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The old linguistic problem of 'reference' in a modern reading of Plato's *Sophist*[1]

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This paper is about interpreting the aim of Plato's *Sophist* in a linguistic framework and arguing that in its attempt at resolving the conundrum of what the true meaning and essence of the word "sophist" could be, it resembles a number of themes encountered in contemporary linguistics. I think it is important to put our findings from the *Sophist* in a broader Platonic context: in other words, I assume—I think not too unreasonably—that Plato pursued (or at least had in mind) a number of overall projects ('OP' for short) *throughout* some or most of the dialogues, while each one of the dialogues would *in addition* have more specific projects ('SP') as part of its individual blueprint. To be sure, the OPs, if they actually existed, might have evolved from the earlier-written to later dialogues, but their foundational premises should have remained intact. In **Section A**, I provide evidence for reading the *Sophist* on a linguistic basis. In **Section B**, I focus on two OPs that I think are relevant to our discussion, one having to do with language and meaning acquisition, and the second concerning the "mind" or a "thought faculty". Ultimately, in **Section C**, I will use the OPs to contextualise two (related) SPs in the *Sophist*: (i) identifying cases of intentional referrals for names *versus* (ii) identifying internal references when searching for word meanings without particular referable instances. At the end of this section, I will draw close parallels between this interpretation of the dialogue and a congruous project of modern 'generative' linguistics.

SECTION A: *Reading the* Sophist *as a work on linguistics*

The *Sophist*, a late-period dialogue thought to have been written almost 2,400 years ago (~360 BC), may be considered one of the most direct and vivid expositions of Plato's philosophy.[2] It is a dialogue between an Eleatic Stranger/Visitor (from the Greek city of Elea in present-day southern Italy) and Theaetetus, a

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[2] The Stephanus pagination of the *Sophist* is: *Sophista*, vol. 1, 216a1-268d5 (the three volumes include 42 titles, excluding the *Definitiones*)
(www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0172%3Atext%3DSoph.)

mathematics pupil (and later of great fame as a geometer), where the conversation is passed back and forth between the two interlocutors 581 times. The perspective of the Visitor is quite appreciated by Socrates and presumably by any reader of the dialogue, because we hear various traces of the philosophical heritage of Parmenides and Zeno of Elea (and even Xenophanes, whom the Visitor mentions in 242d5). Furthermore, Socrates is said to have met Parmenides during the latter's visit to Athens (217c5). Moreover, one of the opening comments in the *Sophist* is made by Theodorus (Theaetetus's mathematics teacher), who, talking of eristics, notes that "there are people who make it their speciality to win arguments" (216b5),[3] suggesting that Plato explicitly wants to stay away from making arguments for arguments' sake. These, along with the fact that the dialogue is an almost continuous exposition of an answer to a single question asked by Socrates, are elements that suggest that the reader should take the main message of the dialogue very seriously. It is perhaps for this reason that, as Noburu Notomi points out, "Neoplatonists, following Plotinus […] placed the *Sophist* next only to the *Parmenides*, which is the main text for Neoplatonism" (Notomi 1999, 4).

There are many candidates for what the "main message" could be: for example, Notomi notes that the five connected questions or problems addressed in the *Sophist* are "the basic problem of defining the sophist", "the issue of appearance", "the difficulty concerning image", "the difficulty concerning falsehood" and "the difficulty concerning what is not" (Notomi 1999, 40), with each having the potential of being considered as an overarching theme. In addition, the five "greatest kinds" of being, change, rest, sameness and difference (254b-257a) could be put forward as another of the main messages. Alternatively, if one takes a more analytical angle in reading the dialogue, we could consider the *Sophist* as a work in logic; as Notomi indicates, "Modern logicians tend to look to the *Sophist* as one of the origins of Western rules of logic [for] It contains an explication of the logical status of negation, the first clear definition of statement (*logos*), that it consists of noun (*onoma*) and verb (*rhêma*), and definitions of truth and falsehood" (Notomi 1999, 5-6).

However, what is the one theme that runs throughout the dialogue? I think it is evident that the theme is the Shakespearean question of "what's in a *name*": even if we simply go by the count of the various concepts Plato discusses in the *Sophist*,[4] it becomes clear that (i) 'being' and (ii) 'call(ing)' together with 'name' are encountered most frequently in the dialogue. I will now provide a number of arguments for why

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[3] Unless otherwise indicated, the English quotations in the text from the *Sophist* are from Christopher Rowe's translation (Plato 2015)

[4] Of the 23,698 words of the translated dialogue (Plato 1921), the frequencies of occurrence of some key selected words are: Theaetetus: 615; Stranger: 599 (*these first two frequencies also give an indication of the number of times the conversation changes hands (581), including the number of times the speakers refer to each other*); **being(s): 187**; **call(ed/ing): 89**; **name(s): 88**; part(s): 71; true/truth: 67; kind(s): 52; sophist(s/ry): 47; soul: 39; false/falsehood: 35; word(s): 32; mind(s): 26; speech(es): 26; division(s): 25; image(s): 24; form(s): 22; sentence(s): 14; Parmenides: 10; philosopher: 10; theory: 8; science: 5

we could take the main question of the dialogue as 'what there *is* in a *name*' and read it as a linguistic project.[5]

Given that we are analysing a *dialogue*, one could say that my point in this section is insubstantial, because this is a conversation *through* language, and therefore it is of course a "linguistic project". But there is much more to this issue. To begin with, the motivating question of the dialogue is about language. It begins with Socrates asking: "was [the view of 'people around the place the visitor is from'] that ['sophist', 'expert in statesmanship' and 'philosopher'] were all one thing, or two – or did they distinguish three kinds, just as there are three names, and attach a kind to each of them, one for each name?" (217a5). Now, arguably, knowing what a sophist is, per se, is quite important. Plato deals with the same problem, or at least brings it to the attention of his readers, in many of his dialogues: The *Apology*, *Hippias Minor*, *Laches* (in relation to influences on Nicias), *Euthydemus* (and his brother Dionysodorus), *Gorgias*, *Meno* (Meno being a student of Gorgias), *Protagoras*, *Phaedrus* (in relation to Lysias), *Republic* (in relation to Thrasymachus), *Theaetetus* (Socrates speaking "on behalf of" Protagoras) and *Philebus* (Protarchus) all have sophistic connotations in one way or another. However, Socrates is also asking if the Visitor can define the *true sense* of the noun "sophist".

Furthermore, although the *Sophist* has the structure of a dialogue, I think it is clear that the conversation is essentially a monologue, where Theaetetus helps the Visitor make his points using terse responses that provide helpful pauses in the conversation. In fact, at one point the Visitor asks Theaetetus: "Are you agreeing with me because you recognize it for yourself, or do you have some sort of compulsion to say yes straightaway because the discussion has got you used to it?" (236d5). And in another part of the dialogue, he remarks: "It's plain, Theaetetus, that you have never seen a sophist" (239e1). Second, if we agree with these remarks, then we could posit that the Visitor's exercise could indeed be a work of introspection: could the Visitor not have had this conversation with himself, internally? Can the *Sophist* not act as a model for an internal dialogue through language? The Visitor hints at this at various places.

First, he says: "The only thing you and I have in common between us on the subject is the name, and we may well each have our own private view of the thing we call by that name" (218c1). Where could the "private view" of a thing we call by a name come from other than through introspection? Second, he states: "It's presumably absurd to allow that there are two names when you have posited just one thing […] And

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[5] I am not implying that the *Sophist* is the only dialogue that could be read this way. Other dialogues can be interpreted as having their own linguistic connotations. Regarding the *Protagoras*, for example, Christopher G. Healow discusses the sophist Prodicus who "doesn't seem to be concerned with describing the *actual* uses of language, nor does he ask about the roots of the standards of correctness [of names] themselves. Rather, he appears to be concerned merely with analyzing what proper usage of a language *would be*" (Healow 2017)

completely absurd to accept anyone's saying there is a name if there is no account to be given of it" (244c5/c10). We can ask, how might an initial account be given of a name, other than through the "private view" of introspection? Third: "Thought and speech are the same thing, with just this difference, that the first is an internal dialogue of the soul with itself that occurs without vocal expression, which is why it has the name we call it by. […] Whereas the stream that passes from the soul through the mouth together with sound is called speech" (263e1/e5). Of interest here is the "internal dialogue", which is reminiscent of the Visitor's earlier analogy (at 252c5) of the ventriloquist Eurycles: an internal source of dialogue for name assignments and meanings (see also **Figure 1**).

SECTION B: *The overall projects*

I have argued thus far that if we read the dialogue as a work on linguistics, there are hints in the text that introspection could be utilised as a primary means of assessing and giving accounts of names. Before we proceed further, however, I think it is important to ask if there might be any OP that could contextualise our search for the main message of the dialogue. To that end, is there a Platonic OP concerning language? When it comes to conjecturing about Plato's stance on our 'faculty' of language—what arguably makes us human and distinguishes us most profoundly from other species—one usually encounters the adage that 'learning is remembering'. This is a paraphrase of the 'argument from recollection' in *Phaedo* (referred to in ancient times as *On The Soul*), a middle-period dialogue where we read Cebes of Thebes as saying:

> "If it is true, Socrates, as you are fond of saying, that **our learning is nothing else than recollection**, then this would be an additional argument that we must necessarily have learned in some previous time what we now remember. But this is impossible if our soul did not exist somewhere before being born in this human form; and so by this argument also it appears that the soul is immortal." (72e/73a)[6]

In the history and philosophy of linguistics, these passages are taken to imply that Plato believed in an intuitive knowledge of language that children are born with, as opposed to what John Locke posited in the seventeenth century, where a child's experience is written on what was later termed as a 'blank slate'. *So, is innatism one of the OPs relevant to our question?* Perhaps, but I think we could narrow down this OP even further. Noam Chomsky, who has worked on generative linguistics since the 1950s, has argued that we are born with an innate capacity for language which is tuned with a very limited set of inputs to form an individual's eventual linguistic faculty. The limitedness of the input, also known as the problem of the "poverty of the stimulus", is key here. When discussing this problem in 1986, Chomsky referred to the thought experiment of learning geometry in the *Meno* and defined "Plato's problem", a problem "concerning human

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[6] This translation is from the publicly available 1966 translation by Harold N. Fowler (Plato 1966)

knowledge", as "*the problem of explaining how we can know so much given that we have such limited evidence*" (Chomsky 1986, xxv). Let us call "Plato's problem" '**OP1**'.

Chomsky expands on this further, writing that "the problem is to discover explanatory principles, often hidden and abstract, to make some sense of phenomena that seem on the surface chaotic, discordant, lacking any meaningful pattern" (Chomsky 1986, xxviii), and Bertrand Russell asks an analogous question: "how comes it that human beings, whose contacts with the world are brief and personal and limited, are nevertheless able to know as much as they do know?" (Russell 1948, 5). I think there is a second OP relevant to our discussion, inherently linked to OP1, that has to do with Plato's conception of the "mind" (see also **Figure 2**). The word I would like to focus on here is *dianoia*.[7] In the translation of the *Republic*, Paul Shorey (Plato 1969) wrote that "διανοίᾳ is used not in its special sense ('understanding'), but generally for the mind as opposed to the senses."[8] This statement was in the context of Socrates's apt depiction of the "mental" structure imposed on perception, which Shorey explained as follows: "a bronze sphere would be the original of its imitative reflection in water, but it is in turn only the imperfect imitation of the mathematical idea of a sphere",[9] the mathematical idea being situated nowhere other than in the mind.

In Harold N. Fowler's translation of the *Sophist* (Plato 1921), we see the same translation of *dianoia*: (i) In specifying "one large and grievous kind of ignorance", the Visitor says: "Thinking that one knows a thing when one does not know it. Through this, I believe, all the mistakes of the mind are caused in all of us" (229c5). (ii) Later, he asks "How then could a man either *utter in speech or even so much as conceive in his mind things which are not, or not-being, apart from number?*" (238b5). This is a crucial statement, because it assumes, reminiscent of modern cognitive science, that things are first conceived of in the mind, then externalised using an "utterance" faculty. It also makes a distinction for a "numerical" faculty, related to but independent of other faculties in the mind, which can deal with notions such as zero, etc. (iii) And finally, in again making a priority distinction between the mind and speech utterance, the Visitor says "for to think or say what is not—that is, I suppose, falsehood arising in mind or in words" (260c1). Christopher Rowe, in his recent translation of the *Sophist* (Plato 2015), translates 'διάνοια' as "thought", and points out that "the Visitor perhaps pretends to get [the word] from *dia*(*logos*) *an*(*eu phônês*), 'dialogue without voice'", which to me again hints at the voiceless internal dialogue of introspection happening in the mind. Let us, therefore, call Plato's hints of a mind (independent of voice utterance), tantamount to a "thought faculty", as '**OP2**'.

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[7] διάνοια; words from the original Greek are as per (Plato 1903)
[8] www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0168%3Abook%3D6&force=y#note349
[9] www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0168%3Abook%3D6&force=y#note348

SECTION C: *The specific project of the* Sophist

The Visitor cautions early on that "We should treat tracking down the kind, sophist, as a hard thing to accomplish" (218d1/d5), and indeed, as I will discuss in this section, providing a definition that would satisfy Socrates's initial question proves to be quite challenging. Having now discussed two relevant putative "overall projects" to contextualise our discussion, what is the dialogue's SP? The Neoplatonist philosopher Iamblichus (245-325 AD) posited primarily that, among other rules, "a dialogue must have only one *skopos*" (Notomi 1999, 12), i.e., one target, goal or aim that it pursues.[10] Following Iamblichus's direction, I would hazard to put forward the problem of "reference"—what we can intentionally choose to refer to using a name ('**SP1**') and what a name means for the speaker ('**SP2**')—as the main target of the dialogue.

Before continuing further, let us consider the following distinction regarding abstract nouns in Greek provided by Constance Meinwald:

> "Expressions of the form 'the Large,' 'the Beautiful,' 'the Just,' can be used in Greek to refer to two very different kinds of things. 'The Just,' for example, can refer on the one hand to something that happens to be just (or to whatever does), and on the other, to what it is about these things that is just. Similarly, 'the Beautiful' could be used of vases or of Helen, but could also be used to refer to what is beautiful about these things. Abstract nouns like 'justice' and 'beauty' come to be used increasingly in Plato's time as a way of being unambiguous in one's reference to the second kind of thing; Plato himself uses both forms of words extensively." (Meinwald 1992, 374)

Similarly, in the dialogue, we are dealing with the question of what *a* sophist is, as opposed to what *this or that* sophist is (an actual person whom one can point to). Let us now consider how the Visitor explains the intentional act of calling (i.e., referring to) things by a certain name (**SP1**), using terms like *proseîpon* (speak to, address) and *eîpon* (say).[11] He tells Theaetetus, "<u>let's</u> sum them all up by <u>calling them</u> productive expertise" (219b10), or "<u>let's call</u> imitation accompanied by belief 'belief-imitative' imitation, and imitation accompanied by knowledge a sort of scientific imitation" (267e1). At one point, when the Visitor talks about "[…] <u>calling it</u> by some such single name as 'strike-hunting'" and asking "Or could one suggest a better term", Theaetetus replies: "Let's not worry about the name; your suggestion will do as well as any" (220d1). In other words, Theaetetus is saying that the act of reference is the key, i.e., let's call this *X.* At other points, the Visitor himself suggests to disregard the exact "name tag" for *X*: "[regarding disputation about contractual matters] these still need to be registered as a form, given that the discussion has recognized it as something distinct, but it has not been given a name by people before and doesn't merit our giving it one now" (225c1). Similarly: "when someone uses his own body or voice to make your shape or voice appear much like his

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[10] σκοπός, from *sképtomai* ("I observe")
[11] "call": προσεῖπον, προσείπωμεν, προσειπεῖν; "say": εἶπον, εἴπῃ

own, this aspect of apparition-making is what we mostly tend to call imitation. […] Then *let's call this aspect* of it 'imitative', and locate it accordingly; as for all the rest of it, *let's indulge ourselves and leave it to one side for someone else to collect it together as a single whole and give it some appropriate name*" (267a5/a10/b1).

The SP discussed above, however, is only used in the dialogue for the more important project of finding out the internal meanings of words and names, i.e., the true meaning of "sophist" and a full account of its internal (mental) connotations. Here the emphasis is no longer on the act of calling things by a name, but on the name itself (**SP2**), for which Plato uses the terms *ónoma* (name)[12] and *eponymía* (nickname, sobriquet)[13]. But here the Visitor, and obviously anyone who embarks upon such an inquiry, faces the problem of having to give an account of one name using other names: "if we're going to claim that he possesses some sort of expertise in apparition-making, *that form of words will make it easy for him to get a lock on us, turning it back on us when we call him a maker of images and asking us what exactly we understand by an image in the first place*" (239c5/d1). Nevertheless, the Visitor perseveres in giving finer and more focused accounts at every turn—similar to a modern reader putting a concept in a corner of a Venn diagram. Theaetetus, at least on two occasions, appears pessimistic about this approach: "I for one am at a loss as to what I'm supposed to put forward as true about him [the sophist] – if I'm to say '*this* is what he genuinely is', and stick to it" (231c1); and also, "it seems catching the sophist will actually be impossible" (241c1).

When we read the Visitor's final formulation of what a sophist is, one may be left underwhelmed as to the final conclusion: "The expert in imitation, then, belonging to the contradiction-producing half of the dissembling part of belief-based expertise, the word-conjuring part of the apparition-making kind from image-making, a human sort of production marked off from its divine counterpart – if someone says that the one who is 'of this family kind, of this blood' is the real sophist, it seems his account will be the truest" (268c5/d1). For one thing, although just a supposition, we are not hearing this formulation from Socrates, so can we surmise that Plato is putting forward the Visitor's approach as one that he would not necessarily agree with? Regardless of this issue, it would seem as though truly *understanding* what a sophist is, is intractable, because we are unable to fully introspect into the meanings of names in the mind. Put simply, introspection can only go so far. Why is this so? Well, we can see that if one tries to circumvent the limits of introspection and follow an analytic method of division, we would conclude with the sophist being a producer of semblances, insincere and unknowing (Ionescu 2013). But one could find a "magician" who might also fit the

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[12] ὄνομα (ónoma), τοὔνομα (tü'nomä), ὀνόματος (onómatos), ὀνόματι (onómati), ὀνόμασιν (onómasin)
[13] επωνυμία (eponymía), ἐπωνυμίας

description of a "producer of semblances" (Macknik et al. 2008; Lamont and Henderson 2009), one who, at a particular instance or for a particular act of apparition-making, happens to also be "insincere and unknowing".

There is also the additional problem of capturing a sophist who is thought to be a sophist today—or is thought to engage in sophistic practices today—while not being thought so tomorrow. The following description by Russell I think is particularly apt:

> "One of the most notable victims of posterity's lack of judgment is the Eleatic Zeno. Having invented four arguments, all immeasurably subtle and profound, the grossness of subsequent philosophers pronounced him to be a mere ingenious juggler, and his arguments to be one and all sophisms. After two thousand years of continual refutation, these sophisms were reinstated, and made the foundation of a mathematical renaissance [by the mathematician Karl Weierstrass]." (Russell 1903, 347)

How could an account of sophism ever capture the complexity Russell describes? Plato shows that we can describe facets or attributes of the sophist in great detail, the same way one could describe the physical attributes of a colour in great depth (wavelength, perceptual responses, etc.), yet still not capture the 'essence' of a colour such as to be able to pass on that understanding to someone who has never seen that colour, or any colour for that matter, previously.

The problem the Visitor encounters in defining what the sophist is (**SP2**), beyond mere descriptive attributions, is the same puzzle that is arguably one of the most consequential and discussed problems in the philosophy of language by Chomsky. Daniel Stoljar writes that "Very few passages in recent philosophy of mind and language are as notorious as the famous London passage from Chomsky's *New Horizons in the Study of Language and Mind*" (Stoljar 2015):[14]

> "London is not a fiction, but considering it as London—that is, through the perspective of a city name, a particular type of linguistic expression—we accord it curious properties: […] we allow that under some circumstances, it could be completely destroyed and rebuilt somewhere else, years or even millennia later, still being London, the same city […] We can regard London with or without regard to its population; from one point of view it is the same city if its people desert it; from another, we can say that London came to have a harsher feel to it through the Thatcher years, a comment on how people act and live. Referring to London, we can be talking about a location or area, people who sometimes live there, the air above it (but not too high), buildings, institutions, etc., in various combinations (as in *London is so unhappy, ugly, and polluted that it should be destroyed and rebuilt 100 miles away*, still being the same city). *Such terms as London are used to talk about the actual world, but there neither are nor are believed to be things-in-the-world with the properties of the intricate modes of reference that a city name encapsulates*." (Chomsky 2000, 37)[15]

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[14] I had discussed this paragraph in the context of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* in (Ehsani 2018)
[15] The cited chapter was first published in (Chomsky 1992). The two works (combined) have been cited more than 2,800 times

It is into this very niche of the intellectual history of language that I think Plato's *Sophist* neatly fits.[16] A child, through intentional acts of referring to outside objects, comes to associate a name with a place or concept. That name, however, as the language faculty matures in the person, comes to have its own internal world, a world that is only partly open to introspection. This is a principal message that I read in the *Sophist*, and is in line with the "overall projects" of Plato that I described earlier. Based on this, when we read, as Christine J. Thomas describes, that "W. V. Quine places much of the blame on Plato for the development of a tradition of holding that meaningful names require corresponding objects as referents and for the consequent problem of nonbeing Quine sees as arising out of the tradition" (Thomas 2008), it appears that the evidence in so far as Plato's project is concerned points in the opposite direction.

Lastly, I would like to point out that although the focus of this essay was on Plato's philosophy and academic linguistics, the theme remains quite modern. For example, recently we read that Amharic "has no term to describe" stroke,[17] and so a new word has been introduced that "draws a very nice parallel with 'heart attack'" (Aseffa et al. 2019).

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[16] There is an interesting side observation which can be made about Chomsky's example of the grammatically-correct sentence "colorless green ideas sleep furiously" which lacks semantic sense (Chomsky 1957, 15), and the following instance in the *Sophist*: "'walks runs sleeps', and the other verbs that signal actions – even if someone says all of them in succession, it won't make them the slightest bit more into speech" (262b5). Here, "walks runs sleeps" is grammatically incorrect, but in terms of its semantics, our minds can immediately think of a few possible interpretations, and questions: e.g., "[who] walks[,] runs [and] sleeps"? This resembles the structure of the title of the book "Eats, Shoots & Leaves" (Lynne Truss, 2003), where a punctuation mark forces the reader to interpret the three words as verbs

[17] "Ethiopians didn't have a term for 'stroke,' so this Dallas doctor created one," *Dallas Morning News* 11 March 2019 (dallasnews.com/news/science-medicine/2019/03/11/ethiopians-didnt-term-stroke-dallas-doctor-createdone)
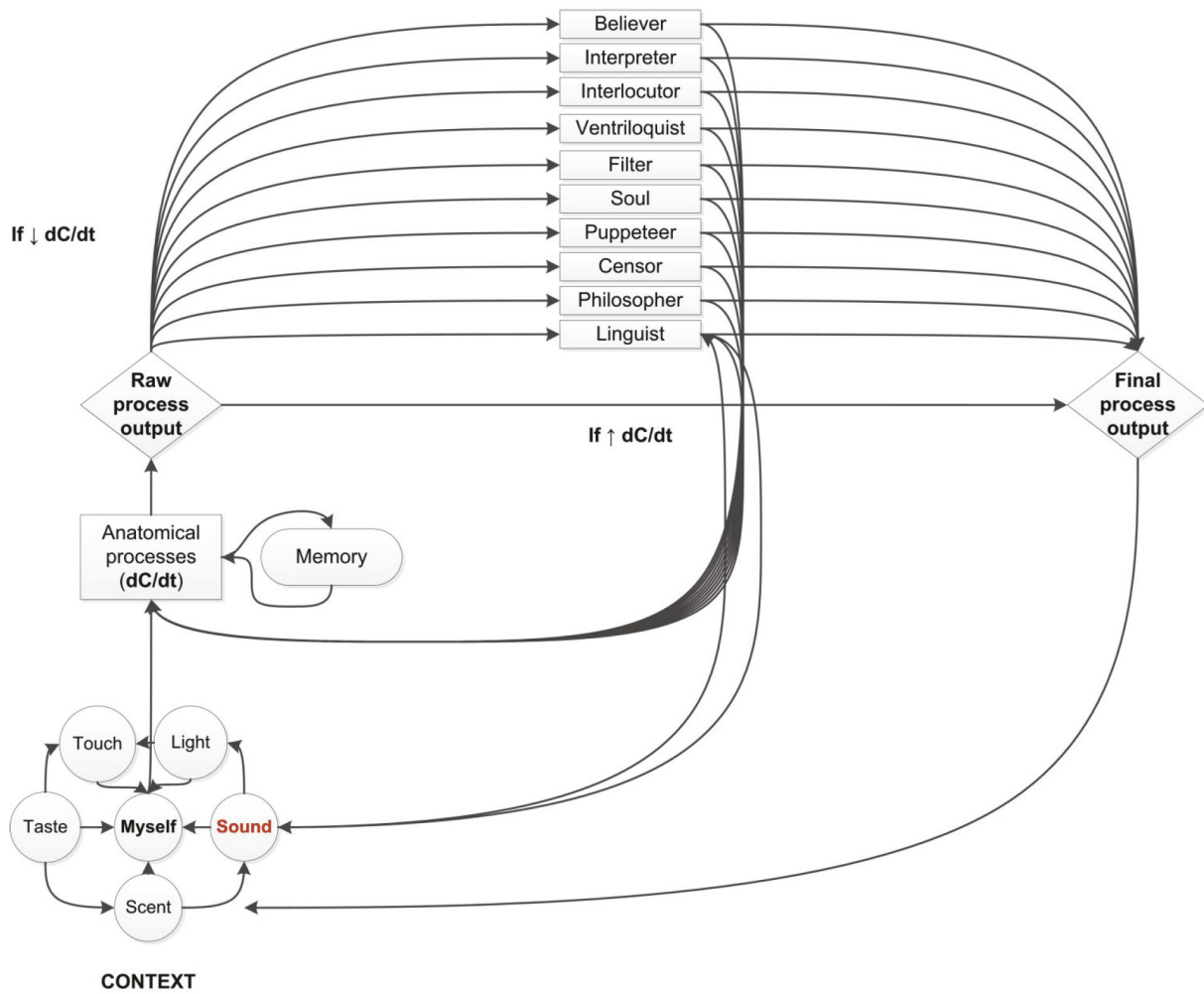
Figure 1. The place of an "internal ventriloquist" as an interlocutor in the mind interpreting perceptual inputs can be seen in this model of a conscious perceptual process, where (dC/dt) is the rate of change in the outside context (Ehsani 2011).
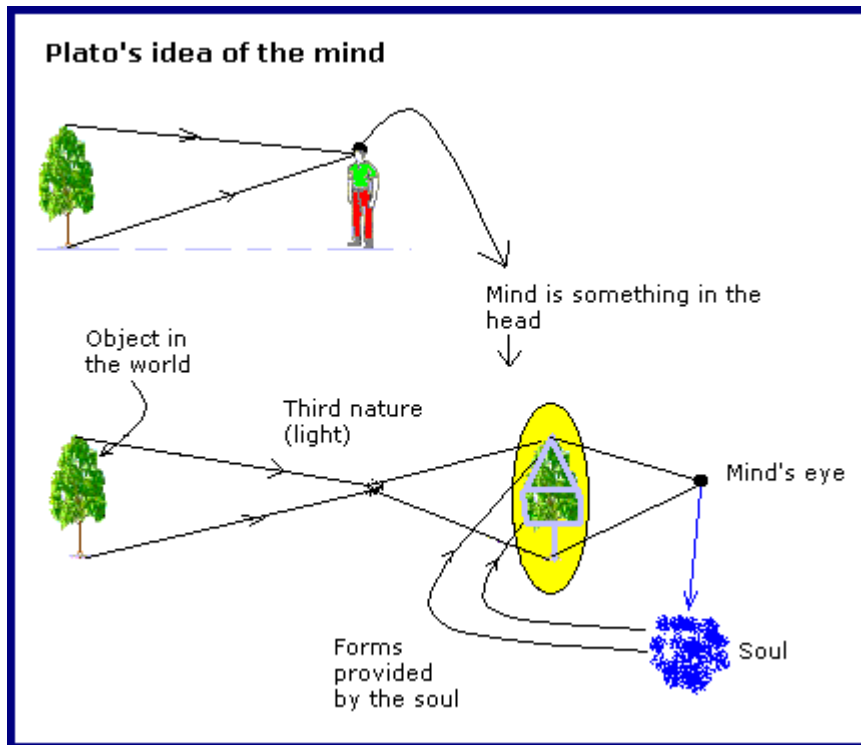
Figure 2. For illustrative purposes, this is one instance of an interpretation of Plato's model for the mind's perception of an outside object from the online book "Consciousness Studies" (*Wikibooks*).[18] The interpretation relies mostly on the following passages from the *Republic*:

    (i)   "Though vision may be in the eyes and its possessor may try to use it, and though color be present, yet without the presence of a third thing specifically and naturally adapted to this purpose [presumably light], you are aware that vision will see nothing and the colors will remain invisible." (507d/e)

    (ii)   "The very things which they [students of geometry and reckoning and such subjects] mould and draw, which have shadows and images of themselves in water, these things they treat in their turn as only images, but what they really seek is to get sight of those realities which can be seen only by the mind." (510e/511a)

The following observation by Socrates in the *Phaedo*, which continues on the passage in **Section B**, is also relevant:

    (iii)   "It is possible, on perceiving a thing by the sight or the hearing or any other sense, to call to mind from that perception another thing which had been forgotten, which was associated with the thing perceived, whether like it or unlike it; so that, as I said, one of two things is true, either we are all born knowing these things and know them all our lives, or afterwards, those who are said to learn merely remember, and learning would then be recollection." (76a)[19]

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[18] en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Consciousness_Studies/Early_Ideas
[19] (Plato 1966)

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