Theophrastus' De sensibus is a unique source of information concerning earlier Greek philosophers' opinions on sense perception and perceptible properties. If his work had not survived, we would lack details pertinent to understanding Parmenides' obscure lines on human thought (fr. 16 DK), and we would know very little

1 I offer this paper as a sixtieth birthday present to my friend Jaap Mansfeld. As the world's greatest expert on the doxography of Greek philosophy, he will be the first to spot its shortcomings and the first to build on anything of value it contains.

Much of my material was presented to the Theophrastus conference, which took place on Lesbos in August 1989. I am grateful for the comments from participants that I received on this occasion, and also to Tom Rosenmeyer, who helped me to improve this final version. After I had submitted it, the editors recalled my attention to H. Baltussen's chapter, 'Theophrastus' De sensibus and Plato's Timaeus', which forms part of his doctoral dissertation, Theophrastus on Theories of Perception. Argument and Purpose in the De sensibus, written under the direction of Jaap Mansfeld and Hans Gottschalk, and published as vol. VI of Quaestiones infinitae. Publications of the Department of Philosophy, Utrecht University (Utrecht 1993). Although there is some overlap in the material we discuss and in our respective findings, our approaches are so different that I find it best to let my original text stand for the most part. My purpose is largely limited to comparing Theophrastus' reports on Plato, as clearly as possible, with the relevant passages of the Timaeus. Baltussen's study offers much more in the way of attempts to explain and partly justify Theophrastus' procedures.

2 Assessments of Theophrastus' accuracy in the De sensibus vary considerably. Citing Stratton (n. 3 below), Charles Kahn wrote: 'The performance of Theophrastus here [i.e. his treatment of Plato], in the sole case where we can fully control his use of source material, is fine enough to justify a modern editor's praise of the "high accuracy" of his "dispassionate and marvellously impartial report", Anaximander and the Origins of Greek Cosmology (New York 1960) 21. Yet, Stratton himself also admitted that Theophrastus, in his criticism of Plato, 'seems often to miss the point' (p. 53). For a very different assessment, cf. J. McDiarmid, who, in his article 'Theophrastus on the Presocratic Causes', HSCP 61 (1953) 133, wrote: 'The fragments considered disclose no evidence that Theophrastus employed his knowledge of the Presocratics in such a way as to exercise independent judgment about them ... He has frequently misrepresented his source and has exaggerated the faults present in it. It must be concluded that, with regard to the Presocratic causes at least, he is a thoroughly biased witness and is even less trustworthy than Aristotle'. To place this comment in perspective, note J. Mansfeld's comment in his Studies in the Historiography of Greek Philosophy (Assen–Maastricht 1990) 24: 'There is no doxography in the proper sense of the word in Aristotle or Plato, or even in Theophrastus, because the doxai at issue are presented from a systematical point of view in order to further the discussion of problems of a systematical nature'.

THEOPHRASTUS' DE SENSIBUS ON PLATO

A. A. LONG
about the relevant doctrines of Alcmaeon, Anaxagoras and Demo­critus. Theophrastus' lengthy treatment of Empedocles includes
many points that could not be inferred from the surviving frag­ments or from other secondary sources. In one instance only,
Plato, we are able to compare Theophrastus' reports with his own
source. Although he does not name the Timaeus, all his informa­tion
about Plato in the De sensibus, as G.M. Stratton observed, seems
‘to be drawn exclusively from’ that dialogue. 3 Indeed, according to
the same scholar, when he deals in the last part of the work (Sens.
83-91) with Plato’s treatment of perceptibles (αἰσθητά), Theophras­
tus preserves Plato’s order of exposition ‘without a single change’.
‘This’, he continues, ‘with the various verbal similarities, makes
one almost see Theophrastus at work with the Timaeus spread
before him’. 4 My purpose in this paper is very simple—to exhibit
what happens when we study Theophrastus’ treatment of Plato in
the De sensibus on the basis of Stratton’s observation. 5

At the beginning of the work Theophrastus divides the majority
of opinions concerning αἰσθητά into two groups: those that explain
it ‘by likeness’, and those that explain it ‘by the opposite’. As pro­ponents
of the first explanation he cites Parmenides, Empedocles and
Plato. In aligning Plato with Empedocles, Theophrastus follows
Aristotle (De an. I 2, 404b16) whose justification for the claim is
tendentious if not impenetrable. 6 After elaborating on the two types
of explanation, Theophrastus makes the following observation:

As for each particular sense, practically all of them are neglectful,
but Empedocles does try to refer them too to likeness (Sens. 3).

Theophrastus returns to Plato, after a page on Parmenides, with
these words:

3 G.M. Stratton, Theophrastus and the Greek physiological psychology before
Aristotle (London–New York 1917) 159. Stratton’s text, which I draw on here,
is substantially that of Diels in his Doxographi Graeci. A new Budé text is bring
prepared by André Laks and Glenn Most.

4 Ibid. 203.

5 Baltussen (n. 1 above), p. 129, says: ‘We should certainly not imagine
Theophrastus at work’ in the way Stratton intimated. I demur. For even if, as
is probable, Theophrastus is writing on the basis of excerpts of the Timaeus,
Baltussen himself assumes (p. 127) that ‘Theophrastus has consulted the (com­plete) Tim. text’, and acknowledges the verbatim character of some of his
reports.

6 Aristotle ad loc. refers to ‘Plato in the Timaeus’. R.D. Hicks, in his great
commentary on the De anima, comments: ‘The reference is to the ψυχογονία
in Timaeus 34C sqq.’, and ‘that like is known by like is the assumption under­lying the language of Tim. 47A-C’. I confess to doubt about both proposals.