

Does *Theaetetus* 184-187 Assume a “Heraclitean” Theory of Perception?

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In his introduction to *Theaetetus*, Myles Burnyeat defends a novel interpretation, which he credits to Bernard Williams, of the structure of that dialogue. The traditional reading, there called “Reading A,” takes it that Plato accepts the “Heraclitean” theory of perception, understood as the view that the object of perception and the act of perception come about through a “twin birth” and lack stability of the type that would make their existences mutually independent. According to the Reading A, Plato has Socrates accept this view because Plato thinks it is true, and the *reductio* presented at 184-187 is taken to show that, given Heracliteanism, knowledge can’t be identical to perception. Burnyeat’s alternative interpretation, “Reading B,” holds that Socrates endorses the Heraclitean view simply because it is the only theory of the metaphysics of perception that Plato can think up that would allow for perception to be knowledge. According to this second reading, the Heraclitean theory of perception is rejected prior to the ultimate refutation of empiricism at 184-187. Instead, the later argument is meant to provide a direct proof that no theory of perception, including any possible alternatives to Heracliteanism, would allow for knowledge to be perception. In this paper, I argue first that the condition adduced at 185a—that what is perceptible by one sense is not perceptible by another—provides the best evidence that Plato is assuming Heracliteanism in this final refutation: for what other background beliefs would suggest we adopt that condition? I go on to claim, however, that a general commitment to the importance of physiology in perception not only suffices to motivate the condition but is also seemingly present in the ensuing discussion. Reading B is thus shown to be tenable, and, given that it understands the conclusion as having a broader scope than Reading A does, it is taken to be the preferable interpretation.