I Introduction

Epistemology is one of Plato’s primary philosophical interests. In many of his dialogues, he attempted to inquire into the nature of episteme, an objective truth, by raising questions like "What is knowledge?" "What does it mean to know something?" "Is there such thing as objective truth that is universal to all human beings?" "What is the essence of knowledge?" Plato’s endeavor to examine the nature of knowledge is demonstrated most thoroughly in Theaetetus, a dialogue that was written circa 369 BC. Through the conversation between Socrates and Theaetetus, a young disciple of Theodorus, Plato dives into the epistemological investigation of "what constitutes knowledge."

Theaetetus does not provide a clear answer to the question of “what knowledge is.” Socrates and Theaetetus propose possible answers to the inquiry – that knowledge is equivalent to perception, crafts, judgment, and a true belief with account – but all of them fall short of explaining the true nature of knowledge. Nevertheless, Plato poses many important questions in pursuit of understanding the nature of episteme.

This paper specifically deals with the first definition of knowledge given by Theaetetus – that knowledge is perception. Plato spends much of Theaetetus in disproving the claim that knowledge is equivalent to perception because such a claim generates many logical and empirical errors. Before we leap to his conclusion, however, it is first important to understand what Plato has in mind when he talks about perception. John M. Cooper and D.K. Modrak raise meaningful questions in regards to the Platonic view of perception in their articles, “Plato on Sense-Perception and Knowledge ("Theaetetus" 184-186),” and “Perception and Judgment in the ‘Theaetetus.’” This paper starts from their inquiries of whether Plato understands perception on the grounds of the conceptualist or non-conceptualist theories. Plato seems to develop his argument based on the non-conceptualist view in which perception merely involves minimal sensory awareness of external stimuli without any type of categorization of perception. The non-conceptualist theory of perception successfully supports Plato’s rebuttal against the claim that knowledge is perception in that knowledge involves “discursive thought while ‘perception’ is at a lower level of logical complexity” (Cooper 144). To put it more simply, knowledge deals with deeper thought processes that involve reasoning while perception is mere sensory awareness. However, the validity of the non-conceptualist theory of perception – whether it is possible to have non-conceptual content in perception – is questionable, if not erroneous. This paper will try to identify the flaws in Plato’s argument against ‘knowledge as perception’ by demonstrating that Plato’s view of perception is ultimately non-conceptualist. Because the non-conceptualist theory is implausible, I will argue that his argument against ‘knowledge as perception’ is flawed. After showing that the non-conceptualist theory of perception is flawed, I will further suggest that the argument that perception is knowledge is still not valid even on the conceptualist theory, since it falls short of explaining metaphysical concepts and the universality of knowledge.
II Perception: Conceptualism and Non-conceptualism

Before we move on to the discussion of Platonic view of perception, it is important to define what it means to perceive conceptually and non-conceptually. Robert Hanna and Monima Chadha in their article, "Non-Conceptualism and the Problem of Perceptual Self-Knowledge," characterize conceptualism and non-conceptualism as follows: The non-conceptualist theory of perception says that "representational content is neither solely nor wholly determined by a conscious animal’s conceptual capacities," and that “at least some contents are both solely and wholly determined by its non-conceptual capacities” (Hanna and Chadha 2). The conceptualist theory, on the other hand, suggests that ‘representational content is solely or wholly determined by a conscious animal’s conceptual capacities” (Hanna and Chadha 2). To put it more simply, conceptual perception takes into account conceptualization of sensation in perceiving an object – the inner work of the mind that combines external stimuli through sense organs and applies them to cognitive images that correspond to such sensation. Non-conceptual perception does not consider the conceptual capacities of the mind towards the external stimuli. Non-conceptualists argue that perception is mere sensory awareness of the external objects in which sense organs react to the stimuli without any type of 'classification' or 'categorization' of such sensation. They claim that there is representational content in perception that is independent from the cognitive works of the mind.

To elaborate more on the notion of conceptualism and non-conceptualism, I would like to give a specific example of perception – let us call this example ‘a casual conversation between two lovers.’ A young couple sitting across the table in a café after dusk casually talks about their routines, the meals they had that day, the movies they watched together, and their plans for the upcoming weekend. The two lovers perceive each other through their distinct sense organs. Here sensory perception includes his/her voice, physical appearance, body temperature, body scent, and texture of skin. Conceptualists would suggest that perception cannot occur without some form of conceptualization. Perception of a lover’s voice immediately entails a process in the inner mind to decide whether it’s ‘low-pitched’ or ‘high-pitched’ or whether the voice is ‘familiar’ or ‘strange’ to me. In other words, conceptual perception naturally entails conscious awareness – or classification – of sense-data and thus does not acknowledge only representational content of sensation. Perception of a lover includes different types of senses such as his/her voice, physical appearance, body temperature, body scent, and texture of skin. They are distinct in that we perceive each sensation through different sense organs, and one cannot be perceived through another sense organ. Yet all of these sensations share commonality as ‘a lover,’ which Plato terms as ‘common features.’ Unlike Plato, however, conceptualists assert that perception partakes of the processing of different sensations into ‘common features’ to some degree, and thus perception goes beyond simple recognition of representational content.

Non-conceptualists, on the other hand, would argue that perception operates on representational ground in which each of the visual, auditory, touch, and olfactory senses is perceived through different sense organs that interact with a corresponding sensation. The non-conceptualists would argue, for example, that the perception of an azure-blue sweater is a distinct experience from the cognitive thought that “that was the gift that I bought him for his last birthday.” In other words, sensation does not entail further conceptualization in which the matching of external stimuli with cognitive images – such as the application of a perceived external object to “my lover” – takes place.

III Platonic View of Perception

Based on the distinction between conceptual and non-conceptual perception described in the previous section, let us look at what Plato means when he talks about perception.

Plato’s inquiry into the nature of true episteme starts from the sophists’ conception of knowledge. Many sophists at the time advocated relativism in regards to knowledge. Protagoras, one of the
most prominent sophists, claimed that “a person is the measure of all things – of things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not” (Cohen 106). In other words, knowledge is essentially subjective to each individual in that he can personally decide what is true for himself through perception. Plato raises objections to the Protagorean relativism that was prevalent in ancient Greek society in favor for searching for objective truth that was universal to all human beings. To refute Protagoras’ view of knowledge, Plato provides several arguments that contradict the claim that what a man perceives is subjectively true for him and that knowledge is perception. One of these arguments is associated with the problem of memory:

“According to us, the man who sees has acquired knowledge of what he sees, as sight, perception and knowledge are agreed to be the same thing… But the man who sees and has acquired knowledge of the thing he saw, if he shuts his eyes remembers but does not see it. Isn’t that so?… But to say ‘He doesn’t see’ is to say ‘He doesn’t know’, if ‘sees’ is ‘knows’?… Then we have this result, that a man who has come to know something and still remembers it doesn’t know it because he doesn’t see it?” (Theaetetus 164a-b)

“He does not know the thing at the very time that he remembers it. We said that this was impossible. And so the tale of Protagoras comes to an untimely end; yours too, your tale about the identity of knowledge and perception.” (Theaetetus 164d-e)

Plato’s character Socrates suggests that knowledge is not perception because if “perceiving” is equivalent to “knowing,” then when one does not perceive a thing, he no longer possesses the knowledge of the thing that he perceives. Perception on this view can be defined as an instant ‘phenomenon’ in which sense organs partake in interactions with external objects through the act of perceiving. External objects stimulate bodily senses through such interaction from which a type of perception – color, taste, smell, or touch – is experienced. When the act of perceiving ceases to take place, Plato claims that on the view that knowledge is perception, we no longer gain access to the knowledge of the perceived objects.

In other words, Plato’s view of perception does not go beyond simple recognition of outside stimuli. On his view, perception is an instant phenomenon that takes place only when the percipient takes part in the act of perceiving the sensible objects. Since perception does not entail any type of conceptualization of sensation, Platonic view of perception is ultimately non-conceptualist.

To organize Platonic view of perception described above in logical sequence:

i Assume that knowledge is perception.

ii To perceive is equivalent to know.

iii If one perceives a thing, he knows the thing that he perceives.

iv When one does not perceive a thing, he does not know the thing that he no longer perceives.

v From iv., memory of perception does not belong to perception.

vi From iv. and v., it is inferred that perception is the instant act of perceiving that includes nothing beyond the mere sensory awareness of external stimuli.

vii Thus, Platonic view of perception is non-conceptualist.

In the latter part of Theaetetus, Plato also hints at his view of perception as non-conceptualist when Socrates says:

“all creatures, men and animals alike, are naturally able to perceive as soon as they are born; I mean, the experiences which reach the soul through the body. But calculations regarding their being and their advantageousness come, when they do, only as the result of a long and arduous development, involving a good deal of trouble and education” (Theaetetus 186c)
The excerpts indicate that perceptibility is something that all creatures are born with, both men and animals alike. Thus, men and animals are equally born with some capabilities to perceive. Considering Plato’s view that animals are not capable of ‘reasoning,’ one can argue that the perceptibility that all creatures are born with does not include anything that goes beyond mere sensory awareness of external objects. This perceptibility does not entail any type of ‘reasoning’ of sensation. Conceptualization of sensory awareness thus does not take place in the stage of perception but rather involves the work of higher entity – which according to Plato’s view corresponds to the soul.

In conclusion, Plato views perception and conceptualization of perception as separate concepts. He explicitly distinguishes the gap between the very moment of perception and the subsequent process of perception in which sensory stimuli are connected to sensory categories. In addition, animals that are incapable of reasoning are also born with perceptibility just like a man. If a man and an animal were to have the same capacity to perceive in their infant stage, perception can be defined as something devoid of reasoning. Thus Plato’s view of perception is ultimately non-conceptualist – one that considers perception as mere sensory awareness of external stimuli in representational content without subsequent conceptualization of the sensation. According to Plato, perception and conceptualization of perception are two separate concepts residing in different realms, controlled by different entities.

IV Non-conceptual Perception: Is It Plausible?

Non-conceptualist theory of perception conveniently supports Plato’s argument against ‘knowledge as perception.’ Based on the non-conceptualist view, perception cannot amount to knowledge since it is mere sensory awareness of external objects. Knowledge that Plato seeks to define involves objective truth that is universal to all human beings. The ‘common features’ that I touched upon in section II require an entity that processes the commonality of different senses other than sense organs, which merely partake in perception. Above all, perception does not get at the ousia, or ‘the true being’ of a thing that is the essential feature of knowledge according to Plato.

But calculations regarding their being and their advantageousness come, when they do, only as the result of a long and arduous development, involving a good deal of trouble and education...Now is it possible for someone who does not even get at being to get at truth?...Then knowledge is to be found not in the experiences but in the process of reasoning about them; it is here, seemingly, not in the experiences, that it is possible to grasp being and truth” (186c-d).

According to Plato, knowledge must be essentially true, objective, and requires reasoning to attain its essence. Ultimately, there arises the necessity of a soul ‘with’ which we conceive knowledge by making judgments on perception gained ‘through’ the sense organs.

But questions still remain regarding the validity of the non-conceptualist theory of perception. While Plato bases his argument on the non-conceptualist theory of perception, it is important to question whether it is plausible for a man to perceive a thing solely on a representational ground independent of the conscious works of the mind. To put it more simply, is it possible to fully isolate perception from conceptualization?

Let us go back to the example of ‘a casual conversation between two lovers.’ Perception defined by the non-conceptualists is an instant phenomenon in which a perceiver and an external object engage in mutual interactions – perceiving and being perceived. Perception is immediate and spontaneous, as sense organs biologically react to the external stimuli without conceptualization of sensation. The question that I would like to raise is the problem of storage of information through perception. If we were to assume that the two lovers were the first human beings ever to encounter, their perception of each would be strikingly different in that what they perceive is new.
and unfamiliar. In other words, they are devoid of categories to which they can identify what they have perceived. Perception at this stage is raw and has yet to be conceptualized.

A series of perception, however, has a great impact on subsequent perception. Unconscious conceptualization of perception takes place as the familiar voice of a lover creates the lover’s physical image in the mind of the perceiver. In other words, there exists a gap between the first encounter with an external object and the subsequent perception of the thing that he perceived in the past. Perception becomes more accurate and detailed as information continues to be stored when one perceives the same object consecutively. Perception after a series of previous encounters entails automatic classification of the objects being perceived into a category – in this example, a familiar lover who has familiar eyes, voices, gait, and so on. Non-conceptual perception might be plausible at the first instance of perceiving an object, but a series of successive perception redefines following perception. The latter perception in this sense does involve some amount of conceptualization in that an object being perceived is classified as either familiar or unfamiliar. In this regard, it is the conceptual theory of perception that seems to be more plausible than the non-conceptual theory of perception since time and experiences continue to redefine subjective perception.

Thus, Plato’s non-conceptualist theory of perception is flawed since it fails to account for the fact that the nature of perception changes with the passage of time.

V Conceptualist View on ‘Knowledge as Perception’

Now that we have demonstrated that the non-conceptualist theory of perception is implausible, I would like to draw our attention to the fact that the statement ‘knowledge is perception’ is still erroneous on the conceptualist view of perception. Conceptualists believe that perception includes categorization of external stimuli. After a series of perception of objects, we tend to categorize the things that we perceive into corresponding groups in our minds. This conception solves the problem of memory that I raised in the previous section. Conceptualist view of perception, however, does not fully support the idea that knowledge is perception, either. Here, we need to redefine our common usage of the word ‘to know.’ If to know something includes only what we perceive through our senses, it is hard to explain the knowledge of abstract concepts. Metaphysical concepts that do not belong to the realm of perception – such as love, friendship, virtue, emotions, language, and so on – are also part of knowledge, but they cannot be grasped through perception. Justice, for example, is a concept that cannot be defined solely from perception. The criterion by which to judge whether a certain action is just is beyond the realm of perception, which involves a higher level of reasoning. The conceptualist theory goes beyond the non-conceptualist theory to include a basic level of classification, sense-data, and categorization of sensations, yet it still falls short of explaining the existence of such knowledge as abstract concepts, which involve some form of judgment and reasoning. Thus, it is not able to support the idea that knowledge is perception.

In addition to the problem of abstract ideas, knowledge as perception dismisses the possibility of the existence of universal knowledge since perception is essentially subjective. What one perceives cannot be the same as what another perceives. We can have a similar ground upon which we can agree in terms of knowledge as Plato suggests with a concept of ‘common features,’ yet it is hard to assert that perceptions experienced by two different people can be the same. Categorization of sensations differs according to the experiences of each participant. For example, perceiving an object from two people differs significantly depending on their familiarity with the object that they perceive. Considering the subjective nature of perception, the conceptualist account also falls short of truly describing Plato’s ousia, the true nature of knowledge that is universal. Thus, even on the conceptualist view of perception, it does not seem accurate to assert that knowledge is perception.
VI Conclusion

Plato does not provide a clear definition of knowledge in Theaetetus. Through the conversation with Theaetetus, Socrates concludes that “knowledge is neither perception nor true judgment, nor an account added to true judgment,” opening up the question to the readers (Theaetetus 210b). Plato in this sense plays a role as a midwife not only for Theaetetus, but also for the readers so that they can give birth to their own definition of knowledge. In understanding the nature of episteme, Plato raises many critical questions. But in order to fully understand his argument on knowledge, it is foremost important to understand what he means by perception. Examining the dialogue thoroughly, I have concluded that Plato’s view of perception is ultimately non-conceptualist in that perception does not entail conceptualization of sensation beyond mere sensory awareness of external stimuli. While the non-conceptualist theory of perception conveniently supports Plato’s argument against ‘knowledge as perception,’ questions still remain regarding the validity of non-conceptual perception – whether it is possible to perceive non-conceptually. I have argued that non-conceptual perception is implausible in that storage of information through a series of perceptions entails automatic classification of the objects. Plato’s argument against ‘knowledge as perception’ is thus erroneous since his view of perception is flawed. Further investigation has revealed that knowledge as perception is also flawed even on the conceptualist viewpoint since it falls short of explaining both metaphysical concepts – such as emotions, love, virtues, or justice – and the universal nature of knowledge. Thus, we can conclude that both the non-conceptualist and conceptualist theories do not adequately support the idea that knowledge is perception, suggesting that we may need to consider an alternative explanation for the nature of knowledge.

1While I have argued that non-conceptual perception is implausible, if not impossible, contemporary philosophers such as José Bermúdez, Tim Crane, Fred Dretske, Gareth Evans, and Michael Tye have argued for the idea that perceptual experience has a content which is non-conceptual. In addition, as John M. Cooper and D.K. Modrak have argued, study of Plato’s argument in Theaetetus based on the conceptualist theory of perception is worthy of close attention. This paper is intended to suggest one of many perspectives to interpret Plato’s work and is thus open to criticism and revision. Further discussion on Plato’s view of perception in association with other works by Plato such as Phaedo, Republic, and Symposium can shed a new light on the interpretation of Platonic view of perception, as well.
Works Cited


