

Symposium 207 D–208 B

(da F. Ademollo, *On Plato's Conception of Change*, "Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy" 55 (2018))

Let me first supply some context. The passage occurs just after Socrates recalls how Diotima told him that love is (also) desire for immortality, hence for generation, because 'generation is something everlasting and immortal to the extent that this is possible for a human being' (206 E 7–8), and drew his attention to the way in which animals protect and care for their offspring at all costs. Why do they do so? Because, Diotima explained,

ἐνταῦθα ... τὸν αὐτὸν ἐκείνῳ λόγον ἢ θνητῆ φύσις ζητεῖ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν ἀεὶ τε εἶναι καὶ ἀθάνατος. δύναται δὲ ταύτη μόνον, τῇ γενέσει, ὅτι ἀεὶ καταλείπει ἕτερον νέον ἀντὶ τοῦ παλαιοῦ.

in this case [*sc.* that of animals], in the same way as in that case [*sc.* that of human beings], the mortal nature seeks so far as it can to exist forever and to be immortal. And it can achieve it only in this way, by the process of coming-into-being, because *it always leaves behind something else new in place of the old.* (207 C 9–D 3)

Thus generation provides mortal creatures with ersatz immortality. Then, in order to drive her point home, Diotima has recourse to a comparison with what happens within one single mortal life:

ἐπεὶ καὶ ἐν ᾧ ἐν ἑκάστον τῶν ζώων ζῆν καλεῖται καὶ εἶναι τὸ αὐτό—οἷον ἐκ παιδαρίου ὁ αὐτὸς λέγεται ἕως ἂν πρεσβύτης γένηται· οὗτος μέντοι οὐδέποτε τὰ αὐτὰ ἔχων ἐν αὐτῷ ὅμως ὁ αὐτὸς καλεῖται, ἀλλὰ νέος ἀεὶ γιγνόμενος, τὰ δὲ ἀπολλύς, καὶ κατὰ τὰς τρίχας καὶ σάρκα καὶ ὅστ' αἶμα καὶ σύμπαν τὸ σῶμα.

For even during the time in which each living being *is said to be alive and to be the same*—as for example someone *is said to be the same person* from when he is a child until he comes to be an old man, and yet, *if he's called the same, that's despite the fact that he is never made up of the same things, but always comes to be new and loses what he had before*—hair, flesh, bones, blood and the whole body. (207 D 4–E 1)

In the next lines Diotima proceeds to extend the scope of her comparison to the soul's inner life:

καὶ μὴ ὅτι κατὰ τὸ σῶμα, ἀλλὰ καὶ κατὰ τὴν ψυχὴν οἱ τρόποι, τὰ ἦθη, δόξαι, ἐπιθυμῖαι, ἡδοναί, λύπαι, φόβοι, τούτων ἕκαστα οὐδέποτε τὰ αὐτὰ πάρεσθιν ἐκάστῳ, ἀλλὰ τὰ μὲν γίγνεται, τὰ δὲ ἀπόλλυται. πολὺ δὲ τούτων ἀτοπώτερον ἔτι, ὅτι καὶ αἱ ἐπιστήμαι μὴ ὅτι αἱ μὲν γίγνονται, αἱ δὲ ἀπόλλυνται ἡμῖν, καὶ οὐδέποτε οἱ αὐτοὶ ἐσμεν οὐδὲ κατὰ τὰς ἐπιστήμας, ἀλλὰ καὶ μία ἐκάστη τῶν ἐπιστημῶν ταύτων πάσχει. ὁ γὰρ καλεῖται μελετᾶν, ὡς ἐξιούσης ἐστὶ τῆς ἐπιστήμης· λήθη γὰρ ἐπιστήμης ἕξοδος, μελέτη δὲ πάλιν καινὴν ἐμποιοῦσα ἀντὶ τῆς ἀπιούσης μνήμην σφάζει τὴν ἐπιστήμην, ὥστε τὴν αὐτὴν δοκεῖν εἶναι.

And that doesn't hold only of the body: in the case of the soul, too, its traits, habits, beliefs, desires, pleasures, pains, fears—none of these is ever the same in any individual, but some come to be while others pass away. It's much stranger even than this with the pieces of knowledge we have: not only

do some of them come to be while others pass away, so that *we are never the same even in respect of our pieces of knowledge*, but in fact each individual piece of knowledge is subject to the same process. For what is called ‘going over’ something presupposes that knowledge goes out of us; for forgetting is departure of knowledge, and going over something, by creating in us again another memory in place of the one that is departing, preserves our knowledge in such a way that it *seems to be the same*. (207 E 1–208 A 7)

And finally she winds up with some general statements:

τούτω γὰρ τῷ τρόπῳ πᾶν τὸ θνητὸν σώζεται, οὐ τῷ παντάπασιν τὸ αὐτὸ ἀεὶ εἶναι ὡσπερ τὸ θεῖον, ἀλλὰ τῷ τὸ ἀπιὸν καὶ παλαιούμενον ἕτερον νέον ἐγκαταλείπειν οἷον αὐτὸ ἦν. ταύτη τῇ μηχανῇ, ὧς Σώκρατες, ἔφη, θνητὸν ἀθανασίας μετέχει, καὶ σῶμα καὶ τᾶλλα πάντα ἀθάνατον δὲ ἄλλη.

For in this way everything mortal is preserved, *not by always being absolutely the same, as the divine is, but in virtue of the fact that what is departing and growing old leaves behind in its place something else new such as itself was* . It is by this means, Socrates,’ she said, ‘that what is mortal, both body and everything else, partakes of immortality; what is immortal partakes of it in a different way. (208 A 7–B 4)

After this statement she picks up the point she was originally trying to make, i.e. the love and care of every animal for its own offspring, and reminds us of the function of her digression: ‘So don’t be surprised if everything by nature values its own offspring: it is for the sake of immortality that this eagerness, this love, affects every creature’ (208 B 4–6).