SOCRATES AGONISTES: THE CASE OF THE *CRATYLUS* ETYMOLOGIES

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THE etymologies of Plato's *Cratylus* are a notorious puzzle. They occupy almost half the dialogue, but what they contribute to the whole is far from clear. In them, Socrates undertakes to vindicate virtually the whole lexicon of contemporary philosophy, theology, and science. For example, he reveals that the name 'Ares' is appropriate because it is in accordance with 'male' (ἄρρεν), 'courageous' (ἀνδρεῖον), and 'tough' (ἄρρατον) (407 C–D); 'Hermes' is so called because 'he devised speaking' (τὸ εἴρειν ἐμήσατο) (408 A–B). 'Techne' can—admittedly with a lot of phoneme-fiddling—be seen to indicate 'possession of reason' (ἕξις νοῦ) (414 B–C). And αἰσχρόν, 'ugly' or 'shameful', relates to 'always restricting what flows' (ἀεὶ ἴσχον τὸν ῥοῦν) (416 B); 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,[2] was a quite different practice—or rather a family of practices, with a wide range of purposes and standards. As practised by Socrates in the *Cratylus*, etymology involves a claim about the

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[1] References to the *Cratylus* use L. Méridier's text (Platon, *Cratyle* (Œuvres complètes, 5/2; Paris, 1931)); translations are my own.

[2] On the importance of the *Cratylus* see e.g. D.H. *De comp. verb.* 16.

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underlying semantic content of the name, what it really means or indicates. This content is taken to have been put there by the ancient namegivers: giving an etymology is thus a matter of unwrapping or decoding a name to find the message the namegivers have placed inside. Further, Socrates offers this decoding as a *justification*: a name is correct by virtue of having content true of or appropriate to its object.

Because of their exorbitant length, and their extravagant, vaguely humorous, tone, it is impossible to read the etymologies without suspecting that there is something more to them than meets the eye—or perhaps something less. Confusion over just what this might be has made the etymologies the subject of much controversial and inconclusive speculation.[3] Commentators have differed not only over the significance of the etymologies but, perhaps more intensely, over their status and provenance. Are they, or are they intended to be, plausible, acceptable, *good* etymologies? Are they Plato's own creations, or borrowings, or parodies of some contemporary etymologizer(s)? Interpretation has tended to suffer from a lack of clarity as to the significance of these questions. For example, failure to accept that the *Cratylus*'s etymologies are not etymologies in the modern manner has led to much irrelevant discussion: whether they are good or plausible by modern standards is clearly beside the point, but what standards *are* appropriate is not so easy to discover.[4] 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.[5]

[3] For a partial survey of the debate see Konrad Gaiser, 'Name und Sache in Platons "Kratylos"' ['Name und Sache'], *Abhandlungen der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse* (1974), 45–9.

[4] 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 etymology, Grote offers more than enough evidence that such condemnation of the etymologies is a recent phenomenon, and that modern standards clearly were not ancient ones (George Grote, *Plato and the Other Companions of Sokrates* (4 vols.; London, 1888), iii. 299–312). For what it is worth, according to Méridier, there are just over twenty etymologies, out of about 140, which would be regarded nowadays as acceptable (*Cratyle*, 20).

[5] 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', 45). On the whole I sympathize with Goldschmidt's exasperated plea: 'on veuille laisser de côté cette inévitable pseudo-question de savoir si Platon est

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I shall begin with what seems to me a prior, not to mention more interesting, question: what is the etymological section *for*? One function it serves is immediately obvious. The etymologies are part of Socrates' account of the 'natural correctness' of names, and help to specify what this correctness consists in. It has previously been established that names are tools by which we divide things as they are and inform each other about them (387 C–388 B). The point of departure for the etymological section is the idea that names perform this function by disclosing the natures of their objects (393 D–394 C), which they do by having appropriate semantic or descriptive content. Operating on the convenient heuristic assumption that Greek *is* more or less a naturally correct language, Socrates' etymologizing shows how this semantic construal of correctness would work.

But this function cannot account for the exhaustiveness of the etymologies, particularly as the semantic construal of correctness turns out to be inadequate anyway. It eventually emerges that a name must ultimately be reducible to primitive 'first names', which are not composed of further words and 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 (421 C–427 C). The mimetic account is Socrates' final construal of natural correctness: he seems to think that it is compatible with the etymological account, but at best the latter must be seen as incomplete or superficial. Moreover, the remainder of the dialogue shows that natural correctness is itself not the whole story. The arguments which follow the mimetic account set limits to the scope and force of natural correctness as such (428 D–435 C); a later series of arguments show that etymology is unreliable as a guide to things, and include a series of etymologies which run counter to those of the earlier section (435 D–439 C). In short, the etymological account of correctness is at least two removes from the dialogue's final results on the subject,

"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' (V. Goldschmidt, *Essai sur le Cratyle* [*Essai*] (Paris, 1940), 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 that perception brings with it the responsibility of explaining just why the passage is funny and in what way (the words 'irony' and 'parody' are not sufficient here), and how this contributes to the philosophical economy of the whole. (I attempt to do this in sect. 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.

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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 paper attempts to answer this question by considering the issues of Platonic method and form raised by the etymological section—by trying to determine what kind of Platonic writing it is. I begin with two obvious features. First, the etymological section is presented as a *rational reconstruction* of a 'Cratylan' position on the correctness of names, where Cratylus stands for a widespread contemporary intellectual practice of using etymology to disclose the natures of things (Section 1); second, it is an *inspiration episode* (Section 2). I argue that more fundamental than either of these is the representation of the etymological section as an *agonistic display*, in which Socrates is seen to beat etymology-mongers at their own game (Section 3). As an *agōn*, the etymological section is an instance of an important Platonic genre with counterparts in other works: notably, Socrates' first speech in the *Phaedrus*, his oration in the *Menexenus*, and his interpretation of Simonides in the *Protagoras*.[6] By considering these examples together, we can get a sense of how the agonistic genre works and what Plato uses it for. Applied to the *Cratylus*, this will make it possible to give an answer to the question of function, and to explain some of the more puzzling features of the etymological section (Section 4). It will also suggest a curious parallel. The etymological section in many ways resembles another notable philosophical *agōn*: Parmenides' cosmology or *Doxa* (Section 5). Though the *Doxa* is as difficult and controversial as the etymologies, the parallel will, I think, help to bring out something important that the two texts have in common: a 'Parmenidean' conception of language as inherently, systematically deceptive.

1. The rational reconstruction

Socrates' etymologizing is presented as part of his explication of Cratylus' claim that there is a natural correctness of names. The

[6] Socrates' speech on *erōs* in the *Symposium* must also count as an agonistic display (see Andrea Wilson Nightingale, *Genres in Dialogue* [*Genres*] (Cambridge, 1995), 111 ff., 127–8). However, the interpretation of the *Symposium* seems to me to present special difficulties, and I shall not be relying on it in this paper.

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Cratylus opens with Hermogenes asking Socrates to interpret this oracular claim (μαντεία) (384 A 5)—to play the role of spokesman to Cratylus' Pythia (cf. *Tim.* 71 E–72 B)—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. None the less, his account is still presented as an explanation of the Cratylan position, and is fully accepted as such (428 C 1–8).

What does it mean for the etymologies to be 'Cratylan'? Cratylus is represented as having a specialized, even professional, skill on the subject of correct names. Though oracular with Hermogenes, he insists that he could convince him; his refusal to explain himself is probably the teasing reticence of the fee-charging expert (384 A, cf. 427 E). Later, Socrates describes him as having both investigated these matters himself and learnt them from others, and even offers to enrol 'as one of your students regarding the correctness of names' if he can offer a better account of it than Socrates himself has done (428 B 4–5, cf. 6–7).

Though Cratylus' acceptance of Socrates' account applies to both its etymological and its mimetic components, it seems likely that the first, much longer, account is particularly in view, and that Cratylus' name 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 this natural correctness is the same for Greeks and foreigners (383 A) makes sense inasmuch as foreign names can be just as etymologically appropriate as Greek ones. More decisively, his initial claim that 'Hermogenes' is not Hermogenes' name must be based on an etymological understanding of correctness, and is explained in this way on two occasions (384 C, 408 B). And later, when Cratylus claims that the study of names is the way to learn about their objects (435 D–436 A), it is clear that the study in question is etymological; hence Socrates' refutation of it by means of contradictory etymologies (437 A–C, and note 436 C–E).

The supposition 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.[7] This is no surprise given

[7] For surveys of the evidence see Goldschmidt, *Essai*, 109–42; Timothy M. S.

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the sophists' well-known general fascination with language and its 'correctness'.[8] And in fact we find etymologizing in a wide range of pre-Platonic texts, in philosophical and poetic as well as sophistic contexts—though it is difficult (and perhaps unnecessary) to mark off etymology proper from a broader genre of explanations, arguments, jokes, and word-play relying on etymologies or on phonetic similarities between words.[9] And if we look to post-Platonic texts, etymological argument for philosophical positions seems to become common practice. The Stoics were notorious etymologizers, but the practice was by no means restricted to them. As an example, here is a striking use of etymology, in support of an important point, by the Peripatetic Alexander of Aphrodisias:

The knowledge of every chance thing is not worthy of philosophy . . . but [only] the knowledge of things divine and precious, and these are things of which nature is the artificer, since it is a kind of divine art; for from the very name is it clear that *theôrein* has for its object the vision and knowledge of divine things, for it means 'to see [ὁρᾶν] the things that are divine (*theia*)'. For this reason we say that theoretical philosophy is knowledge of divine

Baxter, *The* Cratylus*: Plato's Critique of Naming* [*Critique*] (Leiden, 1992), chs. 4–5.

[8] See George Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge, 1981), ch. 7; W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, iii. *The Fifth-century Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1969), 204–25.

[9] Our most fascinating source for early etymologizing in intellectual contexts is the Derveni papyrus (probably composed around the end of the 5th cent.), the greatest part of which is a commentary on an Orphic cosmogonic poem. So far as one can tell, the commentator's project seems to be an integration of the cosmogony with the findings of modern science: he is particularly concerned to vindicate the poet's use of names. His strategies include etymology: 'having named (ὀνομάσας) reason (νοῦν) which knocks (κρούοντα) things against each other "Kronos", he says that he did a great deed against Ouranos . . . He named Kronos from the . . . and the others each according to the same [?] principle' (col. x. 7–11; cf. cols. xvii. 10–12, xviii. 7–13). The relevance of the papyrus to the *Cratylus* has been noted by, among others, Charles Kahn, 'Language and Ontology in the *Cratylus*' ['Language and Ontology'], in E. N. Lee, A. P. D. Mourelatos, and R. M. Rorty (eds.), *Exegesis and Argument* (Assen, 1973), 152–76 at 156 n. 6; Kahn has now discussed the parallel more extensively in 'Was Euthyphro the Author of the Derveni Papyrus?', in A. Laks and G. W. Most (eds.), *Studies on the Derveni Papyrus* (Oxford, 1997), 55–63; for another extended comparison see Baxter, *Critique*, 130 ff. Only a partial and provisional text of the papyrus has been published, in *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, 47 (1982), pages numbered 1–12 following 300. A further telling piece of evidence for contemporary etymologizing is that the etymologizing intellectual was mocked at the theatre: see Eur. *Ba.* 292–7, 298–9 (cf. Plato, *Phdr.* 244 B–D), as well as Ar. *Nu.* 394.

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things and of things that come to be, and are constituted, by nature . . . (*In An. Pr.* 3. 17–23)[10]

I shall call etymologizing of this ambitious sort *strong etymology*. It expresses the powerful assumption that the real meanings of words, as recovered by etymology, can provide knowledge (or can at least confirm and explain what we already know) about the natures of things. Strong etymology is thus a method of discovery, teaching, and persuasion not just about language but about the world. And it is a method which tends naturally to support normative judgements about names: for if names *can* provide insight into the natures of the objects they name, it seems reasonable to suppose that a 'correct' name is one which does so.

I think that we are probably to understand Cratylus as a practitioner of strong etymology: in fact, since he is not strongly 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.[11] It also suggests that we are to see his Heraclitean affiliation in the dialogue as in a way secondary.[12] 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*. What is fundamental is the method and the faith in names it depends on.

As I have said, Socrates' exposition of the Cratylan position is meant as a rational reconstruction: as such it represents an improvement over other possible versions. Thus Cratylus finds he has nothing to add to Socrates' exposition; 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

[10] As cited in Alexander of Aphrodisias, *On Aristotle* Metaphysics *1*, trans. William E. Dooley (London, 1989), 13 n. 8 (with '[ὁρᾶν]' added).

[11] On the problematic relations of the *Cratylus* to the historical Cratylus and to Aristotle's allusions to him, see G. S. Kirk, 'The Problem of Cratylus', *American Journal of Philology* [*AJP*], 72 (1951), 225–53, opposed by D. J. Allan, 'The Problem of Cratylus', *AJP* 75 (1954), 271–87.

[12] Cf. Kirk, 'The Problem of Cratylus', 227, 230–1.

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considers more defensible.[13] For example, in etymologizing 'Hades' (i.e. death) Socrates emphasizes that, far from being frightening, as the obvious etymology 'invisible' (ἀειδές) might suggest, death is a promising opportunity for knowledge (εἰδέναι) (403 A–404 B).

In sum, the etymological account is a rational reconstruction of the Cratylan programme: it represents a contemporary intellectual practice—a pseudo-science—of strong etymology 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 shall consider later on. In etymologizing, Socrates is engaging in a reconstruction of the world-view of the namegivers, as encoded in the names they have given; and by presuming that these names are correct (as in the Hades case), and by invoking natural science in a reasonably sophisticated way, he puts the best face on their beliefs, just as he does with those of Cratylus.

Why does Plato present the Cratylan view through Socrates, rather than letting Cratylus speak for himself? There are, I think, important methodological points at stake: these will come out more clearly when I discuss the etymologies as *agōn*, but we can note them briefly now. One is the idea that part of the philosopher's job is to take on the sympathetic presentation of views which, though alien, are in some way important or helpful. Socrates' performance of this function within the dialogue is an emblem of Plato's own practice as a writer of dialogues. Second, Plato wants to suggest that the resulting presentation 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 *erōs*, 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 (235 D–237 A). The result, which begins with a psychological definition of *erōs* and goes on to consider its implications in a systematic way, is indeed an improvement: more organized, persuasive, and intellectually sophisticated. Another example of rational reconstruction comes in

[13] Cf. Paul Friedländer, *Plato*, trans. H. Meyerhoff (3 vols.; New York, 1958–69), ii. 206–8.

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book 2 of the *Republic*. Here Glaucon and Adeimantus are presented as 'reviving' the argument just made by Thrasymachus (358 B 7–C 1), an argument against 'justice' as ordinarily understood. 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.

In Section 3 I shall suggest that in the *Cratylus* this enterprise of rational reconstruction is ultimately to be understood as an aspect of the agonistic genre.[14] But first I want to look at another dimension of the etymological discourse: its depiction as an episode of inspiration.

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' (396 C). Hermogenes assents to this description, describing him as 'suddenly giving oracles just like those divinely possessed' (396 D 3); then later as inspired (399 A 1, cf. 428 C 7), and as engaging in divination (411 B 4). 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 (396 D, 409 D, cf. 428 C). There is no reason to doubt that this is the Euthyphro of the *Euthyphro*, there portrayed as a dangerous crank who claims esoteric religious knowledge and is widely mocked for his attempts at prophecy (6 B–C, 3 B–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' (396 E 4–397 A 1).

[14] It none the less seems better to present the two separately, for simplicity's sake and because they 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, does Socrates' reconstruction of Protagoreanism in the *Theaetetus* seem to be meant quite as an outdoing of the original.

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Socrates' first speech on *erōs* in the *Phaedrus*, besides being a rational reconstruction, offers a close parallel to this depiction of inspiration. Just as in the *Cratylus* Socrates introduces his inspiration with an air of mystery, and attributes it to being 'filled up' by Euthyphro, so here he says 'I'm sure I've heard better somewhere; perhaps it was the lovely Sappho or the wise Anacreon or even some writer of prose . . . my breast is full and I feel I can make a different speech, even better than Lysias'' (235 C).[15] Disclaiming any expertise himself, he adds that it can only be 'that I was filled, like an empty jar, by the words of other people streaming in through my ears, though I'm so stupid that I've even forgotten where and from whom I heard them' (235 D). The Muses are soon invoked (237 A); and in the course of the speech, much as in the *Cratylus*, Socrates becomes divinely inspired, possessed, and dithyrambic (238 C–D, 241 E, 263 D; cf. *Crat.* 409 C). As in the *Cratylus*, his speech is attributed to another ('Phaedrus, son of Pythocles, of Myrrinous', 243 E–244 A); it is also attributed to inspiration by 'Pan, son of Hermes', and the nymphs of Achelous (263 D, cf. 241 E, 262 D).[16] And as in the *Cratylus*, this inspiration must later be subject to a 'purification': here this purification is of course accomplished by the second, 'palinode' speech (242 C 3, 243 A 2–3).

This language of inspiration relates Socrates to a range of figures associated with divination: 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 (*Ap.* 22 B–C, *Ion* 533 D–535 A, *Meno* 99 C–D, *Laws* 719 C).[17] The idea of 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 the poet inspires and possesses others, including rhapsodes, who in turn transmit their inspiration to audiences (535 C–536 D).

What is the significance of this motif of inspiration? It would

[15] Translations from the *Phaedrus* are by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff: *Plato,* Phaedrus (Indianapolis, 1995).

[16] See *Plato's* Phaedrus, trans. with intro. and commentary by R. Hackforth [*Phaedrus*] (Cambridge, 1952), 127 n. 2.

[17] The view that poetic inspiration involves a suspension of rationality does not seem to have been traditional, and may have been original with Plato. See E. N. Tigerstedt, 'Furor Poeticus: Poetic Inspiration in Greek Literature before Democritus and Plato', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 31 (1970), 163–78.

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be natural to suppose that by depicting these discourses as communications from the divine, Plato means to invest them with a special importance and authority. But if this is part of his purpose it is perversely undermined by the particular sources invoked. Pan, Sappho, Anacreon, and the neighbourhood nymphs are not the most grandly authoritative of sources; and an overflow of inspiration from Euthyphro sounds positively unhygienic. These attributions suggest that the real function of the genre of inspiration is more negative: to *distance* the contents presented from the figure of Socrates. The reason for such distancing is not hard to see. In the *Phaedrus* case, Socrates is not supposed to be one to indulge in effusive, dogmatic *makrologia*; and the account of *erōs* given in his inspired speech is at once deemed impious and in need of recantation.[18] It is telling that his recantation speech, which impresses the reader as infinitely more 'inspired' in the modern, romantic sense, is *not* clearly characterized as inspired in the text.[19] This suggests that the distancing function is central: the second speech need not be inspired because it need not be disavowed. The same considerations apply in the case of the *Cratylus* etymologies: they too are fated to be surpassed and undermined, and are, as I have suggested, meant as a rational reconstruction of Cratylus' view, not to be attributed to Socrates himself.

There is a further aspect to the motif of inspiration: it indicates that the discourse in question is not offered with the backing of rational explanation or argument.[20] In fact, I think we can put the point a bit more strongly: the 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. *Ap.* 22 A–C).

[18] See *Plato:* Phaedrus, trans. and comm. C. J. Rowe (Warminster, 1986), 163–4.

[19] Admittedly, this speech is also attributed, elsewhere, to 'Stesichorus' (244 A 2–3); but this is a figure with whom Socrates has identified himself. And the second speech is also divinely impelled, by Socrates' *daimonion* and his 'divination' of what it intends (242 B–C). But as Hackforth points out, Socrates is never presented as *possessed* by the *daimonion* (*Phaedrus*, 54), which in any case only ever offers prohibitions. Moreover, Socrates takes responsibility for the quality of the second speech when he describes it as being 'to the best of our ability' (257 A 2–3). The only occasions on which the second speech is designated as inspired are Socrates' retrospective references to both speeches together (262 D, 263 D, 265 A 5).

[20] Cf. Gaiser's interesting interpretation of the etymologies: the imagery of inspiration indicates that Socrates' discourse lacks foundations as presented but represents a higher wisdom, so that its content must be grounded by some more satisfactory method, viz. dialectic ('Name und Sache', 53).

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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 is at Delphi neither speaks nor conceals, but gives a sign (σημαίνει)' (B 93).[21] And, importantly, interpretation of this sign depends less on theological or exegetical know-how than on the interpreter's character and understanding. An oracle is a test: 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.[22] Often the meaning of the inspired communication becomes clear only in retrospect, after trial and error, as in the case of the Delphic oracle in the *Apology*.[23]

Now the inspired messages found in the Platonic dialogues share this oracular need for interpretation. In the *Phaedrus* the inspired account of *erōs* offered in Socrates' first speech must be reviewed with the benefit of hindsight after his second. Only then is it legitimated, by being brought into connection with this second account and reinterpreted as referring exclusively to the inferior kind of *erōs*.[24] Subsequent arguments in the *Cratylus* may imply a comparable reinterpretation of the etymologies: I suggest at the end what this might be.

The significance of the inspiration episode, then, is the opposite of what it might at first seem. What the oracle offers is not an authoritative message, but one which, because of the need for further interpretation, *cannot* simply be followed as an authority. We may presume an oracle to be correct; but we 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 of enquiry, for what the presumption of correctness entails is precisely that we can find out what the oracle means by discovering the facts of the matter. The oracle summons us not to interpretation in some narrowly textual sense but to investigation of how things are.

[21] Cf. *Ap.* 21 B.

[22] Hdt. 1. 53–4, 71, 91.

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

[24] That it *is* then accepted is indicated by Socrates' retrospective treatment of it and his second speech together as a single speech (see Hackforth, *Phaedrus*, 125 n. 1, 131 n. 1), as well as his use of it in the later discussion (265 A–266 B).

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3. The agonistic display

While Socrates' inspiration in the etymological section has often been discussed, almost no notice has been taken of another and more important motif, that of the *agōn*: the etymological section is characterized as a competitive display, on the model of an athletic performance. The agonistic character of the etymological section is, I think, the key to understanding it, and has a number of complicated implications. But in a general and preliminary way, its significance is obvious: the etymologies are to be understood as a display of competitive skill. Socrates is depicted as triumphing on the home ground of those who practise and endorse strong etymology.

The agonistic motif is introduced as the etymologizing of divine names draws to a close.[25] 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' (407 D 7–8), he suggests, recalling Aeneas' invitation to Pandarus to join him in the chariot drawn by the famed horses of Tros (*Il.* 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 [lit. 'driving', ἐλαύνειν] a long way in wisdom already' (410 E 3).[26] Later he chides Hermogenes for inattention: 'But you aren't overseeing me, how I'm carried out of my course [or 'lane', ἐκτὸς δρόμου] when I reach smooth ground' (414 B 2–3). (Whether this describes driver error or sharp practice is uncertain—probably the latter[27].) At another point Socrates urges that Hermogenes 'must

[25] 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. However, as I shall soon suggest, the inspiration motif is here really an aspect of the agonistic genre, as is the showiness of Socrates' procedure (for example in his multiple and self-besting etymologies); and these features are present from the beginning.

[26] ἐλαύνω is the standard verb for driving a chariot: see e.g. *Il.* 5. 237, Ar. *Nu.* 69, Plato, *Phdr.* 246 E 4.

[27] Aesch. *Cho.* 1022–3 suggests the former, but *Il.* 23. 424 and Ar. *Nu.* 25 the latter. In either case the point is that Socrates has digressed from his assigned task, the names of the virtues (411 A), into analyses of 'male', 'female', and 'flourish' (414 A–B).

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guard the moderate and the reasonable as a wise supervisor [or referee, ἐπιστάτης]' (414 E 3, cf. the suggestion of a referee to guard a moderate length of speeches at *Prot.* 338 B 1). Hermogenes accepts this charge; Socrates then warns him not to be too nit-picking, 'lest you enfeeble my strength' (415 A 2, a reference to *Il.* 6. 265). Finally, at 420 C–D Hermogenes says: 'Socrates, you seem to me to be urging on more quickly now (πυκνότερα ἐπάγειν)' (420 D 1). Socrates responds: 'For now I am running to the end.'[28] So here Socrates is depicted as entering the home stretch and urging his 'team' on to a burst of speed. More general agonistic imagery might include mention of 'going outside the boundaries' (413 A), and—apparently a proverb—'no excuses in competition' (421 D 7–8).[29]

This imagery has been noted, but little has been made of it. Goldschmidt relates it to Heraclitean flux and to the inspiration with which Socrates has been seized; he also suggests that there may be some more specific allusion to Pindar. But he warns against making too much of the matter, and concludes only that it indicates Plato's parodic intention.[30] Baxter just takes the chariot motif as evidence that we should not look for too much order in the etymologies ('hardly the paradigm of orderly motion').[31]

But surely the significance of the *agōn* must be much more precise: Socrates is depicted as displaying ability, resourcefulness, and stamina in a skilled competitive activity. We are, I take it, 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, a philosophically improved version of a standard intellectual practice and point of view; in the *Cratylus* case at least, the rational reconstruction seems to be ultimately an aspect of the agonistic genre.

This agonistic display is given particular force by the use of the

[28] There is a textual problem here, with manuscripts presenting different versions of ΘΕΩ: thus Méridier prints τέλος γὰρ ἤδη θεῷ, a reference to the inspiration motif. I prefer the version of the new OCT, which (following Stephanus) adds εἰς at the start of the sentence: ⟨εἰς⟩ τέλος γὰρ ἤδη θέω (*Platonis Opera*, i, ed. E. A. Duke, W. F. Hicken, W. S. M. Nicoll, D. B. Robinson, and J. C. G. Strachan (Oxford, 1995)).

[29] Note also 411 A 6: 'once we have put on the lion's skin, we must not be cowardly'; this is of course a reference to Hercules, patron of games.

[30] Goldschmidt, *Essai*, 108–9 (with nn.); cf. also Gaiser, 'Name und Sache', 50–1.

[31] Baxter, *Critique*, 90.

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image of the *chariot*. For the chariot race in *Iliad* book 23 is not only the primal chariot race of Greek literature but the primal scene of Greek epistemology. It depicts the triumph of *mētis*, 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 *mētis* 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 *sēma*, a sign or marker, which he must particularly note and be guided by (326). To what extent Antilochus actually follows Nestor's advice is unclear, but he does overtake Menelaus by a cunning manœuvre, and ends up being placed 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, and Parmenides (as we shall see in Section 5) makes important use of it.[32] 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).[33] This suggests that Plato is exploiting an established tie between *agōn* and inspiration. The poet lays claim to the assistance of the Muses as an agonistic tactic—as a way of asserting his independence of and superiority to his rivals and predecessors.

Before looking into the significance of the agonistic genre, it is worth noting that it is also supported by 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 ψυχή, 'soul', as related to ἀναψῦχον, 'refreshing'; he then dismisses this, saying that

[32] Note also Arist. *NE* 1095[a]32–[b]1, where the image of the racecourse, as a general model for philosophical reasoning to and from first principles, is attributed to Plato.

[33] See J. H. Lesher, 'The Significance of κατὰ πάντ' ἄ⟨σ⟩τη in Parmenides Fr. 1. 3', *Ancient Philosophy*, 14 (1994), 1–20. Note also the whingeing variant found in the proemium of the 5th-cent. 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 by Andrew Ford, *Homer: The Poetry of the Past* [*Poetry*] (Ithaca, NY, 1992), 69).

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'the followers of Euthyphro' would find it commonplace, and instead, invoking Anaxagoras, offers an etymology in terms of *φύσιν ἔχει*, 'sustains nature' (399 D–400 B; cf. also his procedure with e.g. *σῶμα* (400 B–C) and *λυσιτελοῦν* (417 B–C)). On other occasions, e.g. in the case of Apollo (404 E–406 B), he offers a showy multiplicity of etymologies for a single name. A particularly telling case is the etymology of Hades, already noted, in which Socrates rejects an etymology relating Hades to the 'unseen' in favour of one which relates it to 'knowledge' (403 A–404 B). What is interesting is that in the *Phaedo* Socrates invokes the etymology he here rejects (80 D 5–7). There is no substantive difference of view involved: in both the *Phaedo* and the *Cratylus* death is above all an educational opportunity. So the 'unseen' etymology is presumably rejected in the *Cratylus* not because of its content but because it is simply too obvious and well known to be satisfactory in the agonistic context.

In short, a reading of the etymological section as a competitive display is supported not just by the explicitly agonistic imagery of chariot and athlete, but also by the related inspiration motif, by the engagement in a rational reconstruction, and by Socrates' manner of proceeding. That the etymologies are an *agōn* is the central and organizing fact about them. In the rest of this section I shall look at other instances of agonistic display in Plato, and try to work out the function and implications of this 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'*ἀγών*, rencontre ses adversaires sur leur propre terrain de combat';[34] but he does not elaborate, and his list of cases mixes together what seem to me quite different things. For along with two central examples I shall 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 succeeds in competition on the home ground of the non-philosophical claimant to knowledge. Admittedly, if Plato writes (say) a better sophism than a sophist or a more

[34] *Essai*, 103.

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Lysian speech than Lysias, then he does himself succeed in the same way. And there is no doubt that much of Plato's writing—even his philosophical endeavour as a whole—can be seen this way.[35] 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 Plato means to convey when he actually *represents* the performance as a philosophical *agōn*.[36]

A useful starting-point for discussion of the Platonic *agōn* is presented by Proclus' commentary on the *Parmenides*.[37] 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 interpreters—let us call them the Anon. Procli—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 omits' (631). The example offered here is the funeral oration of the *Menexenus*, which I shall 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

[35] Goldschmidt (ibid.) 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 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), 37–8). Cf. also 'Longinus' 13 on another great Platonic *agōn*, his continuing contest with Homer.

[36] In one of the most interesting recent discussions of Plato's methods as a writer, Nightingale ignores what seems to me a still more fundamental distinction, between displays written by Plato himself and texts borrowed from other sources. Speaking of such incorporated 'subtexts' as the *Menexenus* oration and the encomia of the *Symposium*, she says, 'Since Plato is concerned not so much with a specific author or text as with the genre as a whole, it makes little difference whether the subtext is written by Plato or by someone else' (*Genres*, 5). But it makes all the difference, if the purpose of the subtexts is to beat the unphilosophical at their own games.

[37] I use the edition and translation of Morrow and Dillon: *Proclus' Commentary on Plato's* Parmenides, trans. and ed. G. R. Morrow and J. M. Dillon (Princeton, 1987).

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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 *Phaedrus* Socrates first outdoes Lysias in speaking against *erōs* and then argues against him.

This first strategy of competitive imitation (and so, in part, the third as well) is something like what I have in mind in referring to the agonistic genre. And the conspicuous examples of it are just 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 life-size gold statue of him if he succeeds (235 D 4–E 1, 236 B 1–4).

In the *Menexenus* Socrates delivers a funeral oration—another display of skill at a stereotyped practice in which, as he says, the orator contends (*ἀγωνίζηται*, 235 D 6). 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 (235 A 1–C 5, cf. *Phdr.* 234 D 1–6), which his interlocutor recognizes as sarcasm (235 C 6, cf. *Phdr.* 234 D 7–8). He is coy about offering anything, and fears being ridiculous (236 C 8, cf. *Phdr.* 236 D 4); he finally gives in on *ad hoc* grounds, after being begged by his interlocutor (236 C–D, cf. *Phdr.* 236 E–237 A). 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 distancing device.

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.[38] The source of the trouble is the contrast between, on the one hand, Socrates' evident scepticism about the funeral oration genre, as expressed throughout his preliminary remarks, and, on the other, his evidently seri-

[38] Guthrie puts it in terms of 'satirical' and 'serious' interpretations (*A History of Greek Philosophy*, iv. *Plato: The Man and his Dialogues. Earlier Period* (Cambridge, 1975), 312–23, esp. 315 n. 2). For a fascinating *Ernst* reading see Lesley Dean-Jones, 'Menexenus—Son of Socrates', *Classical Quarterly*, 45 (1995), 51–7.

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ous, skilful performance—which includes what sounds like Platonic moral exhortation (e.g. at 246 E–247 A). As with the *Cratylus* etymologies, ancient interpretation tended to take the *Menexenus* as not just *Ernst* but exemplary,[39] while the recent trend is more towards *Scherz*. And as with the *Cratylus*, the aporia is surely a sign that the *Menexenus* is neither the one nor the other: it is agonistic, a mode reducible neither to dogma nor 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., '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.'[40] On Kahn's interpretation, the oration stands in an 'antagonistic' relation to its rivals, and to the funeral oration of Pericles ap. Thucydides in particular; and Kahn rightly balks at reducing this antagonism to parody, caricature, or satire.[41] What Kahn wants to emphasize is that as a specimen of Platonic rhetoric the *Menexenus* shows the *right* way to praise the Athenians, as a piece of 'tendentious protreptic'.[42]

A third example of the Platonic *agōn*, and perhaps the most revealing, comes in the *Protagoras*—appropriately enough, for an agonistic conception of intellectual endeavour was characteristic

[39] According to Cicero, it was actually recited on the annual day of funeral rites for the war dead (*Orator* 151).

[40] Sect. 631. Cf. Grote, *Plato and the Other Companions of Sokrates*, iii. 408 ff., who notes the parallel with the *Phaedrus* (ibid. 411).

[41] Charles Kahn, 'Plato's Funeral Oration: The Motive of the *Menexenus*' ['Oration'], *Classical Philology*, 58 (1963), 220–34 at 223–6.

[42] 'Oration', 226. This suggests that the primary point of the *Menexenus* is substantive rather than methodological, and if so, it is, I shall suggest, unlike Plato's other displays. But Kahn's view is in a general way compatible with the Anon.'s greater emphasis on the formal qualities of the speech: the oration of the *Menexenus* seems to be designed both as a methodological display and as a (rather misleading) vehicle for substantive truth. The relation between substantive truth and success in the agonistic context is difficult to assess, but it seems to me that truth cannot be any significant 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*, ii. 219–20). But the 'For' here seems misleading: in the absence of any consensus regarding 'what is essential', the criteria for agonistic success must be content-neutral.

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of the sophists.[43] The display here is Socrates' interpretation of Simonides,[44] which is preceded by methodological wrangling saturated with agonistic imagery, starting with a reference by Protagoras to his participation in speaking competitions (*ἀγῶνα λόγων*, 335 A 4). 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' (335 E 2–4). Hippias urges them, unsuccessfully, to choose an umpire, overseer, or president, to keep guard over the moderate length of their speeches (338 A–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' (339 E 1–3). He recovers to give an extended interpretation of the poem which is clearly an outdoing of Protagoras at his own game: a great long speech beginning with a parody of Protagoras' own earlier invocation of various famous figures as covert sophists (cf. 316 D). (Presumably Protagoras meant to go on from his elenchus of Socrates to give a speech solving the problem himself—perhaps Socrates' speech should be recognizable as a still cleverer variant on what Protagoras might have been expected to say.) The agonistic motif is even reflected 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' (343 C).

The *Protagoras* case seems to me to bring out what is essential about the Platonic *agōn*: for here it is quite clear that the point at

[43] See *Hi.Mi.* 364 A, *Euthd.* 272 A ff., 277 B–C, 303 A–B, Gorgias B 8, and note the boxing analogy at Plato, *Gorgias* 456 C ff. Cf. also Guthrie, *History of Greek Philosophy*, iii. 42–3.

[44] For a helpful account of the passage see Dorothea Frede, 'The Impossibility of Perfection: Socrates' Criticism of Simonides' Poem in the *Protagoras*' ['Socrates' Criticism'], *Review of Metaphysics*, 39 (1986), 726–53. The existence of a parallel between the *Protagoras* and *Cratylus* passages has been noted in a very general way several times, e.g. R. Weingartner, *The Unity of the Platonic Dialogue* (Indianapolis, 1973), 38 n. 34, Goldschmidt, *Essai*, 101, and Baxter, *Critique*, 99.

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stake is above all methodological. Protagoras holds that the ability to understand and criticize poems is the most important part of education (338 E 6–339 A 2); and part of his view seems to be that literary interpretation is a legitimate method of enquiry into the truth about things, so that his and Socrates' discussion of virtue can be 'transferred' to the literary domain without loss (339 A 2–6). We may thus call him a proponent of 'strong interpretation', as Cratylus is of strong etymology. And having proved himself at this method, Socrates will go on to reject it in scathing terms: it is like 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' (348 A).

The same rejection is accomplished more subtly elsewhere by Socrates' disavowals of his performances. In the *Cratylus*, *Phaedrus*, and *Menexenus*, we have seen that an external source is made responsible for his agonistic display. But it is striking, and important, that these disclaimers are not credible even to Socrates' impressionable interlocutors (*Menex.* 236 C 5–6, *Phdr.* 235 D 4–6, *Crat.* 428 C). 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 clear from this pattern of methodological engagement, performance, and rejection. The rejection is easily explained. From Plato's point of view, the methods treated in the *agōn*—literary interpretation, etymology, and rhetoric (public and private)—are all subphilosophical kinds of discourse. All share the fatal defect of not being dialectic, and so of being unable to generate knowledge of the natures of things. Indeed, all are orientated to words rather than to things, involving a specifically linguistic form of expertise. Literary exegesis and etymology in particular are both *interpretative*, and appeal to an absent authority whose wisdom is uncertain and who cannot be interrogated. Etymology is at bottom a form of exegesis: the *Cratylus* etymologies take the vocabulary of Greek itself as an authoritative text, and investigate the views of the namegivers as the literary interpreter does those of a poet.[45]

[45] Rhetoric may seem the odd man out in that (1) it does not pretend to provide a method of enquiry, being purely a method of persuasion; and (2) it is not inter-

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The reason for engagement with such methods in the first place is again brought out by the *Protagoras*. For here it is intuitively clear that, as a move in the debate, Socrates' scathing rejection of literary interpretation would not be effective as an immediate response to Protagoras' challenge. It is only after offering an extremely clever specimen of poetic interpretation that Socrates has the authority to reject the practice as worthless, so that when they resume, Protagoras is answering Socrates' questions, on Socrates' terms, and on the topic of Socrates' choice. Socrates' performance gives him stature 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 offer a successful etymological display puts him in a position to transcend the etymological method and eventually to dismiss it.

The context for the Platonic *agōn* is a contemporary background of methodological anarchy. *Makrologia*, myths, citations and interpretations of the poets, eristic refutation, dialectical question and answer, strong etymology—any and all such intellectual practices might be used to support or attack 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 can only mean winning by all the methods there are, or perhaps by the method of one's opponent.[46] The agonistic genre is Plato's vehicle for engagement with the language-bound, authority-bound contemporary rivals of dialectic: his purpose is to establish the authority of the philosopher both to practise and to dismiss them.

pretative. 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—nothing wisdom could be beyond what it can offer. So the rhetorician differs from the etymologizer, exegete, and philosopher only in that his claim to wisdom must relate strictly to his mastery of method itself, rather than to any substantive findings the method discloses. And this is perhaps only a difference of degree: the rhetorician's rivals are also method-mongers first and foremost. Second, rhetoric could be seen as interpretative in its deference to what an authority, viz. its audience, already believes: the funeral orator must offer a persuasive interpretation and elaboration of the Athenian conviction that the Athenians are praiseworthy.

[46] That such versatility was generally recognized to be valuable is suggested by the *Protagoras* and *Gorgias*: Gorgias can engage in set speeches or question-and-answer (447 C, 449 C), Protagoras in systematic argument, storytelling, question-and-answer, and literary criticism (320 C, 329 B).

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4. The etymologies as *agōn*

If this reading is correct, the central function of the *Cratylus* etymologies is methodological. They characterize strong etymology as a subphilosophical method and establish that the philosopher, by doing it better than anyone else, is in a position to assess its value. It may seem implausible that this function could really account for the extraordinary length of Socrates' discourse: we might suppose that a brief sample of his skills should suffice to prove any methodological point. But in fact exhaustiveness is an important marker of the agonistic mode. For what makes Socrates' performance impressive is, above all, his ability to etymologize anything and everything, his sustained resourcefulness over an extended and varied terrain. The value of length and completeness in the agonistic context is 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 (234 E, 235 B 3), and he twice demands that Socrates come up with *more and better* (235 B 4–5, 236 B 2, cf. 234 E 3)—or at least, he graciously allows, no less in quantity (235 D 6–7). The Anon. Procli shares this taste, defining Plato's agonistic mode by saying that it 'carries the imitation to greater perfection by adding what his rival's discourse omits' (631).

This prizing of sheer quantity is, I suspect, a respect in which—as the chariot motif suggests—the Platonic *agōn* is descended from the primordial competition of the poets.[47] As Richard Martin has argued, 'the expansion aesthetic' is an important feature of Homer's poetics.[48] Speech in the *Iliad* is generally presented as a competitive performance; Achilles, as hero, is 'the expert at such agonistic rhetoric'.[49] And for both Homer and his champion, 'bigger

[47] As Mark Griffith has noted, 'it is hardly an exaggeration to say that most Greek poetry, from the time of Homer and Hesiod to that of Euripides, was composed for performance in an explicitly or implicitly agonistic context': 'Contest and Contradiction in Early Greek Poetry', in M. Griffith and D. J. Mastronarde (eds.), *Cabinet of the Muses* (Atlanta, 1990), 185–207 at 188. Griffith notes that etymologizing was one agonistic tactic available to the poet: 'Hesiod offers *ad hoc* etymologies/aetiologies that attest to his own verbal skill as well as to the appropriateness of his pedigrees and hence to the "truth" of his narrative' (195).

[48] Richard Martin, *The Language of Heroes* (Ithaca, NY, 1989), ch. 5.

[49] Ibid. 220.

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is better':[50] this drive to the large scale is expressive of 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'.[51] This is part of the significance of inspiration: when Homer invokes the Muses, it is at least sometimes because there is *too much* material for a mortal to cope with otherwise, as in the catalogue of the ships in *Iliad* book 2.[52] The *Cratylus* etymologies are in their own weird way a catalogue, inspired by an appropriately weird sort of Muse (note 428 c 6–8): their exhaustiveness is a necessary feature.

This is in fact an important respect in which the agonistic reading of the etymologies works better than readings in terms of parody, satire, or *reductio*.[53] For there is no particular reason for a parody or satire to be exhaustive. Baxter suggests that the length of the etymological section is due to the fact that there was *so much* etymology around to parody. 'The etymologies parody a whole range of Greek thinkers and poets and in doing so offer a schematic survey of the development of Greek thought, from Homer onwards to the Sophists. 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.'[54] But though he is quite right about the widespread nature of the etymologizing tendency, 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.

The agonistic genre can also explain the principal source of support for the 'parody' interpretation, which is the vaguely humorous tone of the etymologies. It is in fact highly implausible on external grounds that their humour is of a parodic sort, for no one in antiquity got the putative joke: later authors cite the etymologies

[50] Martin, *Language of Heroes*, 224.

[51] Ibid. 226.

[52] See Ford, *Poetry*, 78–9.

[53] I use 'parody' as I take it to have been used by interpreters of the *Cratylus*, in the traditional and commonplace sense involving comic exaggeration and denigration. For a discussion of considerably more sophisticated conceptions of parody, some of which may well be compatible with the agonistic reading, see Nightingale, *Genres*, 6 ff.

[54] *Critique*, 6; cf. 86–7, 96–8, 106, 107, 184–7. Though the general thrust of his reading is clear, Baxter never explains exactly what he means by 'parody', so I cannot be sure I have quite got his point: however, it seems to me likely that the exhaustiveness of the etymologies will be problematic for any reading along these general lines.

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with respect, and attribute them to Plato himself.[55] More important, the parodic reading seems to me to misread our response to the text. Think of Socrates' explanation that the name ἄνθρωπος is correct because alone of the animals a human 'observes closely' (ἀναθρεῖ) 'what he has seen' (ἃ ὄπωπε) (399 C); or that the name of the moon comes from 'always has new and old light', σέλας νέον καὶ ἕνον ἔχει ἀεί, compressed to σελαενονεοάεια, and thence to σελαναία (409 B–C). What is amusing here is not at all that Socrates is being stupid. On the contrary, the humour lies in the display of *mētis*: 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 elaborate pun, the limerick, the cleverly rhymed patter song—a mild and minor kind of humour, but a real one.

This kind of humour is not only quite distinct from parody, satire, or irony: it has the opposed implication that the etymologies are really quite good ones. But we need to be careful about what this means. In this context, as I suggested at the start, a good etymology will not necessarily 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 is just one which successfully shows a name to be semantically appropriate for the object it names, given the nature of that object. The agonistic context implies a further norm of non-obviousness. An inventive, surprising etymology must count as better than a banality: hence Socrates' preference, already noted, for the recherché.

A final ramification of the agonistic genre is that the *Cratylus* etymologies are likely to be for the most part original. For to constitute a successful performance 'in the fiction' the etymologies must pass, by and large, for Socrates' creation. ('By and large' because intelligent theft also reveals *mētis* and so must be an acceptable competitive tactic on occasion.) And to have been so read the etymologies must, I think, have been largely unfamiliar.

So the agonistic reading can account for some of the more puzzling features of the etymologies, and has implications for their character and provenance. More important, it tells us something about why they are there in the first place. Their function is to put

[55] See Grote, *Plato*, iii. 299–312.

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philosophy, in the person of Socrates, in a position to speak with authority on the correctness of names and on the status of etymology itself.

5. Plato and Parmenides on the deceptiveness of language

But is this really all there is? Having proved their methodological point, are the etymologies to be entirely discarded, and etymology as a method to be wholly rejected? Does the subdialectical status of etymology render it worthless for any but agonistic purposes? Not necessarily. The agonistic form leaves open the possibility that etymologizing—and these etymologies in particular—may have some limited legitimacy. And this possibility is confirmed by Plato's readiness to etymologize elsewhere. Plato offers etymologies in contexts which are certainly later than the *Cratylus*, and whose seriousness is undisputed.[56] To take a particularly striking instance, in the *Laws* Plato twice etymologizes *νόμος*, 'law', relating it to *νοῦς*, 'reason', and to *τοῦ νοῦ διανομή*, 'allocation of reason' (957 C, 714 A). And, rather stunningly, he claims that the name *χορός*, 'dance, chorus, choir', has been given by the gods on the basis of the natural association of music and dance with *χαρά*, 'joy'.[57]

This casual etymologizing suggests that etymology may have a place in the philosopher's repertoire as a method not of discovery but of persuasion, to express quickly what could be demonstrated by dialectic. This tactical, persuasive role could indeed be common to all the subdialectical methods treated in the *agōn*. There is a tiny but striking hint to this effect in the *Protagoras*. Shortly after his rather brutal rejection of literary exegesis, Socrates encourages 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 the other' (348 D 1, *Il.* 10. 224). The tag quickly and persuasively suggests an important point about the virtues of dialectic: with this throwaway quotation Socrates sets an example for Protagoras in the right use of poetry.

But though this tactical role alerts us to the possibility that etymologies could in principle have some value for Plato, the *Cratylus*

[56] For further examples see Méridier, *Cratyle*, 18 n. 2.

[57] *Laws* 654 A: the text and translation here are problematic, but the basic idea does not seem to be in question.

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etymologies are clearly a special case. What then can we say about the standing of these etymologies in particular? Once again it is worth considering the parallel cases. The *Menexenus* speech seems to contain some vaguely Platonic sentiments; 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.[58] Socrates' first speech in the *Phaedrus* has the look of a drastically oversimplified Platonism. As Hackforth puts it, its psychological views are 'the popular germ of Platonic psychology';[59] and it does seem to be fully accepted by Socrates after reinterpretation as an account of one side of *erōs*. 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.[60] 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 the legitimate function of these subdialectical methods for Plato is to bring out what is right in traditional or popular ways of thinking.[61]

So we should expect the *Cratylus* etymologies to contain, however obscurely, a grain of truth. What might it be? 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. 401 A, 425 C, 438 A–C). But this is rather unsatisfying. The etymologies so understood would still be undermined by Socrates' later demonstration that etymologies in the opposite sense (representing 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 considerably *less* plausible as an interpretation of Simonides 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,

[58] Cf. Kahn, 'Oration', 224–6.

[59] Hackforth, *Phaedrus*, 42.

[60] See Frede, 'Socrates' Criticism', 737–8, 746.

[61] This view has been strongly argued to me by André Laks.

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as indeed Plato believes the things around us to be. Admittedly, the 'two-worlds' view of the *Phaedo* and *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 (439 C ff.). And the set of anti-flux etymologies presented not long before makes a similar point by associating knowledge with what is unchanging. Socrates' choice of names to etymologize here is surely significant: 'knowledge', 'certain', 'enquiry', 'conviction', and 'memory' in terms of stasis, and conversely 'error', 'mishap', 'ignorance', and 'intemperance' in terms of motion (437 A–C). Though the point that the *Flußlehre* is indeed true of the perceptible world (and that alone) is not explicit here, it is hard not to be reminded of the two-worlds picture of which this association of knowledge and stability is elsewhere part. In that case, the etymologies do get something right.

But of course, the same arguments show more directly that the etymologies get something wrong. To whatever extent the things around us are in flux, they are not the proper objects of our naming, speech, and cognition. For Plato, names name Forms first and foremost, and then apply to their participants by eponymy (*Phaedo* 102 B, 103 B–C, *Rep.* 596 A, *Parm.* 130 E, 133 D). And so the etymologies' message that our nominata are fluxy can be accepted only if we interpret it down, as referring solely to the latter, inferior class—just as Socrates' first speech in the *Phaedrus* must be interpreted down, as an account of the inferior sort of *erōs* alone. In short, the etymologies require quite drastic reinterpretation if they are not to mislead; and this itself is, I believe, 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, the etymologies reveal an innate, systemic tendency of language to mislead and misinform.

So understood, the *Cratylus* etymologies have an important precursor in Parmenides' cosmology 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 interpretative puzzles of the *Cratylus*, for the *Doxa* itself is just as enigmatic; and even to explain what the two texts share will require glossing over some very vexed questions of Parmenidean interpretation. But whatever caveats may be

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in order, it seems to me that the resemblances are indisputable, and they may clarify the account of the etymologies I have presented.[62]

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 as long as Parmenides could be 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's deprecation of the *Doxa* by saying that 'he calls this account apparent and deceptive, meaning not that it is absolutely false, but that the perceptible has fallen away from intelligible truth to what is apparent and seeming' (*In Phys.* 9. 39. 10–12; cf. Plut. *Adv. Col.* 1114 C–D, A 7 DK). 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's condemnation of Doxa, and its purpose must be 'wholly dialectical'.[63]

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 (B 1. 30, B 8. 51–4). Yet its content is developed with apparent seriousness and thoroughness, and it is claimed to be the best of its kind (B 8. 61). If we take our cue from the goddess's general disavowal of cosmology, we end up with the 'dialectical' reading, which presents 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 apparent merits of her performance, we have

[62] The basic substantive agreement here has been noted by Charles Kahn: Kahn does not discuss the particular resemblances between the *Doxa* and the etymologies, but describes the *Cratylus* as a whole as expressing 'the Eleatic view of names' as systematically deceptive ('Language and Ontology', 155–8).

[63] G. E. L. Owen, 'Eleatic Questions', in Martha Nussbaum (ed.), *Logic, Science and Dialectic* (Ithaca, NY, 1986), 9; cf. Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (London, 1982), 156; A. A. Long, 'The Principles of Parmenides' Cosmogony' ['Principles'], *Phronesis*, 8 (1963), 90–107 at 91.

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the problem of explaining how it is not completely undermined by her 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: the *Doxa* is neither *Scherz* nor *Ernst* but agonistic.[64] And lo, this reading finds quick confirmation in the fact that Parmenides is Socrates' precursor as the philosopher-charioteer. The proemium of the poem consists in a detailed account of his progress by chariot to his interview with the goddess whose discourse will occupy the rest of the poem (B 1). Inasmuch as the goddess's privileged communication to our hero resembles, or is a version of, inspiration, there is all the more a 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 (B 6. 5, cf. B 8. 54, *Il.* 23. 321), to stay alert and concentrate (B 7. 3–6, cf. *Il.* 23. 343), to note signs (B 8. 2, cf. *Il.* 23. 326), etc. The agonistic nature of the motif is brought out explicitly in the introduction to the *Doxa*, which includes a promise and a boast: 'This whole ordering I proclaim to you as probable, so that no mortal opinion will ever overtake (*παρελάσσῃ*) you' (B 8. 60–1). The verb here translated 'overtake' is the standard one for the passing of one chariot by another in a race (*Il.* 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 and biology.[65]

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 uses of the image: Plato is quite self-consciously heir to Parmenides. That the 'Parmenidean' character of the *agōn* is part of its signifi-

[64] As has of course has been noted: Long, for example, says that 'the cosmogony, by showing that Parmenides can beat the scientists at their own game, is chiefly useful for the negative purpose of confirming the Way of Truth' ('Principles', 106). However, Long comes close to Owen in reading the *Doxa* as aiming not just 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' (97).

[65] See Plut. *Adv. Col.* 1114 B–C; Cic. *ND* 1. 28; Simpl. *In De caelo* 559. 20 ff.

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cance for Plato is marked 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 chariot-racing horse in a poem by Ibycus, who trembles at the start of the race (136 E–137 A).

A similar correspondence between the *Doxa* and the etymologies is present at the thematic level. The *Doxa* is, for all its originality, represented 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 (*βροτῶν δόξας*), in which there is no true reliability (*πίστις ἀληθής*)' (B 1. 30). The cosmology is then introduced as 'mortal opinions' (*δόξας βροτείας*, B 8. 51); and the goddess concludes it by saying 'Thus according to opinion (*κατὰ δόξαν*) these things have come into being and exist . . . and humans have set down (*κατέθεντο*) a name (*ὄνομα*) as a sign (*ἐπίσημον*) for each one of them' (B 19). 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 analyse 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 we don't claim to be able to do that—but rather about humans (*ἀνθρώπων*), and on the basis of what opinion (*δόξαν*) they set down (*ἐτίθεντο*) the names for them' (401 A 1–5). He later alludes to this by saying that 'knowing nothing of the truth (*ἀληθείας*), we depict (*εἰκάζομεν*) the opinions of human beings (*τὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων δόγματα*)' (425 C 1–3).

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 (*κατέθεντο*) two forms as judgements for naming (*ὀνομάζειν*)' (B 8. 53–4, cf. B 8. 38–41, B 9. 1–2). And, as noted, the goddess concludes by reiterating that mortals have set down a name as a sign for each thing (B 19. 3). As this suggests, 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' (B 8. 39–41). And of course these names are, given the content of the Way of Truth, hideously misguided. Here too the *Cratylus* conforms to

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the *Doxa*: for to the extent that they believed things to be in flux, as their names indicate, the namegivers were mistaken (439 c).

Given that the namegivers were mistaken, and that their mistakes are embedded in ordinary language, it follows that for both Parmenides and Plato our language has a tendency to *deceive*. This fear of deception through names is, I think, at the root of the kinship between the *Doxa* and the etymological section. Before looking at this theme more closely, let me 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 *agōn* 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 the error has something to do with the 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 discourse is hedged round with warnings against deception; and an antidote is offered elsewhere in the same work, in Parmenides' Way of 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 mini-genre 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 (*πιστὸν λόγον*) and thought about truth (*ἀληθείης*). From here on, learn mortal opinions, listening to the deceptive ordering (*κόσμον ἀπατηλόν*) of my words' (B 8. 50–2). This characterization as 'deceptive' or 'misleading'—tending to induce *apatē*—is crucial to the status and function of the *Doxa*.[66] It is important to bear in mind that although this characterization as 'deceptive' is often interpreted as an absolute condemnation of the *Doxa*, equivalent to 'false',[67] it probably should not be (as Simplicius recognized). On the contrary, 'decep-

[66] The related semantic field is thoroughly treated in Marcel Detienne's 'Le Choix: Alétheia ou Apaté', in ch. 6 of *Les Maîtres de vérité dans la Grèce archaïque* (Paris, 1967). In particular, Detienne offers a fascinating discussion of related issues in Simonides; however, his conclusions, particularly about the relevant philosophical texts, seem to me doubtful.

[67] e.g. by Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 156; cf. G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven,

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tive' is better applied to statements and behaviour which are 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. *Il.* 1. 526). The deceptive is what invites such a mistake. Thus the deceptiveness of the *Doxa* is very closely associated with the complex of themes I have already noted. There is no 'true reliability' in human opinion because it relates to the bogus phenomenal world of change (B 1. 30–2), which mortals 'have gone astray' in putting names to (B 1. 53–4). Our ordinary language, and any discourse which shares its basic presuppositions, is deceptive because its names embody a thoroughly mistaken conceptual scheme.

Deception is also an important recurrent theme in the *Cratylus*. Worries about deception on particular points are raised in the etymological section itself (ἐξαπατήσειεν, 397 B 2; ἐξαπατήσαιμι, 413 D 7); and later, having concluded his account of natural correctness, Socrates warns sharply that further investigation is needed to avoid being deceived by it (ἐξαπατᾶσθαι, 428 D 3, cf. ἐξαπατήσων, D 5). This warning seems to apply to the naturalistic account as a whole; but later, when Socrates again claims that by investigating things through their names we run a great risk of being deceived (ἐξαπατηθῆναι, 436 B 3, cf. ἐξαπατηθήσεσθαι, 436 B 11), his arguments make it clear that he has etymology particularly in view. Finally, in the set of arguments which concludes the dialogue, Socrates tries to show 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 (ἐξαπατᾷ) by the fact that so many of these names tend in the same direction. Suppose that in fact those who set them down (ἔθεντο) 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 . . . (439 B 10–C 4)

So the etymologies as a whole were potentially deceptive because they seemed to indicate that things are in flux. And Socrates will

and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 1983), 255 with n. 1.

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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. The moment is the pivotal point at which Socrates moves from the divine to the lower world. 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 (407 E–408 D 4).[68] Hermes, he says, 'seems to have something to do with language (λόγος), and being an interpreter (ἑρμηνέα) and messenger and thievish and deceptive in language (ἀπατηλὸν ἐν λόγοις) and commercial—and this whole business has to do with a power concerning language' (407 E 5–408 A 2). In fact, his name is a distorted derivation from 'he devised speaking' (εἴρειν ἐμήσατο). Pan is the son of Hermes: as such he is either identical with language or its brother, and resembles it. He is thus appropriately named, for language indicates (σημαίνει) all things (τὸ πᾶν) 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 with the human masses, and is rough and goat-like (τραγικόν). For here, in the 'tragic' life, myths and falsehoods are in the majority . . . Since he discloses and always moves (ἀεὶ πολῶν) everything, he would rightly be called 'Pan the goatherd' (Πὰν αἰπόλος), double-natured son of Hermes, with the smooth part above, the lower rough and goat-shaped. (408 C 5–D 2)

The jokes and resonances here are incredibly 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 discourse encompasses the whole cosmos, and presents it as being in motion. 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 natural and human 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

[68] Cf. Friedländer's excellent discussion, *Plato*, ii. 204.

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etymology of 'Pan' suggests an *explanation* of this: 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 readily into the more explicitly Platonic terms I mentioned earlier: language is used ambiguously, to refer both to the divine realm of Forms and, by eponymy, to their defective, fluxy instantiations. This contrast is strongly suggested here by the contrast between the divine and human realms—the pop version of the Form/sensible particular distinction. And Socrates' final set of arguments make it clear that the namegivers' belief in flux involved a failure properly to recognize the existence of the Forms.

And how does this duality make language *deceptive*? Plato's worry here is presumably the fundamentally Parmenidean one that 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 kind of discourse for the higher, and take its objects to be the true realities, which they are not. Language wrongly represents reality as changing and imperfect simply by describing the world around us in just the same way as it does the real one—by describing it *as if it were* 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 declamation. Our names deceptively represent things as in flux simply by their reference 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. This is certainly not what we think they are as we read them; but I have already suggested that given the oracular and agonistic character of Socrates' performance, we should *expect* it to contain a grain of truth which only becomes visible from the perspective gained by the end of the dialogue. And it seems clear that this duality of reference is the *important* respect in which, in Plato's view, language misleadingly 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 move on to

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offer an account of names as images and imitations. And if I am right to read the etymologies as pointing the moral that language is deceptive, this is just what we should expect. For something is deceptive when we are apt to mistake it for what it is not, and to put an inappropriate trust in it. And this is, for Plato, the characteristic effect of an *image*, which by resembling what it is not invites such mistakes. The image (εἴδωλον) is 'another such, made like a real one' (*Soph.* 240 A 8); and since deception proceeds by likenesses (*Phdr.* 262 B 2–3), the image-making sophist has an art of deception (τέχνη ἀπατητική, *Soph.* 240 D 1–2, 264 D 5). Socrates' etymological account brings out the crucial truth *that* names are deceptive; the mimetic account will explain how and why.

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