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Love or Desire: *erôs* in Plato

Although the whole interpretation of works like Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* depends on how one defines the key term *erôs*, almost no attention has been paid to the fact that there is no unanimity on how to construe this word and, what is even more surprising, critics rarely acknowledge their disagreement. LSJ, followed by nearly all translations of the *Symposium*, defines *erôs* as 'love'; others, including K.J. Dover (1980) and Anne Carson (1986), maintain that the word denotes 'desire.' Gregory Vlastos (1981) is typical in his glossing over of meanings: although he defines *erôs* as 'desire, longing,' he systematically translates the word as 'love' in his discussion of the *Symposium*.

It might seem obvious in the abstract, but concrete instances repeatedly remind us that the more attention we devote to Plato's use of individual words, the more aware we are that such scrutiny is indispensable. Therefore, since there is a fundamental difference between loving and desiring a person or thing, any analysis of the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* must be predicated on an understanding of the semantic sphere of *erôs*. This paper reviews some pre-Platonic and Platonic passages and comes to the following conclusions: initially, in the Homeric and Archaic Periods, *erôs* denoted 'desire, appetite.' When *epithumia* entered the Greek language in the late Sixth Century, B.C.E., and, following Kurylowicz's Fourth Law, arrogated the main functions of the older word, *erôs* itself was relegated to the more limited, secondary function of denoting only very strong desires, the most obvious being sexual. The present survey indicates that the translation of *erôs* as 'love' is never appropriate in Archaic, Classical, or Hellenistic Greek; *erôs* always denotes a need or deficiency.

The implications of this word study are crucial to the interpretation of the *Symposium*. When Socrates avers that his only knowledge is *ta erôtika*, he is not claiming any positive knowledge but is stressing his yearning for the wisdom he lacks. Further, when he refutes Agathon, he is not arguing that people *love* their sweethearts only when they are absent but that they *miss and desire* them when they are apart. The *Symposium* itself questions what humans want. Socrates responds that we yearn (*eran*) for that complete wisdom that we can never retain on a permanent basis.