

Notes on the First Definition (Tht. 151–60)

1. D1 (151e)

1. Theaetetus suggests that (a) a person S knows x iff S perceives x , and hence that (b) knowledge is perception. But the biconditional in (a) does not yet justify the identification in (b), since two things may lawfully correlate without being the same. The point: perception is both *necessary* and *sufficient* for knowledge. If S knows x , then S perceives x ; and if S perceives x , then S knows x .

2. What is *αἴσθησις*, *aisthēsis*? ‘Perception’ is the standard translation; but we need to think of it as a kind of sensory *awareness* of something, perhaps akin to consciously experiencing a mental item—perhaps like Locke, who says that an idea¹ is ‘whatsoever the Mind perceives in it self, or is the immediate object of Perception, Thought, or Understanding’.²

3. What is x ? But it may be misleading to think of these items as ‘objects’ at all, as perception could also be an *act*. The key point is that *what* is sensed, perceived, or known is mind-dependent or mind-correlative: perception is an *internal* relation. If we think of it as an external relation between a person and a fact in the world, the next steps make no sense (e.g., privacy, incorrigibility).

4. Socrates’s dialectical strategy: assuming that knowledge is perception, what does this entail? What must we also accept if D1 is true? Or, in what world could D1 be true? Answer: in a world of total flux.³

2. Protagoras: Thesis P (152a–c)

1. P: Man is the measure of all things, of those that are that/how/as (*ὡς*, *hōs*) they are, and of those that are not, that/how/as they are not.

2. *Connecting D1 with P: the wind passage.* (a) The same wind feels warm to S and cold to S^* ($S \neq S^*$). (b) How things appear to S is how things *are* for S : for S the wind *is* warm, for S^* the wind *is* cold. (c) But appearance (*φαντασία*, *phantasia*) is perception:⁴ if the wind seems/appears warm to S , then S perceives the wind as warm. Generalised: ‘ x appears F to S ’ is equivalent to ‘ S perceives x to be F ’.⁵ (d) So, how S perceives things is how things *are* for S : if S perceives the wind to be warm, then the wind *is* warm for S (or *is* cold for S^*).

3. *Corollaries.* Perception is of what is. One cannot perceive what is not. Perception cannot be false: it is incorrigible cognition. These two features are *necessary* conditions for knowledge.

4. *Ambiguity.* P_{Broad} : all appearances are true. But also P_{Narrow} : all *sensory* experiences are true. Hence, the target is both *relativism* and *empiricism*.⁶

1 But *not* in a Platonic sense!

2 *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* 2.8.8.

3 See Sedley, D. (2004). *The Midwife of Platonism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press (p. 44).

4 According to the *Sophist* (264b), *phantasia* combines perception and belief/judgement.

5 *Ibid.* p. 39.

6 *Ibid.* pp. 49–53.

3. Heraclitus: Thesis H (152d ff.)

1. *The secret doctrine: approaching H.* (a) Nothing is *a/one* thing as such/by itself (*καθ' αὐτὸ*, *kath' hauto*), or is qualified in a determinate way, or has stable and enduring qualities. (b) So, it is possible that *x* is *F* in this situation but not *F* in another. (c) Things 'are' through movement, change and mixture. (d) But actually, the word 'be' (*εἶναι*, *einai*) is misleading, for nothing *is*, and everything becomes (= H).

2. If no thing is as such, it follows that things only are in *relation* to other things—and this is what Socrates illustrates with colour (153e–154a), which is *relative* to some 'collision' and the eye, and hence something in between and peculiar/private (*ἴδιον*, *idion*) to a perceiver. A further illustration is the *dice* (154c): 6 are 'more' relative to 4, but 'fewer' relative to 12. Similarly, Socrates becomes smaller because Theaetetus grows, not because *he* changes himself. (155c). (These are so-called 'Cambridge Changes'.)

3. This is consistent with the idea that perceptual objects are not 'out there' in a ready-made world (see above), but *come* to be, or *emerge*, when we get in touch with the world. Given H, it further follows that no particular perception is repeatable, and thus there could be no conflict between *S*' perceptions at different times either.

4. *Perception* (156a–157a; see also 159c–160a). Drawing on whiteboard. The theory suggests that no two *objects* yield the same appearance, and that no two *subjects* have the same perception.⁷

5. H's point is to underwrite the infallibility of knowledge (cf. 154b): if it were not the case that every perceiver had a private and privileged perspective, things could not be true for everyone according to their perceptions. For if we could read off (perceive) a thing's features as they are in themselves, *S* might be *right* and *S** might be *wrong*. But then *S** would perceive but *not know*—and this is bad news for D1.

6. *From an epistemic to an ontological thesis.* If things can be so and not so for different perceivers, or given epistemic relativity, then it seems that things themselves cannot have stable and enduring properties. If it is possible for *x* to seem white to *S* and not white to *S**, and both *S* and *S** are *right* about their perceptions, then *x* 'really' can *be* neither white nor not white—unless things have inconsistent properties, such as *x* being white and not white at the same time. (Some credit Heraclitus with such a view.)

7. Overall dialectical narrative: D1 entails P, and P entails H. This would allow Socrates to finish off D1 in two steps: since H is false, P is false too, and if P is false, there goes D1. But this is *not* how he argues. Plato seems to agree with H (and he obviously reveres Protagoras): he actually defends it as an account of the *visible* world of appearances. But the point will be: knowledge cannot be had of, and in, such a world.

7 A similar theory of perception is given in *Timaeus* 45b–46c, 67c–68d.

