives a “Senzu Bean” to the villain Cell—so that he can fully recover his strength—before fighting against Son Gohan. Otherwise, Son Gohan’s victory would not only be dishonest but unfair too.³⁵ It also explains why Son Goku gives up against Freeza once he realizes that Freeza has already been defeated, i.e., when his power level has become too low to continue fighting.

“It’s done. You [Freeza] keep coming at me [Son Goku] with everything you’ve got, but it’s finally caught up with you, and your power levels are falling fast. The fact is I don’t see the point in fighting you anymore. Your pride is already shot. And, in the end, I guess that’s good enough for me. You were so sure of your own power that you never imagined that anyone in the universe could bring you down—especially a Saiyan. Now you know what failure feels like. See, I don’t need to keep fighting you because I’ve already won. So go crawl off some place and hide, I don’t really care. Like I said, it’s done”.³⁶

Son Goku’s attitude towards his enemies reflects a loving understanding of the world inasmuch as it shows that he does not see his enemies as mere *objects* to be brought down. Rather, he views them as *persons*—in the full philosophical understanding of the term insofar as having their own autonomy and dignity—thus worthy of respect. Some of the villain characters who fight against Son Goku are actually surprised by the way Son Goku respects them. The character of Vegeta is the most relevant case in this regard, though something similar can probably be said of the characters of Ten Shin Hahn and Chaosz. Despite Vegeta’s evolution being much more complex than Piccolo’s, he too goes from being a villain—obsessed with finding the dragon balls to acquire everlasting life—to sacrificing himself to save planet Earth. Notably, as in the case of Piccolo, Vegeta’s transformation is not just a sudden change in his own ethical standards, but an inner, existential transformation

³⁵ *Dragon Ball Z*, Episode 181 and *Dragon Ball Z Kai*, Episode 90.

³⁶ *Dragon Ball Z*, Episode 103 and *Dragon Ball Z Kai*, Episode 52. The reviewer of this chapter thought that this statement seemed “disdainful”—and Son Goku does not demonstrate respect for his enemies—so consequently it runs contrary to my argument in this chapter. But I would counter that by saying that Son Goku may be simply trying to pacify the opponent by using the flippant bravado rhetoric common in combat. Ultimately, my point is that Son Goku’s respect is showed in him not taking advantage of an enemy who has already been defeated while giving him the opportunity to reconsider and take a new path in life.

brought about by his contact with Son Goku. Near the end of *Dragon Ball Z*, Vegeta makes the following confession.³⁷

“I [Vegeta] used to fight for the sheer pleasure of it, sparing no one. I killed for dominance and to feed my insatiable pride, but you [Son Goku] never fought to kill or even to win, only to test your limits and become the strongest you could possibly be. You showed mercy to everyone, even your fiercest enemies, even me—as if you knew I would one day possess this tiny sliver of a soul. How can a Saiyan fight with such power and at the same time be so gentle? It makes me angry just thinking about it, but perhaps it’s my anger that’s made me blind to the truth for so long. I see it now, I fought to push down others, you only fight to push yourself”.³⁸

Son Goku’s example, even while based on fighting, moves his opponents to realize that a lovingly, *agape-charis* way of life is the way to enjoy of an authentic and self-affirming life that is worth living.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I analysed the concept of love—understood in the broad and Christian-inspired sense of *agape-charis* love—in relation to the animes *Dragon Ball* and *Dragon Ball Z*. My comments on the evolution of the character of Piccolo through his friendship with Son Gohan, Son Goku’s respectful attitude towards his enemies, and Vegeta’s inner existential transformation brought about by his contact with Son Goku, show that love—understood in the broad sense of *agape-charis*—plays a central role in the *Dragon Ball* animes. Ultimately, my comments here convey the psychological complexity (and philosophical implications thereof) of some of the main characters of the *Dragon Ball* series—showing thereby that neither *Dragon Ball* nor *Dragon Ball Z* can be reduced to nothing more than kicks, punches and energy attacks.

³⁷ *Dragon Ball Z*, Episode 280 and *Dragon Ball Z Kai*, Episode 159.

³⁸ *Dragon Ball Z Kai*, Episode 159.