Names and Nature in Plato's *Cratylus*

Rachel Barney

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Contents

	Preface	viii
	Introduction: The Argument of the *Cratylus*	1
I	**From Convention to Nature**	21
I.1	*Conventionalism*	22
I.2	*Subjectivism and Private Naming*	28
I.3	*The Significance of Conventionalism*	34
I.4	*Against Conventionalism*	39
I.5	*The First Stage of Naturalism: Names as Tools*	41
II	**The Second Stage of Naturalism: Function and Genre in the Etymologies**	46
II.1	*Rational Reconstruction*	49
II.2	*The Inspiration Episode*	54
II.3	*The Agonistic Display*	57
II.4	*The Etymologies as* Agôn	66
II.5	*Plato and Parmenides on the Deceptiveness of Language*	70
III	**The Third Stage of Naturalism: Mimetic Correctness**	78
III.1	*Beyond Etymology*	79
III.2	*Mimesis and the Elements of Language*	84
III.3	*Craft and the Foundations of Correctness*	94
IV	**Natural Correctness Re-examined**	107
IV.1	*The* Dianomê *Argument*	108
IV.2	*On the Correctness of Images*	111
IV. 3	*The Two Cratyluses*	114

IV.4	*The* Sklêrotês *Argument*	119
IV. 5	*The Names of the Numbers*	127
IV.6	*Conclusions About Correctness*	130
V	**From Names to Things**	138
V.1	*Against the Study of Names*	139
V.2	*Languages, Knowledge and Flux*	143
VI	**The *Cratylus* and After: Names and *Logoi***	156
VI.1	*The* Seventh Letter *and the Weakness of Language*	156
VI.2	*Logos and Knowledge*	162
VII	**The *Cratylus* and After: False Statement**	170
VII.1	*False Statement in the* Cratylus	172
VII.2	*The* Sophist *on Syntax*	177
VII.3	*The* Sophist *on False Statement*	181
	Bibliography	190
	General Index	195
	Index Locorum	201

Preface

This book is a version of my Ph.D. thesis, 'A Reading of Plato's *Cratylus*', submitted to the Princeton University Department of Philosophy (Ph.D. 1996). It has been extensively (but not sufficiently) revised, especially the Introduction and Chapters III and VI.

The Bibliography at the end does not intend to be a complete guide to work on the *Cratylus:* for further references, readers should also consult the bibliographies in the works of Derbolav and Palmer, as well as the up-to-date general listings of recent work on Plato, edited by Luc Brisson, now easily accessible at http://callimac.vjf.cnrs.fr/BiblPlat/BPFrontEngl.html. Relevant publications subsequent to my work on the thesis are marked with an asterisk in the Bibliography; I have not made any general attempt to take account of these in making revisions. I have published two papers derived from the thesis: 'Plato on Conventionalism' (*Phronesis* 42 (1997), pp. 143–62), which combines the central claims of Chapter I with an overview of my reading; and 'Socrates Agonistes: The Case of the *Cratylus* Etymologies' (*Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 16 (1998), pp. 63–98), which is almost identical to Chapter II.

I am endebted to a number of people for help in writing the thesis: first among them is my advisor, John Cooper. In addition, Sarah Broadie and Alexander Nehamas read all of the thesis and offered very helpful comments; others who helped with the work in progress were Michael Frede, André Laks, James Lesher, and Stephen Menn. For discussion on particular points I am endebted to Charles Brittain, Myles Burnyeat, Panos Dimas, David Furley, Raymond Klibansky, Annette Loeffler, Dirk Obbink, John Palmer and Jenny Saul. In addition to the excellent facilities of the Princeton Classical Philosophy Programme and the Princeton Philosophy Department, I was grateful as a visitor to the McGill University Department of Philosophy and the Centre de Recherche Philologique at the Université de Lille III (Charles de Gaulle). Versions of Chapter II were presented at a workshop in Princeton and a seminar in Lille; I would like to thank the members of both groups for useful discussions. In revising the thesis for publication I was helped by comments from John Cooper, Stephen Menn, and Jenny Saul. I would also like to thank Nicholas Hladek for his assistance in preparing the text, and the University Center for Human Values

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NAMES AND NATURE IN PLATO'S *CRATYLUS*

Introduction: The Argument of the *Cratylus*

The *Cratylus* is Plato's most extended discussion of language—more precisely, of 'the correctness of names'—and one of his most enigmatic dialogues. As such, it has attracted a daunting mass of interpretive debate;[1] but there is still no real *opinio communis* on the principal philosophical purpose of the dialogue or its positive results, if any.[2]

Part of the problem is that the *Cratylus* falls into an uneasy middle ground between two kinds of Platonic dialogue. On the one hand are the typical 'Socratic' or 'aporetic' dialogues, which are, on the face of it, devoted primarily to refutation, and at most suggest positive views; on the other, comparatively dogmatic dialogues like the *Republic*, from which constructive teachings can only be interpreted away with difficulty. In the *Cratylus*, Socrates discusses two theories of the correctness of names, which we may call *conventionalism* and *naturalism*, with their respective advocates Hermogenes and Cratylus. First, he quickly refutes the conventionalist thesis that any name we set down for an object is correct. ('Name', as we will see, is used throughout with a much broader

1. Louis Méridier says (in 1931), "Il n'est pas un dialogue de Platon qui ait suscité chez les modernes plus de discussions que le Cratyle" (L.Méridier, trans. and ed., *Platon: Cratyle* (=*Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 5 pt. 2) *[Cratyle]* (Paris, 1931), p. 7). I do not know how accurate this was, or would be today, but the *Cratylus* is certainly a consistently healthy sector of the Plato industry (cf. the bibliographies cited in n. 2). Yet there is, interestingly, quite a widespread impression that the *Cratylus* is a somewhat neglected work; and it is often marginalized in more general and thematic studies of Plato, not least because of the uncertainty of its interpretation.

2. I will not attempt to give an overview of scholarly debate on the *Cratylus.* For a more comprehensive bibliography, see Michael D.Palmer, *Names, Reference and Correctness in Plato's Cratylus [Names]* (New York, 1988), and cf. Josef Derbolav, *Platons Sprachphilosophie im Kratylos und in den späteren Schriften [Sprachphilosophie]* (Darmstadt, 1972). Notable recent works include Timothy M.S.Baxter, *The Cratylus: Plato's Critique of Naming [Critique]* (Leiden, 1992), Allan Silverman, 'Plato's *Cratylus:* The Naming of Nature and the Nature of Naming' ['Plato's *Cratylus*'], *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 10 (1992), pp. 25–72, and David Sedley, 'The Etymologies in Plato's *Cratylus*' ['Etymologies'], *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 118 (1998), pp. 140–54.

application than merely proper names.) Names have natures of their own: they are tools for naming, which we use to distinguish objects and inform each other about them, and they must be naturally adapted to the objects they name (see Chapter I). To explain how names perform this function, Socrates develops the idea that the semantic content of a name, as revealed or explained by etymology, discloses the nature of the object it names; this is explored through a torrential sequence of etymologies taking up almost half the length of the dialogue (Chapter II). This etymological discourse constitutes one of the central interpretive problems of the *Cratylus*. Given that it is far from being his final word on correctness, there is a real puzzle as to why Plato bothers to etymologize at such extraordinary length, a puzzle compounded by the vaguely playful air of the discussion.

In the final phase of the naturalistic account, etymology gives way to an account of language as *mimetic*. The basic, unetymologizable building blocks of language, the 'primary names', disclose the natures of objects by virtue of the expressive properties of their letters: so names are imitations, and a name is naturally correct to the extent that it resembles the object named (Chapter III). This is followed by a 're-examination' of naturalism through a series of arguments which seem both to depend on and to undermine it (Chapter IV). The first and second of these, the *Dianomê* and the 'Two Cratyluses' arguments, show that a name can be used to name an object for which it is not naturally correct; moreover, it cannot be a *perfect* imitation of what it names, for an imitation necessarily falls short of the original. These arguments share a significant corollary: incorrect or false naming is possible, and so too, therefore, is false statement. In the latter phase of the 're-examination', Socrates reintroduces convention—on the basis of some strangely casual-looking argumentation—and concludes that it too must be granted some legitimacy as a determinant of correctness. Just how to take this conclusion is the second central interpretive challenge of the *Cratylus*. Socrates' apparent suggestion that both nature and convention have a role to play is so halfhearted that we may well be left uncertain as to where Plato himself stands on the central question of the dialogue (cf. IV.6). Two final sets of arguments serve both as corollaries to the re-examination and as a new beginning (Chapter V). First, Socrates shows that there is no point in trying to discover the natures of things through the investigation of their names. Finally, Socrates turns to the natures of things themselves: he offers a brief but powerful set of arguments against the view, apparently supported by the earlier etymologies, that all things are in flux.

In this book, I offer a new interpretation of the development and results of this train of argument. Chapters I to V investigate its successive stages; Chapters VI and VII elaborate on its conclusions by bringing them into connection with some other Platonic works, the former dealing particularly with the *Seventh Letter* and the end of the *Theaetetus* and the latter with Plato's treatment of false statement in the *Sophist*. My interpretation does not depend on any one wonder-working key to the dialogue, and I should note that much of what I say on particular

points has been said before in various places: given the volume of scholarly discussion, an entirely new interpretation of the *Cratylus* would have to be very strange indeed.[3] Also, since my concern is with the *Cratylus'* central line of argument, I will ignore or slight a number of important questions which do not, in my view, contribute directly to our understanding of this: these include questions about its historical context (the historical Cratylus, the identity of the dialogue's philosophical 'targets', its philosophical precursors and influence) and its relation to Plato's other works (stylometry and chronology, the status of the 'forms' in the *Cratylus*, etc.).[4] Nor will I attempt to relate the discussion of the *Cratylus* in any systematic way to problems, concepts, and theories in the modern philosophy of language. I will occasionally use terms also found in contemporary discussions, such as 'content' and 'reference', but in what I hope is a vague and intuitively intelligible rather than a theoretically loaded way. (Unfortunately, virtually every English term one might use to speak of the workings of language has been appropriated for various quite particular purposes in modern theories.) In general, I have tried to explain the argument of the *Cratylus*, if not quite in its own terms, then in ones which are independent of any particular modern framework. In part this is because Plato's concerns and assumptions in the *Cratylus* are arguably quite alien to those at work in modern accounts. Moreover, if we are interested in what the *Cratylus* (or any ancient work) might have to say to modern philosophy, we should take care not to mask those features which make it odd and surprising: we should look to ancient texts not to reassure, but to surprise us into an awareness of what is taken for granted under the current theoretical regime. A third reason to abstain from modern

3. As will shortly emerge, my reading is in essence closest to that of Grote (George Grote, *Plato and the Other Companions of Sokrates [Plato]* (3 vols., London, 1865), see esp. vol. 1, pp. 422–3, vol. 2, pp. 497–9, 543–8). Other works to which I am indebted include Baxter, *Critique*, and Victor Goldschmidt, *Essai sur le Cratyle [Essai]* (Paris, 1940). Nicholas White, *Plato on Knowledge and Reality [Knowledge]* (Indianapolis, 1976) includes an illuminating treatment of the *Cratylus* as a contribution to some of Plato's dominant philosophical concerns.

4. The chronological place of the *Cratylus* in the order of Plato's works is much disputed. The most common view has been that it is a 'late-early' work, coming a bit before the *Phaedo*. This dating has standardly been supported by the argument, to my mind worthless, that the 'forms' found in it are not as robust as those of the middle dialogues (cf. Chapter V, n. 9); a *pre-Republic* date has also received more substantial support from stylometrical studies. (See Sir David Ross, 'The Date of Plato's Cratylus' ['Date'], *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 32 (1955), pp. 187–96; J.V. Luce, The Date of the Cratylus' ['Date'], *AJP* 85 (1964), pp. 136–54.) However, the convergences of theme and motif between the *Cratylus* and the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*—which include concerns with flux, Protagoreanism, *stoicheia*, and falsehood—argue for a post-*Republic* dating of the *Cratylus* as a prologue to these dialogues (cf. Max Warburg, 'Zwei Fragen zum 'Kratylos", *Neue Philologische Untersuchungen 5* (1929)). I find the latter view persuasive, and adopt it in relating the *Cratylus* to Plato's other works in VI.2; however, nothing in my interpretation

theoretical commitments in this context is, of course, that one would have to choose the right ones: and the *Cratylus* is not so remote that we cannot see in it puzzles and problems which are still matters of the deepest controversy.

In the remainder of this Introduction, I will first set out the subject-matter of the *Cratylus* in a bit more detail; second, explain the philosophical concerns which I take to motivate the dialogue; and third, give a brief preview of some methodological attitudes and results. My principal starting-point is a feature of the *Cratylus* which is obvious enough and has been noted before,[5] but the significance of which has not, I think, been fully discerned. This is that it is primarily a *normative* account of names. Plato's interest is not so much in describing how actual names work as in discovering the standards by which they should be judged—a project which may well give the revisionist result that our actual names do not work as well as we tend to suppose. This is in fact one of the respects in which the *Cratylus* may seem quite alien to modern philosophical concerns. Because of a variety of factors, including not only philosophical influences but the increasing sophistication of linguistics as a modern social science, the idea that philosophy can provide a normative perspective on our everyday use of language has itself come to seem bizarre to many philosophers. And so what might still be stimulating about the *Cratylus* today is precisely its presentation of a radically alternative kind of project in the philosophy of language, one which does not assume that our language 'is in order as it is'.

The point of a normative approach should be easier to see if we take a closer look at the topic of 'the correctness of names'. To begin with, as my talk of 'language' has already insinuated, this is a much less restricted topic than it might sound. The conception of 'name' *[onoma]* at work in the *Cratylus* is a broad one, including common nouns as well as proper names; at various points in the *Cratylus* we also find adjectives (e.g., 412c2, e1), verbs in the infinitive form (414a8–b1), and participles (421c5) described as names.[6]

For all this breadth, the paradigm case of a 'name' in the *Cratylus* is manifestly the proper name of an individual person. The debate opens with a

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of the *Cratylus* itself depends on it. On stylometry in general, see Leonard Brandwood, *The Chronology of Plato's Dialogues* (Cambridge, 1990) and his essay, 'Stylometry and Chronology', in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato,* ed. Richard Kraut (Cambridge, 1992). My refusal to treat the stylometric evidence as final is founded not on any general skepticism (like that, say, of M.M.McCabe, *Plato's Individuals* (Princeton, 1994), Appendix A), but on the view that stylometry— which involves assessing the overall tendency of a wide range of tests, possibly varying significantly in their results and, arguably, their evidentiary value—simply does not yield clear-cut groupings among the early and middle dialogues as it does in the case of the late dialogues. According to Ross, the stylometric evidence favours placing the *Cratylus* in the 'neighbourhood' of the dialogues written shortly before the *Republic:* this is not really so very different from the neighbourhood between the *Republic* and *Theaetetus*.

5. As by Baxter, *Critique*, pp. 31–2; cf. also Grote, *Plato*, vol. 2, pp. 543–8 and Rudolph Weingartner, *The Unity of the Platonic Dialogue [Unity]* (Indianapolis, 1973), p. 32.

dispute over whether the name 'Hermogenes' is a correct name for Hermogenes (383b); the etymologies center on elaborate discussions of the proper names of the gods (400d–408d). And the broad use made of *onoma,* in the *Cratylus* as in ordinary Greek usage, is likely to express the sense that a whole range of words function in the way that a personal name is supposed to do.

Just how that might be is worth exploring, and in doing so I will introduce some terms and distinctions which will be useful later on. I should warn again, however, that my aim here is simply to explicate the frame-work from which I take Plato to begin. So my use of terms is intended to be vague and theoretically naïve: for instance I will speak indifferently of 'sense', 'meaning' and 'content', to allude to the intensional aspect we typically suppose names in the broad sense to possess—whatever this might turn out to amount to according to the best theory.[7]

To begin with, a person's name seems, on this intuitive view, to have a direct relation to that person, rather than to have its reference determined by any sense; and that name-object relation is standardly established by an act of imposition—a *namegiving* or *baptism* by an authoritative *namegiver* such as, paradigmatically, the parents of a child. (This direct relation to an object evidently helps to define the scope of *onomata*: a word is generally only called a name if we can point to some object in the world of which it is the name. So prepositions and conjunctions, for instance, will not count as names; and a verb is more likely to count as a name when in a form which can be seen as picking out an object, whether an agent (as for example a participle does) or the action itself (like an infinitive).) An important complication is that, though their relation to their nominata does not seem to be determined by a sense, most Greek proper names are manifestly *descriptive*. 'Hermogenes' means 'offspring of the god Hermes', and so 'of the same kind as Hermes', i.e., resourceful, clever, and verbally adept. So understood, 'Hermogenes' is false of Hermogenes.

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6. On occasion Plato distinguishes between *onomata* and *rhêmata,* 'things said', but the nature of the distinction intended is unclear, and seems to fluctuate. Rhêmata at various points include phrases (399b1), infinitives (426e1), and the words or phrases into which names are etymologically analyzed (421e1–2): see further VII.2.

7. There is no term in the *Cratylus* which comes close to meaning 'sense' or anything akin to it; the term closest to 'mean' is probably *sêmainein* (e.g., 393a6, 393d2, 395c3, 411d9), but there are also occurrences in which, arguably, 'make a sign' (422e4), 'indicate' (437c8) or even 'refer to' (408c2, 419a8) would be a more natural translation for this. (Reeve consistently renders *sêmainein* as 'signify', which in general works well.) For this and other terminological issues, see the detailed discussions in L.M.De Rijk, *Plato's Sophist: A Philosophical Commentary [Sophist]* (Amsterdam, 1986). See also T.H.Irwin, 'Aristotle's Concept of Signification', in *Language and Logos,* ed. M.Schofield and M.Nussbaum (Cambridge, 1982). Irwin argues persuasively that for Aristotle, what a name or definition 'signifies' *[sêmainei]* is not a meaning but a nature or essence; though there is clearly some continuity between the two, Plato's uses of *sêmainein* seem to be more diverse.

So a name is directly related to an object, on the basis of a potentially arbitrary imposition; yet it does seem to present a description of that object, one which might be true or false of it.[8] Both those impositions (namegivings, baptisms) and subsequent acts of name use may be called 'naming' *[onomazein]*.[9] The *Cratylus* treats the act of namegiving as a fiat or 'setting-down', intended to establish a convention, of a name as the name of what I will call its *referent*. Hector dubs his son 'Astyanax', with the intention that the name be used for that individual; Adam points to a sample horse and says, 'horse', with the intention that it be used as a name for all and only things of that kind (so that the referent of 'horse' is Midnight, Bucephalus, Dobbin, and so forth). A subsequent act of name use, as to predicate, refer, or address, is performed by a *name user*, and name use is treated as an application of the name to some *object*, such as the person to whom I point while saying, 'There's Astyanax'. So a *naming convention* is just the practice of using a name in the way inaugurated by the relevant namegiving: more precisely, it is the practice of aiming to apply the name to its referent (if it is the name of an individual) or to objects belonging to its referent (in the case of names of kinds): using 'Astyanax' for Astyanax, 'horse' for horses, and so forth.

This leaves it unclear what role the descriptive content of the name is supposed to play in a naming convention; and Hermogenes at one point describes a name as 'a piece of voice' (383a7), suggesting that he thinks of namegiving as consisting strictly in an assignment of phonemes to referent. This is also suggested by his claim that you could reverse the usage of the names 'horse' and 'man' with no harm done (385a–b): this is hardly plausible if the 'names' are taken to include the senses or meanings which, we normally think, should guide their use. On the other hand, even Hermogenes is well aware that, as I have noted, names like his own typically *have* such a descriptive content; and as the discussion shifts to the naturalistic account, this content becomes increasingly central. Understood as *semantic* content, the descriptive content of a name is taken to be disclosed by etymology: 'Astyanax' means 'king of the city', and is a correct name when applied to a ruler or a potential ruler such as Hector's son. This is, as I have mentioned, succeeded by an account which explains

8. Cf. Michael Palmer's reading of the *Cratylus'* position on correctness: a correct name is one whose descriptive content is true of the object it refers to, but reference is not secured through the mediation of that content (pp. 17–8). The first part of this view at least is shared by interpretations which take names in the *Cratylus* to be in effect predicates: see Gail Fine, 'Plato on Naming' ['Naming'], *Philosophical Quarterly* 27 (1977), pp. 290–301 at pp. 300–1 (but see Palmer pp. 105ff. on his differences with Fine) and K.Lorenz and J.Mittelstrass, 'On Rational Philosophy of Language: the Programme in Plato's *Cratylus* Reconsidered' ['Rational Philosophy'], *Mind* 76 (1967), pp. 1–20 at pp. 4ff.

9. *Onomazein* often means to use a name (387c–88b), especially in relation to a particular object (423b–d); it can also mean to give a name (402d11–e1, e4); and it can be used for the action which names perform in relation to their nominata (400b2). This range seems to correspond to that of the verb 'to name' in English, so I will continue to speak of 'naming' where either namegiving or name use or both is in view.

content as *mimetic:* the most basic 'primary' names disclose the natures of their referents through the expressive properties of the letters they include. In either version, a central assumption of the naturalistic account—and I will argue that Plato's basic sympathies in the *Cratylus* lie with naturalism—is that namegiving consists in the setting-down of a name *including a descriptive content* as the name of some referent.[10]

This means that any act of namegiving incorporates a predication; and 'naming' in the sense of name use includes predication too. So it is clear that naming and stating *[legein]* are activities which overlap. Moreover, we will see that one of the determining assumptions of the *Cratylus* is what I will call the principle of *compositionality:* viz., roughly, the principle that the capacities and properties of complex expressions—specifically, their content, truth and falsity—are determined by the capacities and properties respectively of their parts (cf. VII.1). Plato sees names as the basic building-blocks of language; and, in the *Cratylus* at least, he does not worry much about the mechanisms by which those building-blocks are put together. That means that his discussion of the 'correctness of names' can be taken as groundwork for a general understanding of language as a whole.

It should by now be clear how the topic of naming, so understood, is susceptible of normative treatment. For there is clearly something normative about naming conventions when names are understood to include a descriptive content: to say that 'horse' means horse is to say something about how the word 'horse' *ought* to be used. We can see Plato as considering the question of what makes it correct for me to use 'horse' for Midnight (or, indeed, to call him 'Midnight': that this case is different cannot be presumed at the outset), and

10. So one comparatively non-misleading modern comparison would be with John Stuart Mill's theory of connotative names: what I am calling the referent of a name is what he calls its 'denotation', and its content is what in his terminology it 'con-notes'. Thus Mill associates connotation with informativeness and meaning: all concrete general names are connotative, and are applied to individuals "because they possess, and to signify that they possess, certain attributes" (*A System of Logic* I.ii.5 (*Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. I, ed. John M.Robson (Toronto, 1973), p. 31)). The great difference between Mill and the framework I take to be at work in the *Cratylus* is that on the latter all names are connotative or descriptive, and yet are assumed to denote in the same way as proper names do. One way to understand this difference is to see Plato simply as beginning from further back than Mill: he draws no comparable distinctions among kinds of names, and evidently presumes the possibility of a unified account of how names as such work. Together with the 'political' orientation which I go on to discuss above, this attempt to rely on as few assumptions and distinctions as possible (in fact, considerably fewer) is, I think, an important factor contributing to the 'alien' quality of the *Cratylus* discussion. As we will see, Plato does not assume that there is anything normatively salient about the distinction between namegiving and name use, or between private and public naming conventions, or between names of individuals and names of kinds, or between predications and other kinds of speech act.

using this question as a way in to fundamental problems about meaning, truth and how language functions.

For Plato, these problems clearly include the question of what makes an act of namegiving correct as such. Of course, in the case of ordinary common nouns, there may often be no historically recoverable act of namegiving; yet we will see that the *Cratylus* tends to assume a primordial namegiving in these cases as well, and considers, with apparent seriousness, whether the namegiver is likely to have been human or divine (416c, 425d, 438c) and what his reasoning is likely to have been. Plato's point in doing so (as I will try to make plausible) is not to make any historical claim about the origin of names,[11] but rather to insist on the relevance of rational critical norms to the naming conventions we have inherited: even if the referent of a name is just constructed by customary usage,[12] a naming convention is legitimately subject to the same critical scrutiny as a deliberate assignment of names would be. To use what will emerge as a pertinent analogy, a law which is not the product of legislation, but is simply enshrined in custom, may still be critically assessed as a good or bad one: so too with the names we use.[13]

In what ways might a naming convention itself fail to be 'correct'? Here are some intuitive suggestions, without any implication that Plato is equally concerned with all of them. A convention might assign a name to a referent which does not exist, like 'goatstag'; or it might fail to 'carve reality at the joints' (*Phaedrus* 265e), by having a referent which is not a natural kind, like 'jade' or 'shorse' (Kretzmann's coinage, for a word intended to refer to both sheep and horses but no other mammals)[14]; or it might have a referent which the descriptive content of the name misrepresents, like 'the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen'. In Chambers' Dictionary, 'brown rat' is defined as "the larger and commoner of the two British rats (often black)"; 'black rat' is defined as "the smaller of the two British rats (usually brown)". It is not hard to see that there is something wrong with such maladjusted conventions, not least for pragmatic rat-catching purposes. A more subtle case, to which Plato draws attention in the *Statesman*, is 'barbarian'. Here the Eleatic Visitor digresses to

11. For forceful argument against the formerly widespread reading of the *Cratylus* as a work of speculation about the origins of language, see Richard Robinson, The Theory of Names in Plato's *Cratylus*' ['Theory'] (first pub. 1955), in his *Essays in Greek Philosophy* (Oxford, 1969), pp. 103–6.

12. Robinson and Kretzmann suggest that the namegiver in the *Cratylus* is just a reification of convention (Robinson, 'Theory', p. 105; Norman Kretzmann, 'Plato on the Correctness of Names' ['Correctness'], *American Philosophical Quarterly* 8 (1971), pp. 126–138 at pp. 128–9).

13. I will often speak simply of a name as correct or incorrect: as when Plato does the same, this should be taken as shorthand for talk of the correctness of the relevant naming convention as a whole (i.e., the assignment of that name in both its phonetic aspect and its descriptive content to its referent), or, in the context of an act of name use, of the correctness of the name as a name for the object it is used for.

complain of "the way that most people here carve things up, taking the Greek race away as one, separate from all the rest, and to all the other races together, which are unlimited in number, which don't mix with one another, and don't share the same language—calling this collection by the single appellation 'barbarian'. Because of this single appellation, they expect it to be a single family or class too."[15] This is, the Visitor says, just as if someone were to divide number into the number ten-thousand and all the rest. Understood as here simply to mean 'non-Greek-speaker', 'barbarian' is not untrue of the people it is used for: but the name at least *tempts* to error. For, unlike 'non-Greek-speaker', 'barbarian' looks like the name of a positive and unitary kind, coordinate with 'Greek': it includes no markers of the fact that it names a plural, heterogenous, negatively defined group. Thus it encourages bad divisions and false beliefs—centrally, that barbarians have more in common with each other than they do with Greeks.

This concern for the potential of naming conventions to be well or poorly designed for the purposes of correct inquiry and belief is one of the important philosophical motivations at work in the *Cratylus*. The naturalistic account makes this virtually explicit when it defines a name as a tool which we use 'to divide beings' and 'to teach each other' about them, as we do in philosophical dialectic. This implies that the namegiver should be supervised by the expert name user, the dialectician; later on, expert name-giving is itself said to proceed from a 'division' (424b–d), and to depend on knowledge of the things named (424c–d, 436b, 438a). So the names of a language can only be correct to the extent that the divisions or distinctions they embody correspond to those present in the natures of things.

In fact, given the principle of compositionality, we might expect that Plato's interest in developing a normative account of names is as a foundation—perhaps even a proxy—for an account of language as a whole: and for Plato, language is first and foremost the vehicle of philosophy. In the *Timaeus*, Plato discusses the origin of human speech in conjunction with that of the senses, and explains both as gifts from heaven designed to make philosophy possible (47a–d, cf. VI.2); so the measure of the correctness of a language will presumably be its aptness as a vehicle for philosophical dialectic. This centrality of the philosophical use of language also suggests that the nominata whose relations to names are likely to be of principal interest to Plato are the Forms. This is confirmed in the *Cratylus* itself by Socrates' preference for examining the names given to eternal beings (397b), as well as by the arguments at the end of the dialogue regarding 'the beautiful itself and the like (see V.2), though these do not aim to establish any full-fledged theory of such entities. I will also suggest that much more Platonic

14. 'Correctness', p. 131.

15. *Statesman* 262d1–6, CJ.Rowe trans., in *Plato: Complete Works* ed. John Cooper, assoc. ed. D.S.Hutchinson (Indianapolis, 1997).

metaphysics than might appear lurks both in the etymologies (cf. II.5) and in the re-examination of naturalism, which works out the implications of the classification of names as images (cf. IV.2, 4–6).

These are what we might call the philosophical or *scientific* set of concerns operative in the normative project of the *Cratylus*. A closely related set of concerns, I will claim, are *political*. In the *Phaedrus*, *Plato* considers the dangers of rhetorical persuasion without knowledge:

> Suppose I were trying to convince you that you should fight your enemies on horseback, and neither of us knew what a horse is, but I happened to know this much about you, that Phaedrus believes a horse is the tame animal with the longest ears—
>
> Phaedrus: But that would be ridiculous, Socrates.
>
> Socrates: Not quite yet, actually. But if I were seriously trying to convince you, having composed a speech in praise of the donkey in which I called it a horse and claimed that having such an animal is of immense value both at home and in military service, that it is good for fighting and for carrying your baggage and that it is useful for much else besides—…And so, when a rhetorician who does not know good from bad addresses a city which knows no better and attempts to sway it, not praising a miserable donkey as if it were a horse, but bad as if it were good, and, having studied what the people believe, persuades them to do something bad instead of good—with that as its seed, what sort of crop do you think rhetoric can harvest? [16]

In this dysfunctional community, neither rhetorician nor public knows, quite literally, what they are talking about. The meaning of 'horse' in this community would seem to be, 'the tame animal which has the longest ears and is good for waging war';[17] and its referent is donkeys. This seems to be a malformed convention even setting aside its divergence from the usage of 'horse' elsewhere: for not all of its content is true of its referent, and indeed there is *nothing* of which all of it would be true.

The *Phaedrus* emphasizes that such malformed conventions can have serious pragmatic consequences: this community will likely notice that something is amiss when their donkey-equipped military force meets with disaster. But the problem may be more difficult to diagnose or even recognize when the

16. *Phaedrus* 260b–d, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis, 1995).

convention in question—as in the case Plato is here interested in—relates to the usage of 'good' and 'bad'. Or again, consider the case of the names of the virtues. From Plato's point of view, the operative Athenian convention governing 'courage' *[andreia]* may well be in no better state, if we suppose it to mean something like, 'the admirable condition of character which is the cause of all fearless behaviour in war'. For as with 'horse' above, there is nothing of which this is true: some fearless behaviour in war is caused by stupid recklessness, and that is not admirable. Such cases raise the spectre that any amount of the language we use, including its most evaluatively and motivationally powerful terms, might be like 'Hermogenes', 'barbarian' or 'brown rat'.

Such conventions become particularly dangerous when there is a political agenda to be served. Thus for instance Thrasymachus in the *Republic* notes that every regime makes laws to its own advantage, and 'declares that this is just' to its subjects (338d–9a). He does not mean merely that the regime predicates justice of its laws: rather, those laws are presented as constitutive of 'justice', without displacing the evaluatively positive sense which the regime seeks to coopt. So to the extent that an oligarchical regime, for instance, succeeds in imposing its preferred naming convention (and political theory) on its city, 'just' in that city will come to mean something like 'socially beneficial and appropriate, i.e., oligarchy-promoting'.[18] In conjunction with a normal range of other views, such conventions can easily be shown to generate contradictory results, for whatever that is worth; and this is in effect what Socrates does in the elenctic dialogues for names like 'courage'.

These worries about the political abuse of language are of course hardly exclusive to Plato. The ancient *locus classicus* is Thucydides' description of how, during the civil war on Corcyra, ethically and politically evaluative *onomata* underwent a change:[19]

> To fit in with the change of events, words, too, had to change their usual meanings. What used to be described as a thoughtless act of aggression was now regarded as the courage one would expect to find in a party member; to think of the future and wait was merely another way of saying one was a coward; any idea of moderation was just an attempt to disguise one's unmanly character; ability to understand a question from all sides

17. This is perhaps less than explicit in the passage: but the belief about long ears which Socrates cites is presumably what governs the use of 'horse' for donkeys, and the orator must be relying on connotations of the word 'horse' which favour its military use.

18. Of course, one could try to rule such conventions out of court by stipulating that the content of a convention should not have such inferential or 'theoretical' connections embedded in it. But it is clear that naming conventions often do have such a form: for instance, the standard content of a racial slur is probably something like 'inferior because a member-of-such-and-such-a-group'. And what is wrong here seems to be, at least in part, that the embedded implication is not in fact valid.

> meant that one was totally unfitted for action. Fanatical enthusiasm was the mark of a real man, and to plot against an enemy behind his back was perfectly legitimate self-defence. Anyone who held violent opinions could always be trusted, and anyone who objected to them became a suspect.[20]

Of course, if 'meaning' is understood in the usual way, Thucydides' point cannot be that, as translations typically have it, words changed their *meanings*.[21] The complaint is rather that names have come to be used routinely to denote things of which their senses, and their evaluative connotations in particular, are not true. Yet the distinction between the two claims may not be hard and fast. Part of Thucydides' point is, I believe, that corruption of speech goes with corruption of thought; the passage in fact seems to depict the slippery slope from the conscious and propagandistic abuse of language to genuine fanaticism and delusion. It is of course possible to use a naming convention while withholding belief—to play the language game of faction or oligarchy (or, in the scientific sphere, materialism or phlogiston theory) without inwardly assenting to the theory it expresses. But in the ethical and political case, it is not *easy* to do so; and since the relevant naming conventions tend to include names with powerful evaluative content ('courageous', 'just'), it is also not easy to avoid misguided evaluation and action on their basis. In any case, I will suggest that for Plato, malformed naming conventions are not only incorrect indirectly, by tending to serve scientifically, pragmatically or morally mistaken purposes: there is something intrinsically wrong with a convention which calls, say, hopelessly oligarchic election laws 'just'. Our phrase 'an abuse of language' suggests as much: to *abuse* something, after all, is not simply to use it with motivations or consequences of which we disapprove. And to explain what makes some use of language (or even a whole convention) an abuse, we need an account of the 'correctness of names'.

So the starting-point of the *Cratylus* is the presumption that our naming conventions are legitimately subject to rational scrutiny and critique; and the central project of the *Cratylus* is thus in a broad sense *political*. It is parallel to

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19. Cf. also Richard Crossman, who should know: "we have only to read the daily papers to observe that propaganda (the modern counterpart of rhetoric) depends largely for its success on confusing the meaning of terms. If politicians were compelled by law to define any term they wished to use, they would lose most of their popular appeal, their speeches would be shorter, and many of their disagreements would be found to be purely verbal. Thus Socrates believed that the first task of philosophy was to clear away confusion and misrepresentation by defining the meaning of words." (R.H.S.Crossman, *Plato Today* (London, 2nd ed. 1959), p. 46).

20. History of the Peloponnesian War, III.82.4, trans. Rex Warner (Penguin, 1954, revised ed. 1972).

21. See John Wilson, "The Customary Meanings of Words Were Changed'—Or Were They?', *Classical Quarterly* 32 (1982), pp. 18–20.

Plato's explicitly political investigations in other dialogues and involves treating language as a social institution like any other. Like a law, a name may be instituted and applied well or badly, with or without intelligence; it may serve its function or fail to. And what gives the *Cratylus* a special importance is that language does not just run parallel to other social and political institutions: it is, as I have already suggested, coextensive with them, and implicated in their rightness or wrongness. This political bearing is what makes it important to refute Hermogenes' conventionalism at the outset of the dialogue. As I will try to show in 1.3, this is an application to language of what I will call the *thesis* thesis—the claim that since there is 'nothing more' to some social institution than arbitrary human imposition, it can never be deemed incorrect. And as such, Hermogenes' position threatens to ground comparable conventionalist positions regarding political and ethical norms.

Thus to understand the *Cratylus* we should see it in connection with Plato's ethical and political inquiries; and at a very general level, it shares a common project with them.[22] This project is one found, for all their important differences, both in Plato's early 'definitional' dialogues regarding the virtues and associated concepts (e.g., the *Laches* and *Euthyphro*) and in some of his later works (notably the *Statesman*). Very broadly, all these works can be seen as engaged in determining, for some politically vital term or concept, what should *really* count as an instance of the thing in question and why. The *Laches* considers this question for courage, the *Statesman* for the ruler, the Platonic *Minos* for law, and so on. And the same thing on a smaller scale is to be met with frequently in the Platonic dialogues: for example, the *Phaedrus* tells us who should really count as a rhetorician (260e, 266c, 270eff.), the *Phaedo* what real virtue consists in (69b–c), the *Statesman what* a real constitution is (293c, 301a), and so on.

I will refer to this as the *project of the strict sense*. This project is not an investigation into the dictionary meaning of a term, but a particular kind of 'real definition', and one which typically has revisionist results. It is an attempt to work out what a correct naming convention for the term in question would be.[23]

Plato's project of the strict sense typically takes as its Archimedean starting-point the evaluative content of the term in question. So, for example, Socrates takes it as a given for any attempt to define 'courage' that it must be a good thing

22. These political analogues have been perceptively discussed by George Grote (*Plato,* vol. 2, pp. 497–9, 545–8; cf. also Theodor Benfey, 'Uber die Aufgabe des Platonischen Dialogs: Kratylos' ['Aufgabe'], *Abhandlungen der Königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen* 12 (1866)). I am particularly indebted to Grote's comments on the parallels between the *Cratylus* and the *Statesman*. The Minos, in which Socrates argues for a 'naturalistic' account of law, has largely been ignored as inauthentic. It is of interest, though, as a rather schematic instance of the project I consider here—a scholastic version of the more unpredictable dialectic of the authentic dialogues. On the *Minos*, see Grote, vol. 1, pp. 422–425; also Glenn Morrow, *Plato's Cretan City* (Princeton, 1960), pp. 35–9, and William S. Cobb, 'Plato's Minos', *Ancient Philosophy* 8 (1988), pp. 187–207.

(e.g., *Laches* 192c–d, cf. *Meno* 87dff. on 'virtue'). This evaluative content of the term can then be brought to bear to limit its referent: if we do not on reflection consider some putative instance of courage (law, etc.) beneficial, we should deny it the name. The evaluative content of the term also shapes what the rest of its content could be, in the direction of a definition. The aim of the project is a 'strict sense' of the term in question, understanding of which will guide its proper use. Often the results look paradoxical: for example, the attempt to define the statesman in the *Statesman* issues in the result that only the person who possesses knowledge of the craft of ruling is a statesman, regardless of whether this knowledge is accompanied by political power (259b3, 293a1). In the same way it turns out that the virtues of the non-philosopher are all illusory (*Phaedo* 68d–69c, esp. 69b6); that the courage even of philosophers-to-be is only 'civic' *[politikê]* courage (*Republic* 430c); and that only Socrates, and not the famous Athenian leaders, practises the true art of politics (*Gorgias* 521d).

As these instances show, the results of the project tend to fall into a common pattern. Whether what is being investigated is a virtue, a practice such as ruling or rhetoric, or a product such as law, the key to defining it correctly is to see its relation to *knowledge*. Real courage turns out to require knowledge (the *Republic*); the person who possesses knowledge of how to rule is a statesman (the *Statesman*), and so on. Part of the project of the strict sense, then, is to establish the relation to knowledge of the term under investigation, and to work out what sort of knowledge is involved.

Plato's results are typically, as I have said, revisionist; but the purpose of the project is not, or not simply, to change the way we use words. It is to reveal the nature of genuine virtue, statesmanship, etc., as something different in kind from —and much rarer than—what normally passes as such: and to show that only this real thing, which is closely bound up with some kind of knowledge, fully merits the positive evaluative content of the name. Given this new understanding, we are free to insist on the strict sense or not as appropriate: the important thing is that we not be deceived by the commonplace application of names to objects of which their descriptive content, and their evaluative connotation in particular, is untrue.

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23. I suspect that the project of the strict sense must be inherited from the historical Socrates, and perhaps the sophists as well. Xenophon's Socrates also says that kings and rulers are not necessarily those who hold political power, but those who know how to rule (*Mem*. III.ix. 10–11). And a sophistic project of the strict sense is suggested by Plato: in the *Republic*, it is Thrasymachus who introduces the distinction between any chance so-called 'ruler' and a 'ruler in the strict sense' [*kata ton akribê logon*, 340e1–2, *akribei logôi* 341 b6, cf. 340e8, 341 b8]. For Thrasymachus as for Plato, rulers in the strict sense are skilled experts who successfully fulfil the function of ruling—viz., for Thrasymachus, fleecing their subjects (341a–c, 343b–c). Incidentally, a number of the paradoxes of Stoic ethics can be seen as expressions of this Socratic project run amok: only the Sage is free, a king, a public official, a judge, an orator, a friend, and so forth (Diogenes Laertius 7.121–4).

I believe that Plato's investigation of names in the *Cratylus* should be understood both as an instance of the project of the strict sense, parallel to works like the *Statesman*, and as groundwork for the project as a whole. An instance, because its particular project is to determine what really deserves the name 'name', by genuinely and successfully doing what a name is supposed to do. It may seem problematic for this reading that *onoma*—unlike, for example, the names of the virtues—is not an obviously evaluative term. But this is partly compensated for by Plato's speaking explicitly of 'correct' names. And what makes 'name' nonetheless a good candidate for the project of the strict sense is, I think, that it is natural to see names as serving a *function*—an idea which will lie at the foundations of the naturalistic account in the *Cratylus*. Even when they do not have markedly positive connotations, terms associated with functions tend to become success-terms: whatever is a complete failure at serving the function does not deserve the name, and whatever succeeds in serving it, does.[24]

The inquiry of the *Cratylus* constitutes groundwork for—or a defense of—other projects of the strict sense inasmuch as they all rely on certain presuppositions about names. Plato's projects presume that a name like 'statesman' or 'courage' can be applied well or badly, and that it is applied well when it is applied to objects of which its strict sense, evaluative component included, is true. They also presume that a community can be seriously confused about what such a name means and what it should be applied to. So Plato urgently needs some account of the functioning of names, one which explains how naming—not just particular acts of name use but a naming convention as a whole—can be done well or badly.

I will quickly note the implications of this 'political' reading for some of the particular interpretive problems presented by the *Cratylus*. First, it gives a very asymmetrical significance to the naturalist and conventionalist positions. These are not really two alternatives to be compared on an equal footing: from the outset Plato's project is to determine what constitutes a naturally correct name (cf. a genuine law or a true statesman), and what knowledge is necessary to produce or evaluate one. Conventionalism is not a possible answer but (in Plato's view) a denial of the question, since it maintains that all actual (that is, socially recognized) names are *ipso facto* correct. So the initial discussion of conventionalism is—as its brevity suggests—simply intended to clear the ground for the constructive work of the dialogue. (This does not imply, though, that Cratylus is any closer to the truth than Hermogenes. For his peculiar brand of

24. Thus what one considers an evaluatively loaded term may depend less on the language than on what one considers functionally important. For example, for most people, the word 'garden' is scarcely evaluative. But to the great gardener Gertrude Jekyll it merited a strict sense: "I am strongly of the opinion that the possession of a quantity of plants, however good the plants may be in themselves and however ample their number, does not make a garden; it only makes a collection" (as cited by Jamaica Kincaid, 'Just Reading', *New Yorker* March 29, 1993, p. 53).

naturalism also reaches, by a different route, the result that every naming convention currently in force is uncriticizable. For Hermogenes, this was because all naming conventions are as such correct; for Cratylus, it is because we owe our conventions to a divine institution of names. If I am right about the essentially critical character of Plato's project, we can expect Socrates to part company with both his interlocutors at the most basic level.)

This raises the question of why convention reappears near the end of Socrates' discussion of the correctness of names, and is apparently granted some standing in his conclusion. I consider this in Chapter IV: but briefly, it is clear that in the case of the *Cratylus* the project of the strict sense reaches an anomalous result. For what it finds is that names are *imitations* of their objects; and what is imitative is intrinsically defective. In other cases of the project of the strict sense, Plato sometimes uses the model of original and image to state his findings: for example, in the *Statesman*, the Eleatic Visitor says that incorrect political systems are not genuine, but are just imitations of the one correct one (293e1–6). He also says that those who try to change existing laws for the better imitate *[mimeisthai]* the statesman, and very badly if they lack expertise; but if they are expert *[entechnoi]*, "this is no longer an imitation *[mimêma]* but the really genuine thing itself" (300d5–e2). But in the case of the *Cratylus*, it turns out that names *as such* are images: and this entails that the essential distinction between correct and incorrect cannot be drawn so cleanly in their case. Moreover, the function of names is to disclose their nominata; but as images, names have an ineliminable tendency to deceive, and are not to be trusted. So, as Socrates goes on to argue, names are no avenue to knowledge of the things they name; and since knowledge of images goes with knowledge of their originals, there will be no distinct expertise or knowledge relating to names as such (cf. IV.6).

In short, naturalism itself entails that names can only be 'correct' in a peculiar, limited and unhelpful way; and the limitations of that correctness provide room for at least a supplementary role for convention. The thorny interpretive question is then exactly how, if at all, this supplementary role really differs from full-blown conventionalism: but I will argue that it is both possible and important to distinguish the two, and that Plato's final view in the *Cratylus* is better described as a *pessimism* about language. Conventionalism claims that all our names are, *ipso facto* and quite unproblematically, equally correct; the upshot of the *Cratylus* is rather that even the best names can only attain correctness in a limited and problematic way.

A further implication of this 'political' reading is that—as should be clear already—the mimetic phase of the naturalistic account is of absolutely decisive importance for the dialogue as a whole. Although briefly stated, Socrates' account of names as images and imitations has the role of an account of 'first principles', around which the dialogue is in a very loose way ring-composed:[25] it is the final formulation of the naturalistic theory, and, despite its anomalous implications, there is no suggestion that naturalism could dispense with it. I will argue for the essential seriousness and importance of the mimetic account—and

indeed for the necessity of some-thing like it given Plato's project—in Chapter III.

This working out of the 'political' character of the *Cratylus* is one ongoing feature of the interpretation I offer. A second is a general concern with Plato's methodology. To an extent which is unusual even for a Platonic dia-logue, the interpretive problems presented by the *Cratylus* are naturally posed in terms of why-questions. Why does Plato present the version of conventionalism he does, and why does Socrates keep associating it with relativism? Why do the etymologies go on for so long? Why is Socrates so quick to reintroduce convention, and so offhand in drawing his conclusions about correctness? Such why-questions are all questions about Plato's methods and strategies. They are hard to answer, which is why the *Cratylus* is a particularly enigmatic dialogue. But for the same reason it is a dialogue which promises exceptional opportunities for learning about Plato's way of philosophizing.

I do not approach the *Cratylus* from the perspective of any large theory of Platonic method. On the contrary: my hope is to learn something from grappling with the particular problems it presents. But even to do this requires some presuppositions. I will sketch mine here, not because they are novel, but just because it seems to me that such explicitness may be helpful—and particularly about what seems to be common sense.[26]

To begin with, I take it that the mere fact of being written in dialogue form does not preclude the *Cratylus* from expressing positive arguments for philosophical doctrines—arguments and doctrines which we may legitimately (if

25. In the outermost 'rings' come rejections of Protagoreanism and Heracliteanism (equivalent positions in Plato's view, cf. V.2) regarding the natures of things; then arguments against Hermogenean conventionalism and Cratylan naturalism respectively. A confusing factor is that it is unclear how far the arguments of Socrates' 're-examination' (428d–35c) should, like those that follow (435d–9b, cf. V.1), be seen as aimed against Cratylus. At any rate, at the centre of the dialogue comes the exposition of naturalism, culminating in the mimetic account. En passant, the dependence of the truth of logoi on the truth of names is first discussed as a constraint on Socrates' theory (cf. I.2) and then revisited as a corollary to it (cf. VII.1). And—tiniest of symmetries—the significance of Hermogenes' name is mooted at the very beginning and end of the dialogue, as well as at the centre of the etymologies (V.2).

I am inclined to think of the earlier stages of the naturalistic account (viz., the tool model and the etymologies) as an instance of what Aristotle alludes to as argument 'to first principles', proceeding from intuitively plausible theses about names to discover with increasing precision what their natural correctness would have to consist in; and the 're-examination' as, correspondingly, argument 'from first principles', working through the implications of that account (cf. Aristotle *Nic. Eth.* 1095a32ff.). But this raises huge issues of Platonic method which I cannot here explore. Konrad Gaiser also discusses the 'symmetrische Aufbau' of the dialogue; but he takes the etymologies to be its *Kernstück* (Konrad Gaiser, 'Name und Sache in Platons 'Kratylos" ['Name und Sache'], *Abhandlungen der HeidelbergeAkademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse* (Heidelberg, 1974), pp. 20–25).

not automatically or with certainty) ascribe to Plato himself. It is currently fashionable to emphasize the open-ended, non-authoritative character of the dialogue form;[27] but it should be obvious that nothing precludes a dialogue from expounding the author's views.[28] After all, later philosophers such as Leibniz and Berkeley use the dialogue form without any mitigation of dogmatism, while more polyvalent and questioning writers (Montaigne, Nietzsche) have tended to opt instead for the allegedly authoritative first person singular. In fact, the chief lesson subsequent philosophy would seem to have drawn from Plato's use of the dialogue form is that it is excellently suited to the exposition of doctrine. So we should not be too reluctant to recognize doctrine for what it is in Plato's own work.

The real problem is, of course, to discern where that doctrine lies, and to judge how the 'dramatic' or 'literary' features of a dialogue bear on the standing of the explicit argument it depicts. Though I can hardly argue for such a general claim here, it seems to me that these 'literary' features— characterization, imagery, and the course of the dialectic as a human narrative—very often have a function of elaboration and reinforcement. This is easiest to see in the case of characterization, which can serve to claim that a certain type of philosophical view is expressive of a certain type of character (and vice versa). For example, in Book I of the *Republic*, I take it that Thrasymachus exemplifies what we will later be able to see as a type of soul in which reason has been enslaved to the lower parts of the soul: we are to see that it is *this* sort of person who believes that justice is the advantage of the stronger. When he loses in argument to Socrates, and his position is later put more forcefully by Glaucon and Adeimantus, who do not really share it, we also see that this sort of person will be intellectually confused— too distracted by the preoccupations of the lower parts of the soul (money, winning) to work out a solid argument. (Though the *Cratylus* is actually not particularly rich in this respect, I will have something to say about the characterizations of Hermogenes and Cratylus where they seem to be significant: see I.3 and II.1.) To take another example, in the *Phaedrus* Socrates argues that only the dialectician will be a truly skilled rhetorician, because of his knowledge of the truth (which enables him to gauge what resembles the truth), his dialectical ability and his expertise regarding types of speeches and souls (261a–6d, 269d–72b). And these are manifestly just the kinds of knowledge which

26. An explicit concern with the methodology of reading Plato has become much more widespread in recent years. Notable works in this area are Charles L. Griswold, Jr., ed., *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings* (New York, 1988); J.C. Klagge and N.D.Smith, eds., *Methods of Interpreting Plato and His Dialogues [Methods]* (=OSAP supp. vol. 1992); and Michael Stokes, *Plato's Socratic Conversations* (Baltimore, 1986).

27. For a helpfully extreme and self-conscious example, see Gerald Press, ed., *Plato's Dialogues: New Studies and Interpretations* (New Jersey, 1993).

28. Cf. Michael Frede, 'Plato's Arguments and the Dialogue Form' ['Plato's Arguments'], in Klagge and Smith eds., *Methods*, pp. 201–219, see pp. 203–4.

Socrates has recently *displayed* in his speeches to Phaedrus about *erôs:* the explicit argument states what the literary whole depicts.[29]

Of course, these readings are open to debate, and the broader question of how to read a Platonic dialogue as a literary whole demands far more discussion than I can give it here. The point I would insist on is merely a negative one: we have no good reason to expect that attentiveness to the dialogues as literary wholes will tend to support readings of them as pervasively ironic or as somehow subverted by their dramatic richness. And in the case of the *Cratylus* at least, I think it is reasonable—and I will attempt in what follows to make this plausible—to read Socrates' arguments as attributable to Plato in a fairly strong sense. Through Socrates, Plato here presents what he takes to be the best arguments available for true and important conclusions, in the hope that we will reflect on and ultimately accept them.

This is quite compatible with the important, and currently much-emphasized truth that Plato hopes to stimulate our own best reflections on the topics he discusses. One function of the dialogue form is surely to engage us imaginatively as participants in the dialectic as presented. But I am concerned to reject an extreme conception of Platonic philosophizing as 'stimulus', one which goes so far as to claim that he quite often offers bad or woefully incomplete arguments the better to challenge us. Several recent interpretations of the *Cratylus* seem either to adopt this extreme conception or to vacillate between it and the more moderate one I would accept.[30] The attraction of the extreme 'stimulus' view is that it offers Plato exoneration from all error, by showing any apparently bad argument to be part of a cunning plan. But this form of interpretive charity is much too expensive: the price is to reduce Plato to a clever patronizing don testing his pupils with sophisms. I will take it that he standardly offers us his best: and why, after all, should that not be as good a stimulus as anything else?

So I will be avoiding two kinds of scepticism about the explicit argument of a Platonic dialogue: the kind that supposes that the drama must somehow undermine it or render it indeterminate, and the kind that sees it as proceeding by pratfalls and traps. However, I hope to use what is often a good side effect of such scepticism, namely an openness to ambiguities, ambivalences and silences. For these are often either condemned by interpreters or helpfully eliminated, where it seems to me that they should more often be explained as a deliberate, philosophically motivated feature of Plato's work.

This brings back to some of the particular problems presented by the *Cratylus*. For the two areas which I identified as particularly puzzling—the etymologies and the conclusion —have something in common. In both cases, the reader is

29. Thus the relation of depicted argument to drama is perhaps analogous to the relation of statements to images which depict the same content: see *Statesman* 277c4–6, and cf. the *Philebus* on the judgement-forming and picture-painting functions of the mind (39aff.). The dialogue as a whole 'paints a picture' of the propositions advanced by the explicit argument.

presented with what seems to be anbivalence on plato's part: between serious engagement etymology and making fun of it, between a dogged commitment to naturalism and a collapse into conventionalism. And interpreters have naturally been tempted to resolve these in one direction or the other: the etymologies are vindicated as serious doctrine or dismissed as Plato's idea of fun, the conclusion taken as a murky avowal of the one theory or the other

It seems to me likely that in both cases such resolution are oversimplification. So in the case in of the etymologies, I will be putting aside the question of *'Scherz oder Erlst'* (fun or seriousness); I will try instead to define the *genre* of writing to which the etymological section belongs and the functions it serves. In the case of the conclusion, my approach will in a general way be the same: rather than attempting to resolve Plato's ambivalence, I will just aim for a fuller understanding of its content, its sources and its implications. A third point at which issues of method will be important is with Plato's presentation of conventionalism (Chapter I). Here I will claim that to understand the conventionalist position we need to look at it in its dialectical context—that is, not as one timeless option among many, but as expressive of a certain train of reflection by a certain kind of person, and related to other possible positions as a natural predecessor, alternative, opponent or successor (I.3).

That to understand a Platonic dialogue we need to look at it as a whole has become something of a truism—and a hollow one. This thesis will at least put to the test some slightly more concrete, tactical suggestions. To understand a puzzling thesis like conventionalism, we should look at its dialectical context; to understand a problematic set-piece like the etymologies, we should look at the Platonic genre to which it belongs; in approaching an unsatisfying conclusion we should suspect that superficial ambivalence goes all the way down; and to understand an enigmatic dialogue like the *Cratylus*, we should ask what connections its basic project has with those of Plato's other works. If any of this is on the right track, and even if it is not, the *Cratylus* has much to teach us about the interpretation of Plato.

30. Including Baxter, *Critique*, and E.Heitsch, 'Platons Sprachphilosophie im Kratylos' ['Sprachphilosophie'], *Hermes* 113 (1985), pp. 44–62. Heitsch makes intentional fallacy the key to his interpretation (e.g., p. 50); Baxter refers to the concluding argument against Cratylus as "deliberately unsatisfying", and says that it "acts once again as a challenge to the reader to do better" (p. 6, cf. 8, 181). Sliverman describes the dialogue as 'working by misdirection' (*'Plato's Cratylus'*, pp. 26–7).

I
From Convention to Nature

The *Cratylus* opens with an impasse. Cratylus insists that there is a 'natural correctness' of names; Hermogenes maintains that there is nothing more to their correctness than convention. Socrates is invited to help: he begins by examining Hermogenes' conventionalism, and after some elucidation swiftly rejects it in favour of the alternative.

In this chapter, I discuss Hermogenes' conventionalism and its rejection in favour of natural correctness. Section I.1 presents a general sketch of conventionalism. In I.2, I consider two complications which have led to misreadings of it: Socrates' association of conventionalism with Protagoreanism and Hermogenes' defense of the naming conventions of a single individual. Neither, I argue, shows that Hermogenean conventionalism *is* a form of relativism or subjectivism about naming. Section I.3 examines the significance of conventionalism for the *Cratylus* by putting it into two kinds of context. First, conventionalism has counterparts in other topics, as a version of what I will term the *thesis* thesis: the claim that there is 'nothing more' to some social institution than arbitrary human imposition. Second, I briefly look at the *dialectical context* of conventionalism within the *Cratylus*. Hermogenes' conventionalism is, I will argue, important as a comparatively reflective way of supporting the commonsensical 'conservative' intuition that all our actual names (that is, all the things socially recognized as names) are correct. Sections I.4 and I.5 then analyze Socrates' refutation of this position in favour of naturalism, and sketch the first phase of the naturalistic account, which centres on the idea that a name is a tool.

This interpretation of Hermogenes' conventionalism as essentially conservative will amount to something of a defence of his position against portrayals of it as incoherent, subjectivistic, or just plain silly.[1] 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. What this implies for the

1. For example, Charles Kahn says: "Hermogenes' statement of the convention-thesis is of course dreadfully confused"; compare Gosling's summary verdict: "A dim

conclusions of the *Cratylus* will have to be considered later: for now, my concern is with conventionalism itself.

I.1
CONVENTIONALISM

Let's begin with a closer look at the text. Hermogenes opens the discussion with a résumé of his opponent's view:

> (1) "Cratylus here says, Socrates, that there is by nature *[phusei pephukuian]* a correctness of name *[onomatos orthotêta]* for each thing *[hekastôi tôn ontôn]*. And this name isn't just what people call a thing by, having made a compact to do so *[sunthemenoi]*, when they utter a vocal sound [lit., 'a piece of their voice']. Rather there is by nature *[pephukenai]* a certain correctness of names which is the same for everyone, Greeks and barbarians both." (383a4–b1)[2]

Cratylus' view also includes the paradoxical claim, naturally disquieting to Hermogenes, that the latter's name is not really 'Hermogenes' (383b6–7).

I have discussed in the Introduction how 'name' should here be understood. Of the other key terms used in Cratylus' thesis, 'correctness' *[orthotês]* is a generic normative term: however, the phrase 'correctness of names *[orthotês onomatôn]*' is not so clear. It is sometimes translated simply as 'correct name(s)', so that Cratylus is reported as saying that there is a single correct name for each thing.[3] But the phrase would more naturally be taken to mean '*standard of correctness for* names', especially given the claim that it applies to both Greeks and barbarians (i.e., non-Greek speakers). For example—and later developments will confirm that this is what Cratylus has in mind—the standard might be etymological. 'Demeter' is a correct name for the Greek earth goddess because it incorporates the appropriate Greek word *mêtêr*, 'mother'; the name of the earth goddess of a foreign people will be correct if it incorporates the word for mother

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interlocutor is a dialogue writer's godsend." (Charles Kahn, 'Language and Ontology in the Cratylus' ['Language'], in *Exegesis and Argument;* ed. E.N.Lee, A.P.D.Mourelatos, R.M.Rorty (New York, 1973), p. 158; J.C.B.Gosling, *Plato* (London, 1973), p. 204.)

2. Quotations from the *Cratylus* and other ancient texts are in my translation except where otherwise noted; I have generally, except as noted, followed Méridier's text. I have benefited from being able to consult a draft of Reeve's new translation of the *Cratylus:* C.D.C.Reeve, trans., intro., notes, *Plato: Cratylus* (Indianapolis, 1998); translation first published in *Plato: Complete Works* ed. John Cooper, assoc. ed. D.S.Hutchinson (Indianapolis, 1997).

3. For example, Fowler has in the first instance, "right name", then "inherent correctness in names" (*Plato,* vol. 6 (Cambridge Mass., 1926)); Méridier has "une juste dénomination" and "une juste façon de dénommer".

in their language. The claim that such a standard is 'natural' or 'by nature' means that it is objective and independent of our will. What correctness consists in is not dependent on our agreement; whether one's language is correct is a matter about which one can be mistaken.

This will be the foundational thesis of 'naturalism' in the *Cratylus*. Note that it does not commit Cratylus to holding that our *actual* names are correct—though it will eventually emerge that he does by and large endorse them. Nor does naturalism entail that there somehow exist other, 'natural' names beyond our actual ones (as one might hold that 'natural laws' exist); nor that there is any distinctive 'naturally correct' way for a name to originate. Cratylus has advanced just one claim: there is an objective normative standard, the same for each and every language, which determines whether any name in that language is correct. [4]

Hermogenes' position is presented as the denial that any such standard exists. In more positive terms, his view is as follows:

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

Of the crucial terms here, *sunthêkê*, like 'compact', is formed from a verb meaning 'to put together' *[suntithenai];* and as with 'compact', it is coloured by strong political connotations.[5] It is perhaps the central term in the conventionalist lexicon throughout the *Cratylus* (e.g., at 433e), and I will feel free to translate it

4. On the *nomos-phusis* antithesis in general, see George Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement [Sophistic]* (Cambridge, 1981), Chapter 10; W.K.C.Guthrie, *The Sophists* (=vol. 3, part I of *A History of Greek Philosophy [History]*) (Cambridge, 1971), Chapter 4; and Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers [Presocratics]* (London, 1982), Chapter 23. The question of whether language is 'by nature' or 'by convention/imposition/chance' eventually becomes a standard topic of philosophical debate: I do not propose to offer any general account of this debate, for two reasons. First, most of our information is considerably later than the *Cratylus* and unlikely to shed much light on it. (An exception to this would be Proclus' account of Democritus' four arguments for the claim that names are by imposition *[thesis]* or chance *[tuchê]*—to whatever extent these arguments *do* go back to Democritus (DK68B26).) Second, what we can see of the debate is terribly confused, largely because of the multiplicity of ways in which language could be said to be 'by nature' or not. The claim that language is 'by nature' might be (a) the *normative* claim that there is a natural standard of correctness applicable to language (Cratylus' thesis); or (b) the further claim that our actual languages meet this standard of correctness; or (c) the very different *historical* claim that the origins of language were somehow 'natural', as in the Epicurean view that language began with utterances made spontaneously in response to various objects (*Letter to Herodotus* 75–6). To figure out the real and perceived relations among these theses, and what the debate on each amounted to, is well beyond the scope of a study of the *Cratylus*.

5. See e.g., Xenophon *Memorabilia*, IV.iv.13, Plato *Republic* 359a1–3, Ar. *Pol.* 1280b11.

also as 'convention'. In explicating it, 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. For no name exists 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)

This explanation introduces two concepts which are crucial for the conventionalist lexicon, and which heighten the political coloration of *sunthêkê*. One is the verb *tithenai:* to establish a naming convention is to 'set down' or impose a name for something. The idea of *thesis,* imposition, is central to Plato's conception of conventionalism; it is present here not only explicitly at 384d2, but also implicitly in Hermogenes' talk of change *[meta-tithenai]* in our naming conventions, and earlier in the idea of compact itself [*sunthêkê,* from *sun-tithenai,* lit. 'set down together'].

The other term is *nomos,* which I here translate (as is often appropriate) 'convention'. But *nomos* suggests a more determinate and constraining social norm than 'convention', for it is also the standard Greek word for law. The *nomoi* of a community include both written statutes and a wide range of social conventions which might be taken to share their authoritative status and order-giving, regulative function. Now depending on the context, the evaluative content of *nomos* can be either positive or negative, and these evaluative connotations are often what determines whether 'law' or 'convention' is the appropriate translation. Inasmuch as *nomos* is the basis of social order, and contrasts with lawlessness, it is clearly a good thing: and from it we can derive terms with generally positive connotations, such as *eunomia* ('good order'), and *nomimos* ('lawful'). It is also this side of *nomos* which is associated with the reverend, often legendary figure of the *nomothetês* ('lawgiver'). But the *nomoi* of a community may go wrong, and even beneficial social rules may be contrasted with some prior order of 'nature' *[phusis]* in comparison to which they are impermanent and contingent. So for example Aristotle asserts that our use of money is based on compact *[sunthêkê]:* "and this is why it is called currency *[nomisma],* because it is not by nature *[phusei]* but by convention *[nomôi],* and it is in our power to change it" (*Eth. Nic.* 1133a30–31). In this way *nomos* is susceptible to taking on connotations of *mere* convention: a contingent, perhaps arbitrary and factitious imposition over some more valid original. When contrasted with the 'nature' of things, *nomos* may be a dubious man-made substitute, and as such it enters the vocabulary of epistemology.[6] Thus in Democritus' famous attack on secondary qualities, *nomôi* (in the dative) must

mean something like ‘subjectively’, as opposed to what is objective or real: “By convention *[nomôi]* sweet and by convention bitter, by convention hot, by convention cold, by convention colour; in reality *[eteêi]* atoms and void”.[7]

Hermogenes’ contrast of *nomos* with *phusis* and his association of *nomos* with change signal that the latter side of *nomos*—mere convention—is here to the fore. Like Democritus’ secondary qualities, the correctness of a name is mind-dependent—dependent, specifically, on our decision to establish it as a name—and so, like Aristotle’s currency, names can be changed by our decree while remaining correct. The three other terms Hermogenes has used—compact *[sunthêkê]*, agreement *[homologia]*, and custom or habit *[ethos]*—all confirm that the correctness of a name is a matter of quite contingent human institution. However, just what this institution involves is not so obvious. For interpersonal agreement or coordination is central to some conceptions of convention; and though this conception might be suggested by Hermogenes’ references to ‘agreement’ and ‘compact’, he soon states explicitly that his ‘convention’ may describe the naming practices of a lone individual.

> (4) “Whatever someone sets down and calls *[thêi kalein]*[8] 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.

> Well then, what about this? Suppose I call *[kalô]* some existing thing—for instance, what we now call ‘human being’—suppose I refer to

6. Matters become more complicated when the objective natural order is itself understood as a ‘law’ imposed by nature, as by Callicles at *Gorgias* 483e; and cf. Ar. *Rhet.* 1373b8–9. Cf. also the claim of the sophist Antiphon that justice is conventional, and conflicts with the dictates of nature: “the dictates of the laws are imposed, while those of nature are necessary; and those of the laws are agreed *[homologêthenta]* and not developed by nature *[phunta]*, while those of nature are developed, not agreed” (DK87B44; trans. Barnes, *Presocratics*, (p. 509) with some revisions).

7. DK68B9, cf. B125. Note that when Hermogenes later reiterates his complaint that Cratylus has never explained his position, he describes him as “claiming that there is a correctness of names, but saying nothing clear about what it is” (427d2– 6), without specifying that this correctness is ‘natural’. So naturalism can evidently be rephrased as simply the thesis that there *is* such a thing as the correctness of names, and conventionalism as the denial of it.

8. Following Méridier’s text: *Ho an thê1 kalein tis hekaston…;* Burnet, now followed by the new OCT, prints *Ho an phêis kalêi tis hekaston*, to give the sense, ‘Whatever, you say, someone calls a particular thing…’. The manuscripts give a variety of texts.

> *[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." (385a1–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* naming convention that we are to be called 'horses'. And this private convention will be, Hermogenes claims, no less correct than the public one. His next relevant pronouncement[9] confirms that private and public conventions are just the same:

> (5) "So then what each person says *[phêi]* the name of a thing is, this is the name for each?
>
> —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 barbarians." (385d2–e3)

Hermogenes' response here is his most extended expression of his view, and his clearest statement of what seems to me its crucial feature. In saying 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. There is the 'setting down' or imposition of a name *[thesis, tithenai]*, which establishes it as a name for some referent; then there is the 'calling' of objects by that name *[kalein]*. I will refer to the former action as the establishment of a naming convention, or more simply as namegiving or baptism. Baptism here—and throughout the *Cratylus*—is treated as consisting simply in a fiat or decision to assign some name to some referent, establishing the custom *[ethos]* of doing so. The 'calling' of things *[kalein]* will then include all subsequent uses of the name, as in acts of reference and predication. Of course, we need not think of

9. I here omit a passage which seems to me a detour, and which Malcolm Schofield has persuasively argued should come later in the text ('A Displacement in the Text of the *Cratylus*' ['Displacement'], *Classical Quarterly* 22 (1972), pp. 246–53): Socrates' argument that since *logoi* may be true or false, there are also true and false names (385b2–d1). I discuss this argument in section I.2.

this baptism as an explicit, observable, discrete ceremony prior to all acts of calling. For one thing, in the case of a private naming convention, it is hard to see what more the act of baptism could be than a decision *in foro interno* to assign a certain name to a referent. For another, if a name is taken to incorporate a descriptive content, any baptism must incorporate an act of 'calling'—specifically, a predication of that content of the referent. (It may be that Hermogenes is inclined to conceive of a name as consisting solely in a string of phonemes, given his allusion to a name as 'a piece of voice' at 383a7; but he never actually repudiates the assumption, at work throughout the rest of the *Cratylus*, that names have descriptive content.) Still, the point stands that we could in principle, given adequate knowledge, sort all acts of 'naming' as belonging to one kind or the other.

If we return to Hermogenes' earlier statements, we can see this distinction already at work in several places. Right at the start, in (1), Hermogenes describes Cratylus as denying that a name is "just what people call a thing by, having made a compact to do so *[sunthemenoi kalein kalôsi]*". Like "to call each thing by some name which I have set down" in (5), this construction suggests two distinct stages, the first a decision or fiat and the second an ongoing custom; and the verb *suntithêmi* matches the *tithemi* of (5). In (3) the distinction between setting down a name and subsequently using 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 *[meta-tithenai]*, establishing a new standard of correctness for subsequent calling. 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 and calls *[thêi kalein]* a particular thing".

Moreover, *tithenai* and its cognates are apparently a standard way to designate an initial establishment of names. Later in the *Cratylus*, *tithenai* is consistently used for the initial imposition of names by namegivers (e.g., *tithenai*, 389d6ff, *thêsesthai*, 390d7, *thesis* d10). The etymological section investigates the views of 'the very ancient people who set down *[hoi tithemenoi]* names for everything' (411b4–5, cf. 401a5, b8, 414c5, 436b5, 439c2 *bis*, etc.). And we find similar usage outside the *Cratylus:* when Parmenides charges that humans have erred in establishing names indicating differentiation, the verb he repeatedly uses is the compound *katatithênai* (DK28B8.39, 8.53, 19.3; note in particular the suggestion of the imposition-calling distinction in *katathento…onomazein* at 8.53). Pythagoras allegedly 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* 76).

The importance of the distinction for Hermogenes is of course that correctness applies differently in the two cases. In baptism, anything goes: all baptisms are correct, for "any name you set down for *[thêtai]* a thing is correct" (3). But the

convention which it founds constitutes a norm for subsequent use: name use is only correct when in accordance with the relevant baptism (5). At the same time each baptism is only authoritative until the next: a change of name is a new baptism and establishes a new norm (3). So a correct act of naming is either an act of baptism (including name-change) or a use of the name which 'accords' with the relevant baptism.

So far, this looks like a promising and sensible view. For the distinction is clearly an important one; and it is certainly plausible that name use is subject to a norm of 'accordance' with convention, a norm more stringent than any applicable to baptism itself. Yet Hermogenes' position is often found to be hopelessly counterintuitive, and tainted with subjectivism or relativism. In the next section I try to show that these reactions are unfounded.

I.2
SUBJECTIVISM AND PRIVATE NAMING

The accusation of subjectivism arises principally from the fact that some of Socrates' elucidatory questions suggest a quite different account of correctness, one which Hermogenes at first does not effectively reject or distinguish from his view. In (4), Socrates begins by asking whether "whatever someone sets down and calls *[thêi kalein]* a particular thing is its name" (385a2); but his next question, "whether it is a private individual or a community *[polis]* that calls *[kalêi]* it so?" (385a4), slides from baptism-plus-calling to calling *simpliciter*. This might seem a harmless oversimplification, but in (5) the baptism stage seems to be elided altogether. Socrates simply asks: "So then what each person says *[phê]* the name of a thing is, this is the name for each?" (385d2–3). Given that 'says' here seems meant to be equivalent to 'calls', *kalei*, this should be for Hermogenes only a misleading half-truth: he should stipulate that these 'sayings' must be in accord with a baptism. But instead he simply assents.

Some interpreters see Socrates as here manipulating Hermogenes into a shift to subjectivism about naming—that is, to the view that not only our impositions but all our uses of names are correct.[10] Others suppose that this position is what Hermogenes had in mind all along.[11] Either way, if taken as part of Hermogenes' view, Socrates' suggestions would have the effect of obliterating the distinction which I have taken to be crucial, by rendering instances of name use just as incorrigible (that is, excluded from criticism) as baptisms. However, it is

10. E.g., John M.Cooper, *Plato's Theaetetus [Theaetetus]* (New York, 1990 (=Ph.D. thesis 1967)), p. 182.

11. For example, M.M.MacKenzie, ('Putting the *Cratylus* in its Place' *['Cratylus'], Classical Quarterly* 36 (1986), pp. 124–50): "Hermogenes espouses an extreme theory whereby 'whatever anyone posits as the name for something, that is its correct name' (384d2–3)…. For Hermogenes, therefore, there is no distinction to be drawn

important to note that Socrates' manoeuvres are not in fact successful. His 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 (5)—as if he is anxious to make sure that his views are *not* misunderstood in precisely this way.

Now Socrates follows this gambit with the suggestion that Hermogenes might want to invoke Protagorean backing for his views (385eff.). This brings out what was at stake before, for the subjectivist position towards which he has nudged Hermogenes looks like an extension of or counterpart to Protagorean relativism in the domain of names: both legitimate all our statements as true, the one for epistemological or metaphysical and the other for linguistic reasons.[12] But clearly this offer is not in itself evidence that Hermogenes is already committed to subjectivism or relativism already. And in response, while admitting that he has occasionally lapsed into Protagoreanism, Hermogenes 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). As we will see, Socrates goes on to confirm this rejection with argument in favour of realism; and Hermogenes follows with no reluctance or second thoughts.

That Socrates twice—first with his slippery questions, second with his explicit invocation of Protagoras—attempts to push Hermogenes in the direction of subjectivism and relativism is a turn of the dialectic which needs to be accounted for. I offer an explanation of it in the next section; for now, the important point is just the negative one that his manoeuvrings are not good evidence for taking Hermogenes actually to hold this position—in fact, they would hardly be called for if he did.

Another source for the reading of Hermogenes as a subjectivist can be found in the brief argument which precedes Socrates' questions in (5). Here, in an apparent digression (385b2–d1), Socrates gets Hermogenes to agree successively that there is such a thing as speaking truly and falsely; that some statements are

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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…" (p. 126). But what is at issue here, as her own citation shows, is not 'naming' (*onomazein* would indeed include both name use and baptism) but 'positing'. Only the 'positing' *[tithenai]* of a name is infallible; and positing is, as I have argued, baptism.

12. According to White, conventionalism entails Protagoreanism and is an instance of it (*Knowledge*, p. 133, p. 149 n. 3); Silverman claims that Plato "infers that Hermogenes' conventionalism leads to a Protagorean ontology" ('Plato's *Cratylus'*, p. 31); Palmer holds that Hermogenes is in fact committed to Protagorean relativism, which entails subjectivism about naming, without recognizing it (*Names*, pp. 44–50). Cf. also 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 [Language]* (London, 1991), p. 71).

thus true and others false, the true 'saying the things that are as they are', while the false say them 'as they are not'; 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 (385b–e).[13] The point of this argument has been much debated, and Malcolm Schofield has argued that it should be shifted to between 387c5 and 6, where it can serve as an argument for the claim that naming is a part of speaking.[14] Still, it has often been supposed that the argument is principally meant to tell against conventionalism, as its place in the received text would suggest;[15] and it could only do so if Hermogenes is a subjectivist, committed to denying the possibility of error in naming, and with it the possibility of false statement.

However, this reading seems to me implausible. For one thing, the all-important link between incorrectness and falsity is never actually drawn. For another, there are no supporting textual cues: Hermogenes agrees without qualms that there is true and false *logos* [*panu gê*, 385b6], and assents with a reservationless "of course" [*pôs gar ou*, 385d1] to the allegedly lethal claim that some names are false.

Of course, this raises the question of what purpose the argument *does* serve, particularly if the received text is accepted: but this seems to me unproblematic. The argument serves to articulate a principle of critical importance to the *Cratylus* as a whole, which I will refer to as *the principle of compositionality:* namely, that for a property to belong (or be capable of belonging) to a whole of parts such as a complex linguistic expression, it must belong (or be capable of belonging) to those parts individually.[16] The principle as stated is of course vague; and it is not hard to think of properties for which it will be false (for example, number: see *Hippias Major* 301d–2b, cf. IV.2). At this point I want only to note that such a principle seems to function as a sort of default or presumption in Plato's thinking here about the content and truth of names and *logoi*. The argument thus brings to the fore an important desideratum for the pending account of correct naming: it had better show how names, and with them

13. Robinson denounces the argument as involving a 'fallacy of division' ('A Criticism of Plato's *Cratylus*' ['Criticism'] (first pub. 1956), in his *Essays in Greek Philosophy* (Oxford, 1969), p. 123). For more sympathetic exegeses see J.V.Luce, 'Plato on the Truth and Falsity of Names' ['Truth'], *Classical Quarterly* 19 (1969), pp. 222–232; Lorenz and Mittelstrass, 'Rational Philosophy', pp. 6–7; Kahn, 'Language', pp. 159–61; and Fine, 'Naming', pp. 295–6.

14. 'Displacement', now followed by Reeve in his translation; the new OCT seems, rather excessively, to despair of finding a place for the passage anywhere (cf. the apparatus *ad* 387c5).

15. E.g., Lorenz and Mittelstrass, 'Rational Philosophy', p. 7; Gosling, *Plato*, pp. 201–6; Kretzmann, 'Correctness', p. 127; and Robinson, 'Criticism', p. 123.

16. To be a bit more precise, the principle seems intended to work on two levels. First, at the general level, it claims that sentences are the kinds of things which have

logoi, can be false. Socrates will later take care to show that the mimetic account of correctness meets just this demand, when he argues in the reverse direction from the potential falsity of names to the potential falsity of *logos* (431b–c, 432e, cf. VII.1).

A third source of the reading of Hermogenes as denying the possibility of incorrect naming is his much-deprecated legitimation of private naming conventions—his claim that the name-inverter who calls horses 'men' names just as correctly as the rest of us. Some interpreters have found this so offensive that they have attempted to deny that Hermogenes really means it; but there is no evidence that he is uncertain about it, or that it is elicited by sharp practice on Socrates' part.[17] Hermogenes' initial explanation of conventionalism related it to "any name someone *[tis]* sets down for a thing", and his evidence was an individual's power to change the name of his slave (3). Socrates' question as to whether private and public names are equally correct thus arises naturally; Hermogenes' assent is immediate and unqualified (4). And, unlike so many of Socrates' interlocutors, Hermogenes nowhere repents of his thesis or attempts to modify it—on the contrary, he gives it prominence in reaffirming his view (5).

So Hermogenes is not ashamed of his legitimation of private naming. And it seems to me that he has nothing to be ashamed of; for it does not in fact entail subjectivism about naming, or a denial of the possibility of false statement. This is because, as I have already noted, baptisms on his account establish *norms* for name use: any imposition of a name involves a resolution to judge that one names incorrectly when using a name in a way which does not accord with its baptism. So the name-inverter who decides to call humans 'horses' and vice versa *gets something wrong* when he 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 so long as the distinction between correct and incorrect naming can be drawn in principle, this practical problem simply does not mean that anything goes.[18] (Unless, of course, one is impressed by verificationist or behaviorist worries about the possibility of determinate meaning in such a case—but this is hardly a line of thought plausibly associated

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content and a truth-value because the parts of sentences (ultimately their minimal parts, though what these are taken to be changes in the course of the dialogue) are the kinds of things which do. And second, with regard to any particular case, a sentence has the content it does in virtue of the content of its parts, and is true if and only if all those parts are true. Of course, this is a bit awkward in that compositionality seems to apply asymmetrically to truth and falsity: for a *logos* to be true, all its parts must be true, but for it to be false, only one constituent need be so.

17. *Contra* Kretzmann ('Correctness', p. 127) and Heitsch, who claims that Hermogenes 'really' takes the view that communication within a linguistic community is the fundamental function of names: Socrates is accused of not only 'Manipulation' but 'Verfalschung' of this thesis ('Sprachphilosophie', pp. 46ff.).

with Plato.) And even at the level of practice, our situation is not necessarily 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. Or I may establish my own conventions but still attempt to communicate, still recognize and admit to error. So it is quite mistaken to suppose that Hermogenes' views preclude either error or successful communication, as in philosophical dialectic.[19]

Moreover, Hermogenes has good grounds for his acceptance of private conventions as correct. As he himself 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 acted out his belief in conventionalism by changing his slaves' names arbitrarily —for example to *Alla Mên*, 'But Then'.[20] Of course, in such cases the community is likely to adopt the master's convention, but this is just the point. When others subsequently refer to poor *Alla Mên* by that name, it is because they *believe it to be* the correct name for him, taking this correctness to be a function of his owner's authority. We can think of other initially private naming

18. Except in one rather particular respect. This is that Hermogenes' conventionalism provides no purchase for criticism of a figure we might call the practising subjectivist. If you *want* all your acts of naming to be uncriticizable, you can just resolve to engage in baptisms and name-changes only, never in name use. Of course, this sounds like a kind of insanity—but that is the problem for Hermogenes rather than a possible response. Consider the political analogy. Hermogenes' conventionalism corresponds to a view of law according to which all impositions of law (cf. baptisms and acts of name change) are correct and lawful and determine what particular actions (cf. acts of name use) are lawful. And this view, reasonable and innocuous as it may seem, seems to provide no basis for the criticism of dictatorial rule (cf. subjectivism)—of the ruler who sets down one law, viz., 'The law is whatever I will on any particular occasion'. However, though the practising subjectivist is an intriguing figure I do not think he is at the heart of Plato's worries here: what is wrong with conventionalism is much more general.

19. As do e.g. Baxter (*Critique*, pp. 18, 21) and Weingartner (*Unity*, pp. 16–21). Commentators tend to talk as though Hermogenes *demanded* that everyone adopt constantly changing private naming conventions: Kretzmann speaks of an "unbearable burden of a doctrine of autonomous idiolects" ('Correctness', p. 127). Conventionalism does, of course, allow someone to resort to private naming conventions for the purpose of evading public refutation. But there is not much to be done 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.

20. See Ammonius *De Int.* 38. 17ff and Simplicius *Cat.* 27. 18–21. I owe these references to David Sedley's article, 'Epicurus: *On Nature* Book XXVIII', *Cronache Ercolanesi* 3 (1973), pp. 5–79. Sedley offers helpful discussions of Epicurean and Megarian theories of language (see esp. pp. 17–21 and 62–3): he claims that "Diodorus went beyond the usual conventionalist view as represented by Hermogenes in Plato's *Cratylus*, and asserted that the meaning of a word is determined solely by the intention in the mind of the speaker on any occasion on which the word is uttered" (p. 63).

conventions which have a similar authority: the parents' name for the child, the astronomer's name for the newly discovered planet.

What the slave example helps to bring out is that Hermogenes' legitimation of private naming relates to a particular conception of convention as fiat or *decision*. A naming convention consists merely in a decision giving rise to a custom or habit: and since a private individual can engage in such decisions and habits, evidently he or she can constitute a naming convention of one.[21] 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. Much later Socrates will claim 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 very striking: we would naturally think that what is essential for you to understand me is some convention obtaining *between* or common to the two of us. But Plato evidently assumes that the private case is primary. And indeed, on this conception of convention as decision, public conventions do seem to be secondary or derivative. For a public convention will be understood either as a resolution made by some corporate entity analogous to a human individual, or as an aggregate—a literal 'co-imposition', a *sun-thêkê*—composed of the conventions of individuals. And either way, it is plausible that private and public conventions are equally susceptible of correctness.[22]

In sum, given the conception of convention as *thesis* or decision, the legitimation of private naming conventions is a natural part of conven tionalism.[23] To endorse as correct all and only public conventions would be indefensible, or would at least require some further argument, however commonsensical it might seem: and Hermogenes has thought enough about the matter to see as much. I think that there is a clue here for understanding the use Plato makes of conventionalism—a clue as to how Hermogenes' conventionalism relates to other possible positions about the correctness of names. I will explore this dialectical context in the next section.

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21. Though the parallel suggests itself, I cannot here undertake a comparison of Hermogenean private naming with Wittgenstein's much-debated critique of private language in the *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford, 1958). The present discussion depends only on the presumption that there is nothing *obviously* impossible about a *contingently* private language—i.e., the language of a Robinson Crusoe or of a Hermogenean name-inverter who calls men 'horses'. And this seems a reasonable presumption even if Wittgenstein does mean ultimately to refute the possibility of a private language in this sense—a reading which seems to me doubtful in any case.

22. So the basis for legitimating private conventions is not just a 'slippery slope' problem, as Baxter suggests (*Critique*, pp. 20–1), i.e., that it would be hard or arbitrary to draw a line between public and private conventions at some particular number of conveners. Rather, given a conception of convention as decision, there is simply no reason to presume a salient difference between the two.

I.3
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CONVENTIONALISM

To understand the significance of Hermogenes' position—and to see why Plato bothers to represent it in the first place—we need to look at it in two kinds of context. One of these relates it to counterparts on other topics and in other dialogues. For conventionalism is a version of what I will call the *thesis* thesis: the view that there is 'nothing more' to some social institution than human imposition, and no objective norm which such impositions should attempt to meet.

A *locus classicus* for the *thesis* thesis is Plato's account in the *Laws* of trendy scientific theories which encourage atheism among the young:

> "These people say first…that the gods are creations of artifice, not by nature *[phusei]* but by some conventions *[tisi nomois];* and that these are different in different places, according 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 conventions *[tois nomois]*, but not by any nature *[tint phusei]*." (889e3–90a2)

The verbal echoes of Hermogenes' conventionalism are striking; here it is justice and religion which are reduced to matters of authoritative (but changeable) local decision. Likewise in the *Theaetetus*, sympathizers with relativism are said to hold that "what things seem to a city to be just and fine are just and fine for it, for so long as it deems *[nomizêi]* them so" (167c4–5). The city has full authority in the matter and is infallible.

The *thesis* thesis, then, is the claim that some institution or practice is a matter of arbitrary and self-validating human imposition, subject to no objective norms.[24] The thesis is thus a positive claim (whatever is imposed is right) heavily dependent on a negative one (there are no objective standards of rightness); where it applies there is a zone of arbitrariness and incorrigibility.[25]

The *thesis* thesis is typically supported, though it is not genuinely entailed, by the descriptive claim that our established practices or institutions *are* the product of potentially arbitrary human decision. And this descriptive claim typically, as

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23. Of course, we might well question this understanding of what a convention is: in particular, we might think that convention is properly a matter of coordination among individuals based on expectations about each other's actions. Still, this does not mean that a solitary namer could not operate with something very similar: the hostility of the *Cratylus* commentators to the very idea of private naming is rather hard to understand.

in the *Laws*, rests on two pieces of evidence. One is *local variation:* different communities impose different norms. The other is *change:* one imposition can be and often is replaced by another. These twin facts are taken to show that there is 'nothing more' to justice, law or religion than can be created by *thesis*. And this is of course just what Hermogenes offers as evidence in support of his conventionalism: different communities differ in their naming practices (5), and names are easily changed (3).[26]

So Hermogenes' conventionalism is a version of the *thesis* thesis, applied to naming; what is more, it has a relation of mutual support with other versions of the thesis. For any instance of the thesis will involve claims about particular naming conventions: for example, the atheists of the *Laws* hold that the meanings of 'god' and 'just' are variable over places and times, and that local conventions about those names are all fully authoritative.

So what makes conventionalism a threat is its implicit endorsement, not of private naming conventions, but of *all public ones*, including those which Plato would consider dangerously malformed. I have discussed some prospective cases of this in the Introduction; another is mentioned in the *Laws*, when, speaking of states whose rulers pass narrowly self-interested laws, the Athenian says:

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24. Or at least no norms intrinsic or specific to that particular kind of institution: the *thesis* thesis might allow that a community's religious conventions (for instance) can be criticized on the basis of some general pragmatic standard, such as the furtherance of rational self-interest.

25. The claim of Thrasymachus in the *Republic* that justice is the advantage of the stronger or rulers also appears at first to be a version of the *thesis* thesis (338e–9a). But Thrasymachus' position is actually more complicated than this, and risks incoherence. For he evidently wants to maintain both that there is nothing more to justice than the fiat of rulers (338c1–2, 338e1–9a4), and that in some sense justice really is what is to the rulers' (real) advantage (341a3–4). And since rulers can be mistaken about their advantage (339c7–9) it seems that they can be mistaken about what is just, which contradicts the *thesis* thesis. Thrasymachus' difficulties make it clear that the *thesis* thesis is a delicate position to maintain. For it is typically combined with a debunking analysis of what is 'really' going on in impositions: for example, that rulers impose laws to attain some self-interested goal. And that can easily give rise to a slippery slope, from the observation that rulers *normally* impose laws to further their own interests to the claim that it is the *function* of laws to do so, and from there to the claim, incompatible with the *thesis* thesis, that a law is only correct—or, even, only really a law—to the extent that it *does* serve that function.

An unstable account of justice as both by *thesis* and function-serving can also be found in some Epicurean texts. Justice is instituted by a compact *[sunthêkê]* not to harm or be harmed (*Kuriai Doxai* 31–33), with the result that considerations of justice do not apply to those incapable of making compacts (32); and the content of these compacts can and does vary locally and over time (36–37). But while in this sense justice varies, there is an underlying uniformity in the equation of the just with the socially beneficial (36). And this implies that—although Epicurus wants to say that "there is no such thing as justice in itself" (33)—the beneficial is 'by nature' just (31). Thus laws which are not beneficial are not really just (37), despite having been established by compact.

> Surely we say now that these are not political systems *[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],* (715b1–6)

The best efforts of a faction to establish a self-serving convention about the name 'just'—say, to have it mean something like 'socially beneficial, i.e., oligarchical', and denote all and only oligarchical policies—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 speech-act at all (430a4). Plato's claim is not the debatable contingent one that such a regime will never wholly succeed in making its convention stick; rather, there is simply something to the name 'just' which outruns the impositions of regimes, and determines whether they are correct. (Nor does this 'out-running' depend on the presence of rival conventions or past usage: were an oligarchy to introduce a coined term to mean 'socially beneficial, i.e., oligarchical', it would presumably fare no better.)

In sum, if we bring Hermogenean conventionalism into connection with its more explicitly political counterparts elsewhere, it emerges not only that it is an instance of the *thesis* thesis, but that it is a specially important one. And, as I have suggested in the Introduction, it is plausible that the need to combat these political ramifications of conventionalism is an important motivation for the *Cratylus*, and for Plato's project of the strict sense as a whole.

These comparisons also reveal an important peculiarity of Hermogenes' conventionalism. By legitimating private naming conventions as well as public ones, Hermogenes presents as it were a 'democratized' variant of the *thesis* thesis. Such a position would clearly be more problematic in the strictly political case: it is hard to maintain both that whatever a city deems just is so *and* that its citizens are free to adopt a private justice of their own. Nevertheless, Hermogenes' democratizing move has a counterpart in the political relativism considered in the *Theaetetus*:[27]

> So too then concerning political matters, things which are fine and shameful and just and unjust and pious and impious, what each city thinks *[oiêtheisa]* so and sets down *[thêtai]* as lawful *[nomima]* for itself in fact *are* so for each, and in these things neither any private individual nor any city is wiser than another. (172a1–5)

The mention here of 'any private individual' presumably envisages primarily the individual advisor of the city, someone like Protagoras. But the potential for a

26. According to Proclus, the changeability of names was one of Democritus' arguments for conventionalism (DK68B26).

slippery slope to complete democratization—i.e., to *subjectivism* about the just, etc.—is obvious. For acts of imposition, as the passage makes explicit, follow on thoughts or judgements; and all individuals are capable of these (177c–d, cf. 168b and 172a above). And it is presumably because the relevant judgements are, for Protagoreans, as such *true* that the acts of imposition following from them are always in order: the democratized version of the *thesis* thesis finds its natural support in Protagorean relativism.

This will turn out to be relevant to the other context in which I want to consider Hermogenes' conventionalism, to which I now turn: that is, its dialectical context within the *Cratylus*. As a version of the democratized *thesis* thesis, conventionalism has the important implication that all our actual, public naming conventions are correct; and it is plausible, I think, that this view, which I will call *conservatism*, is Hermogenes' starting-point. For not only does conservatism seem intuitively plausible in itself, conventionalism seems to depend on it as a premise: Hermogenes' supporting evidence of name-change and local variation is only really evidence for conventionalism on the assumption that all the naming conventions in question *are* correct. So it is natural to see Hermogenes as beginning from the supposition that our actual naming conventions are correct; having thought a bit about why that is, he has landed on the force of convention itself. Having then thought a bit more about what a convention is, and recognized that it is a matter of fiat or decision, he has realized that there is no salient difference between the public and private case: hence his endorsement of *all* conventions as correct. Hermogenes' conventionalism thus represents a rational advance over the bare intuition of conservatism: he does not simply assert it but offers an explanation for it, and follows through on the implications of that explanation. This relation between Hermogenean conventionalism and an unreflective conservatism is an example of what I mean by a *dialectical* relation: in the context of a particular train of reflection, the one is a natural successor or 'next step' relative to the other.

Note, incidentally, that this is the sort of view we should *expect* to attribute to Hermogenes. For though he is not depicted as unphilosophical or unaccustomed to discussion, neither is his conventionalism advanced with any air of cleverness, dogmatism or theoretical profundity. Hermogenes has thought about the matter, and tried to discuss it with Cratylus; but he simply cannot see what else the correctness of a name could be (383b8–4a5, 384c9–10). When refuted by Socrates, he does not protest but again demands 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 which its advocates cannot clearly specify. This is consistent with his

27. See the discussion of Myles Burnyeat, *The Theaetetus of Plato [Theaetetus]* (Indianapolis, 1990), pp. 32–3, 39–42.

general portrayal in the *Cratylus* as responsive, ingenuous and open-minded (in contrast to Cratylus)—something close, indeed, to the voice of common sense.[28]

Now a complementary dialectical relation is suggested by Socrates' nudging of Hermogenes towards Protagoras: these moves point to subjectivism about naming as a natural 'successor' to Hermogenes' conventionalism. For a convention depends on an imposition or decision; and our decisions depend in turn on our *judgements*. This raises a problem for Hermogenean conventionalism: can all conventions really be equally correct if, as we normally suppose, some judgements are better than others? Once this epistemological question has been raised, conservatism can still be sustained if we insist on the counter-intuitive view that the judgements which ground our conventions are infallible, which Protagorean relativism can guarantee. But since the infallibility this offers applies to *all* our judgements, including those involved in acts of name use, Protagorean backing transforms conventionalism into subjectivism.

As I noted, Socrates' offer to Hermogenes of Protagorean backing is refused: Hermogenes explains that though he has fallen into Protagoreanism from time to time, he does not really accept it (385e4–6a7). This confession confirms that his conventionalism should be seen as dialectically *prior* to Protagorean relativism, and as an unstable position. The conventionalist must eventually decide whether to maintain the infallibility of impositions by grounding them in infallible Protagorean judgements, or to accept that *all* acts of naming are subject to objective norms.

When this crunch comes, Hermogenes is unwilling to embrace Protagorean relativism because he is unwilling to renounce the practice of comparative epistemic evaluation—the practice of deeming one person wiser than another. Wise people believe what is true, and foolish ones what is false: so if we accept relativism about truth, it is impossible for some people to be wise and good while others are foolish and bad—a consequence Hermogenes emphatically rejects (386a–e). As a corollary, Socrates continues, Hermogenes must reject the doctrine ascribed to Euthydemus, that everything has every property. For this must extend to such contrary properties as virtue and vice, and so again prevent anyone from being any wiser than anyone else. The alternative is to grant, as Hermogenes does, that things 'have some fixed being of their own'—objectively real, mind-independent, determinate natures.

Hermogenes' decision here may look like a lucky break for Socrates: but this is clearly the point at which, for Plato, relativism is most obviously untenable. No one can really maintain that all judgements are equally good: to do so would be to renounce not only comparative evaluation but our own ability to judge,

28. On Hermogenes' intellectual style, cf. Baxter's charitable efforts (*Critique*, pp. 17–22). These are hampered by his claim that Hermogenes, "like Cratylus, has a theory of language that rules out productive discusssion" (p. 18) and "render[s] dialectic impossible" (p. 21); as I have argued, this is not really so, and it sits ill with Baxter's characterization of Hermogenes as an "ideal interlocutor" (p. 18).

decide and act. (This is why the 'defense of Protagoras' in the *Theaetetus* will focus on attempting to show that Protagorean relativism need *not* have this implication.) Socrates' subsequent argument that names, as tools, must have a natural correctness will be in effect an elaboration of this epistemological crux. Some of our actions are more correct (i.e., successful) than others; therefore the same must go for the judgements which guide them; and, given that naming is an action, these will include judgements about how to name.

Let me sum up what I take to be the significance of Hermogenes' conventionalism for the *Cratylus*. The conservative intuition that all actual names are *ipso facto* correct threatens to block Plato's whole project of a normative, critical account of naming. Hermogenes' conventionalism seems to represent the most reflective way of grounding this conservative intuition without falling into the implausibilities of subjectivism and relativism. It also promises to support a similarly uncritical stance towards social and political institutions in general. If Plato can show that the conventionalist must on further reflection opt for either relativism or naturalism, his project of the strict sense, here and elsewhere, will be secured against a major threat.

I.4
AGAINST CONVENTIONALISM

Socrates' argument against conventionalism takes the exclusion of relativism as its starting-point, and spells out what this implies for naming. Hermogenes has granted, in renouncing Protagoras, that things have stable natures *[ousian tina bebaion]* of their own (386e1, cf. 386a4). Socrates proceeds:

> So given that they [viz., things] are of such a nature, aren't actions involving them of the same sort? Or aren't actions too a single particular class of existing things *[hen ti eidos ton ontôn]*?
>
> —Certainly they are.
>
> Then actions are performed according to their nature *[phusin]*, not according to what we think *[doxan]*. For example, suppose we undertake to cut something. Is it the case that each thing is to be cut by us in whatever way and by using whatever we want?—or is it rather that while, if we are willing to cut each thing in accordance with the nature of cutting and being cut, and by using what is natural for it, we will cut, and there will be a successful outcome, and we will perform the action correctly *[orthôs]*,—if on the other hand we do so contrary to nature, we will be in error and perform nothing?
>
> —So it seems to me. (386e6–7b1)

Existing things have an independent reality; actions involve existing things, and anyway constitute a class of thing themselves; so actions too have 'stable natures'. These natures are evidently features of reality which outrun what we

can determine; they cause our success or failure in action and so establish norms of correctness for it. The tools we use in acting also have natures: these, and not any convention, determine whether they are right or wrong for a particular task. When we judge rightly about all the natures involved in a prospective action—those of the action itself, the tool, and any other objects involved—our action will succeed (all else being equal); otherwise it will fail. So judgements too share in correctness and incorrectness, by being true or false respectively. As Socrates says, "if we try to burn something, it is necessary to burn not according to every judgement *[doxan]*, but according to the correct *[orthên]* one; and this is the one which tells us how each thing by nature burns and is burned and using what natural tool" (387b2–4). So too with speaking: someone speaks correctly not by speaking in whatever way he sees fit, but by speaking things in the way it is natural to speak them, and using the natural tool (387b11–c4). Naming is a part of speaking, and uses a name as a tool: "so then we are to name things in the natural way for them to name and be named and using what is natural, and not as we please" (387d4–6). Only by using the tool naturally adapted for naming some object will we name successfully.

Thus Plato's argument for an objective or natural norm of correctness in naming falls out of a general argument that such norms apply to our actions. It has accordingly the advantage of presupposing almost nothing about what naming consists in or what makes a name appropriate. The conception of naming in play here is simply that of a purposive act employing a tool.

Because naming is introduced as a part of the action of speaking (387c), this argument might seem to aim particularly at 'naming' in the sense of name use. However, the argument clearly applies to baptism—the construction and initial application of that tool—as well, and it is used to ground Socrates' account of the craft of the namegiver (388c–90e). This means that the argument does tell against Hermogenean conventionalism as I have interpreted it.[29] Namegiving cannot be, as Hermogenes thinks, a matter of arbitrary and infallible *thesis;* it and name use both must be governed by natural norms, not just those I impose on myself through my choice of conventions. Hence Aristotle's avowal of conventionalism is linked with a rejection of the conception of a name as a tool: "All language has meaning, not as a tool but, as has been said, by convention *[kata sun-thêkên]*" (*De Interp.* 16b33–17a2, cf. 16a19).

As Socrates presented it, the argument for natural correctness presumed the existence of stable, mind-independent objects; but it is striking that his depiction of agency in the examples of cutting and burning could actually be used to ground that realist premise. For the examples powerfully suggest that agency as we normally conceive it involves conformity to certain independent natures of actions and things. When I undertake to cut something it is plainly constitutive of that undertaking that not every possible outcome can count for me as success: otherwise it is hard to see how cutting could be distinguished from any other action, or how one could genuinely intend to cut. (One could of course decide to *call* whatever motion one had performed 'cutting', but that seems to be beside

the point—this is one of the puzzles about names, cf. *Theaetetus* 177d5–e2.) And whether I act successfully depends, it seems, on whether my judgements about the natures of the objects involved are true.

In the *Theaetetus*, Plato revisits the refutation of relativism; and here, in his famous 'Defence', Protagoras (as channeled by Socrates) denies the assumption made here that his theory precludes comparative epistemic evaluation (166dff.). And Socrates' response to the 'Defence' includes an argument which resembles the streamlined version of the *Cratylus* argument I have just outlined, as an appeal to the independence of future out-comes (177c–9b). What Socrates points out is that a sick person who tries to prognosticate for himself is likely to err even according to his own ret-rospective judgement: his later state as he himself perceives it will not confirm his prediction but that of the doctor (178d, cf. 178e). This is, after all, why he calls the doctor in. The point is that whenever we make a prediction, some authority external to our present self is established as a tribunal over the correctness of our judgement. And what makes the argument so snappy is that this seems to follow simply from the nature of prediction itself: a kind of prediction which was somehow relativized so as to be infallible would no longer be intelligible to us as a prediction.

What the *Cratylus* variant on this argument brings out is its powerful scope: for *any* purposive action expresses a prediction, or more generally a set of judgements oriented towards the future. As Burnyeat sums it up, "The very notion of the future makes us submit to objectivity. So, then, does action."[30] What goes for prediction in the *Theaetetus* must also go for the judgements about natures which, as the *Cratylus* points out, guide all our actions. They too imply an un-Protagorean subjection to a norm of success or failure determined by realities independent of our present volition. What is oriented to the future cannot be a matter of *thesis*, all action is oriented to the future; and naming is an action.

I.5
THE FIRST STAGE OF NATURALISM: NAMES AS TOOLS

Thus Plato's first step towards an account of the natural correctness of names is the conception of a name as a *tool*. This provides a foundational layer or initial phase for the naturalistic account as a whole: the etymological and mimetic accounts of correctness will undertake to specify just what kind of tool a name is.

29. However, it falls short, as yet, inasmuch as it shows nothing about what is required for a name to be naturally adapted to its task of naming. Hermogenes could insist that all utterances are equally good as tools for naming all things: the argument shows only that one should not try to name things using, say, trees or rocks.

The central point brought out by the tool model is of course that a name serves a *function*. To identify that function, Socrates, having prepared the way with analogies from other tools, suggests that in naming "we inform *[didaskomen]* each other of something and divide *[diakrinomen]* things as they are" (388b10–11). Thus a name is "a tool for informing and for dividing reality *[ousias]*, as a shuttle divides what one weaves" (388b13–c1). This account of the functioning of a name is rather casually introduced, and just what it means needs some working out.[31] The verb *didaskein* is sometimes best translated by the strong and specific 'teach', sometimes by a weaker and more general term such as 'inform', 'explain' or 'tell'. Given that we obviously do more with names than 'teach' in a narrow sense, I translate it here as 'inform': but it is important to bear in mind its potential to bear the more technical meaning. As for the second half of the account, 'divide' is of course a word with an important significance in Plato as, with 'collection', the canonical procedure of dialectic;[32] and here the dialectician will soon be introduced as the expert user of names as tools (390a–d). Talk of 'division' also suggests that names should be used to draw distinctions, by sorting objects by natural kinds—to divide reality at its joints (393b–4e). And so it is plausible that informing and dividing should be seen as constituting a single function, with the *kai* linking them as epexegetical: for 'informing each other' seems to result when we 'divide' and sort things successfully, and it is in turn by giving information about things that we do this. If there is really only a single function here, the point of describing it in these two ways is to draw attention to two different relations in terms of which an act of naming can be judged: naming as 'division' specifies the relation between a name and the object named, while naming as 'informing' relates namer and hearer. We will see that the naturalistic account focusses on the first of these relations, while Socrates' later re-examination turns to the latter.

So far, it is an open question how a name comes to perform this function. It rapidly becomes clear, however, that Socrates presumes a name to 'divide and inform' in virtue of its descriptive content. Socrates brings this out by using the tool model to draw a distinction between the nature or form of the tool and the matter from which it is made (389a–390a). The matter of a name is its phonetic constituents, its 'sounds and syllables' (389d); the form or nature (or at least the 'proper form': see below) is evidently the name's meaning or semantic content, and Socrates speaks of putting it 'in' the name. Thus a name performs its function by virtue of having content which correctly—i.e., *truly*—describes the nature of the object named: as the naturalistic account progresses, this function comes to be summed up in the thesis that names 'disclose' *[dêloun]* the natures they name (394d4, e3–7, 396a5, 422d–e). So a name performs its function by

30. *Theaetetus*, p. 42.

31. For a fuller consideration of the puzzles here see Silverman, 'Plato's *Cratylus*', p. 35 n. 20.

sorting objects into natural kinds; and it does *that* by giving true descriptions of them. In the discussion which bridges the tool model and the etymologies, Socrates discusses this as the 'Homeric' conception of correct naming exemplified by the names 'Astyanax' ('Lord of the city') and 'Hector' ('Defender'): names should describe truly the natures of their bearers, so that father and son should have 'the same name' when they share a common nature (391a–396c). Names should have meanings which carve reality at the joints, and should be applied to objects of which those meanings are true.

I will not here explore the metaphysics of the 'form of name', which has been the subject of considerable discussion.[33] Plato's use of form-language here is characteristic but (characteristically) vague: he gives no real explanation of how the 'form' relates to particular names.[34] A further complication is presented by his sketchy allusions to more specific 'proper' *[prosêkon]* forms of name and shuttle relative to particular tasks *[to tou onomatos eidos to prosêkon hekastôi*, 390a6–7, cf. 390b1]. The introduction of these entities has an explanatory point, for clearly it may not be quite enough to say that a shuttle, say, performs its function in virtue of embodying the form of shuttle. If it is successful in weaving heavy fabrics in particular, what explains its performance of *that* function is the further fact that it embodies the more specific form of heavy-fabric-shuttle. The distinction is particularly important in the case of names: for a name which correctly names dogs must embody not only whatever makes it a name in general but what makes it an appropriate name-for-dogs.[35] This performance-enabling feature of the name is equated by Socrates with semantic content: for present purposes, the (proper) form of a name is the meaning it bears. But of course if the form is just whatever enables a name to perform its function, the question of what it consists in can only be definitely answered by the *Cratylus* as a whole.

The form-matter distinction serves to give the *coup de grace* to conventionalism. Hermogenes had relied on the fact that communities differ in their naming conventions (385e3), a standard means of support for the *thesis* thesis. But if the form of a name is what makes it correct, and this is something which can be present in different languages and different phonetic materials, then this local variation may only be superficial. Blacksmiths in different cultures may use different iron to make tools which function equally well, and so too with names: "the lawgiver, both here and among barbarians, so long as he renders the form of the name proper to each thing in whatever syllables it may be, is no worse a lawgiver, here or anywhere else" (390a5–9). And if, as Socrates will shortly claim (394b–c), 'Hector' and 'Astyanax' can embody the same form, it would seem that complete phonetic diversity may mask identity of form. Moreover, from this functionalist perspective, this form of a name is what makes

32. Cf. *Phaedrus* 265d–6c, 273d–e, *Sophist* 253d–e, *Philebus* 16d–20a, and *Sophist* and *Statesman passim*.

it the name it is: since 'Hector' and 'Astyanax' are the same in 'power' *[dunamis]* and in what they 'signify' *[sêmainein]* they are, as Socrates says, the same name (393a–4c).

This claim that local variation is only superficial typifies an important strategy for rejection of the *thesis* thesis. For example, in the Platonic *Minos*, which argues against the *thesis* thesis regarding law, Socrates insists that—despite the appearance of diversity—real law is invariant, unchanging and the work of knowledgeable experts: the lawgivers. He compares laws to other writings by experts, such as the treatises of doctors: concerning the things about which they have knowledge, Greek and foreign doctors are in agreement (316d–17b). In the case of names too, the project of the strict sense requires looking beyond superficial variety to grasp what all genuine (i.e., function-serving) instances of the phenomenon in question have in common—as with law in the *Minos*, that they manifest expertise.

Some interpreters find the distinction between semantic form and phonetic matter so obvious and appropriate that they give it a prominent place in the results of the *Cratylus*.[36] After all, it seems to provide an eminently sensible compromise resolution to the naturalism-conventionalism debate as it has so far been presented. The correctness of the *form* of a name is a matter of nature: that is, its semantic content must have a naturally correct relation ('truth of, and presumably, rather more vaguely, appropriateness and perspicuity in dividing natural kinds) to the object to which it is applied. But what makes its *matter* correct—what makes the sound 'dog' a correct sound to apply to dogs—is simply the conventional association of that 'matter' with a correct form.

Alas for common sense, this compromise solution seems to evanesce from the argument of the *Cratylus*. As we will see in Chapter III, according to the final, mimetic formulation of naturalism, the correctness of a name is a function of the correctness of the phonemes which compose it—far from being a matter of indifference, the phonetic 'matter' is what does all the work.[37] So the form-matter construal of correctness presented here is very far from being the last word.

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33. I am largely in agreement with the reading offered by Brian Calvert, 'Forms and Flux in Plato's *Cratylus*' ['Forms'], *Phronesis* 15 (1970), pp. 26–47, except in his attempts to draw inferences for the dating of the *Cratylus.* Cf. also J.V.Luce, The Theory of Ideas in the *Cratylus*' [Theory'], *Phronesis* 10 (1965), pp. 21–36; Jeffrey Gold, The Ambiguity of 'Name' in Plato's *Cratylus* ['Ambiguity'], *Philosophical Studies* 34 (1978), pp. 223–51; and, particularly for a defence of taking 'proper forms' to be meanings, Richard J.Ketchum, 'Names, Forms and Conventionalism: *Cratylus* 383–395', *Phronesis* 24 (1979), pp. 133–147.

34. See the papers mentioned in the previous note for discussion of Plato's terminology (which includes *auto ho estin kerkis*, 389b5, *to eidos*, 389b3, B9–10, 390a6– 7, e4, *auto ekeino ho estin onoma*, 389d6–7, and *to tê1 phusei onoma on hekastôi*, 390e3), and particularly for the status of the 'proper form'. Cf. also Kahn, 'Language', pp. 162–3.

35. See Kretzmann on the distinction between the form of name and what he calls the 'model correct name' ('Correctness', pp. 129–31).

Another feature of the tool model is of more permanent significance. This is that it depicts the creation of a name as a matter of expert craft *[technê]*. In fact, when he sums up his refutation of Hermogenes, Socrates emphasizes not the direct conclusion that conventionalism is wrong, but the corollary that namegiving is not to be successfully engaged in by 'any chance person' (388e–9a, 390d). Naming is an undertaking as dependent on right judgement as any other; so the namegiver must be a skilled expert. And since names are, as Socrates notes, standardly provided for us by *nomos* (388d12), the namegiver must be a persona of the lawgiver, the *nomothetês* (388e1ff.). (Note the cunning bridge here from Hermogenes' conventionalism to Cratylus' understanding of names as the product of divine wisdom—from *nomos* as arbitrary convention to *nomos* as authoritative law.) Socrates adds that the dialectician must supervise the lawgiver in his namegiving activity (390d); for the user of a tool must direct its proper construction and judge its quality, and the skilled user of names is the dialectician.

From now on, a major theme of the naturalistic account will be the investigation of this expert craft of namegiving. As I have suggested in the Introduction, this investigation into the kinds of craft or knowledge relevant to a norm is an integral feature of the Platonic project of the strict sense. In the end, though, the *Cratylus* will have an atypically negative result: given the mimetic nature of language, namegiving cannot exist as a distinct and independent craft. For there can no expertise relating to names which is distinct from knowledge of the objects named; and that knowledge is provided only by philosophical dialectic, which is primarily concerned with the natures of things rather than their names.

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36. See Kretzmann, 'Correctness', pp. 129ff.; Gosling, *Plato*, p. 212; Gold, 'Ambiguity'; and Bernard Williams, 'Cratylus' Theory of Names and its Refutation' ['Cratylus' Theory'], in *Language and Logos*, ed. M.Schofield and M.Nussbaum (Cambridge, 1982), p. 91. As Gold puts it: "marks and noises are conventional, but the concepts they express are not" (p. 246).

37. However, this need not involve rejection of the form-matter distinction *in principle*. For the claim that the form of a name consists in its semantic content, understood as independent of its phonemes, is separable from the distinction itself.

Properly, the form is *whatever* does the work of disclosing the nature of the object named (in Socrates' example of the name *bêta*, it is not at all easy to see what this is (393e)): so we might say that the etymological section explores the hypothesis that this is semantic content, while the mimetic account locates the form in the powers of the letters themselves. Moreover, Socrates' initial claim that phonemes are indifferent matter seems, as presented, to depend on a fallacy ("argument contestable", as Méridier says *ad loc.*); for the parallel with the blacksmith by which it is introduced apparently involves a confusion between different *types* of material and different pieces or tokens of the same kind (389d–90a). Perhaps Plato means to encourage us, in advance of the mimetic account, to wonder whether phonemes can really be such a matter of indifference.

II
The Second Stage of Naturalism: Function and Genre in the Etymologies

The centre of the *Cratylus*—and almost half its total length—is taken up with an extravagant array of etymologies. Urged on by Hermogenes, Socrates analyzes the names of the gods, of natural phenomena, and of psychological and evaluative concepts—virtually the whole lexicon of contemporary philosophy, religion, ethics and science. For example, 'Hermes' is so called because *to eirein emêsato,* 'he devised speaking' (408b1–3). *Technê* can—admittedly with a lot of phoneme-fiddling—be seen to disclose 'possession of reason' *[hexis nou]* (414b7–c8). And *aischron,* 'shameful', relates to 'always restricting what flows' *[aei ischon ton rhoun]* (416a10–b6); for, according to Socrates, the ancient namegivers believed that things are in flux, and that what flows is good.[1]

This is obviously not etymology in the modern sense, which offers a non-evaluative, largely evolutionary account of the origins of words. Ancient etymology, for which the *Cratylus* was a classic and central text, was a quite different practice—or rather a loose family of practices, with a wide range of purposes and standards.[2] As practised by Socrates in the *Cratylus,* an etymology evidently amounts to a proof of the correctness of a name; but it is more mysterious than it might appear just how this proof is supposed to proceed—especially as Socrates' procedures are often rushed or allusive, and vary considerably from one case to the next. Roughly and in general, a name is explained or analyzed by Socrates in terms of (at least one) etymologizing term

1. The identity of these namegivers is temporarily left open. Cratylus believes they were divine (438c1–3), and Socrates toys with this idea (397c1–2); but he also describes his inquiry as being into *human* opinions (401a2–6), and his later proof that names are inconsistent excludes a divine origin (438c5–6).

2. On the importance of the *Cratylus* see e.g., Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *De Comp. Verb.* 16; for Plato's influence on the Stoics in particular, cf. Karl Barwick, 'Probleme der Stoischen Sprachlehre und Rhetorik' ['Probleme'], *Abhandlungen der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig, Phil.-Hist. Klasse* 49 (Berlin, 1957), esp. pp. 70–79. Rudolf Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship: from the Beginning to the End of the Hellenistic Age* (Oxford, 1968) helpfully treats various forms of ancient etymologizing in their intellectual context.

or phrase; this phrase is presented as a *phonetic explication* of the name; and it is shown that the meaning of that explication—what I will call the *deep content* of the name etymologized—is true of the nature of the referent of the name.[3] For instance, Socrates deems *psuchê* to be a correct name for souls because soul embraces *[echei]* nature *[phusis]* (399d–400b). That is, *psuchê* is explicated as *phus[in]-echê;* the meaning of that phrase, 'nature-holder', is thus revealed as the deep content of *psuchê*, and Socrates affirms that 'nature-holder' is true of souls. Thus the etymology is presented as an unpacking of the name itself—as decoding a deeper meaning or content actually expressed by it, albeit obscurely. A complication, however, is that in some cases the relation between name and etymologans seems to be vaguer and weaker: 'Ares' is said to be a correct name simply because it is 'in accordance with' *[kata]* the kindred terms 'virile' *[arren]*, 'courageous' *[andreios]* and 'tough' *[arratos]* (407d1–4).[4] At any rate, the collective effect of the etymologies is to offer an interpretation of the names of Greek as an expression of the theory of flux held by the namegivers.

This procedure raises many puzzles; I will consider some of them in Chapter III when I discuss Socrates' eventual turn from etymology to mimesis. The concern of this chapter is with the more general question of the spirit and intention of Socrates' undertaking. Because of their exorbitant length, and their extravagant, humorous tone, it is hard to read them without suspecting that there is more to them than meets the eye (or, perhaps, less). The question of what this is has made the etymologies the subject of much inconclusive speculation.[5] Commentators have differed not only over the significance of the etymologies but, equally intensely, over their status and provenance. Are they, or are they meant to be, plausible, acceptable, *good* etymologies? Are they Plato's own creations, or borrowings, or parodies? Interpretation has tended to suffer from a lack of clarity regarding the relations of these questions; and failure to accept that the *Cratylus'* etymologies are not etymologies in the modern manner has led to much irrelevant controversy.[6] Worse, the tendency has been to collapse all these questions into one and ask whether the etymologies are *Scherz oder Ernst*—whether Plato is expounding dogma or enjoying a (fairly private) joke.[7]

In this chapter I will begin from what seems to me a prior, not to mention more interesting question, the question of function: what is the etymological

3. 'Of the nature of the referent' because truth-of simpliciter is probably not sufficient for correctness: Socrates' etymologies typically disclose not just any true description of the referent, but one which brings out some central aspect of its 'nature'.

4. Note, though, that Socrates will retrospectively reinterpret all his etymologies as belonging to the first kind (cf. III. 1), the better to put them into compositional form.

5. For a partial survey of the debate, see Gaiser, 'Name und Sache', pp. 45–9.

6. The anachronistic supposition that the etymologies must have seemed unacceptable, even ridiculous, to Plato is convincingly refuted by Grote. Though he does not clearly make the point that Plato is doing a different *kind* of thing from modern

section for, relative to the overall purposes of the *Cratylus*? I have already noted one obvious function: the etymologies help to specify what the natural correctness of names consists in. Their point of departure is the idea that names are well-designed tools when their content is appropriate to (by being true of) their objects (393d–4c). Operating on the heuristic assumption that Greek *is* more or less a naturally correct language—for Hermogenes' request was that Socrates *show [deixeias]* him what he means by natural correctness (391a3)—Socrates now reveals how such a language would work.

But this construal of correctness eventually turns out to be inadequate. It leads only as far as primitive 'primary names', the correctness of which is a function not of their semantic content (in any familiar sense) but of their mimetic resemblance to the objects they name (421c–7c). The mimetic account, which I will discuss in Chapter III, is Plato's final construal of natural correctness: he seems to think that the two accounts are compatible, but the etymological account must be regarded as incomplete and superficial at best. Moreover, the remainder of the dialogue shows that natural correctness is itself not the whole story. The 're-examination' arguments set limits to natural correctness as such (428d–35c); a later set of arguments shows that etymology is unreliable as a guide to things, and includes etymologies running counter to those of the earlier section (435d–9c). In short, the etymological understanding of correctness is at least two removes from the dialogue's final results on the subject, and seems to be seriously undermined by them. This makes our initial question all the more pointed: given that it is so far from being the truth and the whole truth about the correctness of names, why does Plato bother to etymologize at such length?

This chapter attempts to answer this question through a discussion of Platonic form or *genre*. My hypothesis is that to understand the etymological section we need to identify and understand the kinds of Platonic writing it exemplifies. I begin with two obvious steps in this direction. First, the etymological section is

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etymology, Grote offers convincing evidence that modern standards were not ancient ones (*Plato*, vol. 2, pp. 516–529). Cf. also David Sedley, The Etymologies in Plato's *Cratylus*', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 118 (1998), pp. 140–54. For what it is worth, Méndier identifies just over twenty etymologies, out of about 140, which would be regarded nowadays as acceptable (*Cratyle*, p. 20 n. 3).

7. The phrase is a section heading of Gaiser's discussion of the etymologies, following Schleiermacher's remark that it is difficult to divide the two ('Name und Sache', p. 45). On the whole I sympathise with Goldschmidt's exasperated plea: "on veuille laisser de côté cette inévitable pseudo-question de savoir si Platon est 'sérieux' ou non,—question qui n'a encore aidé à l'intelligence d'aucun dialogue mais qui, en revanche, a puissamment contribué à obscurir les véritables problèmes" (*Essai*, pp. 144–5 n. 1). Of course, the interpreter's perception that a certain passage is funny, or seems intended to be funny, should be noted; but this calls for an explanation of exactly how and why it is so, and how this humour contributes to the philosophical economy of the whole (cf. II.4.). The bare distinction between 'serious' and 'humorous', with its disastrous suggestion that the latter excludes any philosophical significance, has just the results that Goldschmidt notes.

presented as a *rational reconstruction* of a 'Cratylan' position on the correctness of names, where Cratylus stands for a contemporary intellectual practice of using etymology to disclose the natures of things (II.1); second, it is an *inspiration episode* (II.2). More important, the etymological section is also an *agonistic display*. Socrates is depicted as beating etymology-mongers at their own game (II.3). As an *agôn,* the etymological section is an instance of an important Platonic genre, with counterparts in other works: notably Socrates' first speech in the *Phaedrus,* the oration of the *Menexenus* and the interpretation of Simonides in the *Protagoras*.[8] These examples can give us some idea of how the agonistic genre works and what Plato uses it for. Applied to the *Cratylus,* this will make it possible to answer the question of function, and to explain some of the puzzling features of the etymologies (II.4). It will also suggest a curious parallel. The etymological section in many ways resembles another notable philosophical *agôn:* Parmenides' cosmology or *Doxa* (II.5). And the parallel will, I think, help to bring out something important the two texts have in common: a 'Parmenidean' conception of language as inherently, systematically deceptive.

II.1
RATIONAL RECONSTRUCTION

Socrates' etymologizing is presented as part of his explication of Cratylus' claim that there is a natural correctness of names. The *Cratylus* opens with Hermogenes asking Socrates to interpret this oracular claim *[manteia]* (384a5), playing the role of *prophêtês* or spokesman to Cratylus' Pythia (cf. *Timaeus* 71e–2b)—which suggests that his discourse will be rationalized and explanatory in comparision with what Cratylus himself has to offer—or to offer his own thoughts on the correctness of names. The subsequent imagery of inspiration suggests that Socrates instead becomes a full-blown oracle himself; and it is clear throughout that he is not simply expounding Cratylus but engaging in independent investigation. Nonetheless, his account is still presented as an explanation of the Cratylan position, and is accepted as such (428c1–8).

What does it mean for the etymologies to be 'Cratylan'? Cratylus is depicted as having a specialized professional skill on the subject of correct names. His oracular arrogance with Hermogenes is probably the reticence of the fee-charging expert (384a, cf. 427e). Socrates describes him as having both investigated these matters himself and learned them from others; he even offers to enroll as one of Cratylus' students on the subject, if he can offer a better account than Socrates himself has done (428b4–5, cf. 6–7).

8. Socrates' speech on *erôs* in the *Symposium* must also count as an agonistic display (see Andrea Wilson Nightingale, *Genres in Dialogue [Genres]* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 111ff., 127–30). However, the *Symposium* seems to me to present special interpretative difficulties, and I will not be discussing it here.

Though Cratylus' acceptance of Socrates' account applies to both its etymological and mimetic components, it seems likely that the former, much longer account is particularly in view, and that Cratylus' expertise is supposed to be principally etymological. For an etymological understanding of correctness makes good sense of what little Cratylus does say independently: for example, his claim that natural correctness is the same for Greeks and barbarians (383a). More decisively, his initial claim that 'Hermogenes' is not Hermogenes' name is manifestly based on an etymological understanding of correctness, and is explained in this way on two occasions (384c, 408b). Later on, when Cratylus claims that the study of names is the way to learn about their objects (435d–6a), it is clear that he has etymologizing in mind; hence Socrates' refutation of his thesis by means of contradictory etymologies (436c–7c).

That Cratylus is to be seen as primarily an etymologizer is strongly supported by the fact that etymology *was* a lively intellectual practice of the age.[9] The sophists' fascination with language and its 'correctness' is well known;[10] and we find etymologizing in a wide range of pre-Platonic poetic and philosophical contexts as well—though it is difficult (and perhaps unnecessary) to mark off etymology proper from a broader genre of explanations, jokes and word-play relying on phonetic resemblances.

A fascinating source for early etymologizing in intellectual contexts is the *Derveni Papyrus*, which was probably composed around the end of the fifth century.[11] The *Papyrus* contains the remains of a religious text, the bulk of which is a commentary on an Orphic cosmogonie poem. Though his exact viewpoint is a matter of controversy, the commentator's project seems to be an integration of the cosmogony with the findings of modern science. He performs this largely through naturalizing interpretations of the Orphic text, in many cases identifying gods with each other and with important components of the natural world: for example, Moira (Fate) is identified with breath *[pneuma]* and intelligence *[phronesis]* (Col. XIV). He frequently offers close readings of the poet's 'riddling' statements, including explanations of his use of names. Sometimes the

9. See Goldschmidt (*Essai*, pp. 109–42) and Baxter (*Critique*, Chapters 4 and 5).

10. See Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement*, Chapter 7; Guthrie, *History*, vol. 3, pp. 204–25.

11. I focus here on etymology in the *Papyrus*, but there are other and fascinating points of contact between it and the *Cratylus*. The kinship between the two texts has been discussed by Charles Kahn, in 'Was Euthyphro the Author of the Deveni Papyrus?': he concludes that, if not, "they represent much the same religious and intellectual milieu" (in André Laks and Glenn Most, eds., *Studies on the Derveni Papyrus* (Oxford, 1997), at p. 55; cf. also Kahn, 'Language', p. 156 n. 6). Cf. also Baxter, *Critique*, pp. 130ff. Only a pirate text of the *Papyrus* has been published, in *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 47 (1982), pages numbered 1–12 following 300. I follow the numbering of columns used there, though a renumbered fuller translation (without text) has now been presented in Laks and Most.

poet 'names' on the basis of etymological appropriateness, and it is suggested that he does so systematically:

> having named reason *[noun]* which knocks *[krouonta]* things against each other 'Kronos', he says that he did great deeds against Ouranos…. He named *[ônomasen]* Kronos from the…[brief lacuna]…and the others each according to the same [?] principle *[logon]* (Col. X, 7–11).[12]

It would be natural to read such passages as descriptions of name-giving, but this is unlikely to be the idea. Rather, the poet is typically described as using names which are already current, using his special insight into the nature of things to select them as appropriate to their real denotations (Col. XV, 8–9, Col. XIX, 7–8).[13] He uses ordinary language to communicate a hidden or metaphorical meaning: he signals his own thought through established expressions. So the idea is presumably that the name 'Kronos' had already been in use as a name for a senior ruler-god: Orpheus alone recognized that it really signifies *krouôn nous* and used it accordingly. But since traditional theology is, it seems, to be reinterpreted rather than rejected, the name was in some sense correctly assigned all along. Like the commentator after him, Orpheus must have decoded truths already embedded in the language—with the difference that where the commentator translates these truths into the non-riddling language of natural science, Orpheus continues to speak in code.

Regardless of the exact nature of the Derveni commentator's project, he provides striking evidence that etymologizing was already, before Plato, a practice which could be used to provide support for a theoretical view or to display esoteric knowledge.[14] And if we turn to post-Platonic texts, etymological argument for philosophical positions becomes widespread. The Stoics were notorious etymologizers, but the practice was by no means restricted to them.[15] For instance, the Peripatetic Alexander of Aphrodisias uses etymology to argue that philosophy is knowledge, not of just any subject-matter, but of divine beings; for the word *theorem* (contemplation, theoretical study) means 'to see divine things' *[theia horan]* (*In An. Pr.* 3.17–23).

I will call etymologizing of this ambitious sort *strong etymology*. It expresses the powerful assumption that the real meanings of words, as recovered by

12. Other examples of etymologizing in the DP occur in Col. XVII, 10–12 and Col. XVIII, 7–13.

13. Cf. Baxter, *Critique*, pp. 134–5. But it is hard to come up with a coherent or even intelligible view of how, according to the commentator, names were first established: for an attempt, see Walter Burkert, 'La Genèse des choses et des mots: Le Papyrus de Derveni entre Anaxagore et Cratyle', *Etudes Philosophiques* 25 (1970) ['Genèse'], pp. 443–455.

14. Cf. Gaiser, 'Name und Sache', p. 12. Note that the etymologizing intellectual was mocked at the theatre: see Euripides, *Bacchae*, 292–7, 298–9 (and cf. *Phaedrus* 244b–d), Aristophanes, *Clouds*, 394.

etymology, can provide insight into the natures of things. It is thus a means of discovery, teaching and persuasion not just about language but about the world. And it is a method which tends naturally to support normative conclusions about names: for if names *can* provide accurate information about the objects they name, it seems reasonable to suppose that a 'correct' name is one which does so.

I think that we are to understand Cratylus as a practitioner of strong etymology; in fact, since he is not much characterized as an individual, Cratylus is probably meant as the generic representative of people who do this sort of thing. This suggests, fortunately, that for the purposes of understanding the *Cratylus* we need not worry much about the views of the historical Cratylus.[16] It also suggests that we are to see his Heraclitean affiliation in the dialogue as in a way secondary.[17] The practitioner of strong etymology must have *some* view as to the natures of things—something for his etymologies to support—but this is not really the focus of his interest, and it may well be eclectic and ad hoc (as it seems to be in the *Derveni* case). What is fundamental is the method and the faith in names it depends on.

As a rational reconstruction, Socrates' exposition of the Cratylan position represents an improvement over other possible versions. So Cratylus finds he has nothing to add to it; and there is certainly no indication in the dialogue that he himself could have offered us anything so comprehensive, ingenious, or philosophically informed. Moreover, some etymologies give the impression that Socrates is attempting to revise current views in the direction of what Plato considers more defensible.[18] For example, in etymologizing 'Hades' (i.e., death)

15. Cf. Barwick, 'Probleme', pp. 50–69.

16. The subject is controversial, but it seems to me clear that the views of the historical Cratylus are well beyond recovery. We hear remarkably little about Cratylus from other sources. Besides telling us that he also figured in a dialogue by Aeschines (*Rhetoric* 1417b1–3), Aristotle mentions Cratylus on two occasions, which together with the *Cratylus* are apparently the source of all later references. These characterize Cratylus (a) as an influence on the early Plato, transmitting the Heraclitean doctrine of flux (*Metaph.* 987a29–b1); and (b) as carrying Heracliteanism to such an extreme that he ultimately fell silent in the face of total flux, and only pointed (*Metaph.* 1010a7–15). It seems to me extremely unlikely that there is anything of historical value in either. If (b) is anything more than a cheap Heraclitus joke, what it describes is not an *echt* Heraclitean, extreme or otherwise, but someone who has been convinced by essentially *anti*-Heraclitean arguments against the possibility of describing things which are in flux, like those at the end of the *Cratylus* (see V.2: and cf. *Theaetetus* 182–3). And (a) looks like a sloppy extrapolation from the *Cratylus* itself, offered to explain Plato's concern with flux. At any rate it is difficult to imagine the Cratylus portrayed in the *Cratylus* as a major influence on its author. See G.S.Kirk, The Problem of Cratylus' ['Problem'], *American Journal of Philology [AJP]* 72 (1951), pp. 225–253. A more sanguine view is taken by D.J.Allan, 'The Problem of Cratylus' ['Problem'], *AJP* 75 (1954), pp. 271–287: in order to reconcile Aristotle's two remarks, Allen offers a 'developmental' account of the Cratylan philosophy.

17. Cf. Kirk, 'Problem', pp. 227, 230–1.

Socrates emphasizes that, far from being frightening, as the obvious etymology *aeidês*, 'invisible', might suggest, death is a promising opportunity for knowledge *[eidenai]* (403a-4b).

In sum, the etymological account represents a rational reconstruction of a contemporary intellectual practice—a pseudo-science—of strong etymology, displaying its project in a more systematic and philosophically informed way than strict accuracy would allow. I should note that there is also another dimension to this activity of 'rational reconstruction', which I will consider in Ch. II. 5. In etymologizing, Socrates is also engaging in a reconstruction of the world-view of the hypothesized *namegivers*, as encoded in the names they have given; by presuming that these names are correct, and by invoking natural science in a reasonably sophisticated way, he puts the best face on their beliefs just as he does on those of Cratylus.

Why does Plato present the Cratylan view in this way, rather than letting Cratylus speak for himself? There are, I think, important methodological points at stake: one is that it is part of the philosopher's job to take on the sympathetic presentation of views which, though incorrect or incomplete, are in some way important or helpful. Socrates' performance of this function is an emblem of Plato's own practice as a writer of dialogues. Second, Plato wants to make clear that the results will be an improvement: the philosopher is qualified to make the best of any view.

There are a number of parallels in Plato for this practice of rational reconstruction. One which will be important for our purposes is Socrates' first speech in the *Phaedrus*. Phaedrus has enthusiastically recited a speech by Lysias which argues that, given the harmful effects of *erôs*, it is better for a boy to have sex with someone who is not in love with him. Urged on by Phaedrus, Socrates undertakes to present a better speech in support of the same thesis (235d–7a). The result, which begins with a psychological definition of *erôs* and goes on to consider its implications in a systematic way, is indeed more organized, persuasive and intellectually sophisticated than the speech of Lysias. Another example of rational reconstruction comes in Book 2 of the *Republic*. Here Glaucon and Adeimantus are presented as 'reviving' the argument made by Thrasymachus against 'justice' as ordinarily understood (358b7–c1). But they present this position far more coherently and comprehensively than Thrasymachus himself was able to do, hampered as he was by bad temper and intellectual confusion.

We can see already that there is something competitive or agonistic about this practice of rational reconstruction: I will pursue this suggestion later (II.3) in discussing the agonistic display as a Platonic genre.[19] But first I want to look at

18. Cf. Paul Friedländer, *Plato*, trans. H.Meyerhoff (3 volumes, New York, 1958– 69), vol. 2, pp. 206–8.

another dimension of the etymological section: its depiction as an episode of inspiration.

II.2
THE INSPIRATION EPISODE

In the course of his etymologizing, Socrates is recurrently characterized in terms of divine inspiration. The motif is introduced very early on, when Socrates suggests testing "what this wisdom will do—whether it will give out or not—which has just now suddenly come upon me from I know not where (396c)." Hermogenes assents to this description, describing him as "suddenly giving oracles just like those divinely possessed" (396d3), and later as inspired and as engaging in divination (399a1, 411b4, 428c7). This inspiration is laid by Socrates at the dubious door of Euthyphro the Prospaltian. Socrates claims that his soul must have been taken over by the *mantis,* who was presumably divinely possessed at the time, in the course of a discussion earlier that day (396d, 409d, cf. 428c). There is no reason to doubt that this is the Euthyphro of the *Euthyphro,* there portrayed as a dangerous nutbar who claims esoteric religious knowledge and is widely mocked for his attempts at prophecy (6b–c, 3b–c). Socrates understandably suggests that, having made full use of Euthyphro's wisdom for their investigation, they should the next day seek purification from it, seeking out "someone clever at such purifications, whether one of the priests or the sophists" (396e4–7a1).

Socrates' first speech on *erôs* in the *Phaedrus,* besides being a rational reconstruction, offers a close parallel to this depiction of inspiration. In the *Cratylus* Socrates introduces his inspiration with an air of mystery, and attributes it to being 'filled up' by Euthyphro; here he says that he must have heard something better from some writer, perhaps Sappho or Anacreon, for "my breast is full and I feel I can make a different speech, even better than Lysias'."[20] The Muses are soon invoked (237a); and in the course of the speech Socrates becomes divinely inspired, possessed and dithyrambic (238c–d, 241e, 263d; cf. *Crat.* 409c). As in the *Cratylus,* his speech is attributed to another (Phaedrus, son of Pythocles, of Myrrinous', 243e–4a); it is also attributed to inspiration (by Pan, son of Hermes', and the nymphs of Achelous, 263d, cf. 241e, 262d).[21] And as in

19. I will claim that in fact the rational reconstruction here is ultimately to be understood as one aspect or 'layer' of the agonistic form; but the two are not always found together. That is, not all Platonic rational reconstructions are agonistic. Glaucon and Adeimantus are not represented as being in competition with Thrasymachus; nor, to take another case, is Socrates' reconstruction of Protagoreanism in the *Theaetetus* depicted as a competition with the original.

20. 235c (cf. 243e–4a): translation from *Plato: Phaedms,* trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis, 1995).

the *Cratylus*, this inspiration must later be 'purified': this is of course accomplished by the second, 'palinode' speech (242c3, 243a2–3, cf. *Crat.* 396e).

This language of inspiration relates Socrates to a range of figures: above all to the Pythia, who delivered her oracles in an ecstatic state. Plato is elsewhere determined to assimilate poetic creation, also traditionally considered inspired in some sense, to this process of oracular divination (*Apology* 22b–c, *Ion* 533d–5a, *Meno* 99c–d, *Laws* 719c).[22] This second-hand inspiration in the *Phaedrus* and *Cratylus* also recalls the rhapsode, the expounder of poetry, as depicted in Plato's *Ion*. Just as a magnet holding an iron ring enables that ring to hold other rings in turn, so too the poet inspires and possesses others, including rhapsodes who transmit their inspiration to audiences (535c–6d).

What is the significance of this motif of inspiration? It would be natural to suppose that Plato means, by depicting the *Cratylus* and *Phaedrus* discourses as communications from the divine, to invest them with a special authority. But if this is his purpose it is perversely undermined by the particular sources invoked. Pan, the neighbourhood nymphs, Sappho and Anacreon are not the most grandly authoritative of sources. (The list sounds almost like a parodie inversion of those lists in which the Delphic oracle, Homer, Musaeus, etc. are all invoked in support of some view.) And an overflow of inspiration from Euthyphro sounds more unhygienic than anything else. These attributions suggest that the real function of the genre of inspiration is more negatively to *distance* the contents presented from the figure of Socrates. It is not hard to see why such distancing is called for. In the *Phaedrus*, the account of *erôs* given in Socrates' inspired speech is at once deemed impious and in need of recantation. It is striking that this recantation, which of course impresses the modern reader as infinitely more 'inspired', is not so strongly characterized as such in the text. This confirms that the distancing function is central to the inspiration genre: the second speech need not be inspired because it need not be distanced from Socrates in the same way.[23] Much the same considerations apply in the case of the *Cratylus* etymologies. They too are fated to be surpassed and undermined, and this by Socrates himself; such reversals are less jarring when the original account has not been offered *in propria persona*. Moreover, the etymological section, is, I have suggested, meant as a rational reconstruction of Cratylus' view, not to be attributed to Socrates himself.

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21. Cf. R.Hackforth, trans., intro, notes, *Plato's Phaedrus [Phaedrus]* (Cambridge, 1952), p. 127 n. 2.

22. See E.N.Tigerstedt, 'Furor Poeticus: Poetic Inspiration in Greek Literature before Democritus and Plato', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 31 (1970), pp. 163– 78.

23. Admittedly, this speech is also attributed elsewhere, to 'Stesichorus' (244a2–3); but this is a figure with whom Socrates has identified himself. The second speech is also divinely impelled, by Socrates' *daimonion* and his 'divination' of what it intends

Another point made by the motif of inspiration is of course that the inspired message is not offered with the backing of rational explanation or argument.[24] In fact, I think we can put the point a bit more strongly: an inspired discourse will demand further *interpretation* to yield any determinate thesis at all. Not only can the inspired poet not defend or prove his utterances; he does not really understand and cannot explain them (cf. *Apology* 22a–c). The need for interpretation is a natural part of the inspiration motif, for the god speaks in riddles. As Heraclitus said, "The Lord whose oracle *[manteion]* is at Delphi neither speaks *[legei]* nor conceals but gives a sign *[sêmainei,* n.b.]" (DK22B93).[25] And, importantly, interpretation of this sign depends less on theological or exegetical know-how than on the interpreter's character, which is put to the test and revealed concurrently with the meaning of the message. A hubristic Croesus will interpret an oracle which predicts the downfall of his empire as referring to the empire of his enemy, and so begin the war that fulfils it.[26] Often the meaning of the inspired communication becomes clear only after such trial and error, as is also the case with the Delphic oracle regarding Socrates in the *Apology*.[27]

Now the inspired messages found in the Platonic dialogues do exhibit this oracular need for interpretation. In the *Phaedrus* the inspired account of *erôs* offered in the first speech has to be reviewed with the benefit of hindsight after his second: only then can it be seen to be acceptable, if reinterpreted as referring exclusively to the inferior kind of erôs.[28] Subsequent arguments in the *Cratylus* may imply a comparable reinterpretation of the etymologies: I will suggest later what this might be (II.5).

The significance of the inspiration episode, then, is the opposite of what it might at first seem. What inspiration offers is not an authoritative message, but one which, because of the need for further interpretation, *cannot* simply be embraced as an authority. We may presume it to be correct, but we will need to work out what it means before we can be guided by it. And this working out will be less a matter of exegesis than *inquiry:* what the presumption of correctness entails is precisely that we can find out what the inspired message meant by

(242b–c). But as Hackforth points out, Socrates is never presented as *possessed* by the *daimonion* (*Phaedrus,* p. 54), which in any case only offers prohibitions. The second speech is referred to as inspired only in Socrates' retrospective references to both speeches together (262d, 263d, 265a5). Socrates also takes responsibility for this speech when he describes it as done to the best of his ability (257a2–3).

24. Cf. Gaiser, 'Name und Sache', p. 53.

25. Cf. *Apology* 21b.

26. Herodotus, 1.53–4, 71, 91.

27. For an excellent account of the *Apology* oracle passage, see C.D.C.Reeve, *Socrates in the* Apology (Indianapolis, 1989), pp. 21–37.

28. That it is then accepted is indicated by Socrates' retrospective treatment of it and his second speech together as a whole (see Hackforth, *Phaedrus,* p. 125 n. 1, p. 131 n. 1), as well as his inclusion of its content in the later discussion (265a–6b).

discovering the facts of the matter. So an oracle summons us to the investigation of how things are. With myths and dreams, oracles have a powerful place in Plato's imagery: one reason for this is, I think, that these non-rational communiqués provide a sort of model for the dialogue form itself. Even when it is at its most rigorously dialectical, Plato's writing is to be responded to in the same way as the utterances of poet and Pythia. And what that means is that we are not to assume understanding, nor to bow mindlessly to the authority of the message, but rather to investigate for ourselves how it could be true.

II.3
THE AGONISTIC DISPLAY

While Socrates' inspiration in the etymological section has often been discussed, little notice has been taken of another, more important motif. This is the motif of the *agôn:* the etymological discourse is presented as a competitive display, on the model of an athletic performance. The agonistic character of the etymological section is, I believe, the key to understanding it, and has a number of complicated implications. But in a general way, its significance is obvious: the etymologies are to be understood as a triumphant display of competitive skill, in which Socrates beats the practitioners of strong etymology at their own game.

The agonistic motif is introduced as the etymologizing of divine names draws to a close.[29] Socrates begs to leave off discussing the names of the gods, with a suggestion that Hermogenes ask him about something else. "Try me on some others you want, so that you may see what the horses of Euthyphro are like" (407d7–8), he says: the allusion is to Aeneas' invitation to Pandarus to join him in his chariot, drawn by the famed horses of Tros (*Iliad* 5.221–2). Chariot imagery, and athletic imagery more generally, recurs on subsequent occasions, breaking up the long strings of etymologies. In a moment of self-congratulation Socrates says: "I think I seem to be progressing [literally, 'driving', *elaunein*] a long way in wisdom already" (410e3).[30] Later he chides Hermogenes for inattention: "But you aren't overseeing me, how I'm carried out of my course [or 'lane', *ektos dromou*] when I reach smooth ground" (414B2–3). (Whether this describes driver error or sharp practice is uncertain—probably the latter.)[31] At another point Socrates urges that Hermogenes "must guard the moderate and the

29. This may seem a bit late for the agonistic genre to serve the central role I claim; or it may seem to indicate that only the non-divine names are presented agonistically. The latter would be a further interesting parallel with Parmenides' *Doxa* (see II.5), which follows and contrasts with an account of divine truth. However, I doubt that the *agôn* should be taken in this restricted way. For, as I will argue, the inspiration motif here really belongs to the *agôn*, as do Socrates' showy tactics (for example, his multiple and self-besting etymologies); and these features are present from the start.

30. *Elaunô* is a standard verb for driving a chariot: see e.g., *Iliad* 5.237, *Clouds* 69, *Phaedrus* 246e4.

reasonable as a wise supervisor [or referee, *epistatês*]" (414e3, cf. the suggestion of a referee to guard the moderate length of speeches at *Protagoras* 338b1). Hermogenes accepts this charge; Socrates then warns him not to be too nitpicking, "lest you enfeeble my strength" (415a2, a reference to *Iliad* 6.265). Finally, at 420c–d, Hermogenes says: "Socrates, you seem to me to be urging on more quickly now [*puknotera epagein*, 420d1]." Socrates responds: "For I now am running to the end".[32] Socrates is depicted as entering the home stretch and urging his 'team' on to a burst of speed. More general agonistic imagery also includes mention of "going outside the boundaries" (413a9), and—apparently a proverb— "no excuses in competition" (421d7–8).[33]

This imagery has been noted, but little has been made of it. Goldschmidt relates it to Heraclitean flux and to Socrates' inspiration; but he warns against making too much of the matter, and concludes only that it indicates Plato's parodie intention.[34] Baxter just takes the chariot motif as evidence that we should not look for too much system in the etymologies ("hardly the paradigm of orderly motion").[35] It seems to me that the significance of the *agôn* must be much more precise: it depicts Socrates as displaying ability, resourcefulness and stamina at a skilled competitive practice. We are to understand his etymologizing as a display outdoing the performances of others in this field: as I have already suggested, Cratylus is probably the representative of this guild. This brings us back to my earlier point that the etymologies are a rational reconstruction, an improved version of a current intellectual method; in the *Cratylus* case at least, the rational reconstruction is thus subsidiary to the agonistic genre.

This agonistic display is given particular force by the image of the chariot. For the games in *Iliad* Book 23 are not only the primal chariot race of Greek literature but the primal scene of Greek epistemology—of the tri-umph of *mêtis*, cleverness or ingenuity. Antilochus' horses are the slowest in the race (309–11), but his cunning, and still more that of his father Nestor, reverses the balance. Nestor counsels his son at length, beginning with praise of *mêtis* and its utility in, among other things, chariot racing (315–25). For a driver wins by keeping his eyes open, preventing his horses from going astray, and so on. Nestor then points out to Antilochus a *sêma*, a sign or marker, which he must particularly note and

31. Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 1022–3 suggests the former, but *Iliad* 23.424 and *Clouds* 25 the latter. In either case the point is that Socrates has disgressed from his assigned task, the names of the virtues (411a), into analyses of 'male', 'female', and 'flourish' (414a–b).

32. There is a textual problem here, with different manuscripts presenting different versions of *theô*. Méridier prints *telos gar êdê theôi*, a reference to the inspiration motif. I prefer the version of the new OCT, which adds *eis* at the start of the sentence to give the agonistic allusion cited here: <*eis*> *telos gar êdê theô*.

33. Note also 411a6: "once we have put on the lion's skin, we must not be cowardly", a reference to Hercules, patron of games.

34. Goldschmidt, *Essai*, pp. 108–9; cf. also Gaiser, 'Name und Sache', pp. 50–1.

35. Baxter, *Critique*, p. 90.

be guided by (326). To what extent Antilochus actually follows Nestor's advice is unclear, but he does overtake Menelaos by a cunning manoeuvre, and ends up placing second (though for his sharp practice he is forced to relinquish the prize).

So one succeeds by staying alert, keeping control, noting and dealing appropriately with signs, and using cunning to get out of any difficult situation. Given its epistemological cast, it is no surprise that the chariot motif is taken up into philosophy, as the natural model for successful competitive intellectual endeavour.[36] The chariot imagery also relates to the motif of inspiration. The lyric poets commonly invoked the 'chariot of the Muses' in connection with their inspiration (e.g. in Pindar, *Ol.* 9.80–1, *Isth.* 8.62, *Pyth.* 10.65).[37] And the poet lays claim to that inspiration as (at least *inter alia*) an agonistic tactic, to assert his independence of and superiority to his rivals and predecessors.

So both the 'rational reconstruction' and the 'inspiration episode' dimensions of the etymologies are, I suggest, ultimately to be understood as belonging to it as an agonistic display. Before looking into the significance of this agonistic genre, it is worth noting that it is expressed in some other features of the etymologies. Though there is no explicit competitor present, on a number of occasions Socrates makes a point of outdoing himself: he offers first one etymology, then prefers another, more recherché one. So for example Socrates first explains *psuchê*, soul, as related to *anapsuchon;* he then dismisses this, saying that "the followers of Euthyphro" would find it commonplace, and instead offers an etymology as *phus-echê*, sustainer of nature, invoking Anaxagoras (399d–400b; cf. also his procedure with *sôma* (400b–c) and *lusiteloun* (417b–c)). On other occasions, for example in the case of Apollo (404e–6b), he offers a showy multiplicity of etymologies for a single name. A particularly telling case is the etymology, already noted, of 'Hades'. Here Socrates rejects an etymology relating 'Hades' to the unseen in favour of one which relates it to knowledge (403a–4b). What is interesting is that in the *Phaedo*, Socrates invokes the etymology he here rejects (80d5–7), and yet there is no substantive difference between the views of death in play: in the *Phaedo* as in the *Cratylus*, death is above all an educational opportunity. So the first etymology is rejected in the *Cratylus* not because of its content but, presumably, because it is *too obvious* and familiar to be satisfactory in the agonistic context.

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36. Note incidentally Aristotle *Eth. Nic.* 1095a32–b1, where the image of the racecourse as a model for philosophical reasoning to and from first principles is attributed to Plato.

37. See J.H.Lesher, 'The Significance of *kata pant' a<s>tê* in Parmenides Fr. 1.3', *Ancient Philosophy* 14 (1994), pp. 1–20. Note also the whingeing variant found in the proemium of the fifth-century epic poet Choerilus: complaining that poets were better off in the old days, he says "we have been left behind like the last runners on the track, and there is not any way/though searching in every direction, to drive the chariot, newly yoked." (As cited in Andrew Ford, *Homer: The Poetry of the Past [Homer]* (Cornell, 1992), p. 69.)

In sum, a reading of the etymological section as a competitive display is supported not just by the explicitly agonistic imagery in play, but also by the inspiration motif, by the engagement in a rational reconstruction and by some of Socrates' methods. That the etymologies are an *agôn* is the central and organizing fact about them. In the rest of this section I will look at other instances of agonistic display in Plato, and try to work out the function and implications of the genre.

Though it has often been noted that much of Plato's writing is agonistic, there has been remarkably little systematic discussion of what this means, and the term is used to pick out different things. For example, Goldschmidt alludes in passing to a group of texts "où Platon, suivant le principe de *l'agôn*, rencontre ses adversaires sur leur propre terrain de combat";[38] but his list of cases mixes together what seem to me rather different things. For along with two central examples I will shortly consider (the *Menexenus* and the exegesis of Simonides in the *Protagoras*), he counts as agonistic the speech attributed to Lysias in the *Phaedrus* and the sophisms of Euthydemus and Dionysiodorus in the *Euthydemus*. But what is definitive of the genre I want to identify is that it is *Socrates* (or, in principle, some other representative of philosophy) who is depicted as succeeding in competition on the home ground of the non-philosophical claimant to knowledge. Admittedly, if Plato writes a better sophism than a sophist or a better Lysian speech than Lysias, then he himself succeeds in just the same way. And there is no doubt that much of Plato's writing can be seen in this way.[39] Like the Platonic inspiration episode, the agonistic display within the text stands as a sort of scale model of the text as a whole. But this makes it all the more important to get a sense of what is going on when Plato actually *marks* the performance as agonistic.

As a starting-point, an intriguing discussion of the Platonic *agôn* is reported in Proclus' Commentary on the *Parmenides.*[40] He says that some interpreters have taken the *Parmenides* to be an 'argumentative' or 'controversial' dialogue, likening it to the refutation of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*. And these 'Anon. Procli', as I will call them, see Plato's 'controversial' writings as using three strategies. "Sometimes he composes an imitation of what his rival has written, but carries the imitation to greater perfection by adding what his rival's discourse

38. *Essai*, p. 103.

39. Goldschmidt, *Essai*, refers to Nietzsche's early text, 'Homer als Wettkämpfer', in which Plato is offered as a prime example of the agonistic character of Greek culture. The relevant section is worth quoting in full: "What, for example, is of special artistic significance in Plato's dialogues is for the most part the result of a contest with the art of the orators, the sophists, and the dramatists of his time, invented for the purpose of enabling him to say in the end: 'Look, I too can do what my great rivals can do; indeed, I can do it better than they. No Protagoras has invented myths as beautiful as mine; no dramatist such a vivid and captivating whole as my *Symposion;* no orator has written orations like those in my *Gorgias*—and now I

omits" (631). The example offered here is the funeral oration of the *Menexenus*, which I will shortly discuss. The second strategy is a straight refutation employing the same kind of argumentation as the opponent. The *Parmenides* belongs to this genre: it argues against Zeno's One by the same strategy as he used against pluralism and uses it more impressively. Third, "Plato sometimes constructs a controversial piece by using both imitation and antithesis" (632). For example, in the *Pbaedrus* Socrates first outdoes Lysias in speaking against *erôs* and then argues still more effectively against him.

This first strategy of competitive 'imitation' (and so, in part, the third as well) is something like what I have in mind by speaking of an agonistic genre. And the core instances of it are indeed those identified by the Anon. Procli: the *Menexenus* and Socrates' first speech in the *Phaedrus*. I have already spoken of the first speech of Socrates in the *Phaedrus* as an instance of rational reconstruction and inspiration: it is also explicitly agonistic. (This is the only other case I know of where all three levels of the *Cratylus* display converge.) In it Socrates explicitly undertakes to beat Lysias at his own game of oratory—urged on by Phaedrus, who offers to set up a lifesize gold statue of him if he succeeds (235d4–e1, 236b1–4).

In the *Menexenus,* Socrates delivers a funeral oration—another display of skill at a stereotyped practice in which, as he says, the orator competes [*agônizêtai,* 235d6]. And the presentation is so similar to that of the *Phaedrus* as to suggest a ritual appropriate to such performances. Socrates begins with a mockingly effusive description of the magical, transporting effect of his rival's speech (235a1–c5, 235b8–c4, cf. *Phaedrus* 234d1–6), which his interlocutor recognizes as sarcasm (235c6, cf. *Phaedrus* 234d7–8). He is coy about offering anything, and fears being ridiculous (236c8, cf. *Phaedrus* 236d4); he finally gives in on *ad hoc* grounds, after being begged by his interlocutor (236c–d, cf. *Phaedrus* 236e–7a). And whereas in the *Phaedrus* Socrates falls back on inspiration or the recollection of a poet, in the *Menexenus* he has up his sleeve a speech by Aspasia, surely a similar sort of distancing device.

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repudiate all this entirely and condemn all imitative art. Only the contest made me a poet, a sophist, an orator.' What a problem opens up before us when we inquire into the relationship of the contest to the conception of the work of art!" ('Homer's Contest', in *The Portable Nietzsche,* ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1954), pp. 37–8). The agonistic mode also figures centrally in Jacob Burckhardt's portrayal of Greek culture: see *The Greeks and Greek Civilization,* trans. Sheila Stern, ed. and intro. Oswyn Murray (London, 1998). According to Murray, "The realization that individual contest and the desire to be supreme lay at the centre of early Greek attitudes to the world is… [the] joint discovery" of Nietzsche and Burckhardt (p. xxxii). Cf. also 'Longinus' on the other great Platonic *agôn,* his ongoing contest with Homer (*De Sublim.* 13).

40. I use the edition and translation of Morrow and Dillon, pp. 29–30 (sections 631– 3) (G.R.Morrow and J.M.Dillon, trans. and ed., *Proclus' Commentary on Plato's* Parmenides (Princeton, 1987)).

That the *Menexenus* is essentially agonistic is confirmed by the way in which it has suffered from just the same sort of *Scherz-oder-Ernst* debate as the *Cratylus* etymologies—a clash, as Guthrie puts it, between readings taking it as 'satirical' and as 'serious'.[41] The source of the trouble is the contrast between, on the one hand, Plato's evident scepticism about the funeral oration genre, as expressed throughout Socrates' preliminary remarks; and, on the other, his evidently serious, skilful performance— which includes what sounds like Platonic moral exhortation (e.g., at 246e–7a). As with the *Cratylus* etymologies, ancient interpretation tended to take the *Menexenus* as not only *Ernst* but exemplary,[42] while the recent inclination is more towards *Scherz*. And as with the *Cratylus*, this aporia is, I think, a sign of the fact that the *Menexenus* is neither the one nor the other: it is agonistic, a mode not reducible either to dogma or to play. This agonistic character has been noted in various ways by the Anon. Procli, George Grote and most recently Charles Kahn. According to the Anon., as Proclus reports, "In the *Menexenus*, which he composed in rivalry with Thucydides, the oration written for a public funeral has the same purpose as his rival's, but in the arrangement of its main points, in its invention of supporting reasons, and in the clarity of its exposition, he constructs a much nobler discourse than that of Thucydides."[43] On Kahn's interpretation, the oration stands in an 'antagonistic' relation to its rivals; and Kahn rightly balks at reducing this antagonism to parody, caricature or satire.[44] What Kahn wants to emphasize is that as a specimen of Platonic rhetoric the *Menexenus* shows the *right* way to praise the Athenians; so its gross historical omissions and inaccuracies serve to mark the points at which Athenian history is not in fact praiseworthy. It is thus "tendentious protreptic"—in fact, "a kind of political pamphlet".[45] (This suggests that the primary point of the *Menexenus* is substantive rather than methodological, but Kahn's view can be combined with the Anon.'s emphasis on the formal qualities of the speech: the oration may be designed both as a display of skill and as a (rather misleading) vehicle for substantive truth.)[46]

A third example of the Platonic *agôn* is the most revealing. Plato's most extensive use of agonistic language comes in the *Protagoras*[47]—appropriately enough, for an agonistic conception of intellectual endeavour was characteristic of the sophists.[48] The *Protagoras* episode is introduced by methodological wrangling saturated with agonistic imagery, starting with a reference by Protagoras to his participation in speaking competitions [*agôna logôn*, 335a4].

41. Guthrie, *History*, vol. 4, pp. 312–23, see p. 315 n. 2.

42. According to Cicero, it was actually recited annually at Athens (*Orat.* 44.151).

43. Sect. 631. Grote sees Plato as competing with Lysias (*Plato*, vol. 3, pp. 8–11).

44. Charles Kahn, 'Plato's Funeral Oration: The Motive of the *Menexenus*' ['Oration'], *Classical Philology* 58 (1963), pp. 220–34 at p. 223.

45. 'Oration', p. 226; p. 229.

The motif continues with Socrates' complaint that it is unfair to ask him to compete against Protagoras at *makrologia:* "it is as if you asked me to keep up with Criso of Himera in his prime, or run and keep up with some long-distance or marathon runner" (335e2–4). Hippias urges them, unsuccessfully, to choose an umpire, overseer or president, to watch over the length of their speeches (338a–b).

The combat itself consists in a problem in the interpretation of poetry which Protagoras challenges Socrates to solve. Having got Socrates to agree that a certain ode of Simonides is well written, and that no poem which contradicts itself can be approved, he points out an apparent contradiction in the ode. Socrates is alarmed: "at first, like someone struck by a good boxer, I felt blind and dizzy at what he said and at the clamour of the others" (339e 1–3). He recovers to give an extended interpretation of the poem which is clearly an outdoing of Protagoras at his own game: a long, elaborate speech beginning with a parody of Protagoras' own earlier invocation of various famous figures as covert sophists (cf, 316d). (Presumably Protagoras planned to go on from his *elenchus* of Socrates to give a speech solving the problem himself, so perhaps Socrates' speech should be recognizable as a still cleverer variant on what Protagoras would have been expected to say.) The agonistic motif is even replicated in the content of the interpretation: the reason Simonides attacks Pittacus, according to Socrates, is that "ambitious to succeed in wisdom, he realized that if he could overthrow this saying, as one might some famous athlete, and become its conqueror, he himself would become famous among his contemporaries" (343c).

The *Protagoras* makes it clear that the Platonic *agôn* belongs to a context of competing intellectual methods and practices. Protagoras does not present his challenge just to trip Socrates up: he genuinely holds that literary interpretation is the most important part of education (338e6–9a2). And part of his view seems to be that interpretation is a legitimate mode of enquiry into the truth about

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46. Much remains to be said about how these two features relate in the agonistic genre; but at any rate I doubt that substantive truth can be taken as *part* of what makes an agonistic display successful. Friedländer, noting the parallel between the *Menexenus* and *Phaedrus,* says: "Socrates can play with the art of rhetoric as expertly as with eristics; he can even achieve effects that leave the rhetoricians themselves behind. For Socrates can use their means, inappropriate though they be ultimately, to lead us toward what is essential" (*Plato,* vol. 2, pp. 219–20). But in the absence of any consensus regarding 'what is essential', the criteria for agonistic success must be content-neutral.

47. For a helpful account of the passage, see Dorothea Frede, 'The Impossibility of Perfection: Socrates' Criticism of Simonides' Poem in the *Protagoras'['Criticism'], Review of Metaphysics* 39 (1986), pp. 726–753. The existence of some parallel between the *Protagoras* and *Cratylus* passages has been noted by Weingartner (*Unity,* p. 38, n. 34), Goldschmidt (*Essai,* p. 101) and Baxter (*Critique,* p. 99).

48. See *Hippias Minor* 364a, *Euthydemus* 272aff., 277b–c, 303a–b, Gorgias DK82B8, and note the martial arts analogy at *Gorgias* 456c–7a. Cf. also Guthrie, *History,* vol. 3, pp. 42–3.

things, so that his and Socrates' discussion of virtue can be 'transferred' to the literary domain without loss (339a2–6). We might call him a proponent of 'strong interpretation', as Cratylus is of strong etymology. Socrates, of course, will go on to reject this method in scathing terms. He likens it to the behaviour of drunken diners who, too stupid to amuse themselves, hire flute-girls instead of conversing. Appeals to the poets suggest a sad incapacity and lack of self-sufficiency: "setting the poets aside, we should make our own discussions with ourselves, in our own voices, testing ourselves and the truth" (348a).

The same rejection is accomplished more subtly elsewhere by Socrates' disavowals of his competitive endeavours. In each of the *Cratylus*, *Phaedrus*, and *Menexenus*, we have seen that an external source is made responsible for his agonistic performance (Euthyphro, the love poets and local gods, Aspasia).[49] But what is striking is that these disclaimers are not credible even to Socrates' impressionable interlocutors (*Menex.* 236c5–6, *Phdr.* 235d4–6, *Crat.* 428c). The unconvincing disavowal is a ritual which releases Socrates from any commitment to the practice displayed, while leaving him the credit and authority earned by his skill.

The significance of the agonistic display as a Platonic genre is well expressed by this process of methodological engagement, performance and rejection. The rejection is easily explained. For Plato, the methods treated in the *agôn*—literary interpretation, etymology, and rhetoric public and private—are all sub-philosophical and sub-dialectical modes of discourse. Indeed, all are oriented to words rather than to things, involving a specifically linguistic form of expertise.[50] Literary exegesis and etymology are both *interpretive*, and so bound by an authority. In fact, etymology *is* a form of exegesis: the *Cratylus* etymologies treat the vocabulary of Greek itself as an authoritative text, and investigate the views of its authors as the exegete does those of a poet. The crucial defect of both practices is, therefore, the same: both constitute an appeal across a text to an absent authority, and are thus at least three removes away from being a means to knowledge. First, because the putative authority cannot be properly interrogated, we cannot be certain that we have understood its message correctly. Second, we cannot tell whether it is a genuine authority; and third, even following a genuine authority would not generate knowledge, which requires dialectical examination and understanding, but only persuasion and, at best, true belief.

Why then engage with such methods in the first place? The answer is again most easily seen in the *Protagoras*. For here it is, I think, clear that, as a move in

49. Note also that at the very start of the dialogue Socrates disavows any expertise about names by remarking to Cratylus and Hermogenes that if only he had heard Prodicus' fifty-drachma lecture course on the subject, he would be able to resolve their debate at once; but having heard only the one-drachma version, he is no expert (384b–c). This ironic demurral serves both to disavow expertise in general, as per the requirements of the Platonic *agôn*, and to dissociate Socrates' performance from specifically sophistic sources: if he can do the same as or better than they, it is out of his own resources.

the debate, Socrates' scathing rejection of literary interpretation would not be acceptable as an immediate response to Protagoras' challenge. It is only after offering a first-rate specimen of poetic interpretation that Socrates has what we might call the methodological authority to reject the practice as worthless. As it is, this rejection is effective: when they resume, Protagoras is answering Socrates' questions, on Socrates' terms, and on the topic of Socrates' choice. Socrates' performance gives him methodological leverage by dissolving any suspicion that the philosopher's preference for his own method, dialectic, is just self-serving. Likewise in the *Cratylus*, Socrates' ability to present a successful etymological display puts him in a position to transcend the etymological method and assess its worth.

The need for such agonistic performances, then, derives straightforwardly from real life. The contemporary background to these displays is one of methodological anarchy: a battleground of intellectual practices and methods in which no consensus obtains as to their comparative worth. *Makrologia*, myths, citations and interpretations of the poets, eristic refutation, dialectical question and answer, strong etymology—any and all might be used to support or defeat a position on a *topos* like the correctness of names or the origin of virtue. And where there is no consensus as to method, to win definitively means winning by all the methods there are—and perhaps especially by the method of one's opponent.[51] So Socrates' willingness to use the methods of others need not be a sign of indifference or pluralism: he may do so precisely to give weight to his advocacy of dialectic. In the agonistic genre, Plato takes on the language-bound, authority-bound contemporary rivals of dialectic: he uses it to characterize them as such, and to establish the authority of the philosopher to practise and dismiss them.

50. Rhetoric may seem the odd man out in that (1) it does not pretend to provide a method of inquiry, being purely a method of persuasion; and (2) it is not interpretive. However, I think these differences are only superficial. First, granted that rhetoric cannot even pretend to uncover the natures of things, the rhetorician does still claim wisdom and the ability to teach. That is why rhetoric goes naturally with the Protagorean claim that there *are* no real natures of things to uncover, and nothing wisdom could be beyond what rhetoric can offer. Second, I suspect that rhetoric should also be seen as (for Plato) essentially interpretive. For it clearly involves deference to what an authority, viz., its audience, already believes. In effect, the funeral orator must offer a persuasive interpretation and elaboration of the Athenian conviction that the Athenians are praiseworthy. Though it is hard to be precise about the connection, Plato presumably takes all language-oriented intellectual practices to involve such deference to the authority of established opinion—part of the link between language and 'human opinion' which I discuss in II. 5.

II.4
THE ETYMOLOGIES AS AGÔN

It may seem implausible that this reading of the *Cratylus* etymologies, according to which their central function is methodological, could really account for the extraordinary length of Socrates' discourse: surely a brief sample of Socrates' skills should suffice to prove any methodological point? But in fact, exhaustiveness is an important marker of the agonistic mode: it is precisely the demonstrated ability to etymologize anything and everything, the sustained resourcefulness over an extended and varied terrain, which makes Socrates' display impressive. The value of length and completeness in the agonistic context in explicit in the *Phaedrus* case. When Phaedrus calls on Socrates to match Lysias' speech, it is sheer quantity as much as quality he is interested in: in praising Lysias' speech he twice emphasizes its exhaustiveness (234e, 235b3), and he twice demands that Socrates come up with *more and better* (235b4–6, 236b2, cf. 234e3)—or at least, he graciously allows, no less in quantity (235d6–7). The Anon. Procli evidently share his taste: their basic characterization of Plato's agonistic undertaking is that it "carries the imitation to greater perfection by adding what his rival's discourse omits" (631).

This prizing of sheer quantity is a respect in which—as the chariot imagery suggests—the Platonic *agôn* is descended from the primordial competition of the poets. As Richard Martin has argued, 'the expansion aesthetic' is an important feature of Homer's poetics.[52] Speech in the *Iliad* is generally presented as agonistic ("Speaking to win out—this is the goal of every Iliadic performer"); and Achilles, as hero, is "the expert at such agonistic rhetoric".[53] And for both Homer and his hero, "bigger is better": this drive to the large scale expresses a cultural background in which (to cite Martin's citation of an anthropologist) "length is a marker of verbal art and of a performer's ability".[54]

This epic background also confirms, I think, that the inspiration motif is an integral aspect of the agonistic genre. For when Homer demands inspiration, invoking the Muses, it is often because there is *too much* to be said—for example, in the catalogue of the ships in *Iliad* Book 2. The "close connection of invocations and catalogs" suggests precisely that completeness or exhaustiveness is a crucial respect in which one poet would, with the aid of the Muses, strive to outdo another.[55] The *Cratylus* etymologies are in their own weird way a catalogue, inspired by an appropriately weird sort of Muse (n.b. 428c6–8): their exhaustiveness is a necessary feature.

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51. That such versatility was widely recognized as valuable is clear from the *Protagoras* and *Gorgias*. Gorgias can offer set speeches or question-and-answer (447c, 449c); Protagoras, systematic argument, storytelling, question-and-answer (taking either part) and literary interpretation (320c, 329b, 339a).

52. Richard Martin, *The Language of Heroes [Heroes]* (Cornell, 1989), Chapter 5.

53. Ibid., p. 220.

This is in fact an important respect in which the agonistic reading of the etymologies works betters than readings in terms of parody, satire or *reductio*.[56] For there is no particular reason for a parody to be exhaustive. Baxter suggests that the parody interpretation can help to explain the length of the etymological section simply because there was so *much* for Plato to parody. "Plato is attacking a tendency in Greek thought to over-value words; such a frontal assault on Greek culture requires a thorough exposé of bad linguistic habits."[57] But though he is quite right about the breadth of Plato's target, this still does not explain why such an exhaustive parody is called for, or indeed why parody would be preferable to direct critique. If, as is presumably the case, all etymologizing involves the same fundamental mistake, there is no obvious reason for every flavour of it to be treated individually.

The agonistic genre can also account for the main source of support for the 'parody' reading, namely the vaguely humorous tone of the etymologies. A parodie reading, however exactly we spell it out, presumably entails that the etymologies are obviously bad ones, meant to magnify and draw ridicule upon the defects of etymology in general. And such a reading is highly implausible on external grounds, for no one in antiquity got the putative joke: later authors cite the etymologies with respect, and attribute them to Plato himself.[58] More important, it seems to me a misinterpretation of our response to the text. Think of Socrates' explanation that the name *anthrôpos* is correct because alone of the animals a human 'observes closely' *[anathrei]* 'what he has seen' *[ha opôpe]* (399c), or that the name of the moon comes from 'always has new and old light'—*selas neon kai enon aei*, compressed to *selaenoneoaeia*, and thence to *selanaia* (409b–c). What is amusing here is not that Socrates is being stupid. On the contrary, the humour lies in the display of *mêtis:* in the ingenuity with which he manages—or almost manages—to pull something together out of desperately unpromising materials. The etymological section is funny because of our surprise and pleasure at relentless, unscrupulous ingenuity. It is the humour of the pun, the limerick, the cleverly rhymed patter song—a mild and minor kind of humour, but a real one.

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54. Ibid., p. 224, p. 226.

55. The quotation is from a very interesting discussion of invocations and the Muses by Andrew Ford, though his point is a somewhat different one (*Homer*, Chapter 2, at p. 78 n. 37).

56. I use 'parody' here as I take it to have been used by interpreters of the *Cratylus*, as involving comic exaggeration and denigration. For a discussion of more sophisticated accounts of parody, some of which may well be compatible with the agonistic reading, see Nightingale, *Genres*, pp. 7–8.

57. *Critique*, p. 6; cf. pp. 86–7, 96–8, 106–7, 184–7.

58. See Grote, *Plato*, vol. 2, pp. 516–29.

This kind of humour is not only quite distinct from parody, satire or irony: it has the opposed implication that the etymologies are quite good ones. But we need to be careful about what this means. A good etymology here, as I suggested at the start, will not have to be one that would be plausible as a modern etymology (that is, as a historical account of the origin of a word on a generally evolutionary conception of language). Rather, a good etymology in this context is one which successfully shows a name to be semantically appropriate for what it names, given the nature of that object. The agonistic context implies a further norm of non-obviousness: an inventive, surprising etymology must count for more here than a banality, hence Socrates' preference, already noted, for the recherché. The agonistic genre also suggests that the *Cratylus* etymologies are likely to be for the most part original, and that if they present familiar notions it is likely in a reworked form. For to constitute a successful performance 'in the fiction' they must pass for Socrates' creation—though intelligent theft also reveals *mêtis* and so must be an acceptable tactic. And to read as Socrates' creation in the fiction the etymologies must, I think, have been largely unfamiliar.

So the agonistic genre can account for some of the more puzzling features of the etymologies, and tells us something about their character. More important, it tells us something about why they are there in the first place: to put philosophy, in the person of Socrates, in a position to speak with dis-interested authority on the correctness of names and on the status of etymology itself.

Does it follow from this that etymology is an entirely worthless practice, to be disdained by the philosopher outside the *agôn*, and that the *Cratylus* etymologies, having proved their methodological point, are simply to be rejected? There are two reasons to think that etymologizing and the etymologies might not be, in Plato's view, altogether worthless. One is Plato's readiness to etymologize elsewhere—including contexts which are certainly later than the *Cratylus*, and whose seriousness is undisputed.[59] In the *Laws*, for instance, Plato twice seems to etymologize *nomos*, 'law', relating it to *nous*, 'reason' and to *tou nou dianomê*, 'allocation of reason' (957c, 714a). And, rather stunningly, the name *choros*, 'chorus', is said to have been given *by the gods* on the basis of the natural association of music and dance with *chara*, 'joy' (654a).

It seems reasonable to take such uses of etymology as showing that it has a legitimate supplementary or tactical role, as a method not of discovery but persuasion, to quickly express what could be demonstrated by dialectic. This persuasive role could well be common to all the subdialectical methods treated in the *agôn:* there is, I think, a tiny but striking hint to this effect in the *Protagoras*. Following his rather brutal rejection of literary exegesis, Socrates urges Protagoras to set aside the poets and join him in dialectic. And in encouragement he offers, of all things, *a Homeric tag:* 'When two go together, one sees before

59. For other examples of Plato's etymologizing, see Méridier, *Cratyle*, p. 18 n. 2.

the other' (348d1, cf. *Iliad* 10.224). With this throwaway quotation Socrates sets an example for Protagoras in the right use of poetry. It quickly and persuasively makes an important point which could, but need not, be backed up by philosophical argument. Plato's etymologizing may do the same.

Second, consider again the parallel cases. The *Menexenus* speech seems to contain some vaguely Platonic sentiments (246e–7a); and though it cannot be meant as the literal truth about Athenian history, we are probably meant to accept it as a normative, hortatory account, showing how the Athenians *would* have behaved if they were genuinely praiseworthy.[60] Socrates' first speech in the *Phaedrus* has the look of a dangerously over-simplified Platonism. As Hackforth puts it, its psychological views are "the popular germ of Platonic psychology";[61] and it seems to be fully accepted by Socrates after reinterpretation as an account of only one kind of *erôs*. Finally, in the *Protagoras* the interpretation of Simonides incorporates some distinctively Platonic views: notably, that virtue is knowledge and that no one does wrong voluntarily.[62] In each case, then, there is some philosophically acceptable content to be extracted from the agonistic display, however misleadingly or inadequately it may have been presented. It could even be argued that these subdialectical methods have a distinctive and legitimate function for Plato, namely to bring out persuasively what is right in traditional or popular beliefs and modes of reasoning.[63]

In that case, we should expect that the *Cratylus* etymologies too will be to some extent a vehicle for pop Platonism. They are likely to contain at least a grain of truth, though some interpretive effort may be required to extract it. What might that grain of truth consist in? One obvious possibility is that Plato might offer the etymologies for our acceptance, not as strong etymologies but merely as an interpretation of the intentions and beliefs of the primordial namegivers, who were human and thus fallible (cf. 401a, 425c, 438a–c). But this is rather unsatisfying. The etymologies so understood would still be undermined by Socrates' later demonstration that etymologies in the opposite sense (expressing a preference for stability rather than flux) can be produced just as easily. And what philosophical interest could such an antiquarian investigation have for Plato anyway? Also, this would be disanalogous to the parallel cases: Socrates' reading of Simonides is *less* plausible as an interpretation than it is as an account of the truth (as Plato sees it); the *Menexenus* is wrong on the facts but right on the ideals.

A more promising possibility is that the etymologies point to the truth *en bloc* through their general message that things are in flux, as indeed Plato believes the things around us to be. Admittedly this 'two-worlds' view of the *Phaedo* and

60. Cf. Kahn, 'Oration', p. 224–6.

61. Hackforth, *Phaedrus*, p. 42.

62. See Frede, 'Criticism', pp. 737–8, 746.

63. This view has been strongly argued to me by André Laks.

Republic, with its Heraclitean picture of our lower realm, is never fully articulated in the *Cratylus*. But in the arguments which close the dialogue Socrates hints at it by arguing that the objects of our thought and speech—things like the Beautiful itself—must be stable (439cff.); and the set of anti-flux etymologies presented not long before makes a similar point by associating knowledge with what is unchanging. It is hard not to be reminded of the two-worlds picture of which this association of knowledge and stability elsewhere is a part; and in that case, the etymologies do get something right.

But of course, the same considerations show that the etymologies get something more important wrong. For to whatever extent the things around us are in flux, they are *not* the proper objects of our naming, speech and cognition. Names name Forms first and foremost, and then apply to their participants by eponymy (*Phaedo* 102b, 103b–c, *Rep*. 596a, *Parm*. 130e, 133d, *Seventh Letter* 342e–3a, 343b–c: cf. IV.5). And so the etymologies' message that our nominata are fluxy can be accepted only if we interpret it down, so to speak, as referring solely to the latter class—rather as Socrates' first speech in the *Phaedrus* must be interpreted down, as an account of the inferior sort of *erôs* alone. Thus the etymologies require quite drastic reinterpretation if they are not to mislead; and this itself, I believe, is the grain of truth we have been looking for. By their reference to our world of flux, with the mistaken insinuation that this is all there is, names harbour an innate, systematic tendency of language to mislead and misinform.

II.5
PLATO AND PARMENIDES ON THE DECEPTWENESS OF LANGUAGE

So understood, the *Cratylus* etymologies have an important kinship with Parmenides' cosmogony or *Doxa*. In fact, the parallels between the two texts seem to me so strong that they must represent a deliberate invocation or appropriation on Plato's part. This provides no quick fix for the interpretive puzzles of the *Cratylus*, for the *Doxa* is just as enigmatic; even to explain what the two texts share will require glossing over some very vexed questions of Parmenidean interpretation. But whatever caveats may be in order, it seems to me that the resemblances between the two are indisputable; moreover, they can clarify the reading I have offered of the etymologies, by suggesting Plato's stance to be rooted in a Parmenidean mis-trust of language itself.[64]

We may begin by noting, here again, the *Scherz-oder-Ernst* syndrome. As in the Platonic case, the dominant reading of the *Doxa* in antiquity was as straightforwardly *Ernst:* it was taken as Parmenides' own cosmological theory, in direct competition with those of the natural scientists before and after him. It was recognized, of course, that its status was necessarily subordinate and inferior to the 'Way of Truth'. But this was unproblematic so long as Parmenides was read as a proto-Platonist, distinguishing between a world of real existence and a

world of appearances which only 'exists' to a very inferior degree. So Simplicius explains the goddess' deprecation of the *Doxa* by saying that "he calls this account seeming *[doxastôn]* and deceptive *[apatêlon],* meaning not that it is simply false *[pseudê haplôs],* but that the perceptible has fallen away from intelligible truth to what is apparent and seeming" (*Phys.* 9.39.10–12; cf. Plutarch *Adv. Col.* 1114c–d, DKA7). By contrast, in recent work the *Doxa* has commonly been taken to be a kind of *reductio* of cosmology, the contents of which have no standing at all. As Owen puts it, "there is, after all, no saving clause" in the goddess' condemnation of Doxa, and its purpose must be "wholly dialectical".[65]

This familiar controversy is due to the same textual aporia as we have met in the Platonic case. The *Doxa* is hedged round with very strong statements of mistrust in, even condemnation of the kind of discourse it exemplifies (B1.30, B8.51–4). Yet its content is developed with apparent seriousness and thoroughness and is offered to us as the best of its kind (B8.61). If we take our cue from the goddess' disavowal of cosmogony, we end up with the 'dialectical' reading, with the same difficulties as a reading of the *Cratylus* etymologies as parody or *reductio.* (And worse, since no one seems actually to find Parmenides funny.) If we take our cue from the strength of her performance, we have the problem of explaining how it is not completely undermined by her general remarks, and how it is to be reconciled with the 'Way of Truth'.

So perhaps the same diagnosis of the problem is in order here: we may well suspect that the *Doxa* is neither *Scherz* nor *Ernst* but agonistic.[66] And lo, this is confirmed by the fact that Parmenides is Plato's precursor as the philosopher-charioteer. The proemium of the poem tells of his progress by chariot to the interview with a goddess whose discourse will occupy the rest of the poem (B1). (Inasmuch as the goddess' communication to our hero resembles, or is a version of, inspiration, there is all the more resemblance to the charioteering of the lyric poets and to the *Cratylus* case.) And the chariot motif is maintained throughout: the divine instructor recalls the *Iliad* chariot scene with her injunctions to avoid going astray *[plane,* B6.5, cf. B8.54, *Iliad* 23.321), to stay alert and concentrate (B7.3–6, cf. *Iliad* 23.343), and to note signs [*sêmata,* B8.2, cf. *Iliad* 23.326]. This motif becomes explicitly agonistic with the introduction to the *Doxa,* which includes a promise and a boast: "This whole ordering I proclaim to you as

64. Though he does not discuss the particular resemblances between the *Doxa* and the etymologies, the basic substantive agreement here has been noted by Charles Kahn, who describes the *Cratylus* as a whole as expressing "the Eleatic view of names" as systematically deceptive ('Language', pp. 156–8).

65. G.E.L.Owen, 'Eleatic Questions', in *Logic, Science and Dialectic,* ed. Martha Nussbaum (London, 1986) (paper first pub. 1960), p. 9; cf. Barnes, *Presocratics,* p. 156; and A.A.Long, 'The Principles of Parmenides' Cosmogony' ['Parmenides'], *Phronesis* 8 (1963), pp. 90–107 at p. 91.

66. As has of course been noted: Long, for instance, says that "the cosmogony, by

probable *[eoikota]*, so that no mortal opinion will ever overtake *[parelassêi]* you" (B8.60–1). The verb here translated 'overtake' is the standard one for the passing of one chariot by another in a race (*Iliad* 23.382, 427, 638). And so it offers a pointed clue to the purpose of the *Doxa* as a whole: to outdo attempts by others in the same direction. The content of the *Doxa* confirms this imagery, for it exhibits the characteristics of a successful agonistic performance: like the *Cratylus* etymologies, it was apparently original, exhaustive and encyclopaedic, ranging over the whole cosmos from theology and astronomy to human psychology, embryology and the parts of animals.[67]

So in the *Doxa* as in the *Cratylus*, the chariot is the image of the inspired competitive intellectual display. And this is surely no accident. Not only are both Parmenides and Plato heir to the poetic use of the image: Plato is self-consciously heir to Parmenides. That the 'Parmenidean' character of the *agôn* is part of its significance for Plato is indicated by his use of the motif in the *Parmenides* itself: when the aged Parmenides balks at demonstrating his dialectical method, he likens himself to an old horse in a poem by Ibycus, who trembles at the start of the race (136e–7a).

A similar correspondence between the *Doxa* and the etymologies is present at the thematic level. To begin with, it is notable that the *Doxa* is presented as a rational reconstruction of human opinion. At the start of her discussion, the goddess tells our hero that he will learn not only the truth, but also "mortal opinions *[brotôn doxas]*, in which there is no true reliability *[pistis alêthês]*" (B1. 30). The cosmology is then introduced as 'mortal opinions' *[doxas broteias*, B8. 51]; and the goddess concludes it by saying, "Thus according to opinion *[kata doxan]* these things have come into being and exist…and humans have set down *[katathento]* a name *[onoma]* as a sign *[episêmon]* for each one of them" (B19). In the *Cratylus*, of course, the etymologies provide a rational reconstruction not only of Cratylus' opinions about names, but of the namegivers' opinions about the natures of things; and these namegivers are human. Quite near the start, when Hermogenes encourages him to analyze the names of the gods, Socrates expresses a pious hesitancy: the gods use the correct names for themselves, but what these are exceeds our knowledge. "So, if you like, let's investigate as it were announcing to the gods that we aren't investigating about them at all—for

showing that Parmenides can beat the scientists at their own game, is chiefly useful for the negative purpose of confirming the Way of Truth" ('Parmenides', p. 106). However, Long comes close to Owen in reading the *Doxa* as aiming not only to outdo but to expose: Parmenides seeks to show, by offering an exemplary and comprehensive cosmogony, that "the very best explanation possible from such principles [Being and Not-being both] is utterly fallacious" (p. 97). And this seems to me problematic, in the same way as are readings which attempt to take the etymologies or the *Menexenus* as simultaneously parodie and agonistic: it is very hard to see how the performance in question can in itself be at once exemplary and a parodie critique.

67. See Plutarch *Adv. Col.* 1114b–c, Cicero, *ND* 1.28, Simplicius, *De Caelo* 559.20ff.

we don't claim to be able to do that—but rather about humans *[anthrôpôn],* and on the basis of what opinion *[doxan]* they set down *[etithento]* the names for them" (401a1–5). He later alludes to this move as "saying that knowing nothing of the truth *[alêtheias],* we depict *[eikazomen]* the opinions of human beings *[ta tôn anthrôpôn dogmata]"* (425c1–3).

In the *Doxa* as in the *Cratylus,* these human opinions are closely associated with names. The *Doxa* is framed at its opening and close with references to an establishment of names by mortals. At the start, "they set down *[katethento]* two forms as judgements for naming *[onomazein]"* (B8.53–4, cf. B8.38–41, B9.1–2), setting down a name as a sign for each thing (B19.3). The names given by Parmenides' mortals express the multiplicity and change of the phenomenal world: "to become and to be destroyed, to be and not be, and change place and alter in bright colour" (B8.39–41). And of course these names are, given the content of the Way of Truth, hideously misguided. Here too the *Cratylus* conforms to the *Doxa:* for to the extent that they believed things to be in flux, as their names disclose, the namegivers were mistaken (439c, quoted below).

Given that both sets of namegivers were mistaken, and that their mistakes are embedded in ordinary language, it follows that for Parmenides and Plato both our language has a tendency to *deceive*.[68] Before looking at this theme more closely, I want to briefly sum up the correspondences I have noted so far. Each of these two discourses consists in an exhaustive and largely original exposition of the natures of things. Each is clearly agonistic, and the *agôn* is presented on the model of the chariot race. Each presents itself as a rational reconstruction of human opinions, opinions expressed in an original setting-down of names. In each case, that setting-down was in error; and that error has something to do with its representation of things as changing. This error apparently infects even the discourse presented, though this is as good as any of its kind can be. Hence each is hedged round with warnings against deception; and an antidote—a more valid account of the natures of things—is offered elsewhere in the same work, in Parmenides' 'Truth' and Socrates' closing arguments against flux.

These correspondences seem to me so comprehensive that the *Doxa* and the etymologies must be regarded as the same kind of discourse, a minigenre consciously selected by Plato. To see his point in doing so, we need to look more closely at the central theme of deception. In Parmenides this theme is most explicit when, in turning from the 'Way of Truth' to the cosmology, the goddess offers a warning: "Here I end for you my trustworthy account *[piston logon]* and thought about truth *[alêtheiês]*. From here on, learn mortal opinions, listening to the deceptive ordering *[kosmon apatêlon]* of my words" (B8.50–2). This characterization as 'deceptive'— tending to induce *apatê*—is crucial to the status and function of the *Doxa*.[69] It is important to bear in mind that, although often

68. Cf. also the mistrust of names expressed at *Republic* 454a, *Theaetetus* 177d–e, 184c, *Statesman* 261e.

interpreted as equivalent to 'false',[70] it probably should not be (as Simplicius recognized). On the contrary, 'deceptive' is better applied to statements and behaviour likely to engender false beliefs *without* themselves being strictly false. We are typically deceived when we are led to mistake the status, significance or implications of something—above all, when we put trust, *pistis*, in what does not deserve it (cf. *Iliad* 1.526, Euripides, *Electra* 938ff.). What is deceptive, then, is what invites such a mistake. Though there are a number of difficult and controversial issues here, it seems to me plausible that the *Doxa*, or any discourse about the phenomenal world, is supposed to be deceptive by inviting us to accept as true what is only defectively—temporarily, partially, locally—so. If I say 'It is dark', this may be 'true' at some times, but it will be false at others, or 'true' of some objects but not of others; the name 'dark' stays the same regardless, and (this is the worst) the 'is' is the same name as we apply to unchanging being, of which it is true always and without qualification. So I am deceived if I straightforwardly assent to 'It is dark', in the same way I would assent to 'Being is', for the former can only be 'true' in a very limited way. Thus there is no 'true reliability' in human opinion because it relates to the unstable phenomenal world of change (B1.30–2), which mortals 'have gone astray' in putting names to (B1.53–4). Our ordinary language, and any discourse which shares its basic presuppositions, is deceptive because its names embody a thoroughly mistaken conceptual scheme.

Now the threat of deception through language is also an important theme of the *Cratylus*. Worries about deception on particular points are raised occasionally in the etymological section itself [*exapatêseien*, 397b2; *exapatêsaimi*, 413d7]; and later, having concluded his account of natural correctness, Socrates warns sharply that further investigation is needed to avoid being deceived by it [*exapatasthai*, 428d3, cf. *exapatêsôn*, d5]. This warning seems to apply to the naturalistic account as a whole; but later, when Socrates claims that by investigating things through their names we run a great risk of being deceived [*exapatêthênai*, 436b3, cf. *exapatêthêsesthai*, 436b11], his arguments make it clear that he has etymology particularly in view. Finally, in the arguments which conclude the dialogue, Socrates claims that the things we speak about cannot be in flux, as the namegivers seem to have thought. He introduces these arguments as follows:

> Well, let's investigate one further point, so that we are not deceived *[exapatâi]* by the fact that so many of these names tend in the same

69. The related semantic field is thoroughly treated in Marcel Detienne's 'Le Choix: Alétheia ou Apaté', in *Les Maîtres de verité dans la Grèce archaïque* (Paris, 1994, first pub. 1967).

70. E.g., by Barnes, *Presocratics*, p. 156, and KRS, p. 255 with n. 1 (G.S.Kirk, J.E. Raven, and M.Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 2nd edn. [Cambridge, 1983]).

> direction. Suppose that in fact those who set them down did so thinking that everything is always moving and flowing—for it seems to me at least that they did think this—and that as it happens things aren't like this (439b10–c4)

So the etymologies as a whole are potentially deceptive for the same reason as the *Doxa:* they seem to indicate that things are in flux. And Socrates will go on to argue that what is in flux is, to that extent, not a proper object of our knowledge or speech.

But the most telling reference to deception comes in the etymologies themselves. Having offered etymologies of all the other Olympian gods, Socrates begs that Hermogenes change the subject; but Hermogenes naturally insists on an etymology of his own *etumon,* Hermes. Socrates responds with very curious and suggestive accounts of both Hermes and his son Pan (407e–8d).[71] Hermes, he says, "seems to have something to do with language *[logos],* and being an interpreter *[hermênea]* and messenger and thievish and deceptive in language *[apatêlon en logois]* and commercial—all of which has to do with a power concerning language" (407e5–8a2). In fact, his name is derived from 'he devised speaking [<*to*> *eirein emêsato*]'. Pan is the son of Hermes: as such he is either identical with language or its brother, and resembles it. He is thus well named, for language indicates all things *[to pan]* and keeps them in motion. And like Pan, language is double-natured, made up of a higher and a lower form:

> Its true part is smooth and divine and lives above with the gods, while the false lives below among the human masses, and is rough and goat-like *[tragikon]*. For here, in the 'tragic' life, myths and falsehoods are in the majority…. Since he discloses and always moves *[aei polôn]* everything, he would rightly be called 'Pan the goat-herd' *[Pan aipolos],* double-natured son of Hermes, with the smooth part above, the lower rough and goat-shaped. (408c5–d2)

The jokes here are complicated and to a great degree self-referential. What is said about *logos* as such applies with special force to this *logos* in particular. Language encompasses everything and keeps it in motion; the etymological section expounds the whole cosmos, and presents it as being in flux. Language has both divine and low aspects: this very etymology is the point at which the etymologies turn from the divine realm, as represented by the personal gods, to lower phenomena. This self-referential aspect makes the etymologies of 'Hermes' and 'Pan' a miniature image of the etymologies as a whole. What 'Hermes' brings out is their association with deception. The etymology of 'Pan'

71. Cf. Friedländer, *Plato,* vol. 2, p. 204.

is meant, I think, to provide the *explanation* of this association: language is deceptive because it combines a 'higher' and a 'lower' nature.

But what does it mean for language to have a 'higher' and a 'lower' nature? The claim translates easily into the more explicitly Platonic terms I mentioned earlier: as Plato is concerned to point out elsewhere, language is used ambiguously, to refer both to the divine realm of forms and, by eponymy, to their defective, fluxy participants. This construal of the dual nature of language is of course not made explicit in the etymology itself; but it is pretty strongly suggested by the contrast between the divine and human realms—the pop version of the Form-particular distinction. And Socrates' final set of arguments against flux makes it clear that the name-givers' belief in flux involved a failure to properly recognize the existence of the Forms.

How does this duality make language *deceptive?* Plato's worry is presumably the one I have already noted in connection with Parmenides: we may mistake one kind of language for the other, since both kinds look alike. When we say, 'Helen is beautiful', the verb 'is' is no different from the one we apply to Being itself, and 'beautiful' is the same term we use to describe unchanging unqualified Beauty. As a result we habitually mistake the lower discourse for the higher, and take its objects to be the true realities. So for Plato as for Parmenides, language wrongly represents reality as changing and imperfect, by describing the world around us just as it does the real one.

This means that, for Plato, there is a perfectly general and systemic way in which the names we use indicate that things are in flux, quite apart from the particular doctrines revealed by Socrates' etymologies. And in the end, I think that this is probably the essential thought to be extracted from the etymological *tirade*. Our names deceptively represent things as in flux, not so much by expressing the particular contents here disclosed as simply by referring to the fluxy particulars around us. The etymologies, with their attribution of the flux doctrine to particular names, are to be accepted as a sort of metaphor for this structural weakness of language. Of course, this is not what we think the etymologies are as we read them; but as I have suggested, given the inspired and agonistic character of Socrates' performance, we should *expect* it to contain a grain of truth which only becomes visible under retrospective reinterpretation. And it seems clear that this duality of reference is the *important* respect in which, for Plato, language wrongly indicates things to be in flux.

In the end, the etymological account of correctness will turn out to be incomplete and inadequate, and Socrates will go on to offer an account of names as images and imitations. If I am right that the deceptive potential of language is a guiding theme of the etymological section, then this provides, if not exactly an argument from the one account to the other, then at least an organic connection between them. For something is deceptive when we are apt to mistake it for what it is not, and put an inappropriate trust in it. And for Plato, this is the characteristic effect of an *image*, which by resembling what it is not invites such

mistakes.[72] The etymological account brings out the crucial truth *that* names are deceptive; the mimetic account will explain how and why.

72. An image is 'another such, made like a real one' (*Sophist* 240a8); and since deception proceeds by likenesses [*di' homoiotêtôn tinôn*, *Phaedrus* 262b2–3], the image-making sophist has a *technê apatêtikê* (*Sophist* 240d1–2, 264d5).

III
The Third Stage of Naturalism: Mimetic Correctness

Socrates' etymological display eventually gives way to a brief account of the 'elements' of names and the correctness appropriate to them (421c–Id). This account completes the exposition of naturalism, and, as I hope to show, constitutes the *Schwerpunkt*, the centre of gravity of the *Cratylus* as a whole. The argument so far has been designed to lead us here, and the remainder of the dialogue will be dedicated to working out its implications—specifically, the implications of the idea that a name is an image.

For some commentators on the *Cratylus*, the mimetic account represents the degeneration of naturalism into irremediable weirdness. The etymological section, for all its peculiarities, is at least based on the perennially respectable principle that what we say should be true of the objects of which we say it. The mimetic account, though, strikes many modern readers as primitive and bizarre; and this reaction motivates attempts to deny it any positive place in the final results of the *Cratylus*. Thus even interpreters who grant Plato's sympathies with the naturalism expressed in the tool model and semantic correctness insist that the mimetic accout either is rejected in the latter part of the dialogue or is unserious to begin with. For instance, Bernard Williams says: "Even if it is not formally inconsistent with them, an attachment to Cratylan *mimesis* is in fact banished by the conclusions of the *Cratylus*. This brilliant, tough-minded and still underestimated dialogue does not only show that the idea of language's having mimetic powers could not explain what language is; it leaves the belief in such powers looking like what it is, a belief in magic."[1]

This seems to me a misunderstanding. Williams is rightly sensitive to something in the mimetic account which is alien to modern thinking about language; but that something is not 'magic', nor is it anything we can assume Plato

1. 'Cratylus' Theory', p. 92. Williams is thus forced to claim that Socrates' expression of attachment to 'likeness' in his conclusion is somehow really about the semantic principle of correctness: "it is permissible to take this as referring to what Socrates indeed claimed long before, that the structure of language should represent the structure of things" (ibid.). For the same general approach, cf. Kretzmann, 'Correctness', p. 138 and Gold, 'Ambiguity', nn. 24 and 45.

to have repudiated. On the contrary, the mimetic account is grounded in Plato's highly rationalistic project of the strict sense (cf. Introduction), and it is here that the deepest motivations and requirements of that project are revealed.

III.1
BEYOND ETYMOLOGY

What motivates the introduction of the mimetic account is clearly Socrates' sense that the proofs of correctness offered in his etymologies are ultimately insufficient. But just how those proofs were intended to work, and exactly what makes the mimetic account an improvement, are harder questions than they might appear. In the last chapter I described Socrates' etymological procedure as a kind of decoding, in which the name is given a phonetic explication which makes manifest its real meaning or 'deep content'. The name is correct when this deep content is true of the nature of the referent of the name. Now in practice, what this means is that each etymology given by Socrates has related a name to other names or phrases: for example, *erôs*, 'desire', is something that 'flows in' from outside, and it comes from *esrein*, i.e., eis, 'into' and *rhein*, 'to flow' (420a9–b2). And now Hermogenes presses Socrates about these explanatory words: "But if someone were to ask you about the *ion* [cf. 420d6, 421b8–c2, etc.], *rheon* [cf. 420a9–b2], and *doun* [cf. 419b4], what correctness these names have…?" (421c4–6). Socrates considers and rejects the possible response that these are words of foreign origin (421c–d), the 'device' he previously invoked in difficult cases (409c–410a, cf. 416a). At the same time, he grants that etymologizing must come to an end *somewhere:*

> Let's keep in mind, though, that if someone keeps asking through what phrases *[rhêmata]*[2] a name is formed, and then again inquires about the ones from which the phrases are formed, and won't stop doing this, then isn't it necessary that the answerer give up in the end?" (421d9–e4)

What kind of necessity is this? The previous invocation of foreign words suggested that in some cases the etymologizer will hit a brick wall of names which simply cannot be etymologized. And no doubt on any given occasion, an etymologizer—even Socrates—will eventually run out of steam. But what follows makes it clear that this necessity has other, more important dimensions. For Socrates suggests that the etymologizer can select a stopping-point which is appropriate rather than arbitrary:

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2. I translate *rhêmata* 'phrases' because that is what for the most part Socrates does 'refer' names to, but nothing hangs on this: probably the sense here is really just the loose background sense of *rhêmata*, viz., 'things said [which may or may not count as names]'. Cf. VII. 2.

> So when would the answerer who gives up be right *[dikaiôs]* to stop? Won't it be in the case of those names which are as it were elements *[stoicheia]* of the others, both of sentences and names? For surely it would no longer be right *[dikaion]* to say that these are composed *[sugkeimena]* of other names, being such as they are [i.e., since they are elements]…if once we get one [a name] that is no longer composed from some other names, we would rightly *[dikaiôs]* say we've now reached an element *[stoicheion]* and that it's no longer necessary to refer *[anapherein]* this to other names. (422a1–b4)

The word here translated 'element' also means letter, and this sense will soon be of importance; but in this initial phase of the discussion, the elements are identified with the 'primary names' *[prêta onomata]* to which the names discussed so far have been etymologically referred: *ion*, *rhoun*, and so forth (422c).[3] Socrates now insists that it must be possible to show the correctness of these primary names in some other way, and supplies the mimetic principle in response to that demand.

So the mimetic account is driven by Socrates' assumption that there is a 'right place' for etymology to leave off, and that explanation will not leave off with it. We can sort this out into three substantial claims. First, not all names can be explained by etymology; second, those names which cannot be explained by etymology can be explained by some other method, which will likewise show them to be disclosures and make it possible to assess their correctness; and third, the names which *can* be explained by etymology can be shown to be derivative of those explained by the other method.

Now these claims are scarcely supported as yet by any evidence; it is natural to see them as postulates required by Socrates' ongoing project of demonstrating the correctness of names. To see why they are required, we need to consider the alternatives they exclude; and here it may help to compare a dilemma posed to etymologizers by Sextus Empiricus (*AM* 1.241–5). The kind of etymology Sextus has in view aims to show that names are 'good Greek' rather than correct in any naturalistic sense; but the problem of explanatory method is the same. If a name is shown to be good Greek by an etymology, what of the words used to etymologize it? They themselves must be shown to be good Greek as well, if the first etymology is to be complete. This entails the following dilemma: if all names can be etymologized, and a name is shown to be good Greek by being etymologically derived from words which are good Greek, there will be an infinite regress of etymologies, and it will never be proven that any word is good

3. There is no significance to Plato's use of the participles here: Socrates later refers to *rhoê* (noun) in place of *rhoun*, *ienai* in place of *ion*, and, bizarrely, *schesis* in place of the synonymous *doun* (424a8–9). Presumably the *prôta* need not belong to any particular grammatical category: they include all roots not susceptible to etymology, which we can pick out by whatever cognate we please.

Greek. If on the other hand etymologies terminate in unetymologizable roots which are known to be good Greek, the claim of those roots to be good Greek presumably rests on their conventional acceptance. So the names etymologized should be accepted as good Greek simply on the same basis. Therefore etymology either cannot be completed or is superfluous.

Plato's sense of the explanatory options is, I believe, similar but somewhat more subtle. For one thing, he recognizes that if explanation comes to a halt at unexplained primary names, one may insist on the correctness of the latter without recourse to convention. In fact, this seems to be Cratylus' stance, for later he flatly asserts, "Socrates, I myself believe that the truest account of these things is that some greater than human power gave the primary names to things, so that it's necessary that they are correct" (438c1–4). This leaves it unclear whether the fact of divine imposition is supposed to be somehow constitutive of the correctness of otherwise unexplained primary names, or merely a guarantee of it—and it is perhaps unlikely that Cratylus has seen the distinction. The ambiguity recalls the moment in the *Euthyphro* (10a–11b) at which Euthyphro tries to define the holy as what the gods love while also holding that they love it because it is holy. And like Euthyphro, Cratylus cannot have it both ways. If the gods (or any other namegivers) imposed certain names because those names were antecedently correct, then there is something more to correctness than their fiat. In that case explanations of correctness which stop short at the gods are incomplete and *per accidens* (cf. *Euthyphro* 11a7–8).

Suppose, though, that Cratylus prefers to say that divine imposition itself confers correctness. This is a familiar enough move in theology, if not the philosophy of language, and it is not immediately obvious how best to refute it.[4] What *is* clear, and is repeatedly stressed by Socrates, is that no critical account of correctness or craft of name study (such as he and Cratylus respectively seek) could be founded on such an assertion. And thus Socrates rejects it, holding that it would be an evasion of our explanatory obligations to claim "that the gods set

4. One would have to begin by determining whether Cratylus could mean to deny what otherwise seems to be assumed throughout, namely that *all* linguistic expressions, even the most 'primary', have some kind of descriptive content. For if the primary names do have such content, it is hard to see how even divine fiat could be *constitutive* of its accuracy or truth. Note that Socrates' 'Dream' in the latter part of the *Theaetetus* can be seen as an exploration of one road not taken at this point in the *Cratylus:* it postulates entities so simple that they cannot be described, together with names which are either purely referential or have a content which cannot be expressed in any other way (201e–2c). This is importantly different from the matching of elements envisaged in the mimetic account: in the *Cratylus*, even expressions below the level of names describe, and the elements they are matched with have 'sayable' natures. So *rh*, matched with motion, describes it as moving—and, in effect, predicates motion, denies stasis, and probably entails other *logoi* as well. Since the 'Dream' theory, as I read it, turns out not to present a correct or even coherent epistemology, there is no reason to see its exclusion from the *Cratylus* discussion as a problematic shortcoming. Cf.Luce, Truth', p. 228.

down the primary names, and because of this they are correct" (425d7–8). The same goes for other kindred manoeuvres, such as saying that we have taken the primary names from foreign cultures, or that they are simply too ancient to be explained: all are just "very clever evasions for someone who doesn't want to give an account of how the primary names are correct" (426a1–3). All result in our being unable to explain any names: for it is impossible for someone who can't explain the correctness of the primary names to be expert *[technikos]* about the derivative ones (426a7).

What of the other side of Sextus' dilemma? It seems plausible that Socrates too would reject the prospect that all names can be etymologized, so as to block the threat of something like an infinite regress, and that this is part of what he means by saying that etymologizing must eventually come to a stop.[5] Of course, if we assume that the vocabulary of a language is finite, a genuinely infinite (non-circular, non-repeating, non-terminating) regress is not a possibility. But we can imagine something arguably similar: a web of etymologies for the entire vocabulary of a language, which would give any 'complete' etymology an indefinitely long and circular character. Socrates' actual etymologizing has not followed this pattern in any marked way, but it is not hard to see how such a web would be formed: name *a* would be explained in terms of the description *b*+*c*, with *b* explained in terms of *c*+*d*, *c* in terms of *e*+*f*+*a*, *d* in terms of *b*+*a* and so forth. The result would be something like a single-language dictionary, in which the same words appear both as entries and as parts of definitions.

The usefulness of dictionaries suggests that we take this holistic mode of explanation to be adequate for some purposes; but we might well think that it is likely to be as unacceptable to Socrates as a regress was to Sextus. For it seems that, like a regress, such a 'web' would make it impossible for a full, unconditional, non-circular proof of the correctness of any single name ever to be completed. On the other hand, it is unclear that this is entirely disqualifies the 'web' option from consideration. Obviously it would be unacceptable to *redefine* correctness holistically, as attaching to any name which belongs to a coherent web of mutually explanatory names and etymologies. For as Socrates later argues, even if a language does express a coherent system of beliefs, of the sort such a web of etymologies would disclose, those beliefs might be massively in error. The namegivers of Greek may well have designed its names to express the theory that all things are in flux; but the theory, and the names so interpreted, are not true (436c–d). Perhaps the names of a language must face the tribunal of reality not individually, but as a corporate body: they can still all be wrong. And that means that the explanation of all the names of a language in terms of a web

5. On the regress problem cf., besides Sextus, Augustine *De Dialectica* VI. 9–10 for the Stoic solution (mimetic primary names again), and Varro's defence of etymologies which stop short at unexplained *prôta* (*De Ling. Lat.* 7.1–4). Cf.Lorenz and Mittelstrass, 'Rational Philosophy', pp. 9–10.

of etymologies would be compatible with the critical scrutiny of their correctness which Socrates demands—even if a final verdict would have to be postponed until the language as a whole had received explication. After all, this is in effect Socrates' procedure: his proofs of correctness in the etymologies are clearly incomplete and conditional, and are collectively nullified by his refutation of the theory of flux.

So a web of etymologies, ungrounded in any further account of content, would not preclude a critical account of the correctness of names. Presumably what makes it an unacceptable option here, then, is simply that it would be explanatorily insufficient. The basic reason for this can, I think, be simply put. The central puzzle impelling the naturalistic account to move beyond the resources of etymology is the puzzle of how names come to have content or meaning *at all.* If *psuchê* derives its content from *phusechê,* how is it that they have the content they do? Or if 'Ares' has the content it does by virtue of its accord with *arren,* and also vice versa, how does either get off the ground?

The puzzle can also be presented more pointedly as a problem about Socrates' 'unpacking' of names in his etymologies. For what exactly was being claimed of the explicating phrase used to give the deep content of a name, as *phus[in]-echê* did for *psuchê?* Socrates might hold that this explication gives *psuchê* the deep content it does ('nature-holder') by virtue of its relation to the words *phusis,* with its meaning 'nature', and *echein,* with its meaning 'hold'. In that case, though, the deep content of one name turns out to depend on the superficial, commonly recognized meanings of some others. This seems upside down, especially as the etymologies invariably showed the superficial meanings of names to be roughly compatible with their deep content (otherwise the names as normally used would hardly have been shown to be correct). This rough compatability between deep content and superficial meaning presumably holds because the latter is somehow derivative (at least in correct names) of the former: if we ordinarily and vaguely think of *psuchê* as having the sense 'vital principle of a human being (or animal)', it is because we are somehow dimly grappling with, or at any rate influenced by, its deep content 'nature-holder'. This priority of deep content is written into the structure of language by Socrates' presentation of his etymologizing as a reconstruction of the namegivers' reasoning: it is because the deep content of *psuchê* is true of souls that the namegivers established the naming convention as they did. So the superficial meaning of *echein* must in turn be explained and vindicated in terms of *its* deep content, as revealed in a phonetic explication composed of other phrases; but if the resulting whole is a regress or a web of etymologies, this web as a whole will fail to express the general priority of deep content over superficial meaning. So it seems preferable to adopt an alternative construal of Socrates' 'unpacking' procedure. What makes *phus[in]-echê* bear the content 'nature-holder' is *not* its relation to the superficial meanings of *phusis* and *echein;* rather, these are themselves further symptoms or expressions of that content. The phonemes displayed in the explication *as such* bear a particular content; the roles which they (and closely

related phonemes) play in other words and phrases enable us to discover what that content is, but they are derivative of the content rather than its cause.

In effect, what Socrates does in shifting to the mimetic account of content and correctness is to choose this interpretation of his own etymological procedure. And this decision is clearly made much easier by Socrates' commitment to compositionality. Note that in the passage I quoted at 422a–b, Socrates alluded to unetymologizable 'elementary' names as ones not 'composed' of other names. Earlier, Socrates had in fact waffled between presenting his etymologies as 'unpacking' the names etymologized and as merely adducing true descriptions with which they were phonetically 'in accord'. So for instance 'Ares' was not actually decomposed into or explicated as any other words, but simply displayed as phonetically akin to various descriptions true of its referent *[arren, andreios, arratos]*. But now, at the close of the etymological account, Socrates speaks as if all his etymologies had been of the first, 'unpacking' sort: he now takes all names to be composed of the names to which they are referred by etymology (422a5–c1). Socrates' reinterpretation of his own practice seems to express an assumption that an account of where content comes from must be (so far as possible) compositional in form. Just as the content of a *logos* comes from the words which compose it, so too any complex name must take its content from the parts which compose it. So if the content of some name is a function of the phonetic explication given in its etymology, the parts of that explication must have been the parts of the name. And if certain mimimal expressions (the 'primary names') have no such parts recoverable by etymology, their content must still be provided compositionally, albeit in some other, non-semantic way: hence, again, the necessity of something like the mimetic principle. Compositionality has all along suggested a view of content as something residing 'inside' a *logos* or name and supplied by its parts: this leaves nowhere for the content of the minimal parts to come from other than certain intrinsic expressive properties. Thus, to anticipate, the mimetic principle is uniquely qualified to take over where etymology leaves off: for it promises an explanation—even a reduction—of deep content in terms of a direct relation between phonetic expressions as such and objects in the world.

III.2
MIMESIS AND THE ELEMENTS OF LANGUAGE

Having decided that the correctness of the 'primary names' must be explained by reference to a new principle, Socrates proceeds rather tentatively and indirectly to identify it. He begins by stipulating that, since the primary names are *qua* names no different from the derivative ones, they too must disclose *[dêloun]* the natures of the objects they name (422c7–d2). (This confirms, incidentally, that Socrates uses talk of 'disclosure' as a shorthand for his earlier definition of names as tools for dividing and informing, for only in that case is he entitled to assume that the primary names disclose.) Socrates then observes that non-verbal disclosure

proceeds by means of physical gestures, and that these gestures are imitative. On the supposition that verbal disclosures must involve the same process (speech being, after all, a physical process), a name turns out to be an 'imitation in voice'. But this does not distinguish a name from non-verbal vocal imitation—say, quacking like a duck. So we must distinguish the object of the imitation more precisely: a name imitates not the colour, sound or shape of a thing, but its nature or essence *[ousia]*. Moreover, it does so not through just any kind of voice but through letters and syllables—a hint that the primary names will not be the ultimate units of analysis (423e8).

This is not just an *ad hoc* manoeuvre to distinguish naming from quacking. Socrates has already claimed, in conjunction with the semantic principle of correctness, that names disclose "the nature of the object" [*ousia tou pragmatos*, 393d4, cf. *phusis*, 393e6]. By emphasizing that this 'nature' is distinct from merely superficial or perceptible properties, Socrates now gently advances the ontological subplot of the dialogue—its gradual specification of what both names and objects consist in, and how they are related. This began with the general claim that things, including actions, have stable natures (385e–6e); Socrates then applied the point to show that a name must be naturally adapted to its task (387a–90e), by revealing the nature of the object named [*ousia*, *phusis*, 393bff.]. Here we see that a name does so by imitating that nature, through intrinsic 'powers' *[dunameis]* of its own.[6]

So primary names imitate the natures of things by being made up of letters which resemble them. It is striking that Socrates explains in detail how the letters imitate only at the very end of his discourse, almost as something of an afterthought: *rh* is a tool for disclosing motion (426c2, d4), *i* for imitating what is small and penetrates easily, *d* and *t* for stopping, *l* for gliding, and so forth (426c–7c). What he places in the foreground is not any particular claim of this sort, but the general thesis that the 'powers' of the letters make them suitable as tools for representing natures.

The idea of a *dunamis* here brings out that the mimetic content of a letter is natural or intrinsic to it. The letters are not arbitrary simples whose content is imposed on them by the namegiver, or from the combination of which a capacity

6. The *dunamis* of an object is generally something close to its nature [*phusis* or *ousia*]—though *dunamis* has distinctive connotations related to acting and being acted on. (See *Cratylus* 393e3, cf. e6 for *phusis*, 393d4 for *ousia*.) In the *Sophist*, 'being' is said to be what has some *dunamis* to act or be acted upon (247dff.). For a helpful survey of Plato's uses of the term, see R.G.Bury, '*Dunamis* and *Phusis* in Plato', *Classical Review* 8 (1894), pp. 297–300; cf. also Cornford's comments and references in *Plato's Theory of Knowledge [Theory]* (London, 1935), pp. 234–9; and Heinrich von Staden, 'Dynamis: The Hippocratics and Plato', in *Philosophy and Medicine*, vol. 2, ed. K.Boudouris (Alimos, 1999). In the *Republic*, Socrates discusses *dunameis* in terms of faculties such as sight and hearing, which do or accomplish *[apergazetai]* something in some specific relational context *[eph' hôi]* (477c–d, cf. *Theaetetus* 184e8). This is also central to its sense at *Cratylus* 435d1–3:

for disclosing natures emerges. They have intrinsic expressive powers, and the namegiver must know and work with these, as a chemist must work with the powers of the chemical elements and a painter with those of pigments. It is because it inherently involves vehement motion in its production that *rh* is naturally expressive of motion and suited to names used to indicate it.

At the same time, this expressive phonetic power is not in itself sufficient for a letter to count as mimetic. For that would make the relation of 'disclosure' a purely natural one, independent of the activity of any namegiver, and this is clearly not what Socrates envisages. In fact, the passage in which Socrates discusses the mimetic content of the letters also emphasizes the role of the namegiver, who decides to use various letters as tools to imitate this or that (426d–7c). That *rh* imitates motion in our actual names, as it is naturally suited to do, is due to the namegiver's assignment to it of that role. (Presumably another culture's less competent namegiver might have got things quite wrong, using *rh* for what is static, and so forth.) Thus the crucial relation of imitation, on the mimetic account, breaks down into two: there is the purely natural relation of *resemblance* which obtains between (e.g.) *rh* and motion, and then the conventional relation of 'assignment' by a namegiver, who exploits that resemblance by selecting *rh* to express motion. This seems right, incidentally, for our concept of 'imitation': to say that *rh* imitates motion seems to suggest both that it resembles motion *and* that this resemblance is produced or exploited by some agent. Without that agency, we have mere similarity rather than imitation; without *any* resemblance, the imitation can only be an imitation in a very special sense. The namegiver thus creates mimetic content—intentionality, even—out of the brute natural fact of resemblance, and with it not just a particular language but signification as such.[7]

That what *rh* discloses depends on a relation of assignment determined by the namegiver might look like a last-minute concession to convention. But since this assignment attempts to track the natural resemblances of letter and element—to correctly *use* the natural powers which the letters necessarily contribute to names—the natural relation of resemblance has a natural normative authority over the conventional relation of assignment. It provides an objective basis for determining in the case of any name how correctly it has been assigned, and thus the account remains naturalistic in the crucial respect.[8]

How seriously does Plato take this mimetic explanation of correctness? Both the general and the specific accounts are hedged round with expresssions of embarrassment: Socrates allows that the idea that letters and syllables reveal things by imitation 'looks ridiculous' (425d1), and that his account of how

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Socrates asks "what power *[dunamis]* do we take names to have and what fine thing do we say is accomplished *[apergazesthai]* with them?". The idea that a letter has a *dunamis* has already come up earlier in the *Cratylus,* in the claim that a name such as *bêta* succeeds in disclosing the *dunamis* of *b* despite the presence in it of three other letters (393e3): it is natural to suppose that this *dunamis* just is the phonetic value *b*.

particular letters imitate seems to him 'very outrageous and ridiculous' (426b5–6).[9] The question is made the more pressing by the thought, expressed earlier in the quotation from Williams, that the *Cratylus* ultimately shows the attribution of mimetic powers to language to be an explanatory non-starter, even a kind of superstition. Or as Charles Kahn puts it, a bit more sympathetically, Plato "may have believed that this [the mimetic principle] was in fact likely (though it seems silly to us). But he may simply have been motivated by the desire to construct a model language that was *as natural as possible*, in order to make clear the implications."[10] Obviously a full assessment of such verdicts will depend on one's reading of the 're-examination' arguments, and the conclusions Socrates draws from them: but if the mimetic principle is in itself manifestly magical or silly, that certainly gives us an interpretive starting point.

Now we have good evidence that ancient thinkers were more open than modern (that is, post-Saussurean) ones to seeing significance in verbal mimesis, i.e., onomatopoeia: any assumption that something like the mimetic principle *could* not have been seriously meant by Plato would, like the comparable assumption about the etymologies, be deeply anachronistic.[11] On the other hand, the mimetic principle in the *Cratylus* is not merely the speculative thesis that our actual names originated in onomatopoeia, nor a vague claim to the effect that sound may influence meaning, but a robust theory of what names essentially *are* (imitations), how names *mean* (via the *dunameis* of their letters), and what makes a name—or any linguistic expression—*correct* (resemblance). And in that comprehensive and foundational role, the mimetic principle does indeed seem laughable: certainly it is dizzyingly far from any theory that the observation of actual languages would suggest, and its prescriptive side is hardly more plausible than its descriptive.

However, Socrates' deprecation of the mimetic principle suggests that what is important here is not the specific principle but its general form and the theoretical

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7. Note Aristotle, *De Interp.* 16a28–9: the noises of beasts disclose *[dêlousi]*, but this is not sufficient for them to count as names.

8. Thus Baxter's inference, that the namegiver "could have chosen another feature and arrived at another value for a given sound; in this respect the decision is inevitably somewhat arbitrary" (*Critique*, p. 64), seems to me misleading. Craft decisions may be free, but they are not typically arbitrary; for they will fail if not in accord with the pre-existing natures of things.

9. However, it may be that the force of these two remarks is quite different. In the former, which relates to the general principles of the mimetic account, Socrates' fear is that his claims will appear *[oimai phaneisthai]* ridiculous. But of course if they appear so only to a thoughtless person at first glance, this is no real criticism of them (cf. *Republic* 452a–e). In the second comment, which relates to his explanation of particular letters, Socrates says that he thinks *[moi dokei]* his remarks are absurd. This suggests what would be plausible in any case, that the general and particular mimetic accounts are of different orders and that Plato is much less committed to the latter.

10. Kahn, 'Language', p. 167.

role it plays: the point on which he insists is that some account *of this general kind* is necessary. Albeit clumsily, the mimetic account does attempt to meet the crucial desiderata for an acceptable foun dationalist naturalism: namely, that the relation which constitutes a name as correct *not* be reducible to or guaranteed by convention, and (relatedly) that it be a relation between name and world, not between a name and other names or semantic entities. The model of naming here is in fact the same as has been at work in the naturalistic account since the tool model: what makes a name the name o/some object is convention (understood as a decision of the namegiver), but what makes it name that object *correctly* is a correct natural relation between the nature of the name and the nature of the thing. The successive phases of the naturalistic account have represented this relation with increasing precision: as appropriateness or adaptedness in the tool model, as truth in the etymological account, and now as natural resemblance.

I will have more to say about the attractions and difficulties of the mimetic principle in section III.3, when the account as a whole is on the table. First, though, let us look more closely at the final key ingredient of the mimetic account, the third after the demand for a non-etymological principle and the introduction of mimesis: Socrates' identification of the letters of the alphabet as the elements of names. This initially comes as a bit of a surprise, for when Socrates first speaks of the 'elements' of names they are identified with the 'primary names'. Socrates sets aside this point to introduce the mimetic principle, then returns to the 'elements' as the namegiver's starting-point for the 'division' preliminary to his namegiving:

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11. In addition to the Stoics and other ancient etymologizers (cf. n. 5, II. 1), cf. Grote, *Plato*, vol. 2, p. 531 n. g, who adduces Leibniz and Grimm. Actually, as with the etymologies, the modern 'we' to whom the mimetic principle is obviously silly is not so easy to identify. A striking case to consider is the essay 'New Words', by the normally sane George Orwell, in which he complains that natural language simply lacks words for most phenomena of consciousness, and proposes a solution: "to invent new words as deliberately as we would invent new parts for a motor-car engine" (George Orwell, 'New Words' [1940?], in *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, ed. Peter Davison, vol. 12 (London, 1998), p. 131). Orwell recognizes the obvious objections to such a proposal, and spends most of the essay responding to them; what is of interest here is his note at the end on the form such new words should take: "I suppose there must always be *some* correlation between the sound of a word and its meaning…. Primitive man, before he had words, would naturally rely upon gesture, and like any other animal he would cry out at the moment of gesticulating, in order to attract attention. Now one instinctively makes the gesture that is appropriate to one's meaning, and all parts of the body follow suit, including the tongue. Hence certain tongue-movements—i.e., certain sounds, would come to be associated with certain meanings…. Therefore in forming new words one would have to pay attention to appropriateness of sound as well as exactitude of meaning…. One would have to determine the natural form of the word" (pp. 134–5). This odd reverie could be the work of an ancient syncretist under Platonic, Epicurean and Stoic influences —a tribute to the durable attraction of the notion that names, phonemes and all, must be in some sense *phusei*.

> But what would be the method of the division *[ho tropos tês diaireseôs]* starting from which the imitator begins the imitation? Now isn't it the case that since the imitation turns out to be imitation of essence *[ousia]* in letters *[grammata]* and syllables, the most correct method is first to divide *[dielesthai]* the elements *[stoicheia]*, just as those setting their hand to rhythms first go through the powers *[dunameis]* of the letters *[stoicheia]*, then those of the syllables, and in this way only then move on to the investigation of the rhythms, and not before? (424b7–c3)

There is apparently something of a play here on the term *stoicheion*.[12] In its first occurrence in the passage, *stoicheia* would naturally be taken to mean, as shortly before, the elements of names (422a3, b2, b6): that is, the *nicht-weiter-zurückführbar* 'primary names' into which all others are analyzed. Yet in its second occurrence ("the powers of the letters, then those of the syllables…") Socrates is clearly using *stoicheia* to refer to the letters of the alphabet, taken as the starting point for expertise in prosody. So the primary names [*ion, rhoun,* etc.] are to be referred to the letters as elements and are not elementary or unanalyzable themselves.

We might be tempted to see this as simply an equivocation: the fact that *stoicheion* means both 'element' and 'letter' seduces Socrates into identifying the two. And such a slip could have been made easier by a naïve presumption that, as the minimal phonetic parts of language, the letters must be the minimal bearers of meaning as well—in short, by compositionality run amok, and a failure to recognize the separate spheres of descriptive content and phonetic expression.

But this harsh assessment is implausible. For one thing, in the earlier tool model Plato presented an impeccably tidy version of the distinction between content and phonemes, expressed in terms of the form-matter distinction. If that distinction is now abandoned—if content and phonetic expression turn out to coincide after all—this is unlikely to be a mere oversight. Moreover, the basis for the move to the letters is in fact fairly clear from the order of the argument, for what has intervened between the first mention of the 'elements' and their

12. On the development of the senses of *stoicheion,* see Walter Burkert, '*Stoicheion:* Eine Semasiologische Studie', *Philologus* 103 (1959), pp. 167–97. Burkert argues, *contra* Diels, that the sense of 'letter' derives from that of 'element': this seems to me plausible, but I do not think anything hangs on it for the interpretation of the *Cratylus*. There seems to be no significant difference in meaning between *stoicheion* used for letters and *gramma,* as is evident from 431e10–11: "when we assign these letters *[grammata]*—alpha and beta and each of the letters *[stoicheia]*—to names". There is a difference of nuance, due to the fact that *grammata* is the more usual term (and is associated with such derivative phrases as *hê grammatikê technhê*), as well as to the connotations accruing to *stoicheia* from its other senses (cf. the uses of the two terms at 393d–e). *Stoicheia* is thus the more precise term, and more suited to types than tokens—rather like 'letters of the alphabet' as opposed to 'letters'.

identification with the letters is the adoption of the mimetic principle. If the principle by which the correctness of names is to be determined is mimesis, then it is surely reasonable for the minimal parts of names to be identified by the criterion of mimetic content. The phonetic properties of names are produced by the phonetic properties of the letters, which as such are equally susceptible of mimetic explanation; for a mimetic account of correctness to stop short at the primary names would be rationally indefensible.

So, given the mimetic principle, the elements of language turn out to be the letters;[13] and the 'method of division' from which the namegiver starts turns out to be a division into kinds of the letters of the alphabet:

> So we must in this way divide [dielesthai] first the vowels [lit., those that are sounded, phônêenta], then the others according to their kinds [kata eidê]: those that are both soundless and mute [aphôna, aphthogga]—for so those who are clever [deinoi] about these things call them; and then again those that are not sounded, but are not mute either; and then the sounded letters themselves, however many kinds [eidê] they have, different from each other.[14] And when we have divided these, it's also necessary to divide well the things [onta], all the ones to which names must be applied—if there are any things to which all can be referred [anapheretai], like the letters [stoicheia], from which it is possible to see them, and if among them [the elementary things] there are kinds [eidê]—after the same fashion as in the case of the letters [stoicheia]. (424c5–d4) [15]

'Division' here is evidently the process of classification featured in the *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Philebus* and *Phaedrus*. I will say a bit more about it in the next section, in relation to Socrates' conception of craft, but its basic significance is clear: it involves the sorting of the letters into kinds, and likewise the elements of reality, and then a matching of the two. Having sketched this double division of letters and elements, Socrates' next step is to show how the namegiver will put them. Just as a painter may either use a pure pigment or mix several to match the

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13. Does this mean that the letters are *names* of the elements of reality? Plato is interestingly reticent on this point. Both the semantic and the mimetic principles are, as Socrates says, means of disclosing the nature of an object (422d); and the letters are like names in being 'signs' [*sêmeia*, 427c5]. But these are broadly semiotic terms, not specifically linguistic ones; and it is striking that, though it would be a convenience, Socrates never actually refers to the letters as 'names' of what they imitate. Plato's reticence is often obscured by interpreters, who tend to pronounce either that the letters are or that they are not names ('are': Baxter, *Critique*, pp. 76–7 and Julia Annas, 'Knowledge and Language: the *Theaetetus* and the *Cratylus*' ['Knowledge and Language'], in *Language and Logos* ed. Malcolm Schofield and Martha Nussbaum (Cambridge, 1982)), pp. 106–7, 113; 'are not': Kretzmann, 'Correctness', p. 136 and Williams, 'Cratylus' Theory', p. 85). The letters do, for whatever it is worth, seem to fit the definition of a name as an imitation of essence in voice (423b9–10, 423e).

colours he attempts to represent, so too here: "We too will apply the letters *[stoicheia]* to the things, both one-on-one, if it seems to require it, and many together, making what they call syllables, and then putting together syllables as well, from which names and phrases are composed" (424e4–5a2).

This double division gives the impression that names disclose essences by a one-to-one matching of mimetic letters and essential properties, so that if fire is fine, mobile, etc., its name should be made up of *i*, *rh*, and so forth. But it is not clear that we should think of a mimetic name as simply an orderless enumeration, especially as it seems unlikely that Plato conceives of a 'nature' as an unstructured assemblage of properties. If we bear in mind that, as dividers of being and disclosers of natures, names on the naturalistic account function very much like definitions, it should be clear that they might take a much more structured form. Socrates says glaringly little about any 'syntactic' structures at work in the primary names; in principle, though, there is no obvious reason why a mimetically complex name could not, like a semantically complex definition (e.g., by genus and species), give a unified specification of an essence.

Another area of unclarity is the relation of the mimetic account to the earlier phases of naturalism. Socrates comes closest to showing how the mimetic and semantic principles could be integrated when he gives his detailed account of how particular letters imitate. His account of *i* as imitating light things which go through everything (426e–7a) recalls the etymology given earlier of *dikaion*, 'just', as what goes through everything (412c–3d). And this suggests that, though the earlier etymologies stopped short at the primary names (in this case, *dia* and *ion*, n.b. the mention of *ion* as a 'primary name' at 421c), any one of them could now be grounded in Socrates' account of the letters. In this particular case, the

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14. This threefold classification of letters is repeated at *Philebus* 18b–c. Plato presumably has in mind a division down to the individual letters (as types, that is): in the *Philebus*, all three classes of letter are subdivided in this way (18c).

15. This last sentence is syntactically bizarre, and the text of the first part is unsatisfactory. I translate the text of Méridier and the new OCT: *kai epeidan tauta dielômetha, ta onta eu panta au hois dei onomata epitheinai*. Considerably more radical emendations have been proposed: see M.A.Stewart, 'Plato, *Cratylus* 424c9 sqq', *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 57 (1975), pp. 167–71. Gaiser and Baxter accept Friedländer's emendation of *ta onta au panta hois dei* (*Plato*, vol. 2, p. 344 n. 26; Gaiser, 'Name und Sache', p. 81; Baxter, *Critique*, p. 77 n. 104.) Since Socrates is, as he will shortly note (425a5), being 'carried away', a certain amount of messiness is to be expected. In the clause I have translated "from which it is possible to see them" *[ex hôn estin idein auta]*, I take it that the 'which' are the letters (*stoicheia* is the most recent noun) and the 'them' the elementary things, so that Plato is touching on a point made more explicitly later: the letters had better be akin to the elements of things, and so able to reveal them (cf. 434a–b). But 'all the things' is also plausible as an antecedant for the 'them' (see Gaiser, p. 81 n. 157). Second, the conclusion of the sentence is more usually read as explaining the second 'if clause: "if among them there are kinds in the same way as among the letters". This gives a good general sense; but elsewhere in this passage, *tropos* means a method or procedure, and it is likely to do the same here (cf. 422b7, 424b7, 425b1, 426a4).

letter i imitates smallness and fineness; taken together (and as structured by any 'syntactic' features of such names), it and *o* and *n* will determine the semantic content of *ion;* and *ion* contributes this semantic content to that of *dikaion*, which in turn contributes its semantic content to the phrases and sentences in which it occurs. The two levels of explanation are brought together at the level of the 'primary names': their content is a function of the mimetic powers of the letters they contain, and in turn constitutes the semantic content of the derivative words they compose. Socrates never works through any example all the way from letter to *logos*, but he does emphasize this continuity between the levels (433d1–4b).

Obviously this picture raises a number of problems. One is the apparent esoterism of the view which results. If the deep content of the primary names supervenes on the mimetic content of their elements (together with any 'syntactic' features), then we can only know what our words really mean by analyzing them all the way to the letters, as Socrates here only gestures at doing. And if our language has been badly constructed, or if we do not use it correctly, it might be that we can have no idea *at all* what our words really mean in advance of such an analysis. This extreme esoterism about content is hard to accept—hard, indeed, to make sense of.[16] And again, it entails that the etymologies, which were not presented as deriving from a mimetic analysis, may have been completely misguided.[17] After all, etymological and mimetically analyses seem in principle very unlikely to give the same results.[18]

Be that as it may, Socrates' enthusiastic peroration follows immediately:

> And then again we'll now put together something big and fine and complete from the names and phrases; just as in the other case the picture is put together by the painter's craft. In this case a sentence *[logos]* is put together by the namer's craft *[onomastikê]* or by rhetoric or whatever craft *[technê]* it is. (424e4–5a5)

But he soon retracts—thereby, of course, emphasizing—this prospective 'we':

> Rather, not 'we'—I was carried away in what I said. The *ancients* did put together these things in this way, by whatever skill they are put together. But it's necessary for us, if we are to have expert knowledge *[technikôs epistêsometha]* of how to investigate them all, having thus divided them, to study in this way whether the primary and derivative names are in order *[kata tropon]* or not. For to discourse in any other way is lowly and not methodical, my dear Hermogenes. (424d5–5b3)

16. But not unparalleled. The Derveni commentator seems to take the view that we often grasp neither the semantic content *nor* the referents of the words we use, par

Socrates' confession of being 'carried away' is a pivotal moment of the *Cratylus*, for here the procedure—or pretense—of investigating Greek drops. It will soon be resumed, but, especially at this crucial moment, Socrates' lapse into the prospective makes it clear that the correctness of Greek was always an inessential heuristic presumption, used to help him respond to Hermogenes' challenge to *show* what natural correctness consists in (391a). What Socrates is really interested in, as he is here 'carried away' into admitting, is what *we* must do if we set out to name correctly. His answer, as it has now emerged, is that a name is correctly given if its mimetic content accurately depicts, or is 'like', the nature of its referent; and that it is correctly used if its mimetic content accurately depicts the nature of the object it is used to name. And so anyone who seeks to give names correctly must begin by establishing correct relations between the matching minimal parts of language and reality. The same applies, in fact, to name use, and this is arguably a further problematic result of the mimetic account. For each act of name use is, like namegiving, an assignment of name to object; and both kinds of act are to be judged by the same standard, resemblance;

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ticularly divine names. For example, 'Kronos' really means *kruôn nous* ('knocking reason'), and it really refers not to anything anthropomorphic but to a cosmological entity of this description (Col. X). In the *Cratylus*, the etymologies' deep content was often of a mildly esoteric sort, and seemed to be combined occasionally with revisionist accounts of the referents of names (e.g., of 'Hestia' as Being, 401b–e). There is nothing *in principle* unworkable or paradoxical about such accounts, if they simply invoke a 'linguistic division of labour' between expert and non-expert users of some name. And such views can be made more palatable by the associated claim that our language is designed (or has evolved) in such a way that we *do* end up routinely speaking the truth. As the Derveni commentator puts it, we speak correctly but not knowingly (Col. XIV). 'Kronos' does not mean what we think it does, but when all the relevant terms are correctly decoded our standard claims about, say, the great power of Kronos or his relation to Zeus turn out to be true after all. So the prospect of almost universal incomprehension of our language need not entail, as we might have supposed, that our ordinary talk is generally false or non-sensical. But this faith in the divinely instituted correctness of language is, as we will see, eventually rejected by Plato.

17. As Méridier notes (*Cratyle*, p. 22).

18. A related puzzle is how the mimetic account can be squared with naturalism's earlier distinction between (semantic) form and (phonetic) matter (389d–e, 393–4): this now appears to be, at a minimum, incomplete, since the letters and syllables are ultimately what does the work of providing content. The tension between the form-matter analysis and the mimetic account is noted by a number of commentators, including Goldschmidt ("contradiction évidente", *Essai*, p. 151 n. 1) and Baxter (*Critique*, p. 64). But this tension should not be overstated, especially if I am right that mimetic names need not be assumed to take the form of a one-one mapping of letters to properties. In that case, for all we know, 'Hector' and 'Astyanax' might still turn out to be correct names for the same thing —just as (for instance) definitions of 'sophist' which have no common words can still both be true. And as I noted in 1.5, the basic distinction between form and matter need not be taken to entail a contrast between semantic and phonetic: the form of a name is *whatever* enables it to do its job of disclosing a nature.

so it seems that acts of namegiving can have no normative standing in determining whether acts of name use are correct. The result seems again to be a sort of esoterism: knowledge of my naming conventions will be of no use at all in determining whether what I have said is true.

Though Socrates' account of the mimetic properties of the individual letters comes, as I have noted, somewhat later, it is with this peroration that the mimetic account, and with it the account of natural correctness as a whole, is essentially complete. To recapitulate, naturalism begins from the thought that names are tools, whose function is to enable us to *divide* being and *inform* each other. Names are then said to perform this function by disclosing the natures of the things they name through a particular semantic content; this is then correlated with a 'deep content' disclosed by etymology. With this progressive specification of how a name functions comes a progressive specification of what makes it correct. A name is correct if it functions well as a tool for naming; it functions well if it is appropriate to its object; it is appropriate if it is true of its object; it is true if its 'deep content' is true. Now at this point, with the etymological account, it still seems intuitively reasonable, as I noted in III. 1, to continue the interrogation—to ask how names ever *do* come to have semantic content, deep or otherwise, and what it means to call that content true. These are difficult questions; and the mimetic account, for all its strangeness, does supply direct answers to them, answers which seem to bring the inquiry to a natural conclusion. A name has semantic content by virtue of its mimetic content; and this semantic content is true if the mimetic content is 'like': i.e., if there is a natural relation of resemblance between the letters and the nature of the object named.

Thus the mimetic account has reaffirmed the foundational thesis of naturalism and has brought to completion a progression of explanations of that thesis. As we will see, the account turns out to have deeply problematic implications for the naturalistic project. But I will argue that it stands, both in the *Cratylus* and in Plato's later thought, as his best effort at an account of language of the general form which he takes to be necessary, if what we say is to be subject to objective norms at all.

III.3
CRAFT AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF CORRECTNESS

As Socrates' moment of being carried away makes clear, the mimetic account is above all a normative account of language. In fact, it largely consists in a programmatic sketch of a perfect language: a language which would meet the standard of natural correctness to the fullest extent possible.[19] I will consider in the next chapter the extent to which this language—call it Cratylese—stands as an ideal by the end of the *Cratylus*. For now, my concern is to note some of its promises and peculiarities; this will also help to clarify the question with which I began, of what motivates the account in the first place.

To begin with, it is worth noting that Socrates' sketch of this correct language is closely bound up with his invocation of naming as a craft. Indeed, in expounding the mimetic account Socrates seems, if anything, less interested in explaining correctness itself than in its consequences for the associated craft(s). This should come as no surprise: an important motivation shaping naturalism as a whole is Plato's interest in the idea of an expert craft *[tecbnê]* or crafts related to names.[20] Thus the rejection of conventionalism emphasized the result that namegiving is 'not for any chance person', but is rather a matter of expert craft (388d–390e); and the whole of the naturalistic account has worked towards an account of what that craft consists in. Hence Hermogenes now pronounces that the giver of mimetically correct names is "the one we have been looking for all along, the name-expert *[ho onomastikos]*" (424a5–6). The mimetic account also makes it clear that we have simultaneously 'been looking for' the complementary (putative) craft of name study. This has already been present in practice in Socrates' display of skilled etymologizing (note for example Hermogenes' approval of one etymology as *technikôteron* than another, 400b5); and the prospects for such a craft will also figure in the last part of the dialogue (n.b. 435e1). Namegiving and name study stand or fall together, for in rationally demonstrating the correctness of names we recapitulate the reasoning of the namegivers. Hence the naturalness of Socrates' moment of being 'carried away', i.e., confusing his own activity of study with the work of the namegivers: both belong to a single craft of *onomastikê.*

The scope of *onomastikê* is broader than we might expect; for Socrates' account, as I have noted, seems to treat the distinction between namegiving and name use as normatively irrelevant. Thus the application of primary names, complex names and even *logoi* are all part of the craft of verbal 'painting'. The

19. Cf. Baxter, *Critique,* pp. 31–2, 77: but his treatment of 'descriptive' and 'prescriptive' as alternatives is a bit of an oversimplification. For the mimetic account grounds its prescriptive principle (correctness as resemblance) in its descriptive account or analysis of what names are (images). This combination is what we should expect given that the mimetic account is the explanatory successor to the functionalist account of a name as a tool. For the explanation of what makes a tool function well can hardly be divorced from the explanation of what makes it that kind of tool at all—an aspect of functionalism which, I will suggest in Chapter IV, turns out to be a source of difficulties for the naturalistic account.

20. According to Julia Annas, Plato's account is driven by the principles that (a) knowledge must be based on knowledge, in a 'hierarchical structure' and (b) knowledge must involve a *logos* of what is known. Annas takes it that Plato is persuaded that he cannot provide a logos for the elements, and therefore that language is "not something that we can know" ('Knowledge and Language', p. 109, cf. p. 111). This has an oddly skeptical sound; but if 'know' here means, 'have a distinct *technê* concerning', Annas' view seems right. On the principle that knowledge is based on knowledge, see also Gail Fine, 'Knowledge and *Logos* in the *Theaetetus*' ['Knowledge'], *Philosophical Review* 88 (1979), pp. 366–97.

onomastic craft is thus also identical with rhetoric properly understood; or at any rate the two evidently collaborate to produce *logos*, which is "put together by *onomastikê* or by rhetoric or whatever craft *[technê]* it is" (425a3–5). Taken together, onomastic and rhetoric constitute a comprehensive verbal craft which seems to parallel Platonic dialectic in its universal scope—for it can name and discuss anything and everything.

Now in the Gorgias, Plato demolishes the pretensions of rhetoric to be such a sovereign and universal expert craft. The rhetorician may be able to persuade the ignorant on any topic, but that does not make rhetoric a craft at all: a real craft can accompany persuasion on its particular subject matter with teaching. The *Cratylus* will eventually show that what is wrong with such a universal verbal 'craft' is not its scope, but the supposition that proper the necessary expertise about names could be acquired prior to knowledge of the natures of their nominata. A claim to universal scope could in fact be made out for onomastic-rhetoric properly understood—but only because, properly understood, it is not an independent craft. In fact, though Socrates does not quite state the point here, it is clear that *onomastikê* is a subsidiary of philosophical dialectic, to be practised either by the dialectician or under his supervision.[21] This was at least hinted at when the dialectician was identified as the expert name user and supervisor of the namegiver at 390c; and one function assigned to names was the 'division' of being (388b), the central procedure of dialectic in other dialogues (*Phaedrus* 266b, *Sophist* 253d). Here the namegiver's double 'division' also implies that knowledge of the natures of things which is for Plato the task of the philosopher.

This double division is central to Socrates' depiction of *onomastikê.* For Plato, a craft involves the ability to give a rational account—a *logos*—of its subject matter (*Gorgias* 501a, cf. *Phaedrus* 268a–72b, esp. 270c–d, 271b). And in the *Phaedrus,* it is made explicit that this involves analyzing and explaining the components of that subject-matter down to the level of simple elements: in both rhetoric and medicine, "one must divide *[dei dielesthai]* a nature *[phusin],* of body in the one case and soul in the other, if one is to use not just practice and experience but expertise *[technê]*" (270b4–6). Socrates adds that, regarding any object about which we want to be expert *[technikos],* we have to ask first whether it is simple or complex. If it is simple, we must then investigate its 'powers' *[dunameis],* i.e., its natural dispositions to act on and be acted on by other things. And if it is complex, we must identify the 'forms' which make it up and investigate the powers of each (270d1–I). Explanation on this model takes the form of analysis to simple forms or elements, and craft or expertise depends on the identification, classification and correct use of these elements. So if *onomastikê* is to be an expert craft, names must be compositional, ultimately reducible to and explained by their elements. This compositional conception of craft dovetails nicely with the general conception of language as compositional which we have already seen at work in in the *Cratylus*— indeed, either might easily be the origin of the other.[22]

Thus names are assumed to exhibit a structure of simple and complex, and expertise about them must proceed from grasping the *dunameis* of their simple parts and ordering them into a 'division'. Though 'division' is, as I have noted, a canonical Platonic procedure, in the *Cratylus* case Socrates relates it to the practice of those who, in 'tackling rhythms', start with the *dunameis* of the letters (424c1–2). Presumably these are the same as (or overlap with) those who are 'clever' about letters (424c7); and references in the *Hippias Major* and *Minor* make it clear that one of these experts is the sophist Hippias. In the *Hippias Major*, Socrates alludes to this as one of Hippias' specialities: "that area in which you know, most precisely of all humans, how to 'divide' *[diairein]*, about the power *[dunamis]* of letters *[grammata]* and syllables and rhythms and harmonies" (*Hipp. Maj.* 285c7–d2). And in the *Hippias Minor* Hippias is described as being an expert about the "correctness of rhythms and harmonies and letters" (368d4–5). Note that Hippias is not just an expert on the letters, but specifically on their *dunameis* and on how to divide or distinguish *[diairein]* them: so Plato evidently has Hippias' expertise very closely in view in the *Cratylus* passage.

Socrates' division of the letters, then, is evidently a description of the procedure of an extant sophistic craft or pseudo-craft—rather like the etymological account of correctness it supersedes. ('Division' was itself perhaps some kind of sophistic buzzword: in Plato's early dialogues, the term is regularly used for Prodicus' practice of distingushing the meanings of words.)[23] And so what is especially Platonic here is presumably not the general idea of an onomastic-rhetorical craft, nor even the claim that it must proceed from a 'division', but the suggestion that this procedure could—indeed, must—be applied not just to language but also to its objects. (The mimetic account itself leaves open how the two divisions, of realities and elements of language, must be related: but Socrates will later use the mimetic conception of names to argue that our grasp of the natures of things has logical priority (V. 1).) By insisting that the things to be named must be subjected to the same systematic analysis and division, Socrates affirms that any genuine name-expertise will not be free-

21. Cf. Susan Levin, 'What's in a Name?: A Reconsideration of the *Cratylus*' Historical Sources and Topics', *Ancient Philosophy* 15 (1995), pp. 91–115 at pp. 106–7.

22. A number of other dialogues, particularly in the 'critical' group, make heavy use of the letters as a paradigm or analogy for the elements of things, particularly in epistemological contexts (*Republic* 402a–c, *Theaetetus* 202eff., *Sophist* 252eff., *Statesman* 277d–8e, *Timaeus* 48b–c; cf. the letters as paradigmatic objects of knowledge at *Philebus* 17a–b, 18b–d.) Though the particular points being made by the analogy vary, the features of the letters which tend to be emphasized are just those brought out by the *Cratylus* account: their simplicity, their potential for combination and their capacity to be sorted into types. For a brave attempt to work through the philosophical implications of the analogy, see I.M.Crombie, *An Examination of Plato's Doctrines [Examination]* (London, 1963) vol. 2, pp. 374–88.

standing: the name-expert must also have expertise about the nature of reality.[24] So like the use of the agonistic mode in the etymologies, Socrates' invocation here of a double division amounts to an affirmation that only the philosopher is in a position to execute this rather unphilosophical business of *onomastikê* successfully.

So namegiving turns out to be a subsidiary of dialectic, and its complete product would be a language strictly governed by a philosophical understanding of the natures of things.[25] The vision of such a philosophical language has had a long influence on subsequent thought about language, exerting for centuries the slightly fantastic allure of an El Dorado or a philosopher's stone. Arguable successors to and variants on Cratylese include, among many wackier enterprises, Leibniz' attempts at a 'universal characteristic', Frege's *Begriffschrift,* Russell's vision of a 'logically perfect language',[26] and the specialized languages of modern sciences.

The easiest point of comparison is provided by the last of these, and particularly by those languages which are obviously compositional. For example, chemistry builds names for complex substances from simpler ones— ultimately, from the names of 'elements' (n.b.). In doing so, it tends to exclude ill-formed names—names along the lines of 'barbarian', say, which names a negatively defined plurality but looks no different from the names (like 'Greek') we use for what is unitary and positively defined. The names of simple and complex, positive and negative, like and unlike, all tend to disclose those features in the objects they name. For example, HOH is preferred by chemists to H_2O as a name for the water molecule because it makes manifest the kinship of water to other substances containing OH— in Cratylan terms, we might think of OH as a 'primary name' or a 'syllable'.

Now imagine a language like the language of chemistry but global in scope and *wholly* rationalized, purged of all irrationalities and inconsistencies. All the names of that language will either be elementary or will be complexes produced from the elementary names. These elementary names will themselves be simple, and represent simple things (bracketing, of course, the very difficult question of how this simplicity is to be determined), and complexes will be formed according to entirely regular rules of combination. So if our identification of the elements and complexes of reality has been correct and complete, our language will display them in a perfectly ordered fashion.

Let us call a language which has this character *structurally correct.* A structurally correct language would have, it seems, the virtues of systematicity and transparency—in the names of complexes, at any rate, and in the relations of

23. *Laches* 197d5, *Charmides* 163d4, *Protagoras* 340b1, 341c8, 358a6. Cf. also Burkert, 'Stoicheion', pp. 178–9.

24. This is not to deny that some sophistic points of view can incorporate this position: cf. *Dissoi Logoi* 8.

the names to each other. As a structurally correct language, Cratylese would be a supreme monument to a perfected dialectic: the language would itself be a kind of Dialectician's Dictionary, displaying, for those able to understand, the natures of things.

That there is some functional point to structural correctness, and not merely aesthetic elegance, is suggested by the tendency of scientific languages to approach it as they evolve. And, intuitively, there does seem to be a significant contrast between a name like 'HOH' and a name like 'water'. 'HOH' has its descriptive or semantic content transparently, and so discloses the nature of what it is used to name in an informative way in which 'water' does not. As a result, if I know that 'H' is hydrogen, and '0' oxygen, and if someone points to water and says 'HOH', I can form a concept of HOH from my conceptions of hydrogen and of oxygen, and apply it to the stuff before me. The name can thus be said to disclose the nature of that stuff: under these particular circumstances, we can learn the nature of an object by the inspection of its name. A name like 'water', however, can serve only as a reminder, telling me to apply whatever conception I have of water to the stuff in the glass. Of course, if I am a chemist, then even 'water' will inform me that the stuff in the glass is HOH, but there is, intuitively, a sense in which that is no thanks to the name.[27] I will call a *strong disclosure* one which functions like HOH in this situation, and a *weak disclosure* one which functions like 'water'. Cratylese, then, would to the greatest extent possible exclude weak disclosures in favour of strong ones.

I do not mean to imply, however, that we should think of strong and weak disclosures as being, for Plato, two different *kinds* of name; and on examination, the contrast between them is more slippery than it seems. After all, one might object that the real difference between the two is simply that 'water' is simple and 'HOH' is complex, so that its meaning may be gathered by someone who knows the simpler semantic parts which make it up. Background knowledge of simple expressions can always be brought to bear to generate knowledge of complex ones, so long as our rules for forming complexes are reasonably regular; so the right comparison is between, say, 'HOH' and 'hot water', both of which are transparent to someone who knows their semantic components. If the difference between weak disclosures and strong is merely the difference between simple and complex, then the promise of a structurally correct language is merely that the minimum number of simple names required, one for each of the elements of reality, would be used.

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25. For discussions of Cratylese as a serious aim of the *Cratylus* (and the modern parallels) see Benfey ('Aufgabe'), Grote (*Plato*, vol. 2, p. 506), Weingartner ('Making Sense', pp. 20–1), Baxter (*Critique*, pp. 80ff.) and G.Anagnostopoulos, 'The Significance of Plato's *Cratylus*', *Review of Metaphysics* 27 (1973/4), pp. 318–345. In particular, Baxter provides a fascinating comparison with some much later, more or less Platonist attempts to develop a perfect language.

26. See Baxter, *Critique*, p. 54.

The virtues of structural correctness are made explicit by Leibniz when he extols the promise of his 'universal characteristic'. He boasts of his discovery "that one can devise a certain alphabet of human thoughts and that, through the combination of the letters of this alphabet and through the analysis of words produced from them, all things can both be discovered and judged".[28] This characteristic will give a new transparency, regimentation and rigour to our reasoning—especially about controversial matters of deliberation, in which people are commonly vulnerable to emotional pressures and rhetorical eloquence. Controversies will be reduced to numerical terms, so that reasons can simply be calculated, making moral reasoning as clear and certain as arithmetic. It cannot be an accident that Leibniz' hopes here resonate not only with the *Cratylus* but with Plato's distinction in the *Euthyphro* between questions which are subject to measurement and evaluative questions which are the occasion of controversy (7b–e, and cf. *Phaedrus* 263a–c and *First Alc.* 111b–2b), as well as with the invocation in the *Protagoras* (356c–7a) of an art of measurement to guide, or indeed take the place of, deliberation. As I have noted in the Introduction, Plato too is concerned with the vulnerability of our actual naming conventions to rhetorical abuse, and the lack of transparency which makes the diagnosis of error difficult and controversial. The common vision of Plato and Leibniz in these moments is of a language which would render such errors and deceptions manifest—and therefore impossible.

But of course, the names of Cratylese would be something more than structurally correct: they would deploy a natural resemblance between the elementary names and the objects they represent. In Plato's account, they do so through the phonetic content of letters, as matched to elements of reality by the namegiver; but we can also imagine a written Cratylese which would be pictographic, and no doubt equivalent forms of mimesis could also be worked out for other media. The distinctive feature of such a language is simply that its elementary names (and therefore its complex ones) do not just stand for the elements but accurately represent them; it is not only structurally, but what we might call *representationally* correct.

Representational correctness is not typically an aspiration of modern scientific languages (or any others), and its virtues are less obvious than those of the structural kind. Thus Bernard Williams states flatly: "As a recipe for linguistic

27. Cf. J.S.Mill on the difference between 'connotative' and 'non-connotative' names: with the latter, when we point to and name various objects, "we do not, merely by so doing, convey to the hearer any information about them, except that those are their names. By enabling him to identify the individuals, we may connect them with information previously possessed by him; by saying, This is York, we may tell him that it contains the Minster. But this is in virtue of what he has previously heard concerning York; not by anything implied in the name" (*A System of Logic* I.ii.5, pp. 35–6). The reliance of what I term 'weak disclosures' on prior information will be made explicit by Plato in the *Sklêrotês* argument.

improvement, again, the mimetic principle has nothing to offer. The functions of language…are to teach, learn, inform, divide up reality. The knowledge required for that can appear in language only if someone possesses it already; and while there might be point in making that knowledge appear structurally, and thus improving language dialectically, there can be no such point to altering it in the direction of Cratylan *mimesis*."[29]

Now this contrast is not in fact immediately convincing; in principle, representational correctness too would have its uses. The promise of representational correctness is that I need not even have a prior association of a simple expression with the element it names to grasp its meaning: if the letters have been correctly assigned to the elements, I should be able to tell from inspection of *rh*, for instance, that it represents motion. Whether I could be supposed to acquire the very *concept* of motion, say, as a property of things simply from acquaintance with *rh* seems doubtful; but given some acquaintance with the elements of things, the elements of language will in effect teach themselves. This would give Cratylese a significant edge in informativeness and transparency over a merely structurally correct language—a useful bonus, surely, if there is any hope of attaining it.[30]

Now, to anticipate, in the latter part of the dialogue we will see that no useful degree of representational correctness *can* be attained.[31] This finding derives from Plato's general conception of images as defective, which I will discuss in the next chapter; but one does not have to be a Platonist to see the basic problem. Plainly even a respectable attempt at representational correctness—a well-designed pictogram of HOH, say—will still fall short of the original in many ways, by being of the wrong size, dimensionality, and so forth. And if we suppose that the names for most things at least cannot be *perfectly* representationally correct—the alternative would seem to require our conversing with the things themselves, like the heavily burdened Laputans in *Gulliver's Travels*—we may have doubts about any attempt to posit it even as an ideal. For there is no obvious point short of that impossible perfection at which one can easily draw the normative line—no natural partial degree of resemblance which suggests itself as a threshold for representational adequacy. Any such partial degree has the potential to mislead: to learn reliably from any representational language one would first have to grasp which aspects of the names are representational and to what extent. And this prerequisite seems to cancel out the putative benefits of representational correctness as 'self-teaching'. Trying to learn about things from representational names is like trying to learn history from

28. I cite from the translation of Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber: G.W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays* (Indianapolis, 1989), 'Preface to a Universal Characteristic', pp. 6–7.

29. Williams, 'Cratylus' Theory', p. 92.

Hollywood movies: the problem is not that they always get it wrong, but that to tell when they are right one has to learn the facts independently anyway.

A suggestive corollary to this point is that where representational correctness falls short, convention takes over. In fact, it is only because imperfect representational correctness tends to be backed by quite elaborate conventional codes and assumptions about relevance that it does not invariably mislead us. (Again, think of the pictogram case: it is thanks to convention that we do not suppose that, for instance, the 'No Dogs' sign on a park advertises the presence of a black dog with a red stripe.) So reflection on the prospects for Cratylese should leave us—again, even apart from any proprietary Platonic considerations—well prepared for Socrates' 're-examination', in which the mimetic account itself is shown to issue in a partial rehabilitation of convention.

This self-undermining consequence makes it striking, and perhaps puzzling, that the mimetic account nonetheless remains on the table throughout the *Cratylus* as the final formulation of the naturalistic project. It is the form of naturalism kept in view throughout the 're-examination', and is quasi-affirmed in Socrates' conclusion when he avows a lingering preference that names be 'like' their nominata (435c2–3); it is relied on again in the crucial later argument that name study is valueless (438e–9b). I will consider Socrates' conclusions, and the final status of naturalism in the *Cratylus*, in Chapter IV: my point here is that unlike so many of his interpreters, Plato never treats the mimetic account as a wrong turning from which *naturalism itself* should retreat. He never even notes

30. Representational correctness also promises the interesting advantage of universality: a correctly realized Cratylese would presumably be equally accessible to Greeks and barbarians. This is still in some contexts appreciated as a virtue: when the *Pioneer 10* spacecraft was supplied with greetings from Earth to whomever it might reach beyond the solar system, much of the information was expressed pictographically. However, there is no sign that universality is in itself a normative consideration for Plato—though it is a standard *sign* of what is 'by nature' rather than 'by convention'.

31. One reason it cannot be attained can already be seen from Socrates' deafening silence, noted earlier, about syntax—that is, about the rules which govern the combination of linguistic simples into complexes, and which determine how the structure of such complex expressions informs their meaning. For Cratylese to be genuinely mimetic, these rules too would have to be natural, and mimic the rules operative in the natures of things. But how could they be? Visual representations seem to be capable of a natural syntax, in at least some cases: that is, there is no need to set down a conventional rule to differentiate a picture of Brutus killing Caesar from a picture of Caesar killing Brutus—but nothing comparable seems to be available in the vocal case. Admittedly, the mimetic account does at least leave respectful room for syntactic rules. For Socrates harps on the compositional, many-tiered character of language, and particularly on the syllable as linguistic unit. This suggests that he means to allow that, for example, *dia-ion* and *on-idia* will have different meanings, even though the aggregate mimetic content of their letters is the same. This does not solve the problem, though, that in a strictly mimetic language the syntax itself would have to be mimetic as well; and, though the problem is never explicitly noted by Plato, how it could be so is difficult even to conceive.

that the more plausible semantic understanding of correctness—and, for that matter, the norm of structural correctness—could be accepted in detachment from it.

This loyalty suggests that the mimetic account plays not just a useful but a *necessary* role in relation to the naturalist programme. Now I suggested at the start that we can see the mimetic account as an attempt to solve the puzzle of where semantic content, and specifically the 'deep content' revealed in the etymologies, comes from. Mimesis does so in a way which makes that content appropriately prior to the superficial meanings of words; it also shows content to be in part natural, and normatively subject to the entirely natural relation of 'resemblance'; thus it provides the kind of basis for the critical scrutiny of names which naturalism seeks. But we might still doubt that these advantages are sufficient to warrant the standing of the account, given the difficulties it has now turned out to raise. This makes it natural to wonder what other function the mimetic account might serve. Or to put it in terms of prescription rather than explanation, why might Plato be convinced, despite everything, that mimetic resemblance— that ridiculous-seeming principle—must be demanded of a naturally correct name?

I am not at all sure I have the correct answer to this question, which seems to me considerably more important and difficult than has generally been recognized. But I will explore the question here by way of an answer which, though plausible, I have come to think is probably false. This is that, to put it simply, for Plato *the natural excludes the arbitrary*. The mimetic account is necessary to eliminate any potential arbitrariness from his naturally correct language—in Charles Kahn's phrase, quoted earlier, it ensures that this language is 'as natural as possible'. And since the extra 'naturalness' contributed by representational correctness is ultimately deemed useless, this maximization of the natural must be valued by Plato, and the arbitrary deplored, simply for its own sake. On this reading Cratylese expresses a rationalism carried to the point of aesthetic obsession.

This understanding has a certain plausibility given the rationalizing spirit of Plato's naturalism and the project of the strict sense; however, it seems to me that it fails to explain what we actually find in the text. For, as I have noted, it is striking that Socrates has nothing at all to say about the 'syntactic' structures required to order letters into a correct syllable, syllables into a correct name, and so on. So far as the reader can tell, in this crucial systemic respect the character of a naturally correct language will be subject to whatever arbitrary decisions the namegiver choses to make. This lacuna is in fact a major deficiency in Socrates' account; but it at least indicates that the account is not motivated simply by a compulsion to eliminate all forms of the arbitrary.

There remains a subtler way in which we might see the mimetic account as driven by a demand to exclude the arbitrary from language. One way to get a sense of this demand is through comparison with Leibniz's struggles against it. In a 'Dialogue' of 1677, Leibniz concerns himself with (among other puzzles

about truth and language) the very Platonic question of how the truth and falsity of propositions can be independent of our will when the basic terms they use seem to be conventional.[32] His particular concern is with the threat of a Hobbesian conventionalism about truth. For Hobbes (here only delicately alluded to as 'certain learned men') of course claims that "the first truths were arbitrarily made by those that first of all imposed names upon things, or received them from the imposition of others. For it is true (for example) that *man is a living creature*, but it is for this reason, that it pleased men to impose both those names on the same thing."[33] And though Hobbes' philosophy of language is a complex and difficult (and not obviously coherent) business, it seems reasonable to say that claims like this involve a certain degree of conventionalism about not only names but the truth of statements. The threat can be put crudely as follows: if it is a matter of convention that '2' means 2, and that '4' means 4, how can it not be a matter of mere convention (a convention open to revision by that Hobbesian nomothete, Big Brother) that '2+2=4' is true?

Now Leibniz' answer to this worry is to insist that the characters we use to name or represent things can be safely left a matter of indifference or arbitrariness (though he avows an intriguingly Platonic preference for 'like' names) so long as their *relations* are correctly determined. For "truths don't consist in what is arbitrary in the characters, but in what is invariant in them, namely, in the relation they have to things."[34] This last phrase is a bit inexact, for what Leibniz evidently has in mind is the whole network of relations that characters have with each other in tracking the relations of the objects named. His central idea is that "there is some relation or order among the characters which is also found among things".[35] Even if the words *lux* and *ferens* have only an arbitrary relation to light and bearing respectively, the compound *lucifer* has a relation to these two words which corresponds to the relation between the thing signified by it and to the things signified by *lux* and *ferens*—a relation equally well expressed by the formation *phosphoros* in Greek. Such correspondences of relations are all that really matter for truth: and they are not a matter of arbitrary imposition. In effect, the solution—a reasonably obvious one in the mathematical cases on which Leibniz focusses—is that '2+2=4' is *already part of what it means* to say that '2' means 2: the character is a matter of indifference, but not so its relations to the other characters with which combines in larger expressions.

What Leibniz' strikingly modern solution brings out is that, in effect, meaning and truth alike are only superficially compositional. For what the character '2'

32. In Ariew and Garber, pp. 268–272. On Leibniz on language, see Donald Rutherford, 'Philosophy and Language in Leibniz', in *The Cambridge Companion to Leibniz*, ed. N.Jolley (Cambridge, 1995). Rutherford is especially good on two particularly Platonic strands of Leibniz' thought: his project for a universal characteristic and his lingering sympathy for the idea of mimetic characters.

means is a function of the relations into which it enters with the other characters of our language; and whether some expression involving '2' is true depends on whether the relations among characters it asserts matches the relations of their nominata. But since Plato's treatment of meaning and truth alike is resolutely compositional, this solution of the conventionalist worry would seem not to be open to him. Such a conventionalist understanding of truth is surely part of what the *Cratylus* is somehow intended to block; and if the Leibnizian insight into the grounding of meaning and truth in relations is not available to him, how could he do so without the mimetic account? His only option, we might think, is to block the entry of the arbitrary into language *at any level at all*, so as to ensure that no Hobbesian convention can decide on 'first truths' at will.

If I am right that Plato investigates the correctness of names in part to provide a theoretical grounding for the condemnation of political abuses of language (cf. Introduction), then this reading has considerable plausibility. However, it is not really clear that to exclude conventionalism about truth Plato needs to resort to this exclusion of the arbitrary. It is worth noting again the decisiveness with which Socrates repudiates Cratylus' appeal to the consistency of names, as a proof of correctness, at 436c–d. A consistent system of names can be consistently false; and though Socrates illustrates this claim with reference to geometrical diagrams which incorporate a fundamental error, it does not seem to depend particularly on the mimetic account. Rather, he just takes it as obvious that, given that all names have descriptive content of some kind, this content—regardless of how it is constituted—can *always* be measured for correctness against the referent of the name. The tool model and the etymologies both made it clear that the relation of 'truth of which semantic content should bear to object is one which convention is insufficient to guarantee. What the mimetic account does is to ground this relation of 'truth of in the more basic natural relation of resemblance, corresponding to its grounding of semantic in mimetic content. But this is a further level of explanation rather than a new kind of anti-conventionalist move.

So it seems to me that the status of the mimetic account as the foundational level of naturalism is ultimately secured simply by the explanatory considerations I pointed to in III. 1. The earlier phases of naturalism made it plain that the correctness of a name is a matter of a non-conventional relation between name and nominatum; but both the exact nature of that relation ('truth of) and the feature of the name which figured in it (semantic content, be it

33. *Elements of Philosophy*, Part 1.3.8 *[=De Corpore]* (*The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. William Molesworth (London, 1839), vol. 1, p. 36). (Cf. *De Cive* XVII: since truth depends on definitions, it depends "on the compacts and consents of men" (ibid., vol. 2, pp. 295–6).) For discussion, cf. Tom Sorell, *Hobbes* (London, 1986), pp. 45–50.

34. 'Dialogue', p. 272.

35. ibid., p. 271.

superficial or deep) remained somewhat enigmatic. Socrates' task is to *show* what the natural correctness of names consists in; and though the mimetic account may be, as Socrates suggests, ridiculous, it is at any rate *a theory of the general type required* for this project to be complete. It is an account, that is, which gives an intelligible portrait of how meaning and truth might ultimately be grounded in natural relations between name and object, relations in light of which our naming practices may be critically assessed. Its superficial absurdity only shows, accurately, how very difficult we can expect it to be for philosophers to develop a wholly adequate account of the natural relations in question.

IV
Natural Correctness Re-examined

Socrates' account of mimetic correctness is immediately followed by a 're-examination' of naturalism, through a complex sequence of arguments which seem both to depend on the naturalistic account and to undermine it. This issues in a vague and unsatisfying conclusion: Socrates claims to prefer that, insofar as possible, names be like *[homoia]* their objects (435c2–3), but adds that "we must also bring to bear this vulgar thing, convention, on the correctness of names" (435c5–6).

This is, of course, not the end of the *Cratylus*. Two important sets of arguments are still to come, both *contra* Cratylus: one to the effect that names (and the names of Greek in particular) are an inadequate guide to the natures of things (435d–9b), the other demonstrating that not all things are in flux (439b–40e). But in the absence of any explicit reversion to the central question of correctness, these arguments can at most serve to reinforce and elaborate the conclusion I have just cited. The problem—and it is one of the most consistently vexatious problems in the Platonic corpus— is to determine what this conclusion amounts to.

The answer must depend on the interpretation of the arguments of the re-examination. These fall loosely into two phases. First, in the *Dianomê* and the 'Two Cratyluses' arguments (see sections IV.1 and IV.3 respectively), Socrates works through some of the implications of the mimetic account just given (as well as introducing, *en passant*, a further important corollary to the account: see IV.2). These arguments show, against Cratylus, first that names *can* be applied incorrectly, and second, that they *cannot* be perfect representations of what they name. However, neither point tells directly against naturalism, which is just a theory of what names essentially are (tools, disclosures, and images) and what makes them correct (appropriateness, truth and likeness). If anything, these arguments seem to confirm naturalism, and the mimetic account in particular, for they show that it can explain how incorrect naming and false statement are possible— a desideratum on any account of naming, as Socrates made clear earlier (cf. I.2). I will postpone consideration of this result to Chapter VII, where I consider it in conjunction with the treatment of false statement in the *Sophist*.

In the latter phase of the re-examination, Socrates presses this ascription of powers to convention much further. In the *Sklêrotês* argument he points out that we can understand each other when we use names which are deeply defective, even incoherent, as images of what they name (433b–435b, discussed in IV.4); and convention seems to be what makes this possible. The Numbers argument adds the suggestion that convention is *necessary* to produce names for some objects, viz., the numbers (435b–c; IV.5). Socrates' mushy conclusion immediately follows: the question it leaves us with is just how far this progressive last-minute rehabilitation of convention is meant to extend, and how far it undermines naturalism. In the final section of this chapter I will suggest that Plato's conclusions in the *Cratylus* amount to a new *pessimism* not tidily equivalent either to conventionalism or to naturalism (IV.6); in Chapter VI, I will try to clarify and support this reading by tracing its possible influence in some later Platonic works.

IV.1
THE *DIANOMÊ* ARGUMENT

Socrates' point of departure is the analogy between namegiving and other expert crafts. The namegiver is, as before, identified with the lawgiver (428e–9a, cf. 388dff.); and Socrates suggests that, like the products of other crafts, names and laws must vary in quality. Though this seems simply to reiterate the rejection of conventionalism (cf. 388e–90e), Cratylus balks. He insists that, like all laws, all names are correct, if they are names at all (429b–e). What seems to be an incorrect name, such as 'Hermogenes', is really the correct name of some other object.

This odd and extreme position is clearly motivated by Cratylus' defining intellectual commitment to a pseudo-craft of esoteric name study (cf. II.1). Such a craft depends upon the supposition that actual languages are at least for the most part correct, so that they can provide insight into the natures of things. This view is reinforced by the assimilation of the namegiver to the lawgiver, the totem of ancient, quasi-divine wisdom: hence Cratylus' denial that some lawgivers do better work than others (429b1–6). Apparently incorrect names must either be the result of tampering or decay, a marginal phenomenon due to mortal error, as Cratylus will suggest of *sklêrotês* at 434d; or, as he prefers in the present context, they are misunderstood, and really name the objects for which they are correct (429c3–5). Either way, it follows that the true and original significance of the names we use may await recovery by the teacher of esoteric name-lore.

So 'Hermogenes' always names whomever it is true of, whatever the man normally called by it might happen to think. We might suppose that this just implies a sort of esoterism about reference, so that 'I am speaking with Hermogenes' would claim falsely that I am speaking with the mysterious person of whom the name is true. Strikingly, though, Cratylus also wants to deny the possibility of incorrect name use, and with it false statement (for the equivalence

of 'false' and 'incorrect' here see 430d); for this, as the sophistic paradox claims, would consist in that impossible activity, 'saying what is not'.[1] On being pressed by Socrates with the example of someone abroad who addresses Cratylus as 'Hermogenes, visitor from Athens, son of Smicrion' (429e4–5), Cratylus insists that the attempted speech-act here is 'in vain', and, like a mere noise, neither true nor false.[2] If a speaker attempts to use a name incorrectly, no speech-act will be achieved at all.

The claim that it is impossible to use a name falsely does not obviously follow from the claim that all names have been correctly given, and we may wonder why Cratylus feels compelled to insist on it. One answer would be that he has some independent attachment to the sophistic denial of false statement; but there is no evidence of such sophistic tendencies elsewhere in Plato's portrayal of him. It seems more likely that he has been led to his position by following to its logical conclusion the naturalistic impulse to deny man-made convention any normative standing *at all*. To grant that on some particular occasion of name use, an incorrect name can still manage to name, even incorrectly, seems to attribute to fallible humans the power to defy divine ordinances.

And, given the framework of the naturalistic theory, Cratylus' position—or, more to the point, Plato's dallying with that position—is not so gratuitous as it might seem. For naturalism has all along taken it as a given not only that all names have descriptive content, but that to name is to describe: and in that case there is a serious puzzle about what *misdescription* could be.[3] For me to misdescribe something seems to require that I at least succeed in picking it out—as the *Sklêrotês* argument will put it, that I disclose to you what I have in mind. And naturalism seems to entail, not implausibly, that a description can in itself only succeed in doing so to the extent that it is correct.

Yet it does intuitively seem that we can name while naming quite incorrectly (or falsely). And we might expect Plato to see the potential here for a neat division between the two functions a name might serve, that of picking out or referring and that of describing correctly, and to treat this as equivalent to the distinction between naming and naming correctly and that between weak and strong disclosures (cf. III.3). But he never does so; and as we will see with the *Sklêrotês* argument, there are slippery slopes here as well. For if a conventional

1. So presumably when I say, 'I am speaking with Hermogenes', 'I' refers to me—or to whatever 'I' correctly refers to—, 'am speaking with' to the act of speaking, and 'Hermogenes' to the mystery man it is correct for. In that case it seems I have not successfully uttered a unified *logos* at all, let alone a false one: cf. VII.3 for the eventual blocking of this possibility in the *Sophist*.

2. Of course, Cratylus' rejection of this speech-act depends on the assumption that 'Hermogenes' does not name *Cratylus* correctly either, which on his own theory must be because he himself is no more a genius of *logoi* than Hermogenes is. That this implication passes him right by shows just how hard to maintain this esoterism about reference is.

3. I owe this point to John Cooper.

association of name and object is sufficient for your use of the name to disclose to me that object as the one you have in mind, is this not in at least some cases also sufficient for that naming to be 'correct'? The argument will have to be considered more thoroughly later on; for now, the point is just that Cratylus' denial of the possibility of incorrect naming can be seen as a preemptive strike, albeit a doomed one, against a real threat to the naturalist theory—viz., the possibility that, if the standard of a name's correctness is its 'disclosing' of its object the line between correct and incorrect naming cannot be cleanly drawn, and that this opens the door for convention to contribute to correctness after all.

Socrates eventually stymies Cratylus with a very simple argument by analogy. Both pictures and names can be distributed or assigned *[dianemesthai]* to objects, and this assignment may or may not be in conformity with their content. Cratylus tries again to maintain that names, unlike pictures, cannot be 'assigned' incorrectly; but as Socrates points out, I can go up to a man and say: 'This is your picture *[gramma]*' while showing him either an image *[eikôn]* of himself or one of a woman. Likewise I can go up to that man, say, 'This is your name' and ostend to his hearing the name 'man', or, incorrectly, 'woman' (430e3–1a5). It seems impossible to deny that such a speech act may succeed in performing an 'assignment', and that such assignments can be either correct or incorrect. In the case of names, we say also that they are true or false, and this is how speaking truly or falsely comes to pass (431b1–3). In short, there are ways of getting a name to attach to an object other than by its descriptive content, and therefore relations it can have to that content other than accurate disclosure. In fact, as Socrates notes, in certain contexts a name can be made to name an object by use of an ostentive gesture such as pointing, which can enable a speaker to name virtually by fiat.

There is some ambiguity to these acts of 'assignment'. The example, with the common noun 'woman' being applied to an individual, suggests an instance of predication; but Socrates explicitly draws the conclusion that one 'craftsman' of names may be better than another (431d–e). For name-giving is a matter of creating and assigning a name to a referent: and if correctness consists in resemblance, it evidently makes no difference whether the assignment is taking place for a first time or subsequently. So, *contra* Hermogenes, an act of namegiving cannot establish what will count as correctness for subsequent acts of name use; and it is unclear what value, if any, there is in using a name in a way which accords with its original assignment.

The upshot of the argument would appear to be a clear division of labour: what a name names is determined by an act of assignment, but what makes it correct is its mimetic content. This suggests that even a *completely* inaccurate name or picture can be assigned to an object at the will of the namer. However, what Socrates actually concludes is merely that, just as a painter may add too much or too little of some colour to a picture (431c5–8), so too in the case of names: if the namer leaves out 'a little' *[smikra]* or adds something, the result will still be a name, just not a fine one (431d2–7). This seems to hint that even incorrect names

must meet some minimal threshold of resemblance to their objects to name them at all. This suggestion is repeated with greater definiteness after the Two Cratyluses argument, and I will consider it there; for now, the minimal point in play is just that naming which is to some degree incorrect is possible.

Even this minimal point has an upshot of considerable significance: *contra* Cratylus, we cannot *trust* names for information about the things they are used to name. This has already been an implicit theme, I suggested earlier, of the etymological section (cf. II.5); and its upshot, that names should not be used as a means of discovery, will be the central thesis of the series of arguments which follow the re-examination (cf. V.1). Here in the re-examination, the grounds for this claim are gradually being brought to light.

IV.2
ON THE CORRECTNESS OF IMAGES

Cratylus resists the conclusion of the *Dianomê* argument with what is perhaps his cleverest point of the dialogue:

> But you see, Socrates, when we assign these letters—the alpha and the beta and each of the letters of the alphabet—to names by the craft of spelling *[hê grammatikê technê]*, whenever we leave out or add or change something, it isn't[4] that we've written the name but incorrectly; rather, we haven't written it at all—it becomes something different immediately when one of these things happens. (431e9–2a4)

This does not directly engage with the *Dianomê* argument: instead, it offers an independent argument for Cratylus' denial of the possibility of incorrect naming. His point is evidently that a misspelling, even by a single letter, is analogous to a (putatively) incorrect act of name use—perhaps more than analogous, given the mimetic analysis of the 'elements' of names. And such a misspelling is (at least potentially) indiscernible from a correct spelling of some other word: for example, when I mean to write 'cat' and write 'cot' instead. Accordingly we need never interpret any name—and this evidently applies to name-types as much as to particular tokens in instances of name use—as incorrect.

The question of how names should be individuated and identified has lurked in the background of the dialogue so far. In the initial stage of the naturalistic account, Socrates emphasized that many phonetically quite different names, such as Hector and Astyanax, nonetheless share the same 'form' or 'power'; and such

4. Accepting, with both OCT's (but not Méridier), Bekker's supplement of an *ou* at 432a1. Otherwise it is only as Cratylus develops his objection that he comes to the view that the name has not been written at all; but this must have been the point of the objection all along.

names were said to *be* the same, despite seeming different to the inexpert eye (394a5–c9). This suggested that names are to be individuated by their content; and once content comes to be understood in terms of mimetic *dunameis*, it seems reasonable that the individuation of names by mimetic content should be as fine-grained as those *dunameis* allow. In that case, names which differ even by one letter should be considered different names, since, after all, they are correctly adapted to distinguish objects which differ in just that way. So no name is ever merely a defective variant of some correct name. Every name is a perfect name for precisely the object which its mimetic content discloses. Socrates' rejoinder is curiously general and allusive:

> This isn't a good way for us to consider it, Cratylus…Perhaps what you say happens with things which necessarily exist or don't exist depending on some number *[ek tinos arithmou]*, just as also in the case of the number ten itself (or whatever other number you please)—when you take away or add something, it immediately becomes a different one. But surely this is not the correctness of a qualified thing *[tou poiou tinos]* and images in general,[5] but rather the opposite; nor may it render everything the way it is in what it depicts, if it is going to be an image. (432a5–b4)

Here Socrates gestures towards a rival conception of how names are individuated, a conception which *he* takes to flow from the mimetic account. In doing so he brings out, *en passant*, an important consequence of that account: the parallel between names, *qua* images, and the ordinary sensible particular things around us, which of course Plato describes elsewhere as images of the Forms.[6] Socrates here distinguishes two classes of things: on the one hand, numbers and things which depend on number for their existence; on the other, *to poion ti* and images (I will consider the translation of *to poion ti* in a moment). The things which depend on numbers must be the same as those so described in the *Theaetetus* [*hosa ex arithmou esti*, 204d1], where they include both arithmetical sums and such objects as an acre, a mile, and an army. The passage is not as clear as it might be (and the examples, particularly of an army, are not entirely happy); but the idea seems to be that there is a class of things whose existence and identity are determined by their meeting some exact quantitative measure. An acre fails to be an acre if some land is subtracted; a mile of road is not a mile if it is extended; better, a trio becomes a quartet if another player is added. And these can be contrasted with qualitative natures which, for Plato, sensible particulars

5. The mss give this clause a double negative *[me ouk]* and no verb. Burnet and the new OCT, following Heindorf, add the subjunctive *êi* while Méridier, following Stallbaum, converts the article of *orthotês* to the same effect. Either gives the sense translated above.

6. For sensible particulars as images or likenesses, see *Phaedo* 100a, *Rep.* 500e–1b, *Parm.* 132d. *Tim.* 29b. 48e–52c. *Seventh Letter* 342bff.

possess only roughly and to a degree.[7] The acre may be more or less beautiful, imperfectly green, both hard and soft, and so on: the degree to which it possesses such qualitative characteristics may be imperfect or indeterminate and may well fluctuate.

In effect, Cratylus here attempts to include names in this class of objects whose identities are a matter of exactitude: Socrates brushes him back. Names belong rather to the class of '*to poion ti* and images in general': and this phrase *to poion ti* is a loaded term, put to important use in the *Seventh Letter* where, as here, it is used to deprecate names and language (see VI.1). Just what the phrase means here is worth some investigation. *Poion* (when accented as here on the final syllable) is the indefinite adjective correlated with the interrogative *poios* (accentuated on the penult: 'of what sort?') and the relative *hoios* ('such'), as well as the related demonstrative *toioutos* ('of this sort'). This family of terms has a characteristic use in Plato as variables or place-holders for qualitative predicates—sometimes, though not always, with a connotation of the derivative or imperfect, as at *Timaeus* 49dff. (but cf. *Cratylus* 439d5ff.). Here in the *Cratylus*, the *poion* seems to function as an indefinite version of the demonstrative *toiouton* of the *Timaeus*, with *ti* as qualifier: 'some somehow-qualified-thing', with *to* serving to scare-quote the phrase.[8] So *to poion ti* is, roughly, 'the qualified thing': i.e., any sensible particular bearer of qualitative predicates. This reading of the phrase is confirmed in the *Theaetetus*, where *poion ti* occurs with the same sense in conjunction with the neologism *poiotês*, 'quality'. According to the 'Heraclitean' theory of perception, as Socrates expounds it, one 'motion', a passive one, perceives a quality while the other 'motion', an active one, acquires that quality concurrently: "on the one hand the passive becomes percipient *[aisthêtikon]* but not a perception *[aisthêsis]*, and the active becomes a qualified thing *[poion ti]* but not a quality *[poiotês]*" (182a6–8). Thus a *poion ti* is something qualified in a particular way; the article *to* converts this description into a metaphysical role.

So in the *Cratylus* passage, the phrase *to poion ti* seems to pick out ordinary sensible particulars as the bearers of qualities. In the added phrase "and images in general *[sumpasa]*", the *sumpasa* suggests a broader category, presumably also including names, works of art and so on. Socrates' point, then, is that names as such belong to a broad class of qualified things which are not subject to the same exact conditions of existence and identity as numbers and what is numerically determined. A number becomes a different number if anything at all

7. Another contrast between what is numerically or quantitatively defined and what is not is drawn in the *Hippias Major* (300b–2d). If together we are two, it is because severally we are each one, not two: in effect, the point is that compositionality does not hold for numerical or quantitative predicates.

8. To see that it is *ti* which here modifies *poion*, cf. *Republic* 438d–9a, *Sophist* 262e9 as well as *Theaet.* 182a8–b7 quoted here.

is added or subtracted, but qualified sensible particulars and images, like the qualities they possess, are *vague*: they can fluctuate quite a bit in their properties without becoming something different.

This contrast recalls Aristotle's point in the *Categories* that, unlike quality, quantity and number are not subject to 'more and less' (6a19ff.); and neither, he says, is substance (3b33ff.). "For one person is not more a person than another, as one pale thing is said to be more or less pale than another, and a beautiful thing more or less beautiful".[9] This latter point is suggestive in relation to Plato's contrast in the *Cratylus*: for Plato, of course, the real substances are the Forms, and it seems right that they should be subject to the same exact or fine-grained standards of identity as numbers—after all, on some accounts the Forms *are* numbers. At any rate, I would suggest that Socrates' rather broad and allusive phrasing here should push us to reflect that, in this contrast of numbers with quality-bearers and images, Forms must belong in the former camp. This is admittedly speculative: but the *Sklêrotês* and Number arguments (cf. IV. 4 and IV. 5 respectively) will confirm that, as this tiny excursus suggests, a concern with the metaphysics of naturalism is an ongoing feature of the re-examination.

In any case, the immediate point at stake is that what falls into the class of 'images in general' can be a better or worse instantiation of its properties: so a name can be inaccurate—a poor instantiation of the qualities of its nominatum—without thereby becoming different, and in particular without becoming a correct name for something else. After all, *contra* Cratylus' remark about misspelling, not all phonetic differences between two name-tokens enable them to pass for tokens of different types. Likewise the fact that a name is defective for what it names does not show that it does, or could, name anything else correctly.

IV.3
THE TWO CRATYLUSES

To bolster his claim that the correctness of an image cannot consist in perfect resemblance, and thus defend the *Dianomê* argument against Cratylus' denial of the possibility of incorrect naming, Socrates now shifts to defence of the stronger claim that names are *necessarily* defective. His argument consists in a simple thought-experiment:

> Would there be two things of this sort *[toiade]*—say, Cratylus and an image of Cratylus—if some god not only made an image of your colour and shape, as painters do, but also made all the things inside just like *[toiauta hoiaper]*[10] yours; and rendered the same softness and warmth, and put

9. 3b39–4a2. Cf. also the distinction in the *Philebus* between 'unlimited' things like the hotter and colder, which always contain 'the more and less', and what admits of definite quantity (24aff.).

> motion and soul and intelligence, just like those present in you, in them, and, in short, everything that you have; and set up another such *[toiauta hetera]* next to you? Would there then be Cratylus and an image of Cratylus in such a case; or would there be two Cratyluses? (432b5–c5)

Cratylus opts for 'two Cratyluses': the upshot is taken to be that, *contra* his own position, perfect resemblance is not only not required of an image or a name, but is not possible. Socrates goes on to note that if a name *were* perfect, nobody would be able to tell which of it and its nominatum was which (432d); but the more basic difficulty is simply that such a name would lose its standing as an image and, thereby, as a name.

The argument has the air of a straightforward appeal to linguistic intuition—specifically, to the rather debatable intuition that a perfect duplicate cannot count as an image. That a more substantial argument lurks beneath, however, is indicated by the attribution of the hypothetical perfect image to a divine craftsman. In fact, this points to precisely what the argument would otherwise seem illegitimately to ignore: that decisions about whether to deem something 'an *x*' or 'an image of *x*' are likely to depend not only on its qualitative features but on its causal origins. For the first Cratylus is also the right kind of object to have been made by a god (cf. *Sophist* 265c–6b, *Timaeus* 41bff.); Plato is thus urging the plausible (pre-Xerox) point that perfection in an 'image' could only result from a causal origin equivalent to that of the original. Moreover, if we spell out that origin more fully, it seems clear that the divine craftsman would have to work using not Cratylus himself as his model, but a blueprint for Cratyluses: earlier, the skilled maker of a shuttle was said to look not to any shuttle previously made but to the form or nature of shuttle (389a–b). And this equivalence of causal origin reasonably entails equivalent ontological standing: whatever is made by the same agent, using the same procedures, as a shuttle (or Cratylus) will be the *same kind of thing* as a shuttle (or Cratylus). The negative point also follows: if Cratylus is not the model for the 'perfect image', but just a coordinate instance of the same kind, then it is not correctly described as an image of him.

So if Cratylus insists on perfect mimetic correctness as a condition of naming, nothing will ever be named at all; and no language can attain perfect natural correctness.[11] But it is left unclear here just what kind of imperfection necessarily characterizes names: in particular, whether the argument is meant to exclude the kind of correct names envisaged earlier, in which every letter is appropriately matched to an element of reality (III.3). As I noted at the time, it is

10. The vocabulary here of *hoios* et al. indicates the continuity of this argument with the preceding invocation of *to poion ti:* this will also be the standard vocabulary for the final discussion of natural correctness, which is boiled down to the claim that a correct name is *homoion,* 'like'—i.e., is *hoios,* 'such as' its nominatum is.

far from obvious how high a standard of representational correctness such names should be asked to meet; we might take the Two Cratyluses argument to show merely that no letter can perfectly resemble even the property which it expresses most appropriately. This could easily be explained as a function of the *material* of names: names are made out of sound, which is not what the essences of objects are made of and which may not be a very good medium for representing them. An alternative possibility is suggested by Socrates' presentation of the divine craftsman's task, which emphasizes that he would have to create softness and warmth and soul and intelligence in addition to what painters can represent: perhaps these represent elements of reality which phonemes cannot express *at all*.[12] But that would not explain why the names for other kinds of object could not be perfect. I suspect that the ambiguity of the argument shows that Plato actually does not see any significant difference between these two ways of being defective, or between either and the more crass defectiveness which consists in the inclusion of wrong, inappropriate letters. For if even a *maximally* appropriate name is defective to some degree, and so cannot be trusted as a source of information about its object, then the differences between various kinds of defectiveness may be practically insignificant.

There is also a more basic ambiguity regarding the import of the argument. Socrates' thought-experiment can be read as a *reductio* of the mimetic principle of correctness, as so far understood: by taking the limiting case we can see that correctness cannot simply track resemblance.[13] Socrates does not in fact draw any such radical conclusion; and it does not follow necessarily.[14] Still, even on a weaker reading the argument provides a new basis for questioning whether and why mimetic correctness is worth striving for. After all, to take a pertinent Platonic analogue, if no one so wise and self-controlled as the philosopher-king is available to rule, with the appropriate dictatorial powers, then dictatorship by the next best person is by no means the next best thing (*Laws* 874e–5d: cf. IV.6).

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11. Another way to put the point would be that, in Platonic terms, a perfect language would presumably be what the gods speak (cf. IV.6), and would thus, like the Form of knowledge at *Parmenides* 134a–e, belong to their realm rather than ours. Moreover, these perfect names would presumably have to count as Forms themselves: thus the gods, like the Laputans in *Gulliver's Travels*, would communicate using the things themselves. Perhaps it would be better to say that the gods do not need language, if this is assumed to be a system of representations. Incidentally, the impossibility of perfection is entailed, I suspect, not just by the mimetic understanding of names (cf. III.3) but already by the more basic principle that a name is a tool (388aff.). For what could a *perfect* tool be, if not one which guarantees success? And how could a tool guarantee success unless it in effect used itself, so as to obviate human skill? But a tool which needs no user is not really a tool in any normal sense at all.

12. There is of course a puzzle as to how phonemes are supposed to imitate non-sensible properties in the first place, and Guthrie even claims that on the mimetic account names "can only imitate sensible attributes"; but Plato seems to duck this problem (*History*, vol. 5, p. 25 n. 1).

The finding that images are necessarily defective opens the door to a spectrum of positions which would dispute the value of the degree of mimetic correctness actually attainable.

Up to this point, the re-examination as a whole has been dedicated to working out the implications of the mimetic account. The *Dianomê* argument showed that the mimetic content of a name does not determine what it can be made to name; Socrates' remark about *to poion ti* explained why perfection should not be demanded of that content; the Two Cratyluses argument has now shown that such perfection cannot in fact be obtained. The text gives the impression of an organic progression from one point to the next; and it seems natural to take this progression as an *explanatory* one. Names can be pushed around, and used to name what they name incorrectly, *because* their identity cannot be fixed by what they would name perfectly; and this is because they cannot be perfect at all. Perfect names presumably *would* have fixed and exact identities of their own not subject to our will: a duplicate of Cratylus could not be 'assigned' to name Hermogenes, or a woman, any more than the original Cratylus can. As Hermogenes granted much earlier, 'things' have stable natures of their own, independent of our fiat, and to act on them successfully we must adapt our thoughts and intentions to those natures (386aff.). Names are different because their natures are vague and defective; thus we can make them name what we please, albeit not well. I will later suggest that this is also what allows them to refer to (similarly vague and defective) sensible particulars, as well as to the Forms (IV.5).

So far, the re-examination has on the face of it worked to the credit of the mimetic account and naturalism as a whole, by showing that it can, in effect, detach reference from descriptive success and thus account for the possibility and intelligibility of falsehood (cf. VII.1). And it has done nothing to challenge the constitutive theses of the naturalistic account: that a name, understood as a tool, a semantic disclosure and an image, is correct to the extent that it is appropriate, true of and mimetically 'like' its object.

However, the Two Cratyluses argument is complicated by Socrates' stipulation that an incorrect name names so long as the *tupos* or 'outline' of the object in question is preserved. Socrates extends the point to the possibility of incorrect names being included in a *logos,* and incorrect *logoi* in larger *logoi*: provided that the 'outline' is retained, "the thing is no less named and described"

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13. This seems to be Patterson's view: the argument refutes "Cratylus' similarity criterion of correctness for images", and points the moral that an image is not a (would-be) duplicate or copy (Richard Patterson, *Image and Reality in Plato's Metaphysics* (Indianapolis, 1985), p. 39).

14. That is, it does not follow from the fact that what is perfectly *f* cannot be a *g* that f-ness is not the appropriate norm by which to judge g's. Someone who is transported one hundred yards in 0 seconds—someone who is *perfectly* quick—cannot be sprinting; but a sprinter sprints well by sprinting quickly.

(432e5–6). (The earlier example of incorrect greeting may have expressed the same suggestion: if we suppose, as seems plausible, that Cratylus is an Athenian and a son of Smicrion, then the greeting, with its inclusion of his correct city and patronym, likewise suggests that a certain threshold of 'resemblance' needs to be preserved for even incorrect naming to take place.)

Now this *tupos*- condition is presented as a reiteration of the requirement made near the start of the naturalistic account, that the nature of the thing named be 'in charge' (393d3–4) and that the name disclose its *dunamis* (39 3e). The requirement was left rather mysterious; but it is natural to see the continuity between that earlier passage and this one as consisting in the notion that even a sloppy name or *logos* may function so long as I can *recognize* it—as one does a shape or outline—as being the name or *logos* of the object it is.[15] So *bêta* names so long as I recognize that it names *b;* an inaccurate description of Hermogenes is still a description of him, and not of someone else, so long as it is not so inaccurate that I cannot recognize it as being about him (cf. VII.3 for the presence of this thought in the *Sophist*). (The point seems intuitively fair: one can very likely succeed in addressing or referring to 'Theaetetus' using 'Theodorus', but perhaps not by using, say, the chemical formula for tungsten.) And the 'I' here can of course only be the person who hears the name or description: as with the *Dianomê* argument, we seem to have an implicit appeal to the understanding of the hearer as the criterion for naming.

This appeal to the hearer's situation is not anything radically new: one of the functions of a name all along was to enable us to inform each other (388bff.). But it suggests that the standard for functioning as a name at all may be rather lower than it seemed in the naturalistic account, which focussed rather on the potentially very demanding requirement that a name disclose a 'nature'. The *tupos*- condition also suggests that it will be hard to draw a clean distinction between naming and naming correctly. For it is not so easy to sort 'outlines' into accurate and inaccurate, correct and incorrect; and even a very inaccurate outline may, depending on the context, be recognized for what it is and thus be used to disclose information about that object.

This point can also be brought out in terms of the more general functionalist framework with which naturalism began. Something earns the name 'name' by

15. In the *Theaetetus,* the term *tupos* is used for the mental record of some object with which I am acquainted, and which I match up with subsequent perceptions of that object in reidentifying it (192a4, 194b5). This record is also referred to as an image *[eidôlon],* and it is claimed, in language vaguely reminiscent of *Crat*. 432e6–7, that we know and remember the object as long as the image of it remains present *[heôs enê]* (191e8–9). So in both cases a *tupos* is a likeness derived from some object in the world, telling us *hoios esti,* and making possible acts of identification, albeit of different kinds. A *logos* of Cratylus counts as such if his *tupos* is present in it: that is, I suppose, if it 'resembles' Cratylus sufficiently for me to pick him out as the object it is about. And if I can recognize Cratylus *himself* as Cratylus, it is because I can match my perception of him with the *tupos* of Cratylus in my soul.

serving a certain function, and 'correct name' by serving that function well. But there is bound to be a slippery slope between correct names and names *simpliciter*, since the same factors will make a name both. After all, a *completely* inappropriate shuttle would have to be an object which fails to weave at all; but by failing to function as a shuttle it would also fail really to *be* one. Similarly there are not two different ways or coordinate species of weaving, 'weaving correctly' and 'weaving incorrectly': a certain degree of correctness is implied when we describe an action as 'weaving' in the first place, and the criteria for 'weaving correctly' will just be tighter versions of the criteria for weaving at all. [16]

These 'slippery slope' threats to the naturalistic account might be blocked if we could, as Cratylus has been attempting to do, deny that an inaccurate name names at all—if, in effect, we could set the threshold for the functioning of a name at the very top. But Socrates' point about *to poion ti* has brought out that this would be a category mistake; and the Two Cratyluses argument has shown that it sets a standard *no* name can meet. So the slope towards a lowered threshold for the correctness of a name cannot be blocked off; and, as we will soon see, convention lies in wait at the bottom.

IV.4
THE *SKLÊROTÊS* ARGUMENT

Socrates now takes care to re-commit Cratylus to the view that a name is a disclosure *[dêlôma]* in syllables and letters of a thing; it 'says' the thing well *[kalôs]* if it has all the appropriate, i.e., 'like' letters, and poorly if it has only a few (433a–d). And he rather theatrically invites Cratylus to choose between this view and conventionalism, according to which "the names are compacts and disclose *[dêloun]* the things to those who have made the compact knowing *[proeidosi]* them [the things] already" (433e3–5). He adds that according to the latter view "it makes no difference whether one accepts the present compact or the opposite, to call what is now 'small', large', and what is large', 'small'" (433e6–8).

Socrates' invitation is on the face of it quite unnecessary, since Cratylus is already as committed as can be to naturalism. Besides serving as a bit of a drum-roll for a crucial argument, it includes several important reminders of what is at stake. One is the association of conventionalism with name-reversal, as in its initial exposition (385a)—a strong hint that the conventionalism mooted here is no different from that refuted earlier. At the same time, a new and intriguing stipulation is slipped in: names which function by convention depend on a prior knowledge of the things named. Mimetically correct names, through their

16. For such slippage between 'correct x' and 'really an *x* at all', cf. *Statesman* 293c5–6, e1–5: only a correct *politeia* is genuinely a *politeia* at all.

likeness to the objects named, promised to be a 'self-teaching' means for people to learn about those objects, so that name study could be, as Cratylus claims, a method of learning and even discovery (435d–6a: cf. III.3). But a name which functions thanks to convention can only do so given a prior acquaintance with the thing it names, and a habitual association of name and thing; the name can thus be used as a *reminder* of the thing, but not as a source of information about it.

The *Sklêrotês* argument now proceeds from the observation that actual names may name similarly despite a failure to be 'like' in their mimetic content. Socrates points out that the name *sklêrotês*, 'hardness', and its counterpart in Eretrian dialect, *sklêrotêr*, disclose the same thing, despite the difference between the s and the *rh* (434c–d). The mimetic values of the letter *rh* are motion and hardness (which if anything suggests, teasingly, that the Eretrian word is twice as good as the Athenian one); Cratylus responds that the *s* is at any rate similar to it in representing motion. (Of course, on Cratylus' earlier view about the individuation of names, one of the two names would have to be really the name of something else; so evidently Cratylus has at last given this up.) Socrates lets this pass and points out that *l*, included in both versions, resembles the *opposite* of what *sklêrotês* indicates—that is, it is like softness.[17] In response, Cratylus suggests that the l may be a mistake—the kind of flaw accruing to actual languages over time which Socrates exposed frequently in the etymologies. Given his earlier readiness to discount stray letters in precisely this fashion, we might have expected Socrates to endorse this move, but he does not. Instead he presses Cratylus:

> Now when we speak, do we learn *[manthanomen]* nothing from each other —when someone says, *'sklêron'*—and do you not now know what I mean?
>
> —I do, but because of habit *[to ethos]*, my friend. And when you say 'habit' do you think it means something different from convention *[sunthêkê]*? Or do you mean by 'habit' something other than that, when I utter this, I have that [i.e., hardness] in mind *[dianooumai]*, and you understand *[gignôskeis]* that I have it in mind? Isn't that what you mean?
>
> —Yes.

17. For the mimetic powers earlier attributed to these letters, see 426c–e, 427a and 427b. The recapitulation here is only loosely related to the account Socrates actually gave. Thus *rhô* was explicitly associated only with motion at 426c–e, though a number of the words cited in connection with it arguably characterize the motions of hard objects (e.g., *krouein*, 'knock', *thrauein*, 'crush', *thruptein*, break'). *Sigma* was associated with words which have a breathy quality and represent agitation (e.g., *seiesthai*, *seismos*, 427a); that *l* relates to softness was not claimed at 427b, but its gliding quality was said to contribute to such names as *olisthanein* ('glide'), *leion* ('smooth'), *liparon* ('sleek'), and *kollôdes* ('viscous'), which perhaps suggest it.

> So then if you understand when I make an utterance, a disclosure *[dêlôma]* comes into existence for you from me?
>
> —Yes.
>
> And it comes from what is unlike *[tou anomoiou]* what I have in mind when I make the utterance, if *l* is as you say unlike hardness. And if this is so, doesn't it have to be the case that you have made a compact with yourself *[autos sautôi sunethou]*, and the correctness of the name becomes a matter of convention *[sunthêkê]* for you, since both the like and the unlike letters disclose, which happens by habit and convention? And in particular if compact is not habit, it still wouldn't be right to say that likeness is the means of disclosure, but rather habit. For it is this, it seems, which discloses both by like and by unlike. (434e1–5b3)

For all its flaws, *sklêrotês* does disclose, a fact which is attributed by Cratylus to habit. And this in turn seems to be tantamount to convention: as Hermogenes described his view earlier, a name for an object operates "by the convention *[nomos]* and habit *[ethos]* of those who are accustomed so to call it." (384d6–7).

The *Sklêrotês* argument is commonly read as an overdue blast of empiricism and common sense. Just look at a simple case of successful communication, apparently chosen at random: what you will see is a name functioning by convention, not mimesis. As Schofield puts it, "the natural progress of the argument from preoccupation with the naturalist interpretation of *sklêrotês* to confrontation with the actual realities of the use of words in communication makes the naturalist theory look as irrelevant to a satisfactory account of language as, of course, it is".[18] The upshot is presumably the quick destruction of the mimetic account of names, and as much of naturalism as a whole as we take to be bound up with it.

But this is a very odd sort of argument to attribute to Plato. It can hardly be news to him that the naturalistic account has departed fairly radically from commonsensical, conservative empiricism about our use of language. That is a symptom of its status as a project of the strict sense; and in the context of that project, the names of Greek cannot simply be *assumed* to be correct, as Socrates seems to do with *sklêrotês* here. After all, as Socrates' moment of being 'carried away' showed (cf. III.2), the investigation of Greek in the etymological and mimetic accounts presumed its correctness only for heuristic purposes. We might compare Plato's treatment in the *Republic* of the objection that, on the empirical evidence, philosophers are not qualified to rule cities: his obvious and reasonable response is to make it clear that he means to redefine 'philosopher' in such a way that this 'confrontation with the actual realities'—realities relating to the *usual* denotation of the term—is beside the point. Here in the *Cratylus*, the initial

18. Malcolm Schofield, 'The Dénouement of the *Cratylus*' ['Dénouement'], in *Language and Logos*, ed. M.Schofield and M.Nussbaum (Cambridge, 1982), p. 70.

rejection of conventionalism and conservatism, the esoteric deep content disclosed by the etymologies, and the explanation of names as images have all pressed the point that our actual languages may not function in the way that—or, therefore, as well as—we usually tend to assume. It seems that the unperturbed response of the *Republic* should be equally appropriate here.

What is really going on in the *Sklêrotês* argument is, I believe, much more complicated than an empirical bolt from the blue, and I am not certain that I have fully worked out all its implications. I will begin with three observations which it seems to me any reading should take into account.

First, the name *sklêrotês* is not simply a random example of a name whose mimetic content is inaccurate. It is something more specialized: an *incoherent* or self-contradictory name, thanks to the opposed values of the *rh* and the *l*. We could never adequately tell from inspection of the name itself which of the two opposites it names; so if it functions *at all*, this cannot be due to mimesis. This is why Cratylus' counter-suggestion that the name would be better if the *l* were replaced by a *rh* is irrelevant. He is missing the point that *any* disclosure the name currently accomplishes—and he admits it does something—cannot be by virtue of its mimetic content.

It will shortly emerge that the vocabulary of Greek as a whole is in the same sorry state as *sklêrotês*: for some names present the natures of things as being in flux and others as being at rest (cf. V.1). Given that names are in a state of civil war, it would be arbitrary to trust in one side rather than the other—the question of which to prefer can hardly be decided by counting names like votes (437d). Thus the *Sklêrotês* argument seems to be a rehearsal for the arguments soon to be made about Greek as a whole: here as later, the point is that an incoherent guide cannot be trusted.

The argument also points beyond itself in another way. For this worry about contradictory information is a familiar Platonic theme, as a point not about names but about the particular objects around us—which, as was hinted at in the earlier allusion to *to poion ti*, also have the status of 'images' in their relation to the forms. That this metaphysical resonance is intended by Plato is strongly suggested by his choice of the name *sklêrotês;* for Plato twice uses the hardness of sensible particulars as an example of this very point. In *Republic* VII, hardness is one of a pair of opposite properties whose confusion calls for inquiry (523bff.). The finger-ness of two fingers is unequivocal and is unconfusingly represented by the senses. But the qualitative properties of those fingers are different: sight and touch cannot sense adequately their thickness and thinness, or softness and hardness; the other senses likewise only disclose [*dêlousin*, 523e7] such things defectively. For they all report to the soul that the same thing is both hard and soft, leaving the soul puzzled as to what the sense could mean [*ti pote sêmainei*, 524e7]. Hardness is thus a paradigm case of how little information the senses and sensible particulars can in themselves give us—a procedure of reporting which Plato describes, strikingly, in the semantic vocabulary of 'meaning' and 'disclosing'. Like the name *sklêrotês*, any sensible

particular from which we might try to learn about hardness offers up contradictory information.

In an important passage of the *Theaetetus*, hardness and softness are again a paradigmatic pair of sensible qualities. Referring to the activity of the soul in using the senses, Socrates says that it will "perceive the hardness *[sklêrotês]* of what's hard *[to sklêron]* by means of touch", and softness likewise (186b2–4). "But their being [or nature, *ousia*], and what they both are [or, 'and the fact that they both are', *kai hoti eston*], and their oppositeness to each other, and the being, in its turn, of this oppositeness, are things which the mind itself tries to decide for us, by reviewing them and comparing them with one another" (186b6–9).[19]

Like the name *sklêrotês*, the sensible particular (or more precisely our perception of it) cannot tell us what the nature of hardness is. The *Republic* claims that I will be stimulated by the incoherence of perception to reflect on the nature of hardness and softness; here, the claim is that perception could not begin to tell me about those natures at all. And in the *Timaeus*, for whatever it is worth, we learn that the hardness of an object consists in its not yielding to flesh, as a function of its having quadrangular bases (62b–c)—which indeed seems to be something that neither sensation nor the word *sklêrotês* itself can disclose.[20] In sum, the *Sklêrotês* argument is by no means a commonsensical bolt from the blue; there is considerably more to it than meets the eye, and part of that something more is an engagement with Platonic metaphysics.[21]

Second, neither is the argument a direct appeal to empiricism or intuition: it operates with the conception of names as disclosures *[dêlômata]* articulated earlier in the naturalistic account (422d–3b). Here, the claim that names are *dêlômata* is explicitly reaffirmed in the run-up to the argument (433b–d); and Socrates' crucial claim that when we use a name we 'learn *[manthanomen]* something from each other' (434e1) recalls the initial naturalistic definition of the function of a name as teaching or information [*didaskein*, 388b10ff.].[22] So the argument does not (or not just) aim to show that the word meets some commonsensical standard of adequacy for a name; it makes the more precise point that it fulfils the functions of a name *as set out by naturalism itself*.

This does not mean, of course, that the argument cannot be an argument for conventionalism. Its upshot might be that naturalism must be rejected as self-refuting: for it entails its contradictory, conventionalism. Alternatively, the point

19. 186b2–9, McDowelll's translation, with my supplements to indicate some alternatives. The passage is controversial: see McDowell, *Theaetetus, ad loc.*, and David Bostock, *Plato's Theaetetus [Theaetetus]* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 137–42; cf. also Cooper, *Theaetetus*, pp. 119ff., 137–40 for an interpretation sharply distinguishing this from the *Republic* passage.

20. Some confirmation of the relevance of these texts can perhaps be seen in the fact, generally overlooked by commentators, that the subject of the argument shifts as Socrates presents it. Throughout 434c–d, the example under discussion is *sklêrotês/sklêrotêr*. 'hardness': but when Socrates moves in for the kill at 434e1–2

could be that naturalism took a wrong turning with the mimetic account, and that convention should be substituted for mimesis as the factor which makes a name an effective tool. In that case conventionalism would be rehabilitated by being relocated, as it were, within naturalism: names are tools for naming, but all phonetic matter is equally good for making those tools, provided they then receive the imprimatur of convention. This would entail that Hermogenes was right all along that all our naming conventions are correct, and that name use is correct whenever it is in accordance with those conventions—i.e., as we could now say more fully, whenever it succeeds as a disclosure by drawing on our naming conventions and prior knowledge of the things named. He was wrong only in failing to see that this is compatible with the (functionalist) truth in naturalism.[23]

The former reading would leave us with the puzzle of understanding where the earlier refutation of conventionalism went wrong. And the latter would leave the puzzle of why Plato never *does* seem to treat the mimetic account as a 'wrong turning' or an optional part of naturalism (cf. III.3). (Either would also make it puzzling that his conclusion here is not that names are *not* imitations, but only that convention enables their 'unlike' letters to function as do the 'like' ones (435a9, b3).) And in fact, I do not think that either of these readings of the argument is right; but it will take some work to bring out the alternative. The present point is just that the *Sklêrotês* argument, like the earlier phases of Socrates' re-examination, is located *within* the framework of the naturalistic account.

My third point is that there is a fundamental puzzle about the import of the argument: for on the understanding of 'disclosure' used so far, *sklêrotês* does not actually seem to function very well. To see this, we need to look a bit more closely at the stages by which the argument proceeds. In the crucial closing phase of the argument, Socrates reasons as follows:

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he substitutes the adjective ('when someone says, *'sklêron'*'). There is good reason for this if we bear in mind that, as in the *Theaetetus* parallel, we do not learn anything about *hardness* from its name; we can only learn, from the use of *sklêros*, that this or that is hard.

21. A further metaphysical resonance is with the account of being reminded at *Phaedo* 73b–7a (cf. IV.6). Here as in the *Sklêrotês* argument, the key prerequisites for being reminded are a prior acquaintance with the object to be grasped [*proeidenai* at *Phaedo* 74e3, 74e9 as at *Cratylus* 433e4] and, in the case of reminders which are 'dissimilar', a habitual association of reminder and object [*eiôthe*, *Phaedo* 73d6; *to ethos*, *Cratylus* 434e4]. This prior acquaintance and association make it possible for our grasp of an object to be triggered by what is dissimilar as well as by what is similar [*kai ta homoia kai ta anomoia*, *Cratylus* 435a9, b3, cf. *Phaedo* 74a3, 74c11, d1]. This is just as well, since all reminders of the Forms, like all names relative to their objects, fall short in similarity.

22. For the conceptual connection between *manthanein* and *didaskein*, see e.g., *Crat.* 427e3–4, e6, and note the substitution of *manthanein* at 436a6 for *didaskalia* at 435e7.

1. If we both associate hardness with *'sklêros'*, then when I utter *'sklêros'* you will understand what I have in mind.
2. When you understand what I have in mind by an utterance, that utterance is a disclosure from me to you.
3. A name which is a disclosure is correct: so if we both associate hardness with *'sklêros'*, it names hardness correctly for us.

Admittedly, (3) is not explicit: but Socrates' inference that "the correctness of the name becomes a matter of convention for you" (435a8) shows it to be implied.

In context, Socrates' reasoning here is perplexing. Up to this point in the argument of the *Cratylus*, for a name to 'disclose' its object has meant for it to teach or inform us about the nature of that object by means of its descriptive content (be it semantic or phonetic). The name must give the object's nature or essence [*dunamis, phusis, ousia*, cf. 393d–e, 396a5, 423e], or tell us 'what sort of thing it is' [*hoion esti*, cf. 428e1–2], as does a name like 'Astyanax' or HOH. In short, it must be what I earlier termed a strong disclosure (III.3).

Now clearly *sklêrotês* is not, and is not here claimed to be, a disclosure of this powerful sort. When I use the term *sklêrotês*, you do not learn anything from the name itself about what sort of thing hardness is: the name just picks out a property familiar to both of us. Likewise if I use the adjectival form to say, 'The chair is hard', whatever information you gain about the chair comes from the concept of hardness you already possess and associate with the name. This is why in his run-up to the *Sklêrotês* argument Socrates has had to specify that names which depend on convention work for those who 'know the things in advance' (433e4).

So when Socrates describes *sklêrotês* as a 'disclosure', from which you 'learn' something, he seems to have moved silently from one implicit understanding of disclosure to another—from the strong to the weak. This has been viewed as a switch from one theory of names to its rival: names are no longer expected to describe, but only to refer.[24] But there is no denial here that names offer descriptive or semantic content; and I suggested earlier that we should rather see strong and weak disclosures as representing a spectrum of names all of which do essentially the same thing (cf. III.3). What happens in the *Sklêrotês* argument, then, is not a change of theories but a lowering of standards: even a name as uninformative as *sklêrotês* now gets to count as functional.

This lowering of standards is still a move which needs to be accounted for; and the basis for it surely lies in the preceding arguments. The *Dianomê*

23. And perhaps also in his legitimation of private naming conventions, since a name is now said to function successfully when there is 'a disclosure from me to you'. On the other hand, the phrasing of the argument does not suggest any retreat from that legitimation: cf. n. 34 below.

argument has shown that names may name even when mismatched with their objects: therefore we cannot assume that *any* name names correctly. The Two Cratyluses argument has shown that even if they *are* rightly matched, names will not be perfectly accurate depictions of their objects: therefore *no* name can be entirely reliable. Together, these two results form a pincer attack on any attempt to discover or teach the natures of things through scrutiny of the content of their names. The ongoing parallels with sensible particulars which I have noted in the re-examination reinforce this result: for it is likewise a mistake to attempt to discover the natures of things by attentiveness to sensible particulars, e.g., by defining 'the beautiful', say, in terms of an exemplary instance, or 'the large' in terms of a particular size. Rather, as indicated in the *Republic* and *Theaetetus* passages I have cited, we must turn to reason to resolve the puzzles generated by the incoherent 'disclosures' around us.

This moral is not made explicit until it is explored at length in the arguments against name study beginning at 435d (cf. V.1). But it has been fully established in advance of the *Sklêrotês* argument, and there is no reason Socrates should not put it to work here. In that case the acceptance now granted to weak disclosures such as *sklêrotês* is easy to understand: if we should only *use* names as weak disclosures to begin with, then any names which are adequate for such use will do. Whether the word 'correct' should be applied to them is perhaps moot, though (this is perhaps why (3) above was left implicit), given that the mimetic conception of names as images, which dictates that correctness consists in resemblance, has not been withdrawn—and given that this has been shown to limit how 'correct' a name can be anyway (cf. IV.6).

An important corollary to this is brought out in another striking feature of the argument: *sklêrotês* is, strictly speaking, not said to disclose an object in the world at all (let alone its nature), but what the speaker 'has in mind' [*dianooumai*, 434e7–8, 435a5].[25] This is not so novel as it might seem: in effect it makes more explicit the second half of the function initially ascribed to names, that we use them to 'teach' or 'inform' each other. Still, little attention was given earlier to the relation this implied between speaker and hearer, and the thoughts of each. The naturalistic account proceeded as if understanding were simply guaranteed by a correct division of being—as if nothing had to be said about the thoughts of speaker and hearer, which were simply parasitic on the functioning of the name in relation to its object. However, it was in effect by invoking the reaction of the hearer that the *Dianomê* argument showed that an incorrect name could still name: Socrates' examples (and his subsequent insistence that an incorrect name must preserve a *tupos*) invited us to put ourselves in the position

24. See Bestor's discussion of the dialogue as a whole as supporting the 'Proxy Theory' as against the 'Description Theory' of names ('Plato's Semantics'). Cf. also Levinson: "when the claims of convention are vindicated…description as the essential function of a word is replaced by reference" (R.B.Levinson, 'Language and the *Cratylus*: Four Questions', *Review of Metaphysics* 11 (1957), pp. 28–41 at p. 37).

of witnesses to various 'assignments'. In fact, it is tempting to see the naturalistic account as working through one side of the functional definition of names, as 'dividers of being', while the re-examination turns to the other aspect, of 'informing', and with it to the relation of namer to hearer.

In that case, this turn to the speaker-hearer relation is not a new ingredient in Socrates' account of correctness, but one which has become more visible as the higher ambitions of naturalism, elaborated in terms of the function of 'dividing being', have subsided. And what the *Sklêrotês* argument as a whole principally reveals is just the ebbing of Plato's hopes for naturally correct names as disclosures of natures. We might think that at this point the obvious option for Plato is an account distinguishing sharply between naming and naming correctly. That is: I succeed in naming whenever there is a disclosure from me to you of what I have in mind—the speaker-hearer criterion, now claimed to be met by convention—but do so correctly only when that disclosure reveals the nature of the nominatum by having accurate content. Yet Plato fails almost ostentatiously to hold apart naming and naming correctly in this way. This could be seen, of course, as simply a failure on his part: but I have tried to make it plausible that this stance stems rather from the internal logic of naturalism itself. As a tool, any name must name (i.e., disclose its object) to some degree; and as an image, no name can disclose it perfectly. So the difference between correct and incorrect names can only be a matter of degree; and convention can enable a name to do all that any name should be trusted to.

IV.5
THE NAMES OF THE NUMBERS

Socrates' final argument is no more than a rhetorical question tacked on to the *Sklêrotês* argument; but it represents a new and independent point, and Socrates presents it as giving the *coup de grace* to any unmodified naturalism.

> After all, my friend, if you're willing to turn to the case of numbers, where do you think you'll get names that are like each one of the numbers to apply to them, if you don't allow your agreement *[homologia]* and convention *[sunthêkê]* to have some authority over the correctness of names? (435b6–c2)

This argumentlet has received comparatively little attention; but how it is supposed to work is far from obvious.[26] There are at least two puzzles. First, it is not clear how we should parse the alternatives Socrates is here presenting.

25. This points towards the enormously influential account of Aristotle in *De Interpretatione*, according to which words are conventional signifiers of our experiences or thoughts, which do have a resemblance to things (16a1ff.).

Socrates might just be defying Cratylus to make mimetic correctness work in the case of the numbers, and proposing conventionalism as the alternative; on the other hand, the 'if clause can equally well be read as suggesting that if we *do* accept convention as having 'some authority' we *can* obtain enough 'like' names. In that case the role of convention is as a crutch, a necessary supplement to mimesis. We can indeed give the numbers names which are like them; but they will not be *sufficiently* like to disclose their objects unless we also invoke the help of convention.

This latter reading, though perhaps the less obvious, seems to me to be the more likely. To see why, we need to turn to the other puzzle raised by the passage. Why does Socrates think that the numbers are particularly bad candidates for naturalistic naming? Of course the names of numbers standardly *do* involve convention; but they also involve more 'natural' correctness than most, at least at the level of compounds—*hendeka* is *hen* plus *deka*, and so forth—and it is possible to imagine reformed numerical systems which would carry this to an extreme. No doubt a *completely* naturalistic system of names for numbers, one wholly independent of convention, is an impossibility.[27] But the reasons for this apply more forcefully and obviously to the names for almost anything else.

One way to explain Socrates' selection of the numbers as a case in point would be to gloss his argument as a problem about naming *all* of them.[28] But the phrase Socrates actually uses is 'for each one of the numbers' *[heni hekastôi tôn arithmôn]*: this suggests that difficulty is not about their sheer quantity, but rather about how to pick out individually every single one of them. And the difficulty with this is clear from the earlier invocation of the numbers to which Socrates here alludes. For there it was pointed out that the individuation of numbers is fine-grained and exact: if *x* and *y* are numbers, and *y* differs from *x* even in the slightest possible degree, then *x* and *y* are different numbers. But given the Two Cratyluses argument, any name of *x* will differ from *x* to some degree, which means to at least as great a degree as *y* does; so, depending on the nature of those differences, we may have no way of telling, on the basis of its content alone, whether the name names *x* or *y* (or some other number differing from *x* in a similar way) more correctly. No matter how well designed, the name of a number—like, say, a photograph of a particular snowflake—will not have

26. For discussion, see Bestor, 'Plato's Semantics', pp. 324–5; Schofield, 'Dénouement', pp. 78–9; Baxter, *Critique*, pp. 168–9; and now Reeve, pp. xxxix-xl.

27. Schofield notes, "we can disclose the differences between 1, 2 and 3 through their names only by some purely conventional device such as giving the name of 1 one syllable, that of 2 two syllables, that of 3 three; and it will have to be agreed by convention that they are designed to signify *numbers* in the first place" ('Dénouement', p. 79). But this system would hardly be *purely* conventional: what it shows is rather that even a system with a strongly mimetic component must be grounded in some background convention for its mimetic content to be recognized as such (cf. III.3).

content which is sufficiently precise to disclose its object to the exclusion of all others. And the upshot is that convention is in at least some cases a *necessary* adjunct to mimesis (435c1–2).

This point becomes more powerful if we understand it as telling us about the relation of names to Forms. Like Socrates' earlier remark about *to poion* ti, the Numbers argument contrasts what is numerical, and thus subject to exact and fine-grained standards of identity, with what is merely a vague and defective image. It is hard not to see this as a version of Plato's standard contrast between Forms and sensible particulars, which merely have as imperfect qualities the natures which the Forms are. If this more general metaphysical theme is in view, then the point of the Numbers argument is that mimesis alone is insufficient to hook a name on to a specific Form. And this suggests in turn that it is because of the *vagueness* of names as images that they are able to name sensible particulars as well as Forms. A perfect name would unequivocally be the name of the Form to which it perfectly corresponded, just as a perfect duplicate of Cratylus would unambiguously be a Cratylus and not someone else. But a vague and defective name cannot be definitively assigned to a single referent on the basis of its content; and so it can serve equally well as an image of those other vague and defective entities, sensible particulars.

To sum up, the Numbers argument is complementary to the *Sklêrotês* argument: taken together, these arguments reveal two different ways in which convention may step in where mimesis falters. First, a mimetically incoherent name can be made to function as a weak disclosure thanks to convention alone; second, reliance on convention is ineliminable in at least some cases—and perhaps, as I have suggested, in the central case of the names of Forms. This means that even the best of all possible languages could not be trusted across the board, as a general source of insight into the natures of things; and so it would not be different in kind, and could not be used differently, from the very defective languages we already possess. This is what validates Socrates' acceptance of weak disclosures as functional: we cannot even aspire to a language in which the use of names as strong disclosures would be warranted.

Strikingly, none of this excludes or even challenges the naturalistic analysis of names as tools, disclosures and, in particular, images; in fact, the arguments are constructed with an eye to the metaphysical implications of that conception. The tendency of the re-examination is to reveal the paradoxical result that, *given* naturalism, convention is an ineliminable feature of language, and one which can serve our legitimate purposes as effectively as mimesis. What remains to be seen is what we are to conclude from that paradox.

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28. As do e.g., Crombie, *Examination*, p. 484, Kahn, 'Language', p. 158.

IV.6
CONCLUSIONS ABOUT CORRECTNESS

The Numbers argument was already preceded by a conclusion of sorts: "surely both convention *[sunthêkê]* and habit *[ethos]* must contribute *[sumballestbai]* something to disclosing what we have in mind when we speak" (435b5–6). And it is immediately followed by what looks like a fuller statement of that conclusion:

> I myself also prefer[29] that, insofar as possible, names be like *[homoia]* their objects. But lest this attractive force *[holkê]* of likeness be truly, as Hermogenes said, 'sticky', we must also bring to bear *[proschrêsthai]* this vulgar thing, convention, on the correctness of names. For surely it would be best *[kallist']* to speak, at least insofar as possible, using what is entirely or for the most part 'like', and this is what is appropriate *[prosêkousin]*, and the opposite is worst. (435c2–d1)

This passage stands as the last word of the *Cratylus* dealing explicitly with the central question of correctness: as such it is, to say the least, unsatisfying. The first sentence seems to restate the mimetic principle, but in a somewhat qualified and hesitant way; the second seems to deny it (or to deny that it can be the whole story) by also invoking convention;[30] the third sentence flops back in the direction of naturalism, but in an unnervingly vague and wistful tone. Two opposing diagnoses suggest themselves. One is that, when all is said and done, Socrates is *obstinate* and clings to naturalism, though he now recognizes that mimesis must be supplemented by convention. Alternatively, we might think that his naturalistic sentiments here should be read as *nostalgic*: as "nothing more than an expression of vain regret".[31] In that case his conclusion is a reluctant—and misleadingly understated—embrace of conventionalism.

The appeal of the 'nostalgic' reading is easy to see.[32] After all, the arguments for giving convention some role in determining correctness are, as Plato clearly recognizes, very strong indeed. And once convention is given some standing there is no obvious place to stop short of full-blown conventionalism, and perhaps no defensible way of doing so. This conventionalist reading of Plato's conclusion has the added attraction, from some points of view, of bringing him into line with modern (and Aristotelian) common sense, disembarrassed of mimetic letters and the wild flights of the etymologies.

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29. On the *areskei moi* formulation (also found notably at 433c9), see Schofield, 'Dénouement', p. 71 n. 4.

30. There is not much clarification to be gained from Socrates' comment that the force of resemblance is *glischra*—a word with a number of unhelpful meanings (including 'clinging', 'hungry', 'shabby') which I here translate 'sticky' (see LSJ *s.v.*).

But several serious difficulties immediately confront this conventionalist reading. One is already apparent: what Socrates actually says in his conclusion is far from being an assertion of conventionalism, and includes some kind words for natural correctness. There is also the question of just how much of the naturalist project we should now suppose to be implicitly discarded. Aristotle, a hard-line conventionalist himself, evidently assumes that even the intuitively plausible initial phases of the naturalist project, such as the tool model, are excluded by conventionalism: "All language has meaning, not as a tool but, as has been said, by convention *[kata sunthêkên]*".[33] At a minimum, one would think that the conventionalist position must disavow the mimetic account of names as resembling their objects: but what the *Sklêrotês* argument actually concluded was that convention can make 'both like and unlike' names refer, and the language of resemblance is also present in Socrates' conclusion. A still worse problem for the conventionalist reading is of course that conventionalism was not just set aside but *refuted* in the first part of the dialogue; and there is no sign later that this earlier argument has been retracted, or that convention and its ism have now come to mean something different.[34] To suppose that conventionalism is now proven correct after all involves supposing that the earlier argument against it was wrong, and that Plato is aware of this but cannot be bothered to note or diagnose the error, or to give us any clues as to how it is to be corrected.

Socrates alludes here to Hermogenes' characterization of a particularly forced etymology as only working *glischrôs* (414b–c). I take the point to be that mimetic disclosures keep 'getting stuck', i.e., failing to function unaided: as we have seen in the particular cases of *sklêrotês* and the names of the numbers, names may need the added force of convention to disclose their objects. For the translation and gloss offered here, cf. Williams, 'Cratylus' Theory', p. 93.

31. Schofield, 'Dénouement', p. 67.

32. For a full and careful exposition of this reading see Schofield, 'Dénouement; cf. also Levin, 'What's in a Name?', pp. 107–8; Bestor, 'Plato's Semantics'; and Robinson, 'Criticism'. The other line of interpretation which finds wide perennial support is that—in any one of a number of very different ways—nature and convention collaborate or combine in constituting correctness. So for instance Silverman undertakes to argue that "every name has both a natural and a conventional réferent, that a given name refers to or signifies *by nature* a Form, and that that same name refers to or signifies *by convention* all those entities that 'participate' in that Form" ('Plato's *Cratylus*', p. 27: note also his taxonomy of interpretations on p. 26 n. 2). For other kinds of 'combination' view, cf.Kretzmann, 'Correctness', p. 138; Proclus, *in Crat.* 51; Crombie, *Examination*, p. 475; Kahn, 'Language', p. 153: as Kahn sums up the basic stance, "Plato extracts a kernel of truth from each of the two competing theses, both of which are quite false as originally stated" (p. 153). I think that it would be misleading to take the 'pessimistic' reading I offer here as belonging to this interpretive family: it claims not that there is a clean division of labour between nature and convention, once these are correctly understood, but rather that a fully developed naturalism (the position to which Plato, in his way, remains committed) shows the very idea of a 'correctness of names' to be deeply problematic.

So I take it that the conventionalist reading has no option but to deny the unity of the dialogue and read the *Cratylus* as an incoherent parade of disconnected arguments, some good and some bad, from which we are left to choose our favourites.[35] But this approach—the interpreter as figure-skating judge—seems to me profoundly unsuited to any work as carefully designed as a Platonic dialogue; and it is, in practice, a license for hopelessly subjective and anachronistic interpretation.

In the remainder of this chapter I will try to outline an alternative reading of Socrates' conclusions about correctness, one which does more justice to his evident ambivalence and to the unity of the dialogue as a whole. I will refer to the position I ascribe to Plato here as *pessimism* about names. This is reducible neither to naturalism nor to conventionalism; though it could arguably be seen as a combination of the two, I would prefer to insist that it be seen in its dialectical context (to recall a concept I used in discussing Hermogenes, in I.3) as a sort of 'post-naturalism', fully intelligible only as an anomalous result to Plato's project of the strict sense (cf. Introduction). In the rest of this section I will attempt to explain what I take this position to consist in.

What I am terming pessimism is an ambivalent and paradoxical position. At its heart is the account given by the naturalistic theory of names as tools, disclosures and images. The paradox arises from this last and most precise phase of the theory, and more specifically from the ineliminable defectiveness of images brought out in the re-examination. For this opens up a radical gap between, on the one hand, the nature of names as images and the norm of 'likeness' applicable to them, and, on the other hand, their appropriate use—viz., as weak disclosures which rely on convention in at least a supplementary role.[36]

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33. *De Interp.* 16b33–17a2.

34. What perhaps leads commentators to underestimate this problem, and suppose that Hermogenes' conventionalism is not what Socrates later has in mind, is Hermogenes' earlier legitimation of private naming conventions. I have argued in I.2 that this is not nearly so outlandish a position as is often claimed, and that in any case the refutation of conventionalism does not depend on it; nor is there any sign that private conventions are to be excluded later on. On the contrary: Socrates claims 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 striking because we would naturally think that what is essential is some convention obtaining *between* the two of us; and I have noted that the re-examination arguments do pay more heed than the rest of the dialogue to the speaker-hearer relation. Nonetheless, even here Plato evidently assumes that the individual case is somehow primary.

35. Robinson is boldly explicit in opting for this mode of interpretion: "I conclude that the appearance of Plato's distributing himself equally on both sides of the question is deceptive. In favour of the nature-theory he produces only arguments that are weak or bad; against it he produces unchallengeable arguments; and he probably felt this himself" ('Criticism', p. 125). Bestor offers a still more extreme version of this approach, including a convenient score sheet ('Plato's Semantics', pp. 323–7).

The gap is not the expression of a failure on Plato's part to decide between naturalism and conventionalism, but is rather inherent to the former: it follows from the fact that, as images, names cannot *fully* meet the norm which is nonetheless applicable to them.

A possible objection to this reading is that this mimetic principle now appears not only paradoxical, but downright incompatible with the functionalist perspective which provided the first phase of the naturalistic account. Since the re-examination shows that convention can enable any name to function, albeit in a very limited way, we might think that if Plato *also* retains any allegiance to mimetic likeness as a principle of correctness, the dialogue in fact ends with two conflicting criteria for the correctness of names. This seems an undesirable interpretive result; so surely it is better to hold that the *Sklêrotês* argument shows the functional criterion winning out.

To see why this is not quite right, we need to look again at the implications of the acceptance of 'weak disclosures' in the *Sklêrotês* argument. For as I have said (IV.4), this amounts to an acceptance that a name functions as a *reminder;* and to be a reminder is not properly a function at all. According to Plato's most explicit treatment of functionalism, in *Republic* Book I, the function *[ergon]* of a thing is the task one performs either exclusively or most successfully with it (352e2–3a11); and his discussion of being reminded in the *Phaedo* points out that *any* old thing can be used to remind us of what we have habitually come to associate with it (73b–7a, cf. n. 22 above). Simmias' horse may remind me of him as effectively as a portrait of Simmias does: in either case it is my own prior acquaintance with and memory of him (together with, in the case of his horse,

36. The verb *proschrêsthai,* used in Socrates' conclusion for the deployment of convention, is used on a couple of other important occasions in Plato; these uses seem to me to confirm the supplementary status here allocated to convention. In the Delphic oracle story in the *Apology,* Socrates says that in asserting that no one was wiser than he, the god was just "making use of *[proskechrêsthai]* my name, taking me as an example *[paradeigma],* as if he were to say, 'That one of you is wisest, mortals, who like Socrates has realized that in truth he is worth nothing in regard to wisdom'" (23a8–b4). To 'make use of Socrates here is evidently to use him in an *ad hoc* way which does not alter the general nature of the point being made, but makes it clear when it might not have been otherwise. The second occurrence is in the *Republic* discussion of the 'Divided Line'. Here Socrates says that the reasoning *[dianoia]* of the geometers has reference to immaterial mathematical objects; but they "also make use of *[proschrôntai]* visible forms and make arguments about them, not thinking about *[dianooumenoi]* them but about those things which they are like" (510d5–7). Here again, what is 'made use of is a supplement or a crutch, and more specifically one which assists in making clear what it is one is thinking about (note the use of *dianoeisthai,* as in the *Sklêrotês* argument). Now what geometers do cannot be collapsed either into *doxa,* as if their reliance on sensible particulars were the whole story, or into *noêsis,* as if it were negligible. This suggests that in the *Cratylus* too, Socrates' conclusion should probably be read as a *tertium quid*. A view of naming which invokes convention as a supplement is not conventionalism, but neither is it a negligible addendum which leaves naturalism where it was.

my habitual association of him and the reminder) which does all the work. To put it in other terms, it is the *nature* of a thing that makes it suitable for one function rather than another: the fact that his horse, a picture of his friend Cebes and the name 'Simmias' can all remind us of Simmias, while their natures are entirely different, confirms that to do so is not a genuine function.

So to say that conventional names are reminders is not to ascribe to them a function but precisely to say that they do not really have one; and the upshot is that names do not have the sort of normative standards which derive from having a function. Each thing which has a function also has an excellence *[aretê]*, and that excellence is what enables it to perform its function well *[kalôs]* (*Republic* 353b2–d2); but since any old thing can serve as a reminder, no such excellence exists.

This means that there is no rival norm here to conflict with the distinctive standard applicable to names as images, viz., likeness to the original. But this is itself, as we have seen, a standard of a peculiar sort, for it is one which images by definition cannot fully meet, and one which the legitimate use of names gives us no practical reason to aspire to. So, in terms of the 'project of the strict sense' I set out in the Introduction, the result of the *Cratylus* would seem to be that a name is, strictly speaking, correct to the extent that it resembles the object it names; but that, in this case, there is no point to be served by speaking strictly.

This pessimistic result leaves a number of negative traces in the latter part of the *Cratylus*. For instance, early in the dialogue, the idea of a 'Form of name' figures prominently in conjunction with the tool model (389b–90e); later in the dialogue this concept simply disappears. The reason is surely that once names are found to be images it is clear that they are not the sorts of things which *have* a Form—it would be otiose at best, since the paradigmatic and explanatory role to be served by a Form must on the mimetic conception of names be taken by the object named. The same goes for the idea of a divine language, which is likewise prominent early in the account of natural correctness and evanescent later (391d–e, 400dff: cf. n. 14). And this is no coincidence: the divine language is the pop and traditional version of the Form of name, as the ideal which particular human instantiations approach.

A third renunciation or elision generated by Plato's pessimistic result is of an expertise or *technê* primarily related to names. As I have emphasized in I.5 and III.1, the prospects for expert crafts of namegiving and name study are a driving theme of the *Cratylus*. But the knowledge of an image is merely a corollary to knowledge of its original: as Socrates will note in the course of arguing against Cratylus' claims for name study, "there is one and the same expert craft *[technê]* for all things which are like *[homoia]* each other" (435e2–3, cf. also *Republic* 402b5–c8). So *onomastikê* can only be a wholly-owned subsidiary of dialectic.

One way to get a clearer sense of what this pessimistic result means is to put it in the context of kindred Platonic projects. I have argued for a 'political' reading of the *Cratylus* as an instance of Plato's 'project of the strict sense', analogous to, for instance, the *Statesman*. Now in the *Statesman*, Plato uses the language of

mimesis to mark the difference between the correct or genuine constitution and its inferiors. According to the Visitor, only the one true constitution *[politeia]* deserves the name: others are to be so called, "not as legitimately or really being so, but as imitations of this one" (293e2–3, cf. 297c), while the works of skilled rulers are "no longer an imitation but the very real thing itself" (300e1–2). But in the case of the *Cratylus*, since names *as such* turn out to be images, no such strong distinction between correct and incorrect, between the real thing and the imitation, can properly be drawn.

Another contrast with the result of the *Cratylus* is provided by the ending of the *Meno*. Here Socrates has argued that since virtue is consistently beneficial, it must be a kind of knowledge; yet something is knowledge if and only if it is teachable, and virtue does not seem to be taught. His solution is to conclude that virtue, as exhibited by the great Athenian statesmen, consists not in knowledge but in right opinion. This might look like a retreat from Socratic ambition to empirical common sense, comparable to the end of the *Cratylus* read as conventionalist. Yet at the very end of the dialogue Socrates pointedly notes that a virtue constituted by knowledge remains a possibility. This virtue would be teachable,[37] and would be immeasurably superior to the virtue of the statesmen: its possessor would be like Homer's Teiresias, who alone kept his wits in Hades, "the real thing *[alêthes pragma]* among shadows" (100a6–7). This language of shadow and reality signals quite a strong devaluation of the 'virtue' associated with right opinion: it should come as no surprise that Plato is in more rigorous contexts prepared to deny it the name of virtue altogether (*Gorgias* 515dff., *Phaedo* 69a-c). And his expression of hope for the real thing, in the figure of Teiresias, is clearly very much in earnest. The *Republic* will take up exactly this question of how to create a self-sustaining succession of statesmen endowed with genuine virtue. In short, the close of the *Meno* calls upon us to work through the project of the strict sense left uncompleted there, and to consider what a real virtue, constituted by knowledge, would be like.

Now the conclusion of the *Cratylus could* have taken a very similar form: for just as the Socrates' antinomy regarding virtue and knowledge in the *Meno* hints at the need to disambiguate 'virtue' into strict and vulgar senses, so too the antinomies of the *Cratylus* might seem to be resolved by seeing that there are two ways in which a name can be a disclosure, strong (mimetic) and weak (conventional): the dialogue could thus have ended with a reaffirmation of the ideal of 'Cratylese' comparable to his invocation of 'Teiresias'. But it does not, and it is not hard to see why: the difference between the two cases must lie, again, in the conception of names as images, and their consequent necessary

37. For the view that assistance in recollection could count as 'teaching', note *didakton…ê ho nun de elegomen, anamnêston* at 87d. Socrates' earlier insistence that his questions to the boy do not count as teaching (82b, 82e, 84d, 85d) is clearly just meant to set it apart from the 'didactic' transmission of information standardly called by that name.

defectiveness. There simply cannot be any counterpart to Teiresias here: a perfect language is an impossibility even in principle, and so a strict sense of 'name' (or for that matter 'correct name') reserved for it would be empty.

A case which arguably *does* parallel the *Cratylus* result is the position of the *Laws* on the prospects for human statesmanship. Here Plato claims that human beings must live according to law: for "no human nature *[phusis anthrôpôn oudenos]* is by nature adequate both to realize what is beneficial for humans in relation to a constitution and, realizing it, to be always able and willing to do what is best" (874e9–5a4). Even if someone could acquire the necessary expertise, once given absolute power, "his mortal nature will always push him on towards greed and self-seeking" (875b6–7). Plato concedes that if ever there *were* an expert statesman whose nature was, by the grace of god, adequate to preserve him from corruption, he would have no need of law. "But as things are this is nowhere to be found at all, except in limited amounts: hence we must choose what is second-best, order and law, which see and consider what happens for the most part, but are unable to consider everything" (874d2–5).

In a way this pessimism represents only a slight shift from Plato's earlier view, for the genuine statesman, the 'Teiresias' figure, was always understood to be extremely rare (cf. *Republic* 491a–b). But even so, this slight shift entails a profound change in Plato's practical politics. Given that the statesman is either an impossibility or so close as to be negligible for practical purposes, political systems must be governed by law; we must resign ourselves to the second-best, and not look to be governed by philosopher-kings.

There is an obvious parallel here with the result of the *Cratylus* that a perfectly correct language is impossible, and a partially correct language, therefore, of no particular use. There is also a complementary parallel between the law-governed state Plato recommends in the *Laws* and the convention-dependent names, to be used only as weak disclosures and reminders, which the *Cratylus* re-examination turned out to rehabilitate. (And, of course, it is hardly coincidental that 'law' and 'convention' here are actually the same thing, *nomos*.) Both are second-bests, and fundamentally different in kind from the ideal: both gain legitimacy not from the mere fact that the ideal cannot be completely realized but from the corollary that partial approaches to it cannot be trusted.

The parallel confirms, I hope, my sense that Plato's pessimism in the *Cratylus* should be distinguished from a capitulation to conventionalism. For in the *Laws* it is clear that Plato's practical recommendations have changed drastically while his analyses and normative judgements remain much as they were. So too in the *Cratylus*, Plato's conclusion retains the whole framework of the naturalistic account: names are still tools, disclosures and images, and they are correct or not (at least strictly speaking) as a function of their natural resemblance to the object named. Plato's position precisely stated is thus not the conventionalist one that all conventional names are *ipso facto* correct, but the pessimistic one that, given the implications of naturalism itself, no name is 'correct' except in a very limited degree. This is a very odd result for a project of the strict sense to reach; but it is

compatible with the normative standards and analyses which belong to that project, and the critical stance towards our naming conventions from which it arose.[38]

Of course, from the conventionalist point of view this is open to the charge of hollow metaphysics. If the residual naturalism embedded in pessimism makes no difference to how we should use names, or what sort of language we should aspire to, then what does it amount to? In response, I will try to show in Chapter VI that the difference between pessimism and conventionalism about names is, if nothing else, one which makes a difference to Plato: thus a reading of the *Cratylus* as pessimistic can help to explain the attitudes to language and dialectic we find in some other Platonic works.

38. To elaborate a bit, I take it that the results of the *Cratylus* allow for one language to count as better than another, and for 'barbarian'- or Corcyra-type conventions (to revert to cases I considered in the Introduction) to be deemed incorrect. But the point which now emerges as more important is that even a maximally correct language would be insufficient to provide its users with understanding of the natures it named. Thus no language could provide any shortcuts to or substitutes for the process of talking through a correct dialectical 'collection and division'. Actual languages which are incorrect by being incomplete or misleading may slow this process down, so dialectic may involve some ad hoc neologisms and revisions of the senses commonly attached to words (cf. *Sophist* 267d–e). But there is no purpose to be served by more sweeping reforms, such as the creation of a language of maximally strong disclosures corrected by philosophy. On the contrary, such a language could only magnify the risk inherent to all language, that people would trust in it and be misled. On the indispensibility of dialectic, cf. VI.2.

V
From Names to Things

The *Cratylus* closes with two sets of arguments which look, at first glance, like corollaries. The first concerns the use and value of names: Socrates argues, *contra* Cratylus, that names are not a valuable means to knowledge of the natures of things (435d1–9b9). In the second set of arguments, Socrates adopts his own recommendation to turn from the study of names to the things themselves, and argues against Cratylus' claim that those things are in flux (439b10–440d6).

My purpose in this chapter is to see how both sets of arguments contribute to the general project of the dialogue. I will try to show that they both confirm the results of the larger argument and bring out more clearly what has been at stake throughout. The first set deals conclusively with the prospects for a craft of name study which would also be a means of inquiry into the natures of things. The specific 'craft' in view is Cratylan 'strong etymology' (cf. II.1); but I will suggest that the rejection of this name study also has implications for Plato's own method of inquiry. The final arguments, by showing that the objects of speech and knowledge must have some stability, at last provide support for the premise with which the whole argument of the dialogue began—the realist premise that things have stable natures of their own. The close of the *Cratylus*, then, circles back to reaffirm its argument as a whole, by grounding the hypothesis from which it began. As this confirms, Plato's findings in the *Cratylus*, however paradoxical or hard to reconcile they may appear, are for him the results of a single, unified chain of argument.

These two sets of arguments also have a secondary aim in common. This is to cancel out the potentially deceptive effects of Socrates' etymological display. Plato takes care not to leave us under the impression that Socrates' bravura performance constituted an example of expert name study (which does not in fact exist), or that it revealed for us the natures of things (which are not as there presented). Socrates signals this common function in introducing the arguments. In the first instance, he asks Cratylus to admit that "if someone investigating the things follows their names, studying what each means to be like…there is no small risk of their being deceived *[exapatêthênai]*" (436a9–b3). The arguments which follow bring out just how this deception could take place. The final arguments are then introduced as a specific precaution against our being

deceived by the way in which the names seemed to express the flux doctrine. For if the namegivers did assign names in the belief that things are in flux, they were wrong (439b10–c4). This concern with deception through language was, I argued in II.5, already adumbrated in the etymological section; the mimetic account of language and the re-examination also pointed in the same direction, since the defectiveness of images renders them naturally deceptive. The final arguments at last make this increasingly pressing concern explicit; in them, Plato concludes his exposition of the implications of the naturalism.

V.1
AGAINST THE STUDY OF NAMES

Socrates opens the discussion with a question: "What, in our view, is the power *[dunamis]* of names; what good we are to say that they accomplish?" (435d2–3). Cratylus responds: "They teach, Socrates, as it seems to me; and the simple fact is that whoever knows the names knows the things *[pragmata]*" (435d4–6, cf. 388b–c). That is, he cites the function (or one of the functions) ascribed to names at the start of the account of natural correctness: we are now in a position to see what this 'teaching' really amounts to. Cratylus goes on to support this view with the claim, offered to him by Socrates, that there is a single *technê* for things which are like *[hoion]* each other, and that names, as imitations, are like the objects they name (435d–e). His conclusion is that name study is a means—in fact, *the* means, "the only method and the best" (436a1–2)—of teaching and learning the natures of things. Moreover, it is also the method by which their natures are discovered in the first place (436a3–8).

This idea of a *technê* of name study has been an important subplot throughout the *Cratylus* (cf. 1.5, III.3). In the mimetic account, however, Socrates' moment of being 'carried away' into the prospective made it clear that the proper subject-matter of that study was not Greek but a hypothetical perfect language. Now the study of Greek will be definitively rejected, and the very idea of *onomastikê* called into doubt.

Having drawn Cratylus into making his very strong claim for the powers of strong etymology, Socrates produces two interlocking lines of argument against it. He begins with the warning already noted: the namegivers might have given names on the basis of false beliefs. Cratylus replies that the namegivers must have known the things: "otherwise, as I said all along, they wouldn't be names" (436c1–2). Perhaps dimly sensing that this begs the question (besides being a reversion to his already refuted thesis that only a correct name names at all), he adds that the consistency with which names present the same picture of things—i.e., as being in flux—is a great proof of the namegivers' knowledge. To this Socrates points out that consistency is no proof of correctness: a geometer may deduce consistent consequences from a diagram which nonetheless incorporates some unnoticed error right from the start. And in any case, Socrates adds, actual names do not in fact agree with each other, and he adduces a quick series of

etymologies: *epistêmê* is not, as before, related to *hepetai* ('follows') (412a), but rather to what brings the movement of our soul to rest on *[histêsi epi]* things (437a4); and other words associated with knowledge are likewise here related to stasis rather than flux. Moreover, Socrates shows that flux-related etymologies can be produced just as easily for terms with negative connotations as they were earlier for positive ones: for example, *akolasia*, 'intemperance' is 'following things' [*akolouthia tois pragmasi*, 437c2]. It is striking that so many of the words considered here are related to knowledge: this prefigures the final arguments, where it is in relation to knowledge that the *Flusslehre* finally shows itself to be untenable (439e–40b). But the immediate import of the argument is just that the names given to things are incoherent.

By producing etymologies which represent contradictory views, Socrates has in effect performed an *elenchus* on the hypothesized namegivers of Greek.[1] An *elenchus* refutes a claim to wisdom, on the very reasonable presumption that no one who possesses wisdom will fall into self-contradiction on the very subject matter of that wisdom.[2] Systematic namegiving would require a comprehensive knowledge of the natures of things, and it turns out that the namegivers have expressed contradictory views on a number of subjects: e.g., that knowledge is constituted by both motion and rest, and that flux is both good and bad. And so, even if most of their names happen to be correct (i.e., expressive of true beliefs), the namegivers cannot be taken as authoritative guides to the natures of things. Of course, the possibility remains that *some* of our names (the correct ones) were given by genuinely wise namegivers. But this possibility is agreed to be of no practical use: it would not warrant our trust in any particular name, and to sort names into correct and incorrect would require an independent knowledge of the things against which to test them (438c).

The full import of the *elenchus* comes out in Socrates' other, more general line of argument (438aff.). Here he points out that the investigation of names cannot be the only means of discovering and learning the natures of things. For if the original namegivers knew the natures of things, they must have been able to learn those natures by some independent means of *heuresis*. Of course, this does not yet prove that there is any other method available *to us*. If, as Cratylus suggests, the namegivers were divine (a possibility earlier mooted by Socrates in the case of divine names (397b–c)), they could have had some access to the natures of things which we lack. But here Socrates' *elenchus* comes in handy: the gods are wise, so we can in fact be sure that the incoherent set of names we have are *not* the creation of divine namegivers (438c5–6). (Of course, the *elenchus*

1. Thus Socrates uses language which is standard elsewhere for people who are committed to conflicting beliefs: the names do not *sumphônei* with themselves (436e1), and the namegiver set things down opposed to himself [*enantia etitheto autos hautôi*, 438c5] (cf., e.g., *Gorgias* 482c1–3, d4).

2. See Frede, 'Plato's Arguments', pp. 210ff.

also destroys the supposition that some such method of discovery, namely the one used by the wise namegivers, must exist: it opens up the sceptical possibility that there is no means of finding out the natures of things at all. But even this lack of an alternative would not make the study of names any more valuable.) And so Cratylus agrees that we must turn to some other method to discover which set of names gets things right.

The *coup de grace* for name study takes the form of a more or less rhetorical question—rather as Socrates' little question about the names of the numbers finished off the 're-examination'. With it Socrates turns from the etymological to the mimetic analysis of correctness. Given that names are images, which is better: to learn the image and whether it is well made from the image itself, and also the reality *[alêtheia]* of which it is an image; or to learn the reality from the reality itself, and whether the image of it is well made? (439a5–b2). Guided by his previous concession that we need an independent means by which to judge conflicting names, Cratylus admits that priority must be given to the things.

The assertion of the priority of knowledge of the object is a direct function of the mimetic conception of language: after all, how *could* we learn from a portrait itself whether it is a good likeness? In the *Phaedo*, this is the essence of Socrates' argument for recollection: since we *do* judge sensible particulars, and find them wanting, in relation to the Forms, we must already be independently acquainted with the originals (73e–5e). Similarly in the *Laws*, when Plato returns to the subject of the correctness *[orthotês]* of the likenesses produced by the image-making arts, in a discussion saturated with the terminology of the *Cratylus* (667cff.), he reaffirms that the correctness of an imitation consists in its reproducing the original accurately. And he reaffirms the upshot: anyone who is going to judge an imitative work of art must know the object it is an imitation of (668c–9b). Likewise according to Aristotle in the *Poetics*, we enjoy imitation because we like to learn *[manthanein]:* and what we learn looking at images *[eikones]* is that *this* image represents *that* original. But whenever we have not previously seen *[proeôrakôs]* the original, it is not the imitation as such which gives pleasure, but only its execution, colour, and so forth (1448b12–19). To grasp and evaluate an imitation *qua* imitation requires a prior acquaintance with the original it imitates.

This point adds some retrospective confirmation to the 'pessimistic' results about the correctness of names which I discussed in IV. 6. For it provides another way to see why mimetic resemblance, albeit a norm which remains formally applicable to names as images, is in the end of so little practical importance. In the run-up to the *Sklêrotês* argument, Socrates pointed out that names which depend on convention for their functioning are only of use to those who know the things beforehand; now it turns out that naturally correct *mimetic* names are limited in just the same way. For only someone who already knows the original will be able to judge the quality of the image, and avoid being misled by its inevitable inaccuracies (cf. III.3). Mimetically correct and conventional names have more in common than at first appeared: with *either* kind, we must

know the objects to know how to learn from the names. And so convention can enable a name to do all that we should ask of any.

The principal upshot of these argument is, of course, the rejection of the study of things through their names. This is not because knowledge of names and of things does not go together. Nothing here tells against the combined craft studying the two postulated in the mimetic account, when Socrates sketched the 'double division' of the elements of names and things by which an expert namegiver would have to proceed (III.3). And in the *Republic*, Plato confirms (with reference, incidentally, to the knowledge of letters) that the knowledge of images is part of the same *technê* as the knowledge of their originals (402b7, c7). But the structure of this combined craft is the opposite of what Cratylus thinks, and *onomastikê* would be a misleading name for it; for it must take knowledge of the objects as prior to that of the images. The only true name-craft is philosophical dialectic, and names are not its primary focus: name study, like rhetoric, is a pretender to its throne which gets the order of importance reversed.

This refutation of the claims of name study is in fact the most clear-cut, explicit and indisputable result of the *Cratylus* as a whole; and its position here, concluding the whole of the dialogue apart from the discussion of flux, is very prominent. Yet it is unsatisfying if taken as a—let alone the— central conclusion of the dialogue, for as a philosophical result it seems perplexingly underweight. At this distance, strong etymology seems no more a genuine intellectual rival to philosophical dialectic than, say, the rhapsodic exegesis dissected in the *Ion*: and the *Ion* is a very short dialogue. Of course, such a polemical agenda may have had a very wide target: Baxter, for instance, claims that the philosophical aim of the *Cratylus* is to demonstrate that "Greek thinkers and poets" quite generally had "put too much trust in names, implicitly regarding them as surrogates for the things they named".[3] Even so, the dialogue looks like an oversized hammer.

So it is worth considering whether this rejection of name study might not have some further philosophical bite. In VI.2 I will explore the possibility that the overvaluation of names which is here opposed is not (or not just) an external vice, but one Plato is determined to exclude from his own philosophy. By this I do not mean that Plato himself was ever tempted by strong etymology as a research programme. Rather, thanks to the *Cratylus*' commitment to compositionality, names here can serve as proxy for the *logoi* composed of them: Plato may be warning himself here against the temptation of overvaluing philosophical *logoi*, and specifically accounts or definitions. In effect, the *Cratylus* works out what language *would have to be like* to provide us with perfect, knowledge-ensuring philosophical *logoi*. And it establishes that in fact no language can be like that. Cratylan strong etymology, absurd in itself, can usefully serve as a stalking-horse for a mode of philosophizing which would likewise involve a trusting overem-phasis on language. In that case the *Cratylus*

3 *Critique*, p. 184.

may be, among other things, the repudiation of a version of Platonism—a version still sometimes attributed to Plato—which, misunderstanding the Socratic method of lo*goi*, would fetishize definitions as disclosures of knowledge.[4] On this reading at least, Socrates' repudiation of name study deserves the emphatic position Plato gives to it among the results of the dialogue.

V.2
LANGUAGE, KNOWLEDGE AND FLUX

The set of arguments about flux with which the *Cratylus* ends is fascinating quite apart from its role in the dialogue, as an independent contribution to Platonic metaphysics and a precursor to similar arguments in the *Theaetetus*.[5] But my concern here is with the content of the arguments themselves and their significance for the main project of the *Cratylus*. As I understand them, the arguments are a fairly straightforward attempt to show that Heracliteanism, understood as the claim that all things are in flux, is false. They are admittedly (440c1–3) inconclusive and hypothetical. However, I will try to show that the hypotheses in play are meant to be minimal and broadly acceptable ones, so that the arguments may still have considerable *prima facie* force—in particular, they should be enough to drive an unreflective Heraclitean like Cratylus to second thoughts. Part of their purpose is thus to rid the doctrine of flux of any lingering appeal left over from the etymological section (439b10–c1); they also serve to provide grounding for the rejection of Protagorean relativism with which the account of natural correctness began. So the arguments do not, some appearances to the contrary, import loaded proprietary assumptions about 'Forms'; on the contrary, their purpose requires that they assume as little as possible.

Socrates introduces the discussion with a curious and ambiguous formulation: "Let us investigate, my friend Cratylus, something which I for one often dream of: are we to say that the Beautiful itself *[auto kalon]* is something *[ti]*, and likewise

4. Not to mention a whole range of philosophical methods which would involve an excessive trust in our actual languages: as Crombie notes, with his project of studying things through their names, "Cratylus makes himself the first (and perhaps the only true) 'linguistic philosopher'" (*Examination*, p. 484).

5. A thorough treatment is Cal vert, 'Forms', which also discusses the earlier 'form of name'; cf. MacKenzie, *'Cratylus'*, pp. 136–49; Terence Irwin, 'Plato's Heracliteanism' ['Heracliteanism'], *Philosophical Quarterly* 27 (1977), pp. 1–13; White, *Knowledge*, pp. 145–8; Luce, Theory'; and M.T.Thornton, 'Knowledge and Flux in Plato's *Cratylus* (438–40)', *Dialogue* 8 (1970), pp. 581–91.

I have chosen not to discuss the parallel passage from the *Theaetetus* here: though very brief (182d–3b), it is more in need of illumination from the *Cratylus* than able to offer it any. Comparisons are also made dangerous by the very different dialectical contexts involved. On the *Theaetetus* arguments see Burnyeat, *Theaetetus*, McDowell, *Theaetetus*, and Cornford, *Theory*, all *ad loc.;* on its relation to the *Cratylus* cf. also Cooper, *Theaetetus*, pp. 108–116.

the Good and each one of the things that are *[hen hekaston tôn ontôn]*, or not?" (439c6–d1). This association with a (recurrent) dream gives what follows a distinctive and complex status. There are a number of things a dream can mean in Plato, and to make sense of them it is first important to distinguish between the dream as *source* and the dream as *state*. As a source of ideas, the dream belongs with the forms of non-rational communication I considered in II.2. Like the genres of oracle and inspiration, a dream may come from god; but it is a pointedly non-rational medium, and the message it presents demands careful interpretation and testing. In fact, dreams are notoriously untrustworthy (note *Iliad* 2.5–36, *Odyssey* 19.563–7). So the dream as source is a natural device for presenting an idea without any particular explanation or support; and for making it clear that, lacking these things, it should be examined very carefully before acceptance.[6]

As *states* or experiences, dreaming and waking are for Plato halves of a favourite epistemological metaphor. The metaphor is complex; in fact it has two aspects which lead in different directions. First, dreaming is a state of *misapprehension* and delusion, lacking contact with reality. In dreams we occupy ourselves with unreal, unreliable objects; we mistake images and phantasms for real things (e.g., *Republic* 520c). Thus dreaming is a handy metaphor for the condition of the benighted—specifically, for those who recognize the existence only of sensible particulars, which have precisely the defects of dream-images. The *Republic* makes this sense of 'dreaming' explicit in the argument against the lovers of sights and sounds. They are dreaming inasmuch as they mistake the likenesses of Beauty for Beauty itself; waking consists in recognizing Beauty itself as distinct (476c–d).

But it is also possible, I think, for dreaming to have almost the opposite significance, and this for two reasons. First, dreaming and waking are relative conditions: a state which is aptly called 'waking' relative to utter delusion may still be 'dreaming' in comparison to complete understanding. This means that incomplete apprehensions of the Forms can be fairly characterized as 'dreaming' relative to a higher state, even if they represent a great advance over our customary condition. Second, dreaming is characterized not only by its relation to unreal objects but by our subjective experience of it as disjointed and confusing. And this sort of experience need not accompany our dealings with images—on the contrary, it may occur when we deal with what is by nature most intelligible. It is difficult for us to attain to more than a fleeting, incompletely grasped glimpse of the Forms: so for us, waking (dealing with real beings) can be dreaming (confusion) and dreaming (dealing with images) can be waking (orderly experience).

6. Instances of the dream as source include *Charmides* 173a7, *Theaetetus* 201d8, *Pbilebus* 20b.

So for example, when the slave boy in the *Meno* first begins to grasp the truth, Socrates says: "These beliefs have just now been stirred up like a dream; but if someone asks him these same things many times, and in many ways, you know that he will end up knowing about these things as precisely as anyone" (85c9–d1). The slave-boy's 'dreaming' is a preliminary and inadequate grasp of the truth: what we might call *the dream as glimpse*. The clearest case of the dream as glimpse probably occurs in the 'Divided Line' passage of the *Republic*, when Socrates claims that all reasoning which makes use of hypotheses represents a 'dreaming about Being' [*oneirôttousi peri to on*, 533b8–c1]. The 'about Being' here distinguishes this sort of dreaming from a state which makes no contact with real being at all; Socrates is describing the relatively elevated condition of the geometers, who occupy the second-highest part of the 'Line'. But because of their reliance on hypotheses, their state is still 'dreaming' relative to the complete understanding of the philosopher.[7]

Of these three uses to which Plato puts the dream motif, it is I think clear that Socrates in the *Cratylus* means to invoke both the dream as source and the dream as glimpse.[8] As to the former, Socrates' invocation of the dream in the course of his rather casual introduction to the argument clearly serves to warn that the ideas presented here should not be presumed to have any rational authority. Second, relative to the preceding discussion of names, the arguments to follow represent a shift to a higher and inadequately mastered ontological level. In fact, they are an instance of precisely that hypothetical reasoning about real objects which the *Republic* calls 'dreaming about being'. For though they engage with the Forms, the arguments will depend for their success on important and unargued assumptions: specifically, that there are things which we can speak of and know, and that knowledge itself exists.

Socrates' opening premise that "the Beautiful itself *[auto to kalon]*" is something uses, of course, standard Platonic terminology for the Forms. Its closest precursor in the *Cratylus* is *auto ho estin kerkis* (389bff.)—the form of Shuttle, et al. mentioned in the first phase of the naturalistic account. However, I

7. Cf. also the rather opaque passage in the *Statesman* in which the Visitor claims: "It is likely that each of us, as in a dream, knows everything and then again as waking is ignorant" (277d2–4). As regards 'the elements of all things' *[ta tôn pantôn stoicheia]*, we are in the position of children learning to read: sometimes able to recognize them correctly, sometimes confused (278c8–d6). When we can discern them with exactitude, we move from a dreaming to a waking state (278e10). So in 'deaming' we make contact with what really exists, but in a way which has some of the subjective disorder of the dream state.

8. These two uses are also combined in *Republic* IV when Socrates recalls his initial support for the principle of 'one person, one job', describing this as a dream which has now been realized (443b–d). To retrospectively present this principle as a dream correctly characterizes it as a hunch of no particular provenance or evidentiary weight (the dream as source); but it also, in its way, provided a sketch of the form of Justice (the dream as glimpse).

think it would be a mistake to suppose that this claim is meant to conjure up anything peculiar to Platonic metaphysics.[9] For it would be bizarre in the extreme for Cratylus to admit without demur the existence of any Beings already understood to be exempt from Heraclitean flux; it would also render all the arguments to follow question-begging.[10] Cratylus' ready assent must, I think, be intended precisely to mark this first premise as, at least superficially, nothing peculiarly Platonic, but rather a vague banality—something like the claim we might put by saying that 'there is such a thing as beauty'.[11] We might compare Protagoras' ready assent that justice is 'a sort of thing' *[pragma ti]* at *Protagoras* 330c1–2, and the willingness of people like Euthyphro and Meno to accept Socrates' assumption that there are forms of the relevant moral definienda. We may fairly suppose that Cratylus has no very determinate notion of what he has accepted—what, for example, the *auto* ['itself'] contributes to its meaning. This uncertainty could explain why his assent takes the weak form *emoige dokei*—"I guess so" (439d2).

Socrates' second premise deals with the character of these objects:

> "Well then, let us investigate that thing itself *[auto ekeino]*—not whether a certain face is beautiful or some such thing, and all these seem to be in flux. [12] But the Beautiful itself, shall we say that it is not always *[aei]* such as *[toiouton hoion]* it is?" (439d3–6)

Cratylus again readily assents, in fact in stronger terms than before ("Necessarily", 439d7). Yet, like the preceding premise, this could be read as an importation of Platonic doctrine, viz., the existence of permanent objects whose

9. I intend this to be distinct from the question, widely discussed but to my mind misguided, of whether the Forms (or forms) here introduced 'fall short' in some way of being 'full-blown' middle-period Forms, —and likewise the question of whether the Forms here are 'the same' as those discussed earlier in connection with the tool model (cf. I.5). I am very sceptical as to the value of such discussions, as it is almost impossible for them to avoid heavily *ex silentio* reasoning. For example, Irwin claims that "Plato is not concerned with *separated* forms, but with the 'stable natures' mentioned earlier in the dialogue…. Separated forms are never mentioned or implied" ('Heracliteanism', p. 2). But then 'immanent forms' are never mentioned either: the whole issue of how Forms relate to sensible particulars is confusingly ducked in the *Cratylus*, in their second appearance as in their first. And we have no license to interpret ducking as deflation: Plato is not under an obligation, every time he mentions Forms, to drag in a checklist taken from the *Phaedo* and affirm which of the features attributed to Forms there are true of Forms here. There may indeed be no fact of the matter regarding the points on which he is silent.

10. Goldschmidt accepts this consequence and throws up his hands: "C'est que la dialogue, à proprement parler, le drame philosophique, est achevé. Dans cette fin du *Cratyle*, Platon expose ses propres vues" (*Essai*, p. 176 n. 2).

11. For *auto to kalon* as 'beauty', compare thé substitution of *isotês* for *auto to ison* at *Phaedo* 74c1–5.

properties are not subject to flux. And as before, Cratylus' ready assent looks like evidence for a weaker reading. In particular, the *aei* need not at this point entail a denial of flux; it need mean no more than 'in every case'.[13] So in the absence of any explanation of what the '*x* itself is and how it relates to particulars, Socrates' hypothesis seems to reduce to the banal tautology that in every case, what is *x* is *x*. (I take it that this is a tautology even for Heracliteans and their ilk: they will just deny that it prevents what is *x* from also being the-opposite-of-*x*.) Or, if taken somewhat more strongly, the claim will be that beauty, in the sense of what it is for something to be beautiful, never changes; even if the set of beautiful faces, etc. is constantly changing, the criteria for membership in it are not. Thus all Cratylus need suppose himself to have granted at the start of the argument is that there is such a thing as beauty; that what is beautiful is ('in every case') beautiful; and perhaps, at most, that this thing, beauty, is in every case the same.

Now I suspect that Plato holds that these commonsense views, if their presuppositions and ramifications are properly understood, *do* turn out to entail much of 'the Theory of Forms'. But that does not mean that they are here used to smuggle that theory into the discussion; and the weaker understanding of Cratylus' admissions which I have suggested is sufficient for the use to be made of them. For the arguments to come will apply to *any* objects which are objects of predication and knowledge, and might at the same time be thought (wrongly) to be in flux. In sum, Socrates' Platonic-sounding introduction is just his rather overelaborate way of explaining, using some canonical and important examples, what objects of predication and knowledge are like.

Now for the arguments themselves. The first is simply that what is in flux cannot be an object of correct predication.

> Then is it possible to speak of it correctly *[proseipein orthôs]*, if it is always passing away—to say first that it is 'that' *[ekeino]*, then that it is 'in such a state' *[toiouton]*? Or is it necessary that at the same time as we speak it straightaway becomes something else and passes away and is no longer in this state *[houtôs echein]*? (439d8–11)

12. This final clause has presented difficulties, and has even been excluded as a gloss (see Luce, 'Theory', pp. 32–3). It could also be read as an endorsement of the claim that sensible particulars *are* in flux, which is not otherwise claimed or entailed by the argument to follow (Norman Gulley, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge* (London 1962), pp. 72–3). However, it seems to be better understood as a clumsy extension of the condition (cf. Irwin, 'Heracliteanism', p. 2; Calvert, 'Forms', p. 35–7). So read it may still have concessive overtones: the point is that even if sensible particulars *are* in flux, not all things are.

13. See the references given at LSJ s.u, esp. Thuc. 4.68.1.

There is a continuity here between the terms *toiouton* and *houtôs*, as well as with the *toiouton hoion* just before. All are familiar 'place-holder' terms for qualitative predicates (cf. IV.2), referring to 'how' an object is: its condition, state or qualitative properties. No doubt what Plato particularly has in mind is the constitutive property of a Form, so that a sample *ekeino toiouton* would be, 'Beauty is beautiful'. To say that what is changing ceases to be *toiouton*, or *hoion*, or to *houtôs echein*, is to say that it is loses the property in question, which therefore cannot be correctly *[orthôs]* predicated of it. By the time we have completed the process of naming it and predicating a property of it, it has become a different thing with different properties.

The argument seems to depend centrally on the fact that an act of predication takes place over time—enough time, it alleges, that what is 'always passing away' will change during that time, in respect of whatever quality is being predicated of it. Since Socrates does not bother with any messy and dubious empirical claims about just how much time predication takes, he evidently presumes that, according to the flux doctrine, whatever is changing must change its nature and properties over *any* expanse of time, however small.

It has often been noted that this seems to assume an 'extreme' version of Heraclitean flux. This is true enough, but not necessarily an objection; nor, to explain Plato's introduction of it here, need we suppose that he actually believes extreme flux to be true of sensible particulars. For one thing, it is quite plausible that the Heraclitean position was standardly presented in just this sweeping and unqualified way: certainly Plato consistently depicts the Heracliteans as given to extreme slogan-mongering (cf. *Theaetetus* 179ff.). The relevance of 'extreme' flux is also easy to see if, as I will later suggest, Plato means here to associate Heracliteanism with the Protagorean relativism dismissed at the start of the dialogue. The basis for this association, so prominent in the *Theaetetus*, is evidently that Plato takes the flux doctrine to express diachronousiy ('everything is always changing') what Protagoreanism claims synchronously ('everything is as it appears to anyone'), so that the two positions converge on a kind of indeterminism. And in that case, the relevant version of Heracliteanism is clearly the no-holds-barred one, for nothing less will be equivalent to the claim that things are totally subject to our judgements.

At the same time, the bearing of the argument on extreme Heracliteanism need not mean that it fails to tell against a more moderate version. For the crucial claim here can easily be rephrased as a matter of degree: so read it claims, rather tamely, that *to whatever extent* something is undergoing change, descriptions of it will tend to be falsified by that change. The significance of this possibility will become clearer in light of the second argument.

The second argument follows immediately on the first:

> So how could what is never in the same state *[mêdepote hôsautôs echein]* be that something *[ti ekeino]*? For if it is at any time in the same state *[hôsautôs ischei]*, for that time at least it is clear that it isn't changing at

> all. And if it's always in the same state and is the same, how could this change or be moved, since it does not depart at all from its own nature *[idea]*? (439e1–5)

This picks up Cratylus' initial admission that beauty itself is a 'something' *[ti]* and so a 'that' *[ekeino]* (439c7, d9); and it argues that this status is incompatible with constant change. Conversely, to the extent that something is self-identical and in a determinate state it is not undergoing change. The crucial—and dubious—premise here is the claim that changing objects are "never in the same state" *[mêdepote hôsautôs echei]*. The phrase *hôsautôs echein* should really only refer to sameness of state or properties over time (or in some other context of comparison), but seems to be used here for qualitative determinacy at any given moment—as virtually interchangeable with *boutas ecbein*.[14] Plato's reasoning here can only be understood, I think, as an expression of what in VI.1 I will discuss as the *principle of stability*: that is, the principle that change and constancy over time correspond to and express ontological weakness and soundness respectively (hence the equivalence of Protagoreanism and Heracliteanism). Change over time expresses ontological indeterminacy; something which possesses a genuine, determinate, mind-independent nature is *to that extent* stable over time as well.

This seems, as I say, to be an assumption rather than an argument; but it at least obviates any need to attribute to Plato the further assumption that there can be no intermediates between extreme flux and absolute stability. For the principle of stability, as I understand it, has (like my rephrased version of the conclusion of the first argument) a *quantus-tantus* form: *whatever* degree of mind-independent determinacy a thing possesses, in whatever respects, will be expressed by its stability over time. Thus we need not read the argument as posing a fallacious dilemma in the form of a choice between absolutely stable Forms and extremely fluxy particulars.[15] Looked at closely, its structure is rather that of a tripartition. What is *always* changing is not in a determinate state; what is *not* changing at some time *is* at that time in a determinate state; and what *never* changes is *always* in a maximally determinate state, never 'departing at all' from its own nature. Part of the point of the argument must be to broaden the basic

14. Cf. Calvert: the argument depends on conflating change of state with being in no state, yet still relies on the claim that the changing object is becoming something *other*, which in fact implies determinacy ('Forms', p. 38). One can at least think of sophistic arguments for such a conflation. What is changing from black to white can be neither black (in which case the change would not have begun) nor white (in which case it would already be completed). (And what of the obvious solution that it is grey, understood as a positive and determinate, but intermediate state? Well, to be grey cannot be *what it is to be changing* from black to white, since what is grey may be so unchangingly, or may be undergoing the reverse change. So this answer too might seem to fail to capture the condition of the object at the moment of change itself.)

claim made in the first argument (what is changing is not a proper object of predication) to show its import for this whole spectrum of possibilities.

The other important move made by the argument is to streamline its predecessor by restating the relation between stability and predication: whatever its shortcomings, the argument does step free from dependence on the wobbly empirical-looking premise noted earlier, that change invariably outruns the act of predication. The problem, it now emerges, is not just that we cannot complete saying, 'The wind is cold' before it begins to change: this is presumably just a symptom of the real difficulty, which is that during its change we cannot say anything about it at all. And so the argument applies not only to the frenzied entities of Heracliteanism but to whatever changes, inasmuch as it changes, as an object of predication and knowledge.

Socrates' third argument is that an object which is in flux cannot be known by anyone.[16] For even as it comes to be known it becomes something different and in a different state *[allo kai alloion]*, so that it would not be known what sort of thing *[hopoion ti]* it is or what state it is in *[pôs echon*]: "And surely no knowledge knows what it knows as being in no state *[mêdamôs echon]"* (439e7–a4). This recombines the crucial premises of both the first argument and the second, with knowledge taking the place of predication. Like predicating in the first argument, knowing is here presumed to take place over time, so that the change of what 'always passes away' outruns it; as per the second argument, what is changing is indeterminate, and so is unknowable.

Finally, Socrates applies the thesis of flux not to the objects of knowledge, but to knowledge itself. The key premise of the second argument, that change entails indeterminacy, shows that the flux doctrine cannot apply in this case:

> And if the very Form *[auto to eidos]* of knowledge changes, at the same time *[hama]* as it changes into another Form of knowledge there would be no knowledge. And if it is always changing, there would never be any knowledge, and from this argument neither would there be any knower or any known. But if there is always some knower and something known, and

15. *Contra* e.g., Baxter (under the influence of MacKenzie: see next note), who holds that the upshot of the argument "encourages one to look at the possibility of less fickle sensibles and more approachable Forms" (*Critique*, p. 180).

16. In a radical and ingenious rereading of this whole set of arguments, M.M. MacKenzie argues that this refers not to the putative fluxy *onta* discussed so far, but to the stable natures referred to at the end of the preceding argument (*Cratylus*, pp. 138ff.). That is, it is an argument that *Platonic forms* are unknowable; for they absolutely exclude change, even the change from being unknown to being known. This is a plausible reading so far as the immediate textual context goes; and if we also take the second argument as posing a dilemma, it gives an intriguingly disturbing result, viz., that nothing is knowable at all. However, I find it very hard to believe that Socrates (or Plato) would want to argue this here, or would do so with

> there is the Fine, and the Good, and each one of the things that are, it does not seem to me that these beings are, as you now say, anything like flowing or motion (440a9–c1)

Note again the tripartition of possibilities: if knowledge changes at some time there is no knowledge *at that time [hama];* if knowledge is *always* changing there is *never* any knowledge; but if there is *always* some knower and known, and therefore some knowledge, then the nature of knowledge must always be stable (though this is leapt over in favour of the corollary that the objects of knowledge cannot be fluxy either). The basic point is that already made about indeterminacy during change, but the argument also serves to bring out a perhaps more basic and intuitive point: there cannot really be Forms—kinds, natures, general entities like knowledge—which change into each other.[17] It makes no sense to speak of a car-pentry which is in the process of becoming astronomy, or to claim that Beauty has turned into Justice: not everything we speak of or know is capable even in principle of exhibiting Heraclitean instability.

For all their defects, the collective import of the arguments here is clear. The objects of our predication and knowledge cannot be in a condition of flux; for our predications and knowledge can only hope to capture any entity to the extent that it is determinate and therefore stable over time. So Heracliteanism, even if it were true, could not be known or truly stated; more positively, it turns out that speech and knowledge can only completely capture what is completely determinate, and therefore never changes. If things like Beauty are indeed suitable objects of predication and knowledge, they must have this stable character; and so must knowledge itself, since a change by knowledge itself into something else would destroy the possibility of knowing anything at all. The arguments do not show, or even hint, that these somethings, or Forms, belong to a separate realm, while the doctrine of flux is true for the sensible particulars around us. Nor, of course, does it show that correct predication and knowledge *are* possible. But granted the hypothesis that they are, it shows that the doctrine

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so little preparation or discussion. This reading is a crucial part of MacKenzie's argument for the claim that "the dialogue centres upon a series of paradoxes which are both powerful and unsettling. Their final effect is to attack the theory of forms, not to defend it" (p. 124). I cannot here engage with her complex interpretation in the detail it deserves; obviously the reading I offer aims to make plausible the contrary.

17. Calvert and Baxter take the argument as demanding that knowledge as we possess it must be 'perpetually stable' to count as such (Calvert, 'Forms', p. 43; cf. Baxter, pp. 178–9). But Socrates is explicitly talking here about the *Form [eidos]:* just as Beauty itself was distinguished from the beauty of some particular face, the being in question here must be the nature of knowledge itself. What confuses the point slightly is Socrates' adverting to a 'knower' and 'known' whose existence stands or falls with the stability of knowledge. But this seems to me a harmless rhetorical flourish; it brings home to Cratylus the very relevant point that one who applies the *Flusslehre* to knowledge itself cannot also claim to be a knower.

of flux cannot be true for the objects they are about—and, specifically, for entities like the Beautiful, whose existence Cratylus has been willing to grant. Thus the hypothesis of the Forms, and the premises about them with which Socrates begins, are in effect reducible to our everyday hypothesis that there are 'somethings' of which it is possible to predicate qualities (correctly) and acquire knowledge. And the upshot of the arguments is simply that these somethings (of which knowledge itself must be one) must be temporally stable and qualitatively determinate.

There is much more to be said about Socrates' final arguments; however, my main concern here is with their bearing on the argument of the *Cratylus* as a whole. In this context they serve, I think, three functions. The first of these is to show Socrates' practice to be in accord with his principles: the turn to *onta* displays or enacts the shift which his argument has just demanded, from the examination of names to the things themselves. The second function, stated explicitly by Socrates, is to inoculate us: to rid the doctrine of flux of any plausibility that might have accrued to it from its apparent confirmation by his etymologies. We can also see now that there was no deep connection between the *Flusslehre* and naturalism about names: on the contrary, if Heraclitus were right, correct name use, at any rate in the form of predication, would be impossible.

The third function of these arguments is, I believe, to confirm the very first dialectical move of the *Cratylus:* the rejection of Protagorean relativism. Though this was the starting-point for Socrates' refutation of conventionalism, it was not itself argued for. Relativism was simply rejected by agreement—an agreement which did not include Cratylus—and then confirmed by Hermogenes' unwillingness to do away with the distinction between good and bad or wise and unwise (385e4–6e5). That the refutation of Heracliteanism at the end should be seen to reaffirm this move is not made explicit; but an elaborate equation of the two positions is to come in the *Theaetetus,* and I believe we have reason to see it at work already. One important point is that both Protagoreanism and Heracliteanism are presented in the *Cratylus* as ways of denying that things have any 'stability' (cf. also VI.1). Thus Hermogenes was asked to reject Protagoreanism in favour of the alternative view that things have 'a certain stability of nature' [*tis bebaiotês tês ousias,* 386a3–4, cf. 386e1]; and when the doctrine of flux is attributed to the Heraclitean namegivers in the etymologies, they are said to project their own intellectual disorientation on the world, holding that "the things themselves are like this by nature, none of them persistent *[monimon]* or stable *[bebaion],* but flowing and borne about and always full of every motion and becoming" (411c2–5). When Socrates draws his conclusions from these final arguments, at the very end of the *Cratylus,* the Heracliteans are said to deny things any 'soundness', *hugies*—another of the same repertoire of ontologically loaded terms—in a scathingly sarcastic description of their worldview:

> nor is it the act of a very intelligent person to entrust himself and the care of his soul to names, and put faith in them and those who established them, and affirm confidently that he knows something, and say in condemnation of himself and the beings [tôn ontôn] that there is no soundness [ouden hugies oudenos] to anything, but that 'all things flow' like leaky pots; and simply think that the things [ta pragmata] are in the condition of people who are ill with catarrh—that all things [panta ta chrêmata] are in the grip of flux and catarrh. Maybe this is how it is, Cratylus, but maybe not. So you must investigate bravely and well, and not be satisfied easily—for you are still young and of the right age—and when you discover [heurês] something in your investigations, share it with me."(440c4–d6)

Now this depiction of the *Flusslehre* is reminiscent of an important passage in the *Phaedo*. Here Plato describes the cynical 'misologistic' view "that there is nothing sound or stable in any object *[tôn pragmatôn oudenos ouden hugies oude bebaion]* or argument, but all things *[panta ta onta]* are simply twisting back and forth *[anô katô strepheta]* like the Euripus, and remain no time anywhere" (90c3–6). And importantly, this is not attributed to Heracliteans: it is said to be the result of arguing on both sides of arguments, a practice originated by Protagoras (cf. Diogenes Laertius 9.51). This difference in attribution is licensed, as I have suggested, by the fact that Plato takes Protagoreanism and Heracliteanism to amount to much the same thing, the former expressing in epistemological terms what the latter presents as physics.

If I am right that these final arguments are designed, in a kind of ring composition, to ground the opening move of the dialogue, then it is worth taking a closer look at what they themselves rely on. As we saw, they are presented in connection with a dream: I have suggested that this signals both their non-authoritative status and their promise as a glimpse of the difficult realm of intelligibles. I have also argued that Socrates' hypothesis of the Forms reduces to the hypotheses that there are 'somethings' of which correct predication and knowledge are possible. Now it is striking how very minimal these hypotheses are, and how appropriate to the matter at hand. For if Cratylus and Hermogenes are willing to investigate the question of the correctness of names—or, for that matter, anything else—it seems fair to take them to be committed to the presumption that successful investigation is possible. And it is hard to see what success could consist in if not the attainment of knowledge, or at least correct predications about things.

On this reading, then, the starting-point for the argument of the *Cratylus* as a whole is ultimately pragmatic or heuristic. If we are to engage in making statements, or if we aspire to knowledge, we must trust in the existence of appropriate objects of speech and knowledge; these, Plato argues, must be stable; and this provides naturalism with all the starting-point it needs. Of course, it may be that a Protagoras or Heraclitus can reconstrue speech and knowledge so as to be compatible with universal flux, and that possibility will be worth investigation

in the *Theaetetus*. But in the meantime Plato has presented a decent argument for the realist premise with which his investigation in the *Cratylus* began, one which with considerable elegance relies on nothing but the evident presuppositions of investigation itself. [18]

If this is on the right track, then the *Cratylus* as a whole is a much more tightly structured work than is generally recognized: it deserves to be read as a unified and carefully constructed chain of argument. And a tiny emblem of this unity can be seen when Socrates bids farewell to his interlocutors at the very end. Recall that the issue of Hermogenes' name has been treated twice in the dialogue, both times in terms of his relation to the god Hermes. At the start of the discussion, Cratylus is reported as denying that 'Hermogenes' is Hermogenes' name, clearly on the grounds that Hermogenes is, in some figurative respect, no son of Hermes: and Socrates suggests an explanation of this in terms of Hermogenes' lack of financial success (383b6–7, 384c3–6). At the centre of the etymologies the question recurs in the course of the etymology of 'Hermes'. Here the emphasis is on Hermes as the divinity responsible for *logos;* the passage even suggests that a 'son of Hermes' must, like Pan, be either identical or closely akin to language itself (408d). And so it is again agreed that, this time because of Hermogenes' lack of ability as a speaker, the name is inappropriate (407e–8b, cf. II.5).

Now the very end of the *Cratylus* presents a third invocation of Hermes, one which suggests that Hermogenes' name is at the last restored to him. Socrates' final line of the dialogue, addressed to Cratylus, shows him washing his hands of Hermogenes and Cratylus both: "Well then, you will teach me another time, my friend, when you come. But now go off into the country, as you were planning to do; and Hermogenes here *[Hermogenes hode]* will conduct *[propempsei]* you" (440e3–5). The demonstrative pronoun here has a powerful deictic effect, as if to confirm Hermogenes' much-disputed right to his name; it recalls the first extended speech of the dialogue, in which Hermogenes began, "Cratylus here says…" *[Kratulos phêsin hode]* (383a4). (Cratylus' right to his name is never in doubt.) And this final validation is confirmed by Socrates' use of *propempsei*, for the family of terms to which this verb belongs is characteristic of Hermes as the divine escort of souls and guide of selected mortals.[19]

18. In an interesting account of this final set of arguments, White claims that, understood as a serious refutation of Protagoreanism, it "would be question-begging because it *assumes* that naming (389d8–11) and knowledge (e7–440a), in senses that would be rejected by the Protagorean, are possible" (*Knowledge*, p. 146). He concludes that the *Cratylus* does not really claim to have disproved Protagoreanism, or for that matter conventionalism. But 'question-begging' seems a bit strong here: no specially Platonic sense of 'naming' or 'knowledge' is in play in the arguments, even if Plato has not excluded the possibility that the *Protagorean* might be able to defend his position by recourse to some special sense. The *Cratylus* arguments are not, and are not presented as being, final; but neither are they mere exposition of dogma.

As the pair walk off into oblivion, like Laches and Nicias or Laurel and Hardy, we are left to wonder why Hermogenes should now have his name restored. He is no richer, cleverer or more articulate than before, and neither has he been much of a guide to anything. But in fact the new acceptance here granted to his name is what we should expect given the dialogue's pessimistic results about names in general. 'Hermogenes' is just as incorrect a name for Hermogenes as Cratylus thinks, but we can now see that this does not matter very much: for names cannot attain complete correctness and the degree to which they can approach it is of no great use. Despite its correspondence to the earlier occurrence, the deictic *hode* is compatible with this new resignation. It confirms that 'Hermogenes' is Hermogenes' name; but it also supplements the force of the name, and the need for a supplement points up the weakness of the name itself—it suggests that the name might otherwise fail to preserve the 'outline', *tupos*, of the object named (cf. IV.3 and VII.3). With a little help from such conventional and contextual factors, a name like 'Hermogenes' will, despite its inappropriateness, at least serve to pick its object out; and no name should be trusted to do more. The third capacity of the god is particularly appropriate for expressing this idea. For as the argument of the dialogue has shown, language is (like its brother Pan) profoundly unreliable: but it is still a psychopomp of sorts, accompanying us as we move between the 'Hades' of ignorance and the upper world. And so it is on a faint but resonant note of resignation that the *Cratylus* comes to an appropriate close.

19. Hermes is *propompos* in Alexis fr. 89, and commonly *pompaios* (e.g., Sophocles, *Ajax* 832, Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 91, Euripides *Medea* 759, Diogenes Laertius 8.31) and *pompos* (*Iliad* 24.153, 182, 437, 461, Aeschylus *Persians* 626, Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonnus* 1548). Cf. also LSJ with references linking Hermes *topropompeô* (*I.G.* 14.769) and *pempô* (Aeschylus, *Persians* 630, Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 133).

VI
The *Cratylus* and After: Names and *Logoi*

My purpose in this chapter and the next is to come to a fuller understanding of the *Cratylus'* conclusions and their implications by bringing them to bear on some related works. I here consider the Platonic *Seventh Letter* and the last part of the *Theaetetus*, as well as some uses of *logoi* in the later dialogues; in Chapter VII, I attempt to show that the *Sophist* account of false statement is closer to the *Cratylus* than is often thought.

VI.1
THE *SEVENTH LETTER* AND THE WEAKNESS OF LANGUAGE

If authentic, the *Seventh Letter* must be Plato's final word on the matter of language, having been written after Dion's death in 354; but of course its authenticity, and that of the central 'philosophical digression' in particular, is a matter of ongoing controversy.[1] I have nothing to add to this contro-versy: I am far from certain that the *Letter* is authentic, and make no attempt to argue the

1. On the *Seventh Letter* generally see the translation with introduction, notes, etc. of Luc Brisson, *Platon: Lettres* (Paris, 1987). Cf. also Kurt von Fritz, 'The Philosophical Passage in the Seventh Platonic Letter and the Problem of Plato's 'Esoteric' Philosophy' ['Passage'], in *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, ed. John P.Anton with George L.Kustas (Albany, 1971); Glenn R.Morrow, *Plato's Epistles [Epistles]*, (Indianapolis, 1962); as well as the relevant chapters of White, *Knowledge*, and Guthrie, *History*, vol. 5. Discussions of the *Cratylus* which also treat the *Letter* include Gaiser ('Name und Sache', pp. 110–15), Robinson ('Criticism', pp. 120–1), and Derbolav (*Sprachphilosophie*, Ch. 10.B); Bostock, *Theaetetus*, also includes a relevant discussion (pp. 250–265). Both Brisson and Guthrie present surveys of scholars who have pronounced on the authenticity of the *Letters:* according to Guthrie's larger sample, 44 favour the authenticity of the *Seventh* while 38 oppose it (p. 401; cf. Brisson, p. 70:26 in favour vs. 6 against). Cf. also Ross' overly sanguine remark that "almost all scholars now regard [the Seventh Letter] as genuine" (*Plato's Theory of Ideas [Theory]* (Oxford, 1951), p. 139): this may well have been, and remain, true of those who have discussed the text with care, but they are a self-selecting group. (An interesting sample of attitudes

question here. What I would claim—and the reading I offer here should go some way towards making this good—is that the 'philosophical digression' is plausible as an expression of mature Platonism, containing no philosophical ideas that could not be Plato's. It also seems to me that there is no very strong philological or historical evidence against Platonic authorship; and that it is unlikely (though not impossible) that both these things could be true of an imitative work. But for my purposes it does not matter much whether the *Letter* was written by Plato or a follower; what I hope to show is that it presents a view of language very close to the conclusion of the *Cratylus* as I have interpreted it. Like the conclusion of the *Cratylus,* the *Letter* expresses a resignation to the functioning of actual names by convention, yet insists that this is a grave defect on their part.[2] What it has to say about this defect will help to illuminate the findings of the *Cratylus* as well.

In the 'philosophical digression' which occupies the center of the *Letter,* the author distinguishes four means distinct from any existent Being *[on]* by which that Being comes to be apprehended. These are, first, its name *[onoma];* second, its definition *[logos],* which is composed of names and phrases *[onomata kai rhêmata];* third, its embodied instances, which unlike the Being itself are destructible and defective, and which he refers to as images *[eidôla];* and fourth, its manifestations in our souls: opinion, knowledge and (closest to the Being itself) understanding *[nous]* (342a–e). The Being itself—e.g., 'the circle itself [*autos ho kuklos,* 342c2–3]—must be carefully distinguished from all of these as a 'Fifth', and if we wish to grasp it we must master them all. He warns, however, that the Four "work to disclose *[epicheirei dêloun]* the qualified thing *[to poion ti]* in each case no less than the Being *[to on]* of each, because of the weakness of the definitions *[logoi]"* (342d8–3al). This complaint is later reiterated:

> Again, there are ten thousand arguments about how unclear each of the Four is, but this is the greatest: as we said a little bit before, there are two things, the Being *[to on]* and the qualified thing *[to poion ti],* and the soul seeks to know not the qualified thing *[to poion ti]* but the 'what' *[to ti]:*

among English-speaking scholars can be seen in the contributions to *The Cambridge Companion to Plato,* ed. Richard Kraut (Cambridge, 1992).) A comparatively recent challenge to the authenticity of the 'digression' (not the *Letter* as a whole), and in my view by far the most powerful to date, is Harold Tarrant, 'Middle Platonism and the *Seventh Epistle', Phronesis* 28 (1983), pp. 75–103; a recent defense of the historical utility of the *Letter* as a whole is P.A.Brunt, 'Plato's Academy and Politics', in his *Studies in Greek History and Thought* (Oxford, 1993). The present discussion here does not pretend to deal with all the important issues raised by the 'digression'; I hope to treat it in more detail in future work.

2. *Contra* Robinson, 'Criticism', pp. 120–1, who takes the position of the *Letter* to be simple conventionalism.

> but each of the Four holds out to the soul what is not sought, both in language *[logôi]* and in facts *[kat'erga]*.[3] Each is always providing something stated or shown which is easily refuted by the senses, filling virtually every man with all puzzlement and confusion. (343b6–c5)

Clearly these passages ascribe some kind of deficiency to the Four, but just what this consists in has been a matter of some interpretive confusion. This is in part because of the enigmatic invocation of *to poion ti*—especially as the related occurrence in the *Cratylus*, which I discussed in IV.2, often goes unnoticed. Here in the *Letter*, the phrase is problematic and the precise point at stake somewhat obscure.[4] The sense has generally been taken to be that the Four somehow point to accidental qualities as well as to the essential Form. So for instance Morrow translates it as "the particular property" and "the particular quality", and glosses as "a quality, or set of qualities, that we regard as characterizing the object."[5] This line of interpretation is supported by the fact that a *poion-on* contrast along these lines appears to be present at *Meno* 71b.[6]

However, I see little sign in the *Letter* or elsewhere that some relation to non-essential properties is what Plato finds misleading in non-Forms; rather, his standard complaint is of their imperfection, i.e., their compresence of opposites and susceptibility to change. Moreover, as I have argued in Ch. IV.2, the sense

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3. For the pairing of *logoi* and *erga*, cf. *Phaedo* 100a1–3.

4. It isn't even clear what word *poion* here represents. According to both the OCT and Budé editions, its occurrences are differently accented: in its first appearance at 342e3, *poion* is given a circumflex on the penult, indicating that it is taken to be the interrogative, 'of what sort?'. But at 343b8–9, *poiou* and *poion* are both accented on the last syllable (with circumflex and acute respectively) as befits the indefinite *poios*, 'of some sort', the form present in the *Cratylus*. I can discover no reason for this shift, which seems to have attracted virtually no scholarly discussion, and have difficulty seeing what the interrogative could mean here; so I prefer— presuming that the mss have only a very limited authority on such a point—to take the phrase as indefinite throughout. Bluck *ad loc.* seems to report that Hackforth also suggested accentuating all occurrences as the indefinite; however, his report leaves it unclear exactly how Hackforth intended this to be glossed (R.S.Bluck, ed., intro., notes, *Plato's Seventh and Eighth Letters* (Cambridge, 1947).

5. *Epistles*, p. 71. Cf. Guthrie: "they enumerate its characteristics without conveying its essence" (*History*, vol. 5, p. 408); Ross contrasts "the mere properties of the object" and its "essence" (*Theory*, p. 140). Such formulations leave it unclear whether these 'qualities' or 'characteristics' are those of the *Form* (i.e, presumably, other Forms with which it has communion or with which it might be confused) or those of the sensible particulars which participate in it; either presents serious meta-physical problems. Bostock takes the contrast to be between "what a thing [essentially] is" and "what it is like": as he says, "I have no explanation to offer of why an account which says what a thing is like should be easily refuted *by perceptions"* (*Theaetetus*, p. 256 n. 62).

6. The connection is made by White, *Knowledge*, Ch. 8, esp. section 3 and n. 26; cf. Guthrie, *History*, vol. 5, p. 408 n. 2.

of *to poion ti* at *Cratylus* 432b1 is (in keeping with *Theaetetus* 182a7 and the category *toiouton* at *Timaeus* 49d–50a) 'the qualified thing': it is a placeholder for defective qualified non-Forms as opposed to Forms. So I take it that in the *Letter* too the phrase is likely to stand for the Four in their relation to the Form. The author's complaint is then that the Four present and disclose themselves, in all their inadequacy and confusion, as well as the Form, so that we risk contaminating our understanding of the Form with their inaccuracies. Thus the *Letter's* particular grudge against *logoi* is based on the fact that, since they disclose the rest of the Four, and especially sensible particulars, they offer us not only their defective selves but *all* of the Four with all their imperfections. This is also involved in the second complaint about *to poion ti*, that the Four are 'always providing something stated or shown which is easily refuted by the senses'. For the way in which they do this is mediated by language. It is because we call imperfect drawn circles 'circle' that we are confused when a Protagoras refutes us by the senses, i.e., when he points out that the drawn circles are not perfectly circular, but 'full of the opposite nature' (343a6–7, c2–5, cf. Aristotle, *Metaph.* 997b35–8a4).

So, though all of the Four are guilty of presenting *to poion ti*, the heart of the problem is with *logoi* in particular (343al). And it is explained that the problem with *logoi* is their derivation from names:

> We say that no name for any of them is stable *[bebaion]*, and nothing prevents the things that are now called 'round' from being called 'straight' and the 'straight' ones from being called 'round'; and they will be no less stable *[bebaiôs]* for those who make the change *[metathemenois]* and call *[kalousin]* them the opposite way around. And indeed the same holds concerning *logos*, since it is composed of names and phrases *[onomatôn kai rhêmatôn]:* none is stable *[bebaion]* sufficiently stably *[hikanôs bebaiôs]*. (343a9–b6)

This explanation intervenes between and explains the two complaints against the Four: thus it occupies the central and pivotal moment of the digression as a whole, which is quite systematically ring-composed.[7] And the crucial premise of the explanation is the familiar principle of compositionality: a *logos* can be no better than the names of which it is composed. We might have expected as much, given the general respect for compositionality shown in the *Cratylus*, and more specifically given the inference made there from false names to false

7. In the outermost ring, we have criticisms of Dionysius and his book (341a–b; 344d–345c); second, moving inwards, come general warnings against writing (341 b–c; 344c–d); third, an account of the true knowledge which writers lack (341c–d; 343e–4c); fourth, the problems facing even one who knows the truth in expounding it (341d–2a; 343c–d). At the centre is the account of the Five (342a–3c); and the explanation of what is wrong with *to poion ti* is at the core of this, with the attack on names as its pivot.

statements. But the *Cratylus* never made it explicit that the more general (indeed, rather vague: cf. IV.3) defectiveness of names brought out by the Two Cratyluses argument infects all the *logoi* composed of them.

Now what the *Letter's* complaint against names emphasizes is their lack of 'stability' *[bebaiotês],* which is illustrated by the possibility that our actual assignment of names to referents could be reversed. This reversal of names is presumably the same as that envisaged by Hermogenes in the *Cratylus:* and there are verbal echoes here of his position in the sequence *metatithenai-kalein-echein* (343b1–3, cf. *Crat.* 384d3–4). The possibility of reversal is taken to show, in the *Letter* as for Hermogenes, that there is no natural, intrinsic, necessary relation between the phonemes 'circle' and the object it names. It is an arbitrary relation, of a kind we can create or abolish at will: a matter of *thesis*.

This acceptance of the arbitrary might look like an affirmation of Hermogenean conventionalism. But to read it that way would be to ignore its status in the *Letter* as a *complaint.* In fact, the *Letter's* position is identical with the pessimistic conclusion I have attributed to the *Cratylus*. Our actual names are arbitrary, and there is no point in hoping for anything better; but this is nevertheless a profound defect.

If these two positions are the same, then the *Letter's* complaint that names are 'unstable' must be deeply related to the thesis of the *Cratylus* that they are images, which is the basis of their defectiveness there. In fact, the two claims are very close. For if we look at other Platonic uses of the concept of stability, we can see that, while 'instability' certainly *includes* susceptibility to change over time (e.g., at *Cratylus* 411c2–6), it is not reducible to it: rather, 'instability' is an ongoing inadequacy of which susceptibility to change is a sign. As I noted in Chapter V, 'stable' is one of a family of terms Plato uses to denote general ontological adequacy, typically associated with what is 'true' *[alêthês],* 'pure' *[katharos],* 'sound' *[hugiês]* and—since truth and purity are what render something intelligible—'clear' *[saphês]*.[8] Some particularly telling uses of the term occur in the *Cratylus* itself. In getting Hermogenes to dissociate himself from Protagoras, Socrates asks whether he holds that things are as each person deems them, "or do they seem to you to have a certain stability of nature *[bebaiotês tês ousias]* of their own?" (386a3–4). Once Hermogenes has given his assent to this, and to the rejection of Protagoras it implies, Socrates asserts that things have "a certain stable nature" *[ousian tina bebaion]:* that is, they are not relative to us or determined by our beliefs about them, but rather have determinate natures independently of us (386e1–4). Stability, then, consists in the possession of an intrinsic 'nature' which sets limits to what properties a thing

8. As in: *to te bebaion kai to katharon kai alêthes kai…eilikrines, Philebus* 59c2–3 (cf. 62b6); *ouden hugies oude bebaion, Phaedo* 90c3–4; *alêthôs kai bebaiôs, Republic* 585e3 (cf. *Phaedo* 90c9, *Timaeus* 37b8); *saphes kai bebaion, Phaedrus* 275c6 (cf. 277d8, *Philebus* 56a7).

can be truly said to have and what kinds of change it can undergo. This understanding is confirmed by a crucial passage of the *Sophist*, in which the Visitor suggests that we should have the courage to say that "what is not *[to me on]* stably *[bebaiôs]* is, having its own nature *[phusin]*, just as the large is large and the beautiful is beautiful" (258b9–c1). Something—even not-being—'stably is' to the extent that it possesses a genuine, determinate, mind-independent nature *[phusis]*. Instability consists in ontological degeneracy and indeterminacy, which is manifested in relativization and the compresence of opposites, as well as in susceptibility to strictly temporal flux. This use of the concept thus reveals a commitment to what we might call the *principle of stability:* that is, the principle that change and constancy over time correspond to and express ontological weakness or soundness respectively.[9] The extent to which an object is genuinely, really *x* determines the extent to which it will be enduringly, reliably *x* over time: *bebaiotês* expresses both the ontological (synchronic) and temporal (diachronic) ideas involved. This duality is of fundamental significance for Plato's conception of flux—for seeing why he regularly takes Protagoreanism and Heracliteanism to be different expressions of a single position (cf. V.2).[10]

So the complaint of the *Seventh Letter* that names are unstable comes to much the same as the designation of them as images in the *Cratylus:* both express the accusation that names are ontologically degenerate and therefore potentially deceptive. This instability is inevitable, so that there is no hope of avoiding it through a naturally correct language; on the other hand, it is still a matter for *complaint*, it describes something that is wrong with language. The *Letter* adds to this reaffirmation of Plato's pessimism a very important corollary: since compositionality applies to this general feature of names, *logoi* are necessarily defective as well. Moreover, the structure of the *Letter's* arraignment of the Four, with the denunciation of names at its innermost core, confirms the

9. Cf.Irwin, 'Heracliteanism', who rightly points out that in Plato's conception of Heraclitean flux, the compresence of opposites ("*a*-change") is more important than temporal change ("*s*-change"). However, Irwin does not say much about how and why Plato takes the two kinds of change to be related.

10. Despite its role in this distinctively Platonic conceptual scheme, this view of stability has a considerable background in Greek thought. Note the heroine's denunciation in Euripides' *Electra:* "In this especially you were deceived *[épata]* and did not realize it: you boasted you were somebody *[tis]*, relying on your possessions. But possessions only keep you company for a short time. Character *[phusis]* is stable *[bebaios]*, not possessions" (938–41). Her point is not just that property comes and goes but that this is a sign of its unreality: it is not enough to make you 'a somebody', *tis*, even while you have it. Euripides' moralizing here comes strikingly close to Platonic metaphysics. For Plato at least sometimes refuses to grant that an unstable sensible particular—which possesses only defectively the *phusis* which is the Form—can be a *ti*. And, as I noted in relation to the parallel between Parmenides' *Doxa* and the *Cratylus'* etymologies, this defectiveness leads to deception, which is essentially the placing of trust in what is unstable (II.5).

suggestion of the *Cratylus* re-examination that it is in virtue of this metaphysical defectiveness that names (and with them *logoi*) refer to comparably misleading sensible particulars (cf. IV.5).

VI. 2
LOGOS AND KNOWLEDGE

As the argument of the *Seventh Letter* suggests, Plato's concern with names is to a great extent a function of his concern with *logoi*. The *Cratylus* itself confirms this by its repeated invocations of the principle of compositionality: that is, by the way in which the capacities and properties of *logoi* for semantic or mimetic content, for correctness and incorrectness, for truth and falsehood, are treated as derivative of those of names. Thus Plato's normative account of names can plausibly be read as a foundation, or even a proxy, for an account of the *logoi* composed of them—and that means an account of philosophical *logoi* above all. In the *Timaeus*, Plato discusses the origin of human speech and the senses, and explains both as follows:

> As my account has it, our sight has indeed proved to be a source of supreme benefit to us, in that none of our present statements about the universe could ever have been made if we had never seen any stars, sun or heaven. As it is, however, our ability to see the periods of day-and-night, of months and of years, of equinoxes and solstices, has led to the invention of number, and has given us the idea of time and opened the path to inquiry into the nature of the universe. These pursuits have given us philosophy, a gift from the gods to the mortal race whose value neither has been nor ever will be surpassed. I'm quite prepared to declare this to be the supreme good our eyesight offers us…. Likewise, the same account goes for sound and hearing—these too are the gods' gifts, given for the same purpose and intended to achieve the same result. Speech was designed for this very purpose—it plays the greatest part in its achievement.[11]

There is a strong contrast here with other early Greek conceptions of language, which tend to emphasize its role in the history of human progress and depict it as, above all, what makes possible social and political coop-eration.[12] Plato's emphasis is very different indeed, and his rarefied sense of the function of

11. 47a–d, trans. D.Zeyl, in *Plato: Complete Works* ed. John Cooper, assoc. ed. D.S.Hutchinson (Indianapolis, 1997).

12. For instance, Isocrates says, "because there has been implanted in us the power to persuade each other and to make clear to each other whatever we desire, not only have we escaped the life of wild beasts, but we have come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts; and, generally speaking, there is no institution devised by man which the power of speech has not helped us to establish"

language makes the ambitions of the naturalistic project—and its pessimistic upshot—in the *Cratylus* considerably more intelligible. No doubt a word like *sklêrotês* is perfectly adequate if what we care about is establishing the peace, or selling things to each other, or moving slabs from place to place: but if language is above all the vehicle of philosophical understanding, it seems reasonable to hope for something more— for terms which can actually embody and transmit philosophical insights. For *sklêrotês* to succeed by that standard, it would have to function as a 'strong disclosure', revealing the nature of what it names. That is, we would have to be able to discover from scrutiny of the name what hardness consists in—viz., as it emerges in the *Timaeus*, resistance to touch, which objects possess by virtue of being composed of quadrangular bases (62b–c). Cratylus actually does think that words function like that: to the eye of the skilled etymologist they are telescoped analyses, revealing the natures of what they name. But by the end of the *Cratylus*, as we have seen, Plato does not share this optimism.

This conception of language as first and foremost the vehicle of philosophy entails that the *logoi* by which it must be judged are the definitions and arguments used in philosophical dialectic. That these are in view in the *Cratylus* is strongly suggested by the initial naturalistic account of names as tools by which "we teach *[didaskomen]* each other something and divide *[diakrinomen]* things as they are" (388b10–11), so that "a name is a tool for teaching and for dividing reality *[ousias]*, as a shuttle divides what one weaves" (388bl3–c1). And since the division of being is (with 'collection') the essence of dialectic in Plato's later dialogues, and dialectic is the only real mode of 'teaching', this functional account of names would in fact apply just as well to the philosophical *logoi* composed of them.

Given this quite direct bearing on the status of philosophical *logoi*, we should expect the conclusions of the *Cratylus* to dovetail with—or to modify—Plato's conception of philosophical method. Even to sketch the evolution of this would be an enormous and controversial undertaking, however: I will merely suggest, rather speculatively, what seems to me to be a plausible story about the place of the *Cratylus* in Plato's thinking about philosophical dialectic and definition in particular.[13]

As a starting-point, recall that in the *Phaedo*, Socrates characterizes his philosophical method as one which proceeds through *logoi*. Rather than investigate beings or things *[ta onta, ta pragmata]* directly, he has 'taken refuge' in *logoi* and investigates through them the truth of things *[onta]*. "So perhaps the

(*Antidosis* 253–5, trans. George Norlin in the Loeb edition, *Isocrates* (Cambridge Mass., 1928–9), vol. 2). This becomes a canonical argument in defense of rhetoric: cf. Cicero, *De Oratore* I.33–4, Aelius Aristides, *Against Plato in Defense of Oratory* 205–211. Cf. also Thomas Cole on the relation of language to social order in the 'Democritean' tradition of Greek thought, in *Democritus and the Sources of Greek Anthropology* (Chapel Hill, 1967; reprinted Atlanta, 1990), esp. pp. 61–7.

way I'm depicting it *[hôi eikazô]* is in a way inaccurate *[ouk eoiken]*. For I don't admit at all that someone who investigates things *[onta]* in *logoi* investigates in images *[eikones]* more than someone who investigates in facts *[erga]*" (99e6–100a3). The phrasing here is ambiguous, but Socrates' preference for *logoi* suggests that, if anything, they are somehow images to a lesser degree or in a less confusing way than sensible particulars.

Be that as it may, in such early 'definitional' dialogues as the *Charmides*, *Laches*, and *Euthyphro*, Socrates undertakes to look for a definition or account *[logos]* of an object of investigation such as temperance, courage, or piety; and Plato emphasizes the importance of acquiring such a *logos* if one is to convert true beliefs about that object into knowledge. Thus the Plato of the early dialogues is often taken to endorse the general thesis that 'knowledge is true belief with a *logos*', i.e., a suitably explanatory definition.[14] And a *locus classicus* for this view seems to be provided by the *Meno* passage in which Socrates distinguishes true opinion from knowledge by saying that true opinions "run away from a person's soul, so that they are not worth much, until one ties them down with a reckoning of the reason why *[aitias logismôi]*…. And when they are tied down, first they become knowledge, and then they are reliable *[monimoi]"* (98a2–6). An important question for this interpretation is, of course, how to relate it to the *Theaetetus* and its arguments that—on several possible understandings of what a *logos* is—knowledge *cannot* be defined as true belief with a *logos*. One interesting interpretation, which will usefully contrast with the one I want to advance here, has been offered by Gail Fine. Taking the *Meno* to affirm that knowledge is true belief with an account, Fine argues that the *Theaetetus* retains this general thesis, but now implicitly defends what she terms an 'interrelation' model of accounts. On this model, to know some-thing is to be able to give an account of how it fits in to the various classifications established

13. My presentation of this story treats the *Cratylus* as a *post-Republic* dialogue, best read in close conjunction with the *Theaetetus*. But since the developments I see are rather subtle matters of emphasis, it may be that nothing here is incompatible with placing the *Cratylus* in a significantly earlier context—even, say, as an immediate corrective to the *Phaedo* passage I quote. Cf. n. 18 below.

14. I focus here on the account of Gail Fine, 'Knowledge and *Logos* in the *Theaetetus*' ['Knowledge'], *Philosophical Review* 88 (1979), pp. 366–97, who holds that this position is reconstrued rather than rejected by the later Plato. Alternatively, cf. Guthrie: "For Socrates, the ability to define was itself proof of knowledge, but in Plato's developed doctrine even this was not enough" (*History*, vol. 5, p. 405). Jon Moline also argues that in the early dialogues and the *Republic*, Plato believes in "the epistemic sufficiency of the ability to give an account", while the later Plato does not, supporting this with an interesting reading of the differences between the *Republic* and the *Laws* (*Plato's Theory of Understanding* (Madison, 1981) pp. 43–51, 171–177). However, Moline extends this 'giving' of a *logos* in the early dialogues to include showing one's *logos* to be 'dialectically sturdy' (pp. 45–6); it is not clear to me how sharply this can be distinguished from the open-ended dialectical testing required in the later dialogues.

by collection and division, like the account of the letters of the alphabet sketched in the *Philebus*. Thus "knowledge of *x* is correct belief about *x* with the ability to produce accounts properly relating *x* to other suitably interrelated objects in the same field."[15]

Now it seems to me that Plato is highly unlikely to have held either the earlier or the later position here attributed to him. To begin with, nowhere does the early Plato actually say that to know something *consists* in having true belief and a *logos* of it. It is repeatedly claimed or suggested that this is a necessary condition of knowledge, which includes the ability to define or, more generally, to express what it is one knows; but this is never said to be sufficient. Even in the crucial passage of the *Meno*, what must be added to true belief is not a bare propositional content but a *process* of 'tying down'—not a *logos* but a *logismos*. This process evidently consists in further dialectic: what the slave boy needs is further questioning on problems involving the mathematical principle at work in the example, until his grasp of that principle is secure. "These beliefs have just now been stirred up like a dream; but if someone asks him these same things many times, and in many ways, you know that he will end up knowing about these things as precisely as anyone" (85c9–d1). There is no suggestion that any other way of being exposed to the relevant mathematical principles would be sufficient—no basis for the supposition that a *logos*, regardless of how it is acquired or 'possessed', is equivalent to a *logismos*.

This is important for what we should expect from the *Theaetetus*. Here Fine's reading depends on the view that the final definition of knowledge, as true belief with a *logos* or account, is not refuted across the board. Only particular ways of specifying this *logos* are rejected: Plato's aim is actually to get us to see that something different is intended, and that, with 'account' rightly understood, the definition escapes the critical final refutation at 209e6–10b2. This refutation seems to show the definition to be circular, by amounting to 'knowledge is true belief with knowledge of an account [of differentness]'; Fine claims that the second occurrence of 'knowledge' can be eliminated via the rephrased definition cited earlier.

The problem is that this diagnosis obscures the circularity rather than eliminating it. For the dilemma Socrates presents in the text remains in force: is *knowledge* of these interrelated accounts here implied, or merely true belief about them? If one merely has true beliefs about the *logoi* which interrelate the various objects in a field, why should *that* constitute knowledge? A man may define and define, and be a villain: the fraud, the clueless pedant and the idiot savant can presumably memorize and 'produce' as long and complex a set of *logoi* as anybody else. And if, more plausibly, those *logoi* must be known in some stronger sense—a sense which would incorporate the thought that a knower should also possess understanding, adeptness in refutation and argument, and any

15. Fine, 'Knowledge', p. 394.

relevant practical skills or moral dispositions—then nothing has been defined at all. This is less obvious than it might be because we often do define particular fields of knowledge in the sorts of systematic and content-specific terms Fine has in mind. So for example we might say that an astronomer is someone who knows all about stars, planets, gases, etc. and can give a correct account of how these objects are related. But this kind of definition is used to distinguish the astronomer from the physicist and the meteorologist; it does very little to explain *knowledge*, the mental state they have in common.

This is an objection not only to Fine's reading, but to any which attempts to salvage a positive alternative proposal from the end of the *Theaetetus*, so as to claim that *in some sense* the possession of *logos* is fully constitutive of knowledge for the later Plato. In fact, Socrates' very powerful argument here is perfectly general. *Any* definition of knowledge purely in terms of its prepositional content will be fundamentally inadequate, for it will beg the all-important question of what grasp of or relation to that content is required. Readings of the *Theaetetus* which attribute such a definition to Plato are thus misguided in just the same way as the interpretation of the *Theaetetus* offered by Cornford, according to which the dialogue ends in an *aporia* intended to show that there can be no account of knowledge without reference to the Forms.[16] The problem with both lines of interpretation is that to state the objects to which knowledge relates us is not to explain what that relation is. And, for the later Plato as for the earlier, there is more to a *logismos* than the 'possession', in some unspecified sense, of a *logos*, and no way fully to specify knowledge in terms of the prepositional contents known. The requirement that all this must be known 'in the right way'—that one must have the kind of rich, secure, behaviourally operative grasp of the relevant *logoi* which only prolonged dialectic can induce—is irreducible; and a definition to which 'in the right way' must be tacked on has not defined very much. I see no sign that Plato thinks that anything sufficiently general and precise to be part of a useful definition can be said about what constitutes grasping *logoi* 'in the right way'—in a way, that is, adequate to count as knowledge.[17]

If this reading of the upshot of the *Theaetetus* is on the right track, then Plato by that time holds that no *logos* can fully embody, express and transmit knowledge, in such a way that the 'possession of or 'ability to produce' that *logos* is an adequate positive test for knowledge. This is not, of course, because knowledge must include some further, mysteriously non-proposi-tional content,

16. Cornford, *Theory*, pp. 162–3.

17. In fact, it seems appropriate for this to be allowed to depend on context. For 'knowledge' *(epistêmê)* and 'understanding' *(nous)* are powerfully evaluative: they are terms of commendation, and what cognitive states deserve to be commended may well vary according to context. This is surely one reason for Plato's apparent waffling on questions such as whether sensible particulars can be known and how *epistêmê* relates to *nous* (where the latter figures as a distinct state at all).

but simply because it consists in a particular kind of *command* of the relevant *logoi*, a command which cannot itself be guaranteed or exhausted by some further *logoi*. And this is what we should expect, given Plato's consistent commitment to dialectic as the only possible method of genuine learning (and one for which there are strenuous moral and intellectual prerequisites). After all, if dialectic *could* produce a set of fully knowledge-transmitting definitions—a perfected Dialectician's Dictionary—dialectic itself would ultimately be dispensable. Once the Dictionary had been completed, it could subsequently be replaced by a deeply un-Platonic programme of authoritative teaching, and rote learning of the magic formulae.

So Plato has excellent epistemological motives for holding that there are limits to what even the most philosophically informed *logos* can convey, and shows a full awareness of those limits in the *Theaetetus*. And now we can see where the *Cratylus* comes in. For what the *Cratylus* does is supply the necessary argument from, so to speak, the other direction: starting from the nature of language itself, it shows that the limits of *logos* do indeed fall where epistemological and methodological considerations call for them to. As a defective image, a name cannot hope to fully represent and disclose the nature of what it names; and, given the principle of compositionality, neither can a definition made up of such names.

The 'pessimistic' result that all *logoi* fall short of the objects they describe in a potentially deceptive way means that all any philosophical *logos* can do in dialectic is play a heuristic role: some *logoi* will do this better than others, but since none is perfect there is no reason to expect that any will render all others otiose, or will by itself be sufficient for its possession to confer understanding. The *Cratylus* thus serves to correct the earlier Plato's flirtation with a bias in favour of *logoi* over *erga:* since names, and with them *logoi*, are themselves a kind of image, they belong to the same general ontological caste as sensible particulars. This can explain why the *Seventh Letter* emphasizes that in dialectic we work with *all* of the Four, which means using sensible particulars, presumably as examples, as well as *logoi* (344a–b). This is a serious deviation from the dialectical procedure outlined in the 'Divided Line' of the *Republic*, where such a reliance on sensible particulars as images, in addition to *logoi*, is precisely what distinguishes the lower reasoning involved in *dianoia* from *noêsis* (510b–11e). Given the findings of the *Cratylus* about names and *logoi*, we will not want to give up any further heuristic resources the *eidôla* may offer.

If the morals of the *Cratylus* and *Theaetetus* are complementary in this way, they can help to explain some aspects of definition in the later dialectical dialogues, such as the *Sophist* and *Statesman*. A striking feature of these dialogues is the amount of time dedicated to definitions which do not form part of the final account of the subject, most notably in the six pre-liminary definitions of the *Sophist*. It seems unlikely that these are simply to be discarded: that the sophist is a hunter of young men, for example, tells us something important which we could not have got from the definition of the sophist as image-maker, even if the

latter captures his nature best. That the statesman is a herder of humans is (I suspect) again a true and useful definition, though one dangerously liable to mislead. Here as in the earlier 'definitional' dialogues, a range of *logoi* are served up for dialectical volleyball: but the aim now is simply to learn whatever one can from each, as well as from models, myths, and whatever other instruments of illumination may be at hand.

Since I do not think that even the earlier Plato is ever committed to the view that knowledge is true belief with a definition, I take these developments to be a matter of emphasis: they evince an increased sensitivity to certain dangers, rather than a substantial change in view. [18] In fact, it seems to me unlikely that Plato could ever have been unaware of the dangers of an over-simple faith in definitions as carriers and guarantors of knowledge. There are strong hints of such an awareness in the Socratic dialogues— notably in their treatment of definitions which from the perspective of Platonic theory elsewhere seem to be 'right', yet are overturned or abandoned. In the *Euthyphro*, for example, it is proposed that piety is a matter of service to the gods in an undertaking requiring human collaboration (13d–14a). This corresponds very neatly to Socrates' depiction of his own divine mission in the *Apology*, in which he claims to be serving the god by attempting to make his fellow-citizens more virtuous (30e–1b). But Euthyphro is unable to specify what such an undertaking could consist in, and so the definition is allowed to lapse—not because there is anything wrong with it, but because Euthyphro is not in a position to understand and explain why it is right. In the *Charmides*, several of the definitions of moderation have something to recommend them, but none is grasped sufficiently well to resist the elenchus; in particular, it is surely telling that Critias cannot defend his very Socratic understanding of it in terms of self-knowledge (162d–7a). Likewise in the *Laches*, Nicias is presumably right, in Platonic terms, that courage is a special kind of knowledge, and it is explicit that he is taking on Socrates' own idea (194cff.); but his account is unable to withstand examination.[19]

18. So I do not think that one can assign the *Cratylus* a place in the chronology of Plato's works on the basis of its content; but taking the *Cratylus* as prolegomenon to the *Theaetetus* enables the most tidy 'developmentalist' story to be told about the shift I have described. A full story would have to deal with the *Phaedrus*, which I would take to be the first *post-Republic* dialogue, and its contrast between sterile written *logoi* (extended in passing to prepared spoken speeches at 277e–8a) and the living understanding implanted in a gifted soul by dialectic. In effect, we can see the *Cratylus* as working out the groundwork for this critique of writing, and finding, in doing so, that it applies to spoken words as well as to written. The *Theaetetus* presents complementary results in the theory of knowledge; the *Sophist* and *Statesman* show this pessimistic—or, perhaps better in this context, heuristic—understanding of philosophical *logos* at work. However, I am in general a sceptic about such narratives, which are so easy to devise and so difficult to substantiate. Nicholas White (*Knowledge*, Chapters 5–8) presents an intriguing narrative which differs from this in a number of ways but works with the same chronological sequence.

Commentators tend to stress that in such situations Plato's purpose is to prod us into working out for ourselves where the dialectic has gone wrong or fallen short. But once we do so we will also see a simple point being made, and made with emphasis: 'getting it right' without understanding is not enough. And we have no reason to assume that there is any conclusive positive test for such understanding, as there would be if it were exhausted or guaranteed by 'possession' of some further definition or definitions. There is only the negative test of dialectical examination, which can be prolonged indefinitely and will eventually— such is Plato's faith—reveal bogus claimants to knowledge for what they are.

To sum up, my suggestion is that we read the *Cratylus* in light not only of the 'political' and 'scientific' worries about actual languages which I discussed in the Introduction, but in relation to a danger to which Plato's own philosophical method is vulnerable: the fetishization of *logoi*. Platonic philosophizing is a 'method of *logoi';* but it had better not follow that some snappy set of *logoi,* of the sort a Dionysius might memorize and publish in his book, is sufficient to represent fully the understanding at which it aims. The *Cratylus* shows why it does not follow: it shows how the very nature of language limits what *logoi* can do. Together with the *Theaetetus,* it makes the methodologically and indeed ethically vital point that the 'possession' of or ability to produce a *logos,* whatever its content, cannot be taken as a guarantee of understanding. One can imagine that some Platonic philosophers, not to mention unsavory imitators like Dionysius, might well have been confused on that point: they would be just as guilty as Cratylus of putting too much trust in names, and the *Cratylus* would tell just as deeply against them.

19. Cf. von Fritz, 'Passage', pp. 430–2.

VII
The *Cratylus* and After: False Statement

The *Sophist* is widely taken to represent a laudable breakthrough in Plato's thinking about language. For the first time, so the story goes, Plato fully recognizes that a sentence or statement *[logos]* is a different kind of thing from a name. It is a complex whole composed of a name and a verb or predicate *[rhêma]*, each of which possesses a different linguistic function; it asserts rather than merely naming. It is the Eleatic Visitor's brief discussion of these (roughly) syntactic points which, together with his explanation of not-being as difference, enables him finally to account for the possibility of false statement. Plato had struggled inconclusively with the paradox of false statement in the *Euthydemus*, *Cratylus* and *Theaetetus:* these earlier attempts were doomed by the lack of the syntactic insights of the *Sophist*.

I will refer to this line of interpretation as the *syntactic reading* of the *Sophist*.[1] The part of it which I want to call into question is not the general claim that the discussion of syntax is important for Plato's explanation of false statement: any account of false statement must depend on some understanding of what a statement is. What is problematic is the more specific claim that the discussion of syntax is designed to identify a particular feature of statements, hitherto

1. A fully developed version of this interpretation is Nicholas Denyer, *Language, Thought and Falsehood in Ancient Greek Philosophy [Language]* (London, 1991), Chapter 9. See also G.E.L.Owen, 'Plato on Not-Being' ['Not-Being'], in *Logic, Science and Dialectic*, ed. Martha Nussbaum (London, 1986) (first pub. 1970); Cooper, *Theaetetus*, pp. 165–179; Crombie, *Examination*, pp. 492–98; and Michael Frede, 'Plato's *Sophist* on False Statements' *['Sophist']*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. Richard Kraut (Cambridge, 1992). Dissident readings have been offered by Luce, 'Truth'; Gosling, *Plato*, pp. 198–200, 225; John McDowell, in 'Falsehood and Not-Being in Plato's *Sophist*' ['Falsehood'], in *Language and Logos*, ed. Malcolm Schofield and Martha Nussbaum (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 127–34; and, *en passant*, Nicholas White, in his introduction to *Plato: Sophist* (Indianapolis, 1993), p. xxviii.

I will here bypass a myriad of interpretive problems surrounding the *Sophist's* discussions of being, not-being and language: for fuller discussion, see, among a vast literature (and in addition to the works noted above): David Keyt, 'Plato on Falsity: *Sophist* 263b', in *Exegesis and Argument*, ed. E.N.Lee, A.P.D.Mourelatos, R.M.

inadequately recognized, which enables them to be false, thus enabling the paradoxes of false statement to be dissolved. (Interestingly, there is no real consensus among proponents of the syntactic reading as to precisely what feature of statements the discussion picks out in this way: I will consider several possibilities later on.)

What makes this relevant to the *Cratylus* is that the syntactic reading goes naturally with the drawing of a sharp contrast between the two dialogues. For there is no comparable discussion of syntax in the *Cratylus*, and no recognition that one is needed for the explanation of false statement. Worse, the *Cratylus* explains falsehood as a kind of inaccurate mimesis; and this explanation gives the 'compositional' result that names and statements are false in just the same way. Indeed, it argues for the possibility of false statement *from* the possibility of false naming. According to the syntactic reading, Plato has in the *Sophist* come to see this compositional approach as fundamentally misguided. Here, falsity supervenes on the statement as a complex whole, and is possible because of some feature characteristic of such wholes.

This contrast is not *necessary* to the syntactic reading, for one can argue that the insights of the *Sophist* are already unofficially at work in the *Cratylus*.[2] I will also be arguing for a rapprochement of the two dialogues,

but in the reverse direction: the syntactic reading should be rejected, and the *Sophist* seen as much closer to the *Cratylus* than is generally supposed.

The motivation for this alternative reading is that, as I will try to show, Plato's treatment of falsehood in the *Cratylus* is more carefully thought out and more of an achievement than the syntactic reading would suggest. Moreover, it is bound up with a conception of language which he retains in later works, including the *Sophist* itself. For in the *Cratylus* it is the mimetic conception of language which explains falsehood, and Plato seems to stand by this in later works—at any rate he regularly uses mimetic language to describe speech. (No doubt this could be dismissed as dead metaphor; but Platonic metaphor is generally pretty lively.)[3] Strikingly, the *Sophist* itself is obsessed with mimesis: the whole discussion of being and not-being, *logos* and falsehood takes place in explication of the sophist

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Rorty (New York, 1973); L.M.De Rijk, *Plato's Sophist: A Philosophical Commentary [Sophist]* (Amsterdam, 1986); and J.P.Kostman, 'False Logos and Not-Being in Plato's *Sophist*' ['False Logos'], in *Patterns in Plato's Thought*, ed. J.M.E.Mo avcsik (Dordrecht, 1973).

2. Gail Fine has offered a strongly argued interpretation to this effect, and hints in this direction are occasionally to be found among other proponents of the syntactic reading. See Fine, 'Naming', p. 292; cf. Owen, 'Not-Being', p. 120 n. 41, Crombie, *Examination*, p. 497.

3. In the *Statesman*, the Visitor employs an elaborate analogy with painting and sculpture to describe his own work of definition (277a–c); the *Laws* discusses music and poetry as images *[eikones]*, just like paintings and sculptures, and correct to the extent they are like the originals (667c–9b).

as imitator (233cff., note his 'spoken images', *eidôla legomena*, at 234c5–7). If the *Sophist* represented a hard-won breakthrough over earlier confusions about language which found expression in the mimetic account of the *Cratylus*, we would expect it to avoid or reject mimetic associations as misleading.[4] Instead, its account of false *logos* is explicitly offered as an explanation of how an image can be incorrect (239dff., 264c–d). In short, the order of explanation found in the *Cratylus* is reversed, but the assimilation of word and image remains fundamental. This gives the impression that the whole discussion is taking place *within* the general framework of the *Cratylus*—that Plato has realized, not that the *Cratylus* account was mistaken, but that it is not a complete story.

All this is far from being decisive evidence against the syntactic reading: but it seems to me grounds for suspicion. What matters is the direct evidence of the texts themselves, and in what follows I will focus narrowly on the relevant passages of the *Cratylus* and the *Sophist*. First, I will spell out what the *Cratylus'* solution to the problem of false statement consists in. I then turn to the *Sophist* to examine the discussion of syntax (VII.2); finally I sketch the *Sophist* account of false statement, and note some problems with various versions of the syntactic reading (VII.3).

VII.1
FALSE STATEMENT IN THE CRATYLUS

In Socrates' 're-examination' of naturalism, both the *Dianomê* and the Two Cratyluses arguments are taken to have the important corollary that false sentences or statements *[logoi]* are possible (431b, 432e). ('Statement' is clearly the most accurate translation of *logos* in the *Sophist* context, as will become apparent; matters are vaguer in the *Cratylus*, and I will speak indifferently of sentences, statements and *logoi*.) In addition to the *Cratylus* and *Sophist* (261a–4d) passages, the problem of false statement makes appearances in the *Euthydemus* (283e–8a) and *Theaetetus* (187d–200d, n.b. 190a); together with some fragmentary contemporary evidence, these discussions make it clear that the issue was a lively intellectual *topos* of the day.[5] At the centre of the discussion was the denial by some sophists of the possibility of falsehood (and, relatedly, the possibility of contradiction, cf. *Euthydemus* 285d–6b). This denial clearly took support, and perhaps its initial inspiration, from Parmenides' rejection of 'what is not': the standard description of false statement in Plato is as saying 'what is not' *[to mê on]*, or 'things which are not' *[ta mê onta]* (*Theaetetus* 188d3–4, *Sophist* 237a3ff., cf. *Euthydemus* 284a6–c4).[6] In the *Euthydemus*, the

4. Note too that, as discussed in Chapter VI.1, the *Seventh Letter* makes if anything even stronger use of compositionality than the *Cratylus*. If the *Sophist* renounces compositionality about truth along with mimesis, the *Seventh Letter* presumably must be rejected as inauthentic.

sophists provide a pair of arguments for the impossibility of speaking falsely. First, they argue that those who speak falsely must 'speak the thing which their statement is about' *[legein to pragma peri hou an ho logos ê1]* (283e9–4al). But someone who speaks of a thing, speaks of a thing which is; and to speak of what is is to speak truly; so anyone who speaks speaks truly (284a1–8). Second, one cannot deal with and have an effect on what is not (285b5–7); and to speak is certainly to do something and have an effect (think of orators in the assembly); so anyone who speaks must be speaking of what is– which again means speaking truly (284b8-c6). In the *Theaetetus*, it is made explicit that 'what is not' *[to me on, ta me onta]* is tantamount to 'nothing' *[ouden, mêden];* and someone who judges nothing (judgement being silent statement, 190a) does not judge, just as someone who sees nothing does not see, and likewise for hearing and touching (188e–9b). This comes close to the second *Euthydemus* argument: speech (or judgement) requires interaction with its object, which therefore must exist; and this latching on to an existing object is sufficient to make what is said true.

This argument from interaction might suggest that the real problem relates strictly to speech about non-existent entities, together with a failure to distinguish such speech from false predications. And this suggestion is strengthened by an apparent hint in the *Euthydemus:* Ctesippus, struggling against the sophists' prohibition on saying *ta me onta*, says that someone speaking falsely says "things that are in a certain way, but not as they are" [*ta onta men tropon tina legei, ou mentoi hôs ge echei*, 284c7–8]. This is not genuinely taken up by the sophists, which leaves the impression that it represents a promising line of explanation: false statement is indeed about things which are, but misrepresents *how* they are. However, this is clearly not the whole story, for false predications, even when properly recognized as such, also seem to be ruled out by the prohibition on saying *to me on*. In the *Theaetetus*, false judgement is said to occur "when someone judges things which are not concerning something *[ta me onta peri hotououn]*" (188d3); and the problem is that it seems impossible for anyone to "judge what is not *[to me on]*, whether about things which are *[peri tôn ontôn]* or by itself *[auto kath' hauto]*" (188d9–10, cf. 189b1–2). What makes this particularly telling is that the *peri* formulation will be Plato's own in his explanation of predication in the *Sophist*: so it seems that one can have the right general conception of the structure of a false predication and still be trapped in the paradox.

Thus the problem of false statement is evidently a quite general problem about *all* uses of language which could be described as involving reference to what is not. And this problem is far from being generated simply by a dubious analogy with sensation, as the *Theaetetus* passage might suggest: there are a real and difficult set of puzzles here indigenous to the philosophy of language. Admittedly, the

5. For this background, see Chapter 3 of Denyer, *Language*.

6. See esp. Parmenides B2.5–8, B6, B7.1–2.

only area in which a difficulty along these lines still seems to be a live philosophical puzzle is that of sentences involving non-referring names and descriptions—Santa Claus, the present King of France, phlogiston, the golden mountain and their colleagues. But in the absence of any theory discriminating the roles of different kinds of expressions, and the different relations they may have to the world, false predications are similarly problematic. If I say, 'The grass is red' when it is green, then what I say seems to be about, and depend for its intelligibility on, the non-existent redness as well as the existent grass. And so something needs to be said about how such wayward units of language can be in sufficient contact with the world to say what we think they do without actually matching up with what there is—how there can be a middle zone between truth and meaninglessness in which meaningful falsehood may occur.

There are two things to note about Plato's treatment of this problem in the *Cratylus*. First, it is thoroughly compositional. As I noted in I.2, the issue of falsehood is first raised, to little immediate purpose, in the discussion of conventionalism (385b2–d1). Here Socrates gets Hermogenes to agree that there is such a thing as speaking truly and falsely; that some *logoi* are true and others false, the true 'saying the things that are as they are *[ta onta hôs estin]'*, while the false say them as they are not [*hôs ouk estin*]'; that the parts of a true *logos* are true; that the smallest part of a *logos* is a name; and, therefore, that it is possible to say a true or a false name. The general notion at work is evidently what I termed the principle of *compositionality:* viz., the principle that the capacities and properties of complex wholes, and complex linguistic expressions in particular—specifically, their content, truth and falsity—are determined by the capacities and properties of their parts. And as I suggested earlier, whatever the purpose of the argument in its immediate context, it also serves to mark out an important desideratum for an account of correct naming: it must show how names, and with them *logoi*, can be true or false.

Thus when Socrates takes up the matter again, following the *Dianomê* argument, the argument goes in the reverse direction: since false names and verbs are possible, so are false statements.

> So if there's also some such assignment in this case [i.e., correct and incorrect assignments of names as well as pictures], the one is what we mean to call 'speaking truly' *[alêtheuein]*, and the other is 'speaking falsely' *[pseudesthai]*. And if this is so, and it is possible to assign *[dianemein]* names incorrectly, and not render the appropriate ones in each case, but sometimes inappropriate ones, it would also be possible to do the same with verbs *[rhêmata]*. And if verbs and names can be set down *[tithenai]* in this way, it must be that sentences [logoi] can be too: for surely sentences are, I take it, a combination *[sunthesis]* of these. (431a8–c1)

My translation of *rhêmata* as 'verbs' is not entailed by the literal meaning of the word ('things said'), nor by its earlier uses in the *Cratylus*, in which *rhêmata* include phrases (399b1), infinitives (426e1), and the words or phrases into which names are analyzed (421e1–2)). But it is certainly suggested in this context by the assertion that *rhêmata* combine with names to form sentences. (The claim that a *logos* is a *sunthesis* of names and *rhêmata* is also repeated at *Sophist* 263d3; here 262a3–4 makes it pretty clear that *rhêmata* are verbs.) The unargued extension of falsity from names to *rhêmata* may then be supported by the thought that a verb is just a special kind of name, viz., the name of an action: after all, a verb means or indicates *[sêmainei]* an action (*Sophist* 262b6), and earlier in the *Cratylus* it was claimed that actions are a kind of thing (386e8). The extension to *logoi* then follows by compositionality: if all the parts are capable of falsity, so must the whole be.

The possibility of false *logos* is reiterated following the Two Cratyluses argument:

> Don't compel a name to have all the letters, so that it is completely like what it is a name of, but allow that it may apply an inappropriate letter. And if a letter, then also a name in a statement *[logos]*. And if a name, then also a statement *[logos]* in a discourse *[logos]* can be applied which is not appropriate to the objects, and the object is no less named and spoken of, as long as the outline *[tupos]* of the object which the statement is about is present in it, just as in the names of the letters, if you recall what Hermogenes and I were just now saying. (432e1–3a2)

The invocation of a *tupos* (which I will consider shortly) complicates matters, but the central thrust is clear: false *logos* is possible because of the possibility of false naming—again, an invocation of compositionality. The general idea is presumably that I can point to a sitting Cratylus and say, 'Woman' (a false name), or 'Flies' (a false verb), or a *logos* which is false by incorporating at least one of these.

The second point to note about the *Cratylus* account is that what Plato uses to solve the problem of falsehood is the mimetic conception of language. In fact, I suspect that we are to see this explanation of false *logos* as a significant virtue of the mimetic account. If names and *logoi* are both pictures, differing only in their degree of complexity, then, like pictures, they can be imperfect and inaccurate without losing their relation to the object they are about. In both arguments, the mimetic conception of language is used to show that truth or correctness is not necessary for a name or *logos* to hook on to an object.

This proof of the possibility of false statement brings out the general status—and achievement—of the mimetic account as one which makes possible, perhaps for the first time, a basic formulation of the conception of truth as correspondence. For the account is able to explain false statement only because it performs the necessary disentangling of the descriptive content of an expression

from both the thing or things in the world of which it is true (if any) and the object to which a speaker applies it on some particular occasion. This may now seem obvious enough, but the standard usage of Greek, or for that matter everyday English, does little to make these distinctions clear—think of all the things we can mean by talk of what a name 'names' or an expression 'means'. The same goes for the basic distinction between semantic entities and other kinds of thing, and that between intentionality and other kinds of relation to the world. For of course it is simpler to think of speaking as an action like any other, one which either produces an effect on some object in the world or creates some new object of the familiar sort: thus the puzzle of false statement in the *Eutbydemus* relied on the idea that a *logos* produces an effect on the object it is about (284b–c). The mimetic account of language is a highly effective way to represent the discovery that language involves entities *of a very special kind,* having content and aboutness; and it expresses clearly the insight that the way in which these entities relate to objects in the world is very different from the way in which, say, a shuttle might do. In its ungainly way, the mimetic account sets out the basic machinery necessary to make sense of those distinctions and relations, and brings out that it is in terms of them that the normative character of language must be understood—more precisely, it makes the profound suggestion that correctness and truth are to be understood in terms of a matching between descriptive content and object. What is wrong with false *logos* is not that 'what it says' in some undifferentiated sense fails—least of all that it fails to exist—but that two very different things, its content and the object it is used for, are mismatched.

Before leaving the *Cratylus* account I should note a complication. As I noted above (and *ad loc.* in IV.3), the explanation of false statement which follows the Two Cratyluses argument is accompanied by a puzzling stipulation: "the object is no less named and spoken of, as long as the *tupos* of the object which the statement is about is present in it, just as in the names of the letters, if you recall what Hermogenes and I were just now saying" (432e5–3a2). The word *tupos* is probably used here to mean something like 'outline', like the shape stamped by a ring in sealing wax; and the point seems to be that there are some limits to our power to make an inappropriate name or *logos* apply to whatever we want. Either must meet a certain threshold of similarity to an object to name it or say it at all.

The problem with this stipulation is that nothing in the Two Cratyluses argument, or earlier, warrants it: in particular, the *Dianomê* argument suggested that there is no restriction at all on what object a name can be made to name, though Socrates did not draw this conclusion explicitly at the time. And Socrates' explanation here, his reference back to the names of letters (393d–e), is not much help. In the passage alluded to, he claimed that *bêta,* for example, is a correct name for the phoneme *b* because, despite the addition of three other letters, it still discloses the nature of its object. And a name is correct no matter what letters and syllables are used to make it, "as long as the nature *[ousia]* of

the object *[pragma]* is in control and disclosed in the name" (393d3–4); again, "as long as we place in it *[enttihômen]* the nature *[dunamis]* of it which is being disclosed, it is correct to call it that name which will disclose it to us" (393e2–4, cf. 393e6–7). But this leaves it quite unexplained *how* a name like *bêta* manages to disclose what it does.

The *tupos*-condition becomes more understandable if we focus not on names but on *logoi*, for here it is easier to give some sense to the requirement for a minimal threshold of 'resemblance'. Given that on the mimetic conception both names and verbs can be false, a maximally false *logos* would, as I have noted, be something like 'The woman flies' said of a sitting Cratylus. And it seems true that Cratylus could only be considered to be 'spoken of at all by such a *logos* given a very special context or powerful non-verbal cues: otherwise we will be simply unable to identify the object which the speaker intends. So Socrates was arguably right to stipulate the general need for a *tupos:* there is a limit to how incorrect a speech act can be before it becomes Vain' by failing to refer intelligibly to anything at all. And that Plato has this problem in view is confirmed, I will later suggest, by his presentation of falsehood in the *Sophist*.

VII.2
THE *SOPHIST* ON SYNTAX

The *Sophist* discussion of false statement is introduced by a discussion of the ordering principles which govern the construction of a statement *[logos]*—what I will refer to as the discussion of syntax (261d1–262e2).[7] The Visitor opens the subject by saying that the next task is to examine names *[onomata]*, in the same way as has been done concerning the forms or kinds *[eidê]* and the letters *[grammata]*, to see whether all will 'fit together' with each other, or none, or some (261d1–e2). Following the general pattern of his earlier discussions, he then considers what kinds [*genê*, 261e6] of words combine with each other to form *logoi*.

7. This division of the argument begs some questions which will have to be considered explicitly later on. In particular, the two points made at 262e3–9, that a statement must be of something and must have a quality (i.e., be true or false), do not unambiguously belong either with the preceding discussion of syntax or with the succeeding explanation of falsity. They are introduced with *eti dê smikron tode* ('And another small point:'), and follow what looks like the conclusion of the preceding discussion (at 262d8–e1); they are followed by the application of the discussion so far to the sample *logoi* (262e12–13). I group these transitional points with the following discussion of falsehood simply for convenience, so that I can claim that 'the discussion of syntax' does not pick out any key feature of *logos* which makes falsehood possible. The transitional claims obviously *do* pick out such features: the question is whether they, and in particular the crucially important demand that a statement be 'of something', in turn follow from the preceding discussion of syntax or not.

The Visitor points out that there are two kinds of name, or disclosure *[dêlôma]* of being: verbs *[rhêmata]*,[8] which indicate *[sêmainein]* actions, and names in the strict sense, which indicate the objects that perform actions. Neither kind can by itself form a *logos;* we can see this by considering strings of verbs, such as 'walks runs sleeps', or again strings of names, such as 'lion deer horse'. The Visitor explains that, before the addition of a verb, a string of names is not a *logos* because "what is said does not disclose *[dêloi]* any action or inaction or being *[ousia]* on the part of anything which is or is not" (262c2–4). For a *logos* to be created or accomplished *[apergazetai*, 262b7], a name and a verb must be 'fitted together' [*harmottei*, 262e1, cf. *sunarmottei*, 261d5]. As for the resulting *logos:*

> now surely [it] makes a disclosure *[dêloi]* concerning things that are *[tôn ontôn]* or are becoming or have become or will become; it does not merely name, but gets somewhere *[ti perainei]*, weaving together *[sumplôkôn]* verbs with names. Hence we said that it 'states' *[legein]* rather than merely naming, and moreover we uttered the name 'statement' *[logos]* for this complex *[tôi plegmati toutô1]* (262d2–6).[9]

Two features of this discussion might suggest a fundamental rethinking of the position of the *Cratylus*. One is the contrast between name and *rhêma;* the other, the contrast between name and statement, and so between the corresponding actions of naming and stating. I will consider each of these contrasts in turn, and try to show that there is less to them than has met the eyes of some commentators. In particular, there is nothing in either contrast which entails a rejection of the mimetic, compositional conception of *logos* at work in the *Cratylus*.

To begin with, some sort of distinction between *onomata* and *rhêmata* is already explicit in the *Cratylus* (399b1, 421e1–2, 425al, 431b5–6)—and before.

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8. The translation of *rhêma* here is mildly problematic, in that the Visitor's examples are equally compatible with 'verb' and 'predicate' (261d–3d). It seems to me that the Visitor's rather minimal explanation—"surely we say a *dêlôma* applied to actions is a *rhêma*" (262a3–4)—demands the translation 'verb'. This is compatible, though, with the possibility that there is some ambiguity (the Visitor does not *restrict* the use of *rhêma* to action-words), and that verbs are here discussed as paradigmatic predicates. What suggests this possibility is that 'predicate' is clearly better as a translation for *rhêma* at 257b7, where it was applied to 'not large' *[me mega]*. The basic sense of *rhêma* is simply 'something said', perhaps with the connotation that it is not a name in a strict sense.

9. This passage is usually taken as prime evidence of a breach with the *Cratylus;* but I wonder whether it might on the contrary be making a point about the correctness of names. The final sentence is a bit odd if read, as it usually is, simply as the conclusion of the account of what a *logos* is. For there is no call in that case for the 'hence', nor for the heavy emphasis on the words *logos* and *legein*—there is no real inference here for the Visitor to belabour. It seems to me at least possible that his real point, or part of his point, is etymological: we say *legein* and *logos* from *plegma, sumplekein* and *sumplokê*.

[10] Unhelpfully, the nature of the contrast seems to vary: at various points in the *Cratylus, rhêmata* include phrases (399b1), infinitives (426e1), and the words or phrases into which names are etymologically analyzed (421e1–2). Still, on two occasions (425a1–4 and 431b2–c1) Socrates says that a *logos* is a combination [*sunthesis,* 431c1] of names and *rhêmata*—precisely the central claim in play in the *Sophist,* where the formula *sunthesis ek rhêmatôn kai onomatôn* is repeated (263d3). (The same idea is also expressed at *Theaetetus* 206d1–2, where it is said that one sense of *logos* is "making clear one's thought vocally with verbs *[rhêmata]* and names *[onomata]*".) Neither of the *Cratylus* passages explains what *rhêmata* are, but they seem to be coordinate in complexity with names: at 424e6–5al they are said to be made, like names, from syllables. So there is no *prima facie* reason *not* to take these claims as meaning much the same as they do in the *Sophist*.[11]

Of course, such verbal continuities might mask important changes in doctrine. But little doctrine is supplied in either text: for like Socrates in the *Cratylus,* the Visitor in the *Sophist* does not explain how, if at all, what a name does differs from what a *rhêma* does. His introduction of the name*rhêma* distinction presents the two as differing simply in the kind of entity they correspond to and, accordingly, in what they disclose. Thus the standard functional terminology used in the *Cratylus* for names is here applied to *rhêmata* as well: they are 'disclosures' [*dêlômata,* 261e5, 262a3], and 'indicate' [*sêmainein,* 262b6, cf. *onoma* as *sêmeion* at 262a6]. They are also described as being 'on' *[epi]*—applied to, set over—actions (262a3), as names are set over agents (262a6–7). This assimilation is easy to understand if we recall that according to the *Cratylus,* actions are a species of thing (386e8): presumably a verb is just a *name* for this particular kind of thing. This explains why Plato is happy in more casual contexts to count verbs as names (*Cratylus* 414a8–b2, 421c5, *Theaetetus* 199a4,

10. Cf. *Apol* 17c1, *Symp.* 199b4, 198b5, *Rep.* 601a5.

11. *Contra* Denyer, who argues that *rhêmata* here are to be understood as phrases composed of names. He offers the following evidence (*Language,* pp. 149–50): (1) An *onoma* was earlier said to be the smallest part of *logos* (385c7–9), so presumably verbs count as *onomata* in the *Cratylus.*—However, verbs also count as *onomata* at *Sophist* 261d2, so this obviously does not exclude a distinction of verbs from names proper, if called for in some other passage. (2) At 399b1, *rhêma* is used for a phrase.—True, and apparently at 421e1–2 as well. But since *rhêmata* at 426e1 are infinitives, such occurrences cannot be conclusive: again, the sense being given to the word evidently may vary. (3) Socrates' talk at 431b2–c1 of *onomata, rhêmata* and *logoi* all being falsely assigned or distributed shows that these cases are seen as analogous: but "such analogies would not be remotely plausible if the *Sophist's* distinctions were being invoked" (p. 149). I will dispute this, but in any case it cannot tell us whether the *Cratylus* uses *onoma* and *rhêma* to distinguish different objects from the *Sophist,* or just to say something different about the same ones. Plato might perfectly well have noted the basic syntactic point that a *logos* consists of a name and a verb without seeing its alleged consequences for truth.

Sophist 226b); indeed, the discussion of syntax itself is introduced as explaining how 'names' fit together (261d2).

This does not show that Plato does *not* have at his disposal some stronger and fuller contrast between name and verb: but if he does, it remains up his sleeve. So it would seem that anything importantly novel in the *Sophist* discussion must be expressed in the other contrast, between names and statements and the actions of naming and stating. It is not so easy, though, to figure out exactly what the content of this contrast is. For the Visitor stresses the special character of *logos* through a contrast with strings of names and verbs—malformed complexes which somone might offer in trying and failing to create a *logos*. And it is not clear how directly we can extrapolate from the shortcomings of these to names (or verbs) taken individually. For the Visitor claims that the abortive strings do not collectively indicate anything [*têi sunecheiai mêden sêmainonta,* 261e1–2]; but normally, in the *Sophist* as in the *Cratylus,* an individual name as such is an indication and a disclosure [*sêmainei* 262b6, *semeion,* 262a6–7, *dêlômata,* 261e5]. So the failed string as a whole does less than its parts. Presumably each of the names in 'lion stag horse' indicates its réferent, but the string as a whole fails to indicate anything—or, if even the individual names fail to indicate here, it is because of some sort of contamination by the failure of the whole. And so we can infer little about successful names and naming from the Visitor's claim that only a statement 'gets somewhere'. The phrase is in any case vague: it is often glossed as 'achieves a truth-value',[12] but given the context of contrast with the failed strings, there is no reason to suppose that it means anything more than 'achieves statement-hood', remaining neutral as to what this involves. And even if 'getting somewhere' *does* mean achieving a truth-value, we cannot extrapolate the claim that a name taken independently cannot be true or false. For, again, the contrast at stake is with strings which fail collectively to do even as much as an individual name. In sum, the Visitor nowhere states or implies that only statements, and not names, are susceptible of truth and falsity.[13] And there is nothing in Plato's account here which clearly excludes his saying, as he would have done in the *Cratylus,* that the falsity of Theaetetus flies' is due to the falsity of the *rhêma* 'flies'.[14]

None of this is to deny that the *Sophist* offers, or at least suggests, a richer account than the *Cratylus* of how statements and stating work. Alongside the bland *sunthesis* of names and verbs offered in the *Cratylus* formulation, we get the more vivid *sumplekein* ('weave together') and *sunarmottein* ('fit together'),

12. E.g., Owen, 'Not-Being', p. 135. De Rijk's survey of uses of the phrase shows that it typically means, rather vaguely, 'to make one's point' or 'to complete one's message' (*Sophist,* pp. 309–12).

13. See Luce, 'Truth', who offers a good account of the way in which Plato takes it that names can be true or false, and points out the persistence of this idea in the later dialogues (pp. 228–31). Fine notes Plato's silence on this point, but still takes the

contrasted with the mere *sunecheia* (‘continuity’) of the failed strings. And this clearly suggests an awareness, not on clear display in the *Cratylus*, that something more than the juxtaposition of words is required for the creation of a *logos*. Then too there is the Visitor’s emphasis on the *complexity* of what a *logos* discloses, and on the special contribution of the verb as disclosing being, action and temporality, so that a *logos* “makes a disclosure concerning *[dêloi peri]* things which either are or are becoming or have become or will become” (262d2–3, cf. *De Interp.* 16b6ff.). The upshot is that where an individual name or verb is just a disclosure of something, a *logos* discloses something *of* or about that something.[15] But there is nothing here, or elsewhere in this discussion, which conflicts with the *Cratylus:* nor, so far as I can see, does it pick out some particular feature of *logos* as making truth and falsity possible. To make good this claim, I will turn to the account of false statement itself, and look directly at some ways in which the syntactic reading has been spelled out.

VII.3
THE *SOPHIST* ON FALSE STATEMENT

The Eleatic Visitor’s discussion of truth and falsity revolves around two sample *logoi*, taken to be obviously true and false respectively: ‘Theaetetus sits’ and

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Sophist to hold that names are not true or false (‘Naming’, pp. 294–5). She accordingly emphasizes the continuity between the two texts by playing down talk of true and false names in the *Cratylus* as well, claiming that apart from the compositional argument at 385b–d, Plato in the *Cratylus* “avoids saying that names are true or false; instead he says that names are correct or incorrect, and can be truly or falsely applied to things” (p. 295). Fine is right that in the later argument for false *logos* it is strictly speaking the assignment *[dianomê]* of names which is true or false (430d5–7). However, this is simply because names and *logoi* both are primarily thought of as being both correct and true in the context of a particular ‘assignment’: it does not show that Plato sees any reason not to describe the assigned names themselves as true or false. Nor does Plato really avoid calling names themselves (i.e., naming conventions as a whole) true and false: near the end of the dialogue, the conflict between names which indicate flux and those which indicate stasis is discussed in terms of which names are ‘true’ (437d5–6, 438d7–8).

14. Cf. De Rijk: “Plato’s solution…consists in fact in locating the element of falsehood in the *rhêma* part of the statement” (*Sophist*, p. 205); and cf. Frede as quoted in n. 24 below.

15. Cf. Luce: a *logos* makes “a conjoining revelation” (‘Truth’, p. 229). Of course, an individual name also discloses ‘something of something’ in the sense that it makes its disclosure about some object in the world. And the distinction is somewhat problematic in that, as the Plato of the *Cratylus* was well aware, a speech act equivalent to a statement can be accomplished with only a name as its (explicitly) verbal component—for example, if I point to Theaetetus and say ‘woman’. If we suppose that this qualifies as an act of naming, then it differs from stating (‘Theaetetus here is a woman’) not in what the speech act as a whole discloses but only in what its spoken component does. It is hard to imagine that Plato in the *Sophist* would adopt an account of stating which distinguished it so sharply from naming (so understood) as to deny the latter any truth-value.

'Theaetetus flies'. His first step in each case is to ascertain 'about and of whom' *[peri hou kai hotou]* each statement is: in both cases, the answer is Theaetetus. 'Theaetetus sits' is then said to be true because it says things that are about Theaetetus, that they are (263b4–5).[16] 'Theaetetus flies' is false because it says things which are other than or different from the things which are about him: it 'says things that are not, that they are' (263b5–12).

I will here rely on what I take to be a standard interpretation of the Visitor's invocation of not-being: for a statement to be false is for it to say something which 'is not' concerning the object it is about in the sense that it is different from (i.e., non-identical with) all the things with which that object has 'communion'.[17] Plato is, notoriously, nowhere near as informative as one would like about how this relation of 'communion' works. But, however complex and subtle the metaphysics ultimately required to fill it out, the vitally important point is a simple and negative one: the 'not-being' involved in a false statement is not absolute non-existence. The absolutely non-existent—nothingness, what has no being whatsoever, or isn't anything at all—has by now been dismissed from the discussion: apparently it remains just as problematic and unspeakable as Parmenides supposed (238c, 258e). But we need not deal with it to explain false statement. There is such a thing as flying: it just happens to be different from all the things which 'are concerning' Theaetetus (i.e., with which he is presently in 'communion'). The dismantling of the paradox of false statement is thus a straightforward application of the dialogue's central metaphysical result, the explanation of not-being (of the relevant sort) as difference.

Just what the discussion of syntax contributes here is not so obvious as we might have expected. Proponents of the syntactic reading have offered a number of suggestions: I will consider three possibilities. The significance of the discussion of syntax might lie in its bringing out the fact that a statement can be broken down or *decomposed* into two things, a noun and a verb; or in the fact that a statement *asserts* or *affirms* something; or in the special role of the name as a *subject term*. If, as I believe, none of these works, then we have good reason to look for an alternative line of interpretation.

The 'decomposition' reading has been developed by, among others, Crombie and Denyer. For Crombie, what is essential is that we can decompose the false *logos* into an *onoma* and a *rhêma*, each of which stands for an existing thing; for that reason the *logos* as a whole need not be seen as alluding to a non-existent. In saying falsely that Jones is bald, "You do not mention the nonentity Jones's

16. Or 'things that are, as they are' *[ta onta has estin]*. I translate the *hôs* construction as 'that' because it sits much better with the corresponding claim that a false statement says things which are 'other' than those that are, i.e., says it 'things that are not, that they are' *[ta me onta…bôs onta]*.

17. That only non-identity need be in play here is described by Kostman as "the standard view" ('False Logos', p. 195; cf. Cooper, "the usual view", *Theaetetus*, p. 172).

baldness, but the two entities, Jones and baldness."[18] Thus the key to resolving the paradox of false statement is to see that a statement is not just a long name, and that it must be "broken up into its components before questions of reference are raised."[19] This is also in essence the reading of Denyer, who takes it that the paradox arises from "the supposition that a statement names a fact."[20] The Visitor's account of false statement thus proceeds from a fundamental negative claim: a statement does *not* correspond to some one object in the world (a fact, a state of affairs, a fused object-plus-property) on which it depends for both meaning and truth.

Clearly there is a grain of truth to the 'decomposition' reading: a correct understanding of 'Theaetetus flies' must indeed relate it to two distinct things, Theaetetus and flying. The problem is to determine the significance of this step. To put it another way, did the paradox of false statement arise from *ignoring* the fact that two distinct things are involved in such predications?

A thorough answer to this question would require a long—and probably, given the unsatisfactory nature of our sources, quite inconclusive— detour through the history of the paradox of false statement. I cannot undertake that here; what is clear is that there is strikingly little positive evidence for this reading within the *Sophist* itself. The Visitor nowhere says or hints that this is the key to the paradox of false statement: for example, he does not emphasize that there are not one but two *onta* picked out by 'Theaetetus flies".[21] Moreover, the 'decomposition' reading cannot really explain why the focus of the discussion of syntax falls where it does, not on the complexity of *logos* in general but on the *onoma-rhêma* distinction in particular. Indeed, as Crombie admits, this solution would apply equally well to *logoi* in the sense of many-word descriptions, to which the discussion of syntax would be quite irrelevant.[22]

To make the discussion of syntax really crucial to the account of falsehood we need to look elsewhere. The obvious place, gestured at by almost all versions of the syntactic reading, is the idea of assertion or affirmation. What is important is not that a *logos* can be decomposed into name and verb, but, conversely, that the two combine to form one new thing, an assertion, which accomplishes something different in kind from naming. This line of interpretation can be spelled out in different ways, or at least with a range of different emphases. What is crucial

18. *Examination,* p. 493.

19. *Examination,* p. 497.

20. *Language,* p. 14; cf. pp. 8–14, 146–50.

21. This silence has been noted by both John McDowell and Nicholas White. As White comments, "He does not say, for example, that the reason why a false but meaningful statement is possible is that the meaningfulness of a statement does not depend on the existence of a fact for it to report…. If this were his solution to the problem, one would certainly expect him to announce it more openly" (*Sophist,* p. xxviii; cf. McDowell, 'Falsehood', pp. 127ff.).

might be the simple idea of assertion or claim-making. (This would in fact mark an intriguing advance over the mimetic account of the *Cratylus*, for a picture may be viewed not only as a portrait of something but—non-assertorically, we might say—simply as a picture. The mimetic account thus tended to place assertion in effect outside the utterance itself, in an act of 'assignment' of the *logos* by the speaker.) Or it might be the more complicated notion one might call 'assertion-of': a *logos* not only makes an assertion or claim, but makes it *about* some object. As Cooper puts it: "Not even the notion of not-being as non-identity would be of any use in the absence of the Stranger's theory of statement. It would not help to be able meaningfully to say that sitting is not identical with flying *(et al)* if one did not see how Theaetetus is flying' *affirms* something of Theaetetus."[23]

This idea of assertion-of has some support in the Visitor's emphasis on the way in which statements disclose 'something of something'. On the other hand, the discussion of syntax does not really say anything about the more basic idea here of assertion as such—about what differentiates a *logos* in the sense of a statement from any other complex disclosure, such as a many-word description. What makes this silence particularly striking is that Plato *does* make the relevant point shortly afterwards. In his discussion of *doxa*, judgement, the Visitor casually points out, as one would a well-known fact, that in *logoi* there are "assertion and denial *[phasis kai apophasis]*"; he receives the equally casual response, "We know" (263e10– 13). So nothing could have been easier than for the Visitor to have explained (or stipulated) in the discussion of syntax that a *logos* in the relevant sense is either a *phasis* or an *apophasis*, and to draw whatever consequences this might have for false statement. But he did not.

It seems unlikely, then, that this idea of assertion is the central moral of the discussion of syntax; like decomposition, it is plausibly a part of the Visitor's understanding of statement, but not one with important work to do here. This leaves only our third way to make good the syntactic reading: perhaps the discussion of syntax contributes to the explanation of false statement by bringing out the special role of the name as subject term. The claim is that Plato here identifies names as having a particular function in a statement, viz., to pick out the object which the statement as a whole is about. In doing so he shows how false statement can be possible, for this function can be performed even when the statement as a whole goes awry. 'Theaetetus flies' can be false while remaining meaningful because 'Theaetetus' alone has been delegated the particular job of establishing who the statement as a whole is about, and can succeed in that job independently.[24]

This 'subject-term' reading has the great advantage of making sense of the central emphases of the discussion of syntax, namely its distinctions between

22. *Examination*, p. 496.

23. *Theaetetus*, p. 179.

name and verb and naming and stating.[25] But that does not entail that it is right about the content and purpose of those distinctions. Is it true that 'Theaetetus' in 'Theaetetus sits/flies' is given a special responsibility, unknown to the *Cratylus,* for picking out Theaetetus as the object that the statement is about?

Not obviously. Certainly it is taken as obvious and important that both statements are 'about and of Theaetetus (263a4–10). But this would hardly be news to the *Cratylus:* the question is whether this aboutness is due to an interesting (and newly discovered) operation on the part of the subject term. And I think the evidence suggests that it is not. The basis for the Visitor's claim that both statements are about and of Theaetetus is manifestly the corresponding general claim made shortly earlier: "It's necessary that a *logos,* when it exists, is a *logos* of something *[tinos]:* a *logos* of nothing is impossible *[adunaton]*" (262e5–6). And this 'little point' *[eti de smikron tode,* 262e3], which I will refer to as the frwos-condition, is ambiguous. It might be read as a syntactic or grammatical claim, to the effect that every statement must contain a subject term which picks out the object it is about. Alternatively, it might be read as an *ontological* claim: every statement must be about some object which in fact exists, leaving quite open the question of how that aboutness is secured. On either reading the *timos*-condition is clearly an important part of the Visitor's explanation of the capacity of statements to be true or false. On the syntactic reading, it brings out the import of the account of syntax which has just been offered. On the ontological reading, it wheels in the results of the earlier discussion of not-being, ruling out of court any sophistical objection that 'Theaetetus flies' might be about that famous non-existent, Flying Theaetetus.

Though I do not think the syntactic reading of the *tinos*-condition can be ruled out, the ontological reading seems to me better supported by the text. To begin with

24. This 'subject-term' construal of the syntactic reading is at work in many versions: for comparatively explicit statements, see Fine's summary of "this familiar picture" ('Naming', pp. 291–2) and Frede (*'Sophist'*, pp. 412–4). Fine maintains that a name here still has descriptive content, though how the truth of this content relates to the truth of the sentence is left rather unclear (pp. 300–1). Frede seems to opt for a stronger position, saying that the parts of a *logos* have "radically different functions" (p. 413): one part names, refers to, or identifies a subject, and another part is the means by which we say, state or predicate something of the subject (pp. 412–4). On this more radical reading, as Frede notes, "the locus of truth or falsehood, as it were, is not the statement as a whole, but the predicative or stating part of it" (p. 412). That seems to imply that *rhêmata* can be false after all; and since on this reading *rhêmata* presumably include names being used as predicates, it is not clear that we have moved on at all from the *Cratylus* picture of lone names (or *rhêmata*) being 'assigned' truly or falsely.

25. This is not to say, however, that it is the most natural reading of those distinctions. For as De Rijk's survey of Platonic usage shows, a name for Plato is a 'significative word' or 'appellation' (*Sophist,* pp. 218–22), i.e., a bearer of descriptive content; and *onomazein* is, in accordance with this, commonly used for predication (cf. Introduction and III. 3), rather than for some solely or primarily referential process.

the negative evidence, neither in the tinos-condition itself or its application to the sample *logoi* does the Visitor say anything about names at all, let alone that they are subject terms with a special function. (For instance, he does not say, "for a statement is about and of *whatever is named by the name it includes*, and 'Theaetetus' names you".) In the absence of such a reference, the ontological reading seems simpler: 'Theaetetus sits' has got to be about some existing object, and is in fact about Theaetetus.

There may also be some positive evidence for the ontological reading in the Visitor's suggestive language. His general statement of the *tinos*-condition is that it is *necessary [anagkaion]* that a *logos* be of something, and *impossible [adunaton]* that it be of nothing (262e5–6); and he later reiterates, regarding 'Theaetetus flies', that it were of nothing "it wouldn't be a *logos* at all *[to parapan]*. For we declared that it was impossible [*tôn adunatôn*, lit. 'among the impossibilities'] for a *logos* which is of nothing to be a *logos."* (263c5–11). Now this language strongly recalls the Visitor's earlier denial of the possibility of speech involving not-being. There, he says that it is "most necessary *[anagkaiotaton]*, it seems, that someone who says not-something *[ton me ti]* says nothing whatsoever *[pantapasi]*" (237e1–2); and, therefore, that person does not speak *[oude legein]* (e5). Likewise it is not possible *[oute…dunaton]* to correctly state what is not in itself (238c9). And shortly after, when the prospect of such an attachment of being to not-being is recalled, he says, "we agreed just now that this is the most impossible of all *[pantôn adunatôtaton*, 241b2–3]". In sum, when at 262–3 the Visitor says that a *logos* of nothing *[mêdenos]* "wouldn't be a *logos* at all *[to parapan]*", and refers with an otherwise idle genitive to an earlier declaration that this was "among the impossibilities" *[tôn adunaton]*, he pretty clearly directs our attention to 237–41. And that strongly suggests that the point at issue is the ontological one that this discussion supported: since absolute not-being is unspeakable, a *logos* has got to be about an *on*.

So much for the significance of the tinos-condition. If I am right that it is not making a syntactic or grammatical point, then there is no particular evidence that Plato uses the concept of a 'subject term' with a special reference-securing function to account for false statement. There is also, I think, some evidence that he does *not*. This is the generally ignored fact that the Visitor's sample false statement, as initially presented, is: "Theaetetus, with whom I am now talking, flies" (263a8). Now, as the example of false statement, this is clearly intended to contrast as starkly as possible with Theaetetus sits'. So Plato must be worried that 'Theaetetus flies', without the parenthetical addition, would be somehow inadequate. The obvious reason for this worry is that 'flies' is a sufficiently improbable predicate for Theaetetus to open up room for doubt as to who the statement is about. A troublemaker might ask why (or how we know that) the statement is about the eminently nonflying Theaetetus before us—and not, say, the Visitor's homonymous pet bird. It is to block this sort of question that we need the supplementary 'with whom I am now talking'. But if the false content of 'flies' can destabilize the reference of the *logos*, and if the 'with whom I am

now talking' can remedy it, then clearly the securing of reference is *not* simply delegated to the subject term Theaetetus'. It is at best an oversimplification to claim that the subject term of a statement establishes what the statement is about; and his example shows that Plato recognized as much.

This parenthetical 'with whom I am now talking' has an additional interest. If we think of it as a part of the statement, contributing to the semantic content of the whole, then it is evidently a *true* part of it: we can see it as, in effect, boosting the proportion of truth in the whole to the point at which it is recognizably about Theaetetus. And this is intriguingly reminiscent of the *Cratylus'* invocation of an 'outline' *[tupos]*—the requirement that even a false *logos* (or an incorrect name), if it is to be a *logos* of its object at all, must preserve some resemblance to it. The addition of the phrase 'with whom I am now talking' serves to preserve the 'outline' of Theaetetus—in quite a literal sense—in a *logos* which would otherwise fail to present it.

Alternatively, we might understand 'with whom I am now talking' as a supplement standing outside the *logos* in support of it, like a pointing gesture. (What makes this plausible is that otherwise the *logos* is not a particularly short one, as Socrates claims it to be at 283c1–3.) In that case, it brings out the point that it may be up to the speaker of a *logos* to establish its reference by adding some supplement to the speech-act. And this too is reminiscent of the *Cratylus:* this time, of the *Dianomê* argument and the idea that a name or *logos*—particularly a false or incorrect one—can be made to refer by an act of 'assignment'.

It is hard to know what to make of these matched alternative suggestions—one could almost say vacillations—regarding reference in the two dialogues. Plato is evidently inclined to grant both semantic content and contextual and conventional factors some role in securing the reference of a name or *logos* to an object in particular acts of name use. The problems arising in this connection are so deep and complex that we can hardly be surprised that neither dialogue really develops either suggestion (let alone both) into a coherent theory of reference. My point here is simply that in this respect the *Sophist* and the *Cratylus* are on a par.

I do not claim to have exhausted the ways in which the syntactic reading of the *Sophist* could be made good. But ultimately any version of this reading will be confronted with the same basic difficulties. Looked at closely and without presuppositions, the discussion of syntax is remarkably simple and unexplanatory—or, to put it more charitably, specific in its focus. It focusses relentlessly on the claim that a *logos* must be a combination of *onoma* and *rhêma*. On the syntactic reading, its real point must be some further (albeit closely related) claim, one more helpful for the explanation of falsehood, which the Visitor never quite manages to state.

At the same time, this belabouring of a simple point is probably the main source of support for the syntactic reading. For it inevitably gives us the sense that the discussion of syntax must be doing something more than meets the eye.

So the rejection of the syntactic reading will become more plausible if I can offer an alternative suggestion as to what this 'something more' might be.

A clue is provided by the Visitor's opening announcement. "Just as we said about forms and letters, so too with names—let's investigate in the same way" (261d 1–3). As this general parallel strongly suggests, not all names combine with each other, just as not all forms are capable of 'communion' with each other. This parallel between forms and names seems to be important to Plato, and is reiterated in the summation of the discussion of syntax: "So then just as in the case of the things some fit together with each other and some don't, so too in the case of speech, some signs don't fit together, and others do fit together and a *logos* is created by them" (262d8–e1).

But of course in this snappy and useful parallel there lurks a grave danger. For the simplest and most obvious way to think of the parallel is as follows: two names combine when they name forms which combine. And this simple-minded version of the parallel entails that when two forms do not combine, neither do their names combine to create a *logos*. Which gives precisely the result Plato has undertaken this whole investigation to debunk—namely, that what we normally take to be a false *logos* is in fact no *logos* at all.

There is some evidence that Plato fears we might fall into assuming this simple-minded version of the parallel. For it is curiously emphasized that when Theaetetus first agrees that some names combine and some do not, he has in mind *some other way* than the Visitor intends.[26] The Visitor first offers his own account as an elucidation of what Theaetetus has in mind by agreeing (261d8); then, when Theaetetus shows puzzlement, says that he thought this is what Theaetetus meant (261e4); finally, after his explanation, he notes, "It's clear that you were thinking of something different just now when you agreed" (262b1–2). This triple allusion to a view which is never disclosed is quite pointless on most readings; on mine, it points to the most urgent purpose of the discussion. If Plato's labour so far is not to be wasted, he needs to present a less simple-minded version of the parallel: he needs to show how names may combine or fail to combine in a way which is not just parasitic on whether their respective *onta* do. This is precisely what the discussion of syntax in fact provides, and its heavy emphasis on the necessity of combining an *onoma* and a *rhêma* to generate a *logos* makes perfect sense if its point is to exclude the simple-minded alternative.

If this is its agenda, the discussion of syntax need not be making any contribution along the lines envisaged by the syntactic reading. The account of false statement will of course rely on it: it is essential, if unproblematic, to see that Theaetetus flies' is indeed a statement within the terms of the act. But how it can be a *false* statement remains to be shown: and here all the work is to be done by the earlier explanation of not-being in terms of difference, now freshly invoked in the tinos-condition. Thus we can, I think, say of the account of false statement what Myles Burnyeat has pointed out regarding Socrates' Dream in the *Theaetetus*, that much modern interpretation of it has been coloured by "the

semantic bias of twentieth-century philosophy"—by our tendency to see Plato as thinking about language when he is really thinking about what there is.[27]

If this reading is on the right track, then Plato's conceptions in the *Sophist* of reference, syntax and truth are by no means incompatible with those found in the *Cratylus.* This may seem an implausible claim given the achievements of the *Sophist* on the closely related topic of falsehood, but I have tried to show that the real achievement here is metaphysical: once the immensely difficult task of explicating not-being has been completed, the account of false statement falls out with relative ease. And it is worth bearing in mind that this account is not represented as revolutionary or even surprising (unless you are a certain kind of Parmenidean). That is, the *Sophist* does not after all reject or criticize the habitual characterization of falsehood as 'saying what is not'—the formulation, one might think, that caused all the trouble. On the contrary, what the Visitor undertakes is precisely to explain and justify this formula against philosophical paradox, by showing its metaphysical implications to be unproblematic. Thus the *Sophist* does not present a new 'position' on falsehood, but a new explanation of why an old commonplace is acceptable after all. And so we should not be too surprised to find other earlier ideas about language being used alongside what is new.

To return to a suggestion I made at the outset, this shared perspective is, I think, signaled by the emphasis on *mimesis* common to both the *Cratylus* and *Sophist*. The *Cratylus* explained a false *logos* as being like an incorrect visual image. That model had, I have suggested, some explanatory power to its credit; for it enables Plato to differentiate the content of what is said from the external object it is about, and, rightly, to locate falsehood in a mismatch of the two. Still, it is not hard to imagine Plato being dissatisfied with this as a response to the paradox of false statement. For it does not engage explicitly with the sources of the paradox in the problem of 'what is not'; and it does not explain how—it simply assumes that—an incorrect visual image is possible. Cratylus allowed this assumption, reserving his resistance for the claim that the case of false naming is parallel. But one might well maintain the denial of false statement more effectively by allowing Plato his parallel, and pressing him instead on the possibility of falsity in either medium. This is what the sophist of the *Sophist* is represented as doing; Plato's response does not exclude the mimetic account of the *Cratylus*, but adds to it a new level of explanation.

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26. Cornford, who does take note of these opaque allusions, says "Probably what Theaetetus had in mind was the combination of Forms in affirmative statements and the incompatibility of Forms expressed by negative statements, which was illustrated by the fitting-together *(sunarmottein)* or not fitting of vowels and consonants at 253a" (*Theory*, p. 304 n. 2). But a negative statement is still a statement: what Theaetetus must have in mind is some way in which words can fail to constitute a *logos* at all.

27. Burnyeat, *Theaetetus*, p. 162.

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General Index

Adeimantus, 19, 57, 57 n. 19
Aelius Aristides, 169 n. 12
Aeschines, 55 n. 16
Aeschylus, 61 n. 31, 160n
Alexander of Aphrodisias, 55
Alexis, 160n
Allan, D.J., 55 n. 16
Ammonius, 34 n. 20
Anacreon, 57–58
Anagnostopoulos, G., 102 n. 25
Anaxagoras, 62
Annas, Julia, 93 n, 98 n. 20
'Anon. Procli', 64, 65, 69
Antiphon, 27 n. 6
arguments:
  Dianomê argument, 2, 112–15, 119, 130, 179, 183
  flux arguments, 148–61
  names of numbers argument, 132–34
  name study argument, 144–47
  sklêrotês argument, 123–31, 133, 136, 138
  two Crayluses argument, 2, 119–23, 130, 167, 179, 183
Aristophanes, 54, n. 14
Aristotle, 5 n. 7, 17n, 26, 27 n. 6, 43, 55 n. 16, 62 n. 36, 90 n. 7, 118, 131n, 135, 166
Aspasia, 65, 67
Augustine, St., 85 n

Barnes, Jonathan, 25 n. 4, 74 n. 65, 77 n. 70
Barwick, Karl, 49 n. 2, 55 n. 15
Baxter, Timothy M.S., 1 n. 2, 3 n. 3, 4 n. 5, 20n, 34 n. 19, 35 n. 22, 40 n. 28, 53 nn. 9 and 11, 61, 66 n. 47, 70, 90 n. 8, 93n, 94 n. 15, 96 nn. 15 and 18, 98 n. 19, 102 nn. 25 and 26, 147, 155 n. 15, 156 n. 17
Benfey, Theodor, 13n, 102 n. 25
Berkeley, George, 18
Bestor, T.W., 130n, 132 n. 26, 135n. 32, 136 n. 35
Bluck, R.S. 165 n. 4
Bostock, David, 127 n. 19, 163 n, 165 n. 5
Brandwood, Leonard, 3 n. 4
Brisson, Luc, 163n
Brunt, P.A., 163n
Burckhardt, Jacob, 63 n. 39
Burkert, Walter, 92n
Burnet, J., 27 n. 8, 116 n. 5
Burnyeat, Myles, 39n, 44, 148 n. 5, 196, 196 n. 27
Bury, R.G., 88n

Callicles, 27 n. 6
Calvert, Brian, 46 n. 33, 148 n. 5, 152 n. 12, 154n,156n. 17
chariot imagery, 60–62, 69, 75, 76
Choerilus, 62 n. 37
Cicero, Marcus Tullius, 65 n. 42, 75 n. 67, 169 n. 12
Cobb, William S., 13n
Cole, Thomas, 169 n. 12
compositionality (principle of), 8, 10, 32, 87, 93, 100, 102, 105 n. 31, 108–9, 117 n. 1, 166, 168, 169, 178, 179 n. 4, 181–82, 186
conventionalism, 1–2, 13, 16, 17, 17n, 21, 23–48, 99, 109, 123–29, 132–42, 181

Cooper, John M., 30 n. 10, 113 n. 3, 127 n. 19, 148 n. 5, 177n, 191
Cornford, Francis M., 88n, 148 n. 5, 173, 173 n. 16, 196 n. 26
Cratylus, 53–57
Cratylese, 98, 101–1, 120, 120 n. 11, 140.
See also structural correctness; representational correctness
Croesus, 59
Crombie, I.M., 100 n. 22, 133n, 135 n. 32, 148 n. 4, 177n, 178 n. 2, 190
Crossman, Richard, 12 n. 19

Democritus, 25 n. 4, 27, 38n
Derveni Papyrus, 53–54, 56, 95n
Denyer, Nicholas, 31n, 177n, 179 n. 5, 186 n. 11, 190
Derbolav, Josef, 1 n. 2, 163n
De Rijk, L.M., 5 n. 7, 177n, 187 n. 12, 192 n. 25
Detienne, Marcel, 77 n. 69
dialectical context, 21, 23, 36–41, 137, 148 n. 5
dialogue form, 18–21, 56, 60
Diels, H., 92n
Dillon, John, 64n
Diogenes Laertius, 14n, 158, 160n
Dionysiodorus, 63
Dissoi Logoi, 101 n. 24
dreams, 60, 149–51, 159

elements, 83, 84n, 87, 90, 92–95, 98 n. 20, 100, 100n, 102–5.
See also letters
Sextus Empiricus's dilemma, 83–87
Epicurus/Epicureanism, 25 n. 4, 29, 34 n. 20, 37 n. 25, 91n
etymology/etymologies, 2, 5, 7, 10, 20, 47 n. 37, 49–81, 82–88, 91, 96, 99, 101, 109
argument against, 144–47
Socrates' etymologies as:
agonistic display, 57 n. 19, 60–80, 101
inspiration episode, 57–60, 62, 64, 70, 75
rational reconstruction, 52–57, 61, 62, 63, 64, 76, 77
etymology of:
'aischron,' 49
'akolasia, 145
'anthropos,' 71
'Apollo,' 63
'Ares,' 50, 86, 87
'Astyanax,' 6, 7, 45, 47, 96 n. 18
'Demeten' 24
*'dikaion;*95
'episteme, 145
'eros,' 82
'Hades,' 56, 63, 161
'Hector,' 45, 47, 96 n. 18
'Hermes,' 49, 78, 79, 160
'Hermogenes,' 5, 6, 11, 17n, 24, 53, 112, 113 nn. 1 and 2, 159–62
'Hestia,' 95n
'Kronos,' 54, 9 n
'lusiteloun,' 63
'Moira,' 54
'psuche,' 50, 62, 86
'selanaia,' 71
'soma,' 63
'techne,' 49
Euripides, 54 n. 14, 77, 160n, 168 n. 10
Euthydemus, 41, 63, 66 n. 48, 177, 179, 180, 183.
See also sophists
Euthyphro, 57, 58, 60, 62, 67, 84, 175

falsity/truth (of names or statements), 2, 6, 17n, 30–36, 45, 50 n. 3, 86, 112–18, 177–97
Fine, Gail, 6 n. 8, 32 n. 13, 98 n. 20, 171–173, 178 n. 2, 187 n. 13, 192 n. 24
flux, 2, 3 n. 4, 55 n. 16, 61, 73, 78, 79, 80, 86, 126, 145, 148–61, 168, 168 n. 9.
See also Heraclitus
Ford, Andrew, 62 n. 37, 70 n. 55
Forms, 3, 10, 73–80, 100, 115–18, 120 n. 11, 123–34, 138–39, 143–61, 164–68, 173, 195
form/matter of names, 46–47, 93, 96 n. 18
Frede, Dorothea, 66 n. 47, 72 n. 62
Frede, Michael, 18 n. 28, 145 n. 2, 177 n, 192 n. 24
Frege, Gottlob, 102

Friedlander, Paul, 56n, 66 n. 46, 78 n. 71, 94 n. 15

Gaiser, Konrad, 17n, 50 n. 5, 51n, 54 n. 14, 59 n. 24, 61 n. 34, 94 n. 15, 163n
Glaucon, 19, 57, 57 n. 19
gods, 76, 78, 79, 84, 85, 120, 161.
See also namegivers; etymologies of particular gods
Gold, Jeffrey 46 n. 33, 47 n. 36, 81n
Goldschmidt, Victor, 3 n. 3, 51n, 53 n. 9, 61, 63, 66 n. 47, 96 n. 18, 151 n. 10
Gorgias (figure of), 66 n. 48, 69 n. 51
Gosling, J.C.B., 23n, 32 n. 15, 47 n. 36
Grimm, Jakob, 91n
Griswold, Charles L., 18 n. 26
Grote, George, 3 n. 3, 4 n. 5, 13n, 50 n. 6, 65, 65 n. 43, 70 n. 58, 91n, 102 n. 25
Gulley, Norman, 152 n. 12
Gulliver's Travels, 105, 120 n. 11
Guthrie, W.K.C., 25 n. 4, 53 n. 10, 65, 65 n. 41, 66 n. 48, 120 n. 12, 163n, 165 nn. 5 and 6, 171n

Hackforth, Reginald, 58 nn. 21 and 23, 59 n. 28, 72, 72 n. 61, 165 n. 4
Heitsch, E., 20n, 33n
Heraclitus/Heracliteanism, 17n, 55 n. 16, 59, 61, 73, 117, 148–61, 168 n. 9
Hermogenes (conventionalism of), 36–41
Herodotus, 59 n. 26
Hippias, 66, 101
Hobbes, Thomas, 108–9
Homer, 45, 58, 63 n. 39, 69, 70, 72, 139

Irwin, T.H., 5 n. 1, 148 n. 5, 151, 152 n. 12, 168 n. 9
Isocrates, 169 n. 12

Jekyll, Gertrude, 15n

Kahn, Charles, 23n, 32 n. 13, 46 n. 34, 53 n. 11, 65, 65 n. 44, 66, 72 n. 60, 74 n. 64, 90, 90 n. 10, 107, 133n, 135 n. 32
Kerferd, George, 25 n. 4, 53 n. 10
Ketchum, Richard, 46 n. 33, 135 n. 32
Keyt, David, 177n
Kincaid, Jamaica, 15n
Kirk, G.S., 55 nn. 16 and 17
Klagge, J.C., 18 nn. 26 and 28
Kostman, J.P., 177n, 189 n. 17
Kretzman, Norman, 8 n. 12, 9, 32 n. 15, 33n, 34 n. 19, 46 n. 35, 47 n. 36, 81n, 93n

Laks, André, 53 n. 11, 72 n. 63
Leibniz, G.W., 18, 91n, 102–4, 107–9
Lesher, J.H., 62 n. 37
letters, 2, 7, 83, 88–98, 101, 104, 105, 105 n. 31, 107, 120, 183–84.
See also elements
a, 92n
b: 88n, 92n, 122, 184
d, 89
i, 89, 95
l, 89, 124, 124n, 126
n, 95
o, 95
rh, 89, 90, 95, 105, 124, 124n, 126
s, 124, 124n
t, 89
Levin. Susan.100 n. 21. 135 n. 32
Levinson, R.B., 130n
Long, A.A., 74 n. 65, 75 n. 66
Longinus, 63 n. 39
Lorenz, K., 6 n. 8, 32 nn. 13 and 15, 85n
Luce, J.V., 3 n. 4, 32 n. 13, 46 n. 33, 84n, 148 n. 5, 152 n. 12, 177n, 187n. 13, 188 n. 15
Lysias, 56, 63, 64, 65, 69

Mackenzie, M.M., 30 n. 11, 148 n. 5, 155 nn. 15 and 16.
See also McCabe, M.M.
Martin, Richard, 69, 69 n. 52, 70
McCabe, M.M., 3 n. 4.
See also Mackenzie, M.M.
McDowell, John, 127 n. 19, 148 n. 5, 177n, 190 n. 21
Meridier, Louis, 1 n. 1, 24 nn. 2 and 3, 27 n. 8, 29, 47 n. 37, 50 n. 6, 61 n. 32, 71 n. 59, 94 n. 15, 96 n. 17, 115n, 116 n. 5
method:

of dialectic, 9, 10, 19, 45, 48, 68, 69, 72, 75, 99–102, 104, 139, 141n, 142, 147, 170–76
of division, 9, 44, 45, 47, 92–97, 100, 101, 104, 131, 141n, 170, 172
of elenchos, 145–46
Middlestrass, J., 6 n. 8, 32 nn. 13 and 15, 85n
Mill, John Stuart, 7n, 103 n. 27
mimesis, 2, 7, 16, 17, 17 n, 33, 47n. 37, 48, 53, 81–110, 111–14, 146, 147, 178, 179–84, 86, 191, 197.
See also elements;
letters;
primary names
Moline, Jon, 171n
Montaigne, Michel Eyquem de, 18
Morrow, Glenn, 13n, 64n, 163n, 165
Most. Glenn. 53 n. 11
Murray, Oswyn, 63 n. 39

names:
art of *(onomastike)*, 99–102, 139, 144, 147
'deep content of, 50, 82, 86, 87, 95, 95n, 97, 98, 106, 109
law as analogy to, 8, 13, 34 n. 18, 37 n. 25, 47, 112
mistrust of, 76–80, 119–23, 126
namegiver, 5, 8–9, 33, 43, 48–50, 56, 72, 76–79, 84–86, 89–94, 99–100, 104, 107, 144–6
namegiving/baptism, 5–9, 6 n. 9, 7 n, 25–50, 34 n. 18, 43, 48, 92, 97, 99, 101, 114
normative account of, 4–5, 8, 10, 25, 30, 33, 41, 55, 90, 97, 98, 107, 169, 183
pessimism about, 17, 136–42, 146–47, 174
primary, 2, 7, 51, 83–98, 99, 102
'strong/weak disclosure' of, 103, 114, 129–30, 133–34, 137, 138, 140, 141, 170
tool model of, 44–48, 88, 92–93, 97–98, 109, 120, 122, 128, 134, 137, 141, 170
Nietzsche, Friedrich, 18, 63 n. 39
Nightingale, Andrea Wilson, 52n, 70 n. 56

Orpheus, 54
Orwell, George, 91n
Owen, G.E.L., 74, 74 n. 65, 75 n. 66, 177n, 178 n. 2, 187 n. 12

Palmer, Michael, 6 n. 8, 31 n
Parmenides:
doxa, 52, 60n,73–80, 168
truth, 29, 74, 75 n. 66, 76, 77, 179, 180 n. 189
Patterson, Richard, 121 n. 13
Pfeiffer, Rudolf, 49 n. 2
Pindar, 62
Plato:
Apology, 58, 59, 59 nn. 25 and 27, 137n, 145, 186 n. 10
Charmides, 101 n. 23, 149n, 171, 175
Euthydemus, 63
Euthyphro, 13, 57, 84, 104, 171, 175
First Alcibiades, 104
Gorgias, 14, 27, 63 n. 39, 66 n. 48, 69 n. 51, 99, 100, 140, 145 n. 1
Hippias Major, 33, 101, 117 n. 7
Hippias Minor, 66 n. 48, 101
Ion, 58, 147
Laches, 13, 14, 101 n. 23, 171, 176
Laws, 36, 38, 58, 72, 121, 140, 141, 146, 171n, 178 n. 3
Menexenus, 52, 63–67, 72, 73, 75 n. 66
Meno, 14, 58, 139–140, 150, 165, 171, 172
Minos, 13 n. 47
Parmenides, 64, 73, 75, 116 n. 6, 120 n. 11
Phaedo, 3 n. 4, 14, 63, 73, 116 n. 6, 128 n. 21, 138, 140, 146, 151 nn. 9 and 11, 158, 165 n. 3, 167n, 179 n. 13, 171
Phaedrus, 9, 10, 10n, 11, 14, 45n, 52, 54 n. 14, 56, 57–59, 61n. 30, 63, 64, 65, 66 n. 46, 67, 69, 72, 73, 100, 104, 167n, 175n
Philebus, 19n, 45n, 94, 94 n. 14, 100 n. 22, 149n, 167n, 172
Protagoras, 52, 61, 63, 66–68, 69n. 51. 72. 101 n. 23. 104. 151
Republic, 1, 3 n. 4, 11, 14n, 15, 19, 25 n. 5, 37 n. 25, 57, 73, 76 n. 68, 88n, 90

n. 9, 100 n. 22, 116 n. 6, 117 n. 8, 126, 127, 127 n. 19, 130, 137n, 138, 139, 140, 147, 149, 151, 167n, 171n, 174, 175n, 186 n. 10, 187
Seventh Letter, 3, 73, 116 n. 6, 117, 151, 163–169, 174, 179 n. 4
Sophist, 3, 45n, 88n, 94, 100, 100 n. 22, 113 n. 1, 117 n. 8, 119, 122, 168, 174–97
Statesman, 9, 9 n. 15, 13, 13n, 14, 15, 16, 19n, 45n, 76 n. 68, 94, 100 n. 22, 123 n. 16, 139, 150 n. 8, 174–75, 178 n. 3
Symposium, 52n, 186 n. 10
Theaetetus, 3, 3 n. 4, 36, 39, 41, 43–4, 55 n. 16, 57 n. 19, 64, 76 n. 68, 84n, 88n, 100 n. 22, 117, 117 n. 8, 112n, 127, 127 n. 20, 130, 148, 148 n. 5, 149n, 153, 158, 159, 166, 170n. 13, 171–74, 175n, 176, 177, 179, 180, 186
Timaeus, 10, 52, 100 n. 22, 116 n. 6, 117, 119, 127, 166, 167n, 169, 170
Plutarch, 74, 75 n. 67
'political' reading of *Cratylus*, 10–14, 16, 17, 36–39, 109, 139
Press, Gerald, 18 n. 27
private/public naming conventions, 27–28, 35–36, 35 n. 22, 38, 39, 136 n. 34. *See also* namegiving
Proclus, 25 n. 4, 38n, 64, 65, 135 n. 32
Prodicus, 67 n. 49, 101
Protagoras/Protagoreanism, 3 n. 4, 17n, 23, 31, 31n, 39–41, 41–44, 57 n. 19, 63 n. 39, 64, 66–68, 69 n. 51, 72, 149–59, 168
Pythagoras/Pythagoreanism, 29

Reeve, C.D.C., 5 n. 7, 24 n. 2, 32 n. 14, 59 n. 27, 132 n. 26
're-examination', 2, 10, 17n, 51, 90, 106, 111–42, 169, 179
relativism/subjectivism:
and the flux arguments, 149–159
and Hermogenean conventionalism, 23, 30–36, 40, 41
in the *Theaetetus*, 39, 43–44
See also Protagoras/Protagoreanism
representational correctness, 104–107, 120. *See also* Cratylese
Robinson, Richard, 8 nn. 11 and 12, 32 nn. 13 and 15, 135 n. 32, 136 n. 35, 163n, 164n
Ross, Sir David, 3 n. 4, 163n, 165 n. 5
Russell, Bertrand, 102
Rutherford, Donald, 107n

Sappho, 57–58
Schleiermacher, Friedrich, 51n
Schofield, Malcolm, 28n, 32, 125, 132 nn. 26 and 27, 134 n. 29, 135 nn. 31 and 32
Sedley, David, 1 n. 2, 34 n. 20, 50 n. 6
shuttle example, 46, 119–120, 183
Silverman, Allan, 1 n. 2, 20n, 31n, 44 n. 31, 135 n. 32
Simplicius, 34 n. 20, 74, 75 n. 67
Simonides, 63, 66, 67, 72, 73
Smith, N.D., 18 nn. 26 and 28
Socratic dialogues, 1, 11, 13, 101, 175–76
sophists, 14n, 53, 63n. 39, 66, 67, 101, 101 n. 24, 154n, 179, 180. *See also* Protagoras/Protagoreanism
Sophocles, 160n
Sorell, Tom, 107n
stability, principle of, 154–55, 158, 167–68. *See also* Forms
Stewart, M.A., 94 n. 15
Stokes, Michael, 18 n. 26
'strict sense', project of the, 14–16, 38, 47, 48, 82, 107, 126, 137–42
structural correctness, 102–106. *See also* Cratylese
stylometry, 3, 3n. 4
syntactic reading of the *Sophist*, 177–79, 189–97

Tarrant, Harold, 163n
'thesis thesis', 13, 23, 36–39, 46, 47. *See also* conventionalism
Thrasymachus, 11, 14n, 19, 37 n. 25, 57, 57 n. 19
Thucydides, 12, 65, 152 n. 13
Tigerstedt, E.N., 58 n. 22
to poion ti, 116–118, 119 n, 123, 127, 165–66

Varro, 85n
von Fritz, Kurt, 163n

Zeno. 64

Index Locorum

AELIUS ARISTIDES
Against Plato in Defense of Oratory
205–211: 170n. 12
AESCHYLUS
Choephoroi
1022–1023: 61n. 31
Eumenides
91: 160n. l6
Persians
626: 160n. 19
630: 160n. 19
ALEXANDER OF APHRODISIAS
In Aristotelis Analyticorum Priorum
3.17–23: 55
ALEXIS
fr. 89: 160n. 19
AMMONIUS
In Aristotelis De Interpretatione
38.17ff.: 34n. 20
ANTIPHON
DK87B44: 27n. 6
ARISTOPHANES
Clouds
25: 61n. 31
69: 61n. 30
394: 54n. l4
ARISTOTLE
Categories
3b33ff.: 118
6a19ff.: 118
De Interpretatione
16a1ff.: 131n. 25
16a28–9: 90n. 7
16a19: 43
16b6ff.: 188
16b33–17a2: 43, 135–136
Metaphysics
987a29–b1: 55n. 16
997b35–998a4: 166
1010a7–15: 55n. 16
Nicomachean Ethics
1095a32–b1: 62n. 36
1095a32ff.: 17n. 25
1133a30–31: 26
Poetics
1448b12–19: 146
Politics
1280b11: 25n. 5
Rhetoric
1373B8–9: 27n. 6
1417B1–3: 55n. 16
AUGUSTINE
De Dialectica
VI.9–10: 85n. 5

CICERO
De Oratore
1.33–4: 170n. l2
De Natura Deorum
1.28: 75n. 67
Orationes
44.151: 65n. 42

DEMOCRITUS
DK68B9: 27n. 7
DK68B26: 25n. 4, 38 n. 26
DK68B125: 27n. 7
DERVENI PAPYRUS
Col. X: 96n. 16
Col. X, 7–11: 54
Col. XIV: 54, 96n. 16

Col. XV, 8–9: 54
Col. XVII, 10–12: 54n. 12
Col. XVIII, 7–13: 54n. 12
Col. XIX, 7–8: 54
DIOGENES LAERTIUS
7.121–4: 14n. 23
8.31: 160n. 19
9.51: 158
DIONYSIUS OF HALICARNASSUS
De Compositione Verborum
16: 49n. 2
DISSOI LOGOI
8: 101n. 24

EPICURUS
Kuriai Doxai
31–33: 37n. 25
36–37: 37n. 25
Letter to Herodotus
75–76: 25n. 4
76: 30
EURIPIDES
Bacchae
292–297: 54n. 14
298–299: 54n. 14
Electra
938ff.: 77
938–941: 168n. 10
Medea
759: 160n. 19

GORGIAS
DK82B8: 66n. 48

HERACLITUS
DK22B93: 59
HOMER
Iliad 69–70
1.526: 77
2.5–36: 149
5.221–2: 60
5.237: 61n. 30
6.265: 61
10.224: 72
23.309–326: 62
23.321: 75
23.326: 75
23.343: 75
23.424: 61n. 31
23.427: 75
23.638: 75
24.153: 160n. 19
24.182: 160n. 19
24.437: 160n. 19
24.461: 160n. 19
Odyssey
19.563–567: 149
HERODOTUS
1.53–54: 59n. 26
1.71: 59n. 26
1.91: 59n. 26

ISOCRATES
Antidosis
253–255: 169–170n. 12

'LONGINUS'
De Sublimitate
13: 64n. 39

PARMENIDES
DK28B1: 75
DK28B1.30: 74, 76
DK28B1.30–32: 77–78
DK28B1.53–54: 78
DK28B2.5–8: 180n. 6
DK28B6: 180n. 6
DK28B6.5: 75
DK28B7.1–2: 180n. 6
DK28B7.36: 75
DK28B8.2: 75
DK28B8.38–41: 76
DK28B8.39: 29
DK28B8.39–41: 76
DK28B8.50–52: 77
DK28B8.51: 76
DK28B8.51–54: 74
DK28B8.53: 29
DK28B8.53–54: 76
DK28B8.54: 75
DK28B8.60–61: 75
DK28B8.61: 74
DK28B9.1–2: 76
DK28B19: 76

DK28B19.3: 29, 76
PINDAR
Isthmian 8
62: 62
Olympian 9
80–81: 62
Pythian 10
65: 62
PLATO
Aldbiades I
111b–112b: 104
Apology
21b: 59n. 25
22a–c: 59
22b–c: 58
23a8–b4: 137n. 36
30e–31b: 175
Charmides 171, 175
162d–167a: 176
163d4: 101n. 23
173a7: 149n. 6
Cratylus
383a: 53
383a4: 160
383a4–b1: 24, 29
383a7: 7, 29
383b: 5
383b6–7: 24, 160
383b8–384a5: 40
384a: 53
384a5: 52
384b–c: 67n. 49
384c: 53
384c3–6: 160
384c9–10: 40
384c10–d1: 25
384d2–9: 26, 29–38 *passim*
384d3–4: 167
384d6–7: 125
385a: 124
385a–b: 7
385a1–b1: 27–28, 29–33 *passim*
385b–d: 188n. 13
385b–e: 32
385b2–d1: 28n. 9, 32–33, 181
385c7–9: 186n. 11
385d2–e3: 28, 29–38 *passim*
385e–386e: 88
385e3: 46
385e4–386a7: 40
385e4–386e5: 158
386a–e: 41
386aff.: 121
386a3–4: 158, 167
386a4: 42
386a5–7: 31
386e1: 42, 158
386e1–4: 168
386e6–387b1: 42
386e8: 182, 187
387a–390e: 88
387b2–4: 42
387b11–c4: 42
387c–388b: 6n. 9
387d4–6: 42
388aff.: 120
388b: 100
388b–c: 144
388bff.: 123
388b10–11: 44, 170
388b10ff.: 128
388b13–c1: 44, 170
388c–390e: 43
388d–390e: 99
388dff.: 112
388d12: 48
388e–389a: 48
388e–390e: 112
388e1ff.: 48
389a–b: 119
389a–390a: 45
389b–390e: 138
389bff.: 151
389b3: 46n. 34
389b5: 46n. 34
389b9–10: 46n. 34
389d–e: 96n. 18
389d–390a: 48n. 37
389d6–7: 46n. 34
389d6ff.: 29
389d8–11: 159n. 18
389e7–440a: 159n. 18
390a–d: 45
390a5–9: 46–47
390a6–7: 46, 46n. 34
390b1: 46

390c: 100
390d: 48
390d7: 29
390d10: 29
390e3: 46n. 34
390e4: 46n. 34
390e5–391a4: 40
391a: 97
391a–396c: 45
391a3: 51
391d–e: 139
392c2: 29
393–394: 96n. 18
393a–394c: 47
393a6: 5n. 7
393b–394e: 45
393bff.: 88
393d–394c: 51
393d–e: 92n. 12, 129, 184
393d2: 5n. 7
393d3–4: 122, 184
393d4: 88
393e: 48n. 37, 122
393e2–4: 184
393e3: 88–89n. 6
393e6: 88
393e6–7: 184
394a5–c9: 116
394b–c: 47
394d4: 45
394e3–7: 45
395c3: 5 n. 7
396a5: 45, 129
396c: 57
396d: 57
396d3: 57
396e: 58
396e4–397a1: 57
397b: 10
397b–c: 146
397b2: 78
397c1–2: 49n. 1
399a1: 57
399b1: 5n. 6, 182, 186, 186n. 11
399c: 71
399d–400b: 51, 62
400b–c: 63
400b2: 6n. 9
400b5: 99
400d–408d: 5
400dff.: 139
401a: 73
401a1–5: 76
401a2–6: 49n. 1
401a5: 29
401b–e: 96n. 16
401b8: 29
402d11–e1: 6n. 9
402e4: 6n. 9
403a–404b: 56, 63
404e–406b: 63
407d1–4: 51
407d7.–8: 60
407e–408b: 160
407e–408d: 78
407e5–408a2: 78
408b: 53
408b1–3: 49
408c2: 5n. 7
408c5–d2: 79
408d: 160
409b–c: 71
409c: 58
409c–410a: 82
409d: 57
410e3: 61
411a: 61n. 31
411b4: 57
411b4–5: 29
411c2–5: 158
411c2–6: 167
411d9: 5n. 7
412a: 145
412c–413d: 95
412c2: 5
412e1: 5
413a9: 61
413d7: 78
414a–b: 61n. 31
414a8–b1: 5, 187
414b–c: 135n. 30
414b2–3: 61
414b7–c8: 49
414c5: 29
414e3: 61
415a2: 61

416a: 82
416a10–b6: 49
416c: 8
417b–c: 63
419a8: 5n. 7
419b4: 82
420a9–b2: 82
420d1: 61
420d6: 82
421b8–c2: 82
421c: 95
421c–d: 82
421c–427c: 51, 81
421c4–6: 82
421c5: 5, 187
421d7–8: 61
421d9–e4: 82
421e1–2: 5n. 6, 182, 186, 186n. 11
422al–b4: 83, 87
422a3: 92
422a5–c1: 87
422b2: 92
422b6: 92
422b7: 94n. 15
422c: 83
422c7–d2: 88
422d: 93n. 13
422d–e: 45
422d–423b: 128
422e4: 5n. 7
423b–d: 6n. 9
423b9–10: 93n. 13
423e: 93n. 13, 129
423e8: 88
424a5–6: 99
424a8–9: 83n. 3
424b–d: 9
424b7: 94n. 15
424b7–c3: 92
424c–d: 9
424c1–2: 101
424c5–d4: 94
424c7: 101
424d5–425b3: 97
424e4–425a2: 94
424e4–525a5: 96
424e6–425a1: 186
425a1: 186
425a1–4: 186
425a3–5: 99
425a5: 94n. 15
425b1: 94n. 15
425c: 73
425c1–3: 76
425d: 8
425d1: 90
425d7–8: 85
426a1–3: 85
426a4: 94n. 15
426a7: 85
426b5–6: 90
426c–427c: 89
426c–e: 124n. 17
426c2: 89
426d4: 89
426e–427a: 95
426e1: 5n. 6, 182, 186, 186n. 11
427a: 124n. 17
427b: 124n. 17
427c5: 93n. 13
427d2–6: 27n. 7
427e: 53
427e3–4: 128n. 22
427e6: 128n. 22
428b4–7: 53
428c: 57, 67
428c6–8: 70
428c7: 57
428d–435c: 17n. 25, 51
428d3: 78
428d5: 78
428e–429a: 112
428e1–2: 129
429b–e: 112
429b1–6: 112
429c3–5: 112
429e4–5: 113
430a4: 38
430d5–7: 188n. 13
430e3–431a5: 114
431a8–c1: 181
431b: 179
431b–c: 33
431b1–3: 114
431b2–c1: 186, 186n. 11
431b5–6: 186

431c5–8: 115
431d–e: 114
431d2–7: 115
431e9–432a4: 115
431e10–11: 92n. 12
432a1: 115n. 4
432a5–b4: 116
432b1: 166
432b5–c5: 119
432d: 119
432e: 33, 179
432e1–433a2: 182
432e5–6: 122
432e5–433a2: 183
432e6–7: 122n. 15
433a–d: 123
433b–d: 128
433b–435b: 112
433c9: 134n. 29
433d1–434b: 95
433e: 26
433e3–5: 124
433e4: 128n. 21, 130
433e6–8: 124
434a–b: 94n. 15
434c–d: 124, 127n. 20
434d: 112
434e1: 128
434e1–2: 127n. 20
434e1–435b3: 125
434e4: 128n. 21
434e7–8: 131
435a5: 131
435a7: 35, 136n. 34
435a8: 129
435a9: 128n. 21, 129
435b–c: 112
435b3: 128n. 21, 129
435b5–6: 134
435b6–c2: 132
435c1–2: 133
435c2–3: 106, 111
435c2–d1: 134
435c5–6: 111
435d: 130
435d–e: 144
435d–436a: 53, 124
435d–439b: 17n. 25, 51, 111
435d1–3: 88–89n. 6
435d1–439b9: 143
435d2–3: 144
435d4–6: 144
435e1: 99
435e2–3: 139
435e7: 128n. 22
436a1–2: 144
436a3–8: 144
436a6: 128n. 22
436a9–b3: 144
436b: 9
436b3: 78
436b5: 29
436b11: 78
436c–d: 85–86, 109
436c–437c: 53
436c1–2: 144
436e1: 145n. 1
437a4: 145
437c2: 145
437c8: 5n. 7
437d: 126
437d5–6: 188n. 13
438a: 9
438a–c: 73
438aff.: 145
438c: 8, 145
438c1–3: 49n. 1
438c1–4: 84
438c5: 145n. 1
438c5–6: 49n. 1, 146
438d7–8: 188n. 13
438e–439b: 106
439a5–b2: 146
439b–440e: 111
439b10–c1: 149
439b10–c4: 78, 144
439b10–440d6: 143
439c: 76
439cff.: 73
439c6–d1: 149
439c7: 154
439d2: 151
439d3–6: 152
439d5ff.: 117
439d7: 152
439d8–11: 153

439d9: 154
439e–440b: 145
439e1–5: 154
439e7–440a4: 156
440a9–c1: 156
440c1–3: 148
440c4–d6: 158
440e3–5: 160
Euthydemus 63, 177
272aff.: 66n. 48
277b–c: 66n. 48
283e–288a: 179
283e9–284a1: 180
284a1–8: 180
284a6–c4: 180
284b–c: 183
284b8–c6: 180
284c7–8: 180
285b5–7: 180
285d–286b: 179
303a–b: 66n. 48
Euthyphro 13, 171
3b–c: 57
6b–c: 57
7b–e: 104
10a–11b: 84
11a7–8: 84
13d–14a: 175
Gorgias 99–100
447c: 69n. 51
449c: 69n. 51
456c–457a: 66n. 48
482c1–3: 145n. 1
482d4: 145n. 1
483e: 27n. 9
501a: 100
515dff.: 140
521d: 14
Hippias Major
285c7–d2: 101
300b–302d: 117n. 7
301d–302b: 33
Hippias Minor
364a: 66n. 48
368d4–5: 101
Ion
533d–535a: 58
535c–536d: 58
Laches 13, 171
192c–d: 14
194cff.: 176
197d5: 101n. 23
Laws 171n. 14
654a: 72
667c–669b: 178n. 3
668c–669b: 146
714a: 72
715b1–6: 38
719c: 58
874e–875d: 121
874e9–875a4: 140
875b6–7: 140
875d2–5: 140
889e3–890a2: 36
957c: 72
Menexenus 63, 64, 65–67, 73
235a1–c5: 65
235b8–c4: 65
235c6: 65
235d6: 65
236c–d: 65
236c5–6: 67
236c8: 65
246e–247a: 65. 72
Meno
71b: 165
82b: 140n. 37
82e: 140n. 37
84d: 140n. 37
85c9–d1: 150, 172
85d: 140n. 37
87d: 140n. 37
87dff.: 14
98a2–6: 171
99c–d: 58
100a6–7: 139
Minos 13n. 22, 14
316d–317b: 47
Parmenides 64
130e: 73
132d: 116n. 6
133d: 73
134a–e: 120n. 11
136e–137a: 75
Phaedo 3n. 4, 73, 151n. 9
68d–69c: 14

69a–c: 140
69b–c: 14
73b–77a: 128n. 21, 138
73d6: 128n. 21
73e–75e: 146
74a3: 128n. 21
74c11: 128n. 21
74d1: 128n. 21
74e3: 128n. 21
74e9: 128n. 21
80d5–7: 63
90c3–4: 167n. 8
90c3–6: 158
90c9: 167n. 8
99e6–100a3: 171
100a: 116n. 6
100a1–3: 165n. 3
102b: 73
103b–c: 73
Phaedrus 64–65, 72, 73, 94, 175n. 18
234d1–6: 65
234d7–8: 65
234e: 69
234e3: 69
235b3: 69
235b4–6: 69
235c: 57
235d–237a: 56
235d4–6: 67
235d4–e1: 64
235d6–7: 67
236b1–4: 64
236b2: 69
236d4: 65
236e–237a: 65
237a: 57
238c–d: 58
241e: 58
242b–c: 58–59n. 23
242c3: 58
243a2–3: 58
243e–244a: 57, 58
244a2–3: 58n. 23
244b–d: 54n. l4
257a2–3: 59n. 23
260b–d: 10
260e: 14
261a–266d: 19
262b2–3: 80n. 72
262d: 58, 59n. 23
263a–c: 104
263d: 58, 59n. 23
265a–266b: 59n. 28
265a5: 59n. 23
265d–266c: 45n. 32
265e: 9
266b: 100
266c: 14
269d–272b: 19
270b4–6: 100
270d1–7: 100
270eff.: 14
273d–e: 45n. 32
Philebus 94, 172
16d–20a: 45n. 32
17a–b: 100n. 22
18b–c: 94n. 14
18b–d: 100n. 22
20b: 149n. 6
24aff.: 118n. 9
39aff.: 19n. 29
56a7: 167n. 8
59c2–3: 167n. 8
62b6: 167n. 8
Protagoras 63, 66–68, 72
316d: 66
320c: 69n. 51
329b: 69n. 51
330c1–2: 151
335a4: 66
335e2–4: 66
338a–b: 66
338b1: 61
338e6–339a2: 67
339a: 69n. 51
339a2–6: 67
339e1–3: 66
340b1: 101n. 23
341c8: 101n. 23
343c: 67
348a: 67
348d1: 72
356c–357a: 104
358a6: 101n. 23
Republic 1, 3–4n. 3, 73, 117, 140, 163–168,, 171n. 14

Book I: 19
338c–341a: 37n. 25
338d–339a: 11
352e2–353a11: 138
353b2–d2: 138
358b7–c1: 57
359a1–3: 25n. 5
402a–c: 100n. 22
402b5–c8: 139
402b7: 147
402c7: 147
430c: 14
438d–439a: 117n. 8
443b–d: 150n. 7
452a–e: 90n. 9
454a: 76n. 68
476c–d: 149
477c–d: 88n. 6
491a–b: 140
500e–501b: 116n. 6
510b–511e: 174
510d5–7: 137n. 36
520c: 149
523bff.: 127
523e7: 127
524e7: 127
533b8–c1: 150
585e3: 167n. 8
596a: 73
601a5: 186n. 10
Seventh Letter 3, 117, 163–168, 179n. 4
341a–b: 166n. 7
341b–c: 166n. 7
341c–d: 166n. 7
341d–342a: 166n. 7
342a–e: 164
342a–343c: 166n. 7
342bff.: 116n. 6
342b8–9: 165n. 4
342c2–3: 164
342d8–343a1: 164
342e–343a: 73
342e3: 165n. 4
343a1: 166
343a6–7: 166
343a9–b6: 166
343b–c: 73
343b1–3: 167
343b6–c5: 165–165
343c–d: 166n. 7
343c2–5: 166
343e–344c: 166n. 7
344a–b: 174
344c–d: 166n. 7
344d–345c: 166n. 7
Sophist 3, 3–4n. 3, 45n. 32, 94, 122, 174–175, 177–197 *passim*
226b: 187
233cff.: 179
234c5–7: 179
237a3ff.: 179–180
239dff.: 179
240a8: 80n. 72
240d1–2: 80n. 72
247dff.: 88n. 6
252eff.: 100n. 22
253d: 100
253d–e: 45n. 32
257b7: 185n. 8
258b9–c1: 168
261a–264d: 179
261d–263d: 185n. 8
261d1–262e2: 184ff.
261d2: 186n. 11, 187
261d5: 185
261e1–2: 187
261e5: 186, 187
261e6: 185
262a3: 186
262a3–4: 182, 185n. 8
262a6: 186
262a6–7: 187
262b6: 182, 186, 187
262b7: 182
262c2–4: 182
262d2–3: 188
262d2–6: 185
262d8–e1: 184n. 7
262e1: 185
262e3–9: 184n. 7
262e9: 117n. 8
262e12–13: 184n. 7
263d3: 182, 186
264c–d: 179
264d5: 80n. 72
265c–266b: 119

267d–e: 142n. 38
268a–272 b: 100
Statesman 15, 45n. 32, 94, 174–175
259b3: 14
261e: 76n. 68
262d1–6: 9
277a–c: 178n. 3
277c4–6: 19n. 29
277d–278e: 100n. 22
277d2–4: 150n. 7
278c8-d6: 150n. 7
278e10: 150n. 7
293al: 14
293c: 14
293c5–6: 123n. 16
293e1–5: 123n. 16
293e1–6: 16
293e2–3: 139
297c: 139
300d5–e2: 16
300e1–2: 139
301a: 14
Symposium 52n. 8
198b5: 186n. 10
199b4: 186n. 10
Theaetetus 3, 3–4n. 3, 41, 57 n. 19, 64, 159, 170n.13, 171–176, 177
166dff.: 43
167c4–5: 36
168b: 39
172a1–5: 39
177c–d: 39
177c–179b: 44
177d–e: 76n. 68
177d5–e2: 43
179ff.: 153
182–3: 55n. 16
182a6–8: 117–118
182a7: 166
182d–183b: 148n. 4
184c: 76n. 68
184e8: 88n. 6
186b2–4: 127
186b6–9: 127
187d–200d: 179
188d3: 180
188d3–4: 179
188d9–10: 180
188e–189b: 180
189b1–2: 180
190a: 180
191e8–9: 122n. 15
192a4: 122n. 15
194b5: 122n. 15
201d8: 149n. 6
201e–202c: 84n. 4
202eff.: 100n. 22
204d1: 117
206d1–2: 186
209e6–210b2: 172
237–241: 193
237e1–2: 193
237e5: 193
238c: 189
238c9: 193
241b2–3: 193
258e: 189
261d1–3: 195
261d8: 196
261e4: 196
262–263: 193
262b1–2: 196
262d8–e1: 195
262e3: 192
262e5–6: 192, 193
263a4–10: 192
263a8: 194
263b4–5: 189
263b5–12: 189
263c5–11: 193
263e10–13: 191
283c1–3: 194
Timaeus
29b: 116n. 6
37b8: 167n. 8
41bff.: 119
47a–d: 10, 169
48b–c: 100n. 22
48e–52c: 116n. 6
49d–50a: 166
49dff.: 117
62b–c: 127, 170
PLUTARCH
Adversus Colotem
1114c–d(DKA7): 74, 75n. 67
PROCLUS

In Platonis Parmenidem
631: 64, 65, 69
632: 64
In Platonis Cratylum
51: 135n. 32
PYTHAGORAS
DK58C2: 29

SEXTOS EMPIRICUS
Adversus Mathematicos
I.241–5: 83
SIMPLICIUS
In Aristotelis Categorias
27.18–21: 34n. 20
In Aristotelis De Caelo
559.20ff.: 75n. 67
In Aristotelis Physicorum
9.39.10–12: 74
SOPHOCLES
Ajax
832: 160n. 19
Oedipus at Colonnus
1548: 160n. 19
Philoctetes
133: 160n. 19

THUCYDIDES
III.82.4: 12
IV.68.1: 152n. 13

VARRO
De Lingua Latina
7.1–4: 85n. 5

XENOPHON
Memorabilia
III.ix.10–11: 14n. 23
IV.iv.13: 25n. 5