The Soul’s Tool: Plato on the Usefulness of the Body

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that Plato develops a relationship between the soul and body that is neither accidental nor essential and that is captured by his claim that the body is the soul’s tool. I take perception as an example of the body’s usefulness and argue that perception is necessary for our soul’s perfection. In the first section, I explore the *Timaeus’* view that perception provides us with the models we need to follow in restoring the psychic motions that it also disrupted. I then argue that perception of confusing sensible objects is necessary for our cognitive development too and explain how that is useful for us.
Plato thinks that the soul’s relationship to the body is weaker than being essential but stronger than being accidental.¹ The relationship cannot be essential, since the separation of the soul from the body is what philosophers spend their whole lives aiming for, in the *Phaedo*. On the other hand, to say that the relationship is accidental understates the importance of the body for the soul. The soul uses the body for a variety of purposes: in the *Timaeus*, the gods create the body as a vehicle for the soul (69c); in the *Cratylus*, the soul uses the body for language (400c); and, in the *Alcibiades*, the body is characterized as the soul’s instrument in general (128-130).

This paper is focused on one respect in which the body is useful for the soul: perception. Perception is a special case because, as we shall see, it is necessary for the soul to achieve its perfection. Indeed, the soul needs the body, but not in a way that makes abandonment of the body any less desirable or possible: on the contrary, abandonment of the body is in every way desirable, and it is possible only after using the body in the right way.

Plato develops the language of *organon* (‘instrument’ or ‘tool’) as a middle path between what has come to be called accidental and essential. It marks an important moment in the history of psychology.² After all, Aristotle’s discussion of the soul’s instruments in *Generation of Animals* is indebted to Plato’s work.³ Perception disturbs the soul by disrupting its motions, but it also can prompt the soul to contemplate the Forms.

The first section presents the *Timaeus*’ view that perception is helpful because it provides us with models of harmony for our disordered souls to imitate, despite that perception is a cause of that disorder. I then argue that perception of disordered, confusing sensible objects is necessary for the soul’s development too and explain how that is useful for us.

**Section 1: perception: what it is, and its advantages**

Each episode of perception happens in two stages. The first is that an object external to us causes a disturbance to be conducted through our body. The second is that the disturbance

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¹ All translations of Plato and Aristotle are my own. I have consulted the translations in the bibliography.
² It has also been misunderstood. For instance, Aquinas in *Disputed Questions on the Soul* (Question 1, response) criticizes Plato’s view of the body as the soul’s instrument, claiming that it makes the relationship between the two too weak and that it is just the same as being accidentally related.
³ The central passage is Aristotle’s *Generation of Animals* II.4 740b25-34, where he explains that the nutritive soul uses hot and cold as its “tools” in causing growth, explicitly similar to the way that the products of art are made by the tools of the artist. See Freudenthal 1995 and Gelber (forthcoming) for more on this passage.
reaches the soul. Let us first consider the physiological moment in perception, and then consider the psychological.

In the background of Plato’s account of perception is the view that each of the four so-called elements is made up of polyhedrons. Fire, for instance, is composed of tetrahedra. This informs how the body perceives things as hot or cold. The fire in something hot acts on our skin by cutting and dividing it, entering our body then (*Tim 61e-62a*). We perceive sourness when the earth in what we eat is rough against our tongues; the less rough, the tangier the taste (*65d*). Colors are analyzed as flames that flow from objects (*67c-d*). Odors are more complicated: we cannot smell any of the elements. Plato thinks that our nostrils are narrow wide for earth and water but are too wide to properly capture fire and air (*66d*). Instead, we perceive only the transitions between the elements. Bodies produce odors when they decay, become damp, melt, or evaporate. In general, when there is some transition between water and air, an odor is produced that *can* fit into our nostrils.

Plato does not talk about sense-data or sensory information being transmitted in these episodes. He talks instead of *motions*. For example, he speaks about more or less “penetrating” (*diōthousa*) motions being produced by color-flames (*68a-b*). Sound is the percussion of air in the ear-canal, but hearing is the *motion* (*kinēsis*) that the percussion causes, which is transmitted from the head to the liver (*67b-c*). These motions seem to be transmitted through the blood. When Plato explains how the rational kind of soul is disturbed by perception, he says that the violent motions join with the “perpetually-moving stream” (*rheontos endelekhōs okhetou*) in our body to reach and then stir the soul (*43c-d*). It might be at first be surprising, then, that the gods seemed to have designed the blood-stream exactly for this purpose: the gods connected the whole body with the veins so that no part of us was kept in the dark about what we perceive (*77d-e*).

The motion, caused by the external body, is conducted through the blood to the rational kind of soul, the circles of which are thrown off by the violence. This is an essential part of each episode of perception. That is why, in the *Philebus*, perception requires that the body and soul be jointly affected by the perceived body: if the soul is unaware of a disturbance in the body, then

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4 Air, fire, and water transform into each other. Earth does not, since it is made out of cubes, and cubes cannot transform into the other polyhedrons.

5 See Lautner 2005 for a larger discussion of the mechanics of hearing in the *Timaeus*.

6 This is borne out by the way blood-vessels are present in every perceptive part of the body. Our tongue’s “tasting instruments” are, in fact, blood-vessels and extend to the heart (*65c-d*). Sound is the percussion of air that hits not just the brain and ear but also the blood (*67b*).
there is the opposite of perception, *anaisthēsia* (34a). The *Timaeus* does not make the same point so firmly, but it does say that the motion reaches the intelligent part (*to phronimon*) of the soul, which then makes a judgment about the object of perception, such as whether it is the same or different as something else. The idea, briefly, is that the motion reaches the circle of the different, which then judges it and “announces” (*diangellō*) its judgment to the whole soul, creating opinion (*doxa*) (37b).7

We should pay careful attention to how perception disrupts the activity of the soul. The motion that is conducted through the body reaches reason, whose circles have orbits that ideally are copies of the world-soul’s, and then throws them off-course. Perception exists as one cause of psychic disorders, alongside nutrition, bile, and phlegm. Yet, on the other hand, perception occupies a unique and perhaps unexpected status among these causes. For it seems like the gods deliberately created our bodies as capable of perception. This is not true of, say, nutrition: we need to nourish ourselves because the gods were incapable of furnishing us with a less needy body. In designing our bodies, the gods made certain concessions to necessity, but making us capable of perception does not seem to be one of them.

We see this when we consider that in the *Timaeus*, some perceptions are *good* for us. Consider the following passage:

> The god invented sight and gave it to us in order that we might observe the revolutions of intelligence in the heavens and apply them to the revolutions of our own thought, since there is an affinity between them (*Tim* 47b-c).

The same idea recurs throughout the dialogue: we must “correct the motions in our head that were corrupted at the time of our birth by learning the harmonies and revolutions of the cosmos” (90d). Consider the unfortunate fate awaiting those who do study the cosmos at all: they are reborn as four-legged land animals whose head is close to the ground to reflect how little attention they paid to the heavens above them during their lives (92a-b). Perception is as useful for us as it is dangerous, but it is easy to miss this. Brisson 1997: 166, for instance, says “the contemplation of the universe and, above all, of the celestial movements is supposed to preserve the excellence of the soul. Otherwise sensation may transform the soul into something bad.” He sets up a contrast between contemplation of the universe and sensation – but in such passages at 47b-c, there is no distinction. It might at first be tempting to think that astronomy in the *Timaeus*

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7 See Betegh 2018 and Corcilius 2018 for recent studies of the cognition of the world-soul.
is metaphorical for contemplation of the intelligible, especially following crucial passages in the Republic (e.g., 529) where Plato denigrates empirical astronomy and takes up something more philosophical. Yet, this line is not consistent with what he says about the invention of sight or with the reason we are reborn as land animals with heads close to the ground. So, perception plays an important role in restoring our soul’s orbits back to their original condition, but it also was a culprit in ruining those orbits in the first place.

Let us consider the case of sight. There is a visual stream that strikes the eye, and then the perception-motion is conducted through the blood and reaches the soul. The damage to our soul is done when the motion strikes the circles of the same and different that are spinning around inside our heads. There is nothing useful about that: it is a purely destructive event. What comes next might help us, though. If what we have observed are the heavenly bodies, then awareness of their motions will help us imitate them in our own lives (47b-c; 90d). At first it might seem like the relevant distinction is the one drawn earlier between the physiological moment in perception that ultimately results in the disturbance of the reason and between the psychological moment when reason considers what the body has transmitted to it, but this is incomplete because it overlooks the importance of the objects named. The gods gave us eyes specifically so that we could see the heavenly bodies, but that is not all.

There is a sense in which this claim is what we would expect Plato to say. The Timaeus also says that we care for our body by making it like the cosmic receptacle: we must always keep it moving to keep it in good shape (88c-d). Assimilation to the structure of the cosmos is a central idea. The world-soul is a model for our own souls, so it makes even more sense in this case for the latter to imitate the former. When other scholars, such as Brisson 1997 and Fletcher 2016, discuss the importance of observing specifically the heavenly bodies, they are indisputably getting at an essential part of the dialogue’s ethics. However, when they say that observing the celestial bodies is the only way for perception to be useful for us, they make a mistake, and it is a mistake that obscures something difficult about the usefulness of perception.

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8 I disagree with Fletcher 2016: 432 when she says that “Timaeus does not associate sight itself with any of the negative effects attributed to aisthēsis elsewhere in the dialogue.”

9 E.g., Fletcher 2016: 432: “However, it is through sight, and in no other way, that human beings are able to perceive and appreciate the order of the universe…” (emphasis added). As we shall see, hearing is also a way of perceiving order.
The gods invent hearing for the same reason that they invent sight: it is so we can restore the order in our souls. Here is what Plato says:

We can give the same account of sound and hearing [as was given concerning sight]: they have been given by the gods for the same reason and for the sake of the same goal. For speech was designed for the same purpose, and it makes the greatest contribution in achieving it. As much music that uses audible sound is also given for the sake of harmony. Harmony, when it has an affinity to the motions in our souls, was given by the Muses not to the one who uses it for irrational pleasure, which people nowadays think it is useful for, but to the one who uses it with intelligence, as an ally in restoring the orbits to an unharmonious soul and bringing it into symphony with itself. Rhythm has been given to us too as assistance on account of the disorderliness and the lack of grace in the conditions of most of us (47c-e).

It is remarkable that one could read this passage and forget that hearing is also a cause of the disorders that the Muses want to correct by giving it to us. We learn here that we can restore the harmony of our soul not only by observing the heavenly bodies but by listening to orderly sounds. This passage still supports the view that the objects of useful perception are examples we should follow in restoring harmony, although not identified just as heavenly bodies, but there is more going on here. The claim that speech is the most useful part of hearing means not only that we hear other people’s speech as orderly examples we should follow, but also that hearing speech prompts us to be orderly in our speech. Conversations do not merely provide a model for us to follow but, additionally, require us to impose some order on our thoughts when participating.

While all perception is dangerous, some is also useful for us. This passage about hearing complicates the picture on which it is perception specifically of the heavenly bodies that is useful for us. That picture was initially attractive because of the motions of the heavenly bodies are the same motions we should restore in our own soul. The passage about hearing forces us to widen the account to include all cases of orderly objects of perception, which explains why hearing and sight are the two senses most privileged by Plato. He never sings the praise of taste, for example, presumably because there are no more or less orderly tastes or tastes that prompt our thinking to be orderly. However, the problem that will occupy us in the next section is that Plato throughout the corpus argues that the perfection of our soul depends on observations of confusing and disorderly sensible objects. The Timaeus is exceptional by stressing perception of order, but there is a moment where Plato shows this view is present here, too:
For this reason, we must distinguish between two kinds of causes: on the one hand, the divine; on the other hand, the necessary. As for the divine, we must search for it in all things for the sake of possessing a fulfilling life (eudaimonos biou), as much as it is possible for our nature. We must search for the necessary for the sake of the divine, since we have determined that, without the necessary, the divine causes, about which we are serious, cannot be understood or partaken of on their own (Tim 68e-69a).

We must investigate the necessary before we can understand the divine. The divine in the Timaeus includes the heavenly bodies: elsewhere, we are told that we should imitate the motions of the god (47c) and that our happiness depends on it (90c-d); this is consistent with Plato thinking that the created world is a god (34b, 92c). This passage widens the scope of objects that we must perceive beyond just the orderly. One of the aims of 68e-69a might be to explain why so much of the dialogue is dedicated to discussions of necessity. Whereas the appeal of studying the orderly cosmos is natural to someone who strives to imitate that order, it is harder to see why we would have to study the necessary. The cognitive development described at 68e-69a is not unlike other theories in the dialogues whereby we come to grasp the Forms after perceiving sensible objects. Looking at the Republic’s account of summoners will shine some light on how perception of disorderly objects can be useful.

Section 2: summoners

The pivotal text for us is the discussion of the summoners (ta parakalounta) in Republic VII (522-525). These are objects (or, more properly, sets of properties that objects have) that

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10 Strange 1999: 406 argues that the reason why we have to first pursue the necessary is that “Necessity is prior to Reason in the order of discovery and, at least within the framework of creation story, of time, since it ‘prepares’ Reason’s creation of time.” I do not see how priority in time would explain this idea, though. Plato is presenting a radical thesis: we have to study the cosmic principle that is responsible for disorder and chaos in order to discover the divine and achieve our happiness; this comes after forty pages of saying that we should ignore the sublunary world and imitate the superlunary. Necessity, in fact, undoes God’s effort to order the cosmos in the Statesman (269d). It should not be lost on us that Plato argues there is a development: first, we study the necessary; then, we study the divine and are happy. This is important for the connections I draw to other accounts of our cognitive development in the corpus (e.g., the Republic’s account of summoners) below. See Morrow 1950 and Mason 2006 for more on necessity and chaos in the Timaeus. See Carone 2004 on the Statesman’s myth.

11 We might find some affinity between summoners here and the theory of recollection, although they are not identical. The two theories are just similar enough that they are useful for discovering how perception of deficient objects can improve our cognition. However, I do want to resist claims such as Mohr 1984: 34’s that “there is no explicit mention or even a hint of the doctrine of recollection in the Republic.” Something like the
summon our understanding by confusing the soul. For example, one finger might be taller than a second finger but shorter than a third. Our soul would be confused by the combination of shortness and tallness in one and the same finger: the finger in question is both short and tall. In contrast, the property of being a finger is not a summoner since a finger does not appear to the soul to also not be a finger in the way that it appears to be both tall and short. These perceptions are “adequate” (hikanon) (523b). Plato thinks that a discussion of summoners is crucial for understanding the soul’s cognitive development in the Republic, which portrays education as a reorientation of the soul. Summoners accomplish just this reorientation. There is, however, a difficult question of what summoners summon. Socrates gives an array of answers: they summon our nous (523d4, 523d8, and 524b4), our dianoia (524d2), and our logismos (524b4).

The abundance of answers reflects the variety of possible summoners. Summoners help our soul move upwards on the divided line. There, the lowest category is imagination (eikasia), then belief (pistis), then thought (dianoia), and the highest is reason (nous). Our soul can be summoned from, say, belief to thought or from thought to reason, but the summoners in each case will be different. Someone who has stagnated at the level of pistis might be confused by sensible objects and have their dianoia summoned, but someone who has graduated to dianoia would be confused not by sensible but by mathematical objects, which would summon their nous instead.

The Republic’s discussion bears this out: Plato is, in fact, more interested here in mathematical summoners than sensible objects. He initially defines summoners in terms of perceptions but then uses that schema to understand how to reach the highest mode of cognition, which first requires a lengthy study of mathematics. For most of the time that someone is

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theory of recollection is cryptically suggested at 498d: Socrates hopes Thrasymachus will remember their conversation in a future incarnation. The myth of Er too relies on the possibility of remembering things from previous lives (619b-621b).

12 When considering properties such as being a finger, we might think back to young Socrates’ claim in the Parmenides that there are some things of which there are no Forms, and that these things are just what we see” (130d).

13 Bedu-Addo 1991: 30 makes much of how long our cognitive development takes: “Plato has in mind two quite different types of recollection, namely (i) recollection as a gradual process of learning […] and (ii) immediate recollection of Forms”. (He thinks that the account of summoning in the Republic is the theory of recollection, perhaps dressed up a bit differently, but the same for all intents and purpose except that it is a different kind of recollection, one that takes longer.) However, our cognitive development always takes a while in every dialogue. There is never an immediate grasp of the Forms: the process takes decades in the Republic, goes through multiple stages in the Symposium, and in the Phaedo, we cannot get knowledge of the Forms.
enrolled in Plato’s education system, they will have already turned towards mathematics and away from the sensible world, which explains why the focus in this section is on mathematics. The phenomenon of summoning is clarified by sensible objects, which are more obviously contradictory in nature than mathematical objects are. Summoning is said to occur “whenever perception no more presents one thing than its opposite” (523c).14 The example of a finger being long and short, or of Helen of Troy being beautiful and ugly, illustrates this well — but Plato also imagines more complicated summoners, such as the appearance of something as both one and unlimited, which does not obviously belong to an empirical context at all (525a). The conclusion that Plato draws from this is that the art of calculation is essential for the philosophers-in-training because it will lead their souls upward.

Summoning does not happen frequently. The discussion of summoning begins with this remark about the art of counting:

It [that is, the art of counting] might very well be one of the subjects we were seeking after that lead to reasoning (noēsin), but nobody uses it correctly, even though it is in every way suited for dragging someone towards being (523a).

If mere perception of something both big and small led to cognition of the Forms, then everyone would be a philosopher, so here Plato explains why very few, if anyone, have the highest kind of cognition: summoners are not being used to summon. This anticipates an important point that we shall return to shortly, namely, that it is not the perception that is doing the work. It is the reflection prompted by the perception. Lovers of sights and sounds, for instance, are living as if in a dream (476c). The summoners might rouse them from this dream — and, indeed, the Republic’s theory of cognitive development explains how this rousing happens — but it will not be because they perceive enough beautiful things. It will be because they reflect on how those things can be both beautiful and ugly.

Perception is useful for us because confusion (aporia) is useful for us. There is something familiarly Platonic, or Socratic, about using aporia as a constructive pedagogical tool. When we 

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14 Another helpful account of summoners: “I define as summoners those things that impinge on the respective sense (aisthēsin) at the same time as their opposite, whereas reason is not stirred by those that do not” (524d). Given how much of the discussion of summoners is couched in the language of aisthēsis, how there could be mathematical, non-sensible summoners might seem to be a problem. See Franklin 2012: 485-497 for a solution to this problem.
consider the character Socrates’s use of aporia generally, we see that he tends to use it to initiate a process of learning. Summoners are the first step. They provide a template for the kind of education that the ideal city’s guardians should receive. They might even provide a helpful way of thinking about Platonic dialogues. Some scholars have recently argued that the contradictions within and between Plato’s texts are not unlike the way that sensible objects are apparently contradictory, and that these contradictions are intended as prompts for us to think for ourselves.

It would be a mistake to think that everything we perceive is a summoner. I said above that there are so-called adequate sensible properties that are not always accompanied by their opposites, such as being a finger. Moreover, there is the discussion of model sensible objects in the Timaeus that we explored in the first section: the harmonies that we perceive in the cosmos and that we hear furnish us with a model for restoring our own disordered souls. We might even, for a moment, think that Plato is optimistic about the sensible world, but, in fact, his point is that our cognitive development is so important that we should use every tool at our disposal. Let us imitate harmonious music and the motions of the celestial bodies when we can. The ordinary person, however, will not be naturally disposed to see the celestial bodies as something we should or even can imitate at all. To get to that higher stage in our development, we should first be summoned by the confusion of the sensible world. The confusion is the way that perception harms us. The invitation to think through the confusion, hopefully with guidance, is the way that it helps us.

15 The Eleatic visitor in the Sophist talks about confusion and refutation in this way (230a-231a).
16 Byrd 2007 argues that the dialogues are summoners. Reale 1997, among others, argues that the aporiai among the dialogues prompt the reader to think. It is important to both Reale and Byrd that the dialogues provide us with idealized conversations, such that when we revise our thinking, we have in front of us already a sound model for us to follow.
17 If space permitted, it would be fruitful to consider the way that perception and embodiment are essential to the accounts of cognitive development elsewhere in the corpus. Fierro 2019 explored, for instance, the role of the body in the Symposium’s ascent to beauty. See also Bedu-Addo 1976 and 1977 for more on the Republic on our development beyond the account of summoning.


