

CRATYLUS

This dialogue is on a topic of great interest to Plato's contemporaries that figures little in our own discussions in philosophy of language: the 'correctness of names'. When a name (or, for that matter, any other word or phrase) is the correct one for naming a given thing or performing another linguistic function, what is the source of this correctness? Socrates canvasses two opposed positions. The first is defended by his close friend Hermogenes (Hermogenes was in Socrates' entourage on the day of his death), the impecunious brother of Callicles, the rich patron of sophists at Athens in whose house the drama of Protagoras is set. Hermogenes adopts the minimalist position that correctness is by convention: whatever is agreed in a community to be the name to use for a thing is the correct one in that community. The other position is defended by Cratylus, a historical person mentioned also by Aristotle, whose own information about him may however derive from what the character Cratylus says in this dialogue. Cratylus adopts the obscure 'naturalist' position that each name names only whatever it does 'by nature'—no matter what the conventions in any community may be. As a first approximation, this means that under expert etymological examination each name can be reduced to a disguised description correctly revealing the nature of the thing named by it—and that revelatory capacity is what makes it the correct name for that thing. Socrates examines the views of each disputant and attempts to resolve the conflict between them. But he concludes that the knowledge of names—the etymological art professing to reveal the true nature of things by working out the ultimate descriptive meanings of the words we use—is of no real importance. All it can ever reveal is what those who first introduced our words thought was the nature of reality, and that might well be wrong—indeed, Socrates employs etymological principles themselves to argue that the Greek language indicates, falsely, that the nature of reality is constant change and flux. To learn the truth we have to go behind words altogether, to examine with our minds, and grasp directly the permanent, unchanging natures of things as they are in themselves: Platonic Forms.

Readers are always puzzled at the fact that Plato has Socrates devote more than half his discussion to proposing etymological analyses of a whole series of names, beginning with the names of the gods. We should bear in mind that, when Plato was writing, expertise in etymology was highly regarded, precisely as a means of discovering the ultimate truth about things through coming to possess knowledge of names. At least part of Plato's purpose seems to be to establish Socrates' credentials as a first-rate practitioner of the art of etymology

as then practiced, better than the 'experts' themselves. When Socrates then also argues that knowledge of names is an unimportant thing, he can be taken to speak with the authority not just of philosophy but even of etymological science itself—as an insider, not an outsider looking in. Somewhat similarly, in Phaedrus and Menexenus philosophy is credited with the unique ability actually to do well what rhetoric, another prestigious contemporary expertise, professed to be able to do on its own.

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383 HERMOGENES: Shall we let Socrates here join our discussion?

CRATYLUS: If you like.

HERMOGENES: Cratylus says, Socrates, that there is a correctness of name for each thing, one that belongs to it by nature. A thing's name isn't whatever people agree to call it—some bit of their native language that applies to it—but there is a natural correctness of names, which is the same for everyone, Greek or foreigner. So, I ask him whether his own name is truly 'Cratylus'. He agrees that it is. "What about Socrates?" I say. "His name is 'Socrates'." "Does this also hold for everyone else? Is the name we call him his name?" "It certainly doesn't hold of you. Your name isn't 'Hermogenes', not even if everyone calls you by it." Eagerly, I ask him to tell me what he means. He responds sarcastically and makes nothing clear. He pretends to possess some private knowledge which would force me to agree with him and say the very things about names that he says himself, were he to express it in plain terms. So, if you can somehow interpret Cratylus' oracular utterances, I'd gladly listen. Though I'd really rather find out what you yourself have to say about the correctness of names, if that's all right with you.

384 SOCRATES: Hermogenes, son of Hipponicus, there is an ancient proverb that "fine things are very difficult" to know about, and it certainly isn't easy to get to know about names. To be sure, if I'd attended Prodicus' fifty-drachma lecture course, which he himself advertises as an exhaustive treatment of the topic, there'd be nothing to prevent you from learning the precise truth about the correctness of names straightaway. But as I've heard only the one-drachma course, I don't know the truth about it. Nonetheless, I am ready to investigate it along with you and Cratylus. As for his denying that your real name is 'Hermogenes', I suspect he's making fun of you. Perhaps he thinks you want to make money but fail every time you try.¹ In any case, as I was saying, it's certainly difficult to know

Translated by C.D.C. Reeve.

1. Hermes is the god of profit and 'Hermogenes' means 'son of Hermes.' A different account of the name is given at 407e–408b.

about these matters, so we'll have to conduct a joint investigation to see who is right, you or Cratylus.

HERMOGENES: Well, Socrates, I've often talked with Cratylus—and with lots of other people, for that matter—and no one is able to persuade me that the correctness of names is determined by anything besides convention and agreement. I believe that any name you give a thing is its correct name. If you change its name and give it another, the new one is as correct as the old. For example, when we give names to our domestic slaves, the new ones are as correct as the old. No name belongs to a particular thing by nature, but only because of the rules and usage of those who establish the usage and call it by that name. However, if I'm wrong about this, I'm ready to listen not just to Cratylus but to anyone, and to learn from him too.

SOCRATES: Perhaps you're on to something, Hermogenes, let's see. Are you saying that whatever anyone decides to call² a particular thing is its name? 385

HERMOGENES: I am.

SOCRATES: Whether it is a private individual or a community that does so?

HERMOGENES: Yes.

SOCRATES: What about this? Suppose I call one of the things that are—for instance, the one we now call 'man'—suppose I give *that* the name 'horse' and give the one we now call 'horse' the name 'man'. Will the same thing have the public name 'man' but the private name 'horse'? Is that what you mean?

HERMOGENES: Yes.³ 385b1

SOCRATES: So whatever each person says is the name of something, for him, that is its name? d

HERMOGENES: Yes.

2. Reading *ho ean thēi kalein* in a2.

3. Following Schofield, *Classical Quarterly* 22 (1972), we transfer 385b2–d1 to follow 387c5.

d SOCRATES: Perhaps it will seem absurd, Hermogenes, to think that things become clear by being imitated in letters and syllables, but it is absolutely unavoidable. For we have nothing better on which to base the truth of primary names. Unless you want us to behave like tragic poets, who introduce a *deus ex machina* whenever they're perplexed. For we, too, could escape our difficulties by saying that the primary names are correct because they were given by the gods. But is that the best account we can give? Or
 e is it this one: that we got them from foreigners, who are more ancient than we are? Or this: that just as it is impossible to investigate foreign names, so it is impossible to investigate the primary ones because they are too
 426 ancient? Aren't all these merely the clever excuses of people who have no account to offer of how primary names are correctly given? And yet regardless of what kind of excuse one offers, if one doesn't know about the correctness of primary names, one cannot know about the correctness of derivative ones, which can only express something by means of those others about which one knows nothing. Clearly, then, anyone who claims to have a scientific understanding of derivative names must first and
 b foremost be able to explain the primary ones with perfect clarity. Otherwise he can be certain that what he says about the others will be worthless. Or do you disagree?

HERMOGENES: No, Socrates, not in the least.

SOCRATES: Well, my impressions about primary names seem to me to be entirely outrageous and absurd. Nonetheless, I'll share them with you, if you like. But if you have something better to offer, I hope you'll share it with me.

HERMOGENES: Have no fear, I will.

c SOCRATES: First off, 'r' seems to me to be a tool for copying every sort of motion (*kinēsis*).—We haven't said why motion has this name, but it's

51. See 401a.

clear that it means *'hesis'* ('a going forth'), since in ancient times we used *'e'* in place of *'ē'*. The first part comes from *'kiein'*, a non-Attic name equivalent to *'ienai'* ('moving'). So if you wanted to find an ancient name corresponding to the present *'kinēsis'*, the correct answer would be *'hesis'*. But nowadays, what with the non-Attic word *'kiein'*, the change from *'e'* to *'ē'*, and the insertion of *'n'*, we say *'kinēsis'*, though it ought to be *'kieinēsis'*. *'Stasis'* ('rest') is a beautified version of a name meaning the opposite of *'ienai'* ('moving').—In any case, as I was saying, the letter *'r'* seemed to the name-giver to be a beautiful tool for copying motion, at any rate he often uses it for this purpose. He first uses this letter to imitate motion in the name *'rhein'* ('flowing') and *'rhoē'* ('flow") themselves. Then in *'tromos'* ('trembling') and *'trechein'* ('running'), and in such verbs as *'krouein'* ('striking'), *'thrauein'* ('crushing'), *'ereikein'* ('rending'), *'thruptein'* ('breaking'), *'kermatizein'* ('crumbling'), *'rhumbein'* ('whirling'), it is mostly *'r'* he uses to imitate these motions. He saw, I suppose, that the tongue was most agitated and least at rest in pronouncing this letter, and that's probably why he used it in these names. He uses *'i'*, in turn, to imitate all the small things that can most easily penetrate everything. Hence, in *'ienai'* ('moving') and *'hiesthai'* ('hastening'), he uses *'i'* to do the imitating. Similarly, he uses *'phi'*, *'psi'*, *'s'*, and *'z'* to do the imitating in such names as *'psuchron'* ('chilling'), *'zeon'* ('seething'), *'seiesthai'* ('shaking'), and *'seismos'* ('quaking'), because all these letters are pronounced with an expulsion of breath. Indeed, whenever the name-giver wants to imitate some sort of blowing or hard breathing (*phusōdes*), he almost always seems to employ them. He also seems to have thought that the compression and stopping of the power of the tongue involved in pronouncing *'d'* and *'t'* made such names as *'desmos'* ('shackling') and *'stasis'* ('rest') appropriately imitative. And because he observed that the tongue glides most of all in pronouncing *'l'*, he uses it to produce a resemblance in *'olisthanein'* ('glide') itself, and in such names as *'leion'* ('smooth'), *'liparon'* ('sleek'), *'kollōdes'* ('viscous'), and the like. But when he wants to imitate something cloying, he uses names, such as *'glischron'* ('gluey'), *'gluku'* ('sweet'), and *'gloiōdes'* ('clammy'), in which the gliding of the tongue is stopped by the power of the *'g'*. And because he saw that *'n'* is sounded inwardly, he used it in *'endon'* ('within') and *'entos'* ('inside'), in order to make the letters copy the things. He put an *'a'* in *'mega'* ('large') and an *'ē'* in *'mēkos'* ('length') because these letters are both pronounced long. He wanted *'o'* to signify roundness, so he mixed lots of it into the name *'gongulon'* ('round'). In the same way, the rule-setter apparently used the other letters or elements as likenesses in order to make a sign or name for each of the things that are, and then compounded all the remaining names out of these, imitating the things they name. That, Hermogenes, is my view of what it means to say that names are correct—unless, of course, Cratylus disagrees.