

THE EPISTEMIC REACH OF *AISTHĒSIS* IN *THEAETETUS* 184-6¹

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Abstract: This paper explores the scope of the theses presented in *Theaetetus* 184-6 concerning the epistemic capacity of *aisthēsis*. I develop two main arguments in this analysis. First, I situate the passage within the broader context of 151-183 and propose that the argument in 184-6 stands independently of the analysis of the Protagorean theses conducted in 151-183. Then, I analyze the traditional reading of 184-6, which holds that *aisthēsis* lacks cognition, and contrast this perspective with that of those who argue that Plato allows for some judicative content at the sensory level. I demonstrate that both readings exaggerate the importance of Plato's defended position in 184-6, particularly regarding the epistemic limits of perception.

Keywords: perception, knowledge, being, judgment.

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1. Introduction to the problem: perception and knowledge in Plato⁴

In relation to the informative capacity of perception, Plato acknowledges that there are perceptual experiences that enable us to perceive qualities such as coldness, warmth, bitterness, whiteness, among others. Additionally, there are perceptions that contribute to the formation of beliefs, such as fear, hallucination, and others⁵. Meanwhile, in dialogues like *Phaedo* and *Republic*, he problematizes the epistemic value of information emanating from the senses. According to Plato, sensory experiences are unreliable because, more often than not, they present the subject with perceptual scenarios in which the same object⁶ possesses contradictory qualities. Interpreters characterize the thesis that perception is the stage of occurrence of conflicting content as the “co-presence

⁴ This article has been in preparation for a long time, and several people have contributed in different ways. I am grateful to Gail Fine for the impact of her work on my reading of Plato's *Theaetetus*, for her generosity in sending me her papers when they were inaccessible to me, and for the suggestions she provided for an initial draft of this work. I also thank David Ebrey for his comments on the presentation of a previous version at the '1st Goiânia Conference on *Ousia* and Related Topics in Ancient Philosophy' in 2018. Additionally, I am grateful for the support from CNPQ through the 'MCTI/CNPQ Chamada No. 28/2018' and from PPGFIL/FAPEG for the translation support. Finally, I want to express my gratitude to Wellington Damasceno for the partnership and friendship over the last few years.

⁵ For perception of taste, see *Timaeus* 65d3, 65d4, 65d4-e1, 65e1-4, 65e4-66a2, 66a2-b7, 66b7-c7. For odours, see 67a1-6. For colors, see 68b3-5, 68b5-6, 68b8-c1, 68c1-2, 68c3, 68c3-4, 68c4, 68c5-6, 68c6-7, and 68c7. A detailed description regarding the sensory process through which we perceive colors and other qualities is in *Theaetetus* 156d3-157a7. Some scholars suspect that this passage is dedicated to describing the theory of perception of Protagoras, not Plato's, but to me it is evident that the author of *Theaetetus* has provided a description of how perception actually operates in terms of the interaction between the perceiving subject and the sensible objects. Nothing in the passage indicates that Plato does not endorse the portrayal he has presented. For how perception interferes with experiences like dreams, imaginations, hallucinations, see *Theaetetus* 158a1-3, b1-3, c5-8, d1-e1. For a description of how a person's physical condition alters their perception of properties of beverages like wine, see *Theaetetus* 159c11-e5. For a richer set of passages in which Plato addresses *aisthēsis* and an overview of the issues he discusses, see Caston (2015).

⁶ I use the term “object” broadly, encompassing both physical objects and conceptual topics.

of opposites” (Irwin, 1995b). The *Republic* 523-5 is the *locus classicus* of the platonic defense of this thesis.

It was to be expected that, in revisiting the topic of the cognitive scope of *aisthēsis* in *Theaetetus* 151-186, particularly in 184-6, Plato would reiterate this thesis. However, to the surprise of readers, he refrains from doing so. Instead, he directs his focus towards a critical examination of perception’s capacity to elucidate “common notions” (*koina*). In essence, Plato’s argument in *Theaetetus* 184-6 posits that true *epistēmē* necessitates the apprehension of the authentic attributes of objects, a comprehension that can only be achieved through the subject’s understanding of the *ousia* of these objects. We shall revisit this point later. For now, it is imperative to underscore that, within this conception of *epistēmē*, for a subject *S* to possess *epistēmē* of a property such as “bitterness”, mere particular sensory encounters with things exhibiting this property, such as the bitterness of a beverage or fruit, may prove insufficient. It is imperative that the soul of *S* formulates a belief regarding the intrinsic attributes of bitterness, those that delineate it as a genuine characteristic and distinguish it, for instance, from sweetness. This process of thought may be elaborated upon through a conscious analysis of the sensory experiences that recurrently acquaint the soul with bitterness. Under normal conditions, *S* can develop this consciousness by making comparisons with other flavors, for instance sourness, sweetness, saltiness, and spiciness.

In this article, I will revisit the debate on how the conception of *epistēmē* outlined above impacts Plato’s analysis of the cognitive range of perception in *Theaetetus* 184-6. I

propose a method to dissolve the controversy among interpreters about what forms of judgment this conception of *epistēmē* bestows on perception. In general, the literature on *Theaetetus* acknowledges that the main characteristic of 184-6 is the thesis that the apprehension of the *ousia* of objects is a necessary condition for the structuring of any proposition that intends to be *epistēmē*. Plato organizes the argument to demonstrate that *aisthēsis* cannot, in isolation, capture the being and other common properties of objects that fall within the scope of human perception and, because of this incapacity, it cannot be accepted as a definition of *epistēmē*. Considering this conclusion, one consequence is that we cannot form scientific propositions based solely on the data obtained through perception. Nevertheless, there exists a series of judgments based on sensory data, and they do not necessitate the status of scientific propositions to be accepted as true. Consequently, we must acknowledge that a portion of judgments formed from sensory content do not qualify as knowledge. This latter type comprises judgments such as “What a beautiful rose!” or “Today it is very hot!”. In these judgments, the subject is not formulating scientific propositions or philosophical theses, but rather expressing a sensory experience with external objects. The aspect on which the controversy arises among interpreters is the question whether Plato, in 184-6, assigns any role to *aisthēsis* in the discursive formulation of these admittedly non-scientific judgments or if he includes them in the sphere of formulations whose content is entirely elaborated by the soul.

Two alternative interpretations emerge in the literature. Interpreters such as Burnyeat (1976c), McDowell

(1973), and Cornford (1951) argue that *Theaetetus* 184-6 supports a strong rationalist thesis regarding the cognitive scope of perception. They contend that, according to Plato, any judgment necessitates the use of forms of the verb “to be,” and perception lacks the capacity to engage in this usage. The aforementioned examples of judgments would, in this interpretation, be categorized among propositions requiring an understanding of *ousia*.

Meanwhile, Cooper (1970) and Modrak (1981) advocated for an alternative reading. They argue that there is room to propose that Plato considers a more limited cognitive function in perception, which allows for the accommodation of those judgments on an epistemic level different from that which necessitates the apprehension of *ousia*. This level permits the recognition of names of things and their characteristics within the realm of perception, without undermining the thesis that perception does not attain to being and truth – a thesis that, as is evident, forms the conclusion of the argument in 184-6.

I will demonstrate that these two lines of interpretation stem from a misreading of 184-6: both interpret Plato as redefining the cognitive scope of perception in this passage. In my perspective, the argument presented in 184-6 does not alter Plato’s conception of perception, which he had already outlined, for instance, in the *Phaedo*. According to Plato, perception is a sensory capacity integrated into the discursive function of the soul. It operates through various sensory modalities, enabling our body to absorb the sensory stimuli surrounding us. Plato does not posit that the soul directly perceives colors, houses, trees, cars, or sunsets. He knew, like us,

that, for instance, visual perception relies on the proper functioning of our sensory organs for objects to be adequately integrated into our perceptual experience. Similarly, he does not believe that the soul, in isolation, hears music, as he knows it is necessary for the auditory system to convey the musical content to the soul, and the same applies to other senses.

By delineating, in 184-6, the domain of action of the primary senses within the realm of their respective natural functions, Plato does not intend to refute the cooperative relationship between the soul and sensation in ordinary experiences. Rather, the argument focuses on a much more specific aspect: it is introduced as “a further point” (*Theaetetus*, 188b3), the intricacies of which will be explored later, subsequent to our examination of the logical structure of Protagorean epistemology in sections preceding 184-6.

In the interpretation proposed in this article, the objective of 184-6 is to offer a specific analysis of the cooperative way in which the soul integrates the content given by the senses, in the case of strictly perceptual experiences, while preserving its reflective identity in conceptual, non-perceptual contents. I demonstrate that Plato has no interest in reducing the role of perceptions in the formation of judgments, but indicates that judgments are propositional structures that require discursive work of the soul at any level. Therefore, far from wanting to reduce the function of perceptions in judgments, Plato declares, in fact, that the soul cooperates with perception when it comes to expressing the content of a sensory experience as “salty.” As demonstrated below, the Platonic strategy recognizes two levels of rational

activity or cognition: one that articulates perceptual experience, justifying rational beliefs from them, and an exclusively psychic cognition that employs common notions to undertake an investigative activity in what Plato, since the *Phaedo*, calls the “itself by itself” work of the soul.

2. The role of *Theaetetus* 184-6 in the context of *Theaetetus* 151-186

Before I elaborate on the passage and examine how Plato articulates those two levels of rational activity, it is necessary to examine the function of 184-6 in its context, as the passage narrates the outcome of a discussion that began previously. The argument of *Theaetetus* 184-6 deals with the relationship between three important notions in Plato’s philosophy: perception (*aisthēsis*), being (*ousia*), and knowledge (*epistēmē*). The extensive literature available surrounding this argument attests to the central position it holds in the Platonic conception of knowledge⁷. Although these works have, in recent years, helped to clarify issues that have been raised about Plato’s target in *Theaetetus* 184-6, there is nevertheless scope for controversies about two aspects: (i) its relation with the broader argumentative structure of 151-183 and (ii) the meaning of the claim that perception cannot grasp truth and being.

⁷ The literature on *Theaetetus* 184-6 is numerous. See, among others, Cooper (1970, p. 123-146; repress in Irwin, 1995), McDowell (1973, p. 185-193), Holland (1973, p. 97-116), Burnyeat (1976, p. 29-51; 1990, p. 52-65), Modrak (1981, p. 35-54), Polansky (1985, p. 93-102; 1992, p. 160-171), Kanayama (1987, p. 29-81), Frede (in Irwin 1995 [1987], p. 389-394), Bostock (1988, p. 110-145), Cooper (2015 [1990], p. 118-140), Silverman (1990, p. 148-175), Dixsaut (in Casertano, 2002, p. 39-62), Lorenz (2006, p. 76-94), Borges (2016, p. 45-69), Fine (1988a, p. 15-28; 2017, p. 65-110).

In this section, we will address only the first aspect. The prevailing view in the literature, which I endorse, is that 151-183 constitutes a section of critical analysis concerning opposing theses (see Burnyeat, 1990, p. 7-52). Here, Plato does not expound upon his conception of the cognitive role of perception, but rather delineates how the philosophies of predecessors, particularly that of Protagoras, articulate this role. In the initial part of this section, spanning from 151 to 160, Plato delineates the intricacies of a theory of perception whose purpose is to serve as the theoretical framework for defending the definition of knowledge as perception. It is noteworthy that throughout this exposition, the term “*aisthēsis*” is not regarded as a cognitive capacity that could coexist with others, namely reason or intuition. The proposal put forth by the character Theaetetus is stronger. It is the idea that “knowledge is nothing other than perception” (*ouk allo ti estin epistēmē ē aisthēsis*, 151e2-3). This viewpoint suggests that Plato will describe and discuss the implications of a very specific conception of knowledge: a certain form of individual empiricism that excludes any other source of knowledge. As soon as the character Theaetetus introduces this proposal, Socrates states that it is equivalent to the Protagorean thesis. I believe that Socrates’ suggestion here is not that the definition of Theaetetus has the same meaning as Protagoras’ thesis, but rather that Theaetetus and Protagoras seem to attribute the same cognitive potency to *aisthēsis*. I will refer to this proposal of equivalence between the definition of Theaetetus and Protagoras’ thesis as (T). In *Theaetetus* 152-160, the author presents two propositions to describe the epistemological and ontological implications of (T). Plato

indicates that the function of these propositions is to justify the suggestion, just presented, that the Protagorean thesis expresses the same idea of knowledge as Theaetetus' definition. First, Socrates explains, in *Theaetetus* 152a-c, how the proposition "Man is the measure of all things" (*Pantōn chrematōn metron anthrōpon einai*, 152a2-3) – henceforth (P) – supports (T). Subsequently, in 153dff., Socrates develops an association between (P) and the proposition "Everything was change" (*to pan kinēsis ēn*, cf. 156a5) – henceforth (H). The function of the latter is to ensure that objects and properties of objects, which are the main contents of perception, are in constant flux, a process that changes the way they interact with the subject's perception. Once Theaetetus accepts (H) in the form of a proposition that gives ontological support to Protagoras' epistemic thesis, an important consequence for Protagoreanism follows: epistemic access to objective structures of objects, properties, and processes is not available to more than one subject. On the one hand, we can describe objects, properties, facts of the world, etc., but, on the other, we do so exclusively from our individual experiences, and the Heraclitean thesis helps Protagoras to argue that outside these experiences, there is no objective apprehension of these things or any other aspect of reality.

There exists an alternative construction of Protagoras' thesis that is weaker than the alternative outlined above. Protagoras can argue that all knowledge is based on perception without necessitating a strict equivalence between knowing and perceiving. He can, in fact, assert that these two acts are distinct, while maintaining that one does not develop without the occurrence of the other, which would place him in a

position to defend an epistemologically weaker empiricism than the radical perspective Plato is attributing to him. Furthermore, from this perspective, Protagoreanism posits that not every instance of perception amounts to knowledge, as perception can vary in degrees of precision. On this reading, it wouldn't challenge for Protagoreanism to suggest that new sensory experiences concerning the same objects contribute to enhancing one's knowledge. I contend that Plato, as the author narrating Protagoras' conception of knowledge, takes care, especially in *Theaetetus* 151-160, not to leave this option open to Protagoras⁸. Why? Because Plato conceives Protagoreanism as a stricter and more radical epistemology. From the perspective of this epistemology, there is no distinction between my current perception at time t of an object and the current properties that such an object possesses. If I come across the same object again, my memory will not have retained the initial perception, because, as the secret doctrine (153-160) supports, each perceptual encounter is private and non-repeatable. Therefore, (P) sustains that any perception is not only necessary, but also sufficient for whatever form of knowledge we find in our acts of subjective perception⁹.

⁸ That alternative is a plausible form of empiricism. See Burnyeat (1990, p. 10).

⁹ Gail Fine (2003, p. 134) argues that there are two types of Protagoreanism: "narrow Protagoreanism" and "broad Protagoreanism". In the former, each thing is perceived by any person in the way they perceive it. In the latter, each thing is believed by any person to be the way they believe it to be. I think Protagoras is not committed to that distinction. While I agree that Protagoras acknowledges the difference between the range of perceptual predicates and those of morality, aesthetics, or any other kind of predicate, I cannot find any justification for attributing levels or types of Protagoreanism to him. In my view, in the *Theaetetus*, "Protagoreanism" is a doctrine concerning perception as a sufficient criterion for knowledge. This doctrine applies to any kind of predicate, whether strictly perceptual or not.

Having explained, in the course of 153-160, how proposition (H) supports (P) in the form of a principle that governs the process of the formation of sensory content, the author of *Theaetetus* develops in 161-183 separate criticisms of theses (P) and (H)¹⁰. At 160-179, he works on objections to the thesis (P*) – a version of (P) – according to which “all beliefs are true”¹¹. In this critical section, Plato interprets (P*) in the form of the thesis that for any individual *x* and any proposition *p*, if it seems to *x* that *p*, then it is true for *x* that *p* (Burnyeat, 1976b, p. 178). According to this view, there is no distinction between private perception, opinion, and knowledge. Therefore, all opinions are true. In 169d-171d, Plato argues that (P*) is self-contradictory (or self-defeating, as some scholars prefer). In that context, (P*) means: “Whatever people think and believe is true for them” or “all opinions are true.” Working with (P*) in this sense, Plato imagines a scenario in which a group of individuals take Protagoras’ doctrine as an object of thought and conclude that (P*)

¹⁰ There is some controversy about how Plato understands the connection between (P) and (H). In my interpretation, the text of 151–160 argues that the proposition “everything was change” is a *sine qua non* condition for the thoughts of Protagoras, but in itself, (H) is an independent thesis. Indeed, it is a principle (*archē*, 156a3) defended by various thinkers, not just Protagoras (see 152e). What Protagoras sees in that principle – or better, what Plato believes Protagoras see – is the connection between his account of perception as the sole criterion for knowledge and the denial of objective properties available beyond the realm of perception. It is not easy to understand what Protagoras means by this denial of objective properties. For a plausible account of the last point, see Matthen (1985). For a detailed analysis of the function of (H) in 151–160, see Borges (2012).

¹¹ Since Sextus Empiricus, Plato’s argument against this version has been called “*peritropē*”, one of the ten objections developed in 160–179 against (P). Burnyeat identified in the *peritropē* argument a version of a strategy of refutation also applied by Democritus, Sextus, and Aristotle. The term derives from the verb *peritrepein*, which means “to turn around”, “roll something or someone”, “reverse the meaning of a word or argument”, or “table turning”. Burnyeat cites numerous ancient authors who used forms of *peritrepein* in arguments that employ the thesis asserted by the opponent to derive results contrary to the truth of this thesis. See Burnyeat (1976a, p. 44-69). See also Chappell (2004, p. 88-132).

is false. Therefore, given (P*), the opinion of the group that considers (P*) false is true.

Meanwhile, Protagoras could defend himself from this attack using the following line of argument. As Theaetetus himself relates in the cold wind argument (152b), Protagoreanism can be described as a relativism in which qualities such as “cold” or “warm” are not intrinsic traits of things, but properties relative to subjective perception. For some, the wind is cold; for others, it is warm. Such experiences are formed, as later the “secret doctrine” will show (153-160), by the interaction between objects – with their qualitative potentialities – and our perceptual capacity. Our experience with the wind does not affect its natural properties – that is, our interaction with the wind does not alter it from an ontological standpoint –, but the wind itself and our perception interact in such a way as to generate, for some, the “cold” property, for others, the “warm” property. For Protagoras, generalizing the perception of all objects and facts means that there are no objective truths about what falls into the field of perception, including beliefs formed from individual perceptions. On this perspective, Protagoras or his followers can say that the Platonic criticism is innocuous because, in the case of the majority group that takes (P*) as an object of thought and considers it false, what we have is a collective experience in which one group forms a doxastic perception, as relative as any other, which helps to confirm the plausibility of (P) read as (P*)¹².

¹² Vlastos and Sayre were the ones who indicated the problem of missing qualifiers in Plato’s treatment of premise (i) (see Vlastos, 1956: xiv, n. 29; Sayre, 1969, p. 87-88). However, whether this constitutes a Platonic failure depends on how we interpret the position Plato ascribes to Protagoras.

This is a possible line of defense, but I do not believe that it holds much weight in the context of *Theaetetus*' theses on Protagoreanism. The problem with this line is that it assumes that Plato is describing Protagoras as a departmental-type relativist, who relativizes propositions of cognitive content within the scope of our experiences, while maintains the objectivity of the principle that governs our epistemic relativism. As I see, this is not how Plato conceives the form in which Protagoras presents his own theory. To Plato, Protagoras denies that general propositions can be universally sustained outside the scope of our individual perception. Having this on the horizon, Plato constructs an objection as to how the principle governing this epistemology validates the opinion of those who consider the principle and reject it. This objection seems to suggest to Protagoras that it is imperative to distinguish between relativized propositions and the principles governing relativization. In this respect, the propositions "all opinions are true" and "man is the measure of all things" cannot themselves be relativized. Let us see how this proposal emerges from the structure of Plato's argument against (P*):

On one hand, if Plato considers Protagoras a strict relativist, the omission of the qualifiers at that point might have been a failure because, as a relativist, Protagoras would not support the absolute proposition (i) "every opinion is true," but the relative proposition (i)*, "every opinion is true for those who express it." In this interpretation, assumptions (iii) and (iv) above find support among Protagoras' critics but not from Protagoras himself. On the other hand, if Protagoras is a subjectivist or infallibilist, as Aristotle and Sextus seem to understand him (see Burnyeat, 1976a), then the qualifiers are not required in (i). An infallibilist defends the thesis that if S believes *p*, *p* is true, *simpliciter*. For arguments supporting the infallibilist interpretation, see Fine (1988b; reprinted in Fine, 2003). Burnyeat (1976b) argues that in the *Theaetetus*, Plato, unlike Aristotle and Sextus, portrays Protagoras as a relativist. See also Lee (2005).

- (i) Protagoras believes (P*) is true (P* = “all opinions are true”) (cf. 171a8-9);
- (ii) All but Protagoras express the view that (i) is false (cf. 171a6-8);
- (iii) By (i), (ii) is true, meaning that Protagoras agrees that the opinion of all people who express the view that the opinion of Protagoras is false is true (cf. 171b1-2);
- (iv) Therefore, Protagoras admits that his opinion – that (i) is true – is false (see 171b1-2).

The second premise is supported by the empirical argument (Burnyeat, 1976b, p. 176.) that, under normal conditions, people admit inter-subjective levels of greater or lesser knowledge, which qualifies some opinions as false and others true. That is the reason why Plato asserts that most people believe that (P*) is false (Fine, 1988b, p. 233-234)¹³. With the suggestion that, for most, (P*) does not express what actually happens in our ordinary experiences, Plato probably is noting that it is necessary a certain level of correspondence with reality if the Protagorean epistemology wants to express how people develop opinions. At this level of objectivity, the Protagorean principle cannot itself be considered a mere opinion. Therefore, if Protagoras expects his thesis to be considered a good definition of knowledge, one capable of offering a broad conception of how knowledge works in general, he will need to go beyond mere opinion and state his thesis as a general principle. Plato himself had already taken the thesis

¹³ My description of this argument is schematic and insufficient. For a comprehensive treatment, see Castagnoli (2004) and Chappell (2005).

in this sense, for he described it as a theory – not an opinion – in 152-160. Plato’s aim in this constructive part, as McDowell noted, is “to make the definition of knowledge as perception seem as plausible as possible” (McDowell, 1973, p. 118). However, it is by evaluating this perspective of a general non-relative principle that Plato shows that the principle has problems. Indeed, in the context of the *peritropē* argument, the author of the dialogue is arguing that the Protagorean conception of knowledge accepts as true any opinion and, therefore, also accepts as true the opinion of people who take the Protagorean thesis under consideration (*Theaetetus* 170d-e) and conclude that it is false *simpliciter*, that is, it is not false for some, but objectively false. As Chappell pointed out (2005), Plato illustrates that the tension between Protagoras’ doctrine and the thought of those who reject it is on the level of objective assertions: “To assert *p* to others is to give them reason to believe *p*; to report *p* as my opinion is to give them no reason at all to believe *p*” (Chappell, 2005, p. 111). Therefore, Protagoras must recognize that the object of thought of those who are against his thesis is (P), not just a predicate true in the world of those who deny (P). On that account, the *peritropē* argument “reverses”¹⁴ the thesis, indicating at least two options for Protagoras: (i) he can accept that (P) is false, like most people do; or (ii) he can find a way to distinguish the logical status of (P) and the logical status of all the opinions (P) governs. The second alternative may avoid using (P) to validate the opinion of those who deny it,

¹⁴ *Peritropē* also has the sense of “turning the tables.”

but developing the details of this interpretation is beyond my scope here¹⁵.

Having concluded the examination of (P), Plato develops, in 181-3, a critique of another principle (*archê*) that supported Theaetetus' definition of knowledge: "everything is changing" (*ta panta kineisthai*, 181c2). The similarity of this phrase with the proposition expressed in 156a5, "everything was change" (*to pan kinesis ên*), a thesis that catalyzes the main ideas of the "secret doctrine", shows that Plato now works on the problems of the proposition (H). I will focus on two aspects. First, there is a disagreement in the literature about the scope of the term *panta* (everything) in (H). For some, the term refers to (i) "physical objects" like stones and sticks (Crombie, 1963). For others, it refers to (ii) the items of the "twin ontology," as developed in 156ff in the context of secret doctrine¹⁶. In my analysis, the second option is more appropriate, but it is necessary to qualify it so as not to make the mistake of thinking that Plato is limiting the criticism of

¹⁵ In addition to the conflict with how people conceive their epistemic progress in everyday life, the Platonic critique identifies another problem: (P) is at the same time true (for Protagoras) and false (for all others), thus violating the PNC. Note that this is how Aristotle interprets Protagoras in *Met. Gamma 5*: as one of the thinkers whose ideas are in conflict with the PNC. Aristotle's reading of Protagoras (mainly in *Gamma 5-6*) identifies a general structure of thought in Protagoras and other thinkers. According to Aristotle, they are compromised with the thesis that what appears in perception is necessarily true. As Lee (2005, 118ff) showed, this general principle is the thesis that unifies some opponents of the principle of non-contradiction (Protagoras, Democritus, Heraclitus). In my view, this thesis expresses the theory that Plato develops for Protagoras in *Theaetetus* 151-160. Aristotle, who, as we know, read *Theaetetus*, understood Plato's proposal well.

¹⁶ Option (ii) is defended by McDowell (1973), Burnyeat (1990), and Sedley (2004). The basic idea of the "secret doctrine" is the point that perception (knowledge) is the joint product of two slow motions, one internal to our senses and the other external. These motions produce what the text calls "quick motions". According to Burnyeat, this theory "teaches that there are no things, only a process (...). There are no properties of things either, but again only motions" (Burnyeat, 1990, p. 16). I think, however, that this is not right. The secret doctrine does not collapse things into process, but I cannot develop this point here. See my "The Protagorean conception of 'change' according to Plato" (forthcoming).

(H) to the field of strict perception, because, as I think, the scope of the term *panta* goes beyond the qualities produced by the perceptual interaction defended in twin ontology¹⁷. For Plato, Protagoras held that (H) governs the process of formation of any predicate that has been the result of an individual perceptual experience, be it sensory, moral, aesthetic, *inter alia*. It can be sustained that (H) focuses on the ontology of physical things, maintaining that there are no real objects such as we experience them, a thesis that seems problematic for Protagoreanism and even unnecessary. However, it seems clear to me that if in fact (H) supports Protagoreanism, as Plato suggests, then it must focus on any physical or theoretical object. From this perspective, the critique at 181-3, focused on the example of color, can be taken as a paradigm of how problematic is the suggestion of (H) that there is a total flux in the content of perception.

Let us examine *Theaetetus*' argument about (H). First, Socrates proposes that there are two types of flux (*kineseis*): (i) *phora* (local motion) and (ii) *alloiōsis* (alteration). He then argues that a quality such as "white" (*leukotētos*, 182d3), placed under the action of both fluxes, would imply a continuous change in white, so that the continuous flux would prevent the perceiving subject from even identifying the white object of their perception, resulting in a process of continuous transformation of the perceptual content. The white would virtually change all the time into another color (*metabolēn eis allēn chroan*, 182d3), making the formation of the perceived content in each time impossible. Here the

¹⁷ For a defense of this line on interpretation, see Boter (2009, p. 32).

implication for Protagoras' use of (H) is clear: considering that Protagoreanism maintains that things are for each person as they appear in the person's perception, if there is no stability in the sensory content of a given perception, then there will be no perceptual content for the subject to know in that perception.

We could find alternative interpretations that would help Protagoreanism escape Plato's argument about the problem of (H), but we will not. What we have set forth above is sufficient for us to return to the issue that brought us here: the scope of 184-6. The arguments we have detailed allow us to organize the general structure of Plato's critique of definition (T) in 151-183. This structure is as follows:

1. Definition: Knowledge is nothing other than perception (T);
2. To examine the truth of (T), let us suppose that (T) means (P);
3. If (P), (H) follows, because (H) is an ontological proposition necessary for (P);
4. (P) and (H) are false (cf. 169-171; 181-183);
5. Therefore, by (2) and (4), (T) is false.

Accordingly, if definition (T), interpreted as (2), is criticized and rejected, what is the purpose of 184-6? Silverman understands that in 184-6, Plato aims at a "purified Protagorean" who is no longer committed to (H), but still committed to the thesis that the content elaborated by the soul concerning the properties of objects is obtained in experiences and is relative to the perceiving subject (Silverman, 1990, p. 162).

According to Silverman, the argument in 184-6 intends to criticize the last claim, a version of (T). I agree with the claim that Plato examines the constituents of thought and appearance in 184-6, but I do not think he is still arguing against Protagoras, nor against any surviving residuals of his doctrines. As we have shown above, the analysis of the epistemic scope of the Protagorean theses was undertaken in *Theaetetus* 151-183.

Considering the extent of the examination and critique conducted, there is nothing left of Protagoreanism to be examined. Therefore, the objective of 184-6 must differ from that of 151-183. In the following lines, I will argue that the focus of 184-6 is confined to the question of whether *aisthēsis*, by means of the organs, possesses the capacity to articulate the information it transmits to the soul. At this point in the *Theaetetus*, it is important for Plato to properly delineate the role of perception and the role of reason in dealing with the information that reaches the soul, captured by the senses. Naturally, as we will see, even though Protagoras has been left behind, it is still necessary to conclude the examination of the hypothesis that *aisthēsis* is knowledge. In my interpretation, 184-6 does this from a genuinely Platonic perspective, that is, independent of the dialectical structure we examined above in the analysis of the propositions presented as components of Protagoras' thesis.

3. Analysis of *Theaetetus* 184-6

I begin by revisiting Michael Frede's reading, as he emphatically argued that Plato so drastically diminished the cognitive capacity of perception that he ultimately rendered it

incapable of any minimal propositional content. According to Frede, Plato:

T1. Restricts the general notion of perception to sense perception in such a narrow sense and moreover, to such a narrow notion of sense perception that we cannot even any longer be said to perceive that something is red (1987, p. 394).

For Frede, the argument of 184-6 implies that perception would not be able to formulate a simple judgment such as “x is red”. Every judgment, including those that articulate sensory content, would be an attribute of reason. This interpretation is defended by Burnyeat (1976c), Kanayama (1987), Lorenz (2006), Kahn (2013), Fine (1988a, 2017), and many others. We can consider this to be the majority interpretation today, influenced largely by the extraordinary work developed by M. F. Burnyeat in the paper *Plato on the Grammar of Perceiving* (1976c). However, a different reading, which casts suspicion on Frede’s interpretation, was proposed by interpreters such as Cooper (1970) and Modrak (1981). Cooper argued that Plato failed to mention, in 184-6, whether there is a cognitive role for perception. For Cooper, Plato uses the term “*aisthēsis*” in two ways: (i) as a power of the body and (ii) as a power of the perceptual acts of the mind (Cooper, 1970, p. 129).

According to Cooper, the author of *Theaetetus* was unable to define the semantic scope of the term “*aisthēsis*” in order to clearly accentuate who or what is responsible for perception as such. He states: “if the mind sees and hears, and not any bodily part, then surely the mind and not any part of the body is the possessor of the power of sight and

hearing” (Cooper, 1970, p. 123). In this interpretation, the text of the *Theaetetus* would be ambiguous regarding whether it is the soul that does all the work of articulating the sensory data or if, in some cases, there is a certain autonomy in perception from the point of view of what it can do. It could, for example, be entirely responsible for making us recognize color names. The point is relevant because, if Cooper is correct, the issue lies not only in whether Plato used the term “*aisthēsis*” ambiguously, but also in whether the author of *Theaetetus* knew how to articulate the function he envisioned for the discussion in 184-6: defining the involvement of *aisthēsis*, as a power of the organs, in the formation of contents that entail some conceptual articulation.

Both interpretations exaggerate certain aspects of the argument, which hinders a fair analysis of Plato’s intention in this passage. Initially, I will delve into the context of 185a-e, where Cooper identifies ambiguity in the use of “*aisthēsis*.” Following that, I will proceed to discuss the argument’s stance on the notion of being. It is worth noting that the section Cooper uses to develop his interpretation, the excerpt in 185a-e, follows the argument known as “the proper object argument”¹⁸. Plato seeks to establish two fundamental

¹⁸ I consider that the most relevant aspect of the proper object argument is the thesis that the soul engages in the perception of sensory data in cooperation with the organs. The argument maintains that each sensory organ has its own proper object: audible properties are perceived by hearing, visible properties by sight, olfactory properties by smell, and so on, but the perceptual experience of any of these properties is not an exclusive function of the organ, as the soul cooperates in this perception. Socrates suggests the need for precision regarding perception. He poses the question: “Which response is more accurate: (i) that we see with our eyes or (ii) that eyes are instruments through which we see? And ears, are they what we hear with, or rather, what we hear through?” (184c). *Theaetetus* responds, “Eyes and ears are the means through which we perceive things.” However, the interpretation of this argument remains ambiguous. There are two possibilities: (i) the strong assertion that nothing can be perceived by two senses, or (ii) the weaker assertion that

points in this argument: (i) that the sensory organs (such as the ears and eyes) are structured to perceive *proper sensibles*, and (ii) the soul articulates propositions that it forms on its own through reflection, and articulate propositions about phenomena or information obtained through the senses. Fortunately, Socrates' argument does not depend on the controversial thesis that each sensory modality is confined to proper sensibles¹⁹. The conclusion that the soul is a faculty specialized in reflection and articulation of information from the senses does not hinge on whether Socrates confines perception to the individuation of sensory modalities or allows for cooperative perception among different sensory modalities. With that said, let us now delve into the second aspect of the aforementioned argument: the thesis that there is no specific organ for the perception of common properties, as this function pertains to the soul. This thesis is articulated in the following passage:

each sense has its own domain (sight, hearing, etc.), yet none are restricted to these domains. The former option faces the obvious challenge that sensory properties like “shape” are perceived by two senses (sight and touch). Acknowledging this, Burnyeat (1976c, p. 48) advocated for the latter interpretation: Plato only requires the weaker assertion that some things are limited to one sense. However, I find it challenging to take a definitive stance solely based on the text. Plato did not feel the need to clarify whether he accepts cases of common sensory perception or which version of the thesis he is operating with. This may be due to the focus of the account of perception presented in 184–6, whose scope is limited to the cognitive capacity of perception, contrasting with the detailed explanations in *Theaetetus* 155c–157c and the visual physiology in *Timaeus* 45b–46c/67c–68d. For an alternative interpretation of Plato's perspective on perception in *Theaetetus*, see Modrak (1981).¹⁹ The argument's contention that each organ exclusively focuses on perceiving a specific quality is not a very popular thesis in the context of current research on the philosophy of perception, as experiences demonstrate that sensory modalities often cooperate with each other. For instance, simultaneous hearing and seeing of a person speaking can enhance auditory clarity, suggesting that senses interact rather than operate independently. See Matthen (2015).

T2. SO. Now when it comes to sound, or color, first of all don't you have this very thought about both of them, that both of them are? [*hoti amphoterō eston*];

TE. I do.

SO. And that each of them is different from the other, and the same as itself?

TE. Of course.

SO. And that together they are two, and each is one?

TE. That too.

SO. Are you also able to consider whether they are unlike or like one another?

TE. Probably (185a8-b6).

SO. Through what, then, do you think all these things about them [*peri autoin*] given that it's not possible to grasp what is common to them either through hearing or through sight? (*Theaetetus*, 185a-b)²⁰.

In T2, Socrates introduces the idea that the soul elaborates thoughts based on instances of perceptions. It realizes such thoughts using notions named by interpreters of the *Theaetetus* as “*koina*”. T2 states that a typical case of using *koina* is thinking, about one instance of sound and another of color, “that both are” (185a9: *hoti amphoterō eston*). One could, as Cornford does (1935), assume that in this phrase the author of *Theaetetus* is proposing that the soul ascertains the “existence” of instances of sound and color. Here, we would have an absolute use of the verb, indicating that the soul perceives the concrete reality common to both instances. However, as Lorenz (2006) notes, one can also consider that the use is elliptical and the meaning is predicative: Socrates may be indicating that the soul reflects, first and

²⁰ I use Rowes' translation (CUP, 2015).

foremost, that sound and color are one thing or another²¹. Cornford's suggestion was adopted by Cooper (1970). In my opinion, contrary to what many interpreters believe, Cornford's interpretation has some plausibility, if we understand that the soul uses the verb 'to be' to think of sound and color as concrete things existing in the world. Lorenz's suggested alternative does not exclude this possibility, and I will return to this point later when discussing the text's use of "*ousia*".

The next step of the argument is to emphasize that the soul makes these reflections on instances by way of its own resources, in the modality that Socrates calls "itself by itself." Let us look at the following excerpt:

T3. And through what does this other capacity operate, the one that indicates to you what is common, both in every context [*epi pasi*] and in this particular one [*epi toutois*], namely what you label with "is" and "is not," and the other aspects of things we were asking about just now in relation to our examples? What will you assign for all these aspects, as the instruments through which what does the perceiving in us [*di hōn aisthanetai hēmōn*] perceives each of them?

TE. You're talking about being and not being, likeness and unlikeness, same and different, also things being one or having some number; you're clearly asking about even and odd too, and everything that goes along with these. (...) The soul appears to me to investigate the common aspects in relation to everything by and through itself [*autē di hautēs hē psuchē ta koina moi phainetai peri pantōn episkopein*] (*Theaetetus*, 185c4-d4).

We note how the author of the dialogue makes the character Theaetetus resume the examples of common predicates

²¹ McDowell was the first to note this possibility. He says, "I suspect the Greek verb may be elliptical" (1973, p. 187).

(opposites) on which the soul investigates (*episkopein*) in the mode “itself by itself” (*autē di hautēs*): “being and not being”, “likeness and unlikeness”, “same and different”, “being one or having some number”, “even and odd”. While I am emphasizing that such thoughts are reflective acts of the soul, Socrates considers sound and color as instances of perceptual items upon which the soul attributes such predicates, not as concepts or types upon which the soul would be working itself by itself. To justify this, I rely on the evidence that “sound and color” are the referents of “*epi toutois*” in 185c5, “*peri autoin*” in 185b7, and “*peri autōn*” in 185C6-7 and 185d1. We may conclude from the above that Socrates is not isolating the activity of the soul from activity of perception. On the contrary, his position assumes that, in perceptual experiences with concrete cases of sound and color, the soul exercises the reflective capacity to highlight common aspects of these data. This point will be relevant later, when Socrates cites a specific case of perception, the sensation of “saltiness,” to compare the way the soul acts in this case compared to how it performs on non-sensible topics.

Regarding the meaning of “*koina*” in the argument, Cornford (1935), Burnyeat (1990), McDowell (1973), and Bostock (1988) understand that they are abstract terms used in any act of thinking about objects or theoretical topics. This interpretation aligns with Frede’s proposal as discussed in T1, but it is not in conflict with the comments we made on the texts T2 and T3 above, which suggest cooperation between the soul and perception in forming judgments of any kind. However, Cooper emphasizes an aspect that contradicts this interpretation. He believes that this initial step of

the argument highlights the reflective autonomy of the soul in the process of perception. According to him:

T4. Thus, only colors can be seen, and no color can be heard or tasted. (...) What we are then noticing about the objects, their existence, cannot be either an auditory or a visual property, since it belongs equally to the sound and to color, and it is obvious that there is no further sense through which we could perceive such common properties. Judgments of this kind are made by the mind by itself, without the aid of any sense or organ of sense (Cooper, 1970, p. 128).

I acknowledge that Cooper accentuates the argument of the proper object concerning the individuation of sensory modalities for the five senses. However, it does not necessarily follow that Socrates, in T2 and T3, implies that common predicates attributed to sound and color form reflections “without the aid of any sense”. To assert this is to over-emphasize the intellectual aspect of the proper object argument. It is precisely by adopting this perspective that Cooper identifies an ambiguity in the text. He suggests that Plato’s stance shifts, implying that there are instances where sensible properties are investigated within the realm of perception. He contends that Plato “moves from asserting that a person perceives through the sensory powers of bodily organs (cf. 184b9, c6-8) to acknowledging that (185c8, e6-7, 186b3) the mind perceives through the senses” (Cooper, 1970, p. 129). The evidence he provides is a question posed by Socrates in 185b9-c3:

T5. SO. (...) If it were possible [*ei gar dunaton eiē*] to examine whether both [sound and color] were salty or not, obviously you'll be able to say what you'll examine them with, and this clearly won't be either sight or hearing but something else.

TE. Obviously – the capacity that operates through the tongue (*Theaetetus*, 185b9-c3).

Cooper understands that T5 is conceding that “we investigate whether a couple of things are bitter by means of a physical ability”. He takes “*skepsasthai*” in a technical sense of rational investigation, suggesting that the author of *Theaetetus* is retreating from the position that the soul is the articulator of sensible properties, a thesis of the of the proper object argument, to a position in which two forms of judgment are contrasted, one attributed to perception and the other to reason: (i) bare judgments such as “this is salty” and (ii) abstract or theoretical judgments in which the mind operates with *koina*. I agree that the argument makes it possible to formulate these two forms of thought, but I do not consider this to be a deviation from what was postulated in T2 and T3.

To support my point, I want to first draw attention to the following: T5 introduces a counterfactual condition²² and as such it is not a real alternative. The counterfactual condition elaborates on the following possibility: if it were possible to “to examine” (*skepsasthai*, b10) whether a sound and color are salty [*halmūros*] or not, we would use the power of the tongue. This conditional aims to make Theaetetus

²² As far as I know, Polansky (1992, p. 168) was the first to call attention to the interpretation I am now developing, although he does not explore it. See also Sedley (2004, p. 106). In contrast, Bostock (1988, 119ff) misses the point, despite his criticism of Cooper's interpretation.

perceive that the soul would not be required to perform its work “itself by itself” if the thought about sound and color did not lead it to think of something common, theoretical, or simply a conceptual property. Thus, although in the hypothetical example the soul would be activated – because, according to the proper object argument, it is the seat of perception –, it would be merely coordinating an investigation that, furthermore, cannot be carried out, as sound and color are objects to which the property “salty” does not apply. In conclusion, we cannot understand the verb “*skepsasthai*” in T5 in the technical sense of an epistemic investigation to be carried out by perception.

Secondly, Theaetetus’ response at the end of T5 aligns with the essence of the proper object argument, unlike Socrates, who overlooks this aspect at least once by using the dative case “*hō(i)*” in 185c1 instead of employing “*dia*” plus genitive, as recommended by the argument. Mindful of this nuance, Theaetetus employs “through” [*dia* + genitive: *dia tēs glotēs*] in 185b9-c3 to underscore that he hasn’t lost sight of the central tenet of this initial segment of 184-6: the soul engages in sensation as a recipient of sensory input and plays a role even in a genuine instance of perception, such as when the subject verifies whether two objects are salty. Therefore, given that Cooper’s evidence is exhausted in the aspects that I just highlighted, it can be concluded that his interpretation lacks support.

However, it still remains to be elucidated how the argument constructs a theoretical framework comprehensive enough to accommodate ordinary judgments. This step, I propose, will unfold in the subsequent section of 184-6,

where Socrates initiates a broader discourse on the concept of being and the way it is employed in perception. In the lines that follow, my focus will be on the use of the verb “*esti*” in the argument. I suggest that a proper reading of this usage allows us to verify that Plato has, in 184-6, a clear conception of what is necessary for us to discard *aisthēsis* as definiens of *epistēmē* without having to adopt a highly intellectual idea of perception. As is well known, there is enormous debate among interpreters about the meaning of “being” in *Theaetetus* 184-6. The first point that is usually observed is the absence of Forms in the text. Given the association between Forms and knowledge, amply attested in Plato’s dialogues, at first glance this seems an omission. Cornford believes that Plato is “determined to say as little as possible about the Forms (...) but that these ‘common’ terms simply are Forms should be obvious to anyone who has read the *Parmenides*” (1935, p. 106). In Cornford’s interpretation, the dialogue is an indirect argument for the platonic doctrine that Forms are – and always will be – the sole objects of knowledge. Meanwhile, Ryle (1990 [1952]) maintained that Forms are “objects” of knowledge and that the *Theaetetus* is not interested in objects of knowledge but in the “concept” of knowledge, which is why there is no need to introduce Forms. I think both analyses contain elements of truth, but neither fully encapsulates the truth. First, we must be cautious about inferring any lesson from the absence of Forms in the dialogue. As McCabe (2015) says, Plato never writes anything in vain. He might not have found a purpose for introducing Forms, similar to their role in the *Phaedo* as *aitiai*, or in *Republic* V, where they are posited as objects of

knowledge to distinguish the cognitive perspective of philosophers from that of lovers of spectacle, who rely on sensible properties to support their claims of knowledge.

Having addressed what is possible regarding the absence of Forms, I now turn to the verb “*esti*”. In my interpretation, *Theaetetus*’ argument utilizes a concept of being that is compatible with Forms but is more general. Plato’s approach is to investigate the capacity of commons (*koina*) in terms of the overarching concept that governs any form of reflection on the essence of something: the notion of *ousia*. Among the various *koina*, the argument emphasizes this notion and suggests that perception, as it stands, is incapable of grasping *ousia*, hence rendering it incapable of constituting knowledge. This conception of being, which I will refer to as basic, seems to emerge as early as 185a9, in the sentence previously discussed (T2), where Socrates mentions that only the soul, for instance, is capable of thinking about sound and color, *hoti amphoterō eston*. We previously noted the divergence among scholars regarding the sense of the verb here, but now we can propose that the verb is being employed in the sense that sound and color are something. But something in what sense? In the sense of any Socratic inquiry that presents themes for analysis and asks, first and foremost, whether X is something²³. This sense introduces, in any

²³ Lorenz (2006) and others refer to this usage of “*esti*” as “elliptical” and contrast it with the absolute usage, where the verb implies an existential sense. I do not adopt this interpretation because, as I previously pointed out, the use of the verb is tied to the sense of “*ousia*” in a perspective where contemplating whether sound and color are something means considering whether these items possess any substantiality as genuine items and candidates for examination regarding their properties. Therefore, there is something existential in this usage, and Plato, like many Greek philosophers, conceives “*ousia*” as a general notion of being something in an ontological sense. For a similar argument, in which a particular item is considered as an object of investigation only if

inquiry, the notion of *ousia*, as it always pertains to whether the subject in question possesses any reality, any genuine aspect that can be examined from a philosophical standpoint. McDowell (1973), who observes the emphasis of the text on *ousia*, does not identify this usage as early as 185a9, but that does not preclude his interpretation from aligning with mine. He observes a change in the text regarding how Plato employs the notion of “*koina*”. Initially, Socrates employs “that clauses” (*hoti*, 185a-b), but from 185c onward, McDowell notes the introduction of *ousia* and terms employed in discussing the properties of sound and color. These terms can be categorized into three groups: “F-ness” (being, [*ousia*]); “the F” (the not be, [*to mē einai*]), or simply “F” (different, [*heteron*]). McDowell suggests that the thesis of the unity of judgment, which Plato explores from the proper object argument, is being articulated through such options. One implication he proposes is that when the mind engages in perceptual-level thought, scrutinizing whether entities like sound and color are the same, different, possess being, etc., it is imperative that the soul is already acquainted with these terms. McDowell goes beyond that, suggesting that the soul must “touch” or “handle” the terms of that judgment: being, sound and color, and unlikeness. I concur fully with this analysis, and in examining the subsequent two passages, I indicate that the conclusion of the argument in 184-6 hinges on this interpretation.

there is agreement on whether it is “something” (*ti*), see *Phaedo* 64c2-8. In this text, the object under examination is the notion of “death.”

Having secured Theaetetus' agreement on the proposition that the soul engages in two modes of thought concerning objects – one, examining “something itself by itself” [*autē di hautēs*], and the other, objects “through the capacities of the body” [*tou sōmatos dunameōn*] – Socrates initiates the subsequent phase of the discourse with an inquiry regarding *ousia*:

(T6) SO. So to which of the two sets of things do you assign being [*poterōn oun tithēs tēn ousian*]. This is what is most constantly present in all cases.

TE. I myself count it among the things that the soul reaches out to, itself by itself (...).

SO. Hold it there. It's through touch that it will perceive the hardness of the hard, and similarly the softness of the soft – right?

TE. Yes.

SO. Whereas what our soul tries to judge by itself, going close up to them and comparing them with each other is their being, namely that they are [*tēn de ge ousian kai hoti eston*], their oppositeness to one another, and again the being of their oppositeness?

TE. Certainly, yes (*Theaetetus* 186a2-b10).

The claim in (T6) that being (*ousia*) is the most general of the *koina* lends some support to the suggestion that the meaning of the verb in 185a9 is “to be something”. That sense can be read in the phrase “their being, namely that they are.” Note how the Greek in this sentence is similar to the Greek of 185a9: *hoti amphoterō eston*. If we read “*kai*” in “*tēn de ge ousian kai hoti eston*” as explanatory, as Rowe does in his translation, we can identify in T6 and T2 the basic sense of being as the “first” (*prōton*, 185a9)²⁴ sense of the verb and we

²⁴ See Polansky (1985) for that suggestion.

can confidently connect it to the use of *ousia* in the scientific examination of objects and themes. However, one may ask: if there is this unified sense in the argument, what is the meaning of the phrase: “the being of their oppositeness” (186b7)? In this phrase the term *ousia* is followed by the genitive “*tēs enantiotētos*” and the meaning is probably: “the essence of their oppositeness” or “the what is of their oppositeness”. The idea appears to be that the soul attempts to judge (*krinein peiratai*, 186b6-7) first the opposition between hardness and softness and then the essence of this opposition. This shows two different steps: the ability to raise questions about whether something has some feature and the ability to grasp the being of that feature in relation to others.

My conclusion is that in *Theaetetus* 184-6 “being” is used in two senses: (i) to be something or other and (ii) to be an essence (*ti esti question*). These two senses are two ways of applying the concept of *ousia*, but both senses are interconnected: it is the ontological reality of the items that explains the characteristics they possess. Thus, it is the fact that sound and color possess an ontological reality given by their respective *ousiai* that allows the soul to perceive them as genuine beings and to obtain knowledge about any properties they may have. *Aisthēsis*, as such, is not capable of performing this task.

In 186d2-5, Socrates concludes that knowledge (*epistēmē*) does not reside in our “affections” [*pathemata*], but rather in reasoning about them [*peri ekeinōn*]. Platonic knowledge presupposes the ability to comprehend *ousia* in the second sense described above. Therefore, the question of whether perception can access the first sense of being is

irrelevant, although the answer must be negative and qualified to demonstrate the necessity of articulating the position of the proper object argument, which posits a collaboration between the senses and soul in perception. As McDowell has demonstrated, ordinary judgments already necessitate the use of *koina*, and *aisthēsis* lacks access to such terms. It is the soul that apprehends them, but since Plato does not locate *epistēmē* at this level, it is not necessary to scrutinize the extent to which Plato acknowledges that *aisthēseis* furnishes information or content for such judgments. Consequently, the conclusion of the argument hinges on the fact that *aisthēsis* does not apprehend *ousia*. *Aisthēsis* can deliver, in conjunction with the soul, the perception of a multitude of things and properties, but only the soul can scrutinize characteristics from the perspective of the notion of *ousia*. In this regard, while *aisthēsis* furnishes the soul with sensory contents that only the soul can articulate, the scientific propositions that form the hard core of *epistēmē* are exclusively developed by the soul in its “itself by itself” work, as in each case it is imperative for the soul to concentrate on the *ousia* of beings and on the additional properties that beings display as a result of this *ousia*²⁵.

²⁵ The following lines written by F. Dretske can be considered a contemporary version of Plato’s distinction between *aisthēsis* and *epistēmē*: “The role or function of the sensory systems in the total cognitive process is to get the message in so that a properly equipped receiver can modulate her responses to the things about which she is getting information. The sensory system is the postal system in this total cognitive enterprise. It is responsible for the delivery of information, and its responsibility ends there. What we do with this information, once received, whether we are even capable of interpreting the messages so received, are questions about the cognitive conceptual resources of the perceiver. If you don’t take the letters from the mailbox, or if you can’t understand them once you do, don’t blame the postal system. It has done its job. The trouble lies elsewhere” (Dretske, 2000, p. 109).

Resumo: Este artigo explora o escopo das teses apresentadas em *Teeteto* 184-6, concernentes à capacidade epistêmica da *aisthēsis*. Desenvolvo dois argumentos principais nesta análise. Primeiramente, situo a passagem dentro do contexto mais amplo de 151-183 e proponho que o argumento de 184-6 se mantém independentemente da análise das teses protagoreanas conduzida em 151-183. Em seguida, faço uma análise da leitura tradicional de 184-6, cuja tese sustenta que a *aisthēsis* carece de cognição, e confronto essa perspectiva com a dos que sustentam que Platão permite algum conteúdo judicativo no nível sensorial. Demonstro que ambas as leituras exageram a importância da posição defendida por Platão em 184-6, particularmente no que se refere aos limites epistêmicos da percepção.

Palavras-chave: percepção, conhecimento, ser, juízo.

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