

Plato: Symposium

(206e-208e)¹

PHIL101

Prof. Oakes

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Section II: What is the Self?

Reading II.2

This text is from one of Plato's greatest dialogues, *Symposium*, in which Socrates and his interlocutors take turns offering accounts of what love is. In this passage, Socrates is recounting the views of his teacher, Diotima. Nothing is known of Diotima aside from the contents of this dialogue. It is not even clear that there was an actual person corresponding to this character, though most of Plato's characters are in fact modeled after actual persons, most of whom he knew personally. In any case, pay particular attention to Diotima's argument against the immortality of the soul, which will be our primary focus, here.

Diotima speaks first, followed by Socrates. It is Socrates who is recounting their past conversation.

"For love, Socrates, is not, as you imagine, the love of the beautiful only."

"What then?"

"The love of generation² and of birth in beauty."

"Perhaps," I said.

"Yes, indeed," she replied. "Because to the mortal creature, generation is a sort of eternity and immortality," she continued. "And if, as has been already admitted, love is of the everlasting possession of the good, all men will necessarily desire immortality together with good. Thus, love is of immortality."

All this she taught me at various times when she spoke of love. And I remember her once saying to me, "What is the cause, Socrates, of love, and the attendant desire? Do you not see how all animals, birds, as well as beasts, in their desire of procreation, are in agony when they take the infection of love, which begins with the desire of union; whereto is added the care of offspring, on whose behalf the weakest are ready to battle against the strongest even to the uttermost, and to die for them, and will let themselves be

¹ Plato. 2000. *Symposium*. Benjamin Jowett, trans., with minor alterations by me. The Classical Library: Plato – Dialogues – 9. Symposium.

http://www.classicallibrary.org/plato/dialogues/9_symposium.htm. (Use unrestricted as per: <http://www.classicallibrary.org/about.htm>. Public Domain, as per: http://oll.libertyfund.org/index.php?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=111&Itemid=28)

² I.e., reproduction, by sexual intercourse, in this case.

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tormented with hunger or suffer anything in order to maintain their young. Man may be supposed to act thus from reason; but why should animals have these passionate feelings? Can you tell me why?"

Again I replied that I did not know.

She said to me: "And do you expect ever to become a master in the art of love, if you do not know this?"

"But I have told you already, Diotima, that my ignorance is the reason why I come to you; for I am conscious that I want a teacher; tell me then the cause of this and of the other mysteries of love."

"Marvel not," she said, "if you believe that love is of the immortal, as we have several times acknowledged; for here again, and on the same principle too, the mortal nature is seeking as far as is possible to be everlasting and immortal: and this is only to be attained by generation, because generation always leaves behind a new existence in the place of the old. Nay even in the life of the same individual there is succession and not absolute unity: a man is called the same, and yet in the short interval which elapses between youth and age, and in which every animal is said to have life and identity, he is undergoing a perpetual process of loss and reparation – hair, flesh, bones, blood, and the whole body are always changing. Which is true not only of the body, but also of the soul, whose habits, tempers, opinions, desires, pleasures, pains, fears, never remain the same in any one of us, but are always coming and going; and equally true of knowledge, and what is still more surprising to us mortals, not only do the sciences in general spring up and decay, so that in respect of them we are never the same; but each of them individually experiences a like change. For what is implied in the word 'recollection,' but the departure of knowledge, which is ever being forgotten, and is renewed and preserved by recollection, and appears to be the same although in reality new, according to that law of succession by which all mortal things are preserved, not absolutely the same, but by substitution, the old worn-out mortality leaving another new and similar existence behind unlike the divine, which is always the same and not another? And in this way, Socrates, the mortal body, or mortal anything, partakes of immortality; but the immortal in another way. Marvel not then at the love which all men have of their offspring; for that universal love and interest is for the sake of immortality."

I was astonished at her words, and said: "Is this really true, O thou wise Diotima?"

And she answered with all the authority of an accomplished sophist: "Of that, Socrates, you may be assured; – think only of the ambition of men, and you will wonder at the senselessness of their ways, unless you consider how they are stirred by the love of an immortality of fame. They are ready to run all risks greater far than they would have for their children, and to spend money and undergo any sort of toil, and even to die, for the sake of leaving behind them a name which shall be eternal. Do you imagine that Alcestis would have died to save Admetus, or Achilles to avenge Patroclus, or your own Codrus in order to preserve the kingdom for his sons, if they had not imagined that the memory of their virtues, which still survives among us, would be immortal?³ Nay," she said, "I am persuaded that all men do all things, and the better they are the more they do them, in hope of the glorious fame of immortal virtue; for they desire the immortal."

³ Here, Plato makes three references to ancient Greek myth: Alcestis volunteers to take her husband, Admetus's place in death; Achilles ends his boycott of military action in the siege of Troy when his beloved Patroclus is killed in his place; a prophesy is told that Athens would survive an attack by the enemy Dorians if their King, Codrus, were slain, in response to which Codrus enters battle in such a way as to ensure his death. Even in Plato's time, these stories were hundreds of years old, viewed intellectually much as we view our own religious and cultural myths.

Commentary

We pair this reading with that from Plato's *Phaedo* as offering a counter-argument to the thesis that the human soul is immortal. Diotima's argument occurs within the context of her discussion of love. Love, she maintains, is of the good: for a thing to be good is for us to love it. But we love not simply the thing loved; rather, our desire is for "everlasting possession of the good." Everlasting possession would require immortality, so our love is for immortality.

As it happens, however, our love of immortality can only be of immortality by generation, Diotima thinks, because the human soul, like everything that is less than divine, is subject to change and thus mortal. Diotima seems to make several points in support of this claim. First, she points to what appears to be our obvious mortality: we die, and only by creating children is something tangible left of us. Clearly, we are not the same beings as our children, yet we live for them, and sometimes die for them, such is our love of the degree of immortality that our children confer on us. Not only are our children not the same beings as we, however, but we can raise the question whether we are the same beings over the course of our own life-times. Everything about us changes, continually. Our bodies change; our minds undergo a continuous stream of changing experiences – emotions, sensations, thoughts, etc. Diotima's argument is powerful, including even reference to human knowledge. Our bodies of thought – our sciences – are in a continual state of change. And the extent to which we know our truths, this depends always upon memory, which provides us not only fleeting grasp of knowledge but one that is in memory imperfect: a memory is never the same as the original thought or experience.

With these observations in mind, Diotima is able to articulate a general "law of succession" which points to a fundamental distinction between things mortal and things divine. The divine is perfect and unchanging, unalterable, so that it is always the same, over time. The mortal, by contrast, is continually changing, and so "succession" occurs only by *replacement* of the original by something similar, at best. One's children are similar to oneself, but not the same one thing as oneself. And indeed one's mind and body are only similar over time, replacing prior states with merely similar ones. Our love of immortality, thus, must in our case settle for an imperfect immortality. A certain frustration in that love seems implicit in Diotima's remarks.

Ask Yourself

1. If everything about us changes, in what sense, if any, can we suppose ourselves to be immortal? Is there anything about us that remains constant, over time?
2. Under what circumstances, if any, are we inclined to say that we are *not* the same person as we were before?
3. Does your definition of philosophy apply to this reading and your thinking about it? Can you say, exactly, how?