

Clarifying Dimensions of Being in Plato's Theaetetus: Process/Outcome and Active/Passive

This study examines two fundamental dimensions of being in Plato's Theaetetus, specifically focusing on passages at 182a and 153e-154a. Analysis reveals that Plato establishes a sophisticated ontological framework distinguishing between process and outcome in the generation of qualities, while simultaneously delineating active and passive roles in perception. The distinction between "coming into being" (γίγνεσθαι) and the resultant state existing "just by itself" (οὐ ποιότητα) forms the foundation for understanding how qualities emerge through collision between perceptive faculties and objects. These passages demonstrate Plato's early attempt to differentiate between dynamic processes of qualification and static resultant states, supporting the interpretation that being has at least two distinct dimensions, potentially forming the groundwork for later three-dimensional ontological models.

Context of Ontological Dimensions in the Theaetetus

The Theaetetus stands as one of Plato's most significant epistemological investigations, examining the fundamental question "What is knowledge?" While the dialogue ultimately reaches an aporetic conclusion, failing to provide a definitive answer, it nonetheless explores crucial relationships between perception, judgment, and knowledge^[1]. The passages at 182a and 153e-154a occur during Socrates' examination of Theaetetus' first definition of knowledge as perception, a definition that necessitates considering the nature of perceptual qualities and how they come into being.

These passages emerge in the context of what scholars refer to as the "Heraclitean flux" section of the dialogue, where Socrates introduces the doctrine that "Nothing is in itself just one thing...Everything is in a process of coming to be"^[1]. This Heraclitean perspective serves as a theoretical foundation for explaining perceptual relativity-how the same wind can feel cold to one person but not to another-by suggesting that qualities do not exist independently but arise through interaction between perceiver and perceived^[1].

The ontological dimensions suggested in these passages-process/outcome and active/passive-contribute significantly to understanding Plato's evolving theory of being. While the Forms are rarely mentioned explicitly in the Theaetetus, these dimensional distinctions provide insight into how Plato was conceptualizing the relationship between becoming and being, between dynamic processes and static states^[2].

Process/Outcome Dimension in Theaetetus 182a

Grammatical and Conceptual Analysis of Process Terms

In Theaetetus 182a, Plato establishes a critical distinction between the dynamic process of qualification (ποιόν τι) and the static outcome (οὐ ποιότητα). The Greek term ποιόν τι (poion ti) refers to something "of a certain quality" or "qualified in a certain way," indicating a process rather than a fixed state^[3]. This is contrasted with οὐ ποιότητα (ou poioteta), meaning "not quality itself," which denotes the resultant state that exists "just by itself" ^[3]. This grammatical distinction reveals Plato's concern with separating the process of becoming qualified from the quality that results.

The use of γίγνεσθαι (gignesthai, "to come into being") further emphasizes the processual nature of qualification^[1]. When Socrates states that qualities "come into being" rather than simply "exist," he highlights the transitional movement from potentiality to actuality. This process-oriented language aligns with the Heraclitean doctrine of flux that Socrates introduces as a theoretical framework for understanding perception^[4].

The Resultant State: Quality "Just By Itself"

The concept of a quality existing "just by itself" (οὐ ποιότητα) presents an intriguing ontological puzzle. In one sense, this seems to contradict the Heraclitean doctrine of constant flux that Plato has just introduced. If everything is always becoming, how can a quality exist "just by itself" as a static entity? McDowell suggests that Plato is indicating something important when he presents 'quality' as a strange word in this context^[3], perhaps highlighting the tension between flux and stability.

This tension points to an important aspect of Plato's developing ontology: even within a framework of flux, there must be some way to account for the apparent stability of perceived qualities. The quality that exists "just by itself" represents an outcome or endpoint of the process of qualification, even if that endpoint is temporary or relative within the larger framework of constant becoming^[4].

Active/Passive Dimension in Theaetetus 153e-154a

The Collision Model of Perception

In the passage from 153e-154a, Plato presents what might be called a "collision model" of perception, wherein colors come into being through the collision of perceptive faculties with objects^[5]. This model explicitly distinguishes between active and passive roles in perception. The collision itself represents an active principle—a dynamic interaction between perceiver and perceived that generates qualities.

Plato describes how colors like black and white "come into being" through this collision, emphasizing that qualities are not inherent properties of objects but emerge through interaction^[5]. This active dimension of perception aligns with the process aspect of the first dimension, as both emphasize dynamic generation rather than static existence.

Passive Reception and Manifestation of Qualities

Complementing the active dimension is the passive reception or manifestation of qualities. Once generated through collision, qualities appear to have an independent existence-they stand "just by themselves" ^[3]. This passive aspect corresponds to the outcome dimension discussed earlier, as both concern the resultant state rather than the generative process.

The passage suggests that a "perceptual quality can shuttle between observer and object when they touch" ^[5], indicating that the passive manifestation of qualities occurs in both perceiver and perceived. Neither is completely active nor completely passive; rather, both participate in a dynamic interplay that results in the appearance of qualities.

Comparison of Process/Qualification and Final/Inert States

Philosophical Implications of the Distinction

The distinction between process and outcome in Plato's Theaetetus has profound philosophical implications. By separating the dynamic becoming of qualities (ποιόν τι and γίγνεται) from their static manifestation (οὐ ποιότητα), Plato establishes an ontological framework that can accommodate both change and stability ^[1]. This framework challenges simplistic views that qualities either exist absolutely or not at all, suggesting instead that qualities exist in different modes or dimensions.

This distinction also addresses the problem of perceptual relativity that motivates much of the discussion in the Theaetetus. The famous example of wind feeling cold to one person but not to another becomes comprehensible when qualities are understood as processes of becoming rather than fixed properties ^[1]. The wind is not inherently cold or warm; rather, coldness or warmth comes into being through interaction with perceivers.

Examples from the Text

Plato's examples of qualities like heat, whiteness, and colors illustrate the process/outcome distinction. When something becomes hot or white, this represents a process of qualification (ποιόν τι). The resultant state-the quality of hotness or whiteness that appears to exist "just by itself"-represents the outcome (οὐ ποιότητα) ^[3].

Similarly, colors like black and white come into being through the collision of eye with appropriate motion, exemplifying the process dimension ^[5]. Once generated, these colors appear as stable qualities, exemplifying the outcome dimension. The process/outcome distinction thus applies consistently across different sensory modalities.

Active versus Passive Roles in Producing Qualities

Analysis of Greek Terminology

The active versus passive dimension is reflected in Plato's choice of grammatical constructions and terminology. The use of active verbs like γίγνεται (gignetai, "comes into being") emphasizes the dynamic, generative aspect of perception^[1]. Conversely, the noun phrase οὐ ποιότητα (ou poioteta, "not quality itself") emphasizes the static, resultant aspect^[3].

Additionally, the description of qualities coming into being through "collision" (συμβολή, symbolē) highlights the active dimension of perception^[5]. This term suggests forceful interaction rather than passive reception, emphasizing that perception is not merely receiving impressions but actively generating qualities through interaction.

Contextual Cues and Their Significance

The context of these passages provides important cues about the active/passive dimension. The discussion occurs within the framework of Heraclitean flux, which emphasizes that everything is always "in all kinds of motion" ^[6]. This context suggests that the active dimension is primary-everything is fundamentally active rather than passive.

However, the introduction of qualities existing "just by themselves" suggests that Plato recognizes a need for some form of stability or passivity within this framework of universal flux^[3]. The tension between these perspectives reflects Plato's wrestling with fundamental ontological questions about the nature of being and becoming.

Two Distinct Dimensions of Being

Evaluation of Textual Evidence

The passages from Theaetetus 182a and 153e-154a provide compelling evidence for the existence of at least two distinct dimensions of being in Plato's ontology. The process/outcome dimension is clearly articulated through the contrast between ποιόν τι (the process of qualification) and οὐ ποιότητα (quality existing "just by itself")^[3]. Similarly, the active/passive dimension is evident in the collision model of perception, which distinguishes between active generation and passive manifestation of qualities^[5].

These dimensions are not merely conceptual distinctions but reflect fundamental aspects of being as Plato understood it. The process/outcome dimension addresses the ontological status of qualities-whether they are becoming or being. The active/passive dimension addresses the causal structure of perception-whether qualities are generated through activity or received passively.

Philosophical Significance for Later Developments

These two dimensions provide an important foundation for later developments in Plato's ontology, potentially serving as precursors to a three-dimensional model of being. By establishing clear distinctions between process and outcome, active and passive, Plato creates conceptual space for more complex ontological models.

The third dimension, not fully articulated in these passages but suggested by the broader context of Plato's philosophy, might involve the distinction between appearance and reality, or between the sensible and the intelligible^[2]. This would complete a three-dimensional model of being that accounts for process/outcome, active/passive, and appearance/reality.

Conclusion: Support for a Multi-Dimensional Ontology

The analysis of Theaetetus 182a and 153e-154a strongly supports the interpretation that being has at least two distinct dimensions in Plato's ontology. The process/outcome dimension distinguishes between dynamic becoming and static resultant states, while the active/passive dimension distinguishes between generative interaction and receptive manifestation.

These dimensions are not merely academic distinctions but reflect fundamental aspects of Plato's understanding of reality. They provide a sophisticated framework for addressing perceptual relativity and the relationship between change and stability. Moreover, they establish important conceptual groundwork for later developments in Plato's ontology, potentially including a three-dimensional model of being.

The significance of these dimensional distinctions extends beyond the Theaetetus itself, offering insight into Plato's evolving theory of knowledge and reality. While the dialogue ends without providing a definitive answer to the question "What is knowledge?", its exploration of these ontological dimensions contributes substantially to our understanding of Plato's philosophical project.

Abstract

This abstract will be used in subsequent inquiries. The analysis of Theaetetus 182a and 153e-154a reveals that Plato establishes two distinct dimensions of being: process/outcome and active/passive. The process dimension is evident in his discussion of qualities "coming into being" (γίγνεσθαι), while the outcome dimension appears in qualities existing "just by themselves" (οὐ ποιότητα). The active dimension manifests in the collision model of perception, where qualities emerge through dynamic interaction, while the passive dimension appears in the resultant manifestation of qualities. These dimensional distinctions provide a sophisticated framework for addressing perceptual relativity and establish conceptual groundwork for a potential three-dimensional model of being in Plato's later ontology.



1. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theaetetus_\(dialogue\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theaetetus_(dialogue))
2. <https://dokumen.pub/theaetetus-oxford-worlds-classics-1nbsped-0199646163-9780199646166.html>
3. <https://dokumen.pub/download/theaetetus-oxford-worlds-classics-1nbsped-0199646163-9780199646166.html>
4. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27744617>
5. https://brill.com/display/book/edcoll/9789004251243/B9789004251243_012.pdf
6. <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0172%3Atext%3DTheaet.%3Apage%3D182>

