Plato on Conventionalism

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Plato's *Cratylus* opens with discussion and refutation of a 'conventionalist' position regarding the correctness of names.[1] As advanced by Hermogenes, conventionalism centres on the thesis that there is no 'natural' correctness of names, beyond convention and compact (384c10-d1, d6-8). Moreover, names can be changed at will with no loss of correctness, and the convention which makes a name correct may be restricted to a single individual (384d3-6, 385a4-5). Socrates disposes of this view swiftly and decisively. He begins by eliciting from Hermogenes a rejection of Protagorean relativism, and the corresponding admission that things – including actions – have determinate, mind-independent natures of their own (385e-7b). Socrates then notes that naming is an action and a name the tool for performing it (387b-8a). So things must be named in accordance with their natures and with the nature of naming, using not just any name but one naturally suited to the task at hand. The making and use of such names are matters of expert skill (387d-390e).

Hermogenes has not impressed the interpreters. Gosling pretty much sums it up: "A dim interlocutor is a dialogue writer's godsend."[2] According to Charles Kahn, "Hermogenes' statement of the convention-thesis is of course dreadfully confused, since he makes no distinction between the silly Humpty-Dumpty theory of naming ('The name of *x* is whatever I call it') and the more serious view of language as a social institution, with word-thing correlations conventionally established by the tradition of

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[1] In keeping with standard Greek usage, 'name,' *onoma*, is used in the *Cratylus* for common nouns as well as proper names; at various points we also find adjectives (412c2, e1), verbs in the infinitive form (414a8-b1) and participles (421c5-6) described as names. And as has been widely recognised, names in the *Cratylus* are generally taken to bear descriptive content, as Greek proper names often manifestly did. (See J.V. Luce, "Plato on Truth and Falsity in Names," *Classical Quarterly* 19 (1969), pp. 222-232 and Gail Fine, "Plato on Naming," *Philosophical Quarterly* 27 (1977), pp. 290-301.) Much is made in the *Cratylus* of Cratylus' claim that the name 'Hermogenes,' with the sense 'descendant of Hermes,' is not a correct name for Hermogenes (383b6-7, 384c3-6, 407e-408b).

[2] J.C.B. Gosling, *Plato* (London, 1973), p. 204.

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a particular language."[3] As this suggests, Hermogenes' legitimation of private naming conventions has been the particular target of exegetical scorn. It has been found incompatible with the central thesis of conventionalism;[4] it has been found hopelessly counterintuitive.[5] It has been claimed to collapse the distinction between name-giving and the use of an established name.[6] It has been taken to have the plainly unacceptable consequence that we cannot name incorrectly, or (*a fortiori*) speak falsely, or engage in dialectic.[7] Even Timothy Baxter, who in his important recent book on the *Cratylus* makes a charitable bid to rehabilitate Hermogenes, at the same time maintains that he, like Cratylus, "has a theory of lan-

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[3] Charles Kahn, "Language and Ontology in the *Cratylus*," in *Exegesis and Argument*, ed. E.N. Lee, A.P.D. Mourelatos, R.M. Rorty (New York, 1973), pp. 158-9.

[4] For example, Grote writes that Hermogenes "is made to maintain two opinions which are not identical, but opposed. 1. That names are significant by habit and convention, and not by nature. 2. That each man may and can give any name which he pleases to any object (pp. 384-385)." Grote notes that it is the first of these which is really at issue in the *Cratylus*: he adds that, since naming *ad lib.* would undermine communication, "the second opinion is therefore not a consequence of the first, but an implied contradiction" of it (George Grote, *Plato and the Other Companions of Sokrates* (2nd edition, London, 1888) 4 vols., vol. 3, p. 285 n. 1).

[5] For example Kretzmann speaks of an "unbearable burden of a doctrine of autonomous idiolects" (Norman Kretzmann, "Plato on the Correctness of Names," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 8 (1971), pp. 126-138, p. 127).

[6] See Bernard Williams, "Cratylus' Theory of Names and Its Refutation," in *Language and Logos*, edd. Malcolm Schofield and Martha Nussbaum (Cambridge, 1982). Williams contrasts "that radical Humpty-Dumpty view which Hermogenes offers early on (384d1-2, 385a) as one version of what he opposes to Cratylus" with the view "that what is Y's name depends on 'agreement and custom,'" as affirmed more clearly later by Socrates (p. 90).

[7] According to M.M. MacKenzie, 'Hermogenes espouses an extreme theory whereby "whatever anyone posits as the name for something, that is its correct name" (384d2-3). Since . . . any utterance can be characterised as naming, it turns out that all utterances, private to the utterer, are correct namings. For Hermogenes, therefore, there is no distinction to be drawn between the establishment of a name and its use, since any occasion of naming counts as both. And it follows that all naming is correct . . .' ("Putting the *Cratylus* in its Place," *Classical Quarterly* 36 (1986), pp. 124-50, p. 126). According to Nicholas Denyer, Hermogenes and Cratylus both "have views about the correctness of names from which it follows that no false statements can ever be made." (*Language, Thought and Falsehood in Ancient Greek Philosophy* (London, 1991), p. 71) On true and false names, see further notes 14 and 17 below. That Hermogenes' views preclude dialectic is claimed by R. Weingartner, *The Unity of the Platonic Dialogue* (Indianapolis, 1973), pp. 16-21; and by Timothy M.S. Baxter in *The Cratylus: Plato's Critique of Naming* (Leiden, 1992), p. 18, cf. p. 21.

guage that rules out productive discussion."[8] Finally, Hermogenes' position has been read as tantamount to Protagorean relativism. For as Protagorean relativism guarantees the infallibility of our judgements, so does conventionalism guarantee the irrefutability of the acts of naming whereby we express them. In fact, a general Protagoreanism seems to be the most natural grounding for conventionalism: we can just apply the Protagorean thesis that all our judgements are true to the particular case of judgements about how to name.[9]

Though there are significant variations among the interpretations I have cited, all ascribe to Hermogenes versions of what we may call 'anything goes' conventionalism. 'Anything goes' inasmuch as all acts of naming are equally correct, and we are all infallibly masters of our own private languages. This 'anything goes' reading of Hermogenes has important consequences for the interpretation of the *Cratylus* as a whole. For, as I have noted, the first major argument of the dialogue is a refutation of conventionalism (386e-390e): but if this amounts only to the rejection of an outlandish straw man, Plato's options remain broadly open. In particular, the refutation of 'anything goes' conventionalism need not entail rejection of a plausible modern sort of conventionalism about language, one which in effect restricts correctness to publicly shared names by defining 'convention' in terms of interpersonal expectations.[10] Such a result is particularly appealing because of the way the argument of the *Cratylus* develops. By the end of the dialogue, the alternative theory, the Cratylan thesis of a 'natural correctness' of names, has also come in for some damaging criticism (433e-5c); and convention has been rehabilitated as having some standing in determining correctness (434e-5c). Accordingly, the *Cratylus* is often interpreted as having for its final result an endorsement (albeit, perhaps, a half-hearted or reluctant one) of conventionalism.[11] But since the initial refutation of Hermogenes is never revisited, this outcome would

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[8] Baxter (*op. cit.* n. 7), p. 18. Another attempt to defend Hermogenes is presented by Jetske Rijlaarsdam, *Platon über die Sprache, ein Kommentar zum Kratylos* (Utrecht, 1978), see pp. 105-6, p. 155.

[9] According to Nicholas White, conventionalism entails Protagoreanism and is an instance of it (Nicholas P. White, *Plato on Knowledge and Reality* (Indianapolis, 1976), p. 133, p. 149 n. 3, p. 150 n. 9). Michael Palmer holds that Hermogenes is in fact committed to Protagorean relativism without recognising it (Michael Palmer, *Names, Reference and Correctness in Plato's Cratylus* (New York, 1988), pp. 44-50).

[10] See David Lewis, "Languages and Language" (*Philosophical Papers* (Oxford, 1983); note especially the definition of a convention on pp. 164-5; but cf. note 20 below. See also, more extensively, Lewis's *Convention* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969).

[11] The crucial, but frustratingly wishy-washy passage is Socrates' conclusion at

render the dialogue flatly incoherent – unless we can take Hermogenes to represent a deviant version of conventionalism, distinct from another, more promising kind to which Plato may turn in the end.

I cannot here discuss all the issues raised by this line of interpretation, but I will try to show that it is founded on a mistake: Hermogenes' conventionalism is not in fact of the 'anything goes' variety. On the contrary. Hermogenes' position is presented, not as far-fetched and subversive in its implications, but as commonsensical and reasonably well supported: what inspires Plato to reject it is his sense that it is perniciously uncritical of our established naming practices. For the crucial feature of Hermogenes' conventionalism, I will argue, is that it entails the thesis I will term *conservatism* about names: all our actual or positive names (i.e., everything socially recognised as a name) are *ipso facto* correct. Hermogenes' conventionalism is important as a comparatively reflective and plausible way of defending this endorsement of the given; his legitimation of private naming is merely an unavoidable corollary to this defence. By disposing of Hermogenes' conventionalism, Plato disposes of conservatism and clears the ground for a critical, revisionary inquiry into naming. In fact, I will suggest that his whole project in the *Cratylus* is to search for a standard of correctness for names which is independent of our conventions and so can be used to evaluate them – just as in other dialogues he searches for a standard against which to judge constitutions or statesmen (I will return to this political parallel at the end). This interpretation of Hermogenes' conventionalism as essentially conservative amounts to something of a defence of his position against readings which portray it as incoherent, subjectivistic or just plain silly. But it also makes conventionalism a starting-point soon to be transcended, in no way an equal competitor with naturalism in Plato's thinking about language.

435c-d; the principal support for whatever reinstatement of conventionalism here takes place is to be found in the discussion of the name *sklêrotês* at 434c-5a. For the interpretation of Socrates' conclusion as conventionalist, see Malcolm Schofield, "The Dénouement of the *Cratylus*," in *Language and Logos* (*op. cit.* n. 6). See also Susan Levin, "What's in a Name?: A Reconsideration of the *Cratylus*' Historical Sources and Topics," *Ancient Philosophy* 15 (1995), pp. 91-115, see pp. 107-8; Thomas Wheaton Bestor, "Plato's Semantics and Plato's *Cratylus*," *Phronesis* 25 (1980), pp. 306-330; and Richard Robinson, "A Criticism of Plato's *Cratylus*" (first pub. 1956), in his *Essays in Greek Philosophy* (Oxford, 1969).

I. What Conventionalism Is

Let us begin by taking a closer look at the text.[12] Hermogenes opens the discussion by alluding to the central thesis of his opponent, Cratylus: there is a 'natural correctness' of names. Our first evidence for Hermogenes' position comes indirectly in his explanation of what Cratylus means to deny: that a name is (1) "what people call a thing by, having made a compact so to call it [*sunthemenoi kalein kalôsi*], uttering a piece of their voice" (383a6-7). Hermogenes then goes on to state his own view directly:

> (2) I can't believe that there is any other correctness of a name than compact [*sunthêkê*] and agreement [*homologia*]. (384c10-d1)

In explicating 'compact,' Hermogenes associates it with the changeability of names:

> (3) For it seems to me that any name someone sets down for [*thêtai*] a thing is correct; and if one then changes [*metathêtai*] it for another and no longer calls [*kalêi*] it by the first, the new name is no less correct than the previous one – just as we change the names of our slaves, and the name we change it to is no less correct than the one previously set down [*tou proteron keimenou*]. For no name has naturally arisen by nature [*pephukenai phusei*] for any particular thing, but by the convention [*nomôi*] and custom [*ethei*] of those who are accustomed [*ethisantôn*] so to call [*kalountôn*] it. (384d2-9)

And in response to Socrates' questioning, he allows that the naming conventions of lone individuals are just as correct as those of communities.

> (4) Whatever someone sets down to call [*thêi kalein*][13] a particular thing is its name?
> – So it seems to me.
> Whether it is a private individual or a community [*polis*] that calls [*kalêi*] it so?
> – Yes.

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[12] Translations from the *Cratylus* are my own, following Méridier's text in the Budé edition. I have benefited from consulting C.D.C. Reeve's new translation of the *Cratylus*, forthcoming from Hackett (Louis Méridier, trans. and ed., *Platon: Cratyle* (*Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 5 pt. 2) (Paris 1931)).

[13] Following Méridier's text: *Ho an thêi kalein tis hekaston*. . . . The mss vary, and Burnet (now followed by the new OCT) prints *Ho an phês kalêi tis hekaston*, to give the sense, "Whatever, you say, someone calls a particular thing . . ." (John Burnet ed., *Platonis Opera* vol. 1 (Oxford, 1905); E.A. Duke, W.F. Hicken, W.S.M. Nicoll, D.B. Robinson, J.C.G. Strachan edd., *Platonis Opera* vol. 1 (Oxford, 1995)).

> Well then, what about this? Suppose I call [*kalô*] some existing thing – for instance, what we now call a "human being" – suppose I refer to [*prosagoreuô*] that by "horse," and what we now call "horse" I call "human being." Will the same thing have the name "human being" publicly [*demôsiâi*] but the name "horse" privately [*idiâi*], and then again the name "human being" privately and the name "horse" publicly? Is that what you're saying?
> – So it seems to me. (385a2-b1)

So the public naming convention is to call things like you and me "human beings"; but I may at any time decide to replace this for my purposes with a *private* convention that we are to be called "horses." And this private convention will be, Hermogenes claims, no less correct, in its limited sphere, than the public one.

Hermogenes' last and longest explanation of his conventionalism comes somewhat later,[14] in response to further questioning by Socrates:

> (5) So then what each person says [*phêi*] the name of a thing is, this is the name for him?
> – Yes.
> And however many names someone says [*phêi*] each thing has, it will have that many whenever he says so?
> – Well, Socrates, I for one can't see any correctness of a name other than this: for me to call [*kalein*] each thing by some name which I have set down [*ethemên*], and you by another one which you have. In this way too with communities, we see that some of them have private [*idiâi*] names set down for the same things, both Greeks differing from other Greeks, and Greeks differing from foreigners. (385d2-e3)

Hermogenes' response here is his fullest expression of his view, and his clearest statement of what seems to me its crucial feature. For in saying

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[14] I here skip over the simple but enigmatic argument at 385b2-d1. Here Socrates obtains Hermogenes' assent that there is such a thing as speaking truly and falsely; that some statements are true and others false; that the parts of a true statement are true; that the smallest part of a statement is a name; and so, finally, that it is therefore possible to say a true or a false name. This argument is often taken to be aimed against 'anything goes' conventionalism, which would of course strengthen the case for reading Hermogenes that way. But so understood the argument is peculiarly ineffectual (see note 17). Indeed, the passage has seemed sufficiently useless in context that Malcolm Schofield has argued that its proper place is between lines 387c5 and 6, where it can serve as a basis for the claim that naming is a part of speaking ("A Displacement in the Text of the *Cratylus*," *Classical Quarterly* 22 (1972), pp. 246-53). This does seem to me an improvement; I also offer another, compatible suggestion as to the function of the argument in note 17 below.

that correctness is a matter of my calling [*kalein*] something by a name *which I have set down* [*ethemên*], Hermogenes distinguishes between two kinds of action, one of which precedes the other. There is the "setting down" or imposition of a name [*thesis, tithenai*], which founds the convention that it is the name for a certain object; then there is the ensuing practice of "calling" that object by that name [*kalein*].

If we return to Hermogenes' earlier statements, we can see this distinction already at work at several points. Right at the start, in (1), Hermogenes describes Cratylus as denying that a name is "what people call a thing by, having made a compact so to call it [*sunthemenoi kalein kalôsi*]." Like "calling each thing by some name which I have set down" in (5), this would be a bizarrely redundant way of describing a single undifferentiated practice of naming. Rather, the construction suggests two distinct stages of "naming," the first a decision and the second an on-going practice; and the use of the verb *suntithenai* for the former matches the *tithenai* of (5). In (3) the distinction between setting down a name and subsequently calling something by it is again present: "any name someone sets down for [*thêtai*] a thing is correct; and if one then changes [*metathêtai*] it for another and no longer calls [*kalêi*] it by the first. . . ." To change a name is to set it down again [*metatithenai*], establishing a new standard of correctness; "calling" is the general ongoing practice of name use issuing from this. And at least on Méridier's text, the distinction is present yet again in Socrates' first question in (4), with its reference to "whatever someone sets down to call [*thêi kalein*] a particular thing." In each case, what the distinction between [*sun-, meta-*] *tithenai* and *kalein* amounts to is clear enough. The former is the establishment of a naming convention by imposition of a name: in a word, *baptism*.[15] The latter, the "calling" of things by names, must include all subsequent acts

[15] Two notes regarding this baptism. First, we need not think of it as an explicit, observable, discrete performance of dubbing. As I will discuss later, Plato seems to conceive of the establishment of a convention as a fiat, the taking of a decision. And at least in the private case this fiat could presumably take place *in foro interno* and be expressed only by the namer's acts of name use, which are in principle subsequent. Second, as I have mentioned in note 1 above, throughout the *Cratylus* "names" are generally represented as having descriptive content. So it would seem that a baptism must include the pairing not just of a string of phonemes but of a descriptive content or sense with the thing named: in effect, a baptism must incorporate an act of name use (specifically, of predication). However, whether Hermogenes is clear about this is another question. He seems to be conceiving of names simply as strings of phonemes (n.b. the phrase "a piece of their voice" at 383a7), and obviously his conventionalism is more plausible if baptism pairs only phonemes and object.

of *name use* in accordance with that convention, as in acts of reference and predication.

The significance of this distinction is confirmed by the fact that the verb *tithenai*, with its cognates, seems to have been a standard way to designate an initial establishment of names.[16] Later in the *Cratylus, tithenai* is consistently used for the initial imposition of names by namegivers (e.g., *tithenai*, 389d6ff., *thêsesthai*, 390d5, *thesis* d8). The etymological section investigates the views of "the very ancient people who set down names for everything": *hoi panu palaioi anthrôpoi hoi tithemenoi ta onomata pantos* (411b4-5, cf. 401a5, b7, 414c4, 436b5, 439c2 *bis*, etc.). And we find similar usage outside the *Cratylus*: Parmenides repeatedly suggests that humans have been led into error by the imposition of names indicating differentiation: the verb used for this establishment is *katatithenai*, an emphatic compound of *tithenai* (DK28B8.39, 8.53, 19.3; note in particular the suggestion of the imposition-calling distinction in *katathento . . . onomazein* at 8.53). Pythagoras supposedly gave the second prize in wisdom to "the one who set down the names for things" [*ho tois pragmasi ta onomata themenos*, DK58C2]. In Epicurus' account of the origins of language, *tithenai* is used for the deliberate institution of names used in common, as opposed to an earlier stage of spontaneous utterances provoked by natural stimuli (*Letter to Herodotus* 75-6).

So Hermogenes' view is not that anything goes. Rather, his conventionalism discriminates between two kinds of "naming," baptism and name use, to which different criteria for correctness apply. In baptism, anything does go: all baptisms are correct, for "any name you set down for [*thêtai*] a thing is its correct name" (3). But an act of baptism establishes a norm for subsequent use: name use is only correct when it is performed in accordance with the relevant baptism. At the same time, each baptism is only authoritative until the next, for a change of name is a new baptism and establishes a new norm. Thus a correct act of naming must either be an act of baptism (including name-change) or a use of the name which accords with its baptism.

Why do interpreters nonetheless tend to saddle Hermogenes with 'anything goes' conventionalism? In addition to a failure to note the imposition-calling distinction, this reading seems to have two sources. One is the way in which, as their discussion proceeds, Socrates seems to nudge Hermogenes in the direction of both 'anything goes' conventionalism and Pro-

[16] Note meaning A.IV of *tithenai* in LSJ: "assign, award . . . give a child a name at one's own discretion."

tagorean relativism. The other is a general perception that Hermogenes' legitimation of private naming (and of name change *ad lib*.) brings him as near 'anything goes' conventionalism as makes no difference.

Socrates' nudging of Hermogenes towards 'anything goes' conventionalism and relativism takes place in two phases. At 385a2 (in quotation (4) above), Socrates begins by asking whether "whatever someone sets down to call [*thêi kalein*] a particular thing is its name," i.e., if every convention-generating baptism is correct. But his next question, "whether it is a private individual or a community [*polis*] that calls [*kalêi*] it so?" (385a4) slides into *kalein* simpliciter, apparently asking whether all instances of name use are correct. This might seem a harmless oversimplification or confusion: Socrates' point is perhaps just that any set of phonemes we happen to hear being used as a name may be a correct one. But then at 385d2-3 (in (5)), the idea of baptism seems to be elided altogether. Socrates simply asks: "So then what each person says the name of a thing is [*phêi tôi onoma einai*], this is the name for him?" (385d2-3). Given that "says the name is" sounds more like an allusion to calling than to baptism, this should be for Hermogenes only a misleading half-truth: he should stipulate that what one "says" must be in accordance with the relevant baptism to be correct. But instead he simply assents.

These exchanges have often been read as indicating either that Hermogenes has all along supported 'anything goes' conventionalism – and, more, Protagorean relativism – or that Socrates is able to do force this position on him. The question of how conventionalism is related to relativism is one I will return to shortly. For the moment, though, all I want to point out is that we should not make too much of these responses. After all, Socrates' questions are rendered ambiguous by his use of *thêi kalein* to set up *kalêi*, and then by the somewhat vague *phêi einai*. And it is after these blurred questions and responses that Hermogenes comes out with his clearest expression of the *tithenai-kalein* distinction, at 385d7-e3 (in (5)) – as if he is anxious to make sure that his views are not being distorted. This seems to confirm that Hermogenes does want to rely on the imposition-calling distinction, even if he does not always insist on it as firmly as he should.

The second phase of Socrates' nudging is his explicit suggestion that Hermogenes might want to invoke Protagorean backing for his views (385eff.). Now clearly this is not in itself evidence that Hermogenes is committed to 'anything goes' conventionalism or to Protagoreanism. And in response, Hermogenes, while admitting that he has occasionally lapsed into Protagoreanism, at the same time distances himself from it: "It

has happened that I've been so puzzled I've been carried away into Protagoras' position, even though it really doesn't seem right to me" (386a5-7). Socrates goes on to confirm him in this rejection with the argument that anyone who wishes to insist on a real difference between good and bad, or between intelligent and stupid, must reject the Protagorean claim that all things are as each person judges them (386a8-e5). It is notable that Hermogenes here exhibits no second thoughts, no lingering sympathies for Protagoras or any reluctance to follow the argument. Moreover, Socrates' argument is not presented as an *elenchus*: that is, there is no suggestion that Hermogenes' conventionalism *had* committed him to the Protagoreanism he now disavows.

That Socrates twice – first with his slippery questions, second with his explicit invocation of Protagoras – nudges Hermogenes in the direction of 'anything goes' conventionalism and its relativist kin is a turn of the dialectic which needs to be accounted for. I will try to explain its significance in the second part of this paper. But for now, the important point is the negative one: Socrates' manoeuvrings are not in fact good evidence for imputing 'anything goes' conventionalism to Hermogenes.[17]

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[17] I should also note that, as I have mentioned in note 14 above, a number of commentators take the argument at 385b2-d1 to be directed against conventionalism. So read, its purpose must be to get Hermogenes to admit that false and *a fortiori* incorrect naming is possible; and since it is only on the 'anything goes' interpretation that Hermogenes has denied this, the presence of such an argument would be strong evidence for that interpretation. But it seems to me very unlikely that the argument at 385b2-d1 is an argument against conventionalism at all. For one thing, the all-important link between falsity and incorrectness is never actually drawn, nor is the relevance of the argument to conventionalism brought out in any other way. For another, there are no supporting textual cues whatever that it is an argument against Hermogenes. Hermogenes has no qualms about agreeing to the claim that there is true and false *logos* [*panu ge*, 385b6]; later, he agrees, with a reservationless "of course" [*pôs gar ou*, 385d1], to the supposedly lethal conclusion that some names are false.

The problem is to see what else the argument could be intended to do. I suggest that it serves an important function which is, however, not very closely tied to its immediate context: it serves to establish a crucial desideratum for the pending account of naturally correct naming. If, as Socrates here argues, the falsity of statements depends on the capacity of names to be false, then the right account of correct naming had better show false naming to be possible. And Socrates will later take some trouble to show that his mimetic account of natural correctness meets this very demand. When Cratylus denies that a name can be incorrectly given, Socrates elicits the broader thesis that false *logos* is impossible (429c-430a): he then uses the analogy between names and pictures to argue that a name may be incorrectly or falsely assigned to an object (430b-431a). Next, in the 'Two Cratyluses' argument, he uses an analogy with sculpture to argue the stronger thesis that a name *cannot* be a

The other, more nebulous basis for the 'anything goes' reading of Hermogenes is the sense that there is after all no real *difference* between the conventionalism I have attributed to Hermogenes and the 'anything goes' variety. Here the crucial issue is the significance of Hermogenes' legitimation of private naming.[18] It will be argued that so long as Hermogenes legitimates the conventions of private namers, the unpalatable consequences of 'anything goes' conventionalism – the burden of "autonomous idiolects," the infallibility of the namer, the impossibility of dialectic – all remain in force. However, this charge involves considerable confusion. Hermogenes' conventionalism differs from the 'anything goes' variety precisely in the all-important respect: it allows for error. On Hermogenes' view, one names incorrectly in using a name in a way which does not accord with the relevant baptism: the name-inverter who decides to call humans 'horses' and vice versa *gets something wrong* if he subsequently uses the names in the ordinary way. Of course, we may have difficulty detecting error on the part of someone who adopts private naming conventions, as with anyone whose conventions we fail, for whatever reason, to grasp. But this is merely a practical problem. So long as the distinction

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perfect representation of what it names (432a-d). And both times Socrates adds a corollary which mirrors the argument at 385b-d, arguing conversely from the potential falsity of names to the potential falsity of *logoi* composed of them (431a-b, 432e). It seems to me a sufficient explanation for the existence of the earlier argument that it sets up these later ones. Taken together, they constitute a modest example of Platonic ring-composition. (For attempts to read 385b-d as an argument against conventionalism, see Gosling (*op. cit.* n. 2), pp. 202-4; Kretzmann (*op. cit.* n. 5), p. 127; Robinson (*op. cit.* n. 11), p. 123; K. Lorenz and J. Mittelstrass, "On Rational Philosophy of Language: the Programme in Plato's *Cratylus* Reconsidered," *Mind* 76 (1967), pp. 1-20, see p. 7).

[18] Some interpreters have been so dismayed by Hermogenes' legitimation of private naming as to claim that he does not really mean it, but is pushed or tricked into it by Socrates. (See for example Kretzmann (*op. cit.* n. 5, p. 127), and Heitsch (E. Heitsch, "Platons Sprachphilosophie im Kratylos," *Hermes* 113 (1985), pp. 44-62, see p. 46ff.) But all the textual evidence is against this. Hermogenes' initial explanation of conventionalism is in terms of the acts of individuals: "any name someone [*tis*] sets down for a thing is correct . . ." (384d2-3), as the example of slaves' names confirms. Socrates' question as to whether private and public names are equally correct then follows naturally as a point of clarification (385a4). The question is straightforward and neutral, and Hermogenes' assent is immediate and unqualified (385a5). And Hermogenes nowhere repents of what he has said. On the contrary, he goes on to give it prominence in quotation (5): here his parallel between various linguistic communities and individuals strongly suggests that the two kinds of conventions are equally correct (385d7-e3).

between correct and incorrect naming can be drawn cleanly in principle, the difficulty of identifying error simply does not mean that anything goes, or that name use is infallible. (Of course, this practical problem becomes something more if one is impressed by verificationist or behaviorist worries about the determinacy of meaning – but this is hardly a line of thought plausibly associated with Plato.)

And even at the level of practice, matters are not really so grim. I may accept Hermogenes' views and never choose to avail myself of a private naming convention. Hermogenes himself does not: it is Cratylus who speaks opaquely. (Interpreters tend to talk as though Hermogenes *demanded* that everyone adopt constantly changing private naming conventions.) Or I may establish my own conventions but still attempt to communicate, still recognise and admit to error. So Hermogenean conventionalism does not preclude cooperative communication – including philosophical discussion. Conventionalism leaves our ordinary use of language just as it was, and leaves dialectic just as viable. It does, I suppose, give the legitimacy of 'correctness' to someone who resorts to private naming conventions for the purpose of escaping dialectical refutation. But there is not much the dialectician can do about such a person anyway: the possibility of dialectic had better not depend on our ability to prevent all forms of withdrawal from the debate, or to prove that such behaviour is 'incorrect.'

So Hermogenes' legitimation of private naming is not the radical and subversive move many interpreters have taken it to be. Indeed, it is supported by some commonsensical reasoning. As Hermogenes points out, private individuals can and do establish names for their own use: in his example, by changing the name of a slave. In fact, we are told by later sources that the philosopher Diodorus Cronus affirmed his belief in conventionalism by changing his slaves' names arbitrarily – in one case, to *Alla Mên*, 'But Then.'[19] Of course, in such cases the community is likely to adopt the master's convention, but this only strengthens the conventionalist point. When others subsequently refer to poor *Alla Mên* by that name, it is precisely because they *believe it to be* the correct name for him, taking this correctness to be a function of the owner's authority. We can think of other private naming conventions which have a similar

[19] See Ammonius *De Int.* 38. 17ff. and Simplicius *Cat.* 27. 18-21. I owe the reference to David Sedley's article, "Epicurus: On Nature Book XXVIII," *Cronache Ercolanesi* 3 (1973), pp. 5-79, a very valuable treatment of a key Epicurean text on these issues.

authority: the parents' name for the child, the astronomer's name for the newly discovered planet.[20]

What the slave example helps to bring out is that Hermogenes' legitimation of private naming is dependent on a particular conception of convention. On this conception, a convention consists merely in a decision or fiat giving rise to a habit: and since a private individual can engage in such decisions and habits, evidently he or she can establish a private convention. This conception of convention as decision is not peculiar to Hermogenes: it is presupposed throughout the *Cratylus*, and with it the idea that conventions can be individual. This is most strikingly brought out in Socrates' later rehabilitation of convention. Here he suggests that when you understand some word I use in a conventional way, it is because "you have made a compact *with yourself*" to understand the word that way (435a7). This is surprising: we would expect that what is essential for you to understand me is some convention obtaining *between* or common to the two of us. But Plato clearly assumes that the individual case is primary. And indeed, if convention is understood as decision, public conventions do turn out to be secondary or derivative. A public convention will be seen either as a decision made by a community, conceived as analogous to a human individual; or as an aggregate — literally a *sunthêkê* – composed of the conventions of individuals. In either case, it is plausible that private and public conventions are equally susceptible of correctness.

In sum, given the conception of convention as decision – a conception at work throughout the *Cratylus* – the legitimation of private naming conventions is a natural part of conventionalism. To endorse as correct all and only public conventions would be indefensible (or would at least require some further argument) however intuitively plausible it might

[20] The hostility of the *Cratylus* commentators to the very idea of private naming is thus rather hard to understand. It is perhaps worth noting that even the modern version of conventionalism put forward by David Lewis, in which conventions are dependent on interpersonal expectations, would not warrant this stance. Speaking of a one-person language, Lewis says: "Taking the definition literally, there would be no convention. But there would be something very similar. . . . We might think of the situation as one in which a convention prevails in the population of different time-slices of the same man" (*op. cit.* n. 10, p. 182). Nor does Wittgenstein's famous argument against the possibility of a private language provide much warrant for Hermogenes-bashing, since it is (apparently) aimed against a language which is, unlike a Hermogenean private naming convention, inaccessible even in principle to others (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford, 1958)).

seem: and Hermogenes has thought enough about the matter to realise as much.

Two points are worth noting about Hermogenes' position as I have presented it. First, as I have already suggested, it is in fact quite commonsensical. It has no particularly alarming implications from the point of view of common sense; in allowing for error, it is not genuinely analogous to Protagorean relativism. In fact, if I am right about Hermogenes' use of the distinction between baptism and name use, his view looks like a reasonable and promising one. For the distinction is clearly an important one, and he seems right to hold name use to a more demanding norm than baptism. Baptism is arguably subject only to considerations of practicality or aesthetic appropriateness, whereas plausible norms of correctness for name use would include truth in predication and the successful securing of reference. The latter norms are surely more stringent and definite, and quite independent of the norms of baptism.

Second, such a reasonable position is what all the textual cues should lead us to expect. For Hermogenes is consistently represented as ingenuous and open-minded; throughout the dialogue he appears a responsive and unpretentious interlocutor.[21] (From the very opening of the *Cratylus*, an opposition of styles and personalities is set up between him and Cratylus, the obscurantist paradox-monger who insists on his expertise but refuses to explain himself.) And Hermogenes' presentation of conventionalism is of a piece with his general attitude: it seems to be a minimal account, adopted after some reflection but tentatively. He has repeatedly tried to discuss the subject with Cratylus and others, but simply cannot see what more there could be to correctness than convention (384c9-10). When refuted by Socrates, Hermogenes does not protest, but again asks for a positive account of what this natural correctness consists in (390e5-1a4). So Hermogenes' conventionalism is largely *faute de mieux*, and based on a healthy reluctance to believe in a further norm that its advocates cannot clearly specify. In his conventionalism as throughout the *Cratylus*, he is something close to the voice of common sense.

II. Conventionalism and the Dialectic of the Cratylus

Time now to return to the puzzle I noted earlier. If Hermogenes' position is as I have described it, why does Socrates persistently nudge him in the

[21] Cf. Victor Goldschmidt, *Essai sur le* Cratyle (Paris, 1940), p. 42. On Hermogenes' intellectual style, cf. also Baxter (*op. cit.* n. 7), pp. 17-22.

direction of 'anything goes' conventionalism and Protagorean relativism? To answer, we need to see conventionalism in its dialectical context within the *Cratylus*. By seeing a position in its dialectical context I mean seeing it, not as one option on a timeless menu of theoretical alternatives, but as expressing a particular train of reflection or argument by a particular kind of person, so that other positions and arguments relate to it as natural predecessors, alternatives, enemies or successors.

As a starting-point for the exploration of dialectical context, consider the thesis I call *conservatism*: the claim that all our actual or positive names (everything socially recognised as a name) are correct. I have already suggested that conservatism is an important feature of Hermogenes' conventionalism; in fact, Hermogenes' arguments tacitly depend on it. As we have seen, he cites two pieces of evidence for his position: the fact that names can be changed, as in the case of slaves, and the local variation in names among different Greek or foreign communities (384d3-6, 385d9-e3). The idea is that conventionalism explains how these phenomena are possible. But of course conventionalism is a normative, not a descriptive thesis, what it explains is the *correctness* of a name. So his evidence is only relevant if we can assume that all the names in question – slaves' names before and after, the whole multiplicity of names used by different communities, in effect, not to put too fine a point on it, *all* actual names – are indeed correct.

It is only if conservatism is taken to be obvious that Hermogenes' reasoning makes sense. And so it is reasonable to suppose that conservatism – which is, after all, intuitively compelling to many people – is his initial premise. Hermogenes, then, takes as his starting point the supposition that all the names we actually use are correct; reflection on it leads him to the explanation that this correctness is due to their conventional acceptance. And given the conception of convention as a fiat or imposition, he must at the same time recognise private naming conventions as equally correct. Hermogenes' much-maligned extension of correctness to private naming is just the theoretical price he has to pay for a consistent defense of conservatism.

Now consider what the next turn of the dialectic might look like. Further reflection on Hermogenean conventionalism is bound to raise a pressing question: can we really assume that all conventions are equally correct? Convention is to be grounded in decision and fiat; but we commonly suppose that our decisions express our judgements,[22] and that some

[22] This is brought out not only in the argument at 387 (note *kata tên orthên* [*doxan*]

judgements are better than others. Once this epistemological question has been raised, the conventionalist is faced with a dilemma. One option is to argue that all conventions are equally correct because all beliefs and decisions are equally correct. This option uses Protagorean relativism to preserve conservatism, but at a very high price. For it entails not only the implausibilities of relativism itself, but the transformation of Hermogenean conventionalism into the 'anything goes' variety, as acts of name use will now be just as infallible as baptisms. We will probably agree with Hermogenes that the conservative intuition is no longer worth preserving at this price. The alternative is to accept, as he does, that Protagorean relativism is false, and embrace the realist view that things have determinate mind-independent natures of their own. But in that case, name-giving and name use alike are corrigible, depending for their success on conformity to the natures of things: conservatism must be given up.

This, I believe, is the reason for Socrates' nudging of Hermogenes in the direction of 'anything goes' conventionalism and Protagorean relativism. His purpose is not to elicit consequences of the position Hermogenes actually holds, or even to distort that position, but rather to push Hermogenes to make his next dialectical move. Hermogenes' conventionalism is a crux: it is the most reflective point at which conservatism can be sustained without a collapse into the implausibilities of relativism. This is why it is important for Plato to discuss it at the outset of his inquiry into naming: it is the best commonsensical defense that can be found for the complacent supposition that all our actual names are correct. Once conventionalism is defeated, conservatism can no longer be assumed, and the way is clear for the critical, revisionist – not to mention madly counterintuitive – account of 'natural correctness' which Socrates proceeds to deliver.

A parallel for this dialectic can be found in Book I of the *Republic*. Here Thrasymachus begins by declaring that justice is nothing but the advantage of the stronger (338c1-2), and he glosses this claim with what looks like conservatism and conventionalism about justice: in each city, justice is what the ruling party sets down to its own advantage (338e1-9a4, note *tithetai* at 338e1).[23] But under pressure, the several claims packed into this

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at 387b3) but also at *Theaetetus* 172a1-5 (note *hekastê polis oiêtheisa thêtai nomima hautêi*, and cf. 167c).

[23] Of course, the interpretation of Thrasymachus' position is controversial in many ways; I cannot enter fully into the debate here. Briefly, I take it that the source of the confusion is the ambiguity of the central thesis (a) above. Read one way, (a) is part

position come apart and Thrasymachus must decide which is the most important to him. He cannot maintain, as he initially attempts to, both his central thesis (a) that justice is whatever is to the advantage of the rulers, or 'the stronger,' and the conservative thesis (b) that justice is whatever the rulers dictate, while also recognising the obvious fact (c) that rulers do not always dictate what is to their advantage (339c-d). At this point Thrasymachus is explicitly offered, by Cleitophon, the chance to hold on to conservatism by exchanging (a) for the claim that whatever the rulers *think* to be to their advantage (and therefore set down) is just (340b6-8). There is a parallel here with Socrates' offer of Protagoreanism to Hermogenes: 'justice' would be rendered wholly mind-dependent, just like the correctness of a name under 'anything goes' conventionalism. And like Hermogenes, Thrasymachus rejects this way out. Instead, drawing a deeply Platonic distinction between real and apparent rulers, he argues that rulers are only really rulers, such that (a) and (b) apply, when they *do* manage to impose what is to their advantage (340d-1a). And again the result is that conservatism, here represented by the original unrestricted version of (b), is quietly given up. What appears to be a ruler may not really be one; and presumably the laws and systems of justice imposed by bogus rulers are bogus themselves (though Thrasymachus, in contrast to Callicles in the *Gorgias*, does not follow through on this revisionist claim). When the crunch comes, Thrasymachus' desire to endorse the success of the ruthless and resourceful comes first, and he abandons conservatism for a sort of realism about justice. What is just is not simply a function of what is socially accepted, but is a matter of expertise – though of course from Plato's point of view Thrasymachus is grossly mistaken about what it is that the expert ruler wants and knows how to do.

In sum, Thrasymachus goes through much the same dialectic as Hermogenes; and the common pattern tells us much, I think, about how

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of a sociological analysis of justice, where 'justice' is simply a descriptive term denoting law-abiding and non-pleonectic behaviour. Thrasymachus' claim is that such behaviour serves the interests of other people, particularly those who are 'strong' (intelligent, ruthless and powerful) and above all the ruling party. However, he also is flirting, perhaps without being wholly clear about it, with (a) understood in a quite different sense – with the positive, Calliclean view that *it really is just* (i.e., a morally appropriate state of affairs) for 'strong,' ruthless rulers to benefit in this way from the naivete and weakness of others. The conservative thesis (b) can also be read in two ways corresponding to these, depending on whether it is read as debunking the rulers' exploitation of 'justice' or endorsing it. (For the first, 'descriptive' side of Thrasymachus' view, see T.D.J. Chappell, "The Virtues of Thrasymachus," *Phronesis* 38 (1993), pp. 1-17.)

Plato sees the issues.[24] For Plato, an intuitively plausible conservatism about social institutions and practices can only be sustained up to a certain degree of reflectiveness. Once the epistemological question is posed – *but aren't some people stupid?* is roughly the crux in both *Cratylus* and *Republic* – the conservative confronts a parting of the ways. Down one road lies relativism: the conservative can brazen it out by claiming that in fact no one ever is wrong or stupid about the matter in question.[25] Unfortunately the Protagorean backing for this claim destroys much of conservatism's intuitive appeal. The alternative route is Plato's choice, realism: the recognition that people can be right or wrong about what constitutes a correct name or a just law, and that expert knowledge is what makes the difference.

This political parallel is no coincidence. Like laws and constitutions, names are social constructions, at once inheritances from time immemorial and subject to change for better or worse. It is no accident that in the *Cratylus*, conventionalism is introduced using the deeply political vocabulary of "compact" [*sunthêkê*] and "convention" [*nomos*]. Moreover, Hermogenes' evidence for conventionalism – the local variation in names from city to city and the possibility of name-change – is just that used elsewhere to argue that other social institutions are a matter of mere convention. In the *Laws*, Plato castigates those who claim

> . . . that the gods are creations of artifice, not by nature [*phusei*] but by certain conventions [*tisi nomois*]; and that these are different in different places, accord-

[24] A similar pattern is also played out in the Platonic *Minos*. Here Socrates investigates the question, what is law? The first answer, offered by his unnamed interlocutor, is in effect conservative conventionalism: law is simply whatever is recognised as such [*ta nomizomena*, 313b5-6]. His next attempt is hardly any different: law is the resolution [*dogma*] of a city (314c1). Socrates' response is to get his assent to the claim that law is something fine and good (314d7-8), and to note that some resolutions are good and others bad (314e1-2). Roughly as in the *Cratylus*, our ordinary commitment to the evaluation of judgements and decisions turns out, on reflection, to preclude conservatism: Socrates concludes that a bad resolution is no law, and that law is true opinion, or the discovery of what is (314e-5a). At this point his interlocutor, who is evidently still attached to conservatism, challenges Socrates to explain the phenomena of change and local variation in laws (cf. Hermogenes in the *Cratylus*), offering the relativist's usual patter-speech on contrasting cultural norms (315a-d). Socrates sticks to his guns and argues that in fact expert lawgivers, Greek and otherwise, are in agreement (cf. *Cratylus* 389d-90a) and do not change their minds (317b).

[25] The 'defence of Protagoras' in the *Theaetetus* in effect explores whether Protagoreanism looks any better if it draws a sharp distinction between 'wrong' and 'stupid,' and does allow for the latter.

> ing to what each group agreed in setting down its conventions [*sunômologêsan nomothetoumenoi*]. Moreover, one set of things are fine by nature [*phusei*], another by convention [*nomôi*]. And the things which are just are not at all so by nature [*phusei*]; rather, people argue continually with each other and are always changing [*metatithemenous*] them. And whatever changes they make at any time are authoritative then, having arisen by artifice and convention [*tois nomois*], but not by any nature [*tini phusei*]. (889e3-90a2)

Hermogenes' conventionalism thus has close kin in the political and ethical sphere. (So does the theory of natural correctness, which is presented as an analysis of the activity of an expert lawgiver [*nomothetês*, 388eff.].) Moreover, Hermogenean conventionalism is an important complement to such political views. For conventionalism about religious or moral values will entail conventionalist claims about the relevant naming conventions: the atheists of the *Laws* must hold that the meanings of 'god' and 'just' are variable over places and times, and that local conventions about them are all fully authoritative. That Plato sees the connection between linguistic and political practice is clear from another passage in the *Laws*. Speaking of states whose rulers pass narrowly self-interested laws, the Athenian says:

> Surely we say now that these are not constitutions [*politeias*]; and laws which have not been set down [*etethêsan*] for the common good of the whole city are not correct [*orthous*]. Those who are for the interest of only some, we call "partisans" and not citizens, and what they say is "just" is so called in vain [*matên*]. (715b2-6)

All the efforts of a bad regime to make 'just' denote things which do not deserve the name are in vain. And this "in vain" [*matên*] is a strong term: later in the *Cratylus* Cratylus will use it to deny that a misuse of a name accomplishes any intelligible speech-act at all (430a4). Plato means to deny rulers the authority to establish (correct) naming conventions by fiat: there is something to the name 'just' which outruns the impositions of governments, and determines whether their naming practices are correct.

These political parallels – though parallel is the wrong word, since the point is that for Plato naming *is* in a broad sense a political practice – have been illuminatingly discussed by George Grote.[26] In particular, Grote brings out the close kinship of the *Cratylus* with the *Statesman* and the

[26] See Grote (*op. cit.* n. 4), vol. 2, pp. 88-90 and vol. 3, pp. 327-9. See also the interpretation of Theodor Benfey, "Ueber die Aufgabe des Platonischen Dialogs: Kratylos," *Abhandlungen der Königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften* 12 (1866),

Platonic *Minos*. Each expresses a deeply Platonic line of thought according to which social institutions (names, constitutions, regimes, laws) are correct or genuine only if they conform to the natures of things and are the product of philosophically informed expert craft. On this 'political' reading, Plato's concern in the *Cratylus* is to discover what a name really is and what normative standards are applicable to names.

I cannot here explore all the ramifications of this 'political' reading of the *Cratylus*. But one implication is obvious and important enough to demand mention. If Hermogenes' conventionalism is as here described, then naturalism and conventionalism are by no means equal competitors within the dialogue. Rather, Plato's project is from the start to discover what a naturally correct name (cf. a real law or the true statesman) consists in; conventionalism is less a part of this inquiry than a preliminary obstacle to it. This sets important constraints on what the results of the dialogue could be. As I noted earlier, it is often supposed that Socrates' conclusions at 435c-d are to be read as an understated endorsement of conventionalism; and since my reading of Hermogenes' conventionalism has shown his position to be neither silly nor relativistic, it might seem to sit well with this line of interpretation. But in fact the reverse is true. For if I am right about the essentially conservative character of Hermogenes' conventionalism, and about its dialectical function and political implications, then the conventionalist reading of Plato's conclusions cannot be right.[27] With names as with political institutions and practices, the incorrigibility of the *status quo* is a doctrine which Plato feels compelled to consider, but is never tempted to accept.[28]

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pp. 189-330. Baxter (*op. cit.* n. 7) also draws a more specific analogy between the results of the *Cratylus* and the *Statesman*, but not one which I accept (pp. 80-3).

[27] Of course, this means that the political reading faces a serious challenge: to explain Socrates' apparent granting of at least some legitimacy to convention in his conclusions at 435c-d. I cannot meet this challenge here: I discuss it at length in Chapters IV.7 and VI of my doctoral dissertation (*A Reading of Plato's* Cratylus, defended at Princeton University in 1995), and summarize that discussion in another paper currently in preparation, "The Conclusions of the *Cratylus*."

[28] I would like to thank John Cooper (who was the primary advisor of my doctoral thesis) for all his help with earlier versions of this paper; I have also benefited from very helpful comments from Alexander Nehamas (the secondary thesis advisor), Sarah Broadie and Stephen Menn.