

The Visible/Invisible Dimension: Completing Plato's Three-Dimensional Ontology in Theaetetus

This research report investigates the third dimension of being in Plato's Theaetetus-the visible/invisible distinction-which complements the previously established process/outcome and active/passive dimensions. By examining key passages from the dialogue, we demonstrate how perception emerges through dynamic processes, yet only visible manifestations participate fully in Plato's conception of being. This analysis reveals a sophisticated ontological model where reality emerges from the interaction between tangible manifestations and their underlying invisible generative processes.

Abstract

This abstract will be used in subsequent inquiries. The visible/invisible dimension represents the third essential component of Plato's ontological framework in the Theaetetus, completing the three-dimensional model alongside the process/outcome and active/passive distinctions. This dimension establishes that while being emerges through invisible dynamic processes, only their visible manifestations-the concrete, perceptible qualities-are admitted as "sharing in being." The visible thus functions as the realm of manifest reality, while the invisible encompasses the necessary but hidden generative processes that sustain it. This relationship forms a feedback loop where perceptual reality exists precisely at the boundary between what appears and what remains concealed, revealing a sophisticated understanding of perception that transcends simple subject-object distinctions.

The Context: Beyond Process/Outcome and Active/Passive

Our previous investigations established two fundamental dimensions of being in Plato's Theaetetus: the process/outcome distinction ("coming into being" versus existing "just by itself") and the active/passive polarity (the generative process versus its static result). These dimensions revealed how Plato's ontology challenges the notion of fixed, independent entities, instead presenting reality as emergent from dynamic relations.

However, these two dimensions alone cannot fully account for Plato's complex theory of perception and being. A third dimension-the visible/invisible distinction-is essential for comprehending how perceptual qualities emerge and how they relate to Plato's broader metaphysical framework.

Textual Evidence for the Visible/Invisible Dimension

The Theaetetus provides crucial passages that support the existence of this third dimension. In section 154a, Socrates discusses how color appears differently to different perceivers:

"Indeed each so-called colour will be neither that which strikes nor that which is struck, but something that has arisen in between, private to each." ^[1]

This passage emphasizes that color is not inherently in the object or the perceiver but emerges as something "in between"-a manifestation that becomes visible through interaction. The color represents the visible outcome, while the processes that generate it remain invisible.

Further evidence appears in the discussion of perception at 156c-d, where Socrates explains:

"Now when the eye and some appropriate object which approaches beget whiteness and the corresponding perception-which could never have been produced by either of them going to anything else-then, while sight from the eye and [whiteness from the object occur]..." ^[2]

Here, Plato distinguishes between the unseen generative process (the "begetting" interaction between eye and object) and the visible manifestation (whiteness). The perception itself-a visible phenomenon-emerges from invisible movements and interactions.

The most explicit support comes from 157a-b:

"...nothing exists in itself, but all things of all sorts arise out of motion by intercourse with each other; for it is impossible to form a firm conception of the active or the passive element as being anything separately... And so it results from all this, as we said in the beginning, that nothing exists as invariably one, itself by itself, but everything is always becoming in relation to something, and 'being' should be altogether abolished..." ^[3]

This passage clarifies that "being" as traditionally understood (fixed, self-sufficient entities) should be "abolished" in favor of a model where visible manifestations emerge from invisible processes of relation and becoming.

The Emergence of the Visible from the Invisible

The passages from Theaetetus reveal a sophisticated model where perceptual reality exists at the boundary between visible manifestations and invisible processes. This boundary constitutes the third dimension of being in Plato's ontology.

When Socrates discusses color at 154a, he establishes that what we perceive as "color" is neither in the eye nor in the object, but arises between them. The color itself-the visible manifestation-appears to stand "just by itself" as a complete, autonomous quality. Yet this appearance of autonomy conceals the invisible generative processes that produce it.

The visible color that emerges represents what "shares in being" in the most immediate sense. It manifests as something concrete and perceptible. However, the collision between perceiver and perceived, the movements and transformations that generate this color, remain invisible-despite being fundamental to the color's existence.

This pattern of visible manifestations emerging from invisible processes appears consistently throughout the dialogue. At 156d, when discussing how perception occurs, Plato describes a process where "the slow element keeps its motion in the same place and directed towards such things as draw near it, and indeed it is in this way that it begets." ^[2] This "begetting" process—the invisible mechanics of perception—produces the visible manifestation of whiteness.

Integration with Previous Dimensions

The visible/invisible dimension does not merely supplement the process/outcome and active/passive dimensions—it integrates with them to form a coherent three-dimensional model of being:

1. **Process/Outcome Dimension:** The process of "coming into being" represents the invisible aspect, while the outcome that stands "just by itself" represents the visible aspect.
2. **Active/Passive Dimension:** The active element (that which generates) remains largely invisible, while the passive element (that which is generated) becomes visible.
3. **Visible/Invisible Dimension:** This dimension cuts across the other two, highlighting how manifestations that "share in being" appear visibly, while the generative processes that sustain them remain invisible.

This three-dimensional model reveals a sophisticated ontology where being emerges from the interaction of these three polarities. The visible manifestation of color, for instance, represents the outcome (process/outcome) of a passive reception (active/passive) that appears concretely to perception (visible/invisible).

The Feedback Loop Between Visible and Invisible

The relationship between the visible and invisible is not merely hierarchical but forms a feedback loop. While only visible manifestations "share in being" in the immediate sense, these manifestations depend entirely on invisible processes. Conversely, the invisible processes are only meaningful insofar as they produce visible manifestations.

At 157a-c, Plato emphasizes that we should speak of things as "becoming" and "being made" and "being destroyed" and "changing," rather than as fixed entities ^[3]. This emphasis on constant flux highlights the cyclical relationship between the visible and invisible: visible manifestations constantly emerge from and return to invisible processes.

This feedback loop transforms our understanding of perception. Rather than seeing perception as a simple subject-object relationship, Plato presents it as a dynamic interaction where visible qualities emerge from invisible processes, only to dissolve back into those processes as new perceptions arise.

Philosophical Implications

The three-dimensional model of being developed in this analysis has profound philosophical implications:

First, it challenges traditional ontologies that prioritize static, visible entities. For Plato, what truly "is" cannot be reduced to what appears visibly. Rather, being encompasses both the visible

manifestations and the invisible processes that generate them.

Second, it suggests that perception itself occupies a liminal space between the visible and invisible. When we perceive a color, we apprehend a visible manifestation while remaining blind to the invisible processes that produce it. This limitation of perception hints at why Plato might consider sensory knowledge inadequate for grasping reality fully.

Third, it illuminates why Plato would later develop his Theory of Forms. If visible manifestations emerge from invisible processes, then perhaps these processes themselves follow patterns (Forms) that transcend particular manifestations. The visible/invisible dimension thus offers a bridge between the phenomenal world and the world of Forms.

Conclusion: The Third Dimension Completes the Model

The visible/invisible distinction constitutes the third essential dimension of being in Plato's Theaetetus. While perceptual qualities emerge through dynamic processes, only their visible instantiations participate fully in immediate being. Yet these visible manifestations cannot be separated from the invisible processes that generate them.

This third dimension completes our multi-dimensional model of being, revealing an ontology where reality emerges from the interplay of process/outcome, active/passive, and visible/invisible. The model suggests that being is not a fixed state but a dynamic relationship between what appears and what remains concealed.

In conclusion, the passages from Theaetetus 153e–154a and 156d–157a provide compelling evidence that the visible/invisible polarity constitutes a fundamental dimension of being in Plato's ontology. This dimension, together with the process/outcome and active/passive dimensions, forms a comprehensive framework for understanding how Plato reconceptualizes reality in terms of dynamic relations rather than static entities.



1. <https://www.platonicfoundation.org/translation/theaetetus/>
2. <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0172%3Atext%3DTheaet.%3Apage%3D156>
3. <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0172%3Atext%3DTheaet.%3Apage%3D157>