

Perception and Memory in Plato

*Percepção e Memória em Platão*¹

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ABSTRACT:

The theme of perception in Plato has been a focus of contemporary researchers. This movement aims at bringing this theme back after centuries of abandonment to the detriment of Metaphysics, in Plato's central ideas of the Intelligible World, the Theory of Forms, and the Immortality of the Soul. This paper aims to evaluate the role that perception plays in reminiscence in Platonic texts, thus showing the unrestricted value of sensible knowledge for the learning process, manifested in the process of recollection.

KEYWORDS: Perception; Memory; Body; Aisthesis; Plato.

RESUMO:

O tema da percepção tem sido foco entre os pesquisadores de Platão da atualidade. Esse é um movimento que visa recuperar séculos de abandono dessa temática em detrimento da metafísica, nos temas centrais das teses de Platão sobre a existência do Inteligível, a Teoria das Formas, a Imortalidade da alma. Nosso objetivo com esse artigo é avaliar como nos textos platônicos percepção é necessária para que haja reminiscência, mostrando assim que sensibilidade tem valor irrestrito para o processo da aprendizagem, configurada no processo de rememoração.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Percepção; Memória. Corpo; Aísthesis; Platão.

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Introduction

The most basic themes of Metaphysics are centered around Plato's ideas of the Intelligible World, the Theory of Forms, and the Immortality of the Soul, resulting from aspects that Plato borrowed from his predecessors. Several Plato commentators state that there is contempt towards sensible knowledge in his works², arguing vehemently against his radical Idealism. This study dares to investigate in order to affirm the contrary – that, in the Platonic texts and the philosophy stemming therefrom, perception is deemed to have an unrestricted value for the learning process, manifested in the process of reminiscence (recollection).

This can be attested by the way in which Plato explains the process of learning and how careful an individual has to be concerning sensible experience, due to its instability, always stressing the importance of applying a rational examination to it, besides making it clear that the experience of the senses is a prerequisite for learning to occur, recognized as recollection. As we shall see, the philosophy of Plato, centered on the hypothesis of the existence of an Intelligible reality (Form), is based on the need to explain one's own sense experience, in all its nuances, whether in the ontological field, in which the Forms are the cause (*aitia*) of the sensible, or in the epistemological field, where the philosopher undertakes the task of defending that sensible perception is effective because there are notions in the individual that are prior to birth (i.e., stored in the soul), capable of organizing the data captured by the senses. Furthermore, Plato warns of the care required of those who dedicate themselves to philosophy, based on the unreliableness of the sensible experience, which *is never like the Intelligible* and can mislead those who trust in the experience of the senses as the only path to knowledge, taking any data collected by *aisthesis* as true.

The scope of the question lies in the distinction made by Plato, when he refers to the ideas of Heraclitus and Parmenides, between the two ontological realities, i.e. sensible and Intelligible, which presuppose two specific cognitive experiences, that is, sensible perception and reasoning, as found in

² Many commentators, e.g. Vegetti (1992), Reale (1994), Gerson (1986), as well as most compendia, undoubtedly drawing inspiration from the *Phaedo* and the central books of the *Republic*, insist on the contempt that Plato expresses for *aisthesis*, seeing them as a source of instability and illusion, in opposition to the Intelligible Forms" (SANTOS, 2004, p. 1). This is an old interpretation, dating back to Augustine, who discovered Platonic philosophy through Plotinus' Neoplatonism. In more recent philosophers such as Nietzsche, this attribution to Platonic thought of an exacerbation of the value of the soul to the detriment of the body can also be seen (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 7); even when the philosopher refers to Christianity, he indirectly attacks Platonism, considering it as non-original, because it is, according to him, Platonism for the people. However, it is in philosophy manuals, as we said previously, that this interpretation is more explicit.

the *Timaeus*:

(...) And what is that which is Becoming always and never is Existent? (...) Now the one of these is apprehensible by thought with the aid of reasoning, since it is ever uniformly existent; whereas the other is an object of opinion with the aid of unreasoning sensation. (28a)

In this section, the text develops in an attempt to understand the origin of the world in a different approach from physicalists, who sought the explanation of the *Kosmos* in *physis*. The Platonic philosophy shows that it is in a reality subsequent and *identical to itself* that the origin of everything is found, and therefore the explanation for the *Kosmos* cannot be found in *physis*. Nonetheless, when Plato gives the Intelligible the status of cause (*aitia*) of the sensible, he also considers that without the sensible not even the cause can be a cause (*Phaedo* 99ab). In other words, the Intelligible hypothesis arises in light of sensible knowledge, not as a way of rejecting it.

To illustrate the issue, we can resort to two dialogues by Plato, *Phaedo* and *Theaetetus*, which are dedicated to explaining cognitive experiences, *aisthesis* and *anamnesis*³, showing the philosopher's noticeable defense that there is a considerable role of the body and sensible knowledge in the philosophical activity, the implementation of which uses the faculty of (re)collection. Although *aisthesis* is not sufficient on its own, there can be no knowledge without this stage in the cognitive process; without sensible perception, learning is not effective and this activity is necessary for philosophical activity.

In this paper, we will consider the understanding of the body as the instrument of sensible perception activity, being through it and in it that the search for knowledge, when the soul/body compound is established, takes place.

1. The body: instrument and source of sensation

In Plato, the body is seen as material, visible, and sensible. This comprehension permeates the areas of Plato's arguments. On an epistemological level, the body is the instance that perceives the sensible (sensible things), being able to get things right when it comes to approaching the truth, as well as lead man into error (as it is a source of pleasures and pains, passions and desires, which can confuse those dedicated to philosophy, leading them astray). From tradition, Plato assimilated the perspective

³ From the Greek *ana* (to bring again) and *mnesis/mnemosyne* (memory).

of the body as material, however, there was a change in the current conception that the *sôma* was the real “self” of man, with the philosopher starting to identify the soul as the inner “self”⁴.

Concerning the etymology of the word “body”, two words were used in classical culture by Homer to refer to the material instance of man – *démas*, symbolizing the living body, and *sôma* meaning corpse, but neither, when used by the poet, had the same breadth of meaning that it will have in Plato (See SNELL, 2001, p.7), being necessary for these words to be followed by others to mean the aspects to which they referred⁵.

Bernabé (2011, p. 185ss) developed a study, in which he states that the use of *sôma* to refer to what we understand by a living body was preferred in Plato, and that he continued the use that the Orphics had already been making of the word. The author also analyzes section 400c of *Cratylus*, saying that Plato makes use of the well-known Orphic belief that the *sôma* is a *sêma* (tomb) for the soul, presenting three possible meanings, namely: 1) that the soul is buried in the body, and cannot be separated from it while it is there; 2) that the soul “gives signs” or manifests itself through the body; 3) that the soul, by being in the body which is a prison, is safe, to expiate in it what it must. This interpretation of Bernabé is authentic since these are the meanings of the word *sêma*: sign, tomb, and even salvation. The author suggests that it was the Orphics who began to use the word *sôma* more consistently, instead of *démas*, commonly used by Homer, as the new word (closer to the meaning of corpse) is more consistent with the Orphic proposal, that we are in this world only temporarily attached to a dead body (p. 200). These meanings are due to the fact that there is a relationship between the words *sôma-sêma* as originating from *soízo* (to save) and *semaínei* (to indicate, to signal, to give signs), and in the relationship with this latter derived word, *sêma* to mean *sôma*, not even a single letter is changed, as Socrates concludes in his speech in the *Cratylus*. Plato, by establishing that *sôma* comes from *soízo*, reinterprets the role of the body in a more positive sense, as being the protector of the soul. We found a similar position in Muniz (2011, p. 199), who states that there is a polyvocality about the notion of the body:

The *Cratylus* (400b-c) lists three meanings of the word “body”, while making it clear that it has “a great wealth of meanings” (there is a lot to be said about the word body, says Socrates) (...). The three current meanings are as follows: (i) the body is the tomb of the soul, in the sense that, in this life, it is buried in it; (ii) the body is a sign because the soul gives signs, through the body, of whatever it wants; (iii) the body is an enclosure where the soul is kept safe, like a prison, until the penalty is paid. This Orphic sense makes *sôma*,

⁴ If Homer once saw the body as the “self”, Plato refuted this view and definitively places the soul as a candidate for occupying the position of “self”, and even that of “person” (*Phaedo* 116-117).

⁵ For example, “guia” or “melea” for bodily members, “derma” to refer to the height of the body (See Snell, 2001, p. 6)

without changing a single letter, the guardian of the soul.

Thus, the body is seen by Plato as a place in which the soul is kept, under its guardianship (*Phaedo* 62b4), and can only accomplish something through or by the body⁶. Since the body is the place through which the soul does its activities, all activity of the soul, once united to the body, passes through bodily activity, but needs to pass through the sieve of rationality. In the philosophical investigation, information collected by sight, touch, hearing, or any of the senses, without undergoing due reasoning, cannot be construed as true (64e; 65b), because they can deceive man, as they are just perspective views (*doxái*) of those who make such experiences.

We shall now analyze two dialogues, in particular, that present two versions of the analysis of *aisthesis*, the first being the *Phaedo*, in which Plato presents the possible dangers of irrational belief in the body's senses, while also admitting that they are the instruments for learning, recognized as a process of recollection, to take place. And the *Theaetetus*, in which Plato sees sensory experience as the basis of cognition.

2. Recollection in the *Phaedo*

The theory of reminiscence in the *Phaedo* emerges to redeem the role of the body in the dialogue, when Plato begins to consider that the senses are instruments for learning.

“And besides,” Cebes rejoined, “ if it is true, Socrates, as you are fond of saying, that our learning is nothing else than recollection, then this would be an additional argument that we must necessarily have learned in some previous time what we now remember. (*Phaedo* 72d-73a)

The philosopher explains how reminiscence proceeds through several examples of beings that can recall the memory of another, even different realities when they are similar or dissimilar. And this memory is awakened from (*ek*) the experience of the senses (*aisthéseos*). The argument assumes that for memory to be, previous contact with the thing remembered is necessary. Later it will be seen that more than sensible contact is necessary, but that there has been, at a previous moment, prior knowledge of

⁶ Guthrie (1968, p.311) says that there are no substantial differences between the meaning of the body as a tomb and as a prison, as it expresses the doctrine that the soul is alien to the body. Timaeus' view (45ab) that the demiurge placed in the body all the instruments of the soul's providence also helps with this understanding.

the object of recollection (73c).

The argument, at first, presents two essential requirements:

1. that there is a cognitive experience prior to the current cognitive experience;
2. that previous cognitive experience relates to current cognitive experience.

For there to be memory there must have been a previous experience; as since birth man has this potential to capture and interpret the information received by the senses, such an experience can only have happened before birth, with the hypothesis of the existence of Forms and their contact with the soul being the best way to explain the operationalization of sensible knowledge. Cognition, therefore, is only possible under this condition: Intelligible experience being prior to sensible experience. To have this previous experience, above all, the experience of Forms is necessary, as they are the things that condition and enable the ability to interpret sensible information. Sensation alone is not enough to attain knowledge.

It follows from this definition that *aisthêsis* does not by itself give rise to any propositions about the world, and the predicates such as true cannot be used of it. (Crombie, 1971, p. 26)

This “antecedence” is what opposes sensible and Intelligible. However, the reminiscence argument redeems one in the other, linking both planes, considering that even if the contact with the Forms is prior to the contact with the sensible, conditioning them, the Forms can only be conceived (*ennenoékas*) “from” (*ek*) the sensible things, as they are close to each other. We thus realize that *aisthêsis* has its importance in the process of cognition, for it is how the soul, which has the Forms within itself, collecting the data of perception, can remember them, thus creating knowledge; however, there is only perception because these same Forms already exist in the soul, which proves the antecedence of the Intelligible compared to the sensible and the dependence of one on the other.

Plato warns about the danger of valuing the sensible as a sufficient way to learn, but this does not mean attributing unrestricted value to the sensible in the human process of knowing. The sensible experience is not to be confused with the experience of reasoning, but it is necessary so that this process will happen. The possibility of variation in the use of sensible knowledge distinguishes it from the perfection of thought, making it an error to state that “perception⁷ equals knowledge”. Instead, the best statement to be made is that “perception is a step towards knowledge.”

⁷ Perception should be seen here as the interpretation of information collected by the senses.

Perceptual experience is insufficient for cognition. In addition to being insufficient, the senses are in themselves (as Anaxagoras said), “unreliable”, which is why they do not allow us to “discern the truth / *krínei talethés*”, that is, exercise judgment (*krísis*) about the supposed truth that, through the senses, we are led to readily admit⁸. Therefore, according to Plato, it is necessary to allow the soul, after the mediation of the senses, to remain within itself, in a state of training for dying, distanced from sense information so that it takes refuge in the *logoi*, through the dialectical method.

Finishing the analysis of the *Phaedo*, we suppose that Plato makes use of the hypothesis of Forms to explain sensible knowledge, thus putting to rest the contempt that the philosopher – as it is wrongly attributed to him – expresses for this activity, which makes up the process of search for knowledge, obliterated by philosophy. Therefore, the body and sensible experience, in the context of the dialogue, even though they are considered suspect due to their errant and unreliable nature, are instruments so that in the compound the activity of knowing can be effective.

3. *Sensible perception in the Theaetetus*

In *Theaetetus*, Plato develops a discourse that analyzes the possibility of *sensation* being taken as *knowledge* (151e). In the text in question, the analysis of sensory perception does not follow the logic of how it was done in the *Phaedo*. In the *Theaetetus*, Plato sees sensory perception as the basis of cognition but without resorting to the argument of Forms. In this dialogue, the existence of the Forms is not explicitly mentioned – as it happens in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, in which knowledge comes from them. It is true to state that in the *Theaetetus* the definition of knowledge is not so well resolved. In section 210a, for instance, Socrates says that knowledge is neither sensation nor true opinion or rational explanation combined with true opinion. In the dialogue, the question remains open. We believe that the absence of reference to the Forms in the *Theaetetus* is a strategy by Plato to prove that they are necessary for knowledge to happen, as well as for the experience of the senses to be understood.

The concept of sensory perception in the *Theaetetus* begins to be analyzed with Protagoras’ definition that man is the measure of all things, of the existence of the things that exist and the non-existence of the things that do not exist (152a). The argument involves the explicit declaration of the relativity of sense experience, which in this case is the perspective of one who feels and interprets sense information, according to what appears to him (*phainomai*). In addition to this notion, the analysis uses

⁸ Sexto Empírico. *Contra os matemáticos*, VII, 90; DK 59 B 21a.

Heraclitus's theory of flux, because just as those who perceive can have different interpretations about the objects and data collected by the senses, the sensible is in constant change, never being stable, thus not to be trusted.

The analysis of sensory perception in the *Theaetetus* also covers the possible vicissitudes suffered by the individual who perceives, i.e. the percipient, as mentioned in the text. An ill person who drinks wine will have a different sensation from a healthy person who drinks the same wine (159d). This analysis demonstrates that sensations are real for the person who perceives, being considered infallible, inasmuch as the percipient, as stated by Protagoras, is the only judge of his own sensation. However, compared with the sensations of others and even with the truth, the sensation of the percipient may be far from reality.

It is necessary to make a distinction between sensation and sensory perception. In Plato's texts, the words are linked to the concept of *aísthesis*, which still brings together the notions of sense organs, the senses, sense information, and the notions of pleasure (*hedoné*) and the first signs of what we will understand as emotions in modernity. By sensation, we can understand the data collected by the senses, without necessarily being subjected to the judgment, without necessarily generating an opinion; therefore, the sensation is considered infallible, as it cannot be denied that a person with a fever, who says they feel cold, is not cold. Regarding sensory perception, we understand that it is the processing of sensation, which uses previously collected data and takes into account other sensible experiences lived by the percipient. It must be considered that the "cold" sensation that a person who is feverish feels is true, but it cannot be considered that the sensation they feel truly demonstrates that the room in which they are located has a cold temperature, as there may be, in the same room, individuals who are not having the same sensible perception of cold that the ill person has. Therefore, the problem of the effectiveness of the relationship between *aísthesis* and *epísteme* is not in the sensation, but in the processing and interpretation of the data collected through senses by the percipient(s).

Although *Theaetetus* does not conclude that perception and knowledge are identical (164b), it still demonstrates that the basis for cognition is *aísthesis*. We realize this when Socrates states that there is an instance of perception that comes close to truth, true opinion, even though it is not identical to knowledge. This argument corroborates the thesis found in the *Phaedo*, that the experience of the senses is not sufficient for knowledge to happen, though at the same time, it is necessary in the process of seeking learning.

In the learning process, we recognize that there are other faculties that need to be taken into consideration: perception, which is the interpretation of data collected by the senses; imagination,

which is the comparison between sensations; memory, which is the ability to collect and store past sensations to serve as references; and thought, which is the reflection on the data stored in memory. The structure of the cognitive process permeates sensible experience through language (78e-79a, 102a-b; see *Republic* 596a; *Parmenides* 130e), then through thought (*Theaetetus* 184b-186c, 189e-190a), and finally through reminiscence (*Phaedo* 79c -d).

The concepts of perception (*aisthesis*), recollection (*anamnesis*), and memory (*mnemosyne*) need to be studied considering how Plato assimilates the various meanings of the words in the philosophy of the former, as well as in the underlying Greek culture, in lyrical, epic and tragic poetry. This search will show that *aisthesis* in Plato often adds an intellectual component that makes it possible to describe a complete cognitive experience, but which is ordered by the existence of a memory of cognitive notions that refer to data to which reasoning is to be applied.

Conclusion

The theme of Perception in Plato does not intend to subvert the existence of a metaphysical assumption in the philosopher's thought, but on the contrary, to reaffirm it. The foundation of a study on an Intelligible reality aims to understand the sensible reality itself: the Forms are the cause (*aitía*) of the sensible. The path taken in this study did not intend a reversal of poles, to state that Plato, instead of being an idealist, is a sensist falling into the same mistake as the tradition. On the contrary, we intend to prove that Plato integrates the two realities, sensible and intelligible, demonstrating the role of each in his discourse on "how one can know".

Plato's texts warn that the philosopher needs to be careful with "what" sense data he captures and "how" he captures it, a body's endowment, not giving them credit without subjecting them to reasoning, but no less constant is the strong affirmation that sensitivity is essential and the starting point for learning. It is from sensible experience that the soul has the data to develop its activities of thought, memory, and reasoning. Considering that the soul does not carry out its activities without the help of the body, as it is under its guardianship of and, at the same time, has no life without the soul, all philosophical activity begins with the joint participation of the compound. Therefore, one cannot learn without the help of one's body.

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