

Perception (153d–154a, 156a–157c)

1. *Context.* Someone who knows perceives what he knows (151e), hence knowledge is perception (D1). Furthermore, knowledge is (a) of what is or has being, or (given Protagoras' thesis) what is for me or has being for me; and (b) could not be false, i.e. is infallible or incorrigible (152c).

2. As mentioned, *aisthēsis* is standardly translated as perception, but it is also right to think of it as bare sensation, or sensory awareness, or more or less transitory seemings or impressions. Hence the idea of flux seems obvious. So it seems natural to explore the nature of these *phasmata* or appearances (155a), and how they are possible in, or perhaps compatible with, a world in flux.

3. The first hint (153d–154a) is that in such a world, nothing *is*, i.e. is a stable and lasting entity, and so white neither *is* something in our eyes on outside our eyes. Rather, colours *come to be*, or emerge, for a transitory, yet minimal duration. That is, neither the perceived object nor the perceiving eye is coloured—neither the colliding thing (*proballon*) nor the thing that is being collided with (*proballomenon*); but colour comes to be (*gegonos*) between (*metaxū*) them as something 'private' or peculiar (*idion*) to the perceiver.

4. This last point takes up the relativity of Protagoras' man-measure thesis. That is, perception is essentially perspectival, i.e. relative to my perspective, and thus also essentially private and inaccessible to anyone else.

5. This further suggests that items of perception are 'inner', so that when we see, or are perceptually aware of a cool breeze, say, we stand in a relation to an inner 'datum', *not* the wind as such—even though the inner item is related to, caused by, the object (the wind), of which we—but not Plato—might be tempted to say it is the 'real' wind that exists out there, in some ready-made mind-independent world of appearances. (But see §10 for a qualification.)

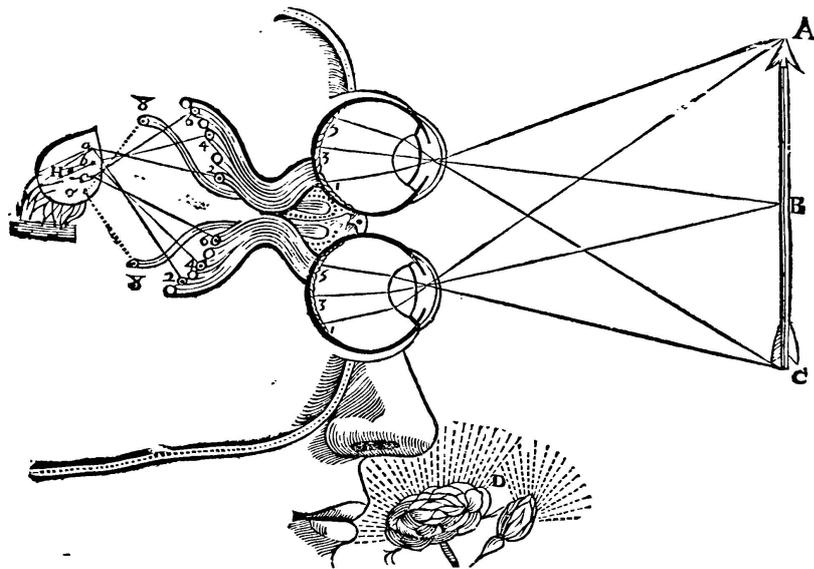
6. *Perception.* The eye, say, has active and passive powers (156a), and when a fiery stream emanating from the eyes (cf. *Timaeus* 45c–d) hits a similar stream emanating from a stone,¹ an offspring (*ἔκγονα*, *ekgona*) comes about between perceived object and perceiving subject (i.e. the 'parents'). This product is *twofold* ('twins' 156b): the perceived thing—white, sweet—and the perception—seeing, tasting. At the moment of collision, seeing and whiteness emerge, and this turns the eye into an eye that sees, and the stone into a stone that is white (156d–e). This entails that things are not *as such* white or seeing, but only in *relation* to some movement and change, which is the cause of these collisions (156e).²

7. It is difficult to illustrate this theory. But in view of Descartes's image,³ we could say the *object* is the arrow 'out there', the eye is the *subject*, i.e. the entity that does the perceiving; the *perception* might happen in the pineal gland on the

1 Objects need to be commensurable (*summetrōn*, 156d), for eyes, say, cannot see sounds.

2 So, in a strict sense, an eye becomes an eye only in the moment that it sees anything, i.e. is affected by an 'inflowing' stream of fire; otherwise, it is an eye only in name—an 'eye' (see 157a).

3 Descartes, *Traité de l'Homme*, second edition, Paris 1677, p. 78.



left. It is less clear where to put the *perceived quality* (the stone's being white): it might be where the perception is, or it might be in the eye. But since there are no stable locations anyway, this is no worry. A similar analysis applies to smelling a rose and drinking wine.

8. The eyes are windows to a flowing world, but as part of that world, they are themselves flowing too. Hence the remarks on *change* (156c–d). Slow change happens at one place and is generating, and fast change is between places and concerns things generated. The stone and the eye change slowly; whiteness and vision change swiftly. Yet *all things* change or flow ‘like streams’ (160d) according to the secret doctrine (152c): *panta rhei*.

9. Thus, not only perceptions are fleeting entities, but also the eye and the stone (the tongue and the wine, 159d–e). Objects of perception and subjects of perception are ‘bundles’ of flowing relations, so to speak. And this underwrites the maximal relativity: it is impossible for two persons to *share* perceptions, and it is impossible for me to *repeat* perceptions. This also emphasises that perception is unique, private, incorrigible—and thus *infallible*. And this is right, *if* perception is supposed to be knowledge. (Remember: knowledge is true and of what is.)

10. *Two Remarks*. (a) At the time that I have a sensation there *is* something that is its necessary cause, namely some property in an object ‘out there’. Without *that* the wine would not be sweet for me. So, there is an external reality. (b) Yet, that reality is not *shared*, even though we all tap into it. If the wine *as such* would be sweet, independent of our perceptions of it, then two problems arise. (i) It might have incongruent properties: for me it is sweet, for you it is bitter; and thus the wine is *both* sweet and bitter. (ii) Infallibility becomes impossible: if the wine really is sweet, but it seems bitter to me, then I am mistaken. But according to D1, I could not be mistaken about any of my perceptions. Whatever reality ‘out there’ looks like, we have *no immediate* or direct access to it.

