

# Eros and Polis

*Desire and Community in Greek Political Theory*

PAUL W. LUDWIG



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# Introduction

A recurrent feature of ancient Greek political discourse was the assertion that erotic passion was a causal factor in the emergence and maintenance, as well as the decline, of the Greek polis. Eros, the most private of passions, was believed by ancient political thinkers to be of the utmost public relevance. For them, the term eros included the ordinary meanings of love and sexuality but went beyond these to embrace a wide array of inclinations comprising ambition, patriotism, and other aspirations that were properly political in nature. Not only the soulcraft of Platonic philosophy but also Thucydides' hard-headed and purely political account of the Peloponnesian War makes use of erotic terminology to describe ambition, including, for example, a citizen's ambition to serve the state, a community's ambition to liberate itself from bondage, and an imperial power's ambition to attempt a foreign conquest. The modern reader must question the accuracy of these descriptions, asking, in particular, how closely the concept of eros in ancient psychology resembles our own experience of eros and how instructive the comparison between political passion and eros is, after the differences between ancient and modern concepts of eros have been taken into account.

In classical Athens, the discourse of political eros was both a rhetoric and a theory. The large semantic field of the Greek word *eros*, comprising political and other meanings, had been a linguistic feature of long standing. During the classical period, this existing resource of the language was self-consciously appropriated, in political oratory and in political theory, at times metaphorically and at times literally, to relate levels of human experience among which the connections have not always been perceived. Much of classical thought, explicitly and implicitly, based its notions of

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eros on purely formal resemblances among sexual desire, love, and ambition as well as higher aspirations such as patriotism and cosmopolitanism. Common features in the psychological responses to each of these passions led orators, poets, and philosophers to conclude that said passions were differing manifestations of a single, underlying eros. They were then able to place the apparently diverse passions on a continuum with one another, so that the logical progression, for example, from sexual license to tyranny or from citizen lovers to loving the city, could seem unproblematic to them. Eros therefore provided them with a bridge, missing in modern thought, between the private and public spheres.

As a theory, the ancient conception of political eros has important implications for the theoretical foundations of republicanism, including the foundations of modern representative and participatory democracies. At the core of every republican regime lies a particular political psychology in which a carefully negotiated balance between personal liberty and civic dedication remains satisfying and fulfilling to most citizens. The longevity of modern liberal democracy rests on the beauty or dignity of the life lived in accordance with this balance. Since greater liberty and greater civic dedication are both goods and since the two cannot normally be increased simultaneously, it follows that the republican life will often appear, by turns, restrictive of personal liberty and insufficiently dedicated to the common good. Democratic citizens will therefore be vulnerable to longings that a liberal democracy cannot satisfy, longings both for greater individual autonomy and for stronger ties of obligation and affection among fellow citizens.

These two longings, which have generated the separate streams of individualism and communitarianism in American thought, were the subjects of exhaustive study in classical political philosophy, as the chief psychological factors contributing to both the formation and the dissolution of republican government. Both tendencies, the desire for perfect freedom as well as the need to belong to a greater whole, were diagnosed as erotic wishes by classical authors. Plato and Aristophanes, for example, were particularly interested in the aspiration to transform the polity into one great household, binding the citizens together through ties of mutual affection. Likewise, Thucydides, Aristophanes, and Plato all understood the transformation from republic to empire to be motivated, in part, by a cosmopolitan yearning, the desire to partake of foreign experiences, products, and customs; in their view, many Athenians wished to transcend the confining limitations

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of the local and the particular. In these theories, private preferences have public implications. Defining the limits of those implications, determining when private choices affect and when they do not affect the balance struck by republicanism between individual liberty and dedication to the common good, remains a crucial problem for political theory today.

### Aims, Method, Scope

The present study aims to restore a portion of the classical understanding of eros to its place in political theory, in part so that modern debates about privacy and sexuality can utilize the full resources of the tradition. In addition to contributing to our own pressing debates about sexual norms, it is hoped that the concept of political eros will prove to be of value for explaining behavior in areas beyond what are normally considered erotic. Although ancient Greek sexuality has been the theme of much recent classical scholarship, the present study aims to exhibit an equally interesting side of Greek eros lying elsewhere and comparatively neglected by both classicists and political theorists: in the political psychology, aspirations, and idealism animating the classical polis, the failures and successes of which reveal the limits of political possibilities. In making a first approach to a theory of political eros, this study concentrates on building bridges from the existing scholarship on ancient sexuality to the more fully *political* conception of eros. Since what is attempted is to recover an unfamiliar way of looking at political phenomena and since the assumptions behind that unfamiliar perspective are by no means explicit in the texts, the burden of the study is to explore suggestions in the texts of ways in which eros might be political or be made political. Some examples examined are the rivalry between citizen lovers and beloveds, in which the older lover provided a role model for the ambition of the younger beloved; eros as hubris or the aggressive self-aggrandizement implicit in the desire to dishonor others, for example, sexuality used to establish and maintain hierarchies; and finally, the “sublimation” of eros into abstract objects of desire such as love of country.

The methodology is primarily an exegesis of texts: many sections are restricted almost entirely to drawing out assumptions of the discourse and indicating internal implications. The approach is literary and philological, and the interpretations are intended to stand on their own as a new comparative study of several related classical texts. Beyond this literary–critical



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purpose, however, it is hoped that the ancient discourse, both the theory and the rhetoric, can expand our knowledge of the latent potentialities of our nature by showing what happens to human eros under different political conditions. It is conceivable that the small, face-to-face societies that comprised much of the life of the polis schooled eros in ways that enabled ancient thinkers to perceive features of eros that we have not seen or that appear in confusing guise in modern society. Clarity about those features of eros might be expected in turn to shed light on our own political choices. However, the remarkable extent to which modern scholarship, going back at least to Rousseau,<sup>1</sup> has shown eros to be constructed by social forces, necessitates paying close attention to the sociology of eros. Sociology includes not only ancient practices and mores but also the texts that report them; our access to the history of ancient eros is largely dependent on the same texts that are under study. A selection bias of the theorists left out large chunks of fact that can be only speculatively supplied, the most obvious example being their almost exclusive interest in male eros. As will become clear, the male bias of the civilization heavily influenced the politicization of eros. As a supplementary methodology, several sections and one entire chapter (Chapter 3) situate arguments from the political theories of eros in a broader context of Greek oratory, historiography, epic and tragic poetry, and political satire, as well as in the context of ancient philosophy. Although the disagreements among ancient authors can be more instructive than their consensus, a wide range of evidence nevertheless demonstrates the broad currency of this discourse throughout the classical period and traces its roots in earlier Greek thought and language.

In addition, an attempt is made to test the plausibility of the ancient theories of eros against modern experience. Although the many pitfalls of such a comparison are obvious, it would be impossible to engage the texts of Thucydides, Aristophanes, and Plato adequately without assigning to their words some portion of our own experience. Not without trepidation, then, does the study bring to bear modern and postmodern theories of eros, particularly those of Freud and Foucault, on the ancient theories. Keeping the voices distinct has been the paramount concern of this exercise. Throughout, an effort has also been made to bring the ancient political discourse into dialogue with the later history of political thought, including selected contemporary authors. This study cannot pretend to have exhausted the

<sup>1</sup> J.-J. Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, pp. 154–7. Compare *Emile*, p. 333.

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resources of the discourse of political eros, even in the three classical authors chosen as representative of it: for example, *Ecclesiazusae* and *Lysistrata*, two plays in which eros and politics are thematic, have been left for a future study. Much less does it survey the entire scholarship even on the various facets of eros in these authors. The subject of political eros has required ruthless narrowing and narrowing again, as it threatened to grow too broad to be viewed whole. The outcome is a literary study and an attempt to reconstruct a political theory. Although this study sketches the history of a discourse, it makes few claims about political history, and certainly no new ones, although it does offer new interpretations of some documents on which social and political histories are, in part, based.

Including a comic playwright in the ranks of serious political thinkers perhaps requires justification. Aristophanes' political satire held up a mirror to Athenian politics for almost forty years, during a period that witnessed direct-vote democracy in its most advanced condition as well as experiments with broad- and narrow-based oligarchies; Athenian imperialism reached its zenith and collapsed during the same period. In response to these changes, Aristophanes presented on stage a variety of political utopias – agrarian, imperial, and communist – in order to show the psychologies of both expansion and reform while allowing the limitations or folly of the projects to arise naturally out of their own assumptions. The satirist especially excelled at portraying the psychology of political action: what motivates the agents, what they tell themselves, and what they tell others, on their way up or down. In classical studies, a long debate has gone on over whether serious views can be ascribed to plays filled with manic humor.<sup>2</sup> The carnival excesses

<sup>2</sup> A. W. Gomme, "Aristophanes and Politics," p. 108, writes that Aristophanes "may, in his youth, have believed, wrongly, that it was his business to direct the counsels of the state . . . mistaking the character of his own genius." Gomme finds Aristophanes' political opinions, even if they could be recovered, irrelevant for his art (p. 97). G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, concerned with Old Comedy's usefulness as a source for ancient history, finds serious opinions "sandwiched" between humorous passages (*Origins of the Peloponnesian War*, p. 357); he finds (p. 363) that the poet identifies himself strongly with the character Dicaeopolis in *Acharnians*, the play arguably most strident about its claims to instruct its audience about politics (e.g., lines 497–501, 644–5). L. Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, also concludes that the poet shows solidarity with such characters or choruses as speak *in persona poetae*; Strauss contends that the poet approves of characters' schemes to the extent to which he makes those schemes succeed (pp. 22, 69, 278), but maintains that even if simple messages can be found side by side with humor, nevertheless more sophisticated thought can be uncovered by taking "the ridiculous [as] all-pervasive" (p. 78). Contrast D. M. MacDowell, *Aristophanes and Athens*, pp. 5–6, on M. Heath, *Political Comedy in Aristophanes*, pp. 16–21. K. J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy*, p. 88, denies that *Acharnians* is "a pill of political advice thickly

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in the plays, in my opinion, only serve to throw into relief the motivations of the protagonists; we witness demagogues, cleruchs, yeoman farmers, and imperialists acting entirely in consonance with their own wishes, free of all communal restraint that might necessitate that they dissemble their true desires. Although historians of antiquity must beware of mistaking caricature for accurate portrayal of fact, political theorists will find that such caricature often highlights the character traits of greatest interest: for example, the religiosity of Nicias in *Knights*, 30–4, which was later to play such a decisive role in the Athenian defeat at Syracuse.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the playwright, who caters to the masses more often than to the privileged few, provides important access to demotic sentiments (spoken by his characters) in an otherwise aristocratic mental culture. In particular, his satire on elite pederasty allows us to see this sociopolitical phenomenon through the eyes of the rank and file of farmers and (to a lesser extent) urban marketers. Aristophanes' works are a largely untapped resource for political theory.

In attempting to meet the standards of both classical philology and political theory, this study runs the risk of falling in between the two disciplines. Relevance to modern problems is especially prized in political theory, whereas in philology, relevance is the siren song that calls us away from historical contextualization. Study of the classics takes its impetus from love of the books on their own terms, but it acquires depth and gravity only if the books speak relevantly to a felt need. My hope is that the ancient view of political eros presented here will prove a useful supplement to, or correction of, the purely private eros of modern theory. The liberal ideal that eros should be kept as private as possible is a deeply felt ethical intuition that this study would otherwise wish to uphold. However,

sugared with humor"; Dover expands Gomme's catalogue of the many inconsistencies that would have to be explained before any coherent political views could be ascribed to Aristophanes. See also S. Halliwell, "Aristophanic Satire," pp. 16 and 19 as well as his *Aristophanes*, pp. xxxix–xlvi. A. M. Bowie, "The Parabasis in Aristophanes," p. 29, note 14, disagrees with Ste. Croix that the poet has a special relationship with Dicaeopolis and points out that the "author" as he functions in the play "is as much a literary construct as his hero" (p. 40; cf. Bowie, *Aristophanes: Myth, Ritual and Comedy*, pp. 28–29). J. Henderson, "The Demos and the Comic Competition," pp. 273–4 explains that Aristophanes never steps out of the humorous because he would lose his "fool's privilege" of saying precisely what he wishes, no matter how unpalatable politically. The king can pretend not to take seriously what the fool says yet seeks to reconstruct, in private, a serious content from his fool's comical criticism. Henderson alludes to an ancient anecdote that when Dionysius, tyrant of Syracuse, wished to study the *politeia* of the Athenians, Plato sent him a copy of Aristophanes (*Life of Aristophanes*, KA, pp. 42–5). "Historical or not, the anecdote expresses the ancient attitude" (p. 272).

<sup>3</sup> Thucydides 7.50.4.

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the moral goodness and political prudence of leaving certain erotic phenomena unregulated must be sharply distinguished from empirical claims that those erotic phenomena are without political consequences and that phenomena acknowledged to be political are not erotic in character. Investigating the degree to which eros can possibly remain private should prove instructive. Postmodernism has already abandoned the liberal position, and the vulnerability of privacy to theoretical attack from both left and right leads us to wish to place it on a firmer basis.<sup>4</sup>

### Eros Ancient and Modern

In classical Greek, the term *eros*<sup>5</sup> had a range of meanings covered by the English words love and lust. It emphatically did not extend so far as the modern idea of love as “caring” or altruism. *Eros*, even at its most innocent, never lost a sense of “longing” and usually meant the desire to possess for oneself. The Greeks did not hasten to condemn such a lover for selfishness. Instead, they were keenly aware that people often perform acts of service in hopes of winning favor in the eyes of their beloved. The arguments for the political utility of eros relied on precisely this psychology.

A different group of words, for example, *aphrodisia* and (more rarely) *aphrodite*, was sometimes used to mean, respectively, sexual pleasures and sexual desire, often without reference to love. An amount of overlap existed between the two concepts of love and sex. In Greek texts, *eros* can, but need not, connote sexual arousal. The fact that the specifically sexual signification is covered by the other group of terms frees up the term *eros*, particularly when contrasted with *ta aphrodisia* or cognates, to mean a passion closer to our romantic love.<sup>6</sup> When not so paired, *eros* can mean either or both.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, pp. 45–9. In the realm of practical politics, the rebirth of the movement to legislate morality (e.g., in the Colorado Amendment 2 case *Evans v. Romer*) is far surpassed by national conventions of journalists who solemnly debate the ethics of “outing” people who wish to keep their practices clandestine.

<sup>5</sup> Italics will mean that the Greek word ἔρως is referred to exclusively. Lack of italics will mean that the modern English word is being used, but the reader should be aware that the English word “eros” will often be used to convey what this study contends is the broader range of meanings associated with the ancient concept in the classical period. For a full discussion, see Chapter 3. As a general rule, less familiar Greek words will appear first in italics, which they will then lose as their meanings are clarified.

<sup>6</sup> The charge of anachronism, viz., that “romantic” love is a product of the medieval period of western history, does not take into account evidence from, e.g., Plato’s *Lysis*, 204b 1–205d 4

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A tendency of recent scholarship has been to reduce the meaning of *eros* in all instances to sexual desire. For example, K. J. Dover in a dozen dense pages never quite succeeds in distinguishing *eros* from an especially strong desire for sexual intercourse. Love, gallantry and honor, romance, “grand gestures,” and military heroism for the purpose of impressing the beloved, all of which Dover catalogues, remain epiphenomenal to *eros* in his account, each one caused by *eros* but none of them, not even love, falling under the domain of *eros* as strictly defined.<sup>7</sup> Yet Dover’s alternative for “love” in Greek, the *philia* word group (denoting dearness, belonging, friendship) does not do justice to the vehemence of the previously mentioned acts of passion, nor was it often used in classical Greek to refer to the more passionate aspects of love.<sup>8</sup> This is just one important instance in which modern assumptions about *eros* color the interpretation of classical texts. Easy acceptance of reductionism (the “order of science”) risks neglecting the phenomenology of *eros* (the “order of experience”). *Eros* in the sense of falling in love, or romantic passion, does not immediately desire genital contact and may, in the young or naïve, even be unaware of sexual intercourse. Sexual reductionism thus simplifies our own experience drastically. While Dover sought to provide a corrective to the chaste picture of Greek homoeroticism promulgated by a previous generation of scholars,<sup>9</sup> subsequent scholarship no longer has the same excuse for neglecting the

(see the discussion in Chapter 5). Compare K. J. Dover, ed., *Symposium*, p. 3 and Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (hereafter *GH*) pp. 50–2, 123–4. Christianity, however transformative, did not create love.

<sup>7</sup> *GH*, pp. 42–54 (especially pp. 49–51). Compare Dover, ed., *Plato. Symposium*, pp. 1–2: *Eros* is “desire doubled” in Prodicus’ dictum (fragment 7.2 DK = Stobaeus 4.20.65). Dover’s translations rightly distinguish between English “love” and “in love,” the latter being the more appropriate translation for *eros*, e.g., p. 45 (the translation of *philia* at *Symposium*, 179b, as “in love” is a slip, p. 52). Nevertheless Dover’s assumption is that *eros qua* being in love differs from “[sexual] desire divorced from *eros*” (pp. 44–5) only by being a much stronger sexual desire, one that is “obsessive, more complex” (p. 44; cf. “obsessive focussing of desire on one person,” p. 63). This assumption cannot be made compatible with his subsequent analysis (pp. 63–4, described in note 8 of this chapter).

<sup>8</sup> It is not accidental that Dover defines *eros* as strong sexual desire when contrasting *eros* with *philia* (*GH*, pp. 49–50) and yet acknowledges the justification for removing the genital dimension from *eros* to leave only “falling in love” when contrasting *eros* with *aphrodisia* (pp. 63–4). This raises the question of what Dover means by obsessively focused sexual desire in the absence of any genital activity. If by “sexual” desire he means not genitally active desire but any desire having to do with the difference between the two sexes (*GH*, p. 206), with homosexual desire shifted under “quasi-sexual” desire (*GH*, pp. vii–viii), it then becomes unclear to what differences between the sexes he refers.

<sup>9</sup> For example, *GH*, p. vii.

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full range of emotional phenomena, that is, for neglecting, in particular, love.<sup>10</sup> It is difficult to imagine a similar oversight occurring in studies of heterosexual relations in, say, a period of comparable interest in European history.

A less reductive view of eros, which relates eros to sexuality without making the two terms coextensive, can be found in ancient thought. For example, the close relationship between *aphrodite* and *eros* is implicit in the traditional pairing of the gods who bore their names.<sup>11</sup> The god of passionate love, Eros, was the son or accomplice of Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty, of sexual attraction, and of reproduction. Passionate love, viewed thus, is inextricably bound up with sexuality; indeed, all eros may be seen as arising from sexual desire, its root cause. In Hesiod, however, there are two accounts of the origin of Eros. In one of the accounts, Eros appears after the birth of Aphrodite, as one of her attendants, and this rendering became traditional. However, in another, earlier Hesiodic account, Eros appears as a primary, cosmogonic hunger, which precedes Aphrodite and most of the other gods.<sup>12</sup> In this earlier account, erotic desire ceases to be derivative from something more basic than itself and takes its place as a fundamental category. All intense desires, whether bodily or spiritual, would have to be referred to this basic structure of yearning. Sexual desire, on this reading, would be one (limited) type of eros among other types of eros. Poetic and philosophical

<sup>10</sup> Two studies indebted to Dover but outside the stream of thought he initiated achieve a better balance: A. Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (see occasional subsequent references); and C. Calame, *The Poetics of Eros in Ancient Greece* (see especially pp. 13–23, 51, 65; cf. p. 72). Calame includes a brief treatment of the relevance of eros for Greek political institutions (pp. 91–109). He goes too far, however, in assimilating the dominant/submissive dichotomy almost entirely to the inversions of educative initiation rites (p. 55, note 5; p. 100, note 18; pp. 107–8; cf. pp. 198–9), and he becomes oversubtle in attempting to explain away the same dichotomy in comic invective (pp. 134–41). Calame's preference for a more benign view of eros (pp. 27–38) seems to wish away the more violent aspect of hierarchy stressed by Dover and Foucault (*The Use of Pleasure*) a view that then became orthodox (cf. D. M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* and J. J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire*). D. Cohen, *Law, Sexuality and Society* and *Law, Violence, and Community*, leaves the dominant/submissive hierarchy intact but emphasizes its relation to hubris. J. N. Davidson, *Courtesans and Fishcakes*, attempts to break the orthodoxy by concentrating on natural pleasures; see the critical review by P. A. Cartledge. B. S. Thornton, *Eros: The Myth of Ancient Greek Sexuality*, likewise tacks against the orthodox view by focusing on Greek references to horror and disgust with eros. My own opinion is that including love within the parameters of eros should not entail forgetting that the full range of eros might also include aggression. Thus in these different streams of modern scholarship, eros seems robbed, by turns, of either its beauties or its dangers.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Hesiod, *Theogony*, 188–206.

<sup>12</sup> Contrast Hesiod, *Theogony*, 116–22 with 188–206.

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accounts of political eros in the classical period could look back to this pre-Aphrodite myth of Eros for evidence of his original domain.<sup>13</sup>

### Political Eros

The originally wide semantic field of the word *eros* in both Homer and Hesiod enabled the word to become part of political terminology. Analyzing specifically political usages of the term *eros* is complicated by the fact that not only *eros* but also *aphrodite* is at times used in an extended sense to denote any passionate or vehement desire. How metaphorical such instances are and how literally authors such as Thucydides would have intended for their readership to take the connotations of “love” or “lust” in important passages of political history are questions addressed in Chapter 3. What should be clear by now, however, is that when Thucydides’ speaker Diodotus, for example, ascribes the revolt of the Mytilenians to *eros* (3.45.5), the word is not intended to convey that the Mytilenians experienced a sexual arousal at the prospect of liberty. The passage may well mean, however, that the Mytilenians experienced a catching of the breath and a pounding of the heart at the prospect of freedom, symptoms conformal with a passion that, in a very different context, might have manifested itself in sexual arousal. A great deal depends on the psychological questions of whether and how sexual desire, romantic passion, and political passion are in fact related to one another.

When we turn to the question of imperialism and to Thucydides’ similarly erotic descriptions of the lust for overseas empire and the desire to dominate far-off lands, the connection between eros and political passion seems more evident to the modern mind. Enough has been written in postcolonial theory about the erotic aspects of aggression, including the sadistic and sexual aspects of dominating the other, to make this particular connection between eros and politics more plausible *prima facie*.

In nonaggressive contexts as well, however, Greek thought insisted that eros was capable of rising above the bodily. Abstract objects such as the fatherland or an imagined community are treated in some Greek texts as no less desirable and “erotic” than a tangible and concrete human body. These latter accounts inevitably invite comparisons with modern theories of sublimation. For example, in Socrates’ speech in Plato’s *Symposium*, bodily

<sup>13</sup> For example, *Symposium*, 178a 6–c 2 and context.

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beauty is used to stimulate conversations between lover and beloved, out of which they conceive grand plans and ambitions such as founding the types of regimes that won the lawgivers Lycurgus and Solon undying honor and fame. Sexual intercourse with the beloved is said to defeat this purpose.<sup>14</sup> This theory would appear to describe a sublimation of the sex instinct into ambition. In a related but far more general trend, an unusually high proportion of instances of eros elsewhere in Greek thought and literature refer to strictly visual enjoyment of desire or gazing at the beloved without recourse to physical contact. Speculations about the reasons for this ocular orientation of the Greeks will be entertained in the chapters that follow, but the contribution that an ocular orientation could potentially make to sublimation should be clear. Objects that by their nature cannot be embraced, such as a whole city or a foreign land, can still be possessed with the eyes.

Yet Plato's Socrates would have called a theory of human eros that took its bearings from an act capable of being performed by quadrupeds<sup>15</sup> a theory of "profanation" rather than of sublimation. Eros is most itself when at its highest and rarest; the most natural eros is eros in its fullest flower, not eros in its grubby root. This response begs not only the philosophical question of whether it is the initial causes or the completed results that are more descriptive of a phenomenon, but also the question of naturalness as opposed to the social construction of eros, that is, whether such a result as politicized eros should ever be considered natural. Can a given society construct eros for its citizens out of whole cloth or does all civilization ultimately come at the cost of natural eros? Although the Greek thinkers under consideration seem to have believed that political eros was in some measure a natural outcome of polis life, they at the same time doubted whether politics would ultimately be able to contain eros.

The present study, in an effort to leave these questions open, will retain the term sublimation,<sup>16</sup> not because of any prior commitment, but rather because too much modern philosophy and psychology have intervened between ourselves and Plato for any scholar to accept uncritically the Platonic

<sup>14</sup> Sexual intercourse relegates the lover to a lower form of "conception": conceiving children rather than ideas (*Symposium*, 208e 1–209e 4).

<sup>15</sup> *Phaedrus*, 250e 1–251a 1.

<sup>16</sup> On the modern coinage of the word "sublimate," see Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, aphorism 189. For a discussion, see W. Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, pp. 216–223.



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theories of eros. Plato's thought on eros will be made plausible to us by beginning from where we are now, or it will not be made plausible at all. Furthermore, Thucydides and Aristophanes, in very different ways, both take a more material view of eros than Plato or his characters do. Instead of affirming or assuming that the concept of eros should be expanded to include political passions, this study seeks to show justifications for doing so by identifying links, causal chains, and analogies between eros narrowly conceived and the political passions that all three of those Greek authors contend ought properly to be considered erotic.

### Criteria for Applying Eros to Politics

If the term eros is to be stretched to cover so wide a range of human motivations, there is the danger that at some point the concept of eros might lose its usefulness as an analytical tool. If any banal desire, such as the wish for a second helping at the dinner table, could be fitted under this rubric, then to ascribe a given human action to eros would effectively add nothing to the discussion. Where to place limits on the Greek concept is not always easy to determine. One feature, which might be called a necessary condition of eros, is the response to an appearance subjectively perceived as beautiful. Political desires such as the wish to belong to a larger whole and the longing for perfect freedom tend to be pursued even in cases in which their implementation is impractical, that is, their idealized images are attractive by virtue of their beautiful appearances alone. A second, related feature, which some of the ancient texts share with the modern theories of Nietzsche and Freud, is the existence of a barrier that blocks fulfillment, allowing the passions to build up over time, causing a sense of anticipation or frustration. Eros tends to be reserved for situations in which the agent already has his or her basic needs met. The desire to eat, then, would not ordinarily be characterized as erotic in the classical<sup>17</sup> discourse of eros. Indeed, eros is often used to describe situations in which the agent gambles more basic goods, risking life or limb in an attempt to obtain a beautiful object of dubious material or practical value. Stealing apples from the king's orchard might be an example of an ordinary appetite that has become erotic, particularly if a high wall around the orchard keeps intruders out and if a bright red apple hangs on its bough just over the wall, forever out of reach

<sup>17</sup> "Classical" as opposed to Homeric: see the discussion in Chapter 3.

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to the peasant boy who fears to break the law: in other words, a provoking object.<sup>18</sup> Eros occurs in cases in which the desire, whether sexual or not, becomes obsessive and the subject of desire becomes willing to devote nearly all his or her life, time, or resources to achieving the goal. Eros tends to engage the whole self or to throw every other concern into the shade. These limitations on the concept have implications for the paradigmatic case of eros, for the Greeks as well as for ourselves: the intense desire to be with and to embrace another human being. Easily available sex is less “erotic,” according to this account, than unrequited love or any other romantic attachment in which some blockage temporarily frustrates the fulfillment of desire. This principle is implicit in the courting strategy of “playing hard to get”: the way to intensify the desire of a potential partner is to pretend lack of interest or to put up barriers.

Although nothing guarantees that the subject will successfully navigate the sea of beautiful appearances, the enigmatic summons or solicitation of certain true or natural goods for human beings can be discerned behind these appearances in both Platonic and some modern theories. Beauty is not arbitrarily illusory but points beyond itself to the good. The simplest example would be the modern evolutionary biologist’s interpretation of the paradigmatic case of eros, the desire for sexual intercourse. Bodies or genes seek to perpetuate themselves, and the beautiful appearance that invests the object of desire has the purpose of leading the subject to fulfill this biological good. The beautiful appearance is not identical to the aforesaid good and may later be found to have been, in many respects, illusory. The human being is even liable to feel as though nature had cheated him or her in order to get what it wanted, propagation of the species, whereas the expectation of the person under the influence of eros was of something vastly different, for example, a perfect spouse or a never-ending romance. What consciously seems an enhancement of life is unconsciously the subject’s embrace of (nature’s remedy for) his or her own eventual obsolescence and death. Bringing conscious expectations in line with the actual aims of eros, as ancient thought attempted to do (in this case, consciously seeking perpetuation through reproduction precisely because one realizes one’s body is mortal), entails a process of discovery, since it means seeing through the beautiful appearances to the good toward which they point. This third feature of authentic erotic experience could be put into a crude formula:

<sup>18</sup> See Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, pp. 26–9, on Sappho fragment 105a, LP.

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“eros consciously or unconsciously seeks more or better life,” albeit with the caveat that the newfound life might not be one’s own. The political analogues in ancient theory, such as a community’s desire for liberation or its movement from republic to empire, wittingly or (usually) unwittingly embrace the death of the community *qua* its current state of being. Eros drives its subject to transcend the limitations of its current existence, to rise above itself, and therefore in particular to risk losing itself.

### An Older Way of Viewing Political Phenomena

What is added to existing explanations of political behavior by adducing eros as a motive? Much current literature in the social sciences reduce political behavior to economic models. The desire for a predictive science leads to simplifying assumptions, many of which hold true within the framework of middle-class freedom. By contrast, ancient theorists were preoccupied with anarchic, tyrannical, revolutionary, and imperial desires that went beyond the boundaries of the maximum allowable freedom, and that presented a danger to others precisely because they had potentially regime-changing consequences, as in the case of Alcibiades, whose imperialism threatened to overthrow the democratic order. These desires, albeit rare, are of such political importance that no theorist can be neutral about their fulfillment. Thus, in contrast to economic models that maximize subjective utility, the theories of political eros are inescapably moral in their intentions. Studying the highest aspirations of diverse human types, determining what they ultimately love, forces the theorist to weigh those loves and to ponder their rank order for the purpose of fulfilling the human good. Such moral weighing is part and parcel of the search for the best political order, in which the most fulfilling loves may be shared. The fundamental question about eros is often the degree of delusion in its perception of the beauty or goodness in the erotic object. Studying the relative goodness of the erotic objects thus comprises a part of the subject matter of the classical theories of political eros.<sup>19</sup>

At the same time, the classical theories of political eros were not purely normative in the sense of allowing moral aspirations to override empirical grounding. Under certain conditions, moral aspirations are themselves

<sup>19</sup> The opposite, value-indifferent approach to sexual eros has been attempted by R. Posner, *Sex and Reason*. See especially pp. 85, 111–15; cf. pp. 220, 431.

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treated as erotic (and illusory) in classical thought. Eros is rooted in the stubbornness of human nature; many of its aspirations, particularly those that are most unrealistic, cannot be eradicated, and the study of them would be incomplete if the gap between feasibility and wish were not taken into account. Eros in the narrower, amatory sense has always been a major motivating force for humankind. The expanded sense of eros, on the other hand, depends on the degree of politicization of eros, which differs from regime to regime. The Greek theorists report that eros was highly politicized in their time. Their record is worth sober analysis because it may be the best way of knowing when and in what way eros might be politicized in our own regime. Merely wishing eros to remain private is not sufficient: assertions about what ought to be must pay strict attention to what is and what has been. Accordingly, the ancient theories of eros come already equipped, as it were, with studies of how eros was politicized in two very different regimes in classical Greece: oligarchic Sparta and democratic Athens.

The classical theories of eros, furthermore, by recovering the deep connectedness among easily compartmentalized domains of human experience, give testimony to the wholeness of human nature. Human beings commit more acts out of love and honor than current political theory allows for. During the age of chivalry and courtly love, eros was harnessed to political ends by astute politicians right through to the time of the French revolution. Edmund Burke, in particular, mourned the privatization of eros, reasoning that a queen was a necessary symbol for a nation because of the romantic concern she could elicit.<sup>20</sup> This obvious connection between patriotism and love for a person raises real issues. Love would be stretched thin by trying to distribute it over a whole commonwealth, but it is possible fervently to love one who sums up the many in herself. Burke doubted whether political submission could ever again be “proud” in the absence of anything to engage the affections, that is, if the law were obeyed only out of fear and interest. Odd as this older system now seems to us, modernity may be, from a historical perspective, more the exception than the rule in its construction of a purely private, apolitical eros.

<sup>20</sup> E. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, pp. 169–72. For the importance to the regime of the queen’s beauty and virtue, see also the scurrilous or pornographic lampoons of Marie-Antoinette reproduced in S. Schama, *Citizens*, pp. 203–27. Her political opponents seem to have known exactly how to destroy that reverent love for her in the public mind that would otherwise have been difficult to combat. See also Tolstoy’s description of Nikolai Rostov’s feelings for the handsome and gracious young Tsar Alexander (*War and Peace*, pp. 256–7, 265–8, 301–2).