THE PLATONIC APPROACH TO SENSE-PERCEPTION

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The perceptions of sense, [Descartes] thought, are to be referred solely to the union of soul and body. They commonly exhibit to us only what may hurt or profit our bodies; and rarely, and by accident only, exhibit things as they are in themselves.—Thomas Reid

I

Philosophers and psychologists writing about touch have often noted the bifurcated character of tactile experience. Our tactile awareness is directed both toward a certain effect on the sentient body and toward the external cause of this effect. For example, in feeling something hot we are able to attend both to the effect of the heat on the flesh and to the heat itself. We often fail to attend either to the affection of the body or to its cause, but both cause and effect are typically available to us in tactile experience. Notice that visual experience seems, phenomenologically speaking, quite different. Unless the lights are especially bright (relative to our state of adaptation), we are apparently unable to attend to affections of the visual organ.

In spite of this difference between the phenomenology of tactile experience and that of visual experience, some philosophers have suggested that all forms of sensory experience are bifurcated in the way that touch is commonly thought to be. Perhaps the first philosopher to express commitment to this idea is Plato, whose views on this topic have been unduly neglected. Plato's most important discussions of the nature of sense-perception (aisthēsis) occur in the Theaetetus, Timaeus, and Philebus, and in all three works Plato makes much of the role of pathē, claiming both that they bring about sense-perceptions (Tht. 179c, Ti. 42a, Philb. 34a) and that they are objects of sense-perception (Tht. 186c, Ti. 64d, Philb. 33e–34a). These pathē are physical changes in the perceiving subject's body brought about by impinging external bodies (see
In some passages these physical changes in the subject's body are called *pathē* of the external bodies (*Ti.* 43b and 61d); in other passages they are called *pathē* of the sentient creature's body (e.g., *Ti.* 65bc). *Pathē* belong to external objects insofar as they are effects of those objects (see *Phlb.* 32a); they belong to the sentient creature's body because they are affections of the subject's body. Such changes in the body do not always yield sense-perceptions (see *Phlb.* 33d and *Ti.* 64a–c). Sometimes the initial effect (*prōton pathos*) on the body's surface is not sufficiently forceful to bring about any further change in the perceiving subject: the blood is not moved by the affection, and the soul (which is housed deeper within the body) remains unmoved as well. However, when the initial affection is sufficiently forceful to bring about a sense-perception, the affection is itself perceived:

An affection which is mild and gradual is not perceived, but the opposite <sort of affection> is perceived. Every <affection>, however, which comes about with great facility is perceived (*aisthēton*) most completely. (*Ti.* 64d, cf. 64a)

Of course, Plato is not claiming that we only perceive affections; the bodies around us are also objects of perception (see, e.g., *Ti.* 31). His claim is rather that our perceptions of the bodies around us are accompanied by perceptions of their effects on our bodies.

The same sort of view is endorsed by Plotinus, who also attributes a significant role to *pathē* in his account of sense-perception. He distinguishes *pathē* from sense-perceptions on two grounds (3.6.1, 1–5). First, affections belong to the body, while sense-perceptions belong to the soul. Second, sense-perceptions are distinct from affections insofar as they are cognizings (*gnōseis*) of affections or judgments (*kriseis*) about them (see also 4.6.2, 16–18). Plotinus follows Plato in supposing that not every affection of the body results in a sense-perception: only the stronger affections reach as far as the soul (4.4.24, 5–6). When the impinging body does have a significant effect on the surface of the sentient body, this affection gives rise to a motion of the blood (or bile), a sense-perception arises in the soul, and along with this sense-perception comes cognition of the bodily affection (4.4.28, 39–42). Plotinus calls the latter "concomitant perception (*sunaištēs*) of the things going on inside the body" (5.3.2, 2–6), and at one point he suggests that we differ from the universe as a whole in being capable of this kind of bodily awareness:

What, then? Does <the soul of the universe> have no sense-perception? It doesn't have sight, <Plato> says, because it doesn't have eyes either. Nor does it have ears, nostrils (obviously), or a tongue. What, then? Does it have concomitant perception just as we have of

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**III**

Plato emphasizes at the outset of his lengthy discussion of sense-perception in the *Timaeus* that an adequate treatment of sensory phenomena must appeal to *pathēmata* or *pathē* (61cd). He is not terribly explicit about why appeal to bodily affections is indispensable, but in the discussion which follows (61–68) Plato does in fact consistently make reference to them. He does so in part because he thinks that we call things hot, white, or bitter in response to perceiving their effects on our bodies. Accordingly, an adequate account of how we employ sensible-quality terms must appeal to bodily affections.
Throughout *Timaeus* 61–68 Plato is concerned to make sense of our practice of using sensible-quality terms, so he begins by asking why it is that we call fire hot (61d). Presumably Plato is interested in this question because he wants to reconcile his scientific approach to material objects with our everyday experience. In his account of how fire affects flesh, Plato invokes the following properties of individual fire particles: fineness of the sides, sharpness of the angles, smallness of the particles, and swiftness of their movement (61e). These micro-properties are not revealed to us in everyday experience, so Plato needs to tell us what it is about fire that we grasp when we call it hot. His claim is that we perceive its distinctive effect on the flesh: “We all perceive that the effect is a sharp one” (*Ti*. 61e). What we are responding to in calling fire hot is its perceived effect on the flesh.

At 64–5 Plato’s general strategy becomes clear. He wants to say that in all cases where a body has some significant impact on a sentient body part we perceive the effect on the body. In perceiving the agent’s effect on the body, we come to recognize the power of the agent (*tou poiešantos tén dunamin*, 64b), that is, the agent’s power to affect the body. Because we perceive differences in how agents affect the body, we assign different names to the agents. Now some types of affection can arise on any sentient body part (e.g., the affection in response to which we call things hot), while others are specific to certain body parts (e.g., the affection in response to which we call things sweet). Plato’s project at *Timaeus* 61–8 of describing both types of bodily affections allows him to provide a comprehensive and detailed account of our usage of sensible-quality terms:

Some account has now been given of the common affections of the body as a whole and of the names bestowed on the agents that produce them; we have next to explain, if we can, the affections that occur in special organs of our bodies and, on the other side, how they are caused by the agents concerned. (65bc)

So, for example, Plato’s account of what a term like “bitter” picks out appeals to affections specific to the gustatory region. Flavors are earthy particles and whether they get called bitter or sweet depends on what powers they have to affect the gustatory region. Those earthy particles that soothe, relax, and restore the region get called sweet (66c), while those that attack the area to the point of dissolving the tongue—e.g., the power (*dunamis*) of soda—are named bitter (65de).

The presence of pleasure and pain in these cases makes it clear that we are aware of more than just the earthy particles that impinge on the tongue. We must be aware of an effect of these particles, for pain and pleasure are not present in the particles themselves. This is not to say, however, that the perceived effects on the body are pleasures or pains. Plato entertains the view that pain is an affection of the body which disturbs the body’s natural or healthy condition, pleasure an affection which restores the natural order (*Phlb.* 32a). However, since disruptive and restorative affections sometimes exist unperceived, this view of pain and pleasure commits one to the existence of unperceived pains and pleasures. Plato is clearly unhappy with this consequence and is prepared to adopt an alternative account of pain and pleasure in order to avoid it (*Ti*. 64cd, *Phlb.* 43c and 51b). It is less clear what alternative account he prefers. There are two plausible interpretations to consider. One possibility is that pains, on Plato’s preferred view, are perceived affections that disrupt the body’s natural order. Another possibility is that pains are the very perceptions of those bodily affections.

There is some evidence in favor of the latter interpretation. First, in the *Timaeus* Plato does not say that the disturbance in the body is a pain; he says it is painful (64cd). Likewise at *Philebus* 43c Plato does not say that significant disturbances in the body are pains; he says they cause pains. Second, Plato sometimes identifies pains with sense-perceptions (e.g., *Thet.* 156b and *Lg.* 653a6). Finally, according to the account in the *Timaeus*, pains are housed in the mortal part of the soul (65a5 and 69cd) along with other perceptions; they are not in the body as affections are. This interpretation of Plato is endorsed by Galen, who tells us that, according to Plato’s view, one’s bodily affection can be pleasant or painful but it is the perception of such an affection that is the pain or pleasure.

It is easy to see why Plato is attracted to this view. By identifying pain with a perception of an affection he is able to maintain both that in suffering pain our sensory awareness is directed toward an affection of the body and that pain exists only while we are perceiving the damage to the body. Accordingly, he is able to reconcile two intuitions we have about pain experience: (i) that in feeling pain we are perceiving something that is going on in the body, the sort of thing that might take place even if we were not aware of it, and (ii) that pain exists only so long as this perceiving is going on.

Plotinus is evidently unhappy with this suggestion that pain is a perception rather than an object of perception. In 4.4.19 he insists that we distinguish pain from cognition of pain. Pain is a bodily affection. For example, a cut, a division of the bodily mass, is a pain. Distinct from this bodily affection is the cognition of this affection which belongs to the soul capable of sense-perception. Plotinus discusses a worry about unperceived pains toward the end of 4.19:
So then that which is affected [i.e., the body] has the pain, unless one
takes “has the pain” as including the immediately consequent sense-
perception: if one includes this obviously one is indicating that pain
requires sense-perception’s awareness of the pain. But, then, the sense-
perception itself is not to be called pain, but cognition of pain.\textsuperscript{15}

The worry is this. If pain is an affection of the subject’s body, as Plotinus
suggests, then pain would surely sometimes go unperceived. However,
pain cannot exist unperceived. Plato’s proposal is that we should identify
pain, not with the affection perceived, but with the perception of that
affection. Plotinus complains that this proposal doesn’t really address
our concern that pain is necessarily perceived, that it is always an ob-
ject of perception. He seems to favor the idea that pain is a perceived
affection of the body.

III

Plato and Plotinus both suppose that sense-perception exists in part for
the sake of preserving the body\textsuperscript{16}—to promote our survival and well-be-
ing as incarnate beings—and they agree that sense-perception fulfills
this purpose in part by affording awareness of how external bodies are
affecting our own bodies. We should expect our views about what the
objects of perception are to be influenced by considerations of purpose.
What we perceive is no doubt shaped by what perceiving is for. So on
the assumption that sense-perception exists for the sake of preserv-
ing the body, we would expect to find that sense-perception is directed
forward toward ecologically significant features of the environment, features
of the environment that have significance for the embodied organism in
its form of life. For example, we might suppose with J. J. Gibson that
sense-perception principally reveals what objects afford us: we perceive
that they are graspable, edible, etc.\textsuperscript{17} While Gibson emphasizes our
perception of what we can do with things, the Platonists by contrast
emphasize our awareness of what objects can do to us, their powers to
affect the body.\textsuperscript{18} Plotinus in particular is concerned to highlight a con-
nection between the purpose of sense-perception and our awareness of
bodily affections.

Plotinus’s views about the psychological role of bodily awareness
draw upon Plato’s later views about bodily appetites, so I will begin
with a brief summary of the latter. On the approach to appetitive desire
sketched at \textit{Philebus} 31–6, appetites come about in response to pains,
i.e., perceptions of bodily affections that disturb the natural condition
of the body. Appetites are desires for affections that restore the body’s
natural condition.\textsuperscript{19} Plato distinguishes two stages of cognition involved
in the formation of any appetite:

(A) An affection of the body that disturbs the natural condition of the
body gives rise to a sense-perception of that affection, i.e., pain.

(B) The sense-perception of this painful affection triggers a memory
of an opposite affection previously cognized by sense-perception, a
pleasant affection that restores the natural condition of the body.

Appetites are desires for physical changes in the body that restore the
body’s healthy or natural condition, and what gets the process of appe-
tite formation started is cognition of some sort of damage to the body, a
departure from that natural condition. In this way sensory cognition of
the perceiving subject’s own body plays a crucial role in the preserva-
tion of the organism. The subject is moved to bodily health by way of
appetites for pleasant affections, and appetites are a response to bodily
awareness, awareness of how the body is presently being affected.

Plotinus embraces Plato’s claim that appetites are desires for affec-
tions opposed to those that one is presently undergoing (4.4.20, 26–8).
Accordingly, Plotinus emphasizes how important a role cognition of
bodily affections plays in the preservation of incarnate beings:

After all, perceiving does not belong to flesh, and, in general, body
needn’t be given to the soul in order that it perceive. Rather a soul
must be given to the body so that the body may exist and be preserved:
it belongs to the soul, with its capacity for making judgments, to
look to the body and make a judgment about the body’s affections.
(4.4.22, 28–32)

The soul, with its capacity for sense-perception, helps preserve the body
by monitoring how the body is being affected. Indeed, this capacity for
sense-perception was devised to contribute toward the maintenance of
bodily health:

[Sense-perception] has been devised so that we can take steps to guard
ourselves against what is acting on the body before it becomes so
strong as to destroy us, or before it comes too near. If this is so, then
sense-perceptions would exist for the sake of need. (4.4.24, 6–9)

Sense-perception fulfills its purpose by informing the incarnate subject
about how its body is being affected by the environment, allowing the sub-
ject to take appropriate measures to prevent serious damage to the body.

When Plotinus claims that sense-perception exists for the sake of
preserving the body, he is not assuming that this is the \textit{sole}
purpose of sense-perception. The Platonists would agree with Themistius, who
suggests that sight and hearing at any rate have a purpose beyond that
of fostering the needs of the body:
We do not grasp as many differences among the objects of smell as we do among sounds or colors. And we do not perceive any of the objects of smell without being pained or pleased, while sight and hearing perceive colors and sounds without such affections. Some say this is a sign that this sense was devised for us solely for the sake of need; that it does not attain accuracy beyond what is required for need. And for this reason we cognize not how the objects of smell are but how they relate to us. (Paraphrase of De anima 67.32–68.1)

Smell is evidently limited to discriminating how the objects of smell relate to our bodily well-being, for we are able to detect very few differences among odors and those differences we do perceive are ultimately differences in how well or how badly odors affect the olfactory region (cf. Timaeus 67a). Sight and hearing, on the other hand, allow us to perceive a great diversity of colors and sounds respectively, and we perceive them without concomitant pleasures and pains. Accordingly, we might suppose that sight and hearing have a task beyond that of advancing the well-being of the body. And, indeed, Plato insists that the god devised sight and hearing with the goal of promoting psychical health. By seeing and hearing the order present in the universe at large, the soul is led to an harmonious arrangement of its own (Ti. 46e–47e). Similarly, Plotinus acknowledges that sense-perception has the purpose of satisfying needs other than those of the body: it satisfies the needs of a soul that lacks knowledge as a result of its incarnate state (4.4.24, 9–12). Sense-perception is able to promote psychical well-being by disclosing truths about the world around us.

IV

We have seen why Plato and Plotinus believe that our perceptions of external bodies are accompanied by perceptions of our own bodies. We have yet to consider how these two forms of perception are supposed to be related to one another. Do we perceive the bodies around us in virtue of cognizing our own bodies, as Schopenhauer supposes? Unfortunately, Plato and Plotinus do not have much to say on this issue, and what little they do say on the topic is open to several interpretations. In the space available we can at best hope to indicate a plausible line of interpretation according to which sense-perception of the world around us depends on cognition of our own bodies.

At Theaetetus 186bc Plato draws a distinction between two objects of cognition. One kind of object is available to humans and other animals from birth, namely, the bodily affections which one cognizes by way of sense-perception. The other is attained only with difficulty and over time, namely, being (ousia) and usefulness (aphelias), which are arrived at by calculations involving the bodily affections. What Plato seems to be saying here is that cognition of one’s own body has a temporal priority in cognition of the world, both with respect to what there is in the world and with respect to what use or benefit things have. At the start we merely perceive our affections, and have no grasp of what is going on in the world around us. Only by making calculations and inferences are we able to cognize what the world is like and how to make it better. In addition to being cognized before being and usefulness, affections seem to serve as a starting-point for the calculations that yield cognition of being and usefulness. As Plato says, the calculations are about these bodily affections (peri touton).

Remarks in the Timaeus suggest that the reasoning in question may be causal reasoning. The appetitive part of the soul, we are told, has irrational sense-perception (alogos aisthēsis, 69d) and lacks the capacity for reasoning and understanding (77b). Perhaps it is for this reason that Plato invokes the rational part of the soul (to phronimon) when the task is cognizing the power of the agent affecting the body. Information about the causal powers of impinging bodies is implicit in the initial effect on the subject’s body. However, that information must be reported (by way of a process of replication) to reason, which alone has the means of extracting the information. On this interpretation, Plato’s alogos aisthēsis is a lot like Schopenhauer’s mere sensation: each is a form of cognition limited to alterations in the subject’s body. Sensory cognition which extends beyond the limits of the body must involve (for Plato) the rational part of the soul or (for Schopenhauer) the understanding. For such cognition involves reasoning from effects to causes.

These remarks in the Timaeus occur in the context of a discussion of our sensory cognition of a variety of qualities including heat, color, flavor, and odor. On the reading suggested here, Plato is supposing that our sensory awareness of these features of the world around us is mediated by an awareness of effects on our bodies. We perceive that something is hot, for example, in virtue of perceiving its effect on the flesh. Perhaps we should think of this supposition as a natural development of Plato’s thesis that we call things hot in response to perceiving their distinctive effect on the body. Plato is assuming that we become aware of something’s heat or color through an awareness of its effects.

Plotinus evidently endorses Plato’s assumption that our cognition of affections serves as a starting-point in our cognition of the world around us. Sense-perceptions are judgments about affections (peri pathēmata, 3.6.1, 1–5), judgments made as a result of the body’s affections (4.3.26, 1–9). Presumably Plotinus is thinking that perceiving external objects is a matter of judging them to be the causes of perceived bodily affections. Consider the following:
But we must grant it [sc. the universe] concomitant perception of itself, just as we concomitantly perceive ourselves. . . . Since we too, when we apprehend something in our bodies which differs from its enduring state, apprehend it as something coming from outside. (4.4.24, 21–25)

In the first sentence of this passage Plotinus asserts that we concomitantly perceive ourselves. In the second sentence he clarifies further what the two concomitant forms of awareness are: apprehension of a change in the body and apprehension of that change as caused by something outside. The latter, we may assume, is our way of cognizing things outside the body. On this reading, our simultaneous apprehension of the body and of the item outside is an apprehension of one thing in two different ways. We cognize the bodily affection both as a change present in the body and as something caused by forces outside the body. When we feel something hot, we cognize the bodily affection both as a change present in the body and as something brought about by something outside the body. The item outside is cognized as the cause of a perceived bodily affection.22

This view of our tactile perceptions ought to be taken seriously. It is not obvious how we are to reconcile two facts about our tactile perception of, say, heat. On the one hand, in feeling something hot we gain information about two very different things: the hot item and the part of the body affected by the hot item. On the other hand, there is Berkeley’s familiar observation that we are aware of just “one simple sensation.” An account of our simultaneous apprehension of the body and the external item ought to respect Berkeley’s insight about the phenomenon of feeling something hot. Plotinus accommodates this insight by insisting that we cognize one thing, the bodily affection, in two different ways.23

V

We began by noting that the phenomenology of vision is rather different from that of touch, that we seem to be aware of affections of the sense-organ in everyday tactile experiences but not in ordinary visual experiences. Perhaps Aristotle has this difference in mind when he suggests that heat, coldness, and sweetness differ from blackness and whiteness insofar as each of the former gets called an affective quality because each “is productive of an affection of the senses,” while the latter are not called affective qualities for this reason (see Categories 9a28 ff.). We are not ordinarily aware of affections of the sense-organ in seeing black and white things, so we do not call blackness and whiteness affective in response to any such affections, as we do in the case of heat, coldness, and sweetness.

Plato insists that sight is not as different from touch as it seems.24 Although we do not seem to be aware of effects of the colors distinct from the colors themselves, in fact vision acquaints us with affections as much as touch does. In his discussion of vision in the Timaeus Plato explains how we become aware of effects of the colors. The light of day is a kind of gentle, non-burning fire (45b4–6), and akin to this sort of fire is a fire within us (b6–7). When we open our eyes, this internal fire flows out and joins together with the external light in such a way that one homogenous body is formed (c2–6). Because of its homogeneity, the whole fire comes to be homoiopathes, similarly affected (c7). So when the colors—which are flames issuing from the bodies around us (67c4–7)—impinge upon this homogenous body of fire, the highly mobile particles which constitute this body are set in a chain of motion which leads up to the soul and a visual perception comes about (45c7–d3). Presumably the causal interaction between the color and this body occurs at the periphery of the latter, i.e., at or near the surfaces of the bodies around us. Plato’s theory thus allows us to hold both that visual experience acquaints us with affections (64d6) —the effects colors have on the visual ray—and that those affections are located precisely where the objects of visual experience seem to be.25

Plotinus agrees that we are aware of affections in vision, but he wants to say that the affections in question are the colors belonging to the bodies around us. Colors, on Plotinus’s view, are produced in objects by the presence of light (4.5.7, 34–55).26 That is, the colors we see are effects of the light that is present.27 Our ability to perceive these effects depends on the fact that they are simultaneously effects on us (4.5.3, 18–21). We are, in Plotinus’s words, sympathetically affected (paschein symphantos, 4.5.1, 36) in the act of seeing color. This sympathetic relation is a consequence of the fact that all bodies are parts of a single living organism (4.5.8, 4–7).28 Thanks to our organic union with the bodies around us, the affections of those bodies are our affections as well. Consequently, seeing color involves awareness of affections as much as feeling heat.

Although their accounts of vision differ somewhat, Plato and Plotinus are both attempting to assimilate vision to touch.29 They are presumably moved to do so because they share the goal of developing a unified approach to the individual senses. Plato and Plotinus also have a shared conception of what problems an account of the senses must confront. Unlike the Protagorean theory criticized in the Theaetetus (151–160), the Platonic approach is not shaped by worries about sensory variability. The Platonists are not overly concerned about the veridicality of the senses because the individual senses are principally intended to promote the preservation and well-being of incarnate beings; they are not meant to reveal what, e.g., odors and flavors are like in themselves. A central task, then, is to determine how the senses serve this central function. Plato and Plotinus seem to agree that they do so by revealing how the body is being affected by its surroundings.30

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NOTES

1. For useful references to the literature in psychology see M. Scott, “Tactual Perception,” Australasian Journal of Philosophy, vol. 79 (2001), pp. 149–160, at p. 149. Scott mistakenly supposes that Thomas Reid is one of the few philosophers to take notice of the bifurcated nature of touch. The only sort of tactual experience that, on Reid’s view, involves perception of bodily affections is pain experience (see T. Ganson, “The Foundation of Reid’s Distinction between Sensation and Perception” [unpublished manuscript]). Furthermore, Scott overlooks the Platónists discussed in this paper and Husserl (for the latter’s remarks on touch see The Body: Classic and Contemporary Readings, ed. D. Welton [Malden: Blackwell, 1999], p. 25).

2. Affections travel through the body to the soul (Thet. 186c) by way of a process of replication described at Ti. 64b.


5. O’Brien and Brisson suggest that pathēmatos themselves become sense-perceptions (O’Brien, Theories of Weight, pp. 140, 143, and 170; Brisson, “Plato’s Theory of Sense Perception,” pp. 153–154). Plato never says or suggests that this is so; he says they come to be perceived.

6. “Perceived” is clearly preferable to “perceptible” as a translation here. Plato is explaining that an affection which comes about gradually or arises in

7. Translations are my own except where I indicate otherwise.


10. At 64a Plato claims that every affection is perceived, provided that the following three conditions are met. First, the affection must arise in a body part whose constituent particles are mobile in nature. The affections of hair, bone, and nails go unperceived because the affection is not passed on to the soul by way of a mobile structure that can replicate the initial affection located on the body’s surface. Second, the affection must be sufficiently forceful to set the neighboring particles in motion. In the case of some body parts even the slightest affection will be perceived. Third, the affection must take place all at once. If it occurs only very gradually, then the affection will go unperceived.

11. That Plato is talking about the agent’s power to affect the perceive’s body is clear from the larger context. At 60ab, 65de, and 66a Plato speaks of powers to affect the body.


14. In this passage Plotinus seems to identify the pain felt with the cut, the disruptive affection of the body. However, he seems to acknowledge that disruptive affections that go unperceived would not count as pains; he seems to identify pains with perceived affections (see 4.4.19, 22–25, discussed below).

15. This translation is due to A. H. Armstrong: Plotinus, Enneads IV.1–9 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1984).

16. This supposition is more explicit in Plotinus (see 4.4.22, 28–32 and 4.4.24, 6–9) than it is in Plato. Plato does not tell us why the gods assigned sense-perception to the appetitive part of the soul (Ti. 69d, cf. 77b), but it is natural to conclude that sense-perception is intended to play a role in the promotion of bodily well-being. For the appetitive part was devise with the needs of the body in mind (Ti. 70c). For discussion of the function of the appetitive part of the soul see Ganson, “Appetitive Desire in Later Plato,” pp. 230–233.

17. In his highly influential book, The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), Gibson writes: “But I now suggest that what we perceive when we look at objects are their affordances, not their qualities. We can discriminate the dimensions of difference if required to do so in an experiment, but what the object affords us is what we normally pay
attention to. The special combination of qualities into which an object can be analyzed is ordinarily not noticed" (p. 134).

18. Although Gibson stresses our awareness of what we can do to things, he does not fail to take note of our awareness of the powers things have to affect our bodies. See especially his discussion of positive and negative affordances (The Ecological Approach, pp. 137–138).

19. For a full defense of this interpretation of Philebus 31–6, see Ganson, "Appetitive Desire in Later Plato."

20. Plato writes: "What's naturally mobile, whenever even a slight affection falls upon it, passes around particles producing the same effect to further particles, until, coming upon reason, it reports the power of the agent." (64b) As noted previously (n.11), it is clear from the larger context that Plato is talking here about the agent's power to affect the perceivers's body.

21. That Plato thinks of colors, flavors, odors, and heat as genuine features of the world external to the body is fairly clear. For example, see his definition of odor (Ti. 66e) and color (67c). On the other hand, Plato's account of sound seems to identify sound with an effect on the body (67b).

22. It is unclear whether Plotinus thinks that our sensory cognition of external bodies depends on reasoning. He does explicitly deny that reasoning plays a role in seeing color (4.5.4, 38–46). On the other hand, Plotinus thinks of color vision as a special case of perceiving an affection of the body (see the final section below). What we want to know is whether our sensory cognition of the items that cause bodily affections depends on reasoning. At 5.5.1, 9–19 Plotinus seems to attribute a role to reason in moving beyond cognition of our bodily affections. But this passage is notoriously difficult, and it would be unwise to place much weight on it.

23. Those familiar with Emilsson's Plotinus on Sense-Perception (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1988) will recognize how much the present interpretation differs from Emilsson's treatment of affections in chapter iv of that book. On the interpretation offered here one perceives external bodies in virtue of perceiving affections, the physical changes in one's body caused by those external bodies. Emilsson's only serious objection to this sort of interpretation is that it fails to accommodate Plotinus's claim that vision is directed toward what is external and at a distance from the perceiver. In the section to follow we shall see how Plotinus reconciles this fact about vision with his claim that we perceive affections.

24. We should not assume that Plato agrees with Aristotle's claim that there are only five senses, one of which is touch. For one thing, Plato does not speak of a sense of touch in the dialogues we are considering (i.e., Timaeus, Philebus, and Theaetetus). (For further discussion see T. Ganson, "Appetitive Desire in Later Plato," p. 234.)

25. Plato does not tell us whether this visual ray is supposed to be a (temporary) part of the organism. He tells us that it is a natural appendage (sumphues iemôn) whose affections do not yield pleasures or pains (64de).