

## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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### Perception and Perceptual Judgment in Plato's Later Dialogues

My dissertation develops an original and integrated account of perception and perceptual judgment in the so-called “late” writings of Plato, focusing on the *Timaeus* and the *Theaetetus*. Despite Plato's reputation as a thinker who spurns the material world and our embodied existence in it, the overall approach to theorizing perception that emerges from these dialogues is in many ways closer to that of today's cognitive scientists than that of a philosopher theorizing mostly from the armchair. The *Timaeus* offers an extensive account of the physics and physiology of perception that incorporates the same general principles of material change that govern the cosmos as a whole. This scientific account does not merely provide external constraints on philosophical theorizing about the psychological and cognitive dimensions of perception, but rather informs the very starting points for such theorizing. The *Theaetetus*' discussion of the objects of perception and necessary conditions for perceptual experience is best understood in light of the physical and physiological account of perception in the *Timaeus*; the latter, in turn, is part of a broader metaphysical and scientific account of the cosmos according to which our bodies are adapted (or, more Platonically, designed) for perceiving the material world around us. The *Timaeus* and the *Theaetetus* thus theorize distinct but complementary aspects of perception as a psycho-physical process that begins with an external object causally affecting the subject's body and results in the subject's awareness of that object.

In ch.1 of the dissertation, I argue that taking seriously the general principles of material change that govern the Timaeian cosmos leads to what I call the “contextualist” account of the physics and physiology of perception. This account offers a unified explanation of the processes underlying veridical perception, cases of perspectival relativity (e.g., a coin looking oval vs. round), and illusions (e.g., a white cup looking red). However, since the use of linguistic predicates like ‘sweet’ is tied to perception-producing affections of the human body in normal physical and environmental conditions, there is an objective standard by which we can distinguish true and false perceptual judgments, despite the fact that perception-producing affections are infallible indicators of their underlying causal processes. In ch.2-3, I turn to the psychological account of perception in the *Theaetetus* and show how analyzing perception-involving hybrid mental states, which have been neglected by scholarly treatments of the Theaetetan conception of perception, significantly clarifies and expands this conception. In the process, I argue that the account of these hybrid states is much more plausible and explanatorily powerful than commentators have recognized. Besides modeling perceptual recognition and misidentification, the account contains resources for explaining the non-randomness observed in patterns of perceptual misidentification, triggers for correcting such misidentifications, and continuous perceptual experience of objects as something or other.

The overall view of perception that emerges from these writings combines (1.) an analysis of perception as anchored in the world – an instance of perceiving presents to the soul the external objects and properties that caused it – and (2.) a thin notion of perception that precludes perceiving things *as something or other*, resulting in a highly cognized understanding of ordinary perceptual experience as a hybrid state that involves perception, memory, and (subpersonal) judgment. This view simultaneously wards off skeptical worries and gives the senses a minimal role in determining *how* we see the world, allowing Plato to distinguish between different kinds of mistaken perceptual experiences as part of an overall unified account: in normal conditions of perception, perceptions reliably present parts of the external world to the perceiving subject, and non-veridical perceptual experiences are primarily due to cognitive defects that affect the subject's (subpersonal) processing and identifying of what she perceives. At the same time, some perceptual mistakes can be explained as primarily due to the subject's environmental circumstances or bodily condition. The resulting account clarifies both the epistemic importance of perception and the source of its limitations in Plato's later dialogues, without privileging either its function as the basis for higher-level knowledge or the potential of perception-involving judgment to lead us astray.