

The Theaetetus as an indirect dialogue: On the difficulties in writing philosophy

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The *Theaetetus* is an indirect dialogue. By ‘an indirect dialogue,’ I mean the dialogue does not directly begin with its main philosophical discussion that is led by its supposed leading character. It may be read or retold by someone else, even someone not present in the main discussion. Among Plato’s authentic dialogues, there are four such ones—*Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Theaetetus*, and *Parmenides*. This special literary form looks odd, considering Plato’s claim on difficulties in writing philosophy. For if one main difficulty is caused by distance between readers and the writer, the form of indirect dialogue seems to make readers more distant from the writer, i.e. Plato himself in the cases.

In this paper, I will take the *Theaetetus* as an example, to investigate Plato’s attitude toward the relationship between readers and him. For the opening plot (142a-143c) shows that it is a dialogue actually read. As readers of Plato’s dialogues, we do share similar experience with Terpsion, who read (by listening to a slave-boy’s reading) a written dialogue between Socrates and Theaetetus in the *Theaetetus*.

Plato’s complaint about the difficulties in writing philosophy can be found in the *Phaedrus* 274b ff. and his *Letter VII* 341a-345a. According to these texts, philosophy must be achieved after a long live conversation. Written words are unable to converse with readers vividly, but left to be misinterpreted. In spite of the difficulties, Plato never avoids being read. A traditional defense for Plato’s writing is that his dialogues are written in a similar form to a live conversation. That is, the form of dialogue imitates Plato’s dialectic, and is consistent of questions and answers. Usually, a live conversation is supposed as an oral one.

But if it is the case, the *Theaetetus* as an indirect dialogue just forms a counter-example: it is uncovered that the dialogue is written. Plato does not try to make it a first-handed oral live conversation. From this point of view, I doubt whether a first-handed oral communication is unconditionally superior to an indirect written one. Besides the form of indirect dialogue, Plato obviously accepts some second-handed material within the *Theaetetus*. E. g. Protagoras’ doctrine (151e ff.), the dream theory (201d-206b) and so on. ‘A live long conversation’ is not necessary to exclude written or indirect words. Further, if the distance between readers and Plato is unavoidable, to ask for an oral and direct dialogue is vain. In order to make these philosophical conversations ‘live,’ the form of dialogue should not just ‘imitate’ the dialectic, but itself must be a dialectic practice, no matter written or spoken, indirect or direct.