Proving Rule 3: A Textual Analysis of Hardness and Softness in Plato's Ontology

This analysis demonstrates that the qualities of hardness and softness differ along all three ontological dimensions of being in Plato's philosophy—process versus outcome, active versus passive, and visible versus invisible—establishing them as "totally opposite" (διαφέρει πᾶν τοὐναντίον) in a comprehensive multi-dimensional framework. Through rigorous examination of key passages from the Theaetetus, Timaeus, and Parmenides, the textual evidence reveals that unlike simple qualitative distinctions that operate along single axes, hardness and softness engage the soul in temporal synthesis, require both passive reception and active judgment, and depend upon invisible processes beneath their visible manifestations. This three-dimensional opposition confirms their status as paradigmatic examples of complete ontological differentiation within Plato's metaphysical system.

The Temporal Dimension: Process versus Outcome (γίγνεσθαι vs εἶναι)

The fundamental distinction between hardness and softness as dynamic processes rather than static outcomes emerges clearly in Theaetetus 186a-b, where Socrates establishes that understanding these qualities requires temporal synthesis across past, present, and future. The crucial passage demonstrates that the soul must engage in active reflection to grasp their essential nature: "I think that these also are among the things the essence of which the soul most certainly views in their relations to one another, reflecting within itself upon the past and present in relation to the future"[6]. This temporal requirement distinguishes hardness and softness from immediate sensory data, positioning them within the realm of γίγνεσθαι (becoming) rather than static εἶναι (being).

The process-oriented nature of these qualities becomes evident when Socrates explains that "their essential nature and the fact that they exist, and their opposition to one another, and, in turn, the essential nature of this opposition, the soul itself tries to determine for us by reverting to them and comparing them with one another"[3]. The Greek terminology here is significant: the soul engages in analogizomene (ἀναλογιζομένη), suggesting a comparative calculation that unfolds through time rather than instantaneous apprehension[11]. This temporal dimension aligns with the Timaeus account of becoming, where Plato establishes that "Was and will be are generated forms of Time" and properly belong to things that undergo motion and change[7][8].

The opposition between hardness and softness thus emerges not as a simple binary distinction but as a temporal process requiring the soul's active engagement across multiple time horizons. This temporal synthesis indicates that these qualities participate in the realm of becoming rather than eternal being, positioning them within the first dimension of our three-fold ontological framework.

The Agency Dimension: Active versus Passive (ποιοῦν vs πάσχον)

The second dimension of differentiation between hardness and softness operates through their simultaneous engagement of both active and passive modalities within cognitive experience. Theaetetus 186b reveals this dual character: "Does it not perceive the hardness of the hard through touch, and likewise the softness of the soft? Yes. But their essential nature and the fact that they exist, and their opposition to one another... the soul itself tries to determine"[3]. This passage establishes a crucial distinction between passive sensory reception and active intellectual judgment.

On the passive side, hardness and softness are received through bodily sensation, specifically touch (ἐπαφή), representing the soul's passive reception of sensory data[13]. However, their essential nature and oppositional character can only be grasped through the soul's active work of comparison and judgment. The text emphasizes this active dimension through verbs like peiratai krinein (πειρᾶται κρίνειν, "tries to judge") and the soul's work of "reverting to them and comparing them with one another"[11].

This dual modality reflects what scholarly analysis identifies as the soul's capacity to operate "itself through itself" (aute di' hautes) when grasping what cannot be perceived through bodily senses[11]. The active-passive distinction in hardness and softness thus demonstrates their participation in both sensory and intellectual domains, confirming their position as qualities that span the second ontological dimension of our framework.

The Manifestation Dimension: Visible versus Invisible

The third dimension of opposition between hardness and softness operates through the contrast between their visible manifestations and underlying invisible processes. While the experienced qualities of hardness and softness present themselves to tactile sensation as persistent, determinate characteristics, their ontological foundation depends upon invisible temporal processes that remain hidden from direct apprehension.

The Timaeus provides crucial insight into this dimension by distinguishing between the visible persistence of temporal outcomes and the invisible rapidity of underlying processes. The text establishes that temporal becoming involves motions that are "generated forms of Time" distinct from eternal being[8]. When applied to hardness and softness, this suggests that what we experience through touch represents the slower, visible manifestation of rapid, invisible processes of becoming hard or becoming soft.

The invisible dimension becomes particularly evident when we consider that the opposition between hardness and softness requires what the Theaetetus describes as the soul's reflection across temporal horizons[6]. This reflective process itself remains invisible while producing visible judgments about the opposition between these qualities. The soul's work of "calculating in itself things past and present in relation to things in the future" represents an invisible cognitive activity that underlies the visible determination of hardness and softness as opposites[11].

This analysis aligns with scholarly interpretations that emphasize how Plato distinguishes between "perceptual features" that are directly accessible through sensation and their "being" which requires invisible cognitive processes[11]. The visible-invisible dimension thus confirms

that hardness and softness operate across the full spectrum of manifestation, from immediate sensory presentation to underlying ontological processes.

Total Opposition: διαφέρει πᾶν τοὐναντίον

The comprehensive nature of the opposition between hardness and softness finds support in the Parmenides, where Plato establishes the concept of total opposition (πᾶν τοὐναντίον) as distinct from partial or single-dimensional differences[9]. This terminology suggests that certain oppositions transcend simple binary distinctions to encompass multiple dimensions of difference simultaneously.

The application of this concept to hardness and softness reveals why these qualities represent paradigmatic examples of complete ontological opposition. Unlike qualities that differ along single axes—such as large versus small (spatial dimension only) or hot versus cold (intensive dimension only)—hardness and softness differ comprehensively across temporal, agential, and manifestational dimensions. Their opposition thus exemplifies what the Parmenides identifies as total rather than partial differentiation.

This total opposition emerges through the confluence of all three dimensions analyzed above: hardness and softness require temporal processes for their comprehension, engage both active and passive modalities of experience, and depend upon invisible foundations beneath visible manifestations. The scholarly literature confirms this interpretation by noting that these qualities involve "trying to grasp the being of the properties of things" rather than simple conceptual application[11]. This ontological complexity distinguishes them from qualities that operate within single dimensions of difference.

Conclusion

The textual analysis confirms that hardness and softness differ along all three ontological dimensions of being in Plato's metaphysical framework. The temporal dimension establishes these qualities as processes requiring synthesis across past, present, and future rather than static outcomes. The agency dimension demonstrates their simultaneous engagement of passive sensory reception and active intellectual judgment. The manifestation dimension reveals their dependence upon invisible cognitive and temporal processes beneath visible tactile presentations.

This three-dimensional opposition supports the classification of hardness and softness as "totally opposite" (διαφέρει πᾶν τοὐναντίον) in the comprehensive sense established by the Parmenides. Their ontological complexity distinguishes them from simple qualitative differences that operate along single axes, positioning them as paradigmatic examples of complete dimensional differentiation within Plato's system. This analysis provides the textual foundation for understanding how certain qualities transcend simple binary distinctions to encompass the full spectrum of ontological opposition across multiple dimensions of being.

Abstract

This analysis demonstrates through rigorous textual examination of Theaetetus 186a-b, Timaeus 37e-38b, and Parmenides 160b-d that hardness and softness differ along all three ontological

dimensions in Plato's philosophy: process versus outcome (requiring temporal synthesis), active versus passive (engaging both sensory reception and intellectual judgment), and visible versus invisible (depending on hidden processes beneath manifest qualities). This comprehensive opposition establishes hardness and softness as "totally opposite" (διαφέρει πᾶν τοὐναντίον) rather than simply differing along single axes, confirming their paradigmatic status as examples of complete multi-dimensional ontological differentiation. This abstract will be used in subsequent inquiries.