

# Linguistic Correctness in the Cratylus: From the Literary Tradition to Philosophy

Author: Sean Donovan Driscoll

Persistent link: <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/bc-ir:108838>

This work is posted on [eScholarship@BC](#),  
Boston College University Libraries.

---

Boston College Electronic Thesis or Dissertation, 2020

Copyright is held by the author, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise noted.

# Linguistic Correctness in the *Cratylus*: From the Literary Tradition to Philosophy

Sean Donovan Driscoll

A dissertation  
submitted to the Faculty of  
the department of philosophy  
in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Boston College  
Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences  
Graduate School



# **Linguistic Correctness in the *Cratylus*: From the Literary Tradition to Philosophy**

Sean Donovan Driscoll

Advisor: John Sallis, Ph.D.

Today, professional philosophy is dominated by the assumption that literary language is either merely ornamental or that it even detracts from the purposes of philosophical discourse. Ancient philosophers, however, did not share this assumption. Thinkers like Heraclitus, Parmenides, Empedocles, and Plato all recognized that their manner of expression contributes to the philosophical purposes of a text in a way that does not merely confirm or illustrate what is said. This is why Plato couches his account of linguistic correctness (his only sustained treatment of linguistic meaning) in a thoroughly poetic dialogue—the *Cratylus*.

Many scholars have recognized Plato's debt to the literary tradition by trying to identify the provenance of his literary practices (such as etymologizing) in the *Cratylus*. And on the other hand, many have developed sophisticated interpretations of the dialogue's arguments. However, no research adequately represents the expressly philosophical contribution made by Plato's appropriation of the literary tradition in the *Cratylus*. My dissertation engages Plato's appropriation of the literary tradition by looking at both his adoption of literary concepts and his enactment of literary practice. It does so with a focus on two philosophical questions that are fundamental to the *Cratylus* and yet have been neglected in the scholarship: (1) what exactly does Plato mean by "correctness," and (2) why does he have Socrates demonstrate this correctness by etymologizing?

The first chapter tackles the first of these questions by replacing the nearly universal understanding of "correctness," as a correspondence between the semantic content of a name with a true description of the name's referent, with an understanding based on the concept's provenance in the literary tradition, a broader appropriateness of language to what is spoken about that I call "resonance." Each subsequent chapter address a key instance where the standard understanding of correctness (and of etymology's role in exhibiting correctness) is inadequate—and where an understanding of correctness as resonance makes more sense. The second chapter demonstrates that *Cratylus* makes positive philosophical contributions to an understanding of correctness as resonance through his own stylized use of language. Therein, I argue that Plato uses *Cratylus*' style to express the idea that language's correctness increases as it is made increasingly conspicuous in its insufficiency, thus precluding closure or reification of what is what is spoken about. The third chapter demonstrates that a crucial argument early in the dialogue is analogical in the strongest sense—that a correct understanding of the argument *requires* an understanding of the correctness (as resonance) of the argument's analogues. Like Chapter 2, this demonstrates how language can be made meaningful, paradoxically, through a sort of destructive manipulation. The fourth chapter shows how the standard understanding of correctness cannot be true of Socrates' paradigm instance of correctness, the Homeric god-given names, and how these names

are more correct because they *require* us to seek their varied and unapparent resonances. And the final chapter shows how the entire dialogue is unified by a brief and previously overlooked allusion to a scene in the *Iliad*. This recognition provides the interpretive key to understanding the philosophical contributions made by the dramatic structure of the dialogue.

Hence, this dissertation provides a renewed understanding of the dialogue's central concern, correctness, and its central practice, etymologizing. Its interpretation is interesting for what it says about the relation of meaning to such diverse things as phonetics, context, language's mode of expression, etc. And by demonstrating how this sophisticated account of meaning results from attention to Plato's appropriation of his predecessors, my dissertation contributes to the growing scholarship that recognizes the philosophical import of Plato's "literary" engagement.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| <b>Table of Contents .....</b>                      | <b>vi</b>  |
| <b>Introduction .....</b>                           | <b>1</b>   |
| <b>1.0 Correctness as Resonance .....</b>           | <b>9</b>   |
| <b>1.1 Introduction .....</b>                       | <b>9</b>   |
| <b>1.2 Assumptions Regarding ὀρθότης .....</b>      | <b>10</b>  |
| <b>1.3 Is ὀρθότης Self-Evident?.....</b>            | <b>12</b>  |
| <b>1.4 Hermeneutic Assumptions .....</b>            | <b>16</b>  |
| <b>1.5 The Phenomenon .....</b>                     | <b>24</b>  |
| <b>1.6 The Literary Provenance of ὀρθότης .....</b> | <b>27</b>  |
| <b>1.7 The Synonymy of ὀρθότης.....</b>             | <b>30</b>  |
| <b>1.8 The Meaning of the Terminology .....</b>     | <b>39</b>  |
| 1.8.1 Appropriate to the Speaker .....              | 41         |
| 1.8.2 Appropriate to the Subject .....              | 46         |
| 1.8.3 Appropriate to the Circumstances .....        | 51         |
| 1.8.4 At the Appropriate Time .....                 | 57         |
| 1.8.5 Appropriate to the Genre .....                | 57         |
| 1.8.6 Appropriate to the Composition .....          | 61         |
| <b>1.9 Each Term Imparts a Special Aspect.....</b>  | <b>66</b>  |
| 1.9.1 τὸ πρέπον.....                                | 67         |
| 1.9.1.1 The Visible/Beautiful Effect .....          | 69         |
| 1.9.1.2 The Contextual Effect .....                 | 71         |
| 1.9.2 ἀρμόζω.....                                   | 79         |
| 1.9.3 τὸ καλὸν.....                                 | 89         |
| 1.9.4 τὸ οἰκεῖον .....                              | 93         |
| 1.9.5 τὸ κύριον .....                               | 97         |
| 1.9.5.1 Power .....                                 | 103        |
| <b>1.10 Correctness is a Unified Concept.....</b>   | <b>106</b> |
| <b>1.11 Meaning .....</b>                           | <b>110</b> |
| <b>1.12 Etymology .....</b>                         | <b>115</b> |
| <b>1.13 Conclusion .....</b>                        | <b>117</b> |
| <b>2.0 Cratylus' Style.....</b>                     | <b>119</b> |
| <b>2.1 Introduction.....</b>                        | <b>119</b> |
| <b>2.2 First Words.....</b>                         | <b>121</b> |
| <b>2.3 Misunderstandings.....</b>                   | <b>125</b> |
| <b>2.4 Brachylogies and Proverbs .....</b>          | <b>127</b> |

|             |  |            |
|-------------|--|------------|
| <b>2.5</b>  | <b>Irony and Style .....</b>   | <b>138</b> |
| <b>2.6</b>  | <b>Clarity, the Virtue of Style .....</b>                            | <b>144</b> |
| <b>2.7</b>  | <b>Oracles and Esotericism .....</b>                                 | <b>150</b> |
| <b>2.8</b>  | <b>Silence .....</b>   | <b>158</b> |
| 2.8.1       | So Much Silence .....  | 159        |
| 2.8.2       | Silence is Counter-Culture .....                                     | 163        |
| 2.8.3       | Significant silence .....  | 164        |
| 2.8.3.1     | Referring to Silence.....  | 165        |
| 2.8.3.2     | Starting in Silence.....   | 168        |
| 2.8.3.4     | The Power of Silence .....   | 169        |
| 2.8.3.5     | Breaking the Silence .....   | 172        |
| 2.8.4       | The Achilles Trilogy.....  | 174        |
| 2.8.4.1     | The <i>Myrmidons</i> .....   | 175        |
| 2.8.4.2     | The <i>Nereids</i> .....   | 177        |
| 2.8.4.5     | The <i>Phrygians</i> .....   | 177        |
| 2.8.5       | Philosophical Implications .....                                     | 179        |
| 2.8.6       | Plato's Other Silences .....   | 181        |
| 2.8.7       | Conclusions Regarding Silence.....                                   | 183        |
| <b>2.9</b>  | <b>Aristotle's Testimonia .....</b>                                  | <b>184</b> |
| <b>2.10</b> | <b>Socrates and Sympathy for Cratylus .....</b>                      | <b>190</b> |
| <b>2.11</b> | <b>Plato's Appropriation of Cratylus .....</b>                       | <b>195</b> |
| <br>        |  |            |
| <b>3.0</b>  | <b>The Tool Analogy, or: How to Philosophize with an Auger .....</b> | <b>199</b> |
| <b>3.1</b>  | <b>Analogical Argument .....</b>                                     | <b>199</b> |
| <b>3.2</b>  | <b>Cutting and Burning.....</b>                                      | <b>204</b> |
| <b>3.3</b>  | <b>Boring Deeper .....</b>   | <b>212</b> |
| <b>3.4</b>  | <b>The 'Shuttle'.....</b>  | <b>215</b> |
| 3.4.1       | Functions of the <i>Kerkis</i> .....                                 | 219        |
| 3.4.2       | Strumming.....   | 220        |
| 3.4.3       | Picking the Shed .....   | 223        |
| 3.4.4       | Beating the Weft.....  | 223        |
| 3.4.5       | The <i>Kerkis</i> and the <i>Statesman</i> .....                     | 228        |
| 3.4.6       | A New Interpretation.....  | 231        |
| <b>3.5</b>  | <b>The Language-Master .....</b>                                     | <b>237</b> |
| <b>3.6</b>  | <b>Conclusions .....</b>   | <b>238</b> |
| <br>        |  |            |
| <b>4.0</b>  | <b>Of Gods and Men: Radical Correctness.....</b>                     | <b>239</b> |
| <b>4.1</b>  | <b>Pay the Sophists.....</b>   | <b>241</b> |
| <b>4.2</b>  | <b>The Homeric Turn.....</b>   | <b>245</b> |
| 4.2.1       | An Unsurprising Turn.....  | 248        |
| 4.2.2       | A Turn from Sophistry?.....  | 251        |
| 4.2.3       | Hermogenes' Surprise .....   | 252        |
| <b>4.3</b>  | <b>There Is No Single Principle.....</b>                             | <b>254</b> |
| <b>4.4</b>  | <b>Xanthus and Scamander .....</b>                                   | <b>261</b> |
| <b>4.5</b>  | <b>Chalcis and Cymindis.....</b>                                     | <b>273</b> |
| 4.5.1       | War.....   | 274        |
| 4.5.2       | Metamorphosis.....   | 276        |
| 4.5.3       | Dissimulation .....  | 277        |

|            |  |            |
|------------|--|------------|
| 4.5.4      | It Works While Hidden.....                                       | 278        |
| 4.5.5      | Bird Signs .....   | 281        |
| 4.5.6      | This Is Not Etymology.....                                       | 285        |
| 4.5.7      | Conclusions .....  | 289        |
| <b>4.6</b> | <b>Batieia and Myrina .....</b>                                  | <b>289</b> |
| <b>4.7</b> | <b>The “Others”: Βριάρεως, Αιγαίων, Πλαγκταί, and μῶλυ .....</b> | <b>295</b> |
| 4.7.1      | Briareus and Aegaeon.....  | 295        |
| 4.7.2      | God-Given Names in the Odyssey.....                              | 299        |
| 4.7.3      | The Moly Plant (μῶλυ).....                                       | 300        |
| 4.7.4      | The Πλαγκταί .....   | 302        |
| <b>4.8</b> | <b>Turn From God-Given Names .....</b>                           | <b>304</b> |
| <b>5.0</b> | <b>The Embassy to Cratylus .....</b>                             | <b>307</b> |
| 5.1        | Introduction: Argumentative Unity .....                          | 307        |
| 5.2        | Introduction to the Embassy.....                                 | 311        |
| 5.3        | A New Interpretation of the <i>Iliad</i> Quote .....             | 317        |
| 5.4        | Initial Objections.....  | 324        |
| 5.5        | Cratylus as Achilles.....  | 327        |
| 5.6        | Socrates as Ajax .....   | 331        |
| 5.7        | Hermogenes as Odysseus.....                                      | 335        |
| 5.8        | Confirmation from the <i>Hippias Minor</i> .....                 | 338        |
| 5.9        | Who, then, is Phoenix? .....                                     | 342        |
| 5.10       | War and <i>Logos</i> .....                                       | 347        |
| 5.11       | Violent Theft: The Initial Offense .....                         | 356        |
| 5.11.1     | A Critical Situation .....                                       | 358        |
| 5.11.2     | Good Gifts.....  | 360        |
| 5.11.3     | The Embassy.....   | 361        |
| 5.11.4     | The End .....  | 361        |
| 5.11.5     | The After-Story .....  | 364        |
| 5.12       | Socrates' Response .....   | 365        |
| 5.12.1     | First.....   | 368        |
| 5.12.2     | Second .....   | 370        |
| 5.13       | Conclusions .....  | 373        |
|            | <b>Epilogue .....</b>  | <b>377</b> |
|            | <b>Works Cited .....</b>   | <b>380</b> |
|            | <b>Appendix.....</b>   | <b>389</b> |





## INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation, I engage Plato's only extended treatment of the nature of language. Specifically, I give an account of what Plato means by the "correctness of names" in the *Cratylus*. I do this with careful attention to thinkers who dealt with the question of correctness in language previous to Plato, especially to thinkers in the literary tradition.

In the *Cratylus*, Plato dramatizes a conversation between Socrates, an eager young Athenian named Hermogenes, and a follower of radical Heracliteanism, Cratylus. Before the dialogue begins, we are told, Hermogenes and Cratylus are discussing Cratylus' ideas about language. Specifically, Hermogenes is puzzling over Cratylus' strange idea that although he is called "Hermogenes," such is not a *correct* name, at least not for him. When the dialogue begins and Socrates joins the conversation, Socrates agrees to help Hermogenes interpret what Cratylus has said.

Socrates then spends some time trying to figure out how to proceed. Following this initial discussion, Socrates demonstrates the correctness of names by giving etymologies for them—and he does so at great length (for most of the dialogue). Following Socrates' etymologizing, Cratylus, who has meanwhile listened silently, enters the discussion. In the remainder of the dialogue, Socrates and Cratylus try to figure out whether or not Socrates' etymologizing, and the principles suggested through that etymologizing, are consistent with Cratylus' radical Heracliteanism. At the climax of this discussion, the dialogue ends inconclusively, with the suggestion that further discussion is necessary.

## Scope

Scholars have given a great deal of attention to the question of whether or not Plato had Socrates give the etymologies sincerely. And scholars have also given a great deal of attention to which theory of correctness these etymologies are meant to support or undercut. But these efforts have been largely carried out in avoidance of two fundamental questions.

First, there is an almost universal tendency to investigate whether or not names are correct by nature or by convention—and to do so without first clarifying what Socrates means by “correct,” or by “correctness.” More precisely, there is a surprising and nearly universal agreement that correctness consists in the correspondence of the semantic content of a name (or a name’s etymology) with a true description of the name’s referent. But Plato never describes correctness in this way, and such a formulation relies on a theoretical framework that ought to be suspect for its obvious origin in the modern philosophical tradition.

Nevertheless, this dissertation does not attempt to unmask a reliance on modernity, nor does it involve a comparative discussion of modern philosophy of language (e.g., by giving a systematic account of how Plato’s theories map on to modern theories about meaning). Though I claim that Plato is concerned with something like a modern ‘theory of meaning,’ and though I make some observations about how Plato’s account could contribute to such a theory (especially in Chapter 1), these sorts of inquiries are outside the scope of this dissertation.

Furthermore, they are not really appropriate to the topic under discussion in the *Cratylus*, as there was no real *philosophy* of language before Plato, and the only intellectual inquiry into linguistic correctness occurred in literary practice or in the speculation surrounding this practice (literary and rhetorical theorists, sophists, etc.). Because of this, I work to establish how the central, unifying question of the *Cratylus* (the correctness of names) comes from the literary tradition, and my dissertation focuses on the linguistic theories and practices from that tradition.

The second fundamental question that scholars fail to adequately address is why etymology is chosen as the primary tool for demonstrating linguistic correctness. The reason for this neglect follows from the first question: if we misunderstand correctness as the correspondence of the semantic content of a name with a true description of the name's referent, then the reason Plato would choose etymology as a tool seems obvious: it is the way the ancients established the semantic content of a name. I challenge both this inference and this understanding of Ancient Greek etymologizing, and I show how etymology's function is much more complex than the dominant theory allows. (Note that there is not a chapter dedicated solely to etymology; rather, I engage this re-thinking of Socrates' etymologizing throughout each chapter.)

By focusing on the early part of the dialogue where Socrates discusses his approach to understanding correctness, I show how etymology is indeed a paradigm, but that Plato uses it in conjunction with other literary-linguistic practices (analogical argument, allusion, dramatic technique, etc.) to develop his conclusions regarding correctness. Because of the great deal of attention paid to the etymologies, most of these other practices have been largely or entirely overlooked. However, these not only

elaborate Socrates' assertions regarding linguistic correctness, but they also make philosophical points of their own. In other words, I argue that the dialogue is insufficiently understood without an understanding of Plato's practice in these instances.

## **The Phenomenon**

Plato is certainly concerned with the correctness of words in the sense of establishing a word's adequacy to what it expresses. However, the nature of this adequacy has been misunderstood. Again, our modern interpretive tendencies readily suggest to us that this adequacy could not reasonably be anything other than the correspondence between a word's semantic content and a true description of the word's referent.

Because this sort of correspondence is not true of Plato's own account in the *Cratylus*, I turn to the provenance of the question of linguistic correctness for an understanding of what is at stake. I argue that Plato appropriates a tradition that understands correctness (or, alternatively, appropriateness or fitness) as the quality a word has when it is adequate to a given use of language—in a very broad sense. According to the concept in the literary tradition, words are not only correct by virtue of their semantic content, but they can be correct for a person, in a given circumstance, at a given time, for a given subject matter, in a given genre, and so on. In short, a word's correctness is a complex phenomenon that involves a word's relation to various aspects of reality. A word that is especially correct in this way is appropriate to the speaker and his or her audience, it fits the context and the genre of the discourse, and it alludes to

other relevant uses of language. All of this contributes to the word's ability to bring what is named by the word vividly before our eyes. Such words veritably resonate. So, throughout this dissertation, I will express this quality as *resonance*.

## **Methodology**

As I have already alluded to, this sort of investigation demands an approach that is sensitive to what is said about correctness in the literary tradition. Not only did Plato adopt a question raised by literary authors, but he also appropriated various aspects of their literary practice. Hence, understanding the question of correctness requires additional attention to the literary practices through which that correctness is expressed.

I carry this out in my own investigation two different ways. In my first chapter, I survey theoretical approaches to linguistic correctness from ancient literary and rhetorical theorists. I do this by cataloguing the uses of various terminology from the texts most relevant to the discussion of literary correctness and drawing out the philosophical principles that are salient in those discussions. In the remaining chapters, I take a different approach. I evaluate how Plato appropriates literary practice in order to advance his claims about the correctness of names. In other words, I am concerned with literary practice not in order to pinpoint the provenance of Plato's practice, but instead to see what philosophical claims are advanced, uniquely, through that practice.

## **Chapters**

Because of limited scope of this dissertation, I have been compelled to focus on a few key instances of Plato's engagement with the tradition. As mentioned above, the first chapter deals with the provenance of the concept of correctness. Therein, I introduce the idea that correctness does not consist—at least, not entirely—in a word's semantic content. Rather, like the literary theorists before him, Plato is attentive to the evocative power or resonance that words have. I show how it is this resonance that makes words correct.

In the remaining chapters, I work to prove that correctness, as resonance, is what Plato has in mind. In Chapter 2, I demonstrate how, in the first few lines of the dialogue, Cratylus' stylized uses of language (such as brachilogia, irony, esoteric speech, and silence) themselves make positive philosophical claims regarding what it is for words to be appropriate: words are appropriate when they make language conspicuous in its insufficiency, thus precluding any closure or immediate understanding, and thus provoking an engagement with what is brought to language. The result of this is that Cratylus is much closer to Socrates and to Plato than is generally supposed. In fact, far from being strange, juvenile, or even freakish, Cratylus is actually quite Platonic—or rather, Plato is quite Cratylean.

In Chapter 3, I draw out some of the implications of linguistic resonance. I focus on Socrates' "tool" analogy, and I show how Socrates' arguments in this section are analogical in the strong sense: a correct understanding of their conclusions *requires* a correct evaluation of their analogues. Because Plato has correctness as resonance in view, I draw out the various resonances these analogues have with the *Cratylus* and with an understanding of language. Doing this reveals a previously unnoticed Heraclitean

argument: Socrates argues that language can be creative in its destructiveness. That is, through a poetic intensification of language's trenchant misrepresentation, language can create meaning. Socrates argues this in preparation for his subsequent etymologizing—an ancient poetic technique that created meaning by destroying the everyday structure of language.

In Chapter 4, I discuss how resonance accounts for the correctness of a very special sort of word. In this section, Socrates addresses his methodology, first by suggesting that Hermogenes pay the sophists to teach him and second by suggesting that they turn to the poets for understanding. I make sense of what Socrates is proposing with each of these options, and I demonstrate what is going on with the frequently dismissed or misunderstood proposal that results: that god-given names are more correct than man-given names. The correctness involved in this proposal cannot be the sort of correctness I oppose throughout this dissertation (i.e., some kind of correspondence between a true description of a thing and the semantic content of its name). Instead, correctness is like Socrates' exposition of it in this section: a name is correct when it has resonance, and it is more correct when it has greater resonance.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I show how these ideas about correctness can lead to a unified interpretation of the dialogue. I do this by paying close attention to a brief and thoroughly decisive dramatic episode toward the end of the *Cratylus*. I argue that the hopelessly diverse interpretations of the *Cratylus*' unity are largely the result of not paying attention to Plato's cues in this crucial scene. In fact, a critical element of this scene has, as far as I have found, been entirely overlooked: what seems to be an uncontroversial passing reference to Homer's *Iliad* (specifically, the *Embassy to Achilles*



scene) is actually a sustained and profound influence on the *Cratylus*. I show how a correct understanding of this dramatic juncture solves the problem of the dialogue's unity.

## **Translations**

Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Plato are my own. All translations of secondary literature written in another language are also my own. I have, however, availed myself of various translations, which I detail in the "Appendix" following my bibliography. All translations not so indicated are my own.

## 1.0 CORRECTNESS AS RESONANCE

One must observe standards of appropriateness (πρέπον) in all things;  
that is, one must even interpret (ἐρμηνευτέον) with fitness (προσφόρως).

Demetrius, *De elocutione* 2.120, my translation.

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I investigate the dialogue’s central concept, ὀρθότης. This concept, has been glossed, as if entirely unproblematic, as “correctness.”<sup>1</sup> And indeed, the Greek word ὀρθότης is a ‘general normative term’ with a similar valance. Nevertheless, I will here argue that Plato invokes ὀρθότης in a specific sense. I do this by demonstrating that the concept is not *sui generis*, but that it has its provenance in the only investigation into the correctness of language that existed before Plato—in the literary tradition. As such, ὀρθότης belongs to a network of technical terms that are used to describe literary correctness, from which Plato draws in developing his own concept of linguistic correctness. In other words, ὀρθότης is far from a mere empty normative designation. As a technical term for linguistic correctness, it draws its force from the similar technical terms employed for the same purpose.

The renewed understanding of correctness that results from this study has several implications for an understanding of the *Cratylus*. Most immediately, it gives us a better

---

<sup>1</sup> “Correctness” is the standard translation of ὀρθότης. I prefer “Appropriateness,” which is a distant second translation. But as I develop the various ways ὀρθότης was used in the ancient literary tradition, it will be necessary to use both terms (along with other synonyms to be discussed below) interchangeably.

understanding of how Plato understands linguistic meaning. I am not the first to argue that ὀρθότης ὀνομάτων is meant to designate something like ‘linguistic meaning.’ But I will show how Plato’s appropriation of literary ὀρθότης resists the simplistic theory of meaning that is traditionally attributed to him. Instead, Plato’s account of ὀρθότης in the *Cratylus* is a context-sensitive and thus suprasemantic theory of meaning that I will call “resonance.”

## 1.2 ASSUMPTIONS REGARDING ὀρθότης

I will begin, as do philosophers in the Neoplatonic commentary tradition, by addressing some pretexts. Specifically, by considering the *Cratylus*’ subtitle: Η ΠΕΡΙ ΟΝΟΜΑΤΩΝ ΟΡΘΟΤΗΤΟΣ· ΛΟΓΙΚΟΣ. The “ΛΟΓΙΚΟΣ” is almost certainly a post-Platonic classification, but we have good reason to believe that the “Η ΠΕΡΙ ΟΝΟΜΑΤΩΝ ΟΡΘΟΤΗΤΟΣ” is either Plato’s own subtitle or at least a legitimate and authoritative Platonic designation.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, this is unsurprising, given that the ὀρθότης ὀνομάτων terminology predominates in the dialogue from Hermogenes’ use of it in the first lines of the dialogue (383a).

Despite this fact, an adequate clarification of the dialogue’s central concern—ὀρθότης—has been almost entirely disregarded. For various reasons, perhaps including the wealth of interesting philosophical questions in the *Cratylus*, scholars have been

---

<sup>2</sup> It was fixed at least by Middle Platonism (van den Berg 2008, 43). Hence, I follow most Platonists in taking it as an integral part of the text. Ironically, the substance of this subtitle is only distantly reflected in the account given by the very Platonist to whom we are indebted for the most extensive interpretation of the *Cratylus*: Proclus. Note Proclus’ σκόπος: “The purpose of the *Cratylus* is to describe the generative activity of souls among the lowest entities and the ability to produce likenesses which souls, since they received it as part of their essential lot, demonstrate through the correctness of names” (1,1). This already demonstrates what will be a drift in interpretive focus throughout the history of the text’s interpretation.

content with an all-too-incautious appropriation of the dialogue's central theme: ὀρθότης. Indeed, although commentators do discuss much of the important and unfamiliar terminology of the dialogue (e.g., στοιχεῖα, νομοθέτης, μίμησις, οὐσία, γέλοιος, τέχνη, and, *ad nauseum*, ὄνομα), and although they offer many sustained investigations into minor focuses of the dialogue (the possibility of false statement, the σκληρότης argument, etc.), there is rarely any attention paid simply to ὀρθότης itself.

In fact, there is a surprisingly common, and even almost formulaic, approach to the dialogue. It involves, first, clarifying what is meant by ὄνομα (few commentators pass over this).<sup>3</sup> Following this, commentators then proceed to evaluate the arguments for and against the two ways that names can be correct (naturalism and conventionalism).<sup>4</sup> Of course, this description of the common approach is over-generalized, and there are a great variety of approaches within the generalization. However, it is instructive of the fact that scholars, who are eager to address the correctness of names, do not engage the more fundamental question of what sort of correctness is being employed in this context. In so doing, they skip over ὀρθότης itself.

But an investigation of ὀρθότης itself may seem unnecessary, given that Plato has given us the answers to the question. That is, if we know what the alternatives to answering this question (“what is the correctness of names?”), i.e., naturalism and

---

<sup>3</sup> The word ὄνομα has a markedly different conceptual valence from its English translations “name,” “noun,” and “word.” For instance, ὄνομα is looser, grammatically speaking, than the English “noun” (e.g., adjectives, participles, and infinitives are frequently classified as ὀνόματα). The word can mean anything from the specific “proper noun” to the more general “phrase” or “expression,” depending on the context it is used in. For example, a passage contrasting an ὄνομα to a ῥῆμα will mean something different from a passage contrasting an ὄνομα to a λόγος. Because of this plurality, I will be obliged to use both “name” and “word.”

<sup>4</sup> As I have said, this is pandemic, but it is exemplified in Anagnostopoulos 1972 (see, e.g., 692). Indeed, it is uncontroversial to say that most scholarship on the *Cratylus* is concerned with making sense of which theory of the correctness of names is ultimately advanced in the *Cratylus* (naturalism, conventionalism, or some derivative alternative).

conventionalism, then why should we take time to clarify such a reasonably clear question or the seemingly straightforward terms of which the question is composed?<sup>5</sup>

Of course, whatever we assume regarding ὀρθότης will largely determine the ensuing investigation. For this reason, this chapter will diverge from the ‘normal approach’ described above. Of course, understanding the difference between natural correctness and conventional correctness is also important, but we will be better prepared to adequately understand these concepts if we first make sense of what the concept “correctness” (ὀρθότης) itself means.

### 1.3 IS ὀρθότης SELF-EVIDENT?

Commentators on the *Cratylus* are, as a whole, quite careful with the Ancient Greek terminology. But why, then, have they disregarded a careful account of ὀρθότης? As a practical matter, no scholar can give a proper sense for every single Ancient Greek word or concept. And as a result, scholars must focus on the more alien concepts and must necessarily assume that most others will be more or less self-evident. This is inevitable, but I will now show why it is an unfortunate mistake in the case of ὀρθότης.

First, not unlike its usual English translation “correctness,” ὀρθότης is not unambiguous; it has quite a diverse signification. This word and its related forms (e.g., ὀρθός, ὀρθῶς, etc.) are immensely common in Ancient Greek and have been since the

---

<sup>5</sup> Incidentally, I side with Sedley 2003, 67ff., in criticizing this dominant way of putting the “alternatives.” I don’t think this is a good way to formulate it, as I think the way of looking at this as between two options is also flawed. What is in question, briefly, is not whether or not something is correct by convention or nature, but whether or not the one who establishes the convention (the νομοθέτης) does so with an eye to nature or not.

earliest extant texts. The myriad uses of these terms in Plato alone discourage any precise determination of the term's extension in the *Cratylus*.<sup>6</sup>

For example, something that is ὀρθός is literally “upright” or “straight” (e.g., it designates right angles in *Timaeus* 55b or man's upright posture in, e.g., Aristotle's *On Respiration* 468a5 and *De partibus animalium* 653a18).<sup>7</sup> But it is more frequent that ὀρθός is used metaphorically in a way similar to the English “upright” and “straight.” For example, it can designate the moral or social correctness of an action (as in *Protagoras* 359e, *Meno* 97b, or *Euthyphro* 9a). It can be a general term for living well (τίς οὖν ὀρθότης; *Laws* 803e), virtue (*Gorgias* 506d, *Laws* 734d), or upright character (as in the σμικροὶ δὲ καὶ οὐκ ὀρθοὶ τὰς ψυχὰς of *Theaetetus* 173a or the τοὺς ὀρθῶς φιλομαθεῖς of *Phaedo* 67b). ὀρθός can designate the correctness of a government (*Statesman* 294a). It can indicate the correct method of proceeding (*Statesman* 293d). There is even a correctness of music (*Laws* 642a, 657a ff.). Indeed, ὀρθός is the word for correctness—or justice—itself (τὸ δὲ ὀρθὸν *Republic* 540d).

The problem is that this plurality of uses doesn't suggest more than a general impression. And indeed, this is how it is glossed. Scholars of the *Cratylus* claim that ὀρθότης is simply to be taken as a general normative term,<sup>8</sup> or declare that the term is inherently vague,<sup>9</sup> or conclude that ὀρθότης is an empty relation-term.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> This diversity has its numerical analogue: in the Platonic corpus, the nominalization ὀρθότης is used almost a hundred times. Its adjectival and adverbial forms are used many hundreds of times, and this of course doesn't include synonyms.

<sup>7</sup> S.v. Beekes “ὀρθός.”

<sup>8</sup> See especially Barney 2001, 24 and Sedley 2003, 126.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Baxter 1992: “Correctness of naming therefore depends on us ensuring that our (empirical) names instantiate this special, as yet unrevealed, relationship between name and thing” (9).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Kretzmann 1971: “Cratylus's answer is that there is something about the relation between names and their *bearers* that makes certain names ‘naturally’ correct, regardless of what the *users* of the names might think about it. And Hermogenes' answer is that names are correct only ‘conventionally,’ that the *users* of

Although Plato does certainly does not define ὀρθότης, he nevertheless uses it as a technical term. And this requires a more precise understanding of the term. The tension between the apparent generality of the term and the conceptual demand for a more specific understanding are apparent in Barney 2001, who notes that “‘correctness’ [*orthotês*] is a generic normative term” (22), but then immediately points out that “however, the phrase ‘correctness of names [*orthotês onomatôn*]’ is not so clear” (22). I suggest that the solution to this problem—the need for a technical sense of so general a term—will not come from more sophisticated accounts of naturalism and conventionalism, however necessary these might be. Instead, we must first attempt a clarification of ὀρθότης itself.

Many scholars tacitly recognize this necessity: in the face of the term’s multiple meanings and of Plato’s inexplicitness, most scholars demonstrate a yearning for a more precise understanding of ὀρθότης, and they attempt to impose one in various ways. This is true even (or perhaps especially) of those who affirm the word’s inevitable generality. For example, Sedley 2003 distinguishes between “philosophical correctness” and “exegetical correctness,” Barney 2001 distinguishes between “structural correctness” and “representational correctness” (102f.), and Kretzmann 1971 distinguishes between a “general theory of correctness” and a “special theory of correctness.” Levin 1997 recognizes how “Particularly striking is the tremendous range of criteria on the basis of which ὀνόματα are said to be assigned” (48) and then proceeds to develop a lengthy taxonomy of the criteria of correctness by virtue of which people are given proper names.

---

the names are the ultimate arbiters of their correctness, regardless of any consideration of the nature of the *bearers* of the names” (127).

But as interesting, and perhaps even accurate, as all of these distinctions are, they depart from Plato's own terminology and they still do not shed much light on ὁρθότης itself.

Indeed, it is ironic that some version of Ockham's Razor should be brought to bear on Plato *scholars* in this way.<sup>11</sup> But if there is an account of ὁρθότης that is consistent and unified, and requires no further extra-Platonic distinctions, then such an account would indeed be preferable. Below I will offer such an account.

But first, a few more words about the dangers of hastily adopting ὁρθότης. The fact that so many scholars have felt the need to invent their own distinctions is telling. Clearly, more than a general impression of ὁρθότης is required, and the vacuum left by Plato's reticence on this account will inevitably be filled—either by careful models like those mentioned above or, worse, by our contemporary philosophical assumptions.

This is a problem in the case of the *Cratylus*, as ὁρθότης is meant to designate a property of language, and philosophers of our century generally come prepared with an understanding of language influenced by one of our century's most sophisticated areas of philosophy—philosophy of language. We must be extremely cautious about adopting such contemporary concepts in relation to ὁρθότης, for our assumptions about this concept will largely determine how we will go about answering the questions in the dialogue. For example, if ὁρθότης is understood as concerning the 'non-referential descriptive content of a name' or the 'correspondence of the semantic content of a name with a true description of its referent,' then the methodologies for investigating ὁρθότης

---

<sup>11</sup> Ademollo finds himself compelled to introduce "model names" in addition to "forms" in order to explain how names are correct. His own reservations about this are telling: "I think that this is an accurate summary of the theory developed up to 390E, although it would not be easy to attach a specific textual reference to each element of the summary" (131).



and the answers that are possible in such investigations are already to a large extent determined. The universe of discourse is set.

Unfortunately, this is the standard account of ὀρθότης in the *Cratylus*. As Barney 2001 writes, a “name performs its function by virtue of having content which correctly—i.e., *truly*—describes the nature of the object named” (42). In other words, ὀρθότης is a standard that consists in words’ “etymon supplying a true description of their referent” (Ademollo 2011, 157). Throughout this chapter, I will refer to the standard account in more or less this language: correctness consists in the correspondence of the semantic content of a name (or a name’s etymology) with a true description of the name’s referent.<sup>12</sup> Throughout this chapter, and indeed throughout this entire dissertation, I will show how this definition is inadequate.

## 1.4 HERMENEUTIC ASSUMPTIONS

By problematizing the traditional account, I don’t pretend to offer an alternative free from assumptions. Indeed, any investigation is inevitably guided by some assumption or other. In what follows, I will deliberately supplant the above assumptions with a different set of assumptions regarding correctness that I hope to be more adequate: that the entire question of ὀρθότης ὀνομάτων emerged from the literary tradition, and that Plato’s appropriation of ὀρθότης is not abstracted from that tradition.

---

<sup>12</sup> A list of the literature adhering to this standard view would be too massive to cite. Cf. Palmer 1989: “a correct name is one whose descriptive content is true of the object it refers to, but reference is not secured through the mediation of that content” (17–8). Or Barney 1991: “Socrates develops the idea that the semantic content of a name, as revealed or explained by etymology, discloses the nature of the object it names” (2), “Understood as semantic content, the descriptive content of a name is taken to be disclosed by etymology” (6), and so on.

This is a shift in how the concept has been understood historically. It is well known that the myriad linguistic themes in the *Cratylus* (etymology, meaning, truth, etc.) have been understood since antiquity as a sort of proto-linguistic-philosophy. Indeed, this has been a dominant interpretation since Aristotle's great work on the philosophy of language, *De Interpretatione*, alludes (albeit vaguely) to the *Cratylus* as its predecessor. Hellenistic philosophers, especially the Stoics, also felt the dialogue was akin to their own logical-linguistic pursuits. Indeed, since antiquity, the *Cratylus* has been grouped as one of Plato's "logical" dialogues (the ΛΟΓΙΚΟΣ subtitle mentioned above), alongside the *Sophist*, *Statesman*, and *Parmenides*. This "logical" designation was traditionally added to the *tetralogy* classification system, which was in place at least since Thrasyllus' 1<sup>st</sup>-century A.D. catalogue, if not earlier (both Hoerber 1957 and Chroust 1965 suggest that the *tetralogies* originated at least in the 4<sup>th</sup>-century B.C. with the Platonic *13<sup>th</sup> Letter*). The designation was implemented to thematically offset what was seen as an inadequate or even arbitrary tetralogy-grouping. For this same classificatory reason, Aristophanes of Byzantium's *Trilogies* groups the *Cratylus* with the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*. In short, the *Cratylus* has been understood as a logical dialogue since antiquity.

But, of course, any classificatory system of Plato's diverse work will be inadequate. Indeed, this is especially apparent with the *Cratylus*, which may have more thematic affinity with dialogues outside its own tetralogy. The ancient tetralogy-categories were logical, ethical, political, obstetric, tentative, probative, and refutative. In other words, there are no separate categories to group dialogues, like the *Cratylus*, that deal with topics that are manifestly poetic, rhetorical, or literary. Hence, the *Phaedrus*,

*Symposium*, and *Menexenus* are “ethical,” the *Republic* is “political,” and the *Ion* is “tentative.” Obviously, there are important aspects of these dialogues that merit such classification, and every Platonic work is too thematically rich to be adequately classified with a single designation.

Nevertheless, these groupings have contributed to an interpretive bias—that the *Cratylus* is more of a logical work (like the *Sophist*, *Statesman*, and *Parmenides*) than a “literary” work like the *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, *Ion*, *Republic*, or *Menexenus*. This is despite the presence, in the *Cratylus*, of “inspiration episodes” (as in the *Ion* or *Phaedrus*), sophisticated accounts of mimesis (like the *Republic*), and lengthy literary composition (like the *Symposium* or *Menexenus*). It is perhaps for this reason that, in the case of classifying Aristotle’s works, Avicenna and other Arabic philosophers broke the traditional classificatory system and included Aristotle’s *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* as logical works proper to the *Organon* (see Black 1990).

Although the *Cratylus* has been treated as a logical work since antiquity, understanding it as dealing with literary concepts is not without ancient precedent. Indeed, one might well sympathize with Dionysius of Halicarnassus, whose own investigations into language caused his dissatisfaction with the strictly logical understanding of how language works. I here quote his reflections at some length for a couple of reasons: first, he is a prime example of an ancient theoretical reflection on language that diverges from the dominant tradition and, second, he does this specifically with reference to Plato’s *Cratylus* (some pages after the below quoted passage):

And yet some of those writers claimed to make a serious study of this department [... i.e., the study of language,] and even wrote some handbooks on the classification of the parts of speech.<sup>13</sup> But they all strayed far from the truth, and never even dreamt what it is that makes composition attractive and beautiful (ἡδεῖαν καὶ καλὴν). For my part, when I decided to write a treatise on this subject, I tried to discover whether my predecessors had said anything about it, especially the philosophers from the Stoa, since I knew that these men paid considerable attention to the subject of language: one must give them their due. But nowhere did I see any contribution, great or small, to the subject of my choice [i.e., the effects of language. These Stoic handbooks] contain, as those who have read the books are aware, not a rhetorical but a logical investigation: they deal with the grouping of propositions, true or false, possible and impossible, admissible and variable, ambiguous, and so forth. These contribute nothing helpful or useful... [but, on the other hand,] the ancient poets, historians, philosophers and orators gave much forethought to this branch of study. They considered that neither words, nor clauses, nor periods should be put together at random, but they had a definite system of rules which they practised, and so composed well. (*De compositione verborum* 4)

Cicero agrees that there had been an apostasy from the Platonic philosophy that had both dialectical rigor and poetic attention to language. As for the Stoics,

---

<sup>13</sup> τῶν τοῦ λόγου μορίων—the *Cratylus* prefers the synonymous στοιχεῖα, but with the same concern.

all their attention is absorbed in dialectic; they pay no attention to the qualities of style which range freely, which are discursive and varied.... Where will you find a writer of greater richness than Plato? Jupiter would speak with his tongue, they say, if he spoke Greek. (*Brutus* 31.117-121)<sup>14</sup>

In order to more fully language, we need more than a logical taxonomy of parts of speech. We do need a rigorous reflection on language, but it must itself come through a deep engagement with language. In other words, an authentic account requires both theoretical rigor and a concern for the actual effect that language produces—for the vitality of language.

The *Cratylus* is this sort of investigation. It examines the nature of language, but does so in a way that engages language more fully—it involves language’s dialectical and its more literary aspects. That is, the dialogue presents us with arguments regarding correctness, but it also demonstrates the nature of linguistic correctness through literary practices like drama, allusion, and etymologizing. This is especially appropriate because, as I will here show, the central concept of the dialogue (ὀρθότης) has its provenance in the literary tradition.

Indeed, Plato wants his readers to recognize that the *Cratylus*’ central terminology (ὀρθότης) has a significant origin. He thematizes this idea of significant origin or provenance early in the dialogue, at least beginning with the House of Atreus names. He then sustains the importance of origin through the dialogue’s central practice,

---

<sup>14</sup> Of course, both Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Cicero had practical aims. To this end, Cicero writes that the Stoics are “introducing a kind of diction that is not lucid, copious and flowing, but meagre, spiritless, cramped and paltry; and, if any man commends this style, it will only be with the qualification that it is unsuitable to an orator” (*De Oratore* 2.38 159-160).

etymologizing. And of course, he invokes specific origins by having Socrates reference other thinkers who previously dealt with ὁρθότης and related questions (Prodicus, Protagoras, Euthydemus, Heraclitus, Hesiod, Homer, Anaxagoras, Euthyphro, and possibly Parmenides, Democritus, Antisthenes, Orpheus, the author of the Derveni Papyrus, Empedocles, Pherecydes of Syros, Heraclides Ponticus, Alcmaeon, Hippon, Theagenes, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, *and so on*).

Plato also attunes his readers to the importance of the origin on ὁρθότης with a dramatic cue: in the dialogue's very first words, Hermogenes asks, "Well then, do you [Cratylus] want us to share our discourse with this here Socrates?" What Plato describes here is a conversation between Hermogenes and Cratylus that has been going on previous to the introduction of Socrates. Socrates, along with the reader, is entering *their* discussion—a discussion which was already in progress. In other words, Socrates did not invent the question being discussed, but rather engages a question that has been asked before he came onto the scene. In fact, long before he came onto the scene: the question had already been under discussion by many individuals, some of which Plato refers to in the *Cratylus* (i.e., the list of distinguished individuals in the previous paragraph). In sum, throughout the *Cratylus*, Plato continuously raises the question of origins—and he specifically interrogates the origin of the question regarding ὁρθότης ὀνομάτων.

So, while it is apparently Hermogenes who raises the question of ὁρθότης ὀνομάτων, he can hardly be said to have invented the question. This, with the complex play of philosophical ideas and allusions to philosophers in the *Cratylus*, makes it clear that we are to consider the question in light of *their* contributions. In other words,

Socrates repeatedly makes it clear will be engaging interlocutors who are not, strictly speaking, present at the discussion.

Given this, we should surely expect Plato to give the significant provenance of the dialogue's central concept (ὀρθότης). This expectation is strengthened by the fact that Socrates readily etymologizes much of the dialogue's other important terminology. For example, in his first lines of the dialogue, he illustrates the central question of whether "Hermogenes" is a correct name for Hermogenes by tracing the origins of the name in "son of Hermes" (384a-c, 407e, etc.), who is himself later etymologized as "he who contrived speech" (ὅς τὸ εἴρειν ἐμήσατο) or "speech-fashioner" (εἰρέμης, 408b). And at the crescendo of his etymologizing, Socrates gives the etymologies of τέχνη (ἔξιν νοῦ, 414b), βουλή (βολήν, βούλεσθαι, βουλεύεσθαι, etc. 420c), ἀληθεία (ἄλη... θεία, 421a), ψεῦδος (καθεύδουσι ... ψεῖ, 421b), τὸ ὄν and οὐσία (ἰὸν, 421b-c), ψυχή (ὄχεϊ, ἔχει, φύσιν→φυσέχην, 400b), and, of course, ὄνομα (ὅτι τοῦτ' ἔστιν ὄν, οὗ τυγχάνει ζήτημα ὄν or τοῦτο εἶναι ὄν οὗ μάσμα ἐστίν, 421a). We should indeed expect the origin of another central term, indeed *the* central term of the dialogue (ὀρθότης), to have a significant origin.

Nevertheless, Plato doesn't develop the origin of ὀρθότης through etymology. Instead, he heightens the reader's own ability to discern the origin of ὀρθότης. He does this dramatically, by making both Cratylus and Socrates deliberately evasive on the question and by having Socrates claim to have given an answer despite this evasiveness. At 384a, Hermogenes implores Socrates: "I would learn with yet more pleasure how it seems to you yourself περὶ ὀνομάτων ὀρθότητος, should you be willing." Socrates repeatedly refuses to give him a straightforward answer (see, e.g., 391a), but then

declares that “This appears to me, Hermogenes, to want to be ἡ τῶν ὀνομάτων ὀρθότης” (427d). One would have expected that in between these passages, Socrates would have said something like “ἡ τῶν ὀνομάτων ὀρθότης is X” (at least, as he does in other dialogues, as a hypothesis), but what we have instead is extensive etymologizing, obscure word-play, a discussion of the poetic resonance of sounds, and so on. In other words, where Socrates claims to have given an answer, we find poetic practice.

This is one of the ways Plato demonstrates the literary origin of ὀρθότης. To demonstrate this, I assume what others have extensively confirmed: that Plato, himself a literary master, crafts his inquiry to be appropriate to what is inquired into. The dominant methods of inquiry in the *Cratylus* (e.g., allusion, inspiration, reference to literary authority, poetic analogy, etymology, and so on) are manifestly literary. Hence, the object of inquiry itself must be somehow literary. So, the fact that Plato directs how own philosophical inquiry into ὀρθότης ὀνομάτων through poetic practices demands that we begin with a literary sense of ὀρθότης.

This really should come as no surprise, as Plato frequently adopts concepts, questions, examples, etc. from the literary tradition. And that he would do so here is strengthened by the fact that *there is no antecedent philosophical tradition of using ὀρθότης in a linguistic context*. There was vigorous intellectual inquiry into language before Socrates, but such inquiry, even when done by philosophers, was done either within the literary tradition or in theoretical reflections on that tradition. Think, for example, of the aphorisms, ambiguity, and word-play of Heraclitus, Democritus, and the Pythagoreans. Or of the exegetical-theoretical-grammatical reflections of the Sophists and rhetorical manuals. This is not even to mention the same sort of inquiry among the



poets. Indeed, it is for this reason that the inquiry into the nature of language takes place in the *Cratylus* via word play, etymologizing, proverbs, metaphors, etc.

And this is indeed a fitting approach, as we have on authority from none other than Aristotle: anciently, concepts regarding correctness and appropriateness in language were not the domain of philosophers, but of rhetoricians and poets: “διάνοια is the ability to say things that are possible and that are appropriate (ἀρμόττοντα). This, insofar as it occurs in language, is *the work of poets and rhetoricians*” (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1450b4-5, my translation).

As with Plato’s adoption of other literary concepts and devices, this turn to the literary tradition is not a departure from philosophical practice, but a deepening of it. I will show how Plato does this by showing how ὀρθότης and its synonyms are used in the literary tradition and what that means for the use of ὀρθότης in the *Cratylus*.

## 1.5 THE PHENOMENON

Before I embark on a lengthy analysis of the terminology, it is important to get a sense for the phenomenon in question. As Aristotle says, the literary arts require unique expectations regarding correctness: “Politics does not have the same correctness as the poetic art—nor does any art have the same correctness as the poetic art” (πρὸς δὲ τούτοις οὐχ ἡ αὐτὴ ὀρθότης ἐστὶν τῆς πολιτικῆς καὶ τῆς ποιητικῆς οὐδὲ ἄλλης τέχνης καὶ ποιητικῆς, Aristotle, *Poetics* 1460b14-15, my translation). And indeed, the phenomenon we will be dealing with is significantly different from how we moderns are inclined to understand the concept of correctness, so I will try here to briefly bring it into view.

Perhaps it would be helpful to begin negatively, that is, to get a sense for what is *not* correct. For, incorrect words are more conspicuously inappropriate in the literary context. Most readers can intuitively recognize when a word or phrase sounds “off,” or doesn’t fit the character speaking it, or is inappropriate for the occasion it was spoken in. We say, for example, that the too much fine diction makes a regular Joe sound too pretentious or a child sound perhaps unusually precocious. Authors must take great care to put words into their characters’ mouths that match their age, gender, ethnicity, sociopolitical standing, and so on. Words can be spoken incorrectly due to their timing (people who speak in public put a great deal of effort into the precise moment to speak especially evocative words), because of the nature of their audience, and because of the particular circumstances of their usage. For example, President George W. Bush came under considerable criticism when he said, with reference to “September 11” and the ensuing “War on Terror” that “this crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take a while” (Bush 2001). While the word “crusade” was clearly correct in one general sense of the word (by virtue of describing military action for the sake of a political or ethical ideal), it was also conspicuously inappropriate for its religiously-charged evocation of a powerful Christian nation engaging in a questionable military offensive against an Islamic nation. Indeed, sometimes words with entirely appropriate *denotations* and even *connotations* can carry *implications* that are inappropriate to contemporary contexts (such as how it is taboo nowadays to say “niggardly,” despite the fact that the word is neither semantically nor etymologically related to “nigger”).

The positive corollary of this phenomenon works, usually, invisibly. That is, when one employs correct words, they are the sorts of words the speaker would be

expected to say in the specific context to the specific people. In everyday contexts, this involves everyday words; in poetic contexts, this involves flourish. Words used in this (correct) way accomplish their task of bringing that which is spoken about, along with appropriate connotations and associations, vividly before the hearer. This is accomplished—and accomplished best—when the word works on various levels: for example, when its meaning fits the context especially well, when it alludes to other usages that contribute to the force of the immediate context, and when it achieves that nearly ineffable, resonant quality when the word just sounds especially right.

In other words, what makes a word correct in a literary sense is not its conventional denotation, nor because (as scholars of the *Cratylus* say) its embedded propositional content is a faithful description of its referent. These are, of course, frequently true of a correct name, but they are insufficient as an account of correctness. A word is correct because the various relations it suggests are appropriate to its referent. It is correct because there is a depth of meaning and of prosodic character. Correct words veritably resonate. So, throughout this dissertation, I will express this quality as *resonance*.

I use this terminology both because I think it is especially suited to ὁρθότης in the *Cratylus* and because I wish to avoid some of the technical terminology used by others. For instance, someone might think that I might, without loss and with greater clarity, just use Fregean “sense,” or Millian “connotation,” or even just “meaning” to express the aspect of correctness that I have in mind—for it does seem like I am arguing that Plato is concerned with an extra-referential aspect of meaning. I will discuss how ὁρθότης may be considered a theory of meaning in detail below (section 1.11), but I bring it up here to

justify what will be important terminology throughout the chapter. In short, theories like Frege's and Mill's that bifurcate the notion of meaning (into sense and reference or into connotation and denotation), impart complex philosophical assumptions that I wish to avoid. For example, at least for Mill, proper names cannot have any connotation. While Plato is certainly clearly concerned with an aspect of meaning distinct from denotation, he would disagree with this aspect of Millian connotation. In fact, meaning externalists (precisely what I argue Plato is *not*) see themselves as heirs to Mill here. Furthermore, "connotation" and "sense" can easily be made continuous with the "traditional account" I identified above (correctness as a correspondence of the semantic content of a name with a true description of its referent). Ademollo 2011, 12, e.g., makes this identification explicitly. I will be arguing that Plato's position is not so simple, and hence I will adopt unconventional terminology to designate this fact.

## 1.6 THE LITERARY PROVENANCE OF ὀρθότης

I will here give an account of ὀρθότης and its synonyms in the literary tradition and show how Plato's use of ὀρθότης comprises this synonym-complex. That is, I will show how ὀρθότης and its variants became technical terminology for intellectual reflection on language and what the means for the philosophical purposes of the *Cratylus*.

I mean the phrase "literary tradition" in a broad sense. That is, for the most part I will not be evaluating the use of correctness-words among the poets and orators (this latter is attempted in Levin). The poets and orators writers were certainly concerned with the idea of correctness, but seldom used technical terminology or meta-discourse to

describe their practice.<sup>15</sup> Because of this, I will be working more with the poetic and rhetorical “handbook tradition,” which constituted the first meta-discourse about language—one which Plato was interested in and engaged with.<sup>16</sup>

A brief defense of this procedure is doubtless called for, as none of the handbooks available in Plato’s day remain extant. As a result, I am compelled to use the work of later authors, such as Aristotle, Theophrastus, Demetrius of Phalerum, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and Hermogenes of Tarsus. This might appear to be straightforwardly anachronistic, but an evaluation of later usage can be genuinely beneficial for several reasons. First, my argument will not rely on the fact that a later author uses *terms*, ὀρθότης e.g., in exactly the same way Plato does. Instead, I demonstrate how these thinkers understand the *concept* of correctness, in its various linguistic manifestations, in

---

<sup>15</sup> As I will show below, Aristophanes in the poetic tradition and Isocrates in the rhetorical tradition prove themselves strong exceptions to this rule. I will reference others where appropriate.

<sup>16</sup> This is evidenced by his own technical ability (think, e.g., of the *Apology* and *Menexenus*) and by his direct and intimate engagement with the handbook tradition in the *Phaedrus*. I have found nobody else who takes my approach, although, as noted above, Levin 2001 does something quite similar: she writes that the literary tradition (by which she means the poets and Herodotus) uses ὀρθότης in a way that parallels other normative terminology: “the terminology used in the *Cratylus* to treat questions of appropriateness—principally the adverbs *orthōs*, *alethōs*, *dikaiōs*, and *kalōs* parallels in striking ways that employed by the literary tradition” (63). As a result, she claims, the strong normative connotations these words would have absorbed from the literary tradition would speak in the *Cratylus* as well. Levin’s references here are enlightening, but she drops the question with the vague suggestion that ὀρθότης “would appear to have strong normative connotations” (63). In contrast, while I do not wish to exclude the poets from my discussion of terminology, I have focused on an analysis of the terminology employed by those who have engaged in the *theoretical examination of the poetic practices* of naming and etymologizing; and poets are only occasionally on this list. I agree with Levin’s point, but I think it is shared already by ancient literary scholars; note the normative terms in the following passage: “In my opinion Force in a speech is nothing other than the proper (ὀρθή) use of all the kinds of style previously discussed and of their opposites and of whatever other elements are used to create the body of a speech. To know what technique must (εἰς δέον) be used and when and how it should (κατὰ καιρὸν) be used, and to be able to employ all the kinds of style and their opposites and to know what kinds of proofs and thoughts are suitable (εἰς δέον καὶ κατὰ καιρὸν) in the proemium or in the narration or in the conclusion, in other words, as I said, to be able to use all those elements that create the body of a speech as and when they should be used (χρησθαι ...δεόντως καὶ κατὰ καιρὸν) seems to me to be the essence of true Force. Just as a man who properly (εἰς δέον) uses the relevant circumstances that comprise, as it were, the substance of his craft is said to be forceful or clever at that craft, and a general who knows how to manipulate properly (εἰς δέον) the circumstances that fall within the general’s expertise (for that is the substance of his craft) receives the same praise, so too an orator who properly (εἰς δέον) uses the circumstances of rhetoric and its material would be considered forceful” (Hermogenes, *Περὶ ἰδεῶν λόγου* 2.9.1-17).

the same way Plato does. And because of this, evaluation of their usage will shed new light on Plato's own usage.

But my claim is in fact stronger than this. Despite the temporal distance between these authors and Plato, we can nevertheless expect a great deal of terminological continuity. This continuity is demonstrable between handbooks from across various generations or even centuries. The authors of these handbooks had unparalleled access to the ancient poetical and rhetorical tradition—to such an extent that he makes a dilettante of even the most widely read modern classicist (think e.g., of Aristotle and Theophrastus). Even for authors writing hundreds of years after Plato, the primary texts for reflection were the very antique poets and classical orators that were active in or before Plato's day (e.g., Dionysius of Halicarnassus has extended treatments of Lysias, Isocrates, Thucydides, Isaeus, and Demosthenes). No reflection on poetry can avoid citing Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. And no manual, rhetorical or poetic, would be complete without extensive reference to Homer.

Furthermore, any later theoretical reflection on these thinkers was in direct dialogue with the earlier handbook tradition. Even Aristotle makes explicit that he will be in dialogue with the handbook writers (οἱ τὰς τέχνας τῶν λόγων συντιθέντες, *Rhetoric* 1354a12-13).<sup>17</sup> And although handbooks earlier than Aristotle (i.e., those that Plato would have had familiarity with) have been lost, assuming that we have no insight into their concepts and even terminology is inconsistent with the fact that new manuals (even, or especially, Aristotle's) largely build on previous ones. That is, Aristotle and his

---

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Aristotle's comparative efforts in biology and politics—he made his own conclusions only on the basis of extensive gathering of previous investigations. We have every reason to assume he does the same with his reflections on rhetoric and poetry, especially given this reference from the *Rhetoric*.

followers engaged dialectically with the manual tradition. And for the most part, they were not engaged in *ex nihilo* invention, but in theoretical response. As such, their ideas and, largely, their terminology would have been continuous with the tradition. Dialogue requires common language.

## 1.7 THE SYNONYMY OF ὀρθότης

That there is continuity of terminology in the later tradition is especially important for my argument because pre-Platonic uses of ὀρθότης are sparse (although, as mentioned above, ὀρθός and its variants are immeasurably common).<sup>18</sup> Indeed, *if there are any truly pre-Platonic uses of ὀρθότης*, they are only very slightly pre-Platonic. Significantly, most of them occur in the context of correctness of language (e.g., the λόγων ὀρθότητα of Gorgias' Fragment 6 and the τῆς ὀρθότητος τῶν ἐπῶν of Aristophanes' *Frogs* 1182—a passage I treat in detail below).<sup>19</sup> And most of them are in fact Plato's own paraphrases—of Hippias (*Hippias Minor* 368d: γραμμάτων ὀρθότητος), of Protagoras (*Cratylus* 391b-c: ὀρθότητα [τῶν ὀνομάτων]), and of Prodicus (*Euthydemus* 277e and *Cratylus* 384b, ὀνομάτων ὀρθότητος). As such, it is questionable whether or not they constitute the paraphrased thinkers' own terminology.

Nevertheless, authors contemporary to and immediately following Plato do give a good sense for how ὀρθότης was employed, specifically in theoretical-linguistic contexts.

---

<sup>18</sup> Despite the scanty evidence for ὀρθότης, there is an abundance of the less-technical form ὀρθός, which is almost universally interchangeable with ὀρθότης, especially in theoretical-linguistic contexts (this is true both in the *Cratylus* and elsewhere).

<sup>19</sup> In fact, the non-linguistic instances include only Xenophon's "upright," as in "standing upright" (*Memorabilia* 1.4.11) and the various instances of the term in the Hippocratic corpus, which are medical in nature (ὀμμάτων ὀρθότης, e.g.). And it is important to note that none of these are strictly pre-Platonic.

As the table below demonstrates, there is a marked synonymy between ὀρθότης and the various terms used to describe linguistic correctness in the literary tradition. Because I will cite numerous examples throughout this chapter, I have here condensed my account so as to include only τὸ πρέπον, τὸ καλόν, and ἀρμόττω. I have also included a column to show where Plato regards the terms as synonymous.

| Synonyms of ὀρθός and ὀρθότης with: | in the Literary Tradition  | in Plato   |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|
| τὸ πρέπον                           | Aristotle, <i>Rhetoric</i> 1414a26. Demetrius, <i>De Elocutione</i> 276. Hermogenes, <i>Progyasmata</i> 2.37. Diogenes Laertius 3.79.3, and so on.             | <i>Hippias Major</i> 290c ff., <i>Critias</i> 109b, <i>Laws</i> 816b-c, etc.   |
| καλός                               | The synonymy here is widespread although frequently implicit. A good instance can be seen in Dionysius of Halicarnassus, <i>De Demosthenis dictione</i> 30.91. | Similarly, examples abound, especially in the <i>Cratylus</i> : 384d, 391a, 411a, 428b, 435c, etc. they abound elsewhere as well, especially in rhetorical contexts: <i>Protagoras</i> 339b, 391a, 400d-e, 411a, 428b, 435c-d; <i>Menexenus</i> 248d; <i>Gorgias</i> 485a; <i>Phaedrus</i> 253d; and <i>Republic</i> 602a. |
| ἀρμόττω/<br>ἀρμόζω                  | Aristotle, <i>Rhetoric</i> 1414a26, <i>Poetics</i> 1450b4-5; Hermogenes <i>Progyasmata</i> 2.37; Diogenes Laertius 3.94-95.                                    | <i>Hippias Minor</i> 368d, <i>Theaetetus</i> 175e, <i>Laws</i> 642a, etc.  |

To expand only one of these exemplary passages, Aristotle discusses the correctness of words in the context of style:



Obviously agreeableness will be produced by the qualities already mentioned, if our definition of excellence of style has been correct (ὀρθῶς). For what other reason should style be clear, and not mean but appropriate (πρέπουσαν)? If it is prolix, it is not clear; nor yet if it is curt. Plainly the middle way suits (ἁρμόττει) best. Again, style will be made agreeable by the elements mentioned, namely by a good blending of ordinary and unusual words, by the rhythm, and by the persuasiveness that springs from appropriateness (πρέποντος). (*Rhetoric* 1414a23-26)

This more or less interchangeable terminology is also exemplary in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, a supremely meta-poetic comedy whose reflections on ὀρθότης ὀνομάτων, though couched in a work of art, are just as thoughtful as those investigating the concept in prose. Here I will give only a sense for his terminology, for within 2 pages, Aristophanes gives us a sense for the contemporary poetic-theoretical understood ὀρθότης, and for its diverse synonymy. First, Aeschylus describes his best choice of words (ἄριστ' ἐπῶν ἔχον, 1161)—terminology which is shown to designate a variety of things, from using words unnecessary to the composition (ἔξω τοῦ λόγου, 1179), to imprecision, to needless repetition, to words without the right meaning. Dionysius calls all of these linguistic elements the correctness of words in Aeschylus' prologues (τῶν σῶν προλόγων τῆς ὀρθότητος τῶν ἐπῶν, 1182). And a few lines later, in response to Aeschylus' challenge, Euripides tries to establish that his own prologues use beautiful words (ἐγὼ δὲ τοὺς προλόγους καλοῦς ποιῶ, 1197). The chorus then describes Euripides' compositions as

well-made verses (**κάλλιστα** μέλη ποιήσαντι, 1255) and Euripides describes them as amazing verses (μέλη **θαυμαστά**, 1256). Aeschylus describes his verses as appropriate or suitable for singing (**ἐπιτήδεια** ταῦτ' ᾄδεν μέλη, 1307) and Euripides describes his words as best spoken (**ἔπος ἄριστ'** εἰρημένον, 1395).<sup>20</sup>

Hence, these words are synonymous enough to be nearly interchangeable in the context of the language arts. And, as the above table demonstrates, the terms are also synonymous in Plato.

But what is more, Plato's synonymous usage does not merely indicate his willingness to substitute one empty normative term for another. That is, they are not synonymous in a vague sense. Rather, Plato frequently follows the literary tradition in using these synonymous terms in a specifically rhetorical or poetic context. This is true across his oeuvre. For example, in a passage from the *Laws* with multiple parallels from the *Cratylus*, the Athenian Stranger describes how a name can be correct by virtue of its etymology:

Many of the names bestowed in ancient times are deserving of notice and of praise for their excellence and descriptiveness: one such is the name given to the dances of men who are in a prosperous state and indulge in pleasures of a moderate kind: how true and how musical was the name so rationally bestowed on those dances by the man (whoever he was) who first called them all

---

<sup>20</sup> In many places in the *Frogs*, Aristophanes expresses the correctness of words without any specific terminology. E.g., "It is necessary that words are born that are equal to [i.e., appropriate to] the great thoughts and understanding they express" (ἀνάγκη μεγάλων γνώμων καὶ διανοιῶν ἴσα καὶ τὰ ῥήματα τίκτειν, 1059, my translation). In the play, Dionysius speaks of evaluating the correctness of poetic words as if weighing a pound of cheese (ἴτε δεῦρό νυν, εἴπερ γε δεῖ καὶ τοῦτό με ἀνδρῶν ποιητῶν τυροπωλῆσαι τέχνην, 1369). And so on.

“Emmeleiai,” and established two species of fair dances—the warlike, termed “pyrrhiche,” and the pacific, termed “emmeleia”—bestowing on each its appropriate and harmonious name.

πολλὰ μὲν δὴ τοίνυν ἄλλα ἡμῖν τῶν παλαιῶν ὀνομάτων ὡς εὖ καὶ **κατὰ φύσιν** κείμενα δεῖ διανοούμενον ἐπαινεῖν, τούτων δὲ ἓν καὶ τὸ περὶ τὰς ὀρχήσεις τὰς τῶν **εὖ πραττόντων**, ὄντων δὲ **μετρίων** αὐτῶν πρὸς τὰς ἡδονάς, ὡς **ὀρθῶς** ἅμα καὶ μουσικῶς ὠνόμασεν ὅστις ποτ’ ἦν, καὶ **κατὰ λόγον** αὐταῖς θέμενος ὄνομα συμπάσαις **ἐμμελείας** ἐπωνόμασε, καὶ δύο δὴ τῶν ὀρχήσεων τῶν **καλῶν** εἶδη κατεστήσατο, τὸ μὲν πολεμικὸν πυρρίχην, τὸ δὲ εἰρηρικὸν **ἐμμέλειαν**, ἑκατέρῳ **τὸ πρέπον** τε καὶ **ἀρμόττον** ἐπιθεὶς ὄνομα. (816b-c, translated by R.G. Bury; see also *Hippias Major* 290- 293)<sup>21</sup>

Besides the vast synonymy of correctness-terms, this passage uses these literary terms specifically in an etymological context. But more importantly, there is a great deal of interchangeable synonymy in the *Cratylus* itself. For instance, every use of *πρεπ*-words in the *Cratylus* is in the context of correctness of words:

it is most likely that we will discover names given correctly about the things that always are and the things that sprout forth by nature. For there it is conspicuously fit [μάλιστα **πρέπει**] that the imposition of names be treated with respect (239b-c)

---

<sup>21</sup> ὀρθότης is used throughout the *Laws* to describe the appropriateness or suitability of a law (νόμος)—just like the *Cratylus* uses ὀρθότης to describe the correctness of a name (ὄνομα). Cf. 783c, 784b, 842d, 847d, etc. Aristotle also noted how a correctly given law is analogous to a correctly given name (*Rhetoric* 1376b17 and 1354a32).

the “e” is inserted perhaps on account of dignity (εὐπρεπείας) (402e)

in this way everywhere he would be fittingly called (πρέποι) “Ares” (402e)

instead of the delta they change it to zeta, to make it magnificent

(μεγαλοπρεπέστερα, 418c)

if it [a name] has been appropriately wrought (πρεπόντως εἴργασται, 439b)

But besides variants of τὸ πρέπον, none of the other terms used in the *Cratylus* to designate correctness are used exclusively as technical terminology.<sup>22</sup> Most conspicuously, even ὀρθός is frequently used in non-linguistic contexts. For example,

correct opinions (δόξαν ... ὀρθήν, 387b)

correct tool (ὀρθῶς ἔχει τὸ ὄργανον, 390a)

most correct way of investigating (ὀρθοτάτη μὲν τῆς σκέψεως, 391b)

not think correctly (μὴ ὀρθῶς ἡγεῖτο, 436b)

---

<sup>22</sup> It is entirely natural for an author to use a term in a technical sense and in a more general sense in the same work. For a parallel involving the very literary terminology we are dealing with here, see, e.g., Aristotle's *Poetics* 1456a31.

Even in the *Cratylus*, with its established technical terminology, Plato expresses the concept of correctness of names in a wide variety of ways—usually adhering to the synonyms for correctness found in the literary tradition. For example, one of the central ways Plato expresses ὀρθότης is as καλός:

beautifully-given names (καλῶς ὀνόματα θήσεσθαι, 390d)

And it seems that the name of his father (who is said to be Zeus) is given most beautifully (παγκάλως τὸ ὄνομα κεῖσθαι, 395e-396a)

Then it would be beautiful (καλῶς... ἔχου) to name this name (400b)

from which it is beautifully named (ὅθεν δὴ καλῶς ἔχειν αὐτὸ ‘ὠσίαν’ ὠνομάσθαι, 401d)

the name is most beautifully given (κάλλιστα κείμενον, 404e)

I would pleasingly behold with what correctness those beautiful names are given (ταῦτα **τὰ καλὰ** ὀνόματα τίνι ποτὲ **ὀρθότητι** κεῖται, 411a)

And naming (καλοῦν) works beautiful things (καλά)? (416d)

Those given well (καλῶς κείμενα) are given in this way; but if something is not given well (καλῶς ἐτέθη), the greater part perhaps contains fitting letters (προσηκόντων) and similar things (if it is to be an icon), but it might have something which does not fit (οὐ προσηκόν), on account of which the name might not be beautiful (καλόν) or well-made (καλῶς εἰργασμένον). Do we speak in this way or otherwise? (433c)

beautifully-given names (ὀνόματα ... τὰ καλῶς κείμενα, 439a)

Another set of terms that Plato uses interchangeably with ὀρθότης and ὀρθός in the *Cratylus* are ἁρμονία-words:

[The name] is indeed harmonious (Εὐάρμοστον, 405a)

to harmonize all names with all things (προσαρμόσειεν, 414d; cf συναρμόσας, 414b).

Plato does the same with δικ-words:

Then we should most justly (δικαιότατ') call it "that which a shuttle is"? (389b)

it is just (δίκαιόν) to call the offspring of a lion a "lion" (393b)

Dionysius is “justly (δικαιότατ) called “wine-mind” (406c)<sup>23</sup>

And the same is true of εὔλογ-words:

would be well-spoken in saying that... [etymology] (εὔλογον, 396b).

let us try to see whether “good” (καλὸν) and “shameful” (αἰσχρὸν) are well-spoken (εὐλόγως, 416a)

Finally, the linguistic sense of ὀρθότης is frequently interchangeable with προσηκ-words:

as long as he gives the appropriate (τὸ προσήκον) form of the name to each (390a; cf. 390b)

which, as we said, is proper (προσῆκειν) for a name to accomplish (396a)

many of them [names] are given according to the names of their progenitors, and some are in no way fitting (προσήκον, 397b)

if it is possible to assign names incorrectly (μὴ ὀρθῶς) and not to display what is appropriate (τὰ προσήκοντα) in each, but sometimes what is inappropriate (τὰ μὴ προσήκοντα)... (431b; cf. 431c-d).

---

<sup>23</sup> This formulation is extremely common: δικαίως ἂν καλοῖτο, 408b; δικαιότατ’ ἂν [τῶν] ὀνομάτων καλοῖτο, 409c; δικαίως ἂν καλοῖτο, 410b; δικαίως ἂν “ὄραι” καλοῖντο, 410c; and so on.

in the correctness of names (ὀνομάτων ὀρθότητα)... one would speak most beautifully (κάλλιστ') whenever he speaks, insofar as possible, with either all or a majority of similar [words]—that is, with appropriate words (προσήκουσιν) (435d).

Indeed, Plato use ὀρθότης synonymously in the *Cratylus* with a range of other words (ἐμμέτρως, ἀληθής, κατά φύσιν, etc.).<sup>24</sup> In sum, while Plato does indeed establish ὀρθότης as his key term, he does not hesitate to use these synonyms fairly interchangeably to designate the property of correctness, even when speaking technically in the *Cratylus*.

## 1.8 THE MEANING OF THE TERMINOLOGY

What, then, is correctness? To understand this question, we must now turn to the literary tradition. For, as demonstrated above, both Plato and the literary tradition use the same complex of synonymous terms to account for the correctness of names. A turn to the literary tradition's use of these terms will clarify how the concept of correctness was understood in the literary context.

In what follows, I will take a few of the more prominent terms (specifically: τὸ πρέπον, ἀρμόζω, τὸ καλὸν, τὸ οἰκεῖον, and τὸ κύριον) and I will show how they are used

---

<sup>24</sup> Unsurprisingly, many of the terms that are synonymous with ὀρθότης are not only used as essential terminology, but they are also etymologized with other important terms. For example, καλός (416d) and δίκαιος (412ff.). Other terms become essential parts of particular etymologies (e.g., ἀρμονία, 405d).



in the literary tradition. From this, I will identify principles at work in the concept of correctness that I will then show to be operative in the *Cratylus*.

I will do this in two stages. First, the synonymy established above for each of the terms used anciently to designate literary correctness leads us to expect some sort of focal meaning that carries across the terminology. So, I will first (in the present section) describe how the synonyms are used for similar purposes in literary-linguistic contexts—for a sort of contextual appropriateness. After doing this, I will (in the following section) demonstrate how each term carries with it a unique aspect on the concept of correctness and I will show how these aspects shed new light on the concept of correctness in the *Cratylus*.

To begin, a few lines from Aelius Theon's handbook will give a sense for the overlapping usage of these terms:

First of all, then, one should have in mind what the personality of the speaker is like, and to whom the speech is addressed: the speaker's age, the occasion, the place, the social status of the speaker; also the general subject which the projected speeches are going to discuss. *Then one is ready to try to say appropriate words* (λόγους ἀρμόττοντας εἰπεῖν). Different ways of speaking belong (πρέπουσι) to different ages of life, not the same to an older man and a younger one; the speech of a younger man will be mingled with simplicity and modesty, that of an older man with knowledge and experience. Different ways of speaking would also be fitting by nature (διὰ φύσιν...ἀρμόττοιεν) for a woman and for a man, and by status for a slave and a free man, and by activities for a soldier and a farmer, and

by state of mind for a lover and a temperate man, and by their origin the words of a Laconian, sparse and clear, differ from those of a man of Attica, which are voluble.... What is said is also affected by the places and occasions when it is said: speeches in a military camp are not the same as those in the assembly of the citizens, nor are those in peace and war the same, nor those by victors and vanquished; and whatever else applies to the persons speaking. And surely each subject has its appropriate form of expression (τὰ πράγματα ἕκαστα ἔχει πρέπουσαν ἑρμηνείαν). (*Progymnasmata* 115-116)

Hence, words are appropriate in a certain context. This means that they are correct in a variety of ways—by being appropriate to the speaker, to the subject spoken about, to a given situation, at a certain time, and so on. Below, I demonstrate how the correctness-terminology we are dealing with (τὸ πρέπον, ἀρμόζω, τὸ καλὸν, τὸ οἰκεῖον, τὸ κύριον, and others) expresses each of these contextual criteria.

### 1.8.1 Appropriate to the Speaker

A word is correct by virtue of it being the sort of word the person speaking it (an orator or a character in a poem) would be likely to say. This is a central feature of literary correctness, and it is consistently expressed across the tradition by each of our terms. For example, Aristotle expresses this idea across his *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*:

Each class of men, each type of disposition, will have its own appropriate way (ἀρμόττουσα) of letting the truth appear. (*Rhetoric* 1408a24-26)

it is not quite appropriate (ὑπερέσπερον) that fine language should be used by a slave or a very young man, or about very trivial subjects: even in poetry the style, to be appropriate (τὸ πρέπον), must sometimes be toned down, though at other times heightened. All the more so in prose, where the subject-matter is less exalted. (*Rhetoric* 1404b13-16)

The second point is to make them [the characters] appropriate (ἀρμόττοντα). The character before us may be, say, manly; but it is not appropriate (ἀρμόττον) in a female character to be manly, or clever. The third is to make them like the reality, which is not the same as their being good and appropriate (ἀρμόττον), in our sense of the term. (*Poetics* 1454a22-23)

If, then, a speaker uses the very words which are in keeping with a particular disposition (ἐὰν οὖν καὶ τὰ ὀνόματα οἰκεῖα λέγῃ), he will reproduce the corresponding character. (*Rhetoric* 1408a29-31)

This is also expressed in all of the style manuals:

Thucydides' language is described as suitable to the characters (τοῖς <τε> προσώποις πρέποντας) and appropriate to the situation. (τοῖς πράγμασιν οἰκείους, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *De Thucydide* 36)

The first kind of revelation of Character that I mentioned, that which naturally appears throughout the whole speech, involves attributing suitable and characteristic words and arguments (οἰκείους καὶ πρέποντας τοὺς λόγους) to certain persons, such as generals or politicians, or to general categories of people, such as the gluttonous or cowards or the avaricious or people who exemplify other traits. (Hermogenes of Tarsus, *Περὶ ἰδεῶν λόγου* 2.2.15)

And he does not give each of his differing and dissimilar characters a style of speech which is appropriate (τὸ πρέπον) and fitting (οἰκεῖον). I mean just as dignity belongs to a king, force to an orator, simplicity to a woman, prosaic speech to a private citizen, and vulgar speech to a common man; but just as if choosing by lot they portion shares of words to the characters, and you can't distinguish whether a son or father is speaking—or whether it be a common man or a god, or an old woman or a hero! (Plutarch, *Comparationis Aristophanis et Menandri compendium* 853d, my translation)<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Καὶ τοσαύτας διαφορὰς ἔχουσα καὶ ἀνομοιότητας ἢ λέξεις οὐδὲ τὸ πρέπον ἐκάστη καὶ οἰκεῖον ἀποδίδωσιν· οἷον λέγω βασιλεῖ τὸν ὄγκον ῥήτορι τὴν δεινότητα γυναικὶ τὸ ἀπλοῦν ἰδιώτῃ τὸ πεζὸν ἀγοραίῳ τὸ φορτικόν· ἀλλ' ὥσπερ ἀπὸ κλήρου ἀπονέμει τοῖς προσώποις τὰ προστυχόντα τῶν ὀνομάτων, καὶ οὐκ ἂν διαγνοίης εἶθ' υἱὸς ἐστὶν εἴτε πατήρ εἴτ' ἄγροικος εἴτε θεὸς εἴτε γραῦς εἴθ' ἥρως ὁ διαλεγόμενος.

And finally, as should be expected, the handbooks are rife with observations to this same effect:

Simply put, it is suitable (προσῆκει) to aim at what is appropriate (πρέποντος) to the speaker and to the other elements (στοιχείοις) of the narration in content and in style. (Aelius Theon, *Progymnasmata* 84.24)

First of all, then, one should have in mind what the personality of the speaker is like, and to whom the speech is addressed: the speaker's age, the occasion (καιρόν), the place, the social status of the speaker; also the general subject which the projected speeches are going to discuss. Then one is ready to try to say appropriate words (λόγους ἀρμόττοντας). Different ways of speaking belong (πρέπουσι) to different ages of life, not the same to an older man and a younger one; the speech of a younger man will be mingled with simplicity and modesty, that of an older man with knowledge and experience. (Aelius Theon, *Progymnasmata* 115.24-31)

Ethopoeia (ἠθοποιία) is speech suiting the proposed situations (λόγος ἀρμόζων τοῖς ὑποκειμένοις), showing ethos or pathos or both: "suiting the proposed situations" since it is necessary to take account of the speaker and the one to whom he is speaking. (Nicolaus, *Progymnasmata* 64.2-4)

Personification is the introduction of a person to whom words are attributed that are suitable (οικείους) to the speaker and have an indisputable application to the subject discussed. (Aelius Theon, *Progymnasmata* 115.13)

Throughout the exercise you will preserve what is distinctive and appropriate (τὸ οἰκεῖον πρέπον) to the persons imagined as speaking and to the occasions (καιροῖς). (Pseudo-Hermogenes, *Progymnasmata* 9.24)

Indeed, Plato recognizes this idea that words would be correct by virtue of being appropriate to the speaker (again, real or fictional). In the *Ion*, he repeatedly describes the rhapsode's ability to put correct and appropriate (πρέποντά) words into the mouths of characters (see, e.g., 540). In the *Laches* he has Laches speak of his delight at hearing the appropriateness and harmony of words that match the speaker (πρέποντα ἀλλήλοις καὶ ἀρμόττοντά ἐστι, 188c-d).

What is more, the appropriateness of words to a speaker is indeed part of the *Cratylus*' reflection on the correctness of names:

someone hearing [the name of Zeus] suddenly might esteem it hubristic to call him the son of Kronos, but would be well-spoken (εὖλογον) in saying that the god is the offspring of some great mind. For “κόρον” signifies not “child,” but his purity (καθαρόν) and his undefiled mind (ἀκήρατον τοῦ νοῦ). (396b)

In other words, part of what makes the word Ζεύς appropriate is that its etymology need not imply that the speaker (a pious individual) speaks a name with an implied impious meaning. The name is correct by virtue of being something appropriate for the speaker to say.

### **1.8.2 Appropriate to the Subject**

Words are also correct when they are appropriate to what is spoken about. Again, Aristotle says much about this:

An expression like that of Euripides' Telephus, "King of the oar, on Mysia's coast he landed," is inappropriate (ὑπερέξ); the word "king" goes beyond the dignity of the subject. (*Rhetoric* 1405a27-30)

Propriety of style (πρέπον) will be obtained ... by proportion to the subject matter. (*Rhetoric* 3. 7. 1, translated by J.H. Freese)

Jokes [must be] appropriate to the character (*Rhetoric* 1419b7, cf. 9 for the same idea with respect to irony)

What has been said has shown us how many kinds of maxim there are, and to what subjects the various kinds are appropriate (ἁρμόττει, *Rhetoric* 1394b28)

in epic poetry the narrative form makes it possible for one to describe a number of simultaneous incidents; and these, if germane to the subject (ὕφ’ ὧν οικείων ὄντων), increase the body of the poem. (*Poetics* 1459b28)

Aristotle also describes how Protagoras considered words to be “correctly given” (ὀρθῶς πεποιήται, *Rhetoric* 1407b8) when the grammatical gender of the word matched the actual gender of the subject spoken about. Again, Aristotle’s observations regarding appropriateness of language to its subject are consistently expressed across the literary tradition:

Does it [the language of Lysias] not... carefully preserve an atmosphere suitable (τὸ πρέπον) to the persons and the events which it describes? (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *De Demosthenis dictione* 13)

a style of civil oratory can be acquired which can please the ear simply by its composition, through the melodiousness of its sound, its measured rhythmical arrangement, its elaborate variety, and its appropriateness (τὸ πρέπον) to the subject, since these are the topics which I have laid down for myself. (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *De compositione verborum* 11; cf. Hermogenes’ λέξεως σχήματα μὲν τὰ κατ’ ὀρθότητα, *Περὶ ἰδεῶν λόγου* 1.1.144)<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *De compositione verborum* 3; Hermogenes, *Περὶ ἰδεῶν λόγου* 2.2.19 (ἁρμόττει προσώποις); and Isocrates, *Ad Nicoclem* 34.3 (τὸ μὲν γὰρ τῇ τυραννίδι πρέπει, τὸ δὲ πρὸς τὰς συνουσίας ἁρμόττει). Sophocles expresses this idea outside of the theoretical context: “Do not spread abroad to many your prevailing fortune; it is fitter (πρέπων) to keep silent about it as you lament it” (σιγώμενος γάρ ἐστι θρηγεῖσθαι πρέπων, *Fragmenta* 653.2, LOEB trans.).



And, of course, the same idea is expressed across the handbook tradition:

As for refutation and proof, we said that the same topics are useful as in fables, but in narratives the topics of the false and impossible are also fitting (ἁρμόττουσιν). (Aelius Theon, *Progymnasmata* 93.8)

These same topics are suitable (ἁρμόττουσι) against mythical narrations told by the poets and historians about gods and heroes (Aelius Theon, *Progymnasmata* 95.3)

We shall introduce many circumstances of life and speak fitting (ἁρμόζοντας) words about each. (Aelius Theon, *Progymnasmata* 128.12)

the kind of expression we use should fit (ἁρμόζειν) the proposed subject (Nicolaus, *Progymnasmata* 70.21)

Thus, we praise Homer first because of his ability to attribute the right (οἰκείους) words to each of the characters he introduces (Aelius Theon, *Progymnasmata* 60.28)

[prosopopoeia] is most often involved with the invention of words appropriate (οἰκείων λόγων εὐρέσει) to the persons who are introduced. (Aelius Theon, *Progymnasmata* 120.27)

In fact, Plato is often considered to be one of the masters of accomplishing this sort of appropriateness:

Let us take Plato first; and since he appears to take pride in the precision and dignity of his language, we shall examine his performance in this respect, beginning where he himself begins the speech: [Dionysius then cites lines from Menexenus.] This beginning is admirable and appropriate (πρέπουσα) to the subject in the beauty (κάλλους) of the words, their dignity and melody (ἁρμονίας). (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *De Demosthenis dictione* 24.8)

But in addition, in the *Cratylus* especially, Plato shows that he has thought about the principle of words being appropriate to the subject discussed (most of the instances of etymologizing in the *Cratylus* can be said to relate to this category of appropriateness). For example,

Socrates: And to the impious man, although he came from a god-fearing man, we must give the name of his class?

Hermogenes: These things are true.

Socrates: Then, it seems we wouldn't call him "god-lover" (Θεόφιλον) or "mindful of god" (Μνησίθεον) or any such name. But something that signifies the opposite of these things, if the names should happen to be correct. (394e)

In other words, despite the fact that most Greek names are given by virtue of the traits of the named person's progenitors, those names would be incorrect unless they are the sorts of names that the people named would be likely to bear—names must be appropriate to the sort of person (or thing) that bears them.

It is important to note that this is *not* the same as saying that the name's semantic content must correspond to a true description of the name's referent. As the above examples from the literary tradition demonstrate, the appropriateness of names to their subject involves a much more holistic evaluation than merely the semantic or etymological content of a name.

For example, in a literary context it is a plain fact that words have their own propriety or dignity that is unrelated to their semantic content, and that it is by virtue of this extra-semantic resonance that they are the sorts of words that ought to be used to describe or name a certain person or not. The words used to describe or name a person or thing must fit, they must harmonize, and they must resonate in the right way with the nature of the subject at hand.

That Plato has the literary tradition in mind on this very point becomes strikingly evident when one evaluates the pertinent terminology. That is, the language used in the *Cratylus* to describe the adequacy of a word to its subject is conspicuously like the

language used in the literary tradition for the same purpose. The *Cratylus* frequently describes this phenomenon as the correctness (ὀρθότης, πρεπόντως, etc.) of words consisting in being appropriate to or in making clear the subject at hand (τὸ πρᾶγμα). To give only one characteristic example: “ὀνόματος, φαμέν, ὀρθότης ἐστὶν αὕτη, ἥτις ἐνδείξεται οἷόν ἐστι τὸ πρᾶγμα” (428e; cf. 391b, 433e, 437a, etc.). What is immediately evident on reviewing the literary tradition’s expression of this same idea is that their words could often be mistaken as Plato’s own on this very point. For example, Pseudo-Dionysius recommends that words be appropriate and fitting to the subject matter (τὸ πρέποντας καὶ προσήκοντας τοὺς λόγους ποιεῖσθαι περὶ τῶν ὑποκειμένων πραγμάτων, *Ars Rhetorica* 11.2.6), Demetrius, talks about those who try to speak words appropriate to the things spoken about (Πειρᾶσθαι δὲ τὰ ὀνόματα πρεπόντως λέγειν τοῖς πράγμασιν, *De Elocutione* 276) and recommends that one speak words that are appropriate to the subject described (πρέπουσιν τῷ ὑποκειμένῳ πράγματι, 237). These are patently similar to Plato’s way of putting the phenomenon in the *Cratylus*. As we shall see, they are only one instance of such.

### 1.8.3 Appropriate to the Circumstances

At this point, the literary tradition’s concept of correctness becomes further distant from the traditional interpretation of correctness in the *Cratylus*. According to the tradition, correctness consists not only in appropriateness to what is immediately named, but in a word’s appropriateness to the circumstances surrounding its use. Again, Aristotle was quick to observe that this was a central part of what makes words correct:

At the time when he is constructing his plots, and engaged on the diction in which they are worked out, the poet should remember to put the actual scenes as far as possible before his eyes. In this way, seeing everything with the vividness of an eye-witness as it were, he will devise what is appropriate (τὸ πρέπον), and be least likely to overlook incongruities. (*Poetics* 1455a22-25)

[‘Thought’ is] the power of saying whatever can be said, or what is appropriate (ἁρμόττοντα) to the occasion. (*Poetics* 1450b4-5)

And the literary tradition confirms this as a central aspect of correctness:

while some things in my discourse are appropriate (πρέποντα) to be spoken in a court-room, others are out of place (οὐχ ἁρμόττοντα) amid such controversies. (Isocrates, *Antidosis* 10.2)

but as for you: arouse the song and the night-long dances, that belong (πρέπουσιν) to our festival here. (Aristophanes, *Frogs* 371)

surely each subject has its appropriate form of expression (πρέπουσαν ἑρμηνείαν, Aelius Theon, *Progymnasmata* 116.9)

And again, the terminology used to express this idea is frequently almost identical to the language used to express correctness in the *Cratylus*. For example, Dionysius of Halicarnassus recommends using appropriate words to suit the circumstances (πράγμασι τοὺς πρέποντας ἐφαρμόττειν λόγους, *De Lysia* 13.15) and to “furnish [the subject] with words which suit it and illustrate it (οἰκεῖα καὶ δηλωτικὰ τῶν ὑποκειμένων τὰ ὀνόματα, *De compositione verborum* 16).<sup>27</sup> Compare these statements with Plato’s:

Dionysius: οἰκεῖα καὶ δηλωτικὰ τῶν ὑποκειμένων τὰ ὀνόματα

Plato: τῶν ὀνομάτων ἡ ὀρθότης ... δηλοῦν οἷον ἕκαστόν ἐστι τῶν ὄντων (422d)

Plato: ὀνόματος, φαμέν, ὀρθότης ἐστὶν αὕτη, ἥτις ἐνδείξεται οἷόν ἐστι τὸ πρᾶγμα (428e)

Dionysius’ δηλωτικὰ ὀνόματα seems deliberately fitted to Plato’s own ἐνδείκνυμι and to Plato’s descriptions of how words make thing clear (δηλόω) and the various places where Plato describes correct words as δῆλωμα (e.g., τὸ εἶναι τὸ ὄνομα δῆλωμα τοῦ πράγματος, 433d).

Furthermore, this aspect of correctness further confirms that what is at stake in the *Cratylus* is not the traditional interpretation of correctness. Because appropriateness consists in being linked to a context, there can be no appropriateness of words solely

---

<sup>27</sup> But what is more, Dionysius does this with reference to overtly Cratylean themes, like *mimesis*: “But they also borrow many words from earlier writers, in the very form in which they fashioned them—words which imitate things” (μιμητικὰ τῶν πραγμάτων, *De compositione verborum* 16).

based on their semantic properties. And what that means is a word can be appropriate to the person it names or describes in one context and inappropriate in another:

Lastly, and what is in fact most important of all, the subject-matter should be arranged in a manner which is natural to it and appropriate (οἰκείαν ἀποδιδόναι τοῖς ὑποκειμένοις καὶ πρέπουσαν ἁρμονίαν). I do not think that we should be shy of using any noun or verb, however hackneyed, unless it is likely to cause offence: for I venture to say that no part of speech which signifies a person or a thing will prove to be so mean, squalid, unwholesome or otherwise disagreeable as to have no fitting (ἐπιτηδεΐαν) place in discourse. (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *De compositione verborum* 12.63)

In fact, this aspect of correctness—a word’s ability to be appropriate to an individual in one context but perhaps not in another—is a central part of the practice of etymology. Think, e.g., of Euripides’ *Trojan Women*, where Hecuba says that Aphrodite’s name (Ἀφροδίτη) is correct because it begins in the same way as the word for folly (ἄφροσύνη): “καὶ τοῦνομ’ ὀρθῶς ἀφροσύνης ἄρχει θεᾶς” (990). This etymologizing makes sense only in the context of the play, where Hecuba is lamenting how Paris chose poorly by virtue of Aphrodite’s influence. Indeed, it seems that Euripides is innovating on the standard etymology of the goddess, as born from foam (ἀφροῦ), which is given in a variety of contexts from Hesiod through Plato and beyond. Hesiod writes, “Her gods and men call Aphrodite, and the foam-born goddess and rich-crowned Cytherea, because she grew amid the foam...” (*Theogony* 198). And Plato

writes, “Regarding Aphrodite (Ἀφροδίτης), I am not worthy of contradicting Hesiod, but I agree that she is called ‘Aphrodite’ (ἀφροδίτη) because she was born from foam” (ἀφροῦ, 406c-d).

This is frequently what is going on when an author offers multiple etymologies; such is the recognition that there is not one fixed “semantic content” that accounts for the word’s correctness, but rather multiple ways that the word can resonate in a given context. For example, Plato recontextualizes Apollo’s name from its more evident etymology (ἀπόλλυμι / ἀπώλεια) to a set of virtues that resound with the cosmological principles being discussed: simplicity (ἀπλοῦ), always shooting (ἀεὶ βάλλοντος), the washer (ἀπολούοντος), and mover of the heavens about the poles (ὁμοπολοῦντος).

Something similar happens with Plato’s etymologizing of Pallas Athena (406d-407c). He treats each part of the goddess’ name separately, enacting what he had suggested a few lines earlier—to talk about the gods “as it is custom for us to pray in our prayers” (400e). In Ancient Greek prayer, the gods were invoked under a particular aspect—with a carefully-considered title or epithet. Hence, it would have been important for the Greeks to know whether to pray or sacrifice to Zeus Panhellenios or to Zeus Agoraeus or to Zeus Philoxenon. Each prayer would invoke a different aspect of the same god—one that would be appropriate according to the circumstances (whether the individual praying is coming as a suppliant, needs military victory, desires justice in the marketplace, and so on). For this reason, Socrates readily gives an etymology for “Pallas,” but claims that it is “a much weightier matter” (407a) to etymologize “Athena”—in the given context, what is soberly desired is knowledge of divine things, and this is precisely the etymology of “Athena” (τὰ θεῖα νοούσης).



In fact, many of the etymologies demonstrate how a word is (or can be made to be) correct in the same *Cratylus*-circumstance of looking for understanding. E.g., “divinities” (δαίμονας) are wise and knowing (φρόνιμοι καὶ δαίμονες), “man” (ἄνθρωπος) reflects and reckons that which he has seen (έώρακεν—‘όπωπε’—καὶ ἀναθρεῖ καὶ λογίζεται τοῦτο ὃ ὀπωπεν), “Hades” (τὸ αἰδές) knows (εἰδέναι) all beautiful things, and “Dionysius” (although more naturally thought to be the giver of wine, ὁ διδοὺς τὸν οἶνον) is etymologized in terms of his effect on people’s understanding: revelers think they understand (οἶεσθαι νοῦν ἔχειν) but get wine-minds (οἰόνους).

I will include one more set of etymological instances that demonstrate the point that Plato has in mind the same sort of circumstantial correctness of the poetic tradition: the case of the flux-etymologies. All of the *Cratylus*-etymologies are given to show how names are correct. A great number of these etymologies demonstrate a word’s link to the Heraclitean doctrine of flux, but few of these words have a plausible semantic link to the idea of flux. Nevertheless, Socrates shows how they can be made appropriate to their circumstances (a discussion of flux) through the poetic practice of etymologizing. What is accomplished, then, is not a demonstration that the semantic content of the word matches a true description of its referent. Instead, the etymologizing shows how the word does resonate (or can be made to resonate) with the present circumstances.

For example, it is plausible that “Rhea” (Ῥέα) is straightforwardly connected to flowing and rivers (ῥοή). But it is less-straightforward how Oceanus, Kronos, Tethys, and Poseidon are. Or, it is fairly straightforward that “air” (ἀήρ) might come from “always flows” (ἀεὶ ῥεῖ) or that “aether” comes from “always runs around the flowing air” (ἀεὶ θεῖ περὶ τὸν ἀέρα ῥέων). But it is not so apparent how “male” (ἄρρεν) and “man” (ἄνθρωπος)

come from “upward flow” (τῇ ἄνω ροῇ). Indeed, the more abstract the terms are being dealt with are, the more work is required to show that they do indeed have resonances with the idea of flux. For example, what is “just” (δίκαιον) passes through (διαίον) things, and what is “injustice” (ἀδικία) is a hinderance to what passes through (ἐμπόδισμα τοῦ διαίοντος). “vice” (κακία) is what moves badly (κακῶς ἰόν), and “virtue” (ἀρετή) is what is always-flowing (ἀειρείτην). Similarly, “shameful” (αἰσχρὸν) is what what always detains the flow (τῷ ἀεὶ ἴσχοντι τὸν ροῦν), “harmful” (βλαβερόν) is a harm to the flow (βλάπτον τὸν ροῦν εἶναι), “hurtful” (ζημιῶδης) is a binding of motion (δοῦντι τὸ ἰόν), “mirth” (εὐφροσύνη) comes from when the soul moves well with things (εὖ ... ψυχὴν συμφέρεσθαι), and so on.

The heartburn experienced by the linguistically-sensitive readers of the *Cratylus* comes largely from failing to grasp that these etymologies are not given with a strict historical correctness in mind. Instead, Plato is engaging in an ancient poetic practice. In other words, we must recognize the etymologizing as demonstrating a different sort of correctness—in this case, that the names resonate with what is being spoken about in the current circumstance. For this reason, many of these etymologies look silly when extracted from this particular discussion of flux. They simply do not make sense in a different context.

#### 1.8.4 At the Appropriate Time

Part of what makes words correct is being uttered at the right moment or at the opportune time. This is obviously related to the other categories I have outlined (the

speaker, subject matter, and circumstances in which the word is uttered), but it is distinct enough a concept that it became an important part of the ancient rhetorical terminology: *καιρός*.<sup>28</sup> For instance, Isocrates frequently uses the term in conjunction with the terms for correctness we have been dealing with: he describes how oratory is “good (*καλῶς*) only if it has the qualities of fitness for the occasion (*καιρῶν*), propriety of style (*πρεπόντως*), and originality of treatment (*καινῶς*)” (*In sophistas* 13.3). He also questions the appropriateness of words at the right moment (*οὐτ’ ἂν ὁ λόγος ἴσως τοῖς καιροῖς ἀρμόσειεν*, *Evagoras* 34.5).

However, Plato does not use this word in the *Cratylus*.<sup>29</sup> And even when it is used in the literary tradition, it is frequently expressed by one of the synonyms we have already been discussing (e.g., *ἀλλὰ γὰρ ἐμπέπτωκ’ εἰς λόγους, οὗς αὐτίκα μᾶλλον ἴσως ἀρμόσει λέγειν*, Demosthenes, *De corona* 42).<sup>30</sup> For these reasons, I simply note the synonymy here and will discuss *καιρός* below as it is used in conjunction with other synonyms for correctness.

### 1.8.5 Appropriate to the Genre

<sup>28</sup> Notable for the *Cratylus* is that *καιρός* is said to have been “invented” by Protagoras (see Diogenes Laertius 8.52).

<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, Plato does use it in other dialogues. And if we are to accept Diogenes Laertius’ report, then Plato had the literary sense of this term (or at least the concept behind it) in mind. Note how the literary aspect of correctness pervades: “Successful speaking (*ὀρθῶς λέγειν*) has four divisions. The first consists in speaking to the purpose, the next to the requisite length, the third before the proper audience, and the fourth at the proper moment (*πηνικά*). The things to the purpose are those which are likely to be expedient for speaker and hearer. The requisite length is that which is neither more nor less than enough. To speak to the proper audience means this: in addressing persons older than yourself, the discourse must be made suitable (*ἀρμόττοντας*) to the audience as being elderly men; whereas in addressing juniors the discourse must be suitable (*ἀρμόττοντας*) to young men. The proper time of speaking (*πηνικά*) is neither too soon nor too late; otherwise you will miss the mark and not speak with success (*ὀρθῶς εἰπεῖν*)” (3.94-95).

<sup>30</sup> *τὰ πρέποντα τῷ καιρῷ* became proverbial (Polybius), and solidified into terminology. For example, Dionysius of Halicarnassus uses *κατὰ τὸν οἰκεῖον καιρὸν ἐρῶ* throughout his oeuvre (*Antiquitates Romanae* 2.26.6, 3.21.10, 3.67.5, 4.38.2; *De Demosthenis dictione* 55.20, *De compositione verborum*, 11.127, and so on).

One perhaps surprising way that words are correct in the literary tradition is by being appropriate to the genre of discourse they are uttered in. Words are sometimes (in)appropriate to be spoken in court, sometimes they are more appropriate to be used in poetry than in everyday conversation, and so on. This aspect of appropriateness is expressed by the same terminology dealt with thus far.

Again, Aristotle makes a great deal of this. He discusses how the usage of certain types of words fits (ἀρμόττει τῶν ὀνομάτων) in certain types of discourse (*Poetics* 1459a9). He discusses when certain figures of speech are appropriate (ἀρμόττει, *Rhetoric* 1394a20). And he writes how “Compound words, fairly plentiful epithets, and strange words best suit (ἀρμόττει) an emotional speech” (*Rhetoric* 1408b12).<sup>31</sup>

The rest of the literary tradition follows suit, discussing how some words are appropriate to poetry (ποιήσεως οἰκεῖται, Hermogenes, *Περὶ ἰδεῶν λόγου* 2.10.332), how some are appropriate to political speeches (ἀρμόττουσι τῷ πολιτικῷ λόγῳ, Hermogenes, *Περὶ ἰδεῶν λόγου* 2.3), how some are not appropriate to the epistolary genre (οὐ πρέπουσιν ἐπιστολαῖς, Demetrius, *De elocutione* 226), and so on.<sup>32</sup> Along these lines, Hermogenes writes,

---

<sup>31</sup> Aristotle describes the trope most appropriate to epideictic speeches (*Rhetoric* 1392a4), the improper and proper use of metaphorical words (ἀπρεπῶς καὶ ἐπίτηδες ... τὸ δὲ ἀρμόττον, *Poetics* 1458b15), and meters that are appropriate to different genres (ἀρμόττον, *Poetics* 1448b31; cf. 1449a24). In a passage that combines etymological appropriateness with this idea of appropriateness to the genre, he writes “In this poetry of invective its natural fitness brought an iambic metre into use; hence our present term ‘iambic’, because it was the metre of their ‘iambs’ or invectives against one another” (ἐν οἷς κατὰ τὸ ἀρμόττον καὶ τὸ ἱαμβεῖον ἦλθε μέτρον—διὸ καὶ ἱαμβεῖον καλεῖται νῦν, ὅτι ἐν τῷ μέτρῳ τούτῳ ἱάμβιζον ἀλλήλους, *Poetics* 1448b29-31).

<sup>32</sup> Of course, there is blending of the categories here, as well. For example, Isocrates speaks of the appropriateness of a topic for a certain discourse (ἤρμοσεν ἐν τῷ λόγῳ, *Panathenaicus* 126.8)—and follows this with a discussion of various other aspects of correctness.

The direct (ὀρθὸν) figure is appropriate (πρέπει) for histories, for it is clearer; the oblique is more appropriate for trials; the interrogative is suitable (ἁρμόττει) for dialectical debate, the asyndetical for epilogues, for it is emotional.

(*Progymnasmata* 2.37)<sup>33</sup>

Although this category of correctness may seem far-flung from the sort of linguistic correctness developed in the *Cratylus*, it is not. In discussing the appropriateness of the name for the moon, Plato has Hermogenes reference this very aspect of correctness:

Socrates: And because it always has new and old brightness (σέλας νέον καὶ ἔνὸν ἔχει ἀεὶ), they justly call her by the name “Σελαενονεοάεια,” and after they have smashed the name together they call her “moon” (Σελαναία).

Hermogenes: That name is fit for the Dithyramb (διθυραμβῶδής), Socrates.<sup>34</sup>  
(409c-d)

In other words, regardless of the nature of the moon itself, because of this etymology is extremely poetic and compound, Σελαενονεοάεια is the sort of word one would hear in poetry—in dithyrambic poetry.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> For related uses of ὀρθότης, see Hermogenes, *Περὶ ἰδεῶν λόγου* 1.1.199 and Aristotle, *Poetics* 1453a26.

<sup>34</sup> διθυραμβῶδής is formed with the prefix -ώδης, which comes from ὀζω “to smell” (Smyth § 833)—in other words, this etymology veritably reeks of the dithyramb. Cf. εὐώδης—good smelling—or ἐργώδης—full of work, toilsome or troublesome.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Aristotle’s *Politics* 1342b4-5: “Poetry proves this, for Bacchic frenzy and all similar emotions are most suitably expressed by the flute, and are better set to the Phrygian than to any other mode” (πᾶσα γὰρ βακχεία καὶ πᾶσα ἡ τοιαύτη κίνησις μάλιστα τῶν ὀργάνων ἐστὶν ἐν τοῖς αὐλοῖς, τῶν δ’ ἁρμονιῶν ἐν τοῖς φρυγιστὶ μέλεσι λαμβάνει ταῦτα τὸ πρέπον).

### 1.8.6 Appropriate to the Composition

Part of what makes a word correct is how it is combined with other words, that is, its place in composition. This fact is true from the very linguistic level: ἁρμόζω/ἁρμόττω is literally used as a term for composition (cf. Aristotle's *Poetics* 1453a26, Dionysius of Halicarnassus' *De compositione verborum* 5.2, etc.). But it is also a term that is used to designate the sort of correctness words have resulting from their arrangement (Dionysius of Halicarnassus reports this of Theophrastus in *De Isocrate* 3.3). For example,

I consider that the science of composition has three functions. The first is to observe which combinations (ἁρμόζόμενον) are naturally likely to produce a beautiful and attractive united effect. The second is to judge how each of the parts which are to be fitted together (ἁρμόττεσθαι) should be shaped so as to improve the harmonious (ἁρμονίαν) appearance of the whole... (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *De compositione verborum* 6)

This is the kind of Beauty that Plato seems to me to mean when he says (*Phdr.* 264c) that a speech must have a head and extremities and middle parts that are in proportion (πρέποντα) to one another and to the whole body, but that these individual parts must not be thrown together in a confused way, even if, taken individually, they are quite beautiful (καλὰ). A speech, even though its individual

parts are beautiful, cannot be beautiful itself (καλὸν), if they are not arranged with harmony and proportion. (*Περὶ ἰδεῶν λόγου* 1.12.32)

Arrangement of the diction to create harmoniously and suitably-joined beautiful compositions (μετασκευάζει τὰς λέξεις, ἵν' αὐτῷ γένοιτο ἁρμοσθῆναι καλλίους καὶ ἐπιτηδειότεραι, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *De compositione verborum* 6.61)

harmonious composition (σύνθεσις ἁρμοσμένη, Aelius Theon, *Progymnasmata* 62.7)

Thucydides' standard of arrangement is incorrect. (οὐκ ὀρθὸς ὁ κανὼν οὗτος, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *De Thucydide* 9.57).<sup>36</sup>

But again, this is not something that concerned only the writers of poetry and rhetoric. Plato is certainly attuned to this idea:

Socrates, he said, I suppose that the greatest part of education is to be clever with verses; that is, to be able to understand the things the poets have said, which have been made correctly (ὀρθῶς) and which haven't, and to know how to distinguish them, and, when asked, to give an account. (*Protagoras* 338e–339a)

---

<sup>36</sup> For related uses of ὀρθότης, see Aristotle, *Poetics* 1453a26 and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *De Thucydide* 9.57 and 34.37.

But surely you will admit at least this much: Every speech must be put together like a living creature, with a body of its own; it must be neither without head nor without legs; and it must have a middle and extremities that are fitting both to one another and to the whole work. (*Phaedrus* 264c, translated by Nehamas and Woodruff)

And furthermore, this is not only something Plato recognizes with respect to literary authors. It is an aspect of correctness that he shows himself aware of in the *Cratylus*. In fact, this is a central aspect of what Plato's etymologizing accomplishes: it shows how a seemingly independent word is itself composed of interacting parts. Think, for example of how ἄνθρωπος is composed of ἑώρακεν καὶ ἀναθρεῖ καὶ λογίζεται τοῦτο ὃ ὅπωπεν. It is the arrangement of these words and ideas that makes ἄνθρωπος correct for what it refers to (within the circumstances it refers to it). Indeed, it is the special correctness that these compositions achieve that lead them to be smashed together into a single word—a process Socrates describes repeatedly in the *Cratylus*. Here are some examples:

τὰ ὄπα ἀναστρέφει→ἀναστρωπῇ→ἀστραπῇ

ἀεὶ θεῖ περὶ τὸν ἀέρα ῥέων→ἀειθεῖρ→αἰθήρ

φορᾶς γάρ ἐστι καὶ ῥοῦ νόησις→φρόνησις

τοῦ νέου ἐστὶν ἔσις→ νόησις

τῷ ἀεὶ ἴσχοντι τὸν ῥοῦν→ἀεισχοροῦν→αἰσχροὺν



Indeed, a central part of Plato’s etymologizing seems to be to demonstrate how compositionality is required for correctness. In fact, this continues even where etymology is no longer possible. Plato has Socrates describe words which are so elemental as to admit of no etymology—these words are still correct by virtue of their compositionality. However, instead of being composed of further words, they are composed of mimetic sounds.

However, correctness is not just the fact that words are composed, but that words can be correct only when their elements are composed in the right way. For instance, the traditional etymology of “Persephone” (Φερρέφαττα or Φερσεφόνην) is something like “bringer of murder” (φέρω + φονή). This is unpleasant, and it is the arrangement of the name that is to blame. Anciently, “Persephone” had numerous different spellings—i.e., numerous arrangements of its linguistic elements.<sup>37</sup> When Socrates suggests that a more correct etymology would come from Φερέπαφα, he is recognizing that the elements are better composed. Though both etymologies recognize the root of the name to include φέρω, this latter composition of the name reveals a different resonance: ἐπαφήν τοῦ φερομένου (the goddess is wise because she ‘grasps those things carried about in flux’).

Plato frequently has Socrates suggest this sort of alternative composition with reference to an alternative Greek dialect. For example, he bypasses the regular Attic word

---

<sup>37</sup> For what it is worth, here are a few: φερέφατα, φερέφαττα, φερρέφατθ', φερρέφαττα, φερσέφασσ', φερσέφασσα, φερσεφόννα, φερσεφόνεια, φερσεφόννη, περσέφασσα, περσεφόννα, περσεφόνεια, περσεφόννη, περσεφονη, περσεφώνη, πηρεφόνεια, φερεφάτης, φερεφάττης, φερεκράττης, φερρεφάττης, φερσεφάσσης, φερσεφάττης, φερσεφόννας, φερσεφόννης, φερσεφονείας, φερσεφονείης, περσεφόννας, περσεφόννης, περσεφονείας, περσεφονείης, περσεφονής, φερεφάττη, φερσεφάττη, φερσεφάσση, φερσεφόννα, φερσεφόννη, φερσεφόννη, φερσεφονείη, περσεφόννη, περσεφόννη, περσεφονείη, περσεφονείη, περσεφονείη, περσεφονείη, περσεφονείη, φερέφατταν, φερρέφατταν, φερσέφασσαν, φερσέφατταν, φερσεφόνειαν, φερσεφόννην, περσέφασσαν, περσέφατταν, περσεφόνειαν, περσεφόννην, περσεφονήν, περσεφώνην, φερεφάττα, φερσεφόναι, φερρεφάττιον, φερρεφαττίου.

for “sun” (ἥλιος), claiming that the Dorian word (ἄλιον) reveals a more resonant composition of elements:

It would be “ἄλιος” because it collects (ἀλίζειν) men together after it rises. Or because the sun always burns its way (ἀεὶ εἰλεῖν ἰών) around the earth. Or because it goes about diversifying the things born of the earth, for “diversifying” (ποικίλλειν) and “αἰολεῖν” are the same. (409a)

The Dorian name is more correct here because, by virtue of its superior composition, it reveals a greater resonance—at least three correct etymologies.

That correct composition is what allows for correct names in this way is confirmed by many of the etymologies. For example, Socrates asks “*is there a better name that harmonizes in one the four powers of the god [Apollo]?*” The result is that it [his name] touches on all of them and it makes clear his manner of music and prophesy and medicine and archery” (405a). And: “‘flourish’ (θάλλειν) seems to me to figure the growth of the young, because it happens quickly and suddenly. For just in this way it is imitated with a name, for *the name harmonizes both* ‘running’ (θεῖν) and ‘jumping’” (ἄλλεσθαι, 414a-b).

This point is driven home at the end of the dialogue, where words are compared, quite extensively, to painting. The point of this painting analogy is to show how words, like paintings, are correct through a sort of mimesis. This sort of mimesis comes about by composing the mimetic material in the right way. Think of Cratylus’ comment:

These things are possible. But—you see that to names we give letters, the alpha, the beta, and each of the elements, by the art of spelling. If we leave something out or add something in or change something, then the name is written for us, not correctly, but it is totally not written—but it is something else entirely if one of these things happens. (431e-432a)

According to Cratylus, composition is key, but there is no ‘incorrect composition’—it is just a total failure at composition. Whether Cratylus or Socrates is right on this point is irrelevant. What is important here is to recognize the importance of composition for the account of correctness throughout the dialogue. The word “beta” correctly evokes the second letter in the Greek alphabet. However, a word with the same components in a different composition would not do this (e.g., “taeb”). Correct composition does not merely combine the semantic components of its elements; rather, correct composition is what happens when those elements are combined so as to resonate (in a given circumstance).

## **1.9 EACH TERM IMPARTS A SPECIAL ASPECT**

I have now identified several aspects of literary correctness that come to bear on the *Cratylus* (that a correct word is appropriate to a speaker, to an audience, in a specific context, at a certain time, and so on). In short, this demonstrates that correctness is context-dependent. I have also shown that the terminology we have been dealing with is largely interchangeable. However, the fact that these terms are not all assimilated (e.g., to

ὀρθότης), either in Plato or across the centuries, evidences the resilience of each term as a manifestation of some particular aspect of correctness. In this section, I will demonstrate how each of these special aspects of correctness leave its mark on the ὀρθότης ὀνομάτων of the *Cratylus*.

### 1.9.1 τὸ πρέπον

Apart from ὀρθότης, the term that is most frequently used to designate the correctness of words in the literary tradition is τὸ πρέπον.<sup>38</sup> This term is usually translated simply as “appropriate,” “correct,” or “fit,” just like ὀρθότης and its related terminology. The reason for its generality is also the same: like ὀρθότης, τὸ πρέπον can designate a variety of things, from moral uprightness and decorum<sup>39</sup> to the outstanding rankness of a nasty smell.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, in the context of language, τὸ πρέπον is used to designate the aspect we are attempting here to understand—the correctness of words. In this section, I will show what special aspect it imparts to the concept.

It is important to note, with Dionysius of Halicarnassus, that any investigation can only touch on such an immense subject: “[The study of τὸ πρέπον] is a profound study

---

<sup>38</sup> And, of course, the variants of the word, including πρέπων, πρεπόντως, ἀπρέπεια, μεγαλοπρεπεία, πρεπώδης, εὐπρεπείας, μεταπρέπω/ μεταπρεπής, διαπρέπω/ διαπρεπής, ἐκπρέπω / ἐκπρεπής, and ἀριπρεπής.

<sup>39</sup> And as with ὀρθότης, this is also true of writers who use the word mostly in a technical (linguistic or literary) sense. Specifically, for its sense as “decorum,” see Aristotle’s *Poetics* 15.4, Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia* 5.3.47, Demosthenes’ *Epitaphius* 31.2, Longinus’ *De sublimitate* 9.7.2, Demetrius’ *De Elocutione* 287 and 288, and Aelius Aristides’ *Λευκτρικὸς* 464.12 and *Πρὸς Πλάτωνα ὑπὲρ τῶν τεττάρων* 242.29.

<sup>40</sup> For example, Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* has Cassandra describe something as just like the reek of a corpse at burial (ὁμοῖος ἀτμὸς ὥσπερ ἐκ τάφου πρέπει, 1311).

and requires a great deal of discussion.... one could make an endless speech if one wished to catalogue all the forms of appropriateness” (*De compositione verborum* 20). Plato recognized the significance of this sort of linguistic appropriateness (Τὸ δ’ εὐπρεπείας δὴ γραφῆς πέρι καὶ ἀπρεπείας, πῇ γιγνόμενον καλῶς ἂν ἔχοι καὶ ὅπη ἀπρεπῶς, λοιπόν, *Phaedrus* 274b). And Aristotle demonstrated the centrality of τὸ πρέπον as an important literary concept throughout the *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*. In fact, it is not incidental that it is *the final word* of the *Poetics*: “It is clear that [poetic] education must be accomplished through three categories: the mean, the possible, and the appropriate” (1342b34, my translation). Dionysius of Halicarnassus expresses the same sentiment:

All the other [linguistic] adornments must be accompanied by appropriateness (τὸ πρέπον). Indeed, if any other function in a speech fails to meet this requirement, it fails to attain the most important end, even if it is not wholly unsuccessful. (*De compositione verborum* 20)<sup>41</sup>

What is this “most important end”? What is Plato’s concern when he asks whether names have been “appropriately wrought” (πρεπόντως εἵργασται, *Cratylus* 439b)? It is, as I will demonstrate, the resonance or *effect* that words have. I will develop this under two related headings: (1) the visible/beautiful effect and (2) the effect produced by context.

---

<sup>41</sup> Similarly, “οὐ γὰρ πάντας ὁμοίως τις καλεῖ, ἀλλὰ ἐκάστῳ τὴν πρέπουσαν κλῆσιν προστίθησιν. αἱ τῶν δανεισμμάτων ἀπαιτήσεις οὐ πρὸς πάντας ὅμοιαι, ἀλλ’ εὐπρεπείας δέονται καὶ διοικήσεως” (Pseudo-Dionysius, *Ars Rhetorica* 9.1.16).

### 1.9.1.1 The Visible/Beautiful Effect

τὸ πρέπον comes from πρέπω, which literally means “to be clearly seen” or “to be conspicuous” (s.v. LSJ). This root meaning is also confirmed etymologically (s.v. Beekes, “to become visible, appear”). It is this sense of τὸ πρέπον that Aristotle has in mind in his *Poetics* when he writes,

At the time when he is constructing his plots, and engaged on the diction in which they are worked out, the poet should remember to put the actual scenes as far as possible before his eyes. In this way, seeing everything with the vividness of an eye-witness as it were, he will devise what is appropriate (τὸ πρέπον). (1455a22-25)

In other words, the choice of words is appropriate if the poet puts into those words the power of making the subject visible. Dionysius of Halicarnassus expresses the same idea:

the good poet or orator should be ready to imitate the things which he is describing in words, not only in the choice of the words but also in the composition. This is what Homer, that most inspired poet, usually does... he is always producing novel effects and working in artistic refinements, so that we see the events as clearly when they are described to us as if they were actually happening. (*De compositione verborum* 20)

Dionysius follows this claim with Homeric examples that demonstrate how words can effectively bring what is spoken about before our eyes. Concerning the Homeric verse that describes Sisyphus' boulder rolling back down the hill,<sup>42</sup> Dionysius writes “Do not the words, when thus combined, tumble downhill together with the impetus of the rock? Indeed, does not the speed of the narration outstrip the rush of the stone?” (*De compositione verborum* 20).

A few chapters before this comment, Dionysius invoked Plato's *Cratylus* as providing the foundational account of appropriateness as *mimesis* (see *De compositione verborum* 16; cf. Aristotle's *Poetics* 1460b14-15).<sup>43</sup> This is important because *mimesis* is how the words accomplish the effect of bringing what is spoken about before our eyes. Plato makes this explicit (that ὁρθότης is μίμησις) throughout his oeuvre. For example, in language similar to that used in the *Cratylus*, Plato says that correctness as *mimesis* is how that which is imitated is rendered as and how it is (μιμήσεως γὰρ ἦν, ὥς φαμεν, ὁρθότης, εἰ τὸ μιμηθὲν ὅσον τε καὶ οἶον ἦν ἀποτελοῖτο, *Laws* 668b).

Nevertheless, it must again be noted that this is not the standard interpretation of Plato. That is, although scholars agree that correctness is a correspondence of the semantic content of a word with a true description of its referent, this cannot be the case. Aristotle recognizes that this is not the role of a mimetic correctness when he remarks that “It is less of an error not to know that a female stag has no horns than to make a picture that is unrecognizable” (1460b31). In other words, such correspondence is not the sort of correctness that is significant in mimetic contexts. Rather, achieving some sort of

---

<sup>42</sup> αὐτίς ἔπειτα πέδονδε κυλίνδετο λάας ἀναιδής (*Odyssey* xi.598)

<sup>43</sup> See Driscoll 2017.

poetic aim such as I have been describing in this section: the power words have to bring something before our eyes.

This is what Plato has in mind, although in slightly different terminology, when he has Socrates say that “it is possible to assign names incorrectly (μὴ ὀρθῶς) and not to display what is appropriate (τὰ προσήκοντα) in each, but sometimes what is inappropriate (τὰ μὴ προσήκοντα)...” (431b; cf. 431c-d). This passage is spoken in the context of the painting analogy: paintings can adequately or inadequately evoke the person they represent (see, e.g., the προσενεγκεῖν at 430b).

This quality of words’ power to make what they name or describe visible is frequently given expression through the concept of beauty. In other words, the result of τὸ πρέπον is beauty (again, s.v. Beekes for etymological support for this idea). I will not do more than mention this here, as τὸ καλὸν is the subject of a later section.<sup>44</sup>

### 1.9.1.2 The Contextual Effect

As described above, the literary tradition considered words to be correct when they were appropriate to the speaker, the audience, the contemporary circumstances, and so on. And as noted above, this aspect of correctness is frequently expressed by τὸ πρέπον. As Dionysius of Halicarnassus writes in his chapter on τὸ πρέπον,

---

<sup>44</sup> For the relation of these concepts, see *De compositione verborum*, especially 3 and 13 (Dionysius generally sees ἡδεῖαν καὶ καλὴν as the goals of composition); Aelius Theon, *Progymnasmata* 116; and the section on τὸ καλὸν below.



It is generally agreed that appropriateness is that treatment which is fitting for the actors and the actions concerned (πρέπον ἐστὶ τὸ τοῖς ὑποκειμένοις ἀρμόττον προσώποις τε καὶ πράγμασιν). Just as the choice of words may be either appropriate (ἢ μὲν πρέπουσα) or inappropriate (ἢ δὲ ἀπρεπής) to the subject-matter, so surely may the composition be. (*De compositione verborum* 20)

This context-dependent nature of correctness leads to several interrelated conclusions that are relevant to the *Cratylus*. First, as noted above, there is nothing we can identify as the appropriateness of a word, full stop. A word may be appropriate in one context and inappropriate in another—even if describing the same person.<sup>45</sup>

Next, this implies that appropriateness has a plurality of standards.<sup>46</sup> For instance, there is a standard for what is appropriate in a courtroom and another for what passes as appropriate in poetry. Or, something can be correct when I say it, but incorrect when you say it. This idea will be discussed at greater length below, but one immediate result is that the standard definition of correctness in the *Cratylus*, as I have already been arguing, is inadequate.

This is strengthened by Sedley 2003 (*pace* Ademollo 2011), who develops the idea that “correctness is a comparative attribute” (78). Although this might seem quite obvious on the surface, it is thoroughly significant because it challenges the traditional

---

<sup>45</sup> This is confirmed by the idea that the same words can be appropriate in private but not in public (e.g., Hermogenes, *Περὶ ἰδεῶν λόγου* 2.3.81-82: ταῦτα γὰρ καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα ἐν μὲν ἰδιωτικοῖς λόγοις ἴσως ἂν ἀρμόσειεν, ἐν δημοσίῳ δὲ καὶ τηλικούτον ἔχοντι ἀξίωμα λόγῳ ἢ προσώπῳ ἢ πράγματι πῶς ἂν ἀρμόττοι). Given this aspect of correctness, we can see another dimension of Plato’s choice of names to etymologize—the names of the gods and their etymologies were an integral part to the ultimate private discourse: esotericism and mystery-cults. The paradigm of this is Persephone, mentioned below.

<sup>46</sup> “But when one has many words of equal weight and similar clarity, variation is suitable (Ὅταν δὲ πολλὰ ὀνόματα ἔχῃ τις ἰσότημα καὶ ὁμοίως ἔχοντα ἐνάργειαν χρήσιμον, ἢ ποικιλία ἀρμόζει, Hermogenes, *Περὶ μεθόδου δεινότητος* 4.15).

idea that correctness is a correspondence of the word's semantic content to a true description of the word's referent. Such a correspondence requires an exactness that is simply not supported by the text. I would add to Sedley's argument that it is precisely what would seem to detract from the traditional understanding of correctness (the fact that multiple etymologies for the same word are actually desirable, e.g.) that strengthens a word's correctness. This fact demands an account open to the comparative nature of ὀρθότης—and indeed, resonance can occur to varying degrees. Those who oppose Sedley's view to uphold the standard position are swimming against the current.

Finally, the context-dependence of correctness shows that appropriateness has to do with the *effect* that words have. One of these effects, central to the discipline of rhetoric but integral to all language-use, is persuasion. To this end, Aristotle remarks,

Obviously agreeableness will be produced by the qualities already mentioned, if our definition of excellence of style has been correct (ὀρθῶς). For what other reason should style be clear, and not mean but appropriate (πρέπουσαν)? If it is prolix, it is not clear; nor yet if it is curt. Plainly the middle way suits (ἁρμόττει) best. Again, style will be made agreeable by the elements mentioned, namely by a good blending of ordinary and unusual words, by the rhythm, and by the persuasiveness that springs from appropriateness (πρέποντος). (*Rhetoric* 1414a22-26)

Another effect language can have, one which is linguistically derivative of τὸ πρέπον, is impressiveness or grandeur (μεγαλοπρέπεια). For example, Dionysius of Halicarnassus writes,

those who wish to fashion a style which is beautiful (καλὴν) in the collocation of sounds must combine in it words which all carry the impression of elegance (καλλιλογίαν), grandeur (μεγαλοπρέπειαν), or dignity. Homer has interwoven and interspersed them with pleasant-sounding supplementary words into so beautiful (καλῶς) a texture that they appear the most magnificent (μεγαλοπρεπέστατα) of all names. (*De Compositione Verborum* 16; cf. *De Thucydide* 23, Demetrius' *De Elocutione* 37ff., and Aristotle's *Poetics* 1459b29)

Indeed, it is no accident that μεγαλοπρέπεια is formed from τὸ πρέπον. If we understand the word in this way, then it becomes clear that magnificence is an effect that language has that is not necessarily “more-than-appropriate,” as it is often understood in rhetorical contexts to designate something like “gaudiness.” Instead, μεγαλοπρέπεια designates the great impact that certain words can have when used *in the correct context*:

Magnificence (μεγαλοπρέπεια) *from its very name* shows itself to be such as we are describing. For since it spends the great amount on the fitting occasion (τῷ καιρῷ τῷ πρέποντι), (ὀρθῶς τῇ μεγαλοπρεπείᾳ τοῦνομα κεῖται). Magnificence, then, since it is praiseworthy, is a mean between defect and excess with regard to

proper expenses on the right (προσηκούσας) occasions. (Aristotle, *Magna Moralia* 1.26.3.3)

It is for this reason that μεγαλοπρέπεια is frequently used to describe the great effectiveness of Gorgias' style.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, this aspect of correctness is present throughout the *Cratylus*—such as when the letters or pronunciation of words is changed for a correct or incorrect effect: “instead of the delta they change it to zeta, to make it more magnificent” (μεγαλοπρεπέστερα, 418b-c).

Indeed, the idea that words get their appropriateness from the effect that they generate in a certain context is central to the etymologizing in the *Cratylus*. Think, for example, of the etymology of “Ares”:

“Ares” (Ἄρης) would be given according to his masculinity (ἄρρεν) and his manliness (ἀνδρεῖον), and if according to his hardness and inalterability (which is called “hardness” (ἄρρατον)), in this way everywhere he would be fittingly (πρέποι) called “Ares” (Ἄρη) as the god of war. (407d)

This might seem like a straightforward support for the idea that correctness consists in the correspondence of a word's semantic content with a true description of its referent. But this is not so. While this normal understanding of correctness might be incidentally true of certain etymologies, most of the etymologies are shown to be correct by virtue of the

---

<sup>47</sup> For example, Dionysius of Halicarnassus' *De Demosthenis dictione* 4.25 and 35.38: τὴν μεγαλοπρέπειαν αὐτοῦ τῶν ὀνομάτων. Or his *De Dinarcho* 7.20: ἡ τῆς λέξεως μεγαλοπρέπεια. Again, although later antique authors regarded Gorgias' style as gaudy, it was extremely impactful earlier in the classical period.

effect—of the effect on the hearers that the word’s resonances the word provides (“Ares” reminds the hearers of manliness, hardness, and so on). The invocation of a name is appropriate when it achieves its desired effect. This is perhaps more evident in the etymologies of “Persephone” and “Apollo”:

Socrates: And “Persephone” (Φερρέφαττα)—many people fear this name and the name “Apollo,” apparently *because they lack experience with the correctness of names*. For the name is seen after they have changed it to “Persephone” (Φερσεφόνην), and this appears terrifying to them. But the name really reveals that the god is wise (σοφὴν). Because things are in motion (φερομένων), grasping (ἐφαπτόμενον) and touching (ἐπαφῶν) and being able to follow (ἐπακολουθεῖν) is wisdom (σοφία). Then the goddess would be correctly called “Persephone” (Φερέπαφα), or something like this, according to wisdom (σοφίαν) and touching that which is in motion (ἐπαφὴν τοῦ φερομένου)... The same as we were just saying holds of Apollo: many fear the name of the god, as if it revealed something terrible. Or do you not perceive this?... And so it is, as it seems to me, most beautifully given, according to the power of the god.... For is there a better name that harmonizes in one the four powers of the god? The result is that it touches on all of them and it makes clear his manner of music and prophesy and medicine and archery. (404c-405a)

Persephone’s name (Περσεφόνη) straightforwardly invokes the words for destruction and murder (πέρθω and φονή), which is why Socrates said it makes people afraid. What is

interesting is that, taken in this way, the semantic content of her name actually *does* correspond to a true description of Persephone (from the terrible story of her abduction by Hades to her eventual role as queen of the underworld, carrying out the curses of men on the souls of the dead, see Homer's *Odyssey* 10.494). And yet, this etymology is supposedly incorrect. In other words, the regular understanding of correctness gives us no understanding of why this etymology is shown to be incorrect by Socrates. Luckily, Socrates never felt the need to talk in terms of "semantic content," and was content to say that the name is not correct because it "appears terrifying to them" and that it is correct because "the name really reveals..." a cosmological truth Socrates is searching for. In other words, the correctness of the name is tied up in the name's ability to effect and manifest what is best in a given situation. Therefore, we can see clearly in this example how the regular account of correctness is simply not what is at stake in the *Cratylus*—instead, a name is correct by virtue of its resonance.

The example of Apollo further confirms this. Apollo's name (Ἀπόλλων) is almost identical to ἀπόλλυμι—again, the verb of destruction and killing. And again, this is not an incorrect understanding of Apollo's functions as the god of war, archery, and plague (if in doubt, see Homer's *Iliad* i). Yet, again, Socrates claims that this etymology is not correct. And the alternative etymologies proposed by Socrates are better not because of corresponding to the god (again, the first etymology does this) or because of being more exhaustive in accounting for the god's functions (the latter etymologies don't include the first, correct, etymology). So, correctness must consist in something else.

Fortunately, in the passages etymologizing the names of Persephone and Apollo, Socrates gives some of the dialogue's only meta-language regarding how to recognize a

correct etymology: “many people fear this name and the name ‘Apollo,’ apparently because they lack experience with the correctness of names” (404c) and “some are suspicious of this very name on account of not investigating the power of the name correctly” (405e). Therefore, as with the name of Persephone, the alternative etymologies proposed for “Apollo” are correct because of the more favorable power or effect that the name elicits on those speaking and hearing it. Instead of invoking destruction, the names help Socrates discover some cosmological principles.

What is more, Socrates uses ἁρμονία-words throughout this section to describe Apollo’s musicality (ἤρμοσεν...μουσικήν...εὐἁρμόστον...μουσικοῦ, 405a), to designate that the etymologies harmonize his functions well, and, ultimately, to indicate the correctness of a name as the *multiple* resonances the name has when correctly understood—i.e., simplicity (ἁπλοῦς), always shooting (ἀεὶ βάλλοντος), the washer (ἀπολούοντος), and mover of the heavens about the poles (ὁμοπολοῦντος). These hang together, well, musically. Although each one is semantically unrelated, they express the name’s multiple resonance.

Hence, the extension of the concept of correctness is much broader than is generally assumed. It exceeds any semantic content contained in a name; ὁρθότης ὀνομάτων invokes a much broader question of language’s appropriateness to the world. This appropriateness depends on the name’s use in a given context and thus results in an inevitable plurality of criteria. In this section, we have seen how this plays out with τὸ πρέπον. In the following section, we shall see how the ἁρμονία-words referred to above are significant for the concept of appropriateness.

### 1.9.2 ἁρμόζω

The ἁρμόζω / ἁρμόττω / ἁρμονία group of terms is perhaps the next most prominent terminology for expressing the correctness of names in the literary tradition. As I will demonstrate, this eminently musical term was chosen to express the correctness of words for a set of profound reasons that exceed the general sense and confirm and elaborate the idea that correctness is a sort of resonance.<sup>48</sup>

The use of ἁρμόζω to express correctness implies, more strongly than ὀρθότης and τὸ πρέπον, the beautiful effect that words can have. Dionysius of Halicarnassus acutely recognizes this, and he describes the beauty that results from the correct or harmonious use of words:

When the primary parts of speech are put together, the tone at once contributes towards heightening their effect, and the rhythms develop into what is called metre. And whenever either of these threatens to overstep the bounds of moderation, then variation steps in and safeguards the individual quality (τὸ οἰκεῖον) of each; and when these have assumed their proper (ἁρμόττουσαν) place in the ordered scheme, then propriety (τὸ πρέπον) supplies them with the beauty that is their due (τὴν προσήκουσαν ὥραν). (*De Demosthenis dictione* 48.20)

Of course, this does not mean that all correct or harmonious words need strike us as beautiful in the sense of ornamental or flowery—indeed, there is a harmony that results

---

<sup>48</sup> As with the other terminology, this term is often used in entirely general ways. For example, Isocrates, *Evagoras* 9.72 and *Panegyricus* 82.9; Demosthenes, *Contra Boeotum* 2.57 and *In Midiam* 166.



even from rough language. Again, Dionysius recognizes this when describing Thucydides' style as τὸ τραχὺ τῆς ἀρμονίας, by which he indicates the beauty words can have despite their "harshness" or "jaggedness" (*De Thucydide* 24.58).

Moreover, what this recognizes is that words really do have a resonant, musical quality, and that such was seen in the ancient literary tradition as an aspect of correctness. For example,

Demosthenes realised this, and, taking into account the tones and the quantities of his words and clauses, tried to arrange (συναρμόττειν) them in such a way that they should appear melodious (ἐμμελῆ) and rhythmical (εὐρυθμα). He tried to alternate and decorate each of these with countless figures and tropes, and conferred upon his speeches a degree of appropriateness (τοῦ πρέποντος) to their subject unmatched by any other serious writer of prose... attractiveness and beauty in writing are achieved by means of these (ἡδὺς γίνεται λόγος καὶ ὁ καλός). (*De Demosthenis dictione* 48)<sup>49</sup>

But to choose from these elements those which should be employed for each subject, to join them together, to arrange them properly (κατὰ τρόπον), and also, not to miss what the occasion (καιρῶν) demands but appropriately (πρεπόντως) to adorn the whole speech with striking thoughts and to clothe it in flowing and

---

<sup>49</sup> Cf. 51.16 and 38.2. What is more, this property is not exclusively expressed by ἀρμόζω, but by each of the synonyms we are dealing with. For example, "I said that the ear took pleasure first of all in melody, then in rhythm, thirdly in variety, and finally in the appropriateness with which all these qualities are used" (ἔφην δὴ τὴν ἀκοὴν ἡδεσθαι πρώτοις μὲν τοῖς μέλεσιν, ἔπειτα τοῖς ῥυθμοῖς, τρίτον ταῖς μεταβολαῖς, ἐν δὲ τούτοις ἅπασιν τῷ πρέποντι, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *De compositione verborum* 11).

melodious phrase. (τοῖς ὀνόμασιν εὐρύθμως καὶ μουσικῶς, Isocrates, *In sophistas* 16.10)

This musical quality really does seem to be what Plato has in mind at various places in the *Cratylus*, such as when he describes the exchange of letters for a good or bad musical effect, an account of word change that is extremely common in the *Cratylus*. This is cashed out in various ways (as meant to achieve appropriateness or dignity, 402e, adding to the grandeur of the word, 407b/418b, adding an antique flavor to the word, 418b, and so on). Sometimes this word-alteration obscures the desired effect of the word, but, notably, sometimes it *enhances* it (see especially 419a, 421b, and 437a).

Furthermore, Plato has his characters be quite explicit about the musicality of words and their consequent effects. For example, he has Socrates agree with Hermogenes about the force of one word:

Hermogenes: ...the name is something extraordinary.

Socrates: It is indeed harmonious (Εὐάρμοστον, 405a).

And he has Hermogenes recognize the musicality of Socrates' etymologizing:

Socrates, you move through the names very elegantly. Even now you seemed to me just as imitating the flute with your mouth (στομαυλῆσαι) the flute-prelude to Athena's hymn, when you pronounced the name "βουλαπτεροῦν." (417e)

Although language does have a musical character, the use of ἀρμόζω does not necessarily imply the musicality of language. Indeed, the terminology is often used to describe the fit of words as analogous to the fit of clothes, which is an evidently unmusical sort of thing:

Metaphors, like epithets, must be fitting (ἀρμοττούσας), which means that they must fairly correspond to the thing signified [the phrase here is ἐκ τοῦ ἀνάλογον]: failing this, their inappropriateness (ἀπρεπές) will be conspicuous: the want of *harmony* between two things is emphasized by their being placed side by side. It is like having to ask ourselves what dress will suit an old man; certainly not the crimson cloak that suits (πρέπει) a young man. (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1405a10).<sup>50</sup>

just as certain clothes suit certain bodies, so certain language (ὀνομασία) fits (ἀρμόττουσά) certain thought. To please the ear by every means, selecting fair- and soft-sounding words, to insist on wrapping up everything in rhythmically constructed (ἀρμονίας) periods, and bedecking a speech with showy figures is not, as we have seen, always advantageous. (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *De Demosthenis dictione* 18.38)

Indeed, Dionysius of Halicarnassus describes how the beautiful harmonizing of words can occur in metered or in non-metered language (τοῦ καλῶς ἀρμόττειν τὰ ὀνόματα ἔν τε

---

<sup>50</sup> “What is this dress they wear, suited to the dead?” (κόσμος δὲ παίδων τίς ὅδε νεπτέροις πρέπων;, Euripides, *Hercules* 548).

μέτροις καὶ δίχα μέτρων, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *De Demosthenis dictione* 36.9).

And he describes Lysias as “a most accomplished literary artist who has invented a uniquely melodious (ἁρμονίαν) style that is yet *free from metre*, in which he makes his words beautiful and attractive (τὰ ὀνόματα κοσμεῖ τε καὶ ἡδύνει) without bombast or vulgarity” (*De Lysia* 2, translation slightly modified). In short, the use of ἁρμόζω in a linguistic context can, but does not necessarily, imply an actual musicality of words.

Given that ἁρμόζω-words do not necessarily imply the musicality of language, it might be objected that Plato (and the literary tradition, for that matter) adopts this term as a dead metaphor—one that expresses the idea of correctness without necessarily implying musicality. However, this would be a mistake. Plato uses this terminology self-consciously throughout his oeuvre, and he does so in a way that *deepens* the term’s musical metaphoricity. For example, Plato talks about “how to tune the strings of common speech to the fitting praise of the life of gods and of the happy among men” (οὐκ ἐπισταμένου ἐπιδέξια ἐλευθερίως οὐδέ γ’ ἁρμονίαν λόγων λαβόντος ὀρθῶς ὑμνῆσαι θεῶν τε καὶ ἀνδρῶν εὐδαιμόνων βίον [ἀληθῆ], *Theaetetus* 175e-176a, translated by Jane Levett). And in the *Sophist*, the Stranger challenges Theaetetus to find a harmonious (ἁρμόττοι) name, and Theaetetus responds that he wants to be careful that the name not strike a false note (πλημμελοίη, 224c). And in the *Phaedrus*,

Phaedrus: what names do you give him? (ἐπωνυμίας αὐτῷ νέμεις)

Socrates: To call him wise is a great thing, Phaedrus, and appropriate (πρέπειν) only for a god. But “philosopher” (φιλόσοφον) or something like that would

better harmonize (ἀρμόττοι) with him and be more melodious (ἐμμελεστέως).  
(*Phaedrus* 278d).

In short, Plato repeatedly and self-consciously uses these ἀρμόζω-words to indicate both their musical force and their correctness. In fact, he seems to deliberately blur the boundaries between a word's musicality and its correctness (see, e.g., the προσαρμόσειεν of *Cratylus* 414d and the συναρμόσας of *Cratylus* 414b).<sup>51</sup> In other words, the metaphoricity of ἀρμόζω is live and active when Plato uses the word to designate linguistic correctness.

This suggests that the literary tradition adopted ἀρμόζω-words to designate an aspect of language that really is akin to harmony in music. Harmony is what makes sound musical. It can be understood as the pitch or tone of a sound (such as shrill or deep),<sup>52</sup> but what truly makes a certain pitch musical is what it evokes when placed in relation to other notes. Hence, musical harmony is what a note accomplishes by virtue of its combination with other notes. What is accomplished, of course, is the evocation of anything from ideas and images to sensations and emotions. By extension, words can be harmonious by virtue of what they evoke in their own context. This evocation is similarly variable (semantic, phonetic, or other). Longinus writes about this inclusive sense of the phenomenon:

---

<sup>51</sup> What is more, this is not exclusive to the *Cratylus* and even appears in Plato's most mature work, such as in the *Laws*: Correctness in the speech (τὸ δὲ ἢ κατὰ φύσιν αὐτοῦ διόρθωσις) cannot be understood apart from correctness in music (ἄνευ μουσικῆς ὀρθότητός, *Laws* 642a). And the Athenian stranger further unpacks the language-music analogy (ἁρμονία is a term for correctness in language) by describing ὀρθῶς φθέγγεσθαι (655a) and ὀρθῶς προσαγορεύειν (655b) and μακρολογία (655b).

<sup>52</sup> This is how Aristotle uses ἁρμονία in *Rhetoric* 1403b31.

that composition, which is a kind of melody (ἁρμονίαν) in words—words which are part of man's nature and reach not his ears only but his very soul—stirring as it does myriad ideas of words, thoughts, things, beauty, musical charm, all of which are born and bred in us; while, moreover, by the blending of its own manifold tones it brings into the hearts of the bystanders the speaker's actual emotion so that all who hear him share in it, and by piling phrase on phrase builds up one majestic whole. (*De sublimitate* 39.3.4)

What Longinus describes here is what I describe as *resonance*. A resonance occurs when a sound is reinforced, extended, or prolonged by the vibration of some other medium. In other words, that other medium produces a sympathetic response to the initial vibration. When this sort of resonance occurs on a linguistic level, it expresses the property of words to evoke—and this evocation occurs across a wide range (again, there can be semantic evocations, but frequently words also evoke images, memories, emotions, and so on). Given the circumstances of their use, words resonate in a variety of ways.

Again, the *Cratylus* confirms that this, more than the normal view (i.e., that a word is correct because its semantic content corresponds with a true description of its referent), is at stake. For example, the name “Hestia” is correct, but this seems to have nothing to do with a true description of the goddess:

It is this way for what we call “being” (οὐσία), which is what some call ἐσσία and others call ὀσία. First of all then, according to the second of these names, the being (οὐσία) of things is reasonably (ἔχει λόγον) called “Hestia” (Ἑστία). And

again, because we say that something that participates (μετέχον) in being (οὐσίας) ‘is’ (ἔστιν), even so according to this we should correctly call [her] “Hestia” (Ἑστία). For it is even likely that we called being (οὐσίαν) “ἑσσίαν” in ancient times.

And alternatively,

even if someone should think about sacrifices, he would consider that those giving names thought about these things in this way; for it is likely that those who named the being (οὐσίαν) of all things “ἑσσίαν” would sacrifice before all the gods to Hestia first. And again, as for as many as say ὀσίαν, these ones might suppose something similar to Heraclitus: that beings (τὰ ὄντα) move about all the time and in no way stay put. Thus, their cause and originator is the pushing force (τὸ ὠθοῦν), from which it is beautifully named the same ὀσίαν. (401c-401d)

In other words, the name turns out to have as a semantic content the various forms of οὐσία with various relations to Heraclitus’ idea of flux. However, οὐσία does not make sense as a description of Hestia. Instead, her name is correct because of the fact that it yields a theoretically interesting description of the nature of reality. When submitted to the ancient literary practice of etymologizing, the word is wrung in order to exposes its resonances. There is a reason we use the name for the goddess, but that reason is not primarily the correspondence of the semantic content of the name to the goddess’ own properties.

A similar situation holds with the name “Pan”:

Then he who reveals everything (ὁ πᾶν μὲνύων) and is always moving (ἀεὶ πολῶν), would be correctly (called) “All-ever-moving-one” (Πᾶν αἰπόλος, 408c-d)<sup>53</sup>

What is at stake here, as with many of the etymologies in the *Cratylus*, is not a true description of Pan (whatever that might mean in this instance). Rather, the name is correct because of its invocation of Heraclitean cosmological principles.

Furthermore, such an understanding of linguistic harmony makes sense of the *Cratylus*’ word-play—as a way of expressing the various resonances a word can have. As with many of Plato’s dialogues, the *Cratylus* has extensive word-play, which frequently becomes integral to the etymologizing. For example,

Thus: this name “man” (ἄνθρωπος) signifies that the other animals (θηρία) reflect (ἐπισκοπεῖ) on nothing that they see (ὅρα), neither do they reckon (ἀναλογίζεται) nor do they look up (ἀναθρεῖ), but at the same time man understands (ἑώρακεν)—that is, ‘when he has seen’ (ὅπωπε)—he both reflects (ἀναθρεῖ) and reckons (λογίζεται) that which he has seen (ὅπωπεν). And from this, of all the animals

---

<sup>53</sup> Plato has Hermogenes respond to this with “Altogether so” (πάνυ γε). This is a normal response used many times in the *Cratylus*, but here one cannot help but see its resonance with Πᾶν. What is more, in the following line Socrates says that “his true part is smooth and divine and dwells among the gods, but his false part dwells below among the majority of men and is shaggy and tragic; for most of the stories and also the falsehoods exist in the tragic life.” This reference to tragedy is an unmistakable extension of the resonances inherent in “Pan.” Τραγικόν means both “tragic” and “goat-like.”



(θηρίων), man (ἄνθρωπος) alone is correctly (ὀρθῶς) called “man” (ἄνθρωπος), reckoning that which he has seen (ὠνομάσθη, ἀναθρῶν ἃ ὅπωπε). (399c)

And

Speaking offhand, I suppose that those who named the soul (ψυχή) thought something like this: whenever it is present in the body, it is the cause of its living and it provides the power of breath (ἀναπνεῖν) and revival (ἀναψύχον), but whenever it ceases this reviving (ἀναψύχοντος), the body is destroyed and dies. From this, they seem to me to call it “soul” (ψυχή). (399d-e)

In these examples, Socrates doesn’t go directly for the supposed etymon. Instead, he works indirectly (through ἀναπνεῖν to ἀναψύχον, e.g.). He plays off of a wide range of similarities, or resonances, to arrive at the target etymon. In other words, the process of etymologizing is calling upon these linguistic resonances.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, it is the chosen tool for demonstrating correctness for precisely this reason—that it draws out the various hidden resonances or harmonies. And, as Heraclitus was famous for saying, the hidden harmony is more powerful than the apparent harmony (ἁρμονίη ἀφανὴς φανερῆς κρείττων, D54).

---

<sup>54</sup> The lengthiest instance of wordplay drawing out a linguistic resonance is doubtless the case of “Hermogenes,” which is arguably etymologized throughout the entire dialogue. For example, Socrates says “this ‘Hermes’ is likely to have something to do with logos, and to be an interpreter and messenger and thievishly deceptive in logos and a popular speaker (ἀγοραστικόν)—all this business is about the power of logos” (407e–408a). This ἀγοραστικόν means both “commercial” (Hermes is the god of commerce) and “popular speech.” Such plays on words surround and are an integral part of a main enterprise of the dialogue—determining whether Hermogenes bears a correct name. Although in different terms, Ewgen gives an excellent and thorough investigation of the wordplay surrounding “Hermes” and “Hermogenes.”

### 1.9.3 τὸ καλὸν

As demonstrated above with τὸ πρέπον and ἁρμόζω, the correctness of words, the resonances that words have, is frequently expressed in terms of the beauty that those words produce. The case with τὸ καλὸν will prove the same: in a literary context, correct words are beautiful words, and this means that they resonate in various ways with those hearing them.

Again, like the other terms I deal with in this chapter, τὸ καλὸν has an almost proverbial generality to it. It can reference any quality that is good, fine, honorable, right, and so on (s.v. LSJ). However, as above, I will argue that in literary contexts, it preserves some of its particular meaning as “beautiful” (which may be its etymological meaning as well, s.v. Beekes).

In linguistic contexts, τὸ καλὸν is used as a word for correctness; as such, is largely interchangeable with the other synonyms discussed in this chapter, particularly ὀρθότης. This is true across the literary tradition, and it is especially true for Plato in the *Cratylus*. I will here reproduce a few of the more prominent instances of this, as I deem necessary, especially in response to Ademollo’s 2011 denial that καλῶς is equivalent to ὀρθῶς.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> Ademollo wants to keep the two distinct because their equation would imply the dissolution of his thesis that all names just are correct names: “we should not assume . . . that here ‘well’ is equivalent to ‘correctly’ and that Socrates is drawing a distinction between naming something and naming it correctly, between names and correct names” (371, cf. 116). But his insistence flies in the face of the blatant interchangeability I cite here.

beautifully-given name (καλῶς ὀνόματα θήσεσθαι, 390d)

And it seems that the name of his father (who is said to be Zeus) is given most beautifully (παγκάλως τὸ ὄνομα κεῖσθαι, 396a)

Then it would be beautiful (καλῶς... ἔχου) to name this name (400b)

from which it is beautifully named (ὅθεν δὴ καλῶς ἔχειν αὐτὸ ‘ὠσίαν’ ὀνομάσθαι, 401d)

the name is “most beautifully given” (κάλλιστα κείμενον, 404e)

Those given well (καλῶς κείμενα) are given in this way; but if something is not given well (μή τι καλῶς ἐτέθη), the greater part perhaps contains fitting (προσηκόντων) letters and similar things (if it is to be an icon), but it might have something which does not fit (οὐ προσήκον), on account of which the name might not be beautiful (καλὸν) or well-made (καλῶς εἰργασμένον, 433c).

did we not agree many times that beautifully-given (καλῶς κείμενα) names are...” (439a)

if on the one hand all the fitting things (τὰ προσήκοντα) are given, then the icon (that is, the name) will be beautiful (καλῇ). But if, on the other hand, if someone

leaves out or adds small things, then it will become an icon but not a beautiful (καλῇ) one? Therefore, some of the names will have been made beautifully (καλῶς) and some badly? (431d)

And he speaks beautifully (καλῶς)—he and the many other poets who speak thus—that when a good man dies, he has a great portion of honor and becomes a divinity according to this (other) name for wisdom (φρονήσεως). In this way then, even I posit that every knowing man (δαίμονα) who is good is a divinity (δαμόνιον), both alive and dead, and is correctly (ὀρθῶς) called “divine” (δαίμονα, 398b-c).<sup>56</sup>

The fact that τὸ καλὸν is used so extensively as a term for correctness might seem to imply that it has been assimilated in its generality to the concept of linguistic correctness. However, this would be a mistake. The ancient literary tradition has always understood beauty as an aspect of correctness. For example, Dionysius of Halicarnassus reports that Theophrastus talked about a certain class of words that are naturally beautiful and make any discourse in which they appear especially appropriate as a result (τίνα

---

<sup>56</sup> Cf. 391a, 400d-e, 428b, etc. As might be expected, Plato also includes these terms in his etymological wordplay: “Then the name of wisdom/mind is correctly (ὀρθῶς) given to ‘beauty’ (καλὸν), because it works such things which we welcome by calling them beautiful” (καλᾶ, 416d). This is also true of Plato’s usage in a non-linguistic context (e.g., *Charmides* 172a, *Laws* 667c and 721a, and *Statesman* 293d) and elsewhere than the *Cratylus* in a linguistic context: “Then does it seem to you that the ode has been written beautifully and correctly (καλῶς ... καὶ ὀρθῶς) or not? And I said, yes: beautifully and correctly” (καλῶς τε καὶ ὀρθῶς, *Protagoras* 339b). Furthermore, as mentioned above, there is an extensive discussion of how τὸ καλὸν is intimately related to τὸ πρέπον throughout the *Hippias Major*. Obviously, I cannot do justice to the question of how adequate τὸ πρέπον is as a definition of τὸ καλόν, to whether or not this is the implied solution in the dialogue, and so on. But it suits my purposes to show that these two concepts are connected to the extent that one may pass for a definition of the other (as it does in Aristotle’s *Topics* 102a6).

ὀνόματα φύσει **καλά** [παραδείγματος ἕνεκα], ὧν συντιθεμένων **καλὴν** οἶεται καὶ **μεγαλοπρεπῇ** γενήσεσθαι τὴν φράσιν, *De compositione verborum* 16.92).

Indeed, there is good reason for the metaphorical extension of τὸ καλὸν to the linguistic sphere. As discussed above, a sort of linguistic harmony occurs when a word resonates. This resonance can obviously be pleasant, but it can be more than that—it can be beautiful in the full sense of the term—as involving some kind of deep affinity. This is what Demetrius has in mind when he quotes Theophrastus as saying that “beauty in a word is that which appeals pleasantly to the ear or the eye, or has noble associations of its own” (Ποιεῖ δὲ εὐχαριν τὴν ἐρμηνείαν καὶ τὰ λεγόμενα **καλὰ ὀνόματα**. ὠρίσατο δ’ αὐτὰ Θεόφραστος οὕτως· **κάλλος ὀνόματός** ἐστὶ τὸ πρὸς τὴν ἀκοὴν ἢ πρὸς τὴν ὄψιν ἡδύ, ἢ τὸ τῇ διανοίᾳ ἔντιμον, *De elocutione* 173.1).<sup>57</sup> In other words, beautiful words are not just those that sound pleasant, but also those which are most effective at bringing what is spoken about before the reader’s eye or mind—in short, beauty is another way of expressing the evocative resonance a word can have. This is perhaps what Aristotle has in mind when he says that “beautiful names emerge from sound or from meaning” (κάλλος δὲ ὀνόματος ... ἐν τοῖς ψόφοις ἢ τῷ σημαινομένῳ, Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1405b5-6, my translation). Resonance is a property of words that involves both spheres.

This idea helps us to better understand how Plato uses the word in the *Cratylus*. For instance, when he writes that “in the correctness of names (ὀνομάτων ὀρθότητα) .... one would speak most beautifully (κάλλιστ’) whenever he speaks, insofar as possible, with either all or a majority of similar [words]—that is, with appropriate words” (προσῆκουσιν, 435c), he is having Socrates express the evocative or resonant power

---

<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Demetrius comments how Sappho’s uses words that are extremely appropriate *because* of the beauty of her words: her poetry is about beauty and uses beautiful words (*De Elocutione* 166).

words have (in this particular instance, by virtue of similarity). This is confirmed by what immediately follows this passage, for this passage is spoken in the later conversation with Cratylus over what names can accomplish. Socrates follows this comment up by asking Cratylus “what sort of power do names have and what good thing do we say that they accomplish?” (435d). Cratylus answers that the knowledge of the names gives us knowledge of the things named. Given what I have demonstrated of the literary tradition’s understanding of correctness, Socrates’ question and Cratylus’ response now appear in a different light: all agree that correct words are evocative and resonant. But Cratylus takes this idea too far. He thinks that it implies a word gives the hearer a knowledge of its referent. But, a word’s meaning (as resonance) involves more than this. This is demonstrated, for example, when Plato writes that “I would pleasingly behold with what correctness (ὀρθότητι) those beautiful names (τὰ καλὰ ὀνόματα) are given” (411a): Socrates here comments on the dimension of correctness that supersedes a semantic correspondence.

#### **1.9.4 τὸ οἰκεῖον**

Another common term that designates words’ correctness is τὸ οἰκεῖον or οἰκεῖος. As the reader has doubtlessly noted, this term has already appeared countless times as a part of the correctness synonym-complex. As such, it is used fairly interchangeably as a general term for linguistic correctness. For example, Aristotle describes how

To express emotion, you will employ the language of anger in speaking of outrage; the language of disgust and discreet reluctance to utter a word when speaking of impiety or foulness; the language of exultation for a tale of glory, and that of humiliation for a tale of pity; and so in all other cases. This aptness of language (ἡ οἰκεία λέξις) is one thing that makes people believe in the truth of your story. (*Rhetoric* 1408a18-20).

Because I have already given numerous examples of this sense of τὸ οἰκεῖον, I will merely note here that they abound.<sup>58</sup>

But as with the other terms used to express correctness, τὸ οἰκεῖον does not lose all of its metaphorical force when extended to the linguistic context. The word has its original meaning from its superficial root in οἶκος—the home or the family. As such, something that is οἰκεῖος is literally at home or familiar (cf. *Cratylus* 420a). This is taken to mean appropriate in the sense of akin, belonging, and dwelling together.<sup>59</sup>

This original sense has an unexpected metaphorical extension in a literary context.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps because of the familiarity of what is οἰκεῖος, or perhaps because of the

---

<sup>58</sup> If the reader is still in doubt, here are some further examples: Dionysius of Halicarnassus equates τὸ πρέπον τῆς λέξεως with τὰ λεγόμενα οἰκείως and with τὰς οἰκείας (*De Lysia* 9.8), talks about how words and phrases must be harmonized so as to appear appropriate (ἀρμόσαι... οἰκεῖα, *De compositione verborum* 7.7.), and so on. Hermogenes talks frequently about making use of appropriate types of words (ταῖς οἰκείαις ιδέαις τῶν λόγων χρώμενοι, *Περὶ στάσεων* 1.138). And: “And these writers change their name, also, to one more suitable (οἰκειότερον) to their condition, calling them Aberrigines, to show that they were wanderers” (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Antiquitates Romanae* 1.10.2.7); in other words, a word becomes οἰκειότερον by virtue of a more indicative etymology (the Latin *aberrare* means “wander”).

<sup>59</sup> Interestingly, despite this, τὸ οἰκεῖον is *contrasted* with commonality by Aristotle: “for the more actual facts we have at our command, the more easily we prove our case; and the more closely they bear on the subject, the more they will seem to belong to that speech only instead of being common” (οἰκειότερα καὶ ἥττον κοινά, *Rhetoric* 1396b9-10). This sort of correctness is singular and not generalizable because it depends on the *resonances due to context*.

<sup>60</sup> There is another relevant sense of οἰκεῖος that I have not mentioned: literal (as opposed to metaphorical). This is a common use of the word in the literary tradition (cf. Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* 1404b35), but I have postponed a discussion of this aspect to the following section, where it will be dealt with at length.

manifest presence of what we dwell with, the term designates *a word's power to make something manifest*. In other words, the correctness of τὸ οἰκεῖον consists in its power to manifest. This idea is expressed at least since Aristotle:

One term may describe a thing more truly (κυριώτερον) than another, may be more like it (ὁμοιωμένον), and set it more intimately (οἰκειότερον) before our eyes. Besides, two different words will represent a thing in two different lights; so on this ground also one term must be held fairer or fouler than another. (*Rhetoric* 1405b12)

This passage is written in the context of word choice. The idea is that some words are more appropriate, more at home in their usage, as they are more effective at presenting images to our eyes. The idea is present throughout the literary tradition. For example, Anaximenes of Lampsacus describes how τὰ οἰκειότατα are the things most important that draw our attention readily (*Ars rhetorica vulgo Rhetorica ad Alexandrum*, 1436b8/29.5.2) and how “Our actual words will be clear, if we describe actions as far as possible in words which are appropriate to them” (ἐὰν ὅτι μάλιστα τοῖς οἰκείοις τῶν πραγμάτων ὀνόμασι τὰς πράξεις προσαγορεύωμεν, 1438a34-35/30.7.3). And in a passage that discusses using appropriate syllables and letters in a way that sounds just like the *Cratylus*, Dionysius of Halicarnassus writes:

The most elegant writers of poetry or prose have understood these facts well, and both arrange their words by weaving them together with deliberate care, and with



elaborate artistic skill they appropriate (οικείας) the syllables and the letters to the emotions which they wish to portray. Homer does this often... (*De compositione verborum* 15.63, translation slightly modified).<sup>61</sup>

And indeed, although τὸ οἰκεῖον does not appear in the *Cratylus*, this idea is thoroughly present therein. For example, the *Cratylus* abounds with passages summarizing their conclusions regarding the correctness of names, like the following:

the correctness of the names which we just now went through wished to be something such as would make clear what sort of being each is. (422d)

The correctness of names, we said, is itself that which will reveal how the matter is (428e)

So, in this light, we can understand Plato's claims about correctness differently. For example, when he writes that "many of them [names] are given according to the names of their progenitors, and some are in no way fitting" (προσῆκον, 397b), he is making a claim about those words' power to make what they name manifest. They are incorrect because they do not make manifest the nature of their bearers or show them for what they really are.

---

<sup>61</sup> I have already overused the passage from Aristotle's *Poetics* that perhaps best exemplifies this idea, so I will include it here in a footnote: "At the time when he is constructing his plots, and engaged on the diction in which they are worked out, the poet should remember to put the actual scenes as far as possible before his eyes. In this way, seeing everything with the vividness of an eye-witness as it were, he will devise what is appropriate (τὸ πρέπον), and be least likely to overlook incongruities" (1455a22-25). Compare *Rhetoric* 3.11.9-10, where appropriateness is described as teaching quickly—for this same reason.

### 1.9.5 τὸ κύριον

A less-familiar but just as significant term that is used to designate the correctness of words is τὸ κύριον. I have already demonstrated this word's synonymy in the extensive citations above, so in this section I will focus on what special aspect this term brings to the concept of appropriateness.

In doing so, it is important to first address one of the main ways the word is used in the literary tradition—as signifying what is proper or ordinary. That is, τὸ κύριον is the property that words have of being ordinary or literal as opposed to poetic or metaphorical (cf. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* 1404b6, 1410b12). This same distinction is made with the term addressed above, τὸ οἰκεῖον, and I will treat this particular usage in tandem here.

The fact that these words are used to signify what is ordinary or literal might appear like an objection to what I have been arguing so far. That is, for a word to have multiple resonance implies that it extends itself beyond its everyday sense. Correctness as defined by this property of resonance would seem to be in conflict with correctness as everydayness.

Indeed, the use of τὸ κύριον to designate ordinary and unambiguous meaning is perhaps its most dominant sense.<sup>62</sup> For example,

---

<sup>62</sup> Readers of the late antique tradition will hear in this category a related aspect of correctness: ἐλληνίζειν. The idea that words are correct if they are (grammatically) correct Greek is a dominant understanding of correctness that I must unfortunately pass over. I note it here only to suggest that my understanding of this aspect of correctness is similar to τὸ κύριον and τὸ οἰκεῖον—it depends on correctness as resonance.

What helps most, however, to render the diction at once clear and non-prosaic is the use of the lengthened, curtailed, and altered forms of words. Their deviation from the ordinary words (τὸ κύριον) will, by making the language unlike that in general use (εἰωθὸς), give it a non-prosaic appearance; and their having much in common with the words in general use (εἰωθότος) will give it the quality of clearness. (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1458b1-5)

Whatever its structure, a noun must always be either the ordinary word (κύριον) for the thing, or a strange word, or a metaphor, or an ornamental word, or a coined word, or a word lengthened out, or curtailed, or altered in form. By the ordinary word (κύριον) I mean that in general use in a country; and by a strange word, one in use elsewhere. (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1457b1-5)

The excellence of diction is for it to be at once clear and not mean. The clearest indeed is that made up of the ordinary (κυρίων) words for things, but it is mean, as is shown by the poetry of Cleophon and Sthenelus. .... A certain admixture, accordingly, of unfamiliar terms is necessary. These, the strange word, the metaphor, the ornamental equivalent, etc., will save the language from seeming mean and prosaic, while the ordinary (κύριον) words in it will secure the requisite clearness. (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1458a19-35)

First, then, call anything of which you speak by its proper name (τοῖς οἰκεῖοις ὀνόμασιν), avoiding ambiguity (Anaximenes, *Ars rhetorica vulgo Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* 25.1.1)

Hence, τὸ κύριον and τὸ οἰκεῖον are used in the literary tradition to express the commonplace distinction between ordinary or literal language and poetic or metaphorical language. For example, Dionysius of Halicarnassus contrasts κυρίαν and τροπικὴν (*De Thucydide* 22.7, 23.23, etc. Cf. Demetrius, *De elocutione* 82), he talks about not being able to find ordinary words to describe something (κυρίοις ὀνόμασιν, *De Compositione Verborum* 21), and he describes using a word because of lacking a more current term (σπάνει κυρίου ὀνόματος for lack of a current term, *De Compositione Verborum* 24). Indeed, he uses both τὸ κύριον and τὸ οἰκεῖον to describe purity in language (*De Lysia* 2.7; cf. Hermogenes, *Περὶ ἰδεῶν λόγου* 1.9.101) and the clarity that results from everyday language (*De Lysia* 3.4, 4.12, 8.12, and so on).<sup>63</sup>

But while the concept of correctness does indeed include this sense, ordinariness or straightforwardness is not the most fundamental sense of correctness. That is, even in the literary tradition, correctness as ordinariness is derivative of what it means to be correct in the sense I have been developing in this chapter.<sup>64</sup> For although these thinkers do talk about the correctness of ordinary words, one must understand that all diction is

---

<sup>63</sup> It is likely for this very reason that ὁρθότης came to designate the use of direct figures and the nominative case.

<sup>64</sup> In other words, verbal ornaments, or lack thereof, must be appropriate to the effects desired; cf. Lysias, *Fragmenta orationum deperditarum in papyris vel apud scriptores antiquos cum titulo vel tituli indice servata* 124.1.15.

‘ordinary’ only in a certain context. For example, ordinary words are, usually, most appropriate—but they are usually more appropriate *for prose*:

Strange words, compound words, and invented words must be used sparingly and on few occasions: on what occasions we shall state later. The reason for this restriction has been already indicated: they depart from what is suitable (πρέποντος), in the direction of excess. In the language of prose, besides the regular (κύριον) and proper (οἰκεῖον) terms for things, metaphorical terms only can be used with advantage. This we gather from the fact that these two classes of terms, the proper (οἰκεῖοις) or regular (κυρίοις) and the metaphorical—these and no others—are used by everybody in conversation. (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1404b29-36)

We may, then, start from the observations there made, and the stipulation that language to be good must be clear, as is proved by the fact that speech which fails to convey a plain meaning will fail to do just what speech has to do. It must also be appropriate, avoiding both meanness and undue evaluation; poetical language is certainly free from meanness, but it is not appropriate (πρέπουσα) to prose. Clearness is secured by using the words (nouns and verbs alike) that are current and ordinary (κύρια). (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1404b1-5)

Indeed, as will become clear both in Aristotle’s own discussion of metaphor and in the subsequent literary tradition, it is not the case that all words are correct by virtue of their

ordinariness. Instead, all words, including ‘ordinary’ words, are correct based on what we have been discussing so far (evocative ability, resonance, etc.).

That this is so is demonstrated by the fact that τὸ κύριον and τὸ οἰκεῖον are also used to express appropriateness in manifestly non-ordinary and non-literal contexts. For example, Dionysius of Halicarnassus discusses how some words are more at home (appropriate to) dithyramb (μᾶλλον δὲ διθυραμβικῆς σκευωρίας οἰκειότερον) than to Thucydides’ prosaic history or historiography (*De Thucydide* 29.23). Indeed, some words are just more suited to the circumlocutions of poetry (περιφράσεως ποιητικῆς ἔστιν οἰκειότερα, 29.34). And later, Dionysius describes how some words are more appropriate to the Gorgianic style (τῆς Γοργίου προαιρέσεως μᾶλλον οἰκειότερα, 46.13). In other words, he invokes τὸ οἰκεῖον in the context of the least prosaic of ancient stylists, Gorgias. If a word can be at home in this most mannered of rhetorical discourse, surely everydayness is not the ultimate standard for correctness.

What is more, the use of new or coined words is frequently expressed by τὸ κύριον and τὸ οἰκεῖον (e.g., Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *De compositione verborum* 21.13), and these words are most certainly *not* used in their everyday sense. In fact, Hermogenes gives an example of a word that is κυριωτέρα when used in a figurative and etymological sense than when it is used in its current everyday sense: “In fact, from an etymological point of view, the word (φιλανθρωπία) is probably used more properly (κυριωτέρα) in this passage from Xenophon than it is to express pity for others and compassion, which is the way in which the word is usually (φύσει) used” (*Περὶ ἰδεῶν λόγον* 2.5.40). Finally,

I believe, however, that there are only the following three generically different kinds of composition, to which anyone who likes may assign the appropriate names (τὰ οἰκεῖα) when he has heard their characteristics and their differences. But for my own part, since I cannot find authentic names (κυρίους ὀνόμασιν) by which to call them, because none exists, I name them by metaphorical terms... (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *De compositione verborum* 21.15)

This is an instance where the proper is no longer opposable to the metaphorical: proper names are those the ones that are best able to evoke their referents. And in the absence of a word that does this, metaphors or coinage becomes necessary and more proper. Indeed, Demetrius writes that “sometimes one speaks more clearly and more appropriately (κυριώτερον) by way of metaphors than by way of everyday words (κυρίους)” (*De elocutione* 82, my translation). This may sound like a contradiction—how can one speak κυριώτερον by not using κύριοις? Clearly, “everyday words” got the designation κύριοις because everyday words are usually the appropriate words to use. But in contexts where a more mannered language is called for, such as in poetry or even in philosophy, a different sort of word-choice is more appropriate. That is, κυριώτερον.

Indeed, that the ordinary-poetic distinction falls apart was evident to the ancients as well. Demetrius says a couple lines after the passage here cited that that metaphors are often ἀληθέστερον and σαφέστερον. And in 86, he describes how usage clothes most concepts in metaphors, with the result that they themselves eventually appear as everyday words (δοκεῖν τοῖς κυρίους). And in 87, he describes how the metaphor eventually

replaces the everyday term and then becomes more appropriate for everyday use. Think of Aristotle's remark that

we all naturally find it agreeable to get ahold of new ideas easily: words express ideas, and therefore those words are the most agreeable that enable us to get ahold of new ideas. Now strange words simply puzzle us; ordinary words convey only what we know already; it is from metaphor that we can best get ahold of something fresh. (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1410b 10-15)

So, the fact that both τὸ κύριον and τὸ οἰκεῖον are used to designate the correctness that comes from ordinariness is not an objection to the idea that words are correct because of their resonance. The property of resonance is more fundamental and is what makes even the everydayness of some words correct.

#### **1.9.5.1 Power**

If nothing else, the distinction I treated above confirms the context-dependence of correctness and relieves certain objections to my position. But that is not all that the investigation of τὸ κύριον can tell us about correctness. As with the other terms, it retains some of its metaphorical flavor when extended to the linguistic sphere as a term for correctness. In non-linguistic contexts, the word is used to designate power, authority, and legality (s.v. LSJ). As I will show, Plato self-consciously adopts the sense of correctness as power (to make visible, to evoke, to make resonate).



The literary tradition frequently indicates that τὸ κύριον retains its meaning as “power.” This is done by discussing τὸ κύριον in proximity with other power words (like κρατέω/κρείσσω and δύναμις). For example, Dionysius of Halicarnassus speaks of a type of composition that is a harmony (ἁρμονιῶν) of the plan and poetic styles (i.e., it is neither austere and literal nor is it thoroughly poetic)—and for lack of a proper word (κυρίου) *and more powerful (κρείττονος) word*, he calls it “tempered” or “well-mixed” (εὐκρατον, *De compositione verborum* 24). For a similar reason, he frequently speaks of features of style that can be appropriate and effective (κυριώτατα καὶ τὰ κράτιστα, *De compositione verborum* 11.2; cf. 20.127 and the κρατίστων δὲ καὶ κυριωτάτων ἐκλεκτικός of *De Lysia* 15.19).

Plato explicitly identifies correctness with power in the *Cratylus*, as might be expected, though wordplay:

Then, o best of men, it is also necessary that the lawgiver knows how to put a name which arises for each by nature into sounds and syllables, and that he makes and gives all names while looking toward that which is a name, if he is to be master of giving names? (εἰ μέλλει κύριος εἶναι ὀνομάτων θέτης, 389d)

κύριος here describes someone who is effective at making names and plays on the idea that a κύριον ὄνομα is correct name. Although for a very different purpose, Dionysius of Halicarnassus writes with the same wordplay, invoking the double sense of κυρίου with κρατ-words: “Ἡ δὲ τρίτη καὶ μέση τῶν εἰρημένων δυεῖν **ἁρμονιῶν**, ἥν **εὐκρατον** καλῶ σπάνει **κυρίου** τε καὶ **κρείττονος** ὀνόματος, σχῆμα μὲν ἴδιον οὐδὲν ἔχει, **κεκέρασται** δὲ

ὥς ἐξ ἐκείνων **μετρίως** καὶ ἔστιν ἐκλογή τις τῶν ἐν ἑκατέρῃ **κρατίστων**” (*De compositione verborum* 24). Similarly, in another instance from the *Cratylus*, Plato writes:

from where do you think you’ll be able to confer names similar to each one of the numbers, unless you allow your agreement and convention to have some authority over the correctness of names? (κῦρος ἔχειν τῶν ὀνομάτων ὀρθότητος περί) Truly, I myself am satisfied that names are, insofar as is possible, similar to things. But this attractive force (ὀλκή) itself is truly, as Hermogenes says, sticky, and it is necessary to make use of this vulgar thing, custom, in the correctness (ὀρθότητα) of names. Perhaps then one would speak most beautifully (κάλλιστ’) whenever he speaks, insofar as possible, with either all or a majority of similar words—that is, with appropriate words (προσήκουσιν)—and would speak reproachfully whenever he speaks the opposite. But still, after these things, answer me this: what sort of power (δύναμιν) do names have and what beautiful thing (καλὸν) do we say that they accomplish? (435b-d)

Hence, Plato shows himself clearly aware that there is a connection between the correctness of names and their power. Indeed, he frequently talks about the power that words have (ὀνομάτων τὴν δύναμιν, 394b; cf. 393e, 405e, 408a, 435d, etc.) and the power their constituents, sounds, have (412e, 417b, etc.).<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> Unsurprisingly, Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* contains various parallels to this idea. For example, it discusses the power of persuasion (κυριώτατον τῶν πείσσεων, *Rhetoric* 1355a7), and, in language quite similar to the *Cratylus*, it references the power of laws: τὸν νόμον κύριον, οἱ δὲ νόμοι τὰς κατὰ νόμους συνθήκας, καὶ ὅλως αὐτὸς ὁ νόμος συνθήκη τίς ἐστιν (*Rhetoric* 1376b8)

Therefore, we can conclude with Dionysius of Halicarnassus that

perhaps it would not have been fitting (ἥρμοστέον) to use other more striking (κρείττοσι) words. It must necessarily be the case, in fact, that whenever ideas are expressed in the most authentic (κυριωτάτοις) and appropriate (προσεχέστατοις) language, no word should be grander than the nature of the ideas. (*De compositione verborum* 3.120)

### 1.10 CORRECTNESS IS A UNIFIED CONCEPT

I will here argue that we should see correctness as a unified concept, despite the various challenges that oppose a unified account of ὀρθότης in the *Cratylus*. For by this point in the chapter, one might despair of massive plurality of terms for linguistic correctness and be inclined to assume that there is either some very general sense of correctness at stake or that there is no underlying unity to the concept. Indeed, part of the reason ὀρθότης is taken as an inevitably general term is that Plato seems to offer so many different formulations of it, even just over the course of the *Cratylus*. But part of the reason is that Plato himself seems to suggest that there are different standards for correctness in the *Cratylus*.

For example, Plato seems to require a different sense of correctness for words that are etymologizable and another for words that are not. The two different analyses required for these two classes of words seems to imply two senses of correctness. Scholars tend to unpack this by showing how, in the former (etymologizable words), the

adequacy of semantic content constitutes ὀρθότης, and in the latter (πρώτα ὀνόματα), it is *mimesis* that renders a word correct. As mentioned above, this has led scholars to identify all sorts of different standards of correctness at work in the *Cratylus*.<sup>66</sup> But this is a mistake, for it is repeatedly concluded that both of these analyses are establishing the correctness of a word through a mimetic account:

Socrates: Accordingly, that there is one correctness for all names (both first and later), and that insofar as they are names they in no way differ from each other, I suppose even you agree.

Hermogenes: Altogether so.

Socrates: But indeed, the correctness of the names which we just now went through wished to be something such as would make clear what sort of being each is.

Hermogenes: Why not?

Socrates: Then it is necessary that this holds no less of the first names than of the later ones, if they are indeed names.

---

<sup>66</sup> See 1.2-1.3. This division of correctness is also generally associated with a negative interpretation of the dialogue. E.g.: “Socrates will be content with recovering the namegivers’ opinion rather than the truth about the gods, while on the other hand continuing to characterize his inquiry as being about ‘correctness’ in some secondary sense. Socrates thus shifts from philosophy to doxography” (Ademollo 2011, 201).

Hermogenes: Altogether so. (422c-d)

Both the etymologizing and the analysis of the first names are correct in the same way, one which is consistent with my account of resonance.

However, there is another challenge to the unity of ὀρθότης, again introduced by Socrates himself. Socrates talks about two ways of correctness:

Yes, Hermogenes, by Zeus. If indeed we pay attention, then [we would recognize that] there is one most beautiful way: that we know nothing about the gods (neither about them nor about their names—whatever they call each other), for it is clear that they call themselves by true names. But there is a second way of correctness, just as it is custom for us to pray in our prayers: we call [the gods] by those names which please them, as we know nothing else. For this seems to me to have been a beautiful custom. Then if you wish, let us investigate how to announce to the gods that we will not investigate anything about them—for we do not esteem ourselves so able to investigate—but about men and which opinions they had when they gave their names; for this will not incur the wrath of the gods.

(400e-401a)

The first sort of correctness, which is to be abandoned because of its sterility, admits total agnosticism about the gods and their names. This sort of correctness is never taken seriously in the *Cratylus*. The second sort of correctness, on the other hand, is how Socrates elects to proceed. It is similar to the first in admitting the human inability to

know anything about the divine, but it differs with respect to our ability to speak about it. While we cannot make assertoric statements regarding the divine, Socrates concedes the we can nevertheless be correct in speaking about the gods if our statements are the sort offered in prayer.

A brief note regarding the Ancient Greek practice of prayer will be instructive here. The Ancient Greek practice of prayer involves not interpersonal communication with a divine being, but an evocation of that divinity. This evocation is accomplished by speaking words that are pleasing to the gods. More properly, it involves speaking words that have been shown in past experience to be pleasing to the gods—judged by the *effect* they have produced in the past. Hence, the correctness of or words is to be judged with the same metric—its evocative effect, or its resonance.<sup>67</sup>

In other words, Socrates is affirming here what I have been developing terminologically throughout this chapter. Words are correct by virtue of their effectiveness in evoking what is talked about and the strength of the consequent resonance.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> See Klinghardt 1999 and Pulleyn 1994. Prayer composition was a carefully fashioned practice because some prayers were meant to be read. This suggests that the force or power of the prayer's words (or at the very least, of the names invoked in the prayer) is to ring through: "The reason for the omnipresent use of formularies is easily recognizable: it is the magic character of prayers that requires a particular, fixed wording. The prayer creates a special connection between the world of the praying person and the divine sphere and from there it draws power and efficacy" (14). Hence, Pulleyn's claim that getting the right epithet in prayer is not a question of naming the god correctly, i.e., it is not a question of identifying the god correctly. Instead, getting the right epithet is a question of invoking the most appropriate power or aspect of the god. Given this context, Aristotle's criticism of Protagoras makes a different sort of sense: Protagoras was said to have criticized Homer for addressing the gods in the first lines of the *Iliad* as if commanding and not as if praying (*Poetics* 1456b13).

<sup>68</sup> The correct interpretation of this passage (Socrates' claim that correctness is akin to prayer) is a strength of my interpretation—most commentators entirely avoid this passage or pass over it without acknowledging that Socrates compared correctness to prayer and what that might mean (exceptions include Sallis 1975 and Ewgen 2014). For example, Ademollo 2011 concludes at this point in the dialogue that this passage "amounts to nothing less than the suicide of naturalism" (201), calling it the "doxographical turn." It is troubling that he makes this conclusion with no reference to prayer, as doxography seems to me to have the opposite spirit. Doxography is the ultimate reification of any idea—precisely what Socrates wants to avoid in speaking as if praying.

That is, Socrates is not giving a second alternative, one which we might take if we are incapable of the first, but he is offering the only true option. Indeed, this is not unlike another “second” in Plato—the “second sailing” of the *Phaedo* (99c-d).<sup>69</sup> In that dialogue, Socrates describes how the sterility of learning the truth from other people caused him to change his methodology—he began to look through images to discern the truth. Without going too deep into what is itself a controversial aspect of Plato’s philosophy, I will simply note the parallel with an observation: in Greek prayer, the suppliant addresses the god by producing a text or even a statue or other icon (see Depew 1997, 247ff.). This image is not intended to be the god, but to be the speaker’s iconic or iconographic representation of the god. Like the *logos* of the *Phaedo*, this is meant to be a vehicle to the real thing.<sup>70</sup> So, the second sort of correctness referred to Socrates is really *the* correctness that will be engaged in the *Cratylus*. It is not correctness as we might initially suppose, but something more like the correctness of a prayer—the use of words to evoke. Correctness is resonance.

## 1.11 MEANING

Understanding correctness in this way has several philosophical implications. The first is for our understanding of linguistic meaning. It has often been recognized, tacitly

---

<sup>69</sup> Sallis 1975 notes that Socrates’ “second sailing” is in a way parallel to the *Cratylus*, but he does so in an entirely different context: “In the *Cratylus* Socrates does not mention this voyage, for the dialogue as a whole is a re-enactment of its initiation” and “The *Phaedo* mentions a second sailing, but never describes what this recourse to *logos* is. The *Cratylus* takes up this torch—it is the very second sailing” (258).

<sup>70</sup> In a similar parallel, *Laws* 841b speaks of a second standard of correctness (ὀρθότητα ἔχον δευτέραν) which the laws provide to regulate sexual intercourse. Such laws are intended to govern those who aren’t governed by nature but who are depraved by nature (τοὺς τὰς φύσεις διεφθαρμένους)—most or perhaps all humans.

or explicitly, that Plato's concept of correctness is a precursor to the concept of meaning as understood by the philosophy of language. If Plato was the first thinker to philosophically engage this question, if he really was a precursor to Mill, Frege, Kripke, etc., then Plato's account becomes interesting for a variety of reasons, from understanding the historical development of one of contemporary philosophy's most vexed concepts, to an accurate portrayal of Plato's own philosophy, to the possibility of engaging Plato's position with current discussions.

These questions are well-beyond the scope of my dissertation. Any one of them would be a massive undertaking in itself. So here I will briefly note what my account can contribute and how it is different from past accounts in these respects.

First, Plato does seem to be engaged in developing the concept of meaning. It is illustrative to this point that the referential function of language is bracketed in the *Cratylus*. For example, Socrates has Cratylus admit by analogy that an inadequate painting can still be used to refer to its subject, and Cratylus says that the name "Hermogenes" is incorrect but nevertheless uses it to refer to Hermogenes. In short, the question of reference simply is a non-issue. Furthermore, the way Plato demonstrates correctness is through his etymologizing—a process which engages the semantic aspects of words on various levels.

As discussed above, correctness is traditionally represented entirely semantically. What makes words correct is what makes words meaningful—that they have a certain sort of semantic content. One of the most recent and sophisticated formulations of this idea is Ademollo 2011:



What I want to say is that etymology [as what identifies the correctness of a name] seems to have something to do, both conceptually and historically, with the emergence of the notion of a *meaning or sense* of names. For present purposes I shall allow myself some oversimplification and identify such a notion as that of a certain *informational content which a name conveys or expresses about its referent*. (12)

Ademollo then goes on, tellingly, to identify Plato's concept of correctness as "a remote forerunner of Frege's descriptivist conception of sense" (12).<sup>71</sup> One can easily see how this relates to my above formulation of the traditional account of correctness, that a name is correct when the semantic content of its etymology corresponds to a true description of that name's referent—the traditional account of correctness parallels this supposition about Plato's theory of meaning.

However, if what I have said is true, then Plato could not have held that meaning is semantic content. That is, if we understand semantic content to be roughly equivalent to propositional content or a paraphrase of the word's usage (which I understand is not an indisputable position to take),<sup>72</sup> then we should not understand Plato as being concerned with identifying that content. Plato is concerned with *more* than merely the objects of our

---

<sup>71</sup> More precisely, Ademollo identifies the "naturalist" thesis about correctness as entailing this.

<sup>72</sup> I exaggerate—this is of course one of the most contentious aspects of semantics. Again, I will have to defer these discussions because of the scope of my own project. The question of whether there is or is not such a thing as semantic content, and what the nature of such content could be, has a distinguished history (e.g. Quine 1960 and Kripke 1982, Davidson 1967, Wittgenstein 1953), and in this brief space I cannot weigh in significantly. Similarly, I cannot engage in discussions of whether Plato was an internalist regarding meaning, and externalist, and eliminativist, or whatever. However, I will note that perhaps part of the confusion in the *Cratylus* literature is a desire to answer what is fundamentally a foundationalist question (what is it that makes words have meaning) with a semantic theory (what meaning is encoded in a word), see Speaks 2018. Of course, if this confusion is at stake, then Plato himself is not immune.

understanding (the propositional content) contained in words. At the very least, such a semantic theory is unfit to account for one of the dialogue's main developments of correctness—the mimetic account of the *πρώτα ὀνόματα*. Indeed, the mimetic force resulting from the pronunciation of these words cannot be straightforwardly translated into propositional content. And furthermore, as I developed above, *ὁρθότης* for Plato involves what I have called *resonance*—a word is correct by virtue of a plurality of criteria that include everything from appropriateness to context to the word's evocative force. Because of this, meaning must also involve who is saying the word, when and where and to whom the word is spoken, what the word alludes to or resonates with, and so on.<sup>73</sup>

Given this situation, it might be appealing to attribute to Plato the position which traditionally opposes semantic theories of meaning—i.e., theories which raise similar objections of context and propositional attitudes: pragmatics. Indeed, it is a mantra of pragmatic theories that there is no meaning without context, and Plato seems to be making a similar point.

However, this too would be hasty and inadequate. Those who attribute a semantic position to Plato do not do so arbitrarily, and it would be inaccurate to say that Plato is *not* concerned with some sort of semantic content. Think, for example, of Cratylus' "brass pot" example: as Cratylus supposes, it is impossible for a person to speak falsely. According to Cratylus, what we consider to be false speech is so devoid of semantic

---

<sup>73</sup> In Aristotle's *Poetics*, we get an account of meaning that results from a situation that seems incapable of conveying propositional content: "the reason of the delight in seeing the picture is that one is at the same time learning—gathering the meaning of things, e.g. that the man there is so-and-so; for if one has not seen the thing before, one's pleasure will not be in the picture as an imitation of it, but will be due to the execution or colouring or some similar cause" (1448b12–19). Many of our names are this way—their meaning does not involve the correspondence of semantic content with some true description of an existent thing, but rather results from resonances in other areas of our soul.

content—that “this man made mere noise, moving himself in vain, just as if someone were to move a copper pot by striking it” (430a). This position appears to express some kind of extreme pragmatist position not unlike Davidson 1984, and yet Socrates opposes it with an analogy to painting to salvage what indeed seems to be semantic in nature.

Hence, the situation is not simple. It is clear that Plato does not think that meaning is, at least exhaustively, semantic content as he is commonly presented. However, he is also not a pragmatist about meaning. In short, he was aware of some of the complexities involved in the question of meaning that have come to the fore only in recent centuries (i.e., the tension, oversimplified here, between semantics and pragmatics). And while he gives us no unambiguous theory of meaning, he does engage the complexities involved in this profound question, and he does so in a way that resists formulating a dogmatic position and which I have attempted to capture by using the term “resonance.”

As I understand Plato’s efforts in the *Cratylus*, I see the spirit of Charles Kahn’s 1981 observations regarding Heraclitus scholarship as true also of Plato scholarship:

a good deal of scholarly effort has been devoted to eliminating multiplicity of meaning and thus impoverishing the semantic content of the text, by defending a single construal to the exclusion of others. In the case of Heraclitus as in that of Aeschylus, the interpreter's task is to preserve the original richness of significance by admitting a plurality of alternative senses—some obvious, others recondite, some superficial, others profound. (92)

This is true of what has been said about correctness and about meaning—Plato’s conception is fundamentally plurivocal<sup>74</sup>—indeed, as we shall continue to see, the multiple resonances of a word strengthen that word’s meaning. For Plato, language is not used for the sole purpose of conveying content. So, in the chapters that follow, I will continue to express this property as *resonance*.

## 1.12 ETYMOLOGY

My above account also has significance for the vexed question of how to understand the *Cratylus*’ etymologizing. That is, my account makes better sense of why etymology is chosen as a way (perhaps the *main* way) of demonstrating the correctness of names.

As demonstrated above, correctness itself is constituted by a plurality of relationships that cannot be condensed into the correspondence that it is generally taken as. If this is true, then Socrates will also need to choose a way of demonstrating this correctness that is true to that plurality. And this is precisely what he does by choosing the ancient practice of etymologizing. As will become clear throughout the dissertation, the ancient practice of etymologizing was not akin to the ‘modern scientific’ practice of etymologizing. Instead, it was more of a poetic device that is so varied in what it is capable of doing that it defies straightforward classification. So, it is perfect for demonstrating correctness because not only does it work on the semantic level, but it

---

<sup>74</sup> This is evidenced by the fact that Plato does not express correctness with a single term (as developed exhaustively above). And indeed, this is true of his meaning-terminology as well. While he does frequently use σημαίνω, he also expresses what words mean with an incredibly diverse array of words, including βούλομαι, μηνύω, νοέω (ὅτι νοεῖ, διάνοια, etc.), δηλόω, λέγω, δύναμις, συμβαίνω, and so on.

achieves its full force when it engages the multiple dimensions of language that correctness is meant to demonstrate—everything from the connotative elements of words to their phonetic resonances.

Hence, the traditional account attributed to Plato, that correctness is what happens when the semantic content of a word corresponds to a true description of the word's referent and that etymologizing is simply the process of uncovering the semantic content of the word in question and comparing it to the word's referent, is mistaken. Indeed, the question of how etymologizing is supposed to demonstrate is never problematized beyond this simplistic account. Both correctness and the ancient practice of etymologizing are more nuanced and require a more sophisticated account.

The idea that correctness is a sort of resonance and that etymology is suitable as a practice for demonstrating this complex fact is reflected in at least one ancient author. In his chapter on how to “look to the subject they are treating and furnish it with words which suit it and illustrate it” (οἰκεῖα καὶ δηλωτικὰ τῶν ὑποκειμένων τὰ ὀνόματα, *De compositione verborum* 16), Dionysius of Halicarnassus makes it clear that what is intended by the etymologizing of the *Cratylus* is a more holistic sort of resonance:

These matters have been discussed at length by our predecessors, the most important work being that of the first writer to introduce the subject of etymology, Plato the Socratic, in his *Cratylus* especially, but in many places elsewhere. What is the main gist of my argument? It is that the varied effect (δύναμις) of the syllables is produced by the interweaving of letters, that the diverse nature of words is produced by the combination of syllables, and that the multiform

character (ἁρμονίας πολύμορφος) of a discourse is produced by the arrangement of the words. This leads us forcibly to conclude that style is beautiful (καλὴν) when it contains beautiful words (καλὰ ὀνόματα); that beauty of words is caused by beautiful syllables and letters; and that attractiveness of language is due to words, syllables and letters which please the ear by virtue of some affinity. (*De compositione verborum* 16)

It is the evocative power some words have (which Dionysius frequently generalizes as beauty) that is the point of etymology—etymology is a device that brings out the resonant power of words.

### 1.13 CONCLUSION

So, before turning to the text of the *Cratylus*, we can conclude various things about ὀρθότης based on how the term was used to talk about the correctness of names before Plato—in the literary tradition. As such, ὀρθότης belonged to a network of synonymous terminology used to express linguistic correctness in the literary tradition—a network which Plato is not only aware of but actively engages in the *Cratylus*. As a result, ὀρθότης shares in its provenance, as a word for a poetic sort of correctness. It is not—at least, not entirely—a word’s semantic content that makes it correct, but rather the word’s evocative power or *resonance*.

I will further demonstrate this thesis throughout the remainder of my dissertation. In the following chapter (Chapter 2), I will discuss how Cratylus’ style is intended to be

correct in this sense—he desires what language he does use to be resonant. In Chapter 3, I will show how understanding correctness as resonance makes sense of some of Socrates’ early analogical arguments. In Chapter 4, I will show why Socrates references the language of the gods as a paradigm for correctness—because of its resonance. And in Chapter 5, I will demonstrate the extent to which linguistic resonance can play a specifically philosophical role; when Cratylus finally returns to the dialogue, his words resonate in a way that is decisive for how to understand the *Cratylus* as a whole.

## 2.0 CRATYLUS' STYLE

Writing, which would seem to crystalize  
language, is precisely what alters it. It  
changes not the words but the spirit,  
substituting exactness for expressiveness.

(Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of  
Languages*, 21)

## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Is reality ever brought adequately to language? That is, when something is expressed in language, is it faithfully preserved or violently altered? This is Cratylus' central concern, and it takes on special urgency in Plato's *Cratylus*, where the reality in question is not a concept (like temperance, justice, or beauty), but language itself. The *Cratylus* is self-conscious in its investigation of how language is brought to language, and it questions whether or not this can be done appropriately—i.e., whether language can be preserved as a flower in a garden or whether it will be inevitably 'preserved' like a flower pressed between the pages of a book.

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated that linguistic correctness is a sort of resonance. In this chapter, I will show how Cratylus attempts this sort of correctness. I will do this by reading the first few lines of the dialogue with an attention to the question of how Cratylus says what he says—i.e., with careful attention to Cratylus' style.



Initially, this methodology is bound to appear strange and perhaps even philosophically inappropriate, for style is a concern that has traditionally been the domain of rhetoric and poetics.<sup>1</sup> Style is only important for philosophers if it helps make their discourse clearer—a sentiment common since Aristotle: “The virtue of style is to be clear (a sign of this is that if discourse is not clear it will not complete its function) and to be neither banal nor over-glorious, but *appropriate*” (*Rhetoric* 1404b1-3, my translation, cf. 1414a22–26). Appropriateness in style is a matter of balance between everyday language and dignity, between dry simplicity and poetic flourish. But in the case of rigorous academic writing, Aristotle famously claims that one should limit the flourish, for “nobody teaches geometry in this way” (1404a12, my translation).<sup>2</sup>

However, another ancient author who took geometry seriously as a paradigm for philosophical inquiry did not share these sentiments. Indeed, it is no accident that Plato’s own prose is heavily stylized, and it is thoroughly significant that his only extensive reflection on the nature of language is situated in a discussion about an aspect of style. This fact has been largely overlooked, but the *Cratylus* leaves a careful reader no alternative but to try and understand what is being suggested through the dialogue’s style. This is because not one of Plato’s characters plainly articulates what it is that makes names correct, yet at least Socrates (427d), if not also Cratylus (428c), claims to have done so. If they have indeed done so, then in lieu of analyzing definitions or arguments,

---

<sup>1</sup> Philosophers largely either ignore Plato’s own literary practice or assume it merely elaborates or reinforces the explicit arguments. For an example of this with respect to the *Cratylus*, see Barney 2001, 18–19.

<sup>2</sup> “For the purpose of manifesting something, it does make some difference to speak in one way or another, although not so much. But all these things are mental representations and are for the same purpose of making something well-heard. For this reason, nobody teaches geometry in this way” (1404a10–12).

we are left to interpret what makes names correct through how they said what they said—through their style.

This is of special importance in the case of Cratylus, whose initial remarks are calculated, brief, and followed by prolonged, deliberate silence. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how, in the first few lines of the dialogue, Cratylus' stylized uses of language (such as brachylogy, irony, esoteric speech, and silence) themselves make positive philosophical claims regarding what it is for words to be correct: words are correct when they make language conspicuous in its insufficiency, thus precluding any closure or immediate understanding, and thus directing attention away from themselves. I will show how Plato approvingly appropriates this idea, and that as a result, Cratylus is much closer to Socrates and to Plato than is generally supposed.<sup>3</sup> In fact, far from being strange, juvenile, or even freakish,<sup>4</sup> Cratylus is actually quite Platonic—or rather, Plato is quite Cratylean.

## 2.2 FIRST WORDS

As is common with Plato, the first words of the dialogue introduce most of what will govern the dialogue.<sup>5</sup> I will draw out only one thread from these first words: Plato makes it clear that the dialogue's questioning of language will be a matter of style. In other words, the investigation of what makes words correct will require understanding of

---

<sup>3</sup> The standard account is that, straightforwardly, Plato has Socrates refute Cratylus. See Baxter 1992, 171, 176, etc.

<sup>4</sup> As indeed many claim, cf. Baxter 1992, 162, and Kahn 1985, especially 244 and 258, etc.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Ewegen 2014 does a great deal of work on how the very first word (βούλει) echoes throughout the *Cratylus*; Ademollo 2011 shows how the first words are uttered *in medias res* or *mid-stream*, thus suggesting the dialogue's Heracliteanism; and Baxter 1992 gives an interpretation of how the κοινός from ἀνακοινώσωμεθα is important throughout.

the style in which those words are expressed. And this is demonstrated already in the first few lines of the dialogue, where Plato makes it clear that the philosophical stance of the interlocutors will be codified in their style—in how they express themselves. Here are the first two lines of the dialogue:

Hermogenes: Well then, do you wish that we share the argument with Socrates here?

Cratylus: If it seems good to you. (383a)

First, Cratylus' philosophical position (that what is expressed is severed from the speaker and subject to misrepresentation and misinterpretation) will be developed in greater detail below. But we can already see his position reflected here in his manner of expression: he is reluctant to express his ideas in language, and he gives as little as possible to words. Cratylus speaks in deliberately brief statements, and, ultimately, ceases to speak at all. We never hear him express his thesis about natural correctness (despite the fact that it is the focus of the entire dialogue), and these few words are the only ones Cratylus speaks until the end of the dialogue. Nevertheless, what he does say here is calculated, and a few lines later, it is even called "oracular." This loaded description indicates that Cratylus' brevity is to be taken as one would take an oracle: available for interpretation, but not for clarification. Indeed, the fact that Hermogenes does not say, βούλει οὖν καὶ Σωκράτει τῷδε ἀνακοινωσώμεθα **ἡμέτερον** λόγον; and instead refers to it

as τὸν λόγον reflects this fact.<sup>6</sup> Like a poetic or oracular utterance, Cratylus' *logos* no longer belongs to Cratylus. Because of this, it is not something Cratylus can clarify; it must be interpreted.

Next, as we shall see, Hermogenes' philosophical position is simple: language is, just as it appears, correct only by convention. This simplicity is echoed here in his style. In a dialogue as rich as the *Cratylus*, it is conspicuous that Hermogenes' discourse is always so short and unadorned. (This is in marked contrast to Cratylus' style which is short but complex and Socrates' style which will become increasingly verbose and complex.) Hermogenes' simplicity is reflected in Cratylus' response (εἴ σοι δοκεῖ). This has long been recognized as a loaded remark that introduces the dialogue's Protagorean theme. But additionally, Cratylus' response implies an evaluation of Hermogenes' approach, his style. Given that Cratylus follows these words by receding into obstinate silence, and given that Cratylus is later identified with Achilles in precisely this respect (Achilles' wrath over his treatment by Agamemnon caused him to refuse to participate in the battle), Cratylus' remark takes an overtly disdainful tone. This may be in response to Hermogenes' relativistic conventionalism, but it is certainly also a response to Hermogenes' simplicity of style—a style which attempts to simplify and thus remove the complexity that Cratylus holds dear.

Finally, we can even discern elements of Socrates' style in Hermogenes' words. Hermogenes asks whether Cratylus wishes to share the argument (ἀνακοινωσώμεθα τὸν λόγον) with Socrates. But though this might seem as a simple stage direction, it carries a deeper meaning. That is, it is not only the case that Hermogenes is encouraging Cratylus

---

<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, the definite article *can* function as a possessive, but it is at least inexplicit here.

to let Socrates enter the conversation. In addition, Hermogenes suggests that the *logos* could be recuperated (ἀνα) by being made common (κοινός) one once Socrates joins the conversation.<sup>7</sup> In other words, Socrates' way of speaking will be to take the *logos*, which Cratylus considers severed and independent, and make it common or shared.<sup>8</sup> That Plato intends this as characteristic of Socrates' style is further indicated grammatically by his use of the correlative pair: Hermogenes' Σωκράτει τῷδε parallels the Κρατύλος ... ὅδε which he utters 2 lines later in an explicit discussion of Cratylus' style. Furthermore, this is also emphatically confirmed in how Socrates responds to Hermogenes:

I am ready to search together (συζητεῖν—literally συν-ζητεῖν) with you and Cratylus in common (κοινῇ)... it is necessary that we, putting it down for a shared discussion (εἰς τὸ κοινὸν δὲ καταθέντας) search for whether it is as you say or as Cratylus says. (384c)

Hence, Hermogenes' diction suggests that, instead of treating the *logos* as severed, they approach things through Socrates' style: by sharing the *logos*—by bringing it into a *dialectical* conversation.

---

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, this is Socrates' philosophical position as well: Plato consistently portrays him as committed to constant reinterpretation of the matter at hand. But as with other words that are conspicuous, there are many interpretations of ἀνακοινωσώμεθα. Baxter reads it as indicating Hermogenes' tendency towards agreement. The most common interpretation rightly points out that this ἀνακοινωσώμεθα prefigures the idea that a *logos*, to be true, must not belong to one person alone (*pace* Protagoras' 'man is the measure'). This interpretation also anticipates Cratylus' response (εἴ σοι δοκεῖ—in terms of seeming to an individual).

<sup>8</sup> And this is precisely what Socrates accomplishes throughout the dialogue. Indeed, by the end of the dialogue, he has even drawn Cratylus back into the conversation—into his own *logos*. And although I cannot make the case until much further in the dialogue, we see here already Plato offering a sympathetic interpretation of Heraclitus in contrast with Cratylus. Heraclitus says, "Although the account is shared, most men live as though their thinking were a private possession" (D2). Cf.: ξυνόν ἐστι πᾶσι τὸ φρονεῖν (D113) and: ἀνθρώποισι πᾶσι μέτεστι γινώσκειν ἑωυτοὺς καὶ φρονεῖν (D116).

## 2.3 MISUNDERSTANDINGS

So, from the first few lines, we are introduced into questions of style. This will only become more explicit throughout. Indeed, we can see this in Hermogenes' immediately following remarks. What really causes Hermogenes trouble is not what Cratylus says, but the way he says it:

Socrates, Cratylus here says that the correctness of names for each being is by nature, having sprouted forth, and that a name is not that which some people call it (when they agree to call it such, applying a portion of their own voice to it). But rather, he claims that some correctness of names sprouts forth naturally in the same way for all, both Greek and barbarian. So I asked him whether or not "Cratylus" is, in truth, his name. He agreed that it is. "What about 'Socrates?'" I asked. "Yes, 'Socrates' too," he said. "And with respect to all other men, the name by which we call each of them—is this the name for each?" But then he said "Your name is certainly not 'Hermogenes,' even if all men call you so." And although I am asking and am very desirous to understand what the hell he is saying, he makes nothing clear and feigns ignorance before me, pretending that he knows something in himself as if he knows about this correctness, which, if he should say it clearly, he would bring it about that I would agree and that I would say just what he says. Now if you somehow have it in you to interpret Cratylus' prophetic pronouncement, I would listen with much pleasure. But I would learn

with yet more pleasure how it seems to you yourself regarding the correctness of names, should you be willing. (383a-384a)

Readers of the *Cratylus* are likely to identify here with Hermogenes here. Indeed, Hermogenes' position is much more intuitive; our everyday experience of name-change suggests that convention is all that is at stake. And Cratylus' position seems contrary to this common sense. Cratylus believes that names are appropriate for each of the things that exist because such appropriateness sprouts forth by nature (φύσει πεφυκυῖαν, 383a)—and this—combined with his paradoxical claims about “Hermogenes” not being a name—indeed sounds strange.

But readers should also identify with Hermogenes' main reason for failing to understand Cratylus, which is not, at least not primarily, that Cratylus' ideas are difficult to grasp or contrary to common sense. Indeed, Hermogenes is fascinated and unusually motivated to overcome that obstacle and learn what is hard. Instead, Hermogenes' bewilderment arises because Cratylus' ideas are presented in a confusing way—in a style that confuses Hermogenes. Hermogenes does complain that Cratylus' ideas are hard to understand; but they are hard to understand because Cratylus “makes nothing clear,” because he “feigns ignorance,” and because his speech is akin to a “prophetic pronouncement”—in other words, because of his style. It would be preferable to hear the same ideas expressed by Socrates—that is, in Socrates' manner of presenting them.

Because I understand Plato as encouraging readers to think with Hermogenes here, I will proceed in a way that is faithful to Hermogenes' stated concerns. To do this, I will not analyze Cratylus' expression or Socrates' arguments, at least not yet. Rather, I

will evaluate Cratylus' style and what it is meant to suggest about his thinking. Indeed, Hermogenes asks Socrates to interpret Cratylus' words, and, as Aristotle says in his *Poetics*, evaluation of style is how we interpret words.<sup>9</sup> So, in what follows, I will evaluate the various aspects of Cratylus' style and their philosophical contributions.

## 2.4 BRACHYLOGIES AND PROVERBS

To begin with, Cratylus has, according to Hermogenes' report, stated his case tersely and perhaps abruptly. Then he responds to Hermogenes with even more abbreviation. Given that Cratylus says only 3 words and is reported to say less than 10 words at once when expressing his views, and given that he repeatedly refuses to elaborate for the remainder of the dialogue, we can be sure that his condensed manner of expression is deliberate. In other words, Cratylus expressed himself in the style of a brachylogy or proverb—which is wholly appropriate for a disciple of the ancient philosopher most famous for writing in short, enigmatic aphorisms, Heraclitus.

Because proverbs and brachylogies are deliberately stylized forms of language, they were thematized anciently in treatises on rhetoric and poetry. For instance, Aristotle's *Rhetoric* describes them as an important source of 'non-technical' arguments.<sup>10</sup> The point of this sort of argument is to go beyond the speaker (by, e.g.,

---

<sup>9</sup> "The fourth element of speeches (λόγων) is style. What I mean is that, just as was said previously, style is that through which we interpret words, which in the case of meter [poetry] and in the case of speeches (λόγων) has the same meaning" (τέταρτον δὲ τῶν μὲν λόγων ἢ λέξις: λέγω δέ, ὥσπερ πρότερον εἴρηται, λέξιν εἶναι τὴν διὰ τῆς ὀνομασίας ἐρμηνείαν, ὃ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ἐμμέτρων καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν λόγων ἔχει τὴν αὐτὴν δύναμιν, *Poetics* 1450b13-15, my translation). This is just as true in philosophical contexts as in poetic contexts.

<sup>10</sup> "for instance, if one man advises another not to make a friend of an old man, he can appeal to the proverb, 'Never do good to an old man.' And if he advises another to kill the children, after having killed



referring to witness, oaths, evidence secured under torture, etc.). Such arguments are not manufactured and crafted by the speaker, so they bear a sort of independent authority.

They don't necessarily contribute exact premises, but they impart force to the argument.

Cratylus seems to be speaking in this way—to be concerned more with the forcefulness of words than with their content. Although we only have Hermogenes' somewhat awkward paraphrase—"Cratylus here says that the correctness of names for each being is by nature, having sprouted forth, and that a name is not that which some people call (when they agree to call it such, applying a portion of their own voice to it)" (383a)—it takes little imaginative construction (or, rather, subtraction) to see the core of what must have been a more terse and proverbial expression: ὀνόματος ὀρθότητα ἐκάστω φύσει πεφυκυῖαν.<sup>11</sup> Like a proverb, this would have impacted Hermogenes with its concision, its vivid and provocative phrasing, and with the elusive deeper meaning it suggested. Rhetorically, it functioned as Aristotle describes, as if it were an ancient witness to the profundity of Cratylus' claim.

Proverbs and other forms of condensed speech serve a similar role in poetic discourse. Demetrius writes how brachylogies are like symbols in their forcefulness (Διὸ καὶ τὰ σύμβολα ἔχει δεινότητος, ὅτι ἐμφορῇ ταῖς βραχυλογίαις, 5.243. Cf. 3.156 and Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 3.11.14). Such inherently symbolic or figurative sayings are concerned not as much with supporting an argument as with creating an *impact*.

Cratylus clearly intends this sort of impact. He readily pronounces his ideas in what would be conspicuously poetic language. Again, we can see this through the

---

the fathers, he can say, 'Foolish is he who, having killed the father, suffers the children to live'" (*Rhetoric* 1376a5, translated by J.H. Freese).

<sup>11</sup> Heraclitus was known for this sort of repetition: ἐὰν μὴ ἔλπηται, ἀνέλπιστον οὐκ ἐξευρήσει, ἀνεξερεύνητον ἐὸν καὶ ἄπορον (D18).

conspicuous lyrical repetition preserved in Hermogenes' brief paraphrase: φύσει πεφυκυῖαν, καλεῖν καλῶσι, φωνῆς ἐπιφθεγγόμενοι (383a). Cratylus has not made an offhand comment about an idea that just occurred to him; he has carefully crafted a pithy statement that would have been all the more striking for its deliberate formulation.

Is this force merely poetic? Or is there something philosophically significant about brachylogy? In the *Protagoras*, Plato describes this sort of device as not only literary but also philosophical—and he does so with reference to a proverb that is strikingly-similar to the one Socrates will offer shortly: “Some sort of laconic brachylogy *was the manner of the philosophers of old*. Indeed, even this saying of Pittacus was carried about in private and praised by wise men: ‘It is difficult to be good’” (χαλεπὸν ἐσθλὸν ἔμμεναι, 343b; cf. χαλεπὰ τὰ καλά, *Cratylus* 384b).

One way to understand how this is philosophical is to understand how it answers a philosophical question. In the *Cratylus*, the question is whether language inadvertently does violence to what it expresses. Brachylogy answers this question by showing how language can avoid such violence: the force of a proverbial statement precludes immediate understanding and provokes reflection in a unique way, thus avoiding misrepresentation. In other words, the deliberate brevity of proverbs makes their own expression conspicuous, thus causing the reader to think more carefully about what is expressed. The language itself impacts the reader not into trying to understand the surface meaning of the words, but into pausing and considering the matter at hand.

This is one aspect of what Cratylus intends with his εἴ σοι δοκεῖ. Because he expresses himself only with such concision, we are obliged not to gloss over his words quickly (as indicating a superficial agreement, e.g.). Instead, we are to see in them the

indication of a deeper meaning, one which will require a supralinguistic sort of analysis.<sup>12</sup>

So, like Hermogenes, we cannot understand Cratylus' *logos* simply. Instead, we must make a special effort to grasp why Cratylus speaks as he does. And Socrates demonstrates that he is sensitive to this necessity in how he responds to Hermogenes (indeed in his very first words)—with a proverb:

Hermogenes: Now, if you somehow have it in you to interpret Cratylus' prophetic pronouncement, I would listen with much pleasure. But I would learn with yet more pleasure how it seems to you yourself regarding the correctness of names, should you be willing.

Socrates: Hermogenes, son of Hipponicus, there is an ancient proverb which says that "it is difficult to learn how the beautiful things are." (*χαλεπὰ τὰ καλά*, 384a-b)

Of course, this might appear as merely a creative way of saying that it is going to be difficult to understand what Cratylus has said. And this seems to be assumed by scholars, as Socrates' response here is generally treated with at most a footnote indicating other instances of the proverb. However, Socrates' response is of decisive importance for how we are to understand Cratylus, as it indicates *how* Socrates will respond to Cratylus: he

---

<sup>12</sup> For example, we can understand Cratylus as refusing to be complicit with Hermogenes' words or to take responsibility for what they suggest—he refuses responsibility for what will happen to the *logos*. In short, he refuses to be committed to the words themselves (but is presumably committed only to reality).

will make his discourse appropriate to Cratylus. That is, he will interpret Cratylus' *logos* as Cratylus would speak it—indirectly, allusively, poetically, and of course proverbially.

This also indicates how Socrates will answer the philosophical question regarding the correctness of names: he will *show* how language can be appropriate to what is expressed. His use of proverb here is exemplary but typical of his procedure throughout the dialogue. Like Cratylus' account, Socrates' account of the correctness of names is elliptical (he gives, examples, analogies, allusions, etymologies, and, as here, proverbs). And as Cratylus does, we must read carefully into these devices in order to understand his account of the correctness of names. Here in particular, I will show how Socrates' brachylogy and his proverb are both dramatically and philosophically significant.

Socrates' brachylogy (his first 4 words in response to Hermogenes—ὦ παῖ Ἱππονίκου Ἑρμόγενης) already shows an interpretation of Cratylus' thought. This is because Socrates' use of Hermogenes' patronym suggests the importance of lineage or inheritance for an account of language. And indeed, etymology will rely on just such an understanding of inheritance. Socrates' brachylogy further suggests etymology because, from two lines later and throughout the dialogue, we are repeatedly returned to the etymology of Hermogenes' own name (son of Hermes). Because of the importance of inheritance for etymology, we are here drawn to the question elliptically (via "son of Hipponicus"). And finally, Socrates' brachylogy perhaps already suggests a specific etymology, as "Hippoinicus" means "horse-victor," and Socrates will characterize the entire etymological program in terms of chariot races later in the dialogue.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed discussion of the chariot *agon*, see Barney 2001, 57ff.

But Socrates' proverb (χαλεπὰ τὰ καλά) is an even more prominent part of his interpretation of Cratylus throughout the dialogue. First, the idea that beautiful sorts of things are difficult is, as demonstrated above, an allusion not to Cratylus' ideas, but to his style. So, the proverb functions as a hint that a beautiful *logos*, one with an appropriate style, will be difficult to understand.

But furthermore, Socrates' evocation of the proverb throughout the *Cratylus* confirms what was said in the previous chapter about the link between correctness with beauty. Names are frequently described as being given beautifully if they are correct (390d, 400b, 401d, 404e, etc.), and this is further emphasized late in the dialogue by comparing beautifully-made images with beautifully-made names (430-433). Indeed, Socrates even identifies naming and beauty with a linguistic play (a high compliment in the *Cratylus*), describing naming as working beautiful things (καὶ τὸ καλοῦν ἄρα καλά, 416d). And what is more, Socrates encodes an echo of the proverb χαλεπὰ τὰ καλά later in the dialogue when καλόν is etymologized:

Hermogenes: Τί δὲ τὸ “καλόν”

Socrates: Τοῦτο χαλεπώτερον κατανοῆσαι. (416b)

And finally, allusion to the proverb is how Socrates eventually provokes Cratylus to enter the discussion late in the dialogue:

If you have something more beautiful than these things to say, I would not be amazed—for you seem to me to have investigated these things yourself and to

have learned them from others. So, if you will say something more beautiful, then write me down as one of your students on the correctness of names. (428b)

Clearly, this proverb is an important tool in Plato's thinking in the *Cratylus*. But we can also learn what Plato is suggesting by his use of the proverb in other dialogues.<sup>14</sup> For example, the proverb is repeated twice in the *Republic*. In the first instance, Glaucon uses it to encourage Socrates to pursue a line of inquiry which might seem tangential.<sup>15</sup> The second instance is similar: Socrates prods the conversation by using the same proverb.<sup>16</sup> By echoing important themes in the *Republic*, such as the superiority of the desire for τὸ καλόν, the proverb serves a rhetorical function; it is used as a goad to get the interlocutors, and the readers, to continue through the difficulties by keeping a worthy goal in sight. Socrates' use of the proverb in the *Cratylus* does the same; Socrates needs to urge Hermogenes—who, remember, has just asked quite impatiently for a straightforward answer—to put forth the effort to work through Cratylus' difficult and beautiful style.

Indeed, this probably agrees with the ancient interpretation of the proverb. Various scholia report that the proverb originated with Solon as a refrain for those who, like Pittacus and Periander, deliberately turned from success to hardship.<sup>17</sup> In other

---

<sup>14</sup> The conceptual link between χαλεπός and καλός is pervasive throughout Plato; it was clearly one he was interested in. However, I will have to limit myself to focusing only on direct quotations of the proverb.

<sup>15</sup> ἴσως γάρ, ὃ Σώκρατες, τὸ λεγόμενον ἀληθές, ὅτι χαλεπὰ τὰ καλὰ (*Republic* 435c)

<sup>16</sup> τὰ γὰρ δὴ μεγάλα πάντα ἐπισφαλῆ, καὶ τὸ λεγόμενον τὰ καλὰ τῷ ὄντι χαλεπὰ (*Republic* 497d)

<sup>17</sup> This is certainly not the only reading of the proverb, or indeed of the scholia. Here is the text of the *Cratylus* scholium:

παροιμία ἐπὶ τῶν ἐν εὐπραγία μεταβαλλομένων εἰς ὁμότητα. φησὶ δὲ αὐτὴν Δίδυμος ὑπὸ Σόλωνος ἀναφωνηθῆναι ἐπὶ Πιττακῷ ἱκετεύοντι τὴν ἀρχὴν ἀποθέσθαι, καὶ φάντι χαλεπὸν ἐσθλὸν φῦναι, διὰ τὸ Περιάνδρον εἰς ὁμότητα μεταβαλεῖν. ὅθεν, οἶμαι, φησὶ καὶ Μένανδρος (fr. 724 Kock)  
ἀρχὴ μεγίστη τῶν ἐν ἀνθρώποις κακῶν  
ἀγαθὰ τὰ λίαν ἀγαθὰ.

words, Solon was trying to demonstrate how good things could not be attained through a life of ease—something we might well expect Solon to do, given his famous interaction with Croesus.<sup>18</sup> Think, e.g., of Menander’s variation of this idea: “The greatest beginning of evils among men are good things—an excess of good things” (Fragment 724, my translation). And indeed, in the *Cratylus*, Socrates urges Hermogenes to depart from the ease that is language’s superficiality and to embrace the beautiful difficulty of veiled, poetic speech.

Not only does the proverb suggest this as a solution, but Socrates’ use of this proverb would have itself been conspicuous as this type of oblique discourse. For instance, the proverb’s brevity and lyrical assonance and alliteration would have made it poetically forceful, as discussed above by Aristotle. In addition, its origin with the Seven Sages would have granted it the rhetorical status discussed by Aristotle above: it would have been a forceful expression of ancient wisdom.<sup>19</sup> What would have only added to this status is the fact that the proverb echoes the various Heraclitean themes in the *Cratylus* (e.g., the paradoxical-sounding idea that to achieve good one must seek what seems to be

---

μέμνηται δὲ αὐτῆς καὶ Ἐπίχαρμος (fr. 220 Kaibel) καὶ Πλάτων Πολιτεία (497 d) καὶ Κρατύλῳ. (Greene 1981, 1.40)

This is essentially repeated in other scholia, particularly those on the *Hippias Major*. Apart from this, there is a good account of the proverb given in the *Suda* entry, which uses the same individuals (Solon, Pittacus, etc.), but interprets the idea as “it is hard to be good,” or “it is hard for everyone to become good”: “they say that Periander of Corinth in the beginning was a popular leader, but later he changed his political loyalty and became tyrannical. From this comes the proverb. But some take ‘difficult’ as meaning ‘impossible,’ since even he was unable to maintain his own resolve” (*Chi* 16, translated by Catharine Roth). I think this confounds the proverb, for which Plato seems to be the only early source, with the other Platonic χαλεπὸν ἐσθλὸν ἔμμεναι (*Protagoras* 341c, 343b ff.). Plato himself did not identify the two, despite using them in a variety of contexts, and I think this fact further confirms my reading.

<sup>18</sup> Herodotus 1.30.

<sup>19</sup> Alternatively, since Prodicus is a dominant influence on the *Cratylus*, the proverb may be meant to echo Prodicus’ rhetorical piece “The Choice of Heracles,” which proffers similar ideas: the life of virtue is good, but it is a hard road to travel, and one must leave other goods like wealth and reputation to attain it. See also Themistius’ *Περὶ φιλίας* 270c4, where the proverb is used in another rhetorical speech to indicate that virtue is hard to obtain.

the opposite of good, difficulty). For these reasons, it would have been conspicuous as an instance of the same kind of mannered language that Socrates suggests as a solution to the problem of linguistic misrepresentation. This is how Plutarch understands the proverb:

For it is a good thing not to say or do anything at random, and according to the proverb, “Good things are hard.” Speeches made offhand display a large measure of readiness and facility, being characteristic of persons who know not what should be the beginning or where the end. But, apart from all other errors, those who speak on the impulse of the moment fall into a dreadful disregard of limit and into loquacity. Reflexion on the other hand prevents a discourse from exceeding the due limits of proportion. (*De liberis educandis* 6c7, translated by F. C. Babbitt)

Accordingly, an appropriate speech is achieved through careful use of defamiliarized language.

In this way, we can see that a close reading of the proverb shows how Plato probably did not intend it merely as another *jeu de theatre*. And Socrates’ use of the proverb in the *Hippias Major* is certainly a confirmation of this: it is intimately connected with the subject of the dialogue, τὸ καλόν. Because both Hippias and Socrates’ inner voice have challenged him to think hard about beauty, Socrates says “Thus I seem to myself, Hippias, to have been benefitted by communion with both of you; for I now seem to myself to understand the saying ‘beautiful things are difficult’” (304e). In other words,



the conclusion is not that τὸ καλόν is a pretty girl, gold, to be honored and respected, appropriate, useful, favorable, etc., despite the fact that these have been proposed as definitions. Instead, the definition on which the dialogue resolves is that beautiful things are difficult—χαλεπὰ τὰ καλά. This is a non-definition. Or perhaps this is a recognition that what is being spoken of exceeds definition.

The parallels with the *Cratylus* should strike us. Not only does the *Cratylus*, like the *Hippias Major*, continuously defer giving a definition of “correctness,” but it also seems to be concerned with the inadequacy of definitional language. In both dialogues, Socrates enacts this principle himself by giving voice to someone else (his inner self in the *Hippias Major* and Cratylus in the *Cratylus*). And, most importantly, the proverb makes the same suggestion about closure in both dialogues. This is shown by the strategic position of the proverb: it constitutes Socrates’ final words in the *Hippias Major* and his first words in the *Cratylus*. In both cases, Socrates is at the end of his speech. And in both cases, he is resisting the drive for an easy answer from one of his interlocutors. Socrates uses this phrase to suggest that there is no easy or ready-made answer to the difficult question at hand.

A passage later in the *Cratylus* confirms this. As we have already seen, Socrates responds to Hermogenes’ complaint about not understanding Cratylus with the proverb. Toward the end of the dialogue, Hermogenes makes an almost verbatim complaint and this time Cratylus answers—both the complaint and the answer echo Socrates’ proverb in various ways:

Hermogenes: Truly, Socrates, Cratylus frequently submits me to many challenges, just as I was saying at the beginning, saying on the one hand that there is a correctness of names, about which he says nothing clear, with the result that I am unable to know whether each time he speaks unclearly about these things willingly or unwillingly. Now then Cratylus, as you are standing before Socrates, tell me whether the way Socrates speaks about names appeases you, or do you have some other more beautiful way of speaking? And if you have, speak, so that now surely you might learn from Socrates or you might teach both of us.

Cratylus: And what, Hermogenes? Does it seem easy to you to learn and teach anything so swiftly, not to mention so great a thing, which in fact seems to be greatest among the greatest? (427d-e)

Hermogenes thus complains that Cratylus' teachings are *difficult* and asks for a more *beautiful* way of understanding them. Cratylus balks at this, and challenges Hermogenes to consider whether such great and beautiful things can really be had without difficulty. Certainly, the question at stake is whether or not χαλεπὰ τὰ καλὰ. Indeed, this drives right through the last words of the dialogue:

Socrates: It is necessary that we investigate courageously and well, and that we do not approve of things so easily....

Cratylus: These things shall be, Socrates, but even you should try to ponder these things yet again.

This is a refrain that echoes throughout the dialogue (and indeed throughout Plato): beautiful things are difficult, and they require an approach that does not settle so easily on an answer. This is not only a statement about careful inquiry; in the context of the *Cratylus*, it is a comment on the nature of language: language is correct insofar as it does not admit such a simplified or superficial closure on the matter at hand. This is accomplished in part through brachylogy and proverb; the poetic force of this use of language resists being extinguished and reified in definition. It revitalizes itself by being conspicuous, thus provoking reconsideration and further inquiry. As a result, it is laborious or difficult. To echo the chapter's initial discussion: there is no royal road to geometry.

## 2.5 IRONY AND STYLE

These conclusions are also suggested through another aspect of Cratylus' style—irony. When Hermogenes complains that Cratylus “makes nothing clear and feigns ignorance before me,” we might conclude that Cratylus is just being an annoying Heraclitean.<sup>20</sup> But we should resist a dismissive understanding of Cratylus or one that takes him as avoiding answering difficult questions because of his own superficial

---

<sup>20</sup> He certainly has this reputation among modern scholars, even the foremost of who poohpooh him as radicalizing Heraclitus in order to be trendy or edgy, not unlike how Anglo-American philosophy felt about Derrida. See Kahn 1985, 256-8.

understanding. For Hermogenes' brief comment describes Cratylus' style. And as such, as we shall see, it suggests that we should be more attentive to the *figurative* nature of Cratylus' use of language.

The term used for “feigns ignorance” (which is also translated as “is ironical,” εἰρωνεύεταιί) has been the matter of some controversy. For example, Lane 2006 argues that in Plato εἰρωνεύομαι never means “is ironical” (i.e., in the contemporary sense of irony as saying one thing and meaning another) but that it means “dissemble, conceal by feigning, etc.”:

What Cratylus is accused of feigning is not the claim to possess (what he takes to be) knowledge ... It is rather the insinuation that were Cratylus to expound his knowledge, his account would be so compelling that Hermogenes would inevitably and necessarily come to agree. Hermogenes sees this as a feint which conceals the fact that Cratylus may not have such a knock-down proof. (56–7)

I do not accept this reading. Hermogenes is not calling Cratylus' bluff; rather, he sincerely wants to understand and is at the same time sincerely exasperated with Cratylus for not telling him. Both of these considerations tell against interpreting him as hinting at Cratylus' insincerity. Also, given the sympathetic nature of Socrates' response as discussed above (itself a form of irony—of saying one thing in order to suggest another), Lane's thesis should be questioned.

Indeed, Ademollo 2011 does so when he writes that “εἰρωνεύομαι can mean just ‘feign’, as at *Euthd.* 302b, where Dionysodorus is reported to have said something ‘after

pausing most deceitfully [εἰρωνικῶς πάνυ], as if he were considering some big issue” (27n5). He argues that the *Cratylus* passage in question “fits more naturally with such a construal of the verb.” I agree, but only in part, with these conclusions. In the *Cratylus* passage, Hermogenes does refer to Cratylus as speaking in a paradigmatically ironical way (again: saying one thing and meaning another)—like speaking in oracles. But, I will argue, *pace* Ademollo 2011, that what is intended is not irony in the modern sense.

Oddly, an excessive focus on this word and its variants actually misses the word’s diversity,<sup>21</sup> but there is a critically important nuance that should keep us from reading into the term the modern understanding of irony. In our contemporary use, we mean “to say one thing and mean another (opposite or contrary) thing.” While this is certainly one possible use of εἰρωνεύομαι, the word itself has a broader scope. That is, while it does mean “to say one thing and mean another,” the “another” is not necessarily an opposite. Rather, in rhetorical contexts, the “another” simply means something that is conspicuously different from what is said. This may seem to be a slight difference, but it is decisive because it shows how εἰρωνεύομαι is not necessarily a case of modern irony, but rather just indicates what we would call “figurative language.”

Like other uses of figurative language (metaphor, simile, etc.), εἰρωνεύομαι has a wide range of applications, only some of which comprise the modern sense of irony. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle gives us a sense for this:

Compound words, a number of epithets, and “foreign” words especially, are appropriate to an emotional speaker; for when a man is enraged it is excusable for

---

<sup>21</sup> This is recognized by lexicographers, at least. The LSJ entry allows a wide range of meanings, from “self-deprecation” to “sarcasm” and “understatement”; s.v. εἰρωνεύομαι.

him to call an evil “high-as-heaven” or “stupendous.” He may do the same when he has gripped his audience and filled it with enthusiasm, either by praise, blame, anger, or friendliness, as Isocrates does at the end of his *Panegyricus*: “Oh, the fame and the name!” and “In that they endured.” For such is the language of enthusiastic orators, and it is clear that the hearers accept what they say in a sympathetic spirit. Wherefore this style is appropriate to poetry; for there is something inspired in poetry. It should therefore be used either in this way or when speaking ironically (μετ’ εἰρωνείας), after the manner of Gorgias, or of Plato in the *Phaedrus*. (1408b20, trans. J. H. Freese)

Hence, using language ‘with εἰρωνεία’ is a question of the performative nature of language; it is a use of language that becomes stylistically conspicuous.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the question raised in this passage is whether or not such literary devices can be used *appropriately* or *correctly*—in other words, understanding correctness is a matter of understanding style. This is precisely why Hermogenes complains that Cratylus εἰρωνεύεταί. In doing so, Hermogenes puts into question the appropriateness of Cratylus’ style.

Furthermore, in this passage, Aristotle gives two principle examples of this type of style: those of Gorgias and Plato. Although it is perhaps questionable what in Plato’s *Phaedrus* Plato is referencing, it seems probable, given the reference to Gorgias, that

---

<sup>22</sup> εἰρωνεία is mentioned elsewhere in *Rhetoric* 1420a2 as a rhetorical technique (Cf. the performative suggestions made about εἰρωνεία in 1419b8, 1379b31), and it is disputable whether it describes contemporary irony. In support of this, Demetrius 291 describes how ambiguity is not the same as irony, although the latter may be suggested in the former. Furthermore, the “Compound words, a number of epithets, and ‘foreign’ words” that are mentioned here are each central to the etymology section of the *Cratylus*.

Aristotle intends the passages where Socrates employs a Gorgianic style (cf. *Phaedrus* 238d, 241e, etc.). Gorgias' style was ornamental in the utmost, exemplifying the use of compound words, foreign words, and epithets. Gorgias' trademark was precisely in the fact that he pushed the limits of style in oratory (in which it was usually considered more advantageous to avoid such flourish). His rhetorical style was exceptional because it was thoroughly poetic and figurative. But why would it be a case of speaking ironically? Gorgias is certainly not famous for saying one thing and mean something opposite. Rather, he is ironic in the more basic sense that I have been describing: he says one thing in order to suggest another. In other words, his speech is figurative (and ancient εἰρωνεία is tantamount to figurativity). This is confirmed by another example from Aristotle:

Gorgias of Leonti, on the one hand perhaps to raise *aporia* and on the other hand to speak *ironically*, said that, just as mortars are those things made by mortar-makers, so too are Larissans those people made by craftsmen; for some are Larissan-makers. (Γοργίας μὲν οὖν ὁ Λεοντῖνος, τὰ μὲν ἴσως ἀπορῶν τὰ δ' εἰρωνευόμενος, ἔφη, καθάπερ ὄλμους εἶναι τοὺς ὑπὸ τῶν ὀλμοποιῶν πεποιημένους, οὕτω καὶ Λαρισαίους τοὺς ὑπὸ τῶν δημιουργῶν πεποιημένους: εἶναι γὰρ τινὰς λαριστοποιούς, *Politics* 1275b26-30, my translation)

This is a paradigm case of ancient irony, but it is neither a case of feigning ignorance nor of saying one thing and meaning something opposite. Instead, it is simply an example of saying one thing to mean another—of speaking with multiple meanings. The dominant literary device is simile (“just as....so too”), and it is intensified by an ambiguity

(δημιουργός means both craftsman and magistrate) and an etymological play on words (λαριστοποιούς commonly means “kettle-makers”—a λάρισα is a kettle—but is, as I have translated, also intended to mean “makers of Larissans”).

In this example, Gorgias addressed what makes someone a rightful citizen. If we were to paraphrase his point, it would simply be that “citizens are manufactured as citizens by the magistrate.” But for rhetorical purposes, Gorgias chose to state this idea quite elliptically, in the way that made Gorgias famous: poetic molding of rhetorical discourse, figurative language, and conspicuous style. This is ancient εἰρωνεία.

Returning to the *Cratylus*, it has been suggested that the use of εἰρωνεύεται refers unfavorably to Cratylus. Scholars who have studied the word show that it is almost always employed by opponents of Socrates, and almost always in derision.<sup>23</sup> Socrates himself admits that his opponents tend to accuse him of this, and he does so in two of his rhetorical dialogues *par excellence*, in *Apology* 37e-38a and *Gorgias* 489d-e. And in another instance, in Plato’s *Republic*, Thrasymachus

gave a great guffaw and laughed sardonically and said, “Ye gods! here we have the well-known irony of Socrates, and I knew it and predicted that when it came to replying you would refuse and dissemble and do anything rather than answer any question that anyone asked you.” (337a, translated by Shorey; cf. *Symposium* 216d-e)

---

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., Burnet’s 1977 note on *Apology* 38a.



However, although the term is certainly used in order to deprecate Socrates, it is not necessarily the word that accomplishes this. Indeed, Thrasymachus could have said “the well-known *philosophy* of Socrates...” and been just as derisive.

And there is another reason to question the negativity of Cratylus’ ‘irony’: Cratylean irony is much like Socratic irony. Both Cratylus’ and Socrates’ manner of speech frustrates people, but usually that is because those people do not understand what is being done. That is, they do not understand why someone would speak in that way—why they would choose that style of expression. Thrasymachus was not upset by the ideas Socrates may have expressed, but with his reticence to express ideas at all. So it is with Cratylus; he is not playing games, but is thoughtfully engaged with language in a way that does not allow for premature closure of the discussion or reification of what is talked about. He does so through a mode of speech that is ironical only in its figurative sense: of saying (or not saying) one thing in order to cause the hearer to understand another. As with Socrates, we should see Cratylus’ expression or lack thereof as a matter of style, and we should look through that style to the deeper meaning he intends.

## 2.6 CLARITY, THE VIRTUE OF STYLE

Not only is Cratylus’ speech abbreviated and figurative, but it is also not explicit. That is, it is not *clear*. Hermogenes is frustrated with this, and makes such frustration explicit, or explicative, when he remarks, “although I am asking and am very desirous to understand what the hell he is saying, he makes nothing clear” (ἀποσαφέω). Hermogenes feels like he would understand “if [Cratylus] should say it clearly... (σαφῶς)” (384a).

This term, “clarity,” was an important technical term in ancient discussions of style—both rhetorical and poetical. According to Aristotle, clarity is the principle virtue of rhetoric (*Rhetoric* 1404b1-3), and is manipulated but nevertheless maintained to some degree in poetry (1414a22–26). So again, Hermogenes is indicating to us that Cratylus’ style is in question. Cratylus is obviously distancing himself from a plain style and taking sides with a more poetic manner of expression.

This comes as no surprise, given that Cratylus is a disciple of Heraclitus. The latter was renowned anciently for the obscurity of his style. Aristotle tells us that *because of his style*, he was called “the obscure” (ὁ σκοτεινός, *Rhetoric* 3.4.6).<sup>24</sup> And Diogenes Laertius reports that “Euripides gave [Socrates] the treatise of Heraclitus and asked his opinion upon it, and that his reply was, ‘The part I understand is excellent, and so too is, I dare say, the part I do not understand; but it needs a Delian diver to get to the bottom of it’” (2.5, cf. 9.12).<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, Heraclitus’ stylistic obscurity did not consign his legacy to historical obscurity. This is because his style was an integral part of his thought. Hence, when Heraclitus writes that “The hidden attunement is better than the obvious

---

<sup>24</sup> The associated example is of Heraclitus’ infamous grammatical ambiguity: τοῦ λόγου τοῦδ’ ἐόντος αἰεὶ ἄξύνετοι ἄνθρωποι γίνονται. In this passage, it is uncertain whether “always” (αἰεὶ) should go with the word preceding or following it. Kahn’s 1981 reading of this supports my interpretation of Cratylus, Plato, and the etymologies: “What Aristotle noticed, in one of his rare comments on another philosopher’s style, was that the word *aiei* ‘always, forever’ in this opening sentence can be construed either with the words that precede (‘this logos is forever’) or with those that follow (‘men always fail to comprehend’). Aristotle offers no opinion on the construction beyond the appropriate remark that such ambiguity makes Heraclitus hard to read.... But modern scholars have felt obliged to take sides, either in favor of the former construction (which was long predominant, and has been defended recently by Gigon, Verdenius, Frankel, Guthrie, and West), or in favor of the latter (which was urged by Reinhardt, Snell, Kirk, Marcovich, and Bollack-Wismann, among others). What this division of opinion shows is that, as Aristotle observed, *there is good reason to take the adverb both ways*” (93, emphasis added).

<sup>25</sup> The word σκοτεινός is used in the *Republic* to describe the things in the cave; someone who has been outside will be very good at discerning them (7.520c). Similarly, it is used in a way matching the proverb above: things that are σκοτεινός are difficult to understand and require persistence (*Republic* 4.432c; cf. *Philebus* 48b). But they will be rewarding; Herodotus reports that these divers were frequently employed to recover shipwrecked treasure (8.8).

one” (D54), he is making a claim that is at once an interpretation of reality and also an expression of his own style. The surface meaning of his expressions isn’t as significant as the deeper meaning that comes through poetic devices such as allusion, enigma, resonance, and ambiguity. Commenting on this aspect of Heraclitus’ writing, Kahn 1981 says,

The true parallel for an understanding of Heraclitus' style is, I suggest, not Nietzsche but his own contemporaries, Pindar and Aeschylus. The extant fragments reveal a command of word order, imagery, and studied ambiguity as effective as that to be found in any work of these two poets.... Heraclitus is not merely a philosopher but a poet, and one who chose to speak in tones of prophecy. (7)

In other words, although scholars tend to emphasize Heraclitus’ aphoristic style, it really is the calculated poetic elements of his aphorisms that are characteristic of his writing. This could equally have been said of Cratylus—and certainly of Plato. Like Heraclitus, Cratylus and Plato strive for a mode of expression that is appropriate to the reality expressed.

Indeed, there are philosophical reasons for not expressing oneself with banal clarity. According to Aristotle, the virtue of style, especially in the context of oratory, is clarity (*Rhetoric* 1404b1-3), but this is because orators must generally convince normal people who have little time for reflection (poets and philosophers, on the other hand, have an audience with more leisure to reflect). Furthermore, Aristotle does not understand

clarity as some straightforward technical expression of an idea (as we might understand it in modernity), but rather as successfully conveying an idea. That is why he can say that “it is metaphor most of all that possesses clarity, enjoyableness, and distinction” (*Rhetoric* 1405a8, my translation). Metaphors are not generally considered to be the trademark of clear speech, but a good metaphor can often convey an idea much more successfully than a clear but prolix account of it.

Hence, one must use more or less clarity in their style depending on the purposes of the discourse.

Furthermore, there is no ‘neutral’ style, and each manner of expression, even clarity, carries presuppositions about what is expressed.<sup>26</sup> Consider Aristotle’s criteria for good style:

what other reason should style be clear, and not mean but appropriate? If it is prolix, it is not clear; nor yet if it is curt. Plainly the middle way suits best. Again, style will be made agreeable by the elements mentioned, namely by a good blending of ordinary and unusual words, by the rhythm, and by the persuasiveness that springs from appropriateness. (*Rhetoric* 1414a22-26, trans. W. Rhys Roberts)

So, using unambiguous everyday language can contribute to good style, but it does not always do so. *Depending on what is to be expressed*, one might need more or less of it. In the case of more difficult concepts, as with Heraclitus, style that is appropriate to what is expressed might need to fall to the ‘unusual’ side of Aristotle’s spectrum. Indeed, as

---

<sup>26</sup> See Nussbaum 1992.

mentioned above with reference to Gorgias, even orators began to understand and make use of this fact: “the poets seemed to garner reputation through their style, when they spoke simply, and for this reason did their [the orators’] style first become poetic, like that of Gorgias” (*Rhetoric* 3.1.9, my translation).<sup>27</sup>

And this really does seem to be what is going on in the *Cratylus*. Socrates gives a generous interpretation of Cratylus’ position, and he does so largely by trying to see just what it is that different styles of expression can accomplish. To better understand the ancient alternatives to a more straightforward style, Demetrius’ *On Style* is instructive.<sup>28</sup> According to Demetrius, there are 4 Types of Style: ισχνός (plain), μεγαλοπρεπής (elevated), γλαφυρός (elegant), δεινός (forcible). I have already addressed the merits of the ‘plain style.’ And I will omit an account of the ‘elegant style,’ because, for my purposes, the relevant aspects of this style have sufficient overlap with the two types of style discussed below.

We can discern aspects of the ‘elevated style’ throughout the *Cratylus*. For Demetris, style is elevated when it makes the language used conspicuous in itself. This is in contrast to the plain style, wherein words should be readily apprehended or invisible. To see an elevation above this invisibility in the *Cratylus*, one need think no further than

---

<sup>27</sup> ἐπεὶ δ’ οἱ ποιηταί, λέγοντες εὐήθη, διὰ τὴν λέξιν ἐδόκουν πορίσασθαι τὴν δόξαν, διὰ τοῦτο ποιητικὴ πρώτη ἐγένετο λέξις, οἷον ἡ Γοργίου. There is a disturbing variety of translations of this passage, especially of the straightforward εὐήθη. For example: “And as the poets, although their utterances were **devoid of sense**, appeared to have gained their reputation through their style, it was a poetical style that first came into being, as that of Gorgias” (translated by J. H. Freese, 1926). “Now it was because poets seemed to win fame through their fine language when their thoughts were **simple** enough, that language at first took a poetical colour, e.g. that of Gorgias” (translated by W. Rhys Roberts).

<sup>28</sup> Although Demetrius’ categories are undoubtedly anachronistic for Plato, he draws them faithfully from works mostly contemporary to Plato. The authorship of *De Elocutione* is contested, but whoever wrote it, the work is of peripatetic origin and was obviously influenced by Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and was almost certainly referring to Theophrastus’ *περὶ λεξεως*. I use Demetrius because he is much more attentive to Plato as a literary author than Aristotle was.

Socrates' extensive etymologizing. But what is more, the subject matter of the *Cratylus* itself demands a more elevated style. Perhaps in order to correct Aristotle's privileging of the ordinary, Demetrius claims that, in some contexts, the ordinary simply is trivial (πάν δὲ τὸ σύνηθες μικροπρεπές, 2.57). The word for trivial is μικροπρεπές, which is literally less-than-appropriate (μικρο-πρεπές). For great things, such as the nature of language (2.77), the plain style is shabby and petty. For example, the greatness that comes from allegory loses its powerful effect if spoken directly (ἀπλῶς εἶπεν, 2.99,100). What is called for, even in prose texts (2.112), is a grander style—a style more appropriate (πρεπής) to its great (μεγα) subject matter—μεγαλοπρεπής style.

We can also discern elements of Cratylus' style in what Demetrius calls the “forceful style,” which is not wholly separate from the elevated style (5.272). This is the style employed by those using deliberately strong language or those expressing their language in a strong manner. Cratylus fits both of these characterizations. As discussed above, there is power in his brachylogy, and, also as will be discussed below, Cratylus eventually refused to speak at all and communicated only through gesture. Because of this, Plato's audience would have understood that what few words he did say would have been deliberate and forceful.

What is more, Plato's own writing echoes Cratylus' style here. Plato's style was forceful—it took readers by storm (Demetrius 5.298). To describe this effect, Demetrius uses the word ἐκπλήσσω, which means “to drive one out of one's senses with shock.” It was majorly powerful. Plato was a great philosopher with great ideas to express, but the forcefulness of his dialogues was largely due to a style appropriate to those ideas.

## 2.7 ORACLES AND ESOTERICISM

To further challenge the difficulty of Cratylus' style, Hermogenes speaks of "Cratylus' prophetic pronouncement" (τὴν Κρατύλου μαντείαν). This reference to μαντεία is thoroughly pregnant. First, it introduces a range of themes that will be important parts of the argument later in the dialogue. For instance, Socrates will later claim that it is prophetic ability and inspiration that guide him in his etymologizing. And throughout the dialogue, especially in the etymological section, there are references to esoteric practices. Prophecy and esotericism are introduced already in this first paragraph for the same reasons discussed so far: they are forms of expression that try to be true to their content, and they do so by manipulating language and deviating from regular speech.

This is the idea behind Heraclitus' famous explanation of the Delphic Oracle, "The lord whose oracle is in Delphi neither declares nor conceals but gives a sign" (ὁ ἄναξ οὗ τὸ μαντεῖόν ἐστι τὸ ἐν Δελφοῖς, οὔτε λέγει οὔτε κρύπτει ἀλλὰ σημαίνει, D93). The Delphic Oracle speaks indirectly, through imagery, symbolism, ambiguity—in short, figuratively—and understanding her pronouncements required careful reflection and interpretation. Grasping what is meant by an oracle required a recognition that there was a deeper meaning and an attention to what could be suggested through the oracular style.

The way oracular or prophetic declarations do this is by blocking the regular process of understanding language use. In everyday speech, we understand almost immediately what is communicated. Oracular speech makes language strange enough that such immediate grasp is not possible. Such a style of expression provokes a deepening of

understanding that comes by reflecting on what is talked about instead of merely assuming the words have sufficiently conveyed what is talked about. For example, Croesus asked the Oracle at Delphi about the duration of his monarchy and received the response

But when it cometh to pass that a mule of the Medes shall be monarch  
Then by the pebbly Hermos, O Lydian delicate-footed,  
Flee and stay not, and be not ashamed to be callèd a coward” (Herodotus 1.55).

This answer became proverbial in antiquity as an example of one where the surface meaning was ridiculous enough that it should have provoked further reflection. Unfortunately for Croesus, it didn’t. And Croesus should have known better, given the nature of one of his previous inquiries, where the Pythian answered in *hexameter* and with a symbolic and esoteric message that only Croesus could understand:

But the number of sand I know, and the measure of drops in the ocean;  
The dumb man I understand, and I hear the speech of the speechless:  
And there hath come to my soul the smell of a strong-shelled tortoise  
Boiling in caldron of bronze, and the flesh of a lamb mingled with it;  
Under it bronze is laid, it hath bronze as a clothing upon it. (1.47)

Compare this with the metered message given to the Siphnians who asked the oracle about their treasury:



But when with white shall be shining the hall of the city in Siphnos,  
And when the market is white of brow, one wary is needed  
Then, to beware of an army of wood and a red-coloured herald. (3.57)

Indeed, assuming that the most straightforward meaning of an oracular utterance is the correct one brought disastrous consequences—this fact was proverbial in Plato’s day. For example, Oedipus received an oracle that said he would kill his father and marry his mother. He took the oracle at face value and fled his native Corinth, failing to ask who his father and mother really were (Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*). Similarly, King Croesus of Lydia asked the oracle whether he should engage in a preemptive strike against the Persians and was told that, should he do so, a great kingdom would fall. Because the Persians were indeed a great kingdom, Croesus took this to mean he should attack. But doing so destroyed his own great kingdom (Herodotus 1.53, cf. 1.91).

Plato’s readers would have been thoroughly familiar with these and similar cases, and would have understood that there is a different process for interpreting an oracular saying, one that involved attentiveness to the deeper meaning of the words encoded in the message’s style. This is evidenced in perhaps the most famous oracle ‘success story’ in antiquity. The Athenians sent emissaries to Delphi to inquire what to do about the impending Persian threat. After receiving an unambiguously foreboding message, one too terrible to bring back to their leaders,<sup>29</sup> they persisted and received a message advising them:

---

<sup>29</sup> “Why do ye sit, O ye wretched? Flee thou to the uttermost limits, Leaving thy home and the heights of the wheel-round city behind thee! Lo, there remaineth now nor the head nor the body in safety,—Neither

Pallas cannot prevail to appease great Zeus in Olympos,  
Though she with words very many and wiles close-woven entreat him.  
But I will tell thee this more, and will clench it with steel adamantine:  
Then when all else shall be taken, whatever the boundary of Kecrops  
Holdeth within, and the dark ravines of divinest Kithairon,  
A bulwark of wood at the last Zeus grants to the Triton-born goddess  
Sole to remain unwasted, which thee and thy children shall profit.  
Stay thou not there for the horsemen to come and the footmen unnumbered;  
Stay thou not still for the host from the mainland to come, but retire thee,  
Turning thy back to the foe, for yet thou shalt face him hereafter.  
Salamis, thou the divine, thou shalt cause sons of women to perish,  
Or when the grain is scattered or when it is gathered together. (Herodotus 7.141)

The Athenians had a good deal of trouble understanding what this meant, but it was Themistocles whose interpretation carried the day and, as history has it, ended up being true. He argued that the “bulwark of wood” that would save the Athenians was not the hedge around the acropolis, as some argued, but that it would be their ships. So, he encouraged them to build a fleet fit to challenge Xerxes. But what is interesting is not his

---

the feet below nor the hands nor the middle are left thee,—All are destroyed together; for fire and the passionate War-god, Urging the Syrian car to speed, doth hurl them to ruin. Not thine alone, he shall cause many more great strongholds to perish, Yes, many temples of gods to the ravaging fire shall deliver,—Temples which stand now surely with sweat of their terror down-streaming, Quaking with dread; and lo! from the topmost roof to the pavement Dark blood trickles, forecasting the dire unavoidable evil. Forth with you, forth from the shrine, and steep your soul in the sorrow!” (Herodotus 7.140)

foresight or his strategy, but the *way* he understood the oracle—he submitted it to stylistic analysis. He argued that

if these words that had been uttered referred really to the Athenians, he did not think it would have been so mildly expressed in the oracle, but rather thus, “Salamis, thou the merciless,” instead of “Salamis, thou the divine,” at least if its settlers were destined to perish round about it: but in truth the oracle had been spoken by the god with reference to the enemy, if one understood it rightly, and not to the Athenians: therefore he counselled them to get ready to fight a battle by sea, for in this was their bulwark of wood. (7.141)

Themistocles successfully interpreted the oracle because of his attention not to the straightforward meaning of the oracle’s words, but to the diction and style of the oracular declaration. As is repeatedly evidenced, this example is paradigmatic; successful interpreters of the oracle are always attentive to the deeper meaning that is suggested in the oracle’s style.

Because of this, Plato uses the oracle-trope here to provoke *aporia* in Hermogenes. The result of *aporia* is to realize that we don’t have the resources to pursue the question—that our conceptual framework is inadequate. Hence, this dialogue begins with *aporia* in order to do what Plato frequently does: provoke the reader to further thought about the matter in question. Plato does it here at the beginning both for Hermogenes’ sake and for the reader’s sake. He is letting us know that we will not be investigating language in the way one might expect. The language that will be looked

into will be riddled and unclear, but crafted and profound. This is to provoke an interaction with reality as truly “trackless and unexplored” (Heraclitus D18).

However, one might say that Plato moved beyond all of this soothsaying; in fact, the tradition pits him as in reaction against the poets and sophists and as the champion of putting his arguments into straightforward prose. Of course, the past century has vigorously challenged this assumption; it is an inescapable fact that Plato was himself poetic and that he had a productive engagement with the poets. And such an engagement with poetry would not extrapolate the content from poetry, but would be faithful to the poetry by engaging its style.

Doing this is especially necessary for understanding the esoteric nature of the dialogue. We have already seen Hermogenes hint at this esotericism by asking Socrates to guide him to an understanding of Cratylus’ mysterious doctrine, and we shall see many other echoes in Socrates’ own etymologizing.<sup>30</sup> In fact, at one point (the etymology of “justice”), Socrates makes the esoteric nature of his etymologizing explicit, describing how he “persisted... and inquired into all of these things in secret...” (413a). The interaction he then describes is clearly esoteric in nature. The words he uses here (διαπέπυσμαι ἐν ἀπορρήτοις) are the same terms used to describe the investigation of the Pythagorean esoteric doctrines in *Phaedo* 62b (ἀπορρήτοις λεγόμενος περὶ αὐτῶν λόγος) and sophistic esoteric doctrines in *Theaetetus* 152c (ἀπορρήτῳ τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἔλεγεν).

---

<sup>30</sup> The *Derenvi Papyrus* is illustrative: it witnesses that, before Plato, etymologizing was thoroughly connected with esotericism. In addition, Socrates describes how ancient poets hid their meaning from the majority of people “τῶν ἀρχαίων μετὰ ποιήσεως ἐπικρυπτομένων τοὺς πολλούς” (*Theaetetus* 180c-d), and the illustration at stake here is the same Hesiodic and Homeric theogony that will be etymologized in the *Cratylus* (the flux hidden in the names of Oceanus and Tethys); it is contrasted with the σοφωτέρων ἀναφανδὸν of modern times who do, in a banal way, make their meaning clear (ἀποδεικνυμένων).

In support of the conclusions made above, Esotericism proves to be a matter of how something is expressed—a matter of style. The *Theaetetus* passage alluded to above reads, “By the Graces, was Protagoras some sort of totally wise man, and did he utter this dark saying to us, the common rabble, but spoke the truth to his pupils in secret?” (152c). The word used for “utter dark sayings” is αἰνίσσομαι, which is repeatedly used in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* with reference to the riddling of metaphors (1405b4, 1405b5, 1412a24). Plato himself uses the term to indicate a saying that is puzzling (*Republic* 5.479c), is figurative (*Theaetetus* 194c), and hints at a deeper meaning (*Phaedo* 69c, *Gorgias* 495b, *Symposium* 192d, *Lysis* 214d, *Charmides* 162a, and *Alcibiades II* 147d). The term is used to describe the famous saying of the Delphic Oracle in *Apology* 21b4 and in his expression of esotericism *par excellence*, the *Seventh Letter*: “we did not speak openly in this way—for that would not have been safe—but we did so esoterically...” (λέγοντες οὐκ ἐναργῶς οὕτως—οὐ γὰρ ἦν ἀσφαλές—αἰνιττόμενοι, 332d). Finally, Plato connects the use of the term to poetry: “Simonides spoke esoterically, that is, poetically...” (ἡνίξατο ἄρα, ἦν δ’ ἐγώ, ὡς ἔοικεν, ὁ Σιμωνίδης ποιητικῶς, *Republic* 1.332c), and “But he speaks esoterically, best of men, both he and nearly all other poets. For by nature poetry is altogether enigmatic and not every man can happen upon its knowledge” (ἀλλ’ αἰνίττεται, ὃ βέλτιστε, καὶ οὗτος καὶ ἄλλοι δὲ ποιηταὶ σχεδόν τι πάντες. ἔστιν τε γὰρ φύσει ποιητικὴ ἢ σύμπασα αἰνιγματώδης καὶ οὐ τοῦ προστυχόντος ἀνδρὸς γνωρίσαι, *Alcibiades II* 147b-c). What is more, the αἰνιγματώδης of this last reference echoes the Heraclitean style; as described above, Demetrius 4.192 calls him σκοτεινὰ, which is actually the verbal noun of αἰνιγμα (the root of this αἰνιγματώδης—and the etymon of the English “enigma”). Furthermore, the root of αἰνιγμα is an αἴνος (a

fable or story). So, the etymological sense of the word is really to speak in fables—or, as has been discussed, figuratively. Thus, Plato’s esotericism does reference mysteries and secret teachings, but more importantly, it indicates his own engagement with the stylized sayings of poets and philosophers like Heraclitus.

Consequently, I do not read Plato as *thoroughly* esoteric—in the sense that the philosophy of his dialogues *cannot* be unlocked without some secret key. I also do not read Plato’s esotericism as avoiding political retribution (Strauss 1952) or as expressing some all-but-lost Pythagorean numerology (Sachs 2011). My approach is simpler and more pragmatic: Plato does intend a deeper meaning, but he leaves plenty of clues for careful readers to find that deeper meaning in the dialogues themselves. That is, Plato invokes esotericism for now familiar reasons: as a form of discourse that requires attention to style. Speaking an esoteric doctrine outright will misrepresent it. Plato understood this and so he revealed his ideas under the cover of figurative language (symbols, riddles, proverbs, and even some crafted obscurity)—in short, esoterically.

Plato does this for the same reason as Cratylus: to guard against misinterpretation.<sup>31</sup> And by not allowing any straightforward understanding, i.e., an objectification or reification of the matter, misinterpretation is evaded.<sup>32</sup> The intellectual father of both Plato and Cratylus, Heraclitus, also speaks with this aim. He says so explicitly: “Although this account holds forever, men ever fail to comprehend, both before hearing it and once they have heard” (D1)—and: “Not comprehending, they hear

---

<sup>31</sup> Again, this is unlike Strauss because Plato is not *hiding* his views from the uninitiated to avoid the political consequences of expressing them outright. Even if this is true, he has a more fundamental philosophical purpose: to avoid a form of expression that would misrepresent what is brought to language.

<sup>32</sup> A slight variation on this is expressed in *Protagoras* 316d-317a. And, as I will argue below, it is misinterpretation that finally draws Cratylus back into the dialogue.

like the deaf. The saying is their witness: absent while present” (D34). Furthermore, Heraclitus manifests this through his actions: he was said to have deposited his book as a dedication in the great temple of Artemis, inaccessible to the *hoi polloi* (Diogenes Laertius 9.6). Indeed, these esoteric remarks and actions are reflected in Heraclitus’ style, as evidenced by an ancient anecdote regarding Heraclitus: “Do not be in too great a hurry to get to the end of Heraclitus the Ephesian’s book: the path is hard to travel. Gloom is there and darkness devoid of light. But if an initiate be your guide, the path shines brighter than sunlight” (Diogenes Laertius 9.16).

## 2.8 SILENCE

Do you remain silent?

One who keeps silence is

an inscrutable interpreter of language

σιγᾶς· σιωπὴ δ' ἄπορος ἐρμηνεύς λόγων.

*Andromeda* Fr. 126 (Stobaeus

3.34.12, my translation)

Perhaps the most conspicuous aspect of Cratylus’ style is his silence. He speaks only three words in the first lines of the dialogue and then remains silent until the end of the dialogue (i.e., for almost 80% of the dialogue bearing his name) while his ideas are discussed by Socrates and Hermogenes. Because Cratylus is immediately introduced as the *provocateur* of the dialogue, his consequent silence is both conspicuous and

deliberate. So much is clear. But there are a wide variety of interpretations of what his silence means. In this section, I will contribute to this debate by showing how Plato stages Cratylus as silent in a self-conscious appropriation of an ancient literary trope: dramatists, especially Aeschylus, frequently cast a main actor as silent through the first part of a play. I will argue that Plato is, in fact, alluding to a specific occurrence of this trope (Aeschylus' *Achilles Trilogy*), and that he does so to confirm the thesis I have been advancing throughout this chapter: that the style within which a word is employed is integral to that word's resonance and therefore its meaning. Because of this, silence is an impressively appropriate vehicle for expressing the nature of spoken language—as a medium that is incapable of containing all of *logos*—and of language itself—as more fundamentally resonant than semantic.

### 2.8.1 So Much Silence

The most common scholarly response to Cratylus' silence is, well, silence. This major facet of the dialogue is either briefly noted or passed over entirely. But among those that do briefly mention his silence, there is quite the diversity of interpretations. For instance, it is possible to see in Cratylus' dramatic silence what Aristotle reports of his ultimate condition: refusing to use language and receding into total silence.<sup>33</sup> Or it is possible to understand Cratylus' philosophical position about the correctness of names as somehow leaving the individual holding that position with no alternative other than to keep silence. For example, Baxter 1992 writes that

---

<sup>33</sup> *Metaphysics* 1010a10-14.



holding a theory of names that supported flux he comes to see how names too are infected with radical flux, inducing a despair with names that was to lead to eventual silence. (28)<sup>34</sup>

An alternative understanding of this dramatic element of the dialogue is that Plato uses it to say something about his own endorsement of Cratylus' ideas—portraying Cratylus as silent is how Plato charitably disowns Cratylus' ideas:

Why does Plato present the Cratylan view in this way, rather than letting Cratylus speak for himself? There are, I think, important methodological points at stake: one is that it is part of the philosopher's job to take on the sympathetic presentation of views which, though incorrect or incomplete, are in some way important or helpful. Socrates' performance of this function is an emblem of Plato's own practice as a writer of dialogues. Second, Plato wants to make clear that the results will be an improvement: the philosopher is qualified to make the best of any view. (Barney 2001, 56)

---

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Bagwell 2010: "Instead of confessing that his silence was because of the difficulty involved in teaching the correctness of names, Cratylus blamed Hermogenes for expecting Cratylus to be able to make him understand his view of the correctness of names (384a). Cratylus admits that teaching the correctness of names is difficult, but he denies that his failure to teach Hermogenes is due to any difficulty inherent in the subject. Cratylus blames Hermogenes for assuming that teaching the correctness of names is easy" (174-5).

Or perhaps, more simply, Plato is just doing what he frequently does in other dialogues—having Socrates question someone else’s ideas. That is, Cratylus’ silence allows Socrates to more fully take up the questioning of Cratylus’ ideas:

Presenting Cratylus as studiously silent about his own theory may be a device for fictionally enabling Socrates to work it out as his proxy. (Sedley 2003, 77)

Here, Cratylus is in a typically Socratic position—that of avoidance. (Lhomme 2001, 172)

But perhaps the most common interpretation of Cratylus’ silence is to see in it Plato’s expression of Cratylus’ character—as stubborn, prideful, and so on:

Cratylus maintains a Delphic silence through much of the dialogue, and dogmatically sticks to his Heraclitean tenets to the bitter end. (Baxter 1992, 96-97)

Cratylus’ silence in the face of Hermogenes’ questions was part of his enigmatic and superior attitude. (Ademollo 2011, 405)

A final way of understanding Cratylus’ silence is that he simply agrees with Socrates, and that there is nothing more to say about the matter.<sup>35</sup> This goes hand-in-hand

---

<sup>35</sup> This is Socrates’ own playful (and doubtless ironic) suggestion, given at 435b. I will argue in Chapter 5 that this is the dominant interpretation of Cratylus’ silence and that it is thoroughly mistaken.

with the opposite interpretation—that Cratylus is disdainfully silent in his disagreement—and its correlate—that Cratylus is silent because he has been shamed or bested by Socrates—he is stumped.<sup>36</sup>

Doubtlessly, aspects of each of these interpretations echo in Cratylus' silence. However, there are good reasons to reject each as insufficient. For although Plato does frequently portray silences that result from shame, shyness, and befuddlement,<sup>37</sup> we have little reason why Cratylus' main silence is of such a sort. We have only a fragmentary account of the conversation with Hermogenes that preceded the dialogue, but it seems improbable that Hermogenes has given Cratylus a puzzling request—indeed, quite the opposite is manifestly the case.

Furthermore, Cratylus simply does not agree with Socrates (whether out of vainglory, dogmatism, or whatever). I will defer a full discussion of this aspect of Cratylus' silence to Chapter 5, where I give a thorough interpretation of how Cratylus breaks his silence. In that chapter, I demonstrate how, although it is possibly the unanimous interpretation of scholars, Cratylus does not agree with Socrates.<sup>38</sup>

In like manner, Cratylus is not silent *because* he disagrees, either. As I will demonstrate below, his silence is the expression of a more complex sort of relationship

---

<sup>36</sup> This is a common Platonic *topos*. E.g., in *Theaetetus* 146a, Socrates asks, “why the silence?” because Theaetetus has been driven to silence by the difficulty of the argument. Socrates and Theodorus then spend some time discussing the reason for Theaetetus' silence, thus drawing further attention to it. In *Euthydemus* 286b, Ctesippus fell silent because of the difficulty of the argument, and at 299d, Euthydemus falls silent for the same reason. In *Protagoras* 360d, Socrates reduces even Protagoras to silence. Finally, and perhaps most recognizably an instance of this, Socrates reduces his accuser Meletus to silence at *Apology* 24d.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. the spurious though Platonic *Rival Lovers*, which ends with a silence: “When I said this, the wise fellow was ashamed at what he'd said before, and fell silent, while the unlearned one said that I was right; and the others approved of what I'd said” (139a, translated by Mitscherling). Cf. also Lysias' shy silence in *Lysias* 222. Instances such as these deliberately imitate the sort of dramatic shame-silence portrayed, e.g., in Euripides' *Andromeda* or Aeschylus' *Niobe*.

<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Plato plays with the fact that Cratylus is not silent because of agreement later (after Cratylus has broken his main silence) at 435b, where Socrates chides: “I take your silence as a sign of agreement....”

with language itself. That is, what Plato suggests is similar Neoptolemus' silence in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*: Neoptolemus has stolen Philoctetes' bow, and Philoctetes begs him to return it. Neoptolemus is silent in the face of these pleas, which Philoctetes takes to signify that Neoptolemus is bent against him. However, the reader eventually sees in this silence neither agreement nor disagreement, but rather a profound transformation of character (cf. 965f.), as Neoptolemus struggles with a change of heart. Cratylus, too, is in anguish over his relation to language, and is troubled by what he will be committing himself to if he decides to speak. He neither agrees nor disagrees with Socrates, but, as I will show, he is considering how to respond without sacrificing any truth to the misrepresentation of spoken language.

### **2.8.2 Silence is Counter-Culture**

Cratylus' silence would have been conspicuously foreign to Plato's immediate audience. The contemporary culture was one of speech—it was the way of the *agora*, it was what counted in the assembly, it was what made for the outrageous popularity of the sophists. It was even more proper in private contexts. Consider, e.g., Eryximachus' remarks in the *Symposium*:

This is certainly most improper. We cannot simply pour the wine down our throats in silence: we must have some conversation, or at least a song. What we are doing now is hardly civilized. (214b, translated by Reeve).

Being human, or being civilized, plays itself out in speech—think of the ἑλληνισμός of the previous chapter, or of Aristotle’s ζῶον λόγον ἔχον. In a telling passage, Aristotle even expresses how the lack of speech is the lack of manliness: “All classes must be deemed to have their special attributes; as the poet says of women, Silence is a woman’s glory, but this is not equally the glory of man” (*Politics* 1260a29-30). The glory of man, of course, is speech.

### 2.8.3 Significant silence

Dramatists used this fact—the importance of speech for Greek culture—to their poetic advantage.<sup>39</sup> That is, they carefully portrayed characters as silent to achieve powerful effects. Taplin 1972 describes how this is foreign to our modern experience of drama:

In the theatre today silences are usually total: there is a hiatus, during which nobody speaks. Most previous theatres, including the Greek theatre, have generally avoided empty pauses, and have tended to a continuity of sound. In surviving Attic tragedy there is scarcely anywhere, so far as I can see, where the text obliges us to suppose a total silence of more than a few seconds. (57)

---

<sup>39</sup> While the dramatic use of silence is what I investigate here, it should be noted that silence was itself interesting to sophists as well—of course, for different purposes. Think, e.g., of “the speaking of the silent” in *Euthydemus* 299b ff. that Aristotle is fond of unmasking in *Sophistical Refutations* (he references it no fewer than 8 times as an example of a disingenuous ambiguity, e.g. 165b30–4).

Because the Greeks were so attentive to the absence of speech, the existence of silences in Greek drama become especially conspicuous as deliberate action on the part of the author. I will now show how Greek dramatists used this fact and what this means for our understanding of Cratylus' silence.

### **2.8.3.1 Referring to Silence**

One could certainly interpret any trace of silence as significant. However, there is an ancient literary trope that helps us identify some silences as especially significant—a way the author presents some silences as silences, by having the characters of a play reference another character's silence.

Each of the major dramatists (Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides) makes use of this device by having a character or a chorus make comments about the silence of another character. Sometimes the character or chorus conjectures as to what motives underlie the silent character's silence. These attempts usually precede the silent character breaking his or her silence and either confirming or defending himself or herself against such conjectures. For example, in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Cassandra is referenced as present but refrains from speaking until hundreds of lines after her entrance (thus paralleling the oracular indirection that is her lot). This causes both the chorus and Clytemnestra to conjecture that Cassandra might not speak Greek (1050-1063). Of course, Cassandra will defend the intelligibility of her ideas, but to no avail. Similarly, Clytemnestra is present yet silent at various points during the play (e.g., at 258-350, 587-614, 855-974, 1035-1068), veritably, and appropriately, haunting the action of the play. In Sophocles'

*Oedipus at Colonus*, Theseus and Antigone despair openly and beg Oedipus not to continue in silence (1180ff.). And in Euripides' *Hippolytus* (243-352), Phaedra veils herself and falls silent while her nurse and the chorus muse about her silence; when Hippolytus is mentioned as a potential reason for this silence, Phaedra can't contain herself and bursts into language again. Finally, in Euripides' *Suppliants*, Adrastus approaches in veiled silence while the other characters discuss why this man has approached them.

When the audience's attention is deliberately directed towards a character's silence in this way, the silence changes from a mere theatrical device to a significant part of the work. That is, they are silences that the author wants the audience to be attentive to in order to grasp their deeper meaning. Scholars of the classics call these *significant silences*. Taplin 1972 describes such silences in Greek theater:

dramatists have discovered and demonstrated that a silence can be imbued with significance; that it can say more, on occasion, than ever words could say. When a silence means something, the attention of the audience is directed to it; they are invited to consider its significance. Such a silence is no mere technical necessity; it is a meaningful part of the play. (57)

Plato recognizes this fact and uses it to his philosophical advantage. Not only does Cratylus not speak, but in various ways Plato draws our attention to his silence. During most of the dialogue, Cratylus is referenced more than he is addressed (besides the introductory pages, see 390d, 407e, 408b, and 427d). He is frequently referenced in a

way that recognizes his silence—in a way that wouldn't make sense if the interlocutors thought Cratylus might respond to their claims. Think of some of Hermogenes' first words, for example:

And although I am asking and am very desirous to understand what the hell he is saying, he makes nothing clear and feigns ignorance before me, pretending that he knows something in himself as if he knows about this [correctness], which, if he should say it clearly, he would bring it about that I would agree and that I would say just what he says. (383b-384a)

The remainder of the dialogue is Socrates' unpacking of what Cratylus must have meant by what he said (and by what he doesn't say). Following this, Hermogenes again references Cratylus' silence by asking him to break it:

Now then Cratylus, as you are standing before Socrates, tell me whether the way Socrates speaks about names appeases you, or do you have some other more beautiful way of speaking? And if you have, *speak*, so that now surely you might learn from Socrates or you might teach both of us. (427e)

Even after Cratylus has broken his silence and entered the conversation, Socrates continues to reference his silence, such as at 435b, when Cratylus falls briefly silent: “since we agree about these things, Cratylus—for I fancy that your silence is agreement....” So, what is this significant silence meant to demonstrate? I will unpack



the various aspects of Cratylus' dramatic silence by first showing how significant silences were employed in the theater of Plato's day.

### 2.8.3.2 Starting in Silence

One powerful use of this device has a main character enter the play silent and remain silent until a decisive moment. This is likely what Aristotle approvingly suggests in his *Rhetoric*: "Bring yourself on the stage from the first in the right character, that people may regard you in that light; and the same with your adversary; but do not let them see what you are about" (1414b6-8). Sometimes this sort of silence even precedes the play (as described by the characters that do speak). For example, Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* portrays a sentry who has been on the lookout with no news of Troy for years—alone and waiting in silence. And in Euripides' *Orestes*, Electra has been watching over her brother for days. In Aristophanes' *Clouds* and *Wasps*, the characters have been there all night. And in Aeschylus' *Niobe*, Niobe would presumably have been waiting for days.

Plato is well-aware of this trope and employs it in the first lines of the *Crito*:

Socrates: Why have you come at this hour, Crito, for is it not still early?

Crito: Indeed, it is.

Socrates: Precisely how early is it?

Crito: Just before dawn.

Socrates: I am amazed that the prison guard was willing to heed you.... Did you just come, or have you been here for a long time?

Crito: For quite a long time.

Socrates: Then why did you not straightway awaken me, but sit beside me in silence? (43a-b)

Because the reader knows that each moment of Socrates' life, especially at this point, is precious, this initial silence would have created a tension and focus on what Socrates does say. The *Cratylus* does something similar. Hermogenes tells us that before the dialogue, Cratylus has refused to elaborate on—i.e., he has remained silent with respect to—his theory of linguistic correctness. Immediately, the reader desires to hear Cratylus elaborate. When he finally does, the reader is conditioned to expect that what is said will be valuable and decisive.

### **2.8.3.3 The Power of Silence**

In many cases of significant silence, the silence is not readily broken. As the characters of a play reference the silence, speculate on its causes, and otherwise motivate

the situation, the silence becomes more and more prominent. It gains greater power. For example, in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus enters and maintains his silence in the face of Hephaestus, Kratos, and Bia, who meanwhile shackle Prometheus and comment on his plight. Or in the *Agamemnon*, Cassandra's silence only becomes more and more powerful as the lines go on; we know she is a seer and we know she her prophecy is going to be decisive for the play, and the viewer doubtlessly becomes more and more anxious to hear what she has to say.

Similarly, in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, Heracles enters and exits the play in silence. The chorus remarks on this, causing an increase in tension and in the power of Heracles' eventual speech. (Cf. the silence of Iole in the same play.) And in *Oedipus at Colonus*, one can feel Oedipus' resentment brimming as he stewes in silence. When he breaks his silence, his words are consequently much more powerful in their harshness.

Finally, as mentioned above, Euripides' *Hippolytus* stages Phaedra as sitting silently while her nurse and the chorus speculate about her silence—meanwhile, the tension builds and her situation is invested with a great deal of power.

The fact that such deliberate and significant silence is accompanied by a supralinguistic power is not an insight exclusive to the Attic dramatists. Indeed, Homer frequently dramatizes silence, such as when Thetis' weighty request causes Zeus to lapse into silence (book 1), Hera falls silent in fear of Zeus' rage (book 1) or when the Achaeans marched in courageous silence (book 3). Perhaps most pertinent is the sort of silence that falls after a great speech: “ὥς ἔφαθ', οἳ δ' ἄρα πάντες ἀκὴν ἐγένοντο σιωπῇ.” This phrase occurs 10 times in the *Iliad* and 6 times in the *Odyssey*, and always follows the moving or powerful discourse of the likes of Hector, Priam, Agamemnon, Achilles,

Nestor, or Diomedes (a dramatic trope that Plato shows awareness of in *Republic* III.389e). This is Homer's attempt at dramatizing the sheer gravitas of silence when it is an aspect of language. In support of this idea, Longinus records that

I have already said that of all these five conditions of the Sublime the most important is the first, that is, a certain lofty cast of mind. Therefore, although this is a faculty rather natural than acquired, nevertheless it will be well for us in this instance also to train up our souls to sublimity, and make them as it were ever big with noble thoughts. How, it may be asked, is this to be done? I have hinted elsewhere in my writings that sublimity is, so to say, the image of greatness of soul. Hence a thought in its naked simplicity, even though unuttered, is sometimes admirable by the sheer force of its sublimity; for instance, the silence of Ajax in the eleventh *Odyssey* is great, and grander than anything he could have said. (*On the Sublime* IX, translated by Havell)<sup>40</sup>

Even Herodotus frequently comments on instances of this sort of silence. One especially memorable instance was when Periander sent a messenger asking advice of Thrasybulus in how he should maintain his kingship. Thrasybulus said nothing to the messenger, but walked with him through a cornfield, cutting the tops off the tallest and best of his crop. The messenger thought it strange that he did not speak, but his silent actions struck Periander with a great deal of force and he knew what he needed to do

---

<sup>40</sup> Lhomme 2001 does not have this Homeric context in mind, but he makes the same conclusion about the *Cratylus*: that Cratylus' silence reflects the fact that his ideas are more powerful than can be spoken in traditional forms of argument—i.e., that Cratylus' "Ce silence est plutôt le signe de la force d'une thèse qui n'a pas besoin d'être polémiquement soutenue, débattue" (174).

(5.92). As Demetrius notes, “a sudden lapse into silence is often yet more forcible [than further speech]” (5.253).<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, Plato is thoroughly aware of this device. Think, e.g., of how he portrays Thrasymachus in the *Republic*: he is mentioned at the outset as present, but then he sits silently for the initial discussion. We are told that

And while we were in the midst of discussing, Thrasymachus frequently had to be restrained from taking hold of the discussion, since those sitting around him wanted to hear the whole discussion. But as we were paused after I had said these things, he was no longer able to keep quiet, but turning himself about sharply like a wild beast, he came upon us as if to tear us into pieces. (336b)

Thrasymachus’ contribution to the discussion became more powerful as a result of his antecedent brewing silence. His entrance causes Socrates to quake with fear.

We are to read Cratylus’ silence as similar in this respect as well—it is invested with power as the dialogue continues. Like Thrasymachus, we know he is there and that he is quite opinionated regarding the topic they are discussing. The reader expects the eponymous work to include some dialogue with its main character—and page after page, the expectation builds.

#### 2.8.3.4 Breaking the Silence

---

<sup>41</sup> Another memorable example is when the Scythian king sent the Persian king Darius a silent message: a bird, a mouse, a frog, and five arrows (4.131). This was a powerful gesture, not unlike the biblical instance of the Levite who cut up an unfaithful concubine into 12 pieces and sent one to each of the tribes of Israel (*Judges* 19).

This leads directly to a final aspect of silence—that of breaking the silence. As mentioned above, when Oedipus, Cassandra, and Phaedra finally break their respective silences, the impact is iconic and powerful. Think, for example, of Euripides' *Heracles*, where two characters discuss a pivotal part of the play while Theseus silently approaches—Theseus breaks his silence with dramatic action that is made more powerful by his antecedent silence: he strips Heracles of his head covering (thus uncovering his lamentable and shameful deeds). The play has led us to expect this disclosure through Theseus' silent approach.

Even if no great amount of tension has built over the silence of a certain character, there is usually great significance in what the character says when the silence is broken. For example, in Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*, Pylades is silent through most of the play, but no attention is drawn to this silence. Nevertheless, when Pylades does speak, he provides arguably the most decisive lines of the play:

Orestes: Can I my mother spare? speak, Pylades.

Pylades: Where then would fall the hest Apollo gave

At Delphi, where the solemn compact sworn?

Choose thou the hate of all men, not of gods.

Indeed, as in so many instances, Aeschylus' dramatic technique here was interesting to more intellectuals than Plato. For example, in Aristophanes' *Frogs*,

Aeschylus himself is parodied for portraying his characters as silent—Aeschylus remains silent from his entry.

Dionysus: Why are you silent, Aeschylus? You hear what he says.

Euripides: First he'll put on solemn airs, just as so often he used to pull those hoaxes in his tragedies. (831-833)

...

Euripides: And then after he pulled this cheap trick, and the play was already half over, he'd speak a dozen bullish words With eyebrows, crests, some awful witch-faced things, Unknown to the audience. (923-926, translated by Dillon; see Michelakis 1999, 199 and 238)

In conformity with his own staging efforts, Aeschylus remains silent while expectations as to what he will say are developed. When he does break his silence, it is poetic and forceful.

Again, so it is in the case of the *Cratylus*. Tension builds throughout the dialogue, and readers are brought to expect the words Cratylus eventually does speak to be decisive. And as I describe in Chapter 5, that is precisely what happens—when he does speak, he gives us a clue as to how to value the etymologies, and thus how to understand the nature of language.

#### **2.8.4 THE ACHILLES TRILOGY**

But there are additional dramatic suggestions we can glean from this literary trope—indeed, from instances more closely related to the *Cratylus*.<sup>42</sup> To do this, we must take a cue from later in the dialogue. When Cratylus does break his silence, he does so with a quotation identifying himself with Achilles. I will explore this identification and its implications more fully in Chapter 5, but it is significant to recognize the fact here. Given the nature of Cratylus' identification with Achilles, Plato's audience would naturally have thought about Aeschylus' strikingly similar portrayal of Achilles in the contemporary *Achilles Trilogy*.<sup>43</sup>

In this section, I will show how Achilles' silence in this trilogy is exemplary of the significant silences above, how it is parallel to the case of Cratylus, and what that means for the nature of language. Specifically, I argue that the parallel further demonstrates my thesis in this chapter so far, that the style within which a word is employed is integral to that word's resonance and therefore its meaning. Specifically, I show how Plato is aware of this and portrays Cratylus as especially concerned with spoken language's (in)ability to contain all meaning.

#### **2.8.4.1 The *Myrmidons***

---

<sup>42</sup> The only scholar I know of to identify this similarity is Nightingale 2003, 226, who recognizes that Cratylus is a type of Aeschylean silence, but makes nothing more of it.

<sup>43</sup> The *Achilles* trilogy is a dramatic representation of the 'Embassy Scene' in the *Iliad*, so the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>-century audience would have been especially attentive to this more recent work. This fact is confirmed by the sudden proliferation of this scene on vase paintings—often with characters like Diomedes who were not part of the *Iliad* version of the scene but who could have been part of Aeschylus' staging—following the production of the play (see Michelakis 1999, 236). Furthermore, Aristophanes' *Frogs* supports the idea that it is Aeschylus to whom we should turn, as he also identifies Achilles as a paradigm of Aeschylean silence (*Frogs* 911-913). Plato is primarily concerned with the *Iliad* episode (as I describe in Chapter 5), but, like Aristophanes does in *Frogs*, he imitates Aeschylus' staging of the silent Achilles.



In Aeschylus' *Myrmidons*, Achilles is portrayed as callously silent while he is petitioned to help his comrades in battle.<sup>44</sup> He enters veiled and totally silent while a chorus tells the audience why he is silent. Amidst the pleas and reproaches of the chorus and various heralds, Achilles maintains his silence. It is not until very late in the play that Achilles speaks.

Like the above parallels, this is a case of significant silence: Aeschylus not only draws attention to the silence but to the reasons for the silence. And, again in line with the above parallels, this silence invests Achilles with power. This is especially evident in the 5<sup>th</sup>-century vase paintings which portrayed staged scenes from the play, which scholars argue would be iconographically parallel to the play's actual staging.<sup>45</sup> Therein, Achilles is consistently portrayed as hunched over in a pose that Michelakis 1999 describes as "coiled" (240) and like "a spring before it is sprung" (238). And finally, conforming to the parallels identified above, the silence is broken in a striking manner (see Fragment 132c).

But what is more, Achilles' silence in the *Myrmidons* directly parallels Cratylus' silence in the *Cratylus*. As mentioned above, Cratylus breaks his silence by identifying himself with Achilles—the Achilles of the very scene portrayed in the *Myrmidons*. Thus, Plato has Cratylus set himself up as an Achilles-type, but specifically as the Achilles who rejects all supplications. And Cratylus' silence, like Achilles', is referred to and made conspicuous and significant. And as with Achilles, Cratylus' prolonged silence causes

---

<sup>44</sup> The entire trilogy exists only in fragments, but there is enough ancient testimony to reconstruct the relevant details of these plays with a reasonable accuracy. This aspect, Achilles' silence at the outset of the *Myrmidons*, comes mainly from Aristophanes' *Frogs* (911-913; see Taplin 62).

<sup>45</sup> see Michelakis 1999, 236 Sommerstein 2009 supports this by pointing out that there is a parallel series of vases linkable to *Nereids* (135).

tension, and the breaking of his silence marks a turn in the dramatic progress of the work (again, see Chapter 5). Finally, both Cratylus and Achilles break their silence with vehement language—what Taplin calls “martial bombast” (65).

#### **2.8.4.2 The *Nereids***

The second Play in the trilogy is the *Nereids*, wherein, again parallel to the *Iliad*, we know that Thetis and other nymphs bring Achilles his new armor.<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately, this play is too fragmentary for us to know whether or not Achilles is portrayed as silent. However, there are several reasons to assume that he was. First, we know that the other two plays in the trilogy portray Achilles as initially silent in the face of pleas by his peers—and then as breaking his silence with a great show of words. And we know that these two initial silences are portrayed on period vase paintings by having a veiled Achilles sit, avoiding the glance of other characters present at the scene. If the *Nereids* stages the scene where Achilles gets new armor from Thetis, and if we can take Achilles veiled sitting as a visual representation of silence, then we have excellent reason to believe he is silent at the outset of the *Nereids*. For this scene is also illustrated in period vases by a veiled Achilles sitting and avoiding the glance of Thetis.<sup>47</sup>

#### **2.8.4.3 The *Phrygians***

---

<sup>46</sup> West 2000 argues that the *Nereids* was actually the *third* in the trilogy and that the topic was the death of Achilles. This incredible divergence in opinion is possible because we have so few extant fragments of this dialogue, but it is the minority position.

<sup>47</sup> Again, because of the fragmentary nature of this play, it is unclear if there are further parallels to the *Cratylus*.

Finally, in the *Phrygians*, Achilles is approached by Hermes, to whom he speaks only a few words before falling silent and refusing to reply further (see scholia to Aristophanes, *Frogs* 911 and *Life of Aeschylus* 6). The remainder of the play concerns Priam's petition to a silent Achilles to return the body of his son, Hector.

This is another instance of significant silence as outlined above. Aeschylus draws attention to Achilles' silence by having a brief interchange followed by Achilles' refusal to speak. Again, due to the fragmentary nature of this play, we don't have a precise sense for how the rising tension surrounding Achilles' silence was fostered, but given the portrayal of Aeschylus' use of the silence-trope in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, and given our knowledge of the scene from the *Iliad*, we can surmise that Achilles' refusal to budge at Priam's supplication would have, at every moment, nurtured further anxiety in the audience. And that this tension would have erupted in Achilles' eventual words. Indeed, we do know that when he did speak, he surprises the audience by accepting the very offer he rejected in the *Iliad* version of the scene: Hector's weight in gold in exchange for Hector's body.

Furthermore, just as Achilles falls silent after his short interchange with Hermes in the *Phrygians*, so does Cratylus fall silent after his short interchange with Hermogenes in the *Cratylus*. This dramatic parallel is played out on several levels. Besides the fact that Cratylus is an Achilles-figure and that both Cratylus and Achilles fall silent after some short interchange with some character, the figure to whom both initially speak is significant. That is, it is further the case that Hermogenes is a Hermes-figure in the *Cratylus*. Before the dialogue began, Cratylus suggested that "Hermogenes" was not a

correct name for Hermogenes. Socrates spends much of the rest of the dialogue interpreting this suggestion, primarily by putting into question whether or not Hermogenes is etymologically adequate to his name—i.e., if he really is of the race of Hermes. And, just like Hermogenes initiates this discussion of the correctness of names, Hermes introduces what will be the theme of the play. Both characters usher in the theme of the play, a theme that will be played out on the battleground of language itself. (Hence the god of language is extremely appropriate.)

### **2.8.5 Philosophical Implications**

Plato's appropriation of Aeschylus' staging confirms the theses advanced so far in this chapter. First, Plato uses this specific parallel because of its fitness for expressing the idea that style is integral to meaning. That is, Plato is concerned with understanding that aspect of language which exceeds the semantic content of the actual words. Language, in the absence of actual words, has only its style, its way of expressing (or not expressing) what is expressed. With reference to the Achilles trilogy, Michelakis 1999 claims that

In the *Myrmidons* it is not silence which is equivalent to impotency, but language. Unlike, say, in the Homeric assemblies, where silence is an undesirable action... manifesting someone else's power, in Aeschylus it is a self-conscious decision, a weapon against those who attempt to impose their will on Achilles. (238)

And indeed, the same can be said of silence in Plato's *Cratylus*: it is a self-conscious practice that functions as Cratylus' primary response to his interlocutors. But whereas the expert warrior Achilles decides to fight with silence (this weapon that is a non-weapon), the expert with language Cratylus decides to speak with silence (this language that is a non-language). In this way, Plato has Cratylus challenge the traditional idea that language is exhausted by what can be put into words.

Similarly, when Achilles and Cratylus refrain from battle and language, respectively, they demonstrate a clever alternative to how they would be expected to respond to their respective situations. That is, Achilles really ought to return to battle, but he knows that doing so would imply complicity with what he saw as a flawed political situation (one based on having had his prized Briseis taken away from him). Cratylus refrains from speaking for a parallel reason: he knows that responding with language—even in disagreement—implies his complicity in the very language system that has misrepresented his own words. That is, like Achilles, Cratylus is dissatisfied with the whole way that his own efforts are framed (based on having had his prized *logos*—his account of language—taken away from him). Again, compare what Michelakis 1999 has to say about the Achilles trilogy: “Achilles’ breaking of his silence, like the silence itself, challenges the linguistic structure of the *Myrmidons* and the claim of language to meaning and authority” (238). In a culture dominated by language, and in such linguistically-centered media (drama and philosophy), such silences would have been conspicuous to the point of suggesting these profound conclusions regarding language.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Indeed, there are significant thematic parallels that I can't discuss here. E.g., Achilles' εἶπον οὐ ψευδῇ λέγων (132c.26) or Patroclus' [ο]ὐδαμῶς πρέπει τόδε (132c.34).

### 2.8.6 Plato's Other Silences

It is important to note that the sort of silence I am identifying here in the *Cratylus* is not an isolated instance for Plato. Indeed, Plato uses silences in a variety of contexts in just as nuanced a manner—and, indeed, he frequently does so for the same reason (to demonstrate an avoidance of the confines of determinate discourse).

For example, in the *Hippias Minor* 363a, Eudicus reproaches Socrates for remaining silent and neither praising or criticizing Hippias' speech about τὸ καλὸν. However, Socrates clearly wants to avoid saying anything because doing so would acknowledge a problematic framework (the praise/blame dichotomy that is formulaic in the epideictic context). Furthermore, Socrates refrains from saying anything because doing so would commit him to a certain faulty interpretation of τὸ καλὸν, something which he avoids by his silence.

Similarly, in *Gorgias* 506c, Callicles falls silent in what appears to be simply a sort of stubborn embarrassment in the face of defeat. However, a closer reading shows that Callicles' silence is quite calculated for its political implications—resistance and retaining control of his own *logos*.<sup>49</sup>

Perhaps the most significant parallels of Platonic silences come from Socrates' own prolonged silences (in the *Timaeus*, *Critias*, and *Sophist*, e.g.). Socrates makes a few initial comments and then falls silent while another speaker guides the discussion. Just like Achilles speaks briefly to Hermes before falling silent or Cratylus speaks briefly to Hermogenes before falling silent. There are, of course, a variety of interpretations of

---

<sup>49</sup> Algozin 1977 holds a similar interpretation, calling Callicles' silence “the appropriate counter-declaration of the tyrannical soul” (238).

these silences.<sup>50</sup> But it is striking that in the *Sophist*, perhaps the most thematic successor to the *Cratylus*, Socrates is silent for complex reasons that echo his silence in the *Cratylus*: Plato is concerned with *logos* beyond determinate discourse.<sup>51</sup> Think of how Plato expresses this idea in the *Phaedrus*:

Socrates: Phaedrus, I suppose there's a terrible thing about writing that is truthfully similar to painting: the children of the latter [i.e., paintings] stand there like living things, but if someone were to question them, they would remain majestically silent. The same goes for linguistic beings: you might think that they speak with some understanding, but if you want to learn more and question those things that have been said, they always only signify the same one thing.

(*Phaedrus* 275d)<sup>52</sup>

Both painting and language appear alive, but lack the power to respond for themselves. Once they have been articulated, they become determinate and inflexible. Cratylus understands this for what it is and he crafts his response so as not to be pinned down in this way. In doing so, he recognizes the correlative similarity that language has with painting—that although the painting does not verbalize words, it nevertheless does not remain entirely silent. The silence speaks.

---

<sup>50</sup> For a good survey of these in the *Sophist*, see Eades 1996.

<sup>51</sup> Here I must simply agree with Clanton 2007, as the scope of this chapter allows no more detailed engagement with the *Sophist*. I will note that this option is not exclusive of the interpretive alternatives mentioned in the previous note.

<sup>52</sup> Think of how, in the *Andromeda*, Perseus mistakes Andromeda for a statue in her silence. Or think of Niobe, who used language too freely and was consequently turned into a statue (*Niobe*).

Indeed, in the *Cratylus* and in the *Sophist*, Plato portrays his masters (Cratylus and Socrates) as engaged in his own enterprise: speaking through remaining silent—philosophically silent. Socrates and Cratylus (and Plato) remain silent in a medium that is composed of language. Because of this, and because they are silent in dialogues that are *about* language, their silence becomes especially conspicuous and thus significant for what that silence can tell us about language. Again, remember Socrates’ description of an authentic sort of living language in the *Phaedrus*: a *logos* that “is able to defend itself, knowing before whom it should speak remain silent” (276a). Socrates and Cratylus exemplify this ability continue in *logos* while remaining silent.

### 2.8.7 Conclusions Regarding Silence

Cratylus’ silence is not utter silence. Rather, it is a significant silence. That is, it is the sort of silence employed by Plato’s contemporary dramatists—a silence which says something that is better expressed (or perhaps cannot be expressed) in explicit language. As such, the silent Cratylus looms large throughout the dialogue bearing his name. He refrains from speaking, but not from expressing his understanding of language. Hence, although commentators tend to give superficial interpretations of Cratylus’ silence,<sup>53</sup> we can see by virtue of the parallels with Aeschylus’ *Achilles Trilogy* that we are to glimpse Cratylus’ theory through his silence.

---

<sup>53</sup> This is true even of the most careful readers of the *Cratylus*: “Presenting Cratylus as studiously silent about his own theory may be a device for fictionally enabling Socrates to work it out as his proxy” (Sedley 2003, 77).



Like Achilles, Cratylus has fallen silent in a resentful response to having had something taken away. But whereas Achilles' prize of war was taken from him, it is Cratylus' *logos* that is taken from him. Hence, we are to read Cratylus' silence as his response to having his account of language subject to mistreatment. And just as Achilles refrains from battle to vehemently deny his own complicity with the entire framework, so too does Cratylus refrain from speech in order to avoid any participation in a medium that he sees as inherently unjust. Hence, he chooses an alternative medium (silence) to express his position with respect to language. That is, he chooses a *logos* that is not *logos*—meaningful language that is the absence of language—resonance.<sup>54</sup>

## 2.9 ARISTOTLE'S *TESTIMONIA*

So far, Cratylus has shown himself to believe that language is appropriate when it does not do violence to what is spoken about. In order to achieve this, language must become conspicuous, indirect, or even unclear and absent in order to point beyond itself to the matter at hand. These variations are variations in style.

We have reasons to believe that this is Cratylus' position that are independent of the *Cratylus*. Apart from Plato's characterization of Cratylus in the eponymous dialogue, the only other ancient source providing significant information about Cratylus is Aristotle. Although many (if not most) scholars of the *Cratylus* are content to ignore the

---

<sup>54</sup> This aspect of language appears later in the dialogue when Cratylus does speak, where he describes misuses of language as akin to banging a copper pot (430a), which sounds a lot like Davidson's famous 1984 account of linguistic success not in terms of semantics but in terms of effect: language works by getting someone to notice something, as if they are being banged on the head. Compare also Philoctetes' inarticulate but resonant cries (ἄᾤ, ᾤᾤ) which are vocal, but described as silent: σιωπᾶς (*Philoctetes* 731), οὐκ ἐρεῖς... σιγηλός... κυρῶν (740, 741), σιγᾶς... κυρεῖς (805), etc. See Stanford 2014 for further examples of significant but inarticulate cries.

relevance of his *testimonia*,<sup>55</sup> I see in them profound illustrations of Cratylus' position on language that are coherent with Plato's account in the *Cratylus*.

First, Aristotle shows us just how unusually committed Cratylus is to the problem of language's inadequacy:

It was this belief [that the world is in constant motion and hence no true statement about it can be made] that blossomed into the most extreme of the views above mentioned, that of the professed Heracliteans, such as was held by Cratylus, who finally did not think it right to say anything but only moved his finger.”

(*Metaphysics* 1010a10-14)

Aristotle introduces Cratylus' actions here as indicating a world that is constantly changing, and this is how it is usually interpreted. For example, Apostle 1966 writes “while one is speaking about a thing, the thing has changed; but in pointing a finger, one indicates the continuous change which really takes place” (291n10; cf. Sedley 2003, 19). However, thinkers like Ademollo 2011 reject this “temporal” interpretation (i.e., that Cratylus avoids saying something at one time that will not be true at another time—even perhaps by the time he has finished speaking). Instead, they understand Cratylus as speaking more metaphysically: “the advantage of pointing lay in the fact that *pointing*

---

<sup>55</sup> I don't see fit to address these in depth here. Scholars either just remain silent on the issue or repeat the unconvincing argument that Plato is writing fiction and thus any identification with the “historical” Cratylus is questionable. E.g.: “since he is not much characterized as an individual, Cratylus is probably meant as the generic representative of people who do this sort of thing. This suggests, fortunately, that for the purposes of understanding the *Cratylus* we need not worry much about the views of the historical Cratylus” (Barney 2001, 55).

*does not commit you to the identity or nature of the thing pointed at*” (Ademollo 2011; 17-18, cf. Taylor 1960, 76).

But while this heads in the right direction, it still fails to address what was clearly Cratylus’ central concern: the use of language, a (mis)representational tool, to describe reality. Part of this is because Aristotle’s own interpretation of Cratylus’ actions is obviously influential (as is his reading of all of his predecessors, see Cherniss 1935). Aristotle places this anecdote in a discussion of change, so naturally we are bound to think that was Cratylus’ concern. But the anecdote itself doesn’t conform. That is, Cratylus’ actions are simply that he gave up language and decided only to point. In doing so, Cratylus is certainly concerned with language’s (in)ability to express reality, and he is not necessarily thereby making a point about the changeableness of reality (however true that might be). Hence, Cratylus is attempting alternative ways of communicating that don’t misrepresent or that are better suited to what is communicated.

This is also evident in Aristotle’s mention of Cratylus in the *Rhetoric*: “Aeschines described Cratylus as ‘hissing with fury and shaking his fists’. These details carry conviction: the audience take the truth of what they know as so much evidence for the truth of what they do not” (1414b1-3). This comes in a passage about how a speaker should characterize both the emotions of oneself and of one’s opponent by alluding to well-known examples. Because the audience understands the example, it is likely to believe it is true of the speaker or opponent. In other words, the speaker should employ physiognomic symbols—anything from facial characteristics to manner of dress—to

stand for what the audience can't see (character, previous actions, thoughts, etc.). This is something Aeschines was well-known for doing.<sup>56</sup>

This is not entirely foreign to Plato's Cratylus, who was clearly concerned with how something manifest and available (spoken language) could be misused or misinterpreted. Language exists as symbols for something not seen, and Cratylus is concerned with the mistreatment of what is not seen. As a result, Cratylus limits his use of the linguistic symbol, substituting it for a manner of expression that shows instead of says. That is, when he points to a thing, it is the thing itself (and not its representation in a word) that comes to light. That is, unlike what happens in language, there is no danger that someone will mistake the finger as what it indicates.

This is true even if we understand the anecdote apart from the context Aristotle gives it. Aristotle is merely citing another Socratic writer (Aeschines) as someone who used an example of a person whose actions are well-known (Cratylus). Plato also used what he knew would be a well-known example (Cratylus), but for a different end. So, while Aristotle may be right in saying that Cratylus' hissing and shaking somehow evidenced his emotions, I submit that it also symbolizes a deeper commitment, the one that is characteristic of Cratylus and that would have made him—and this anecdote about him—famous: it symbolizes his commitment to speaking appropriately about a reality in flux.

This is evident in Plato's treatment of shaking. Although the word used by Aristotle (διασίζω, "to hiss") is a *hapax legomenon*, its root without the grammatical intensifier δια—i.e., σίζω ("to hiss")—and the close cognates which Aristotle uses to

---

<sup>56</sup> O'Connell 2017, 69-70.

describe Cratylus' gestures (σειώ/διασειώ, "to shake/violently") are common words. Yet strikingly, these words are used in Plato exclusively in the *Cratylus* and the *Timaeus* (and once in the *Laws*). And in all of these contexts, the words either directly reference flux or indirectly symbolize flux. For example, διασειώ is used only in the *Timaeus*, twice to indicate motion and once to signify flux proper.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, its uncompounded form σειώ is consistently used for flux-related motion (*Timaeus* 43d, 52e, 53a, and 88e), and something similar is done in *Laws* 7.790d-e.

This is, unsurprisingly, confirmed in the *Cratylus*: Shaking characterizes the cosmic force responsible for one aspect of flux (by constituting the etymology of Poseidon, "the shaker," 403a). And it is shaking motion that is symbolized in the very act of speaking about flux (ρόή), as the tongue is σειομένην (426e) when pronouncing the letter rho (of ροή/ρέω). Indeed, the word itself ("σειεσθαι") must be pronounced with a fluxy mouth (427a).

Perhaps the best indication that Plato intended to invoke Cratylus' famous hand-shaking is the passage where Plato describes how one would express oneself without language:

Socrates: And answer me this: if we did not have voice or tongue, and if we wished to make things clear to one another, would we not, just as the dumb [*or as Cratylus*], attempt to sign by way of the hands and head and other body parts?

---

<sup>57</sup> "And for these reasons all such motions were then termed 'Sensations,' and are still so termed today. Moreover, since at that time they were causing, for the moment, constant and widespread motion, joining with the perpetually flowing stream in moving and violently shaking the revolutions of the Soul, they totally blocked the course of the Same by flowing contrary thereto, and hindered it thereby in its ruling and its going; while, on the other hand, they so shook up the course of the Other that in the three several intervals of the double and the triple..." (43c-d). Interestingly, this passage is also etymologically playful (αἴσθησις, "sensation," is derived from αἶσσω, "dart," "rush").

Hermogenes: How could it be otherwise, Socrates?

Socrates: If then I suppose that we wished to make clear that which is above and is airy, then we would have *raised our hands* to the heavens, imitating the nature of the thing; and if we wished to imitate the things that are below and that are heavy, we would have *dropped our hands* to the earth. And if we wished to make clear a running horse or some other living thing, you see that we would have made our bodies as much like them as possible and we would have made figures of them. (422e-423a)

Plato and Hermogenes are trying to determine what the essence of language is—and the answer is identified as mimesis. Cratylus would have been a ready reference to ancient readers as someone who embodied this desire to speak only in language appropriate to what is expressed—as close to the nature of language as possible.

As we have seen, Cratylus believes that language is correct if it is in some kind of natural relation; according to Cratylus, as we will see, nature is in flux; therefore, correct language must follow nature in its flux. The oddities of Cratylus' position can be seen as ways of attempting to do just this. He is attentive to the flowing nature of reality and wants to try and speak appropriately to it.

And really, this is not so strange, given that we desire the same thing with our concepts (to speak about reality appropriately). As philosophers, we strive to think about the world in a way that is appropriate to the world, and not just convenient for the

philosophical concepts we have generated. A bad philosopher forces reality to conform to his concepts where reality resists such a fit. The good philosopher is attentive to where reality doesn't quite fit the conceptual scheme we have developed, and he or she attempts to rectify that by generating concepts that are appropriate. Thus, it is fitting that Cratylus should desire that language be appropriate.

## 2.10 SOCRATES AND SYMPATHY FOR CRATYLUS

Still, Cratylus is widely understood as an extremist who Plato stages only to refute.<sup>58</sup> Hence, the idea that Cratylus is a serious philosophical figure bears some defense. To this end, clues from the biographical tradition help to establish the nature of Cratylus' influence on Plato relative to Socrates'. For Socrates and Cratylus were two of the most notable thinkers in Plato's intellectual formation. Aristotle writes,

[Plato], having in his youth first become familiar with Cratylus and with the Heraclitean doctrines (that all sensible things are ever in a state of flux and there is no knowledge about them), these views he held even in later years.

(*Metaphysics* A 6.987a29-987b1)<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> E.g., Allen 1948, 40 or Kahn 1985, 256; cf. Smith 2008.

<sup>59</sup> “ἐκ νέου τε γὰρ συνήθης γενόμενος πρῶτον Κρατύλῳ καὶ ταῖς Ἡρακλειτεῖσι δόξαις, ὥς ἀπάντων τῶν αἰσθητῶν αἰεὶ ῥεόντων καὶ ἐπιστήμης περὶ αὐτῶν οὐκ οὔσης, ταῦτα μὲν καὶ ὕστερον οὕτως ὑπέλαβεν,” Aristotle's ‘first’ (πρῶτον 987a32) is clearly chronological, not logical: see Cherniss 1955. But this causes a host of chronological problems (Nails 2002, 105) and conceptual problems (Ademollo 2011 15ff.; Kahn 1996, 81f.) that I see as an impasse. My own historiographical intuitions are that Aristotle's characterization is reported for reasons that would not seem to require any exaggeration or manipulation of the evidence, while Plato's account is clearly a fictitious representation. While it is likely true to some degree of the reality of the situation, it is true to other degrees of reality precisely by taking some literary liberties.

According to Aristotle, Plato then studied with Socrates and eventually with the Pythagoreans. It is probably impossible to read Aristotle's account non-teleologically, as Aristotle's accounts of his predecessors frequently work in this way (i.e., that Plato progressed from Cratylus to Socrates). And indeed, this is still the almost universal interpretation.<sup>60</sup> But the later biographical tradition gives us good reason to question this. Because they had access to Aristotle's account, we must assume the variations they offer are deliberate. What is striking is that they are *consistently* different from Aristotle. Hence, Diogenes Laertius writes,

At first he used to study philosophy in the Academy, and afterwards in the garden at Colonus (as Alexander states in his Successions of Philosophers), as a follower of Heraclitus. Afterwards, when he was about to compete for the prize with a tragedy, he listened to Socrates in front of the theatre of Dionysus, and then consigned his poems to the flames, with the words:

“Come hither, O fire-god, Plato now has need of thee”

From that time onward, having reached his twentieth year (so it is said), he was the pupil of Socrates. When Socrates was gone, he attached himself to Cratylus the Heraclitean.... (3.6)

And Olympiodorus writes,

---

<sup>60</sup> Even the most scholarly and careful readers who know the alternative biographical tradition merely reference the variations as oddities in a footnote: Sedley 17n37, Ademollo 15n17.



After the death of Socrates, [Plato] resorted next to Cratylus the Heraclitean as his teacher, for whom he also composed a dialogue of the same name, entitling it *Cratylus*, or On the Correctness of Names.... (86-90)

And we have from the *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*,

After his apprenticeship with Socrates he went to the Pythagoreans, to perfect himself in the science of numbers as expressing realities; hence the frequent instances of this in the *Timaeus*. Further he attended courses by Cratylus the Heraclitean and Hermippus<sup>61</sup> the Parmenidean to become acquainted with the doctrines of Heraclitus and Parmenides; as a result he wrote two of his dialogues, the *Cratylus* and the *Parmenides*, in which he refers to the teachings of these men. (4.4-7)

Here is the transition mapped out, chronologically (from top to bottom and left to right):

|                       |        |          |          |                            |
|-----------------------|--------|----------|----------|----------------------------|
| Aristotle             | X      | Cratylus | Socrates | Pythagoreans               |
| Diogenes Laertius     | Poetry | Socrates | Cratylus | Pythagoreans               |
| Olympiodorus          | Poetry | Socrates | Cratylus | Pythagoreans               |
| Anonymous Prolegomena | Poetry | Socrates | Cratylus | Pythagoreans <sup>62</sup> |

<sup>61</sup> Diogenes Laertius says “Hermogenes” here.

<sup>62</sup> The *Anonymous Prolegomena* is ambiguous as to whether Plato studied with the Pythagoreans before Cratylus or whether they both occurred during the same phase of Plato’s development. I opt for the latter.

Of course, ancient bibliography was frequently more concerned with interesting anecdotes and apocryphal stories than with the fact of the matter. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to believe the Neoplatonists over Aristotle here. As noted, Aristotle frequently rearranges things to fit his own teleological account.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, Aristotle can't account for Plato's early work in poetry—in fact, the widely-attested tradition that Socrates drew Plato from poetry into philosophy seems at odds with Aristotle's account, but not with the Neoplatonists'.

But whether the chronology is correct or not, the Neoplatonic tradition provides an important confirmation of the philosophical idea that Cratylus was a major influence on Plato, and that his influence was not extinguished by the brilliance of Socrates.<sup>64</sup> The chronological order in Aristotle's account might leave us to assume the latter, but even Aristotle admits that some form of “these views he held even in later years.”

Although Cratylus and Socrates were two of the most notable thinkers in Plato's intellectual formation, one might still be led to think that, since Socrates is portrayed sympathetically in almost every single dialogue, Cratylus, who appears only in this dialogue, is meant as a foil or contrast to Socrates. Again, with variations, this is the dominant view. Some argue that Plato rejects his former master in yet another apology for Socrates,<sup>65</sup> some claim instead that Cratylus is meant to parody the more complete Socratic practice of philosophy,<sup>66</sup> and others go so far as to claim that Plato ridiculed his teacher Cratylus.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> Cherniss 1935.

<sup>64</sup> A dramatic suggestion of this idea in the *Cratylus* is that Hermogenes speaks with Cratylus first, but even when he turns to Socrates he is speaking about Cratylus the entire time.

<sup>65</sup> Baxter 1992, 184, 14.

<sup>66</sup> See especially Trivigno 2012, Baxter 1992, Brock 1990, Arieti 1991, Gonzalez 1998, and Nightingale 2003.

<sup>67</sup> See Ijzeren 1921, 174ff.; but: Allan 1954, 276n3.

Rather than decisively *dismiss* or *refute* Cratylus, Plato's dialogue fully *engages* Cratylus. Plato does this by having a widely-recognized master of inquiry, Socrates, take an in-depth look at Cratylus' theory. Socrates was famous for really pushing the limits of what people from all manners of expertise know. In the *Cratylus*, he does this to a further degree; he inquires into Cratylus' theory by becoming Cratylus. That is, after his initial words, Cratylus remains silent and Socrates takes up his position *as if he were Cratylus*. No greater dramatic identification is possible. Socrates is sympathetic to Cratylus in the highest degree—he not only listens to how Cratylus speaks and attempts to represent it faithfully, but he also tries to do so as Cratylus.

The chief way that Socrates does this is by imitating Cratylus' style. As we have seen, Socrates initially responds to Cratylus' position with a veiled interpretation and with a proverb. As we shall see below, this only intensifies throughout the dialogue. Because Cratylus has spoken oracularly, Socrates too will speak as inspired. Because Cratylus seems to be concerned with plays on words, Socrates will play with words for a majority of the dialogue through the etymologies. Some even suggest that Plato etymologizes because Cratylus was known for doing so.<sup>68</sup> But perhaps most notably is Cratylus' silence. Besides the fact that Socrates himself is portrayed as silent in other dialogues (from the significant silence in the *Sophist* to his total absence in the *Laws*), Socrates is sympathetic in practice to Cratylus; where Cratylus says nothing, Socrates writes nothing.

---

<sup>68</sup> This is based on the fact that Socrates interprets Cratylus' idea immediately as a matter of etymology and that Plato studied with Cratylus. This is discussed in Steinthal 2013, Sedley 2003, Wilamowitz 1959, Rijlaarsdam 1978, Baxter 1992, Barney 2001, and Levin 2001. For refutations of the idea, based on the fact that Cratylus gives no hint of etymologizing in the *Cratylus*, see Derbolav 1972, Meridier, and Heath 1888.

For these reasons, the character who speaks the least in the *Cratylus* (i.e., Cratylus) also says the most; although Cratylus does not speak much, his forceful style and the amplification of his ideas by Socrates make him the most vocal character of the dialogue. Plato knew this, and that is why the dialogue is not called the *Hermogenes*. Just as Plato defends Socrates but does not adopt all of Socrates' teachings or methods, so too does he here defend Cratylus while rejecting a portion—only a portion—of Cratylus' thought. Indeed, in large part, the dialogue is a veiled apology of Cratylus.

## 2.11 PLATO'S APPROPRIATION OF CRATYLUS

Even more conspicuous than Cratylus' similarity with Socrates is his similarity with Plato. After Hermogenes asks Socrates point blank to just tell him what correctness is, Socrates answers, "But I, marvelous Hermogenes, say nothing" (391a). Just like Cratylus says nothing in the dialogue and will eventually recede into silence, Socrates here says nothing. As argued above, Socrates is confirming here that he is trying to speak as Cratylus would and that he is trying to represent Cratylus' views appropriately. But, what is more, the one penning these words himself follows this same approach. That is, Plato also says nothing. Indeed, in his form of speech, Plato is quite like Cratylus. Neither says anything of himself, but both speak through the other characters. Our only account of Cratylus' position comes through the mouth of Hermogenes and the questioning of that position comes through Socrates.

This stylistic or methodological similarity mirrors the fact that Plato is concerned with the same philosophical problem. This conclusion is illustrated by Plato's other

prominent accounts of the nature of language, in the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter*.<sup>69</sup>

The *Phaedrus* account is well-known: written language is a problem because the speaker is no longer there to defend its meaning (277e ff.).<sup>70</sup> But this is not just a problem for written language—everything that is expressed in language is separated from that which it is about. Think of Plato’s remarks in the *Seventh Letter*: “There exists no written account of mine on these things neither will one ever come into being; for in no way can it be spoken as with other teachings” (οὐκ οὐν ἐμὸν γε περὶ αὐτῶν ἔστιν σύγγραμμα οὐδὲ μήποτε γένηται: ῥητὸν γὰρ οὐδαμῶς ἔστιν ὥς ἄλλα μαθήματα, 341c). In short, Cratylus’ concern what happens to language when it is expressed is taken up by Plato.

Why is this a concern? According to Plato, what happens when language is expressed is that it “casts [the truth] out of harmony and into inappropriateness” (εἰς ἀναρμοστίαν καὶ ἀπρέπειαν ἐκβάλλειν, *Seventh Letter* 344d).<sup>71</sup> In our previous chapter, we investigated the topic of correctness in language and showed that it means, essentially, appropriateness or resonance in the sense of these very words (ἀρμόττον and πρέπον). In short, writing something in a didactic treatise as Dionysius did is not necessarily *incorrect*, but it is entirely inappropriate. Dionysius wanted to collect all of Plato’s arguments and publish them in a book; but because publishing is tantamount to a

---

<sup>69</sup> I refrain from entering the controversy over the authenticity of the *Seventh Letter*; if it is not authentic, it is certainly a thoroughly Platonic production; see Barney 2001, 171–4.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. *Seventh Letter* 344c and *Protagoras* 347d–348a, where Socrates despairs of the fact that interpretation of the poets seems like a futile sort of enterprise, specifically because they are not present to answer for themselves. Compare also description of logographers in the *Euthydemus* as “the border-ground between philosopher and politician” (μεθόρια φιλοσόφου τε ἀνδρὸς καὶ πολιτικοῦ, 305c). Yet, they fancy themselves as the wisest of all. The idea is that logographers write their speeches, which are usually to be memorized and then recited. Orators, on the other hand, are masters of gauging their audience and evaluating the political context on their feet. Their speech is alive and reacting to the circumstances—perhaps the most excellent example of such a thing

<sup>71</sup> Barney 2001 sees this as a weakness: language is inherently deceitful (it inevitably falls short of the objects it describes) and so is of no philosophical value (16, 174, etc.). I agree that Plato sees language as having this weakness, but I also think Plato thought he could remediate it through careful use of language (e.g., dialogue).

claim that the *logos* is complete or sufficient, Plato is appalled by Dionysus' actions.<sup>72</sup>

The *logos* is fundamentally inadequate to what it expresses. If someone does what Dionysius does, then what is expressed is not said in the right way—in a way fitting to what is expressed.<sup>73</sup>

The way that *is* appropriate would have to be a style of expression that, as discussed above, does not misrepresent or do violence to its content—one that precludes immediate understanding and points beyond the words themselves to a deeper meaning. A style that causes continual reinterpretation in this way is precisely what Plato crafts with great care in his dialogues. In light of these conclusions, we can now understand Aristotle's above remarks differently:

[Plato], having in his youth first become familiar with Cratylus and with the Heraclitean doctrines (that all sensible things are ever in a state of flux and there is no knowledge about them), *these views he held even in later years.*

(*Metaphysics* A 6.987a-987b1)

Aristotle's own explanation of this enduring influence is that Plato still believed in his later thought that sensible reality was in flux.<sup>74</sup> But at least in the dialogue form, if not in

---

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Heraclitus' "Pythagoras, son of Mnesarchus, practiced inquiry more than all men, and making a selection of others' writings, he invented his own brand of wisdom: information-gathering, fraud!" (D129, translated by Graham).

<sup>73</sup> There are epistemological parallels here that echo throughout Plato: one can correctly describe the road to Larissa without really knowing the way (*Meno*), Phaedrus can memorize Lysias' speech without understanding any of it (*Phaedrus*), etc. Cf. Heraclitus D40.

<sup>74</sup> At least one careful scholar understands that this may not be the only reading of Aristotle's text. As Ademollo 2011 reports, "Scholars are content to say that he believed that sensibles are in flux, but Aristotle doesn't say that here and the possibility is open that such a simplistic schema might be incorrect. Aristotle's words ταῦτα μὲν καὶ ὕστερον οὕτως ὑπέλαβεν, usually translated 'this he believed later too', admit also of a different construal: 'If one takes ... καὶ ... as "actually", we get the result that Plato was acquainted with

more explicit philosophy (e.g., *Timaeus* 497c-e), Cratylus' influence persisted beyond Plato's acquaintance with Socrates. It became an essential part of his views on language.

In conclusion, some of Charles Kahn's words about Cratylus' master are appropriate: "he must resort to enigma, image, paradox, and even contradiction, to tease or shock the audience into giving thought to the obvious, and thus enable them to see what is staring them in the face" (Kahn 1981, 270-271). This also describes Plato's task in the *Cratylus*. Because language is so familiar as to be invisible to us, Plato makes it conspicuous so that we can see it for the first time. That is, he brings language to language through his use of language. And he does this with care, attempting to speak about language in an appropriate way. He does this by staging someone who is well-known for this concern, someone who also manipulated language to interrupt immediate or superficial understanding—someone who strives to make his style appropriate to what is said—Cratylus.

---

flux theory from youth, and later actually believed in it' (Myles Burnyeat, personal communication, 2003)" (16).

### 3.0 THE TOOL ANALOGY, OR: HOW TO PHILOSOPHIZE WITH AN AUGER

Whoever must be a creator always annihilates

Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 59

In his *Twilight of the Idols, or, How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, Nietzsche compares his philosophical method to the practice of discerning the authenticity of idols by striking them with a hammer: “To pose questions here with a hammer for once, and maybe to hear in reply that well-known hollow tone which tells of bloated innards—how delightful for one who has ears even behind his ears” (3, translated by Plot). Plato also wants his readers to have ‘ears to hear,’ and in *Cratylus* 386e-390d, he elicits such listening by having Socrates use analogies just like Nietzsche uses his philosophical hammer—to test the solidity of the dialogue’s central philosophical concepts. I will argue that Plato uses this sort of robustly analogical argument to demonstrate the sort of dialectic between creation and destruction—or *creation through destruction*—exemplified in Nietzsche, or, more proper to the *Cratylus*, in Heraclitus.<sup>1</sup> I will demonstrate what this means for Platonic διαίρεσις and for the target of Socrates’ analogical argument, the nature of language.

### 3.1 ANALOGICAL ARGUMENT

---

<sup>1</sup> Creative destruction is a well-known theme in Nietzsche’s oeuvre. For example, “If a temple is to be erected a temple must be destroyed: that is the law – let anyone who can show me a case in which it is not fulfilled!” (*Genealogy of Morals*, 24, trans. Kaufmann). Or, “You must want to burn yourself up in your own flame: how could you become new if you did not first become ashes!” (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 47, trans. del Caro). Or, “Why so soft.... if your hardness will not flash and cut and cut to bits: how else could you—create with me someday?” (*Twilight of the Idols* 92, trans. Polt).



Before turning to the specifics of Socrates' arguments, it is important to assure we are proceeding in a manner appropriate to the arguments' peculiar—analogue—status. In general, an argument by analogy concludes that a 'target domain' has certain properties by virtue of its similarity with a 'source domain' which is known to have those properties.<sup>2</sup> This is precisely what Plato says he is doing in the *Republic* when he has Socrates investigate justice in an individual soul (the target domain) by looking at justice in the city (the more easily observed source domain). This is also Socrates' procedure in the *Cratylus*, where the target domain (names) is shown to have certain characteristics based on its similarity with a more evident source domain (actions and tools such as drilling and shuttles).<sup>3</sup>

Socrates offers several closely-related analogical arguments in immediate proximity with each other. I will focus on the two most fundamental of these arguments.<sup>4</sup> The first, the "action analogy," argues that the correct way to name is similar to the

---

<sup>2</sup> Of course, there are more sophisticated definitions, but they are based on this basic form and their subtlety is unnecessary for the present paper. See, e.g., Adler 2007, Bartha 2019, Juthe 2005, and Govier 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Smith 2014 makes a strong case that the arguments of 386e-390d are *not* actually analogical—that names just *are* tools. But, besides the problems with translating Socrates' argument into deductive terms, which I address below, it is not uncommon for analogical arguments, ancient or modern, to omit analogical indicators ("like" or "as"). Furthermore, the language Plato uses to express the current argument is parallel to other more established analogical arguments (such as the famous "city-soul analogy." Compare: ἄρ' οὖν, ἦν δ' ἐγώ, εἰ γιγνομένην πόλιν θεασαίμεθα λόγῳ, καὶ τὴν δικαιοσύνην αὐτῆς ἴδοιμεν ἂν γιγνομένην καὶ τὴν ἀδικίαν; (*Republic* II, 369a) with οἷον ἐάν τι ἐπιχειρήσωμεν ἡμεῖς τῶν ὄντων τέμνειν, πότερον ἡμῖν τμητέον ἐστὶν ἕκαστον ὥς ἂν ἡμεῖς βουλόμεθα καὶ ᾧ ἂν βουληθῶμεν (*Cratylus* 387a) or: οὐκοῦν καὶ ἐάν κάειν τι ἐπιχειρήσωμεν, οὐ κατὰ πᾶσαν δόξαν δεῖ κάειν, ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὴν ὀρθήν; (387b). Neither use "like" or "as," and instead both indicate the analogy with conditionals accompanied by some degree of uncertainty. Furthermore, the only counterargument available to even Smith's formulation is by disanalogy (and I don't see how is it any different to say that names are not tools or to say that names are not like tools in the relevant respects). What is more, even Smith must admit at least one of the extensions is analogical (91). And finally, failing to recognize the analogical nature of the argument blinds an interpreter to the rich heuristic dimension that, as I will show, Plato intended with his carefully-chosen analogues.

<sup>4</sup> Distinguishing Socrates' analogical arguments is fairly sticky business. However, the interesting theoretical work is accomplished in these first two arguments and remains relevant for the arguments that follow.

correct way to perform other actions. And the second, the “tool analogy,” argues that what one accomplishes by naming is similar to what one accomplishes with other tools. There is extensive scholarly disagreement over the ultimate point of these arguments,<sup>5</sup> a disagreement which I think arises because *Cratylus* scholars have misunderstood the nature of analogical argument—and of Plato’s nuanced use of this sort of argument.

But this is not necessarily because of incautiousness, as, undeniably, the logic of argument by analogy is itself fraught. It is beset by two questions that are especially relevant to the *Cratylus*: whether analogical argument is valuable only as a heuristic device or whether it has any robust justificatory role,<sup>6</sup> and whether it should be evaluated as inductive or as deductive. Indeed, some scholars embrace the inductive nature of analogical argument and try to establish its logic on grounds similar to other forms of induction.<sup>7</sup> But at its worst, this means for many that analogical argument is merely vague and probabilistic—or, in other words, that it is not really an argument at all.<sup>8</sup> Others argue that analogical arguments are really just veiled deductive arguments, or that

---

<sup>5</sup> While many scholars interpret them as somehow establishing the objective nature of naming, or at least that naming depends on the objective nature of things (e.g., Ackrill 1964 and 1999, Sallis 1996, 205; Weingartner 1970; Anagnostopoulos 1972, 704; Sedley 2003, 57; Smith 2014, 78; etc.), some claim that the argument establishes the reverse (that actions do not really depend on the nature of things and are in fact *not* independent of our wishes, e.g., Robinson 1956, 333 and Ewegen 2013, 77ff.). Still others think it is meant to show that words are purposeful (Joseph 2000, 27), that they fulfil a function (Barney 2001, 42), or even just that they are tools (Gould 1969, 20-21). Some consider the argument to prove that certain instruments perform their function better than others (Bestor 1980), some that convention is rooted in nature (Riley 2005, 36), some that Socrates uses it to argue for an ideal language (Baxter 1992 39ff.), and some that Socrates uses it to argue that names are unsuitable for dialectic (van den Berg 2007, 19). Some think the argument makes a point about how speaking can be performed well or badly (Sedley 2003, 57), while others take the opposite view, that it proves that there are no degrees of success in actions (Ademollo 2011). While most of these consider Socrates to be making an argument in earnest, some even think that Plato has Socrates make a bad argument or hold a position he will later reject (Robinson 1956; Ademollo 2011, 102). And this is not even to mention the vast scholarship that considers this argument to be introducing Plato’s theory of forms (or that argues against it doing so).

<sup>6</sup> For the former, see Duhem 1914 and Hájek 2018; for the latter, see Campbell 1920 and Hesse 1963.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., Carnap 1980; Kuipers 1988; Niiniluoto 1988; Maher 2000; Romeijn 2006; Niiniluoto 1981; Keynes 1921; Lindenbaum-Hosiasson 1941; von Wright 1951; Hesse 1963, but: Hesse 1965; Uyemov 1970 and 1973; Mill 1843/1930; Harrod 1956; and Liston 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Agassi 1964 and 1988; Copi and Burgess-Jackson 1992, 186 and 195; and Copi 1990, 363.

they can, without any relevant loss, be made into such by supplying an implicit premise or two.<sup>9</sup> But defenders of analogical argument are hesitant to admit that this reconstruction is lossless.

Remarkably, this disagreement over the logical form of analogical argument is played out in *Cratylus* scholarship. On the one hand, there are those who think Socrates' arguments here are weak and probabilistic (i.e., merely inductive).<sup>10</sup> And on the other hand, there are those who reformulate Socrates' arguments as deductive.<sup>11</sup> For instance, Ademollo 2011, 96 summarizes the argument thus: "All beings have an objective nature; Actions are one kind of beings; Therefore actions have an objective nature."

But seductive though these approaches may be, neither takes the analogical nature of the argument seriously;<sup>12</sup> analogical arguments are neither inductive nor deductive. As

---

<sup>9</sup> E.g., Hempel 1965 writes, "For the systematic purposes of scientific explanation, reliance on analogies is thus inessential and can always be dispensed with" (441). See also Keynes 1957, Nagel 1961, Govier 1999, Waller 2001 (but Guarini 2004), Kraus 2015, Russell 1986, Davies and Russell 1987, Davies 1988, and Weitzenfeld 1984. Of course, there are those like Agassi 1988 who take both positions, claiming that, either way, we should avoid analogical argument. For if the argument is not strictly conclusive, then it is undesirable, and if it is really deductive, then its analogical form is unnecessary.

<sup>10</sup> Allan 1954 calls them "plainly incomplete" (283); Robinson 1965 calls them "vague," "weak and fanciful," (330) and not even really an argument at all: "This argument is not so much an argument as a free development of the nature-theory on the assumption that a name is a tool like a shuttle... It all rests on the easily deniable assumption that a name is a tool like a shuttle" (329). Others attribute induction implicitly, by claiming that "cutting," "drilling," and "shuttle" are just *examples* Socrates uses to illustrate the argument (Riley 2005, 35; Ackrill 1999, etc.).

<sup>11</sup> Reformulating Socrates' arguments in this way has been a common approach at least since Proclus' devotedly syllogistic reconstructions of it (xlvi ff.). In fact, contemporary commentators are essentially engaging in Proclus' πρόληψις (the supplying of missing, hidden, or implicit premises in the service of syllogistic evaluation; see van den Berg 2007, 119). Cf. Baxter 1992, 39; Sedley 2003, 57; Barney 2001, 39; Joseph 2000, 27; Anagnostopoulos 1972, 704; Gould 1969, 20; and, of course, Smith 2014. In her forthcoming article, Smith makes this quite explicit: "I characterise the argument for naturalism in the tool analogy passage as deductive."

<sup>12</sup> There are scholars who head in the right direction. Joseph, e.g., uses the language of "metaphor" to describe Socrates' procedure. However, he does not consider it essential to the argument: "To say that words are 'tools' is to contend, by means of metaphor, that they are purposeful. The same point can be made about speaking—an action—more directly and without recourse to metaphor" (Joseph 2000, 27). There are scholars (like Ewgen 2013) who really do recognize the irreducible depth of the analogues' metaphoricity and correctly work to unpack the metaphors. But without the recognition of the bounds set by the analogical argument (see below), this approach lacks the corrective necessary to guard against an over-liberal eisegesis.

numerous evaluations of Plato's analogical arguments demonstrate (see, e.g., Hussey 1896), induction is insufficient to account for the complexity and rigor of analogical argument (e.g., Hesse 1965, 337). And analogical arguments are also unlike deductive arguments in that their conclusions just do not follow necessarily from their premises (at least when based solely on the syntax or even semantics of the premises). Instead, they depend on a host of background information not contained in the premises. And in trying to make analogical arguments deductive, supplemental premises are scarcely able to do justice to the complexity of this "background information."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, there is a rising tide of scholarship defending analogical argument as being unique, irreducible, and rigorously justificatory.<sup>14</sup>

What this requires is a procedure of evaluation unique to analogical argument, one which recognizes two standard criteria. First, analogical arguments work through the transfer of complex, structural properties or relations (and not just similarities between analogues), which limit the extent of the argument.<sup>15</sup> And second, grasping this requires

---

<sup>13</sup> Think, e.g., about Aristotle, for whom the mathematical-proportional nature of ἀναλογία is especially evident (cf. *Metaphysics* 1048b7). Nevertheless, in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1096b, he describes how the good is good not by virtue of any identifiable property, but by analogy. And similarly, in *Metaphysics* 1048a36-37, he claims that instances of ἐνέργεια don't fit neatly into a definition, but are somehow unified by analogy. (Cf. *Metaphysics* 1016b, 1070a, 1042b, 1048a, etc.) Modern logicians are also sympathetic to this theoretical position (e.g., Juthe 2005, Adler 2007, etc.). Consider Bartha 2019: "nobody has ever formulated an acceptable rule, or set of rules, for valid analogical inferences. There is not even a plausible candidate. This situation is in marked contrast not only with deductive reasoning, but also with elementary forms of inductive reasoning, such as induction by enumeration."

<sup>14</sup> Despite the problem of there being no rule for the evaluation of these arguments. See, e.g., Juthe 1995; Gamboa 2008, and Keynes 1921. A misunderstanding of this aspect of analogical argument is what has elicited the practice of 'refuting' Socrates' argument with a simplistic or hasty disanalogy (see especially Ackrill 1997 and 1999, and Robinson 1955 and 1956). However, a proper disanalogy must be relevant to the original analogy. With the recognition of this structural constraint, counterarguments are indeed fairly easy to give, as everything is dissimilar in some way to everything else.

<sup>15</sup> "Analogies are about relations, rather than simple features. No matter what kind of knowledge (causal models, plans, stories, etc.), it is the structural properties (i.e., the interrelationships between the facts) that determine the content of an analogy" (Falkenhainer, Forbus, and Gentner 1989/90: 3). Cf. the refinements of this theory in Forbus, Ferguson, and Gentner 1994; Forbus 2001; Forbus et al. 2007; Forbus et al. 2008; Forbus et al 2017.

an understanding of “prior associations” that we have with the analogues of the source domain (Bartha 2010, 94).

Accordingly, I will illuminate the analogues’ prior associations (their ancient literary and historical associations) in an effort to reveal the structural properties underlying the argument. I will show how this renders a methodological claim about διαίρεσις (i.e., that collection happens *through* division—or creation *through* destruction), and I will explain what it means that language, the ultimate analogue in the argument, is creative through its destructiveness.

### 3.2 CUTTING AND BURNING

The first two analogues, cutting and burning, are, point by point, given in tandem:

Socrates: Actions are done according to their own nature, and not according to our opinion. Just as if we tried to cut some being, would it be necessary for us to cut each as we wish and with whatever we wish? Or if we wish to cut each thing according to the nature of cutting and being cut and with the tool naturally fitted to cutting, we will cut and it will be an advantage to us and we will accomplish this correctly? But if we wish to cut each thing contrary to nature, we will be mistaken and we will accomplish nothing?

Hermogenes: To me it seems so.

Socrates: Then even if we should try to burn something, it is not necessary to burn according to any opinion but according to the correct one? And this is the way in which each is naturally burned and burns and with that tool naturally suited for burning? (387a-387b)

The other two main analogues, “boring” and “shuttling,” are presented later in the argument and with a different focus than “cutting” and “burning.” Because of this, and because “cutting” and “burning” are regularly conjoined examples in antiquity,<sup>16</sup> I will argue that Plato invokes the background information surrounding “cutting and burning,” i.e., the proverbial medical practice of cauterizing wounds—τέμνειν καὶ καίειν.<sup>17</sup>

Plato’s broader engagement with the contemporary medical tradition (both theories and practices) is itself an entire discipline of scholarship that I can only allude to here.<sup>18</sup> But as I will show, Plato frequently appropriates concepts and methodologies

---

<sup>16</sup> Besides the thinkers referenced below, Aristotle frequently uses these examples together to designate cautery. Cf. *Physics* 251a12-16 and 251b35, *Problems* 863a10-12 and 20, *Categories* 2a3-4, and *Sophistical Refutations* 178a10-11. These latter references especially indicate that the example was in common circulation, especially in philosophical discussions concerned with the paradoxical-sounding unity of activity and passivity; cf. commentaries on Aristotle’s *Categories*, e.g. “the cutting issuing from the cutter and that effected in the object are one, though to cut is not the same as to be cut” (Plotinus, *Ennead* 6.1.19, trans. Mackenna). Cf. Simplicius’ *In Aristotelis categorias commentarium* 8.320.27.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Galen 4.664, Antyllus Medicus 7.9.2, Philodemus Philosophus *περί παρησίας* 560, and Diodorus Rhetor 53H. As far as I can tell, no scholars have made anything of this connection. However, Rosenmeyer 1998, 43 recognizes the medical associations of cutting and burning, but passes over it quickly, claiming that cutting and burning are “also part of the priestly functions of sacrifice that are strongly connected with the concept of convention, *nomos*” (43). Similarly, Bernadete 1981, 130 recognizes that cutting and burning could suggest the surgical practice, but he also mentions that it could suggest ravaging the countryside and makes nothing of the analogy (although he does pay homage to the sort of ambiguity that Heraclitus would have approved of—and that I will discuss below—that cutting and burning can be both a form of punishment and of therapy). Cf. Kretzmann 1971, 130n10. And, although Ademollo 2011 does nod to the surgical practice, he makes the disappointing conclusion that, because “cutting” and “burning” are only used generally in the *Cratylus*, “the generic meaning of both verbs seems to remain dominant” (100). Yet taking the argument to advance “cutting and burning” in tandem removes the need for the quite intricate maneuvers that he must go through to distinguish between the ‘cutting analogy’ and the ‘burning analogy’ (99).

<sup>18</sup> For a recent treatment, see Levin 2014. Indeed, Plato himself was often portrayed as a sort of intellectual soul-doctor. His honorary epitaph composed by Diogenes Laertius reads “If Phoebus did not cause Plato to

from medicine, and he does so for the profound metaphorical connections they have with the philosophical issues he is dealing with.<sup>19</sup> In fact, Plato's central philosophical method (διαίρεσις) is frequently understood as originating in medical practice with none other than Hippocrates.<sup>20</sup> This is hardly incidental to the *Cratylus*, as the final stage in the analogical argument claims the *dialectician* as best suited to supervise the making of the tools in the tool analogy (390c).<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the cutting analogue echoes the method of division elsewhere in Plato (e.g., the “cutting at the joints” of *Phaedrus* 265d ff.). Later in the dialogue, Socrates both references the method (τίς ἂν εἴη ὁ τρόπος τῆς διαιρέσεως, 424b ff.) and identifies naming therewith: “we teach each other something and separate things (διακρίνομεν) according to the way in which they are” (388b).<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, what this reference to διαίρεσις means in the context of the analogical argument is far from obvious. Part of the reason for this is that the method itself remains a puzzle for Plato scholars.<sup>23</sup> And this usually has to do with the uneasy status that “collection” has as a part of the “method of collection and division” (which is

---

be born in Greece, how came it that he healed the minds of men by letters? As the god's son Asclepius is a healer of the body, so is Plato of the immortal soul” (V.45, trans. Hicks). Cf. the *Phaedo*.

<sup>19</sup> In addition to the examples provided below, see Plato's discussion of Herodicus in *Protagoras* 316e1, *Protagoras* 316d9–e1, *Republic* 406a7–8, and *Phaedrus* 227d3–5. See also his references to Hippocrates in the *Phaedrus* 270c–d, *Protagoras* 311b–c, and possibly *Charmides* 156e.

<sup>20</sup> See *Phaedrus* 270 ff., which, in fact, contains the only surviving contemporaneous passage on Hippocratic method from outside the Hippocratic corpus. On Plato's Hippocratic borrowings, see Mansfeld 1980. For Hippocrates on τέμνειν καὶ καίειν, see *Aphorisms* 7.44–45; *Affections* 2, 4; *Diseases* I 10, 15; II 31, 36, 57, 60; III 16; *Internal Affections* 9; *Epidemics* V 15; *Places in Man* 40; and *Prorrhetic* II 15, and Martin 2012, 330.

<sup>21</sup> Ryle 1939 argues that dialectic has nothing to do with division; I take Ackrill 1971 as a decisive refutation of this.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Kretzmann 1971, 130; Gold 1978, 229; Barney 2001, 8 and 42–43; Ewgen 2013, 79, 82, and 151; Wood 2007; van den Berg 2007, 157; and Ademollo 2011, 141 and 448. But while Sedley 2003 claims that the διαίρεσις of 424b is “the dialogue's only reference to the Platonic method of division” (129), I will show how the methodology is in view much earlier, at least from the analogical arguments onward. (This is not even to mention the proliferation of διαίρεω and διακρίνω throughout the dialogue: 388b, 396a, 399d, 410d, 424b–425c, 438d, etc.)

<sup>23</sup> E.g., Hackforth 1945, Menn 1998 and Franklin 2011. There are questions over whether division is the same as dialectic, whether there are multiple kinds of division, whether the method changes across Plato's works, and so on.

also the reason why it is frequently abbreviated as (“method of division,” “division,” etc.).<sup>24</sup> This same uneasiness is tacit in *Cratylus* scholarship. That is, attention to primarily to division is why scholars such as Kretzmann 1971 and Sedley 2003 attribute a “taxonomic” and “analytic” function to names, but a recognition of the complexity of both the method and its object (names) obliges them to point out that names do other things, too (like designation).

Indeed, interpreting this use of διαίρεσις simply as “cutting” along the lines of “dichotomous division” does not make sense of the entire analogical argument (burning and boring, e.g., are harder to understand as instances of cutting at the joints).<sup>25</sup> But while it has long been recognized that διαίρεσις is more complex, how to interpret this complexity is still disputed.<sup>26</sup>

The *Cratylus* provides some clues, but these clues must be drawn carefully out of the analogical-literary context in which they are embedded. Ewegen 2013 does this by suggesting that cutting, burning, and boring are intrinsically destructive practices; he connects this insight to the analogy by claiming that, rather than being guided by their objects, these tools do violence to them (and language follows suit, 79).<sup>27</sup> I think that Ewegen is on the right track, but that Plato uses the cutting analogue *for the opposite*

---

<sup>24</sup> Plato himself does this, e.g., even in the present passage from the *Cratylus*. But even in other instances where a συναγωγή or συνκριτικός is not mentioned, it clearly remains, somehow, part of the method.

<sup>25</sup> Although, Heraclitus may provide a clue: “Fire coming on will discern [*krinei*] and catch up with all things” (D66). Fire is here represented here as the world order and principle of cosmic justice, a function which is elsewhere attributed to *logos*.

<sup>26</sup> E.g., Ackrill 1971, Grams 2012, Lloyd 1952, Moravcsik 1973, and Cohen 1973.

<sup>27</sup> This is similar to Sallis 1996, who sees at least the reference to burning as echoing the earlier discussion of Euthydemus, who abolishes (burns away) differences (205). Cf. Aristotle’s “All natural destruction is on the way to it, as are, for instance, growing old or growing dry. Putrescence is the end of all these things, that is of all natural objects, except such as are destroyed by violence: you can burn, for instance, flesh, bone, or anything else, but the natural course of their destruction ends in putrefaction” (*Meteorology* 379a4-7).



*purpose*: to suggest how dialectical language can ultimately avoid this violence.<sup>28</sup> In other words, Plato suggests a nuanced model of διαίρεσις: collection happens through division.

To demonstrate this, it is important to examine the analogues in their context: as terms for medical practices. Although cutting may be *prima facie* destructive, in the medical context it is not ultimately violent. And what is more, the way it is described, at least by Hippocrates, is strikingly parallel to Plato's above analogy: medical division (cutting) is done with the aim of being appropriate to its object—and according to that object's nature. According to Hippocrates, cuts must be made at the right moment (*Diseases* II 61), with an eye to the circumstances (*Physician* 5), and with the right tools (*De Medico*, i.62, ii.258, etc.).<sup>29</sup> What is more, acting κατὰ φύσιν is beneficial and acting παρὰ φύσιν is harmful (*Places in Man* 44); accordingly, “if you minister to patients in accordance with their disease and their body,” they will be benefitted, but if “you miss the right measure (ἀμαρτάνης) in either direction,” they will be harmed (*Affections* 47).<sup>30</sup>

This parallel is further confirmed by Plato's progression from cutting to burning, which is not unlike Hippocrates' progressive prognostic: “What drugs will not cure, the knife will; what the knife will not cure, the cautery will; what the cautery will not cure must be considered incurable” (*Aphorisms* 7.87, translated by Lloyd). In other words, cutting (surgery) *can* be seen as a restorative practice, but ‘cutting and burning’ (cautery) can be seen *only* as a restorative practice. Plato trades on these associations to suggest

---

<sup>28</sup> Again, Aristotle, who also uses these examples frequently, is instructive: “surgery and cautery are wholesome and productive of health” (*Maga Moralia* 1199a33).

<sup>29</sup> This is also evidenced by the variety of cutting tools used in Ancient Greek medical practice, see Milne 1907.

<sup>30</sup> These translations are modified from Levin 2014, 156.

that language is not ultimately violent. Although cutting into a person (surgery, bleeding, or cauterizing a wound) appears destructive by going against that thing's nature, it is ultimately for no other reason than to cure. This practice was so iconic in its paradoxicality that it became proverbial in antiquity (See Săndulescu 1967). For example, Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* 844-850 compares cautery and governing—both are painful, but both are cures.

Plato suggests the same paradoxical nature of τέμνειν καὶ καίειν in various dialogues. For instance, in *Protagoras* 354a, the practice (καύσεών τε καὶ τομῶν) is used to illustrate the paradoxical idea that good things are painful things (ἀγαθὰ ἀνιπαρά), just like exercise, medication, fasting, etc.<sup>31</sup> And in *Republic* III.406, the practice (ἢ καύσει ἢ τομῇ) is referenced as unpleasant but curative (cf. *Timaeus* 64d-e and 65b, and *Republic* 426a-b). Indeed, according to Diogenes Laertius, one of Plato's own *divisions* (or areas of inquiry) was medicine, a division of which was τέμνειν καὶ καίειν (3.85). And in fact, parallel to the *Cratylus*, Plato uses the paradoxical nature of τέμνειν καὶ καίειν in the *Gorgias* as an analogy for the power of language:

Gorgias: Frequently, when I go with my brother and with other doctors to some of their patients who are unwilling either to drink medicine or to be cauterized (ἢ τεμεῖν ἢ καῦσαι) by the doctor, and when the doctor is unable to persuade them, I do persuade them—by no other art than rhetoric. (456b).

---

<sup>31</sup> In fact, in all of these examples, τέμνειν καὶ καίειν are presented alongside the administration of φάρμακον and sometimes of “charms”—both highly suggestive examples for the power of names used throughout the *Cratylus*.

In the *Gorgias* context, the practice of cauterization symbolizes, as in the *Cratylus*, the seemingly violent yet restorative power of language. Gorgias' rhetoric is violent because it is manipulative, but it is restorative because it gets the hearer to act to his or her benefit—Gorgias can convince people “not to flinch but to keep silence well and courageously, just as when being cauterized (τέμνειν καὶ κάειν) by a doctor, *pursuing the noble and good*” (480c). Although language may appear to do violence to a thing by misrepresenting it, that same violence, if applied correctly, can actually be restorative.

Unsurprisingly, this same idea is illustrated by one of the dialogue's main silent interlocutors, Heraclitus: “Doctors who cut and burn (τέμνοντες, καίοντες) [and torture their patients in every way] complain that they do not receive the reward they deserve [from the patients], acting as they do” (D58). Again, as with all of Heraclitus' sayings, there are philosophical underpinnings to what might seem merely quotidian. Heraclitus picked up on the paradoxical idea that something negative and destructive is actually positive and beneficial. Cutting was a form of torture and yet also of relief from illness. Cutting opened the flesh, but when done with a hot knife it also sealed it. By damaging, this practice healed.<sup>32</sup>

Given the nature of τέμνειν καὶ καίειν, Socrates' final claim in the analogical argument now makes a different sort of sense: “But if we wish to cut each thing contrary to nature, we will be mistaken and we will accomplish nothing?” (387a). What does it mean to accomplish nothing? The standard interpretation leaves the reader no alternative but to assume that Socrates had in mind a ridiculous sort of example, such as trying to cut

---

<sup>32</sup> See Kahn 1981, 188. This is similar to D59: the carding device was used to create wool thread for the production of clothing, but was also used for torture (cf. Herodotus 1.92.4). Kahn also interprets D11 in this way (“All beasts are driven <to pasture> by blows”): domestic animals would die if not subjected to violence—the violence is creative or restorative. Cf. Aristotle, *Problems* 877a14-15.

steel with butter.<sup>33</sup> But if we understand the analogy within the limits of τέμνειν καὶ καίειν, we can see that a doctor could cut a patient in all sorts of ways, but the doctor will accomplish nothing (i.e., *will not heal the patient*) unless he or she does it in the right way.<sup>34</sup>

This also makes sense of the final extension of the analogical arguments, where Socrates claims that both speaking and naming must be done in the right way or they will also “accomplish nothing” (387c, 387d). But what does “accomplish nothing” mean in a linguistic context? As with cutting, it does not mean nothing *simpliciter*. That is, we will always accomplish *something*. Violence is always possible when wielding a knife, even if the cutting is not done well. Just so, misrepresentation is always possible in language; we can “accomplish nothing” by using language that is not correct or properly meaningful. To avoid this, language must deal with its object just as the practice of cautery deals with its object: doing something that is manifestly violent in order to bring health to that thing.

To see what this means in the specific case of naming, it is important to recognize the purpose of the analogical argument: to discern what sort of correctness names have. And given that Socrates follows the argument by etymologizing, it is reasonable to understand the argument as laying the theoretical foundation for how the more practical etymologies will demonstrate the correctness of names. And in fact, it is well-suited for

---

<sup>33</sup> E.g., “If we want to do some cutting, it is no good trying to use a feather, we must use a knife; and if we want to cut wood, it is no use trying to do it with a butter-knife” (Ackrill 1999, 129-130). Furthermore, it just doesn’t sound right to call a torch a “tool for burning”—really the only instrument that makes sense as parallel to the other analogues in this way is the cautery knife.

<sup>34</sup> Again, Plato’s language parallels the Hippocratic sources above: we err (ἐξαμαρτησόμεθα, 387a; cf. Hippocrates’ ἀμαρτάνης above) when we cut παρά φύσιν and accomplish nothing. What is more, Plato’s next analogue (drilling) parallels Hippocrates in this same way: “‘One part pulls, the other pushes; what is forced inside comes outside. But if violence be applied at the wrong time there is no success’ (τὸ μὲν ἔλκει, τὸ δὲ ὠθεῖ· ἔσω δὲ βιαζομένου ἔξω ἔρπει· ἣν δὲ βιάται παρά καιρόν, παντὸς ἀποτεύξεται, *De Victu*, Chapter 7, translation in Bartoš 2012. See also the Aristotelian discussion of how these practices are effective when done in the right way, *Problems* 863a10-12 and 20.

this purpose, as etymology is a destructive-creative practice: it creates meaningful words precisely by dividing (and thus destroying) extant words.

Furthermore, these suggestions about etymology hold true of language in general. Language is an inevitably inadequate medium. It does violence to what it represents. But not all uses of language are *ultimately* destructive. Careful uses of language (poetic uses like etymology or even logical uses like dialectic) turn this misrepresentation on itself—by making its inadequacy manifest—for creative and productive ends. Hence, just as ‘cutting and burning’ is done correctly with an eye to the health of what is cauterized, correct use of language can turn its inherent misrepresentation to restorative effect.

### 3.3 BORING DEEPER

Following the action (cutting and burning) analogies, Socrates turns to a discussion of the tools with which we perform actions: “And for that which it is necessary to bore, it is necessary to bore with something?... And for that which it is necessary to name, it is necessary to name with something?” (387e). In short, Socrates argues that what we accomplish with a name will be analogous to what we accomplish with other tools (a borer or auger and, below, a shuttle). Because of this, what Plato wants us to understand about the function of a name depends on how we understand the function of a borer. I will demonstrate how this understanding will also reflect the paradoxical motion of dialectic: creation or combination through destruction or division.

I noted above how boring would have been familiar from its medical usage,<sup>35</sup> but it would have been more familiar through its use in carpentry. The borer (τρύπανον) was a sort of bow drill or a helical auger, requiring a reciprocal push-pull motion.<sup>36</sup> This circular motion can be seen in Odysseus' use of the τρύπανον to bore into the Cyclops' eye:

They took the stake of olive-wood, sharp at the point, and thrust it into his eye, while I, throwing my weight upon it from above, *whirled it round*, as when a man bores a ship's timber with a drill, while those below keep it *spinning* with the thong, which they lay hold of by either end, and the drill *runs around unceasingly*. (*Odyssey* ix.384-385, emphasis added)

Clearly, a borer penetrates its object. But the motion of a τρύπανον is more prominently circular.<sup>37</sup> This circularity results from reciprocal pushing and pulling—an image of opposed forces blending into one harmonious motion.<sup>38</sup> This is a supremely Heraclitean invocation: “They do not comprehend how a thing agrees at variance with itself; it is an attunement turning back on itself, like that of the bow and the lyre” (D51).<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> See n34. The medical use of a τρύπανον, like τέμνειν καὶ καίειν, is well-attested in ancient medicine, especially in the Hippocratic corpus: *De morbis popularibus* (= *Epidemiae*) 1.35.5; *De diaeta i–iv* 16.2; *De capitis vulneribus* 18.13; *De affectionibus interioribus* 23.25, 23.26; *De morbis i–iii* 15.22, 26.15; *De natura muliebri* 107.5; *De superfetatione* 8.9, 8.13; *De capitis vulneribus* 21.37; and *De mulierum affectibus i–iii* 222.15.

<sup>36</sup> There is some textual controversy over which specific instrument is intended by τρύπανον in the Hippocratic corpus (see Jones 1931), but in either case the motion is cyclical.

<sup>37</sup> Hence, the error of Ewigen's “piercing or penetrating” (2013, 81) interpretation.

<sup>38</sup> In the Hippocratic corpus, the cyclical motion of a τρύπανον is readily used as an analogy for opposed bodily processes (ingestion and excretion, inhalation and exhalation, etc.), see Bartoš 2012.

<sup>39</sup> This is probably more than an “echo” or “invocation.” Socrates extends his analogies quite carefully, and one product of the borer-tool is the lyre-instrument, which is frequently exemplary in Heraclitus (D48, D51, etc.).

As such, it is precisely the sort of paradoxical unity Plato wants to suggest with his analogical arguments: boring appears destructive, but is ultimately creative. The order of the analogues supports this interpretation. Socrates moves from evidently destructive action-analogues (cutting and burning) through tool-analogues (borers and shuttles) finally to productive makers-and-users-analogues (e.g., ship builders, lyre players, and the dialectician). The motion is indeed from (apparent) destruction to creation, and the tool analogues (borers and shuttles) lie at the middle of this progression. As such, borers embody both the destructive and the productive; they destroy the natural state of wood, but, ultimately, for the sake of building and then sailing ships or building and then playing lyres (390b-c).

Plato demonstrates this creativity-through-destruction linguistically as well. That is, when Socrates applies the borer analogue to naming, he says that “A name, then, is some instrument fit for teaching and for discerning being” (388b-c). “Discerning” here is a translation of one of the Greek words for boring (piercing or penetrating), διακριτικός. But just like the action (boring), the name (διακριτικός) is not entirely destructive in its incisiveness, which is why it is used in philosophical contexts to refer to understanding and dialectic.

Finally, just like the action analogy, the tool analogy shows us how analogizing is used to demonstrate correctness. This is evident if we read the analogy carefully: boring (action) uses borers (tools) in a way analogous to how naming (action) uses names (tools). This seems straightforward, but speaking of a name as the tool for the action of naming ought to strike us as somewhat odd. How do we *use* names when we name? Don’t we, instead, *create* names when we name? This confusion is partially the result of

the Greek ὀνομάζω, which has a different conceptual valence than the English verb “to name”—ὀνομάζω can mean either “to give a name” or “to use a name.” But Plato was not confused by this ambiguity. Rather, he alludes to a practice which uses names and produces names: etymologizing. In the etymologizing that follows the arguments by analogy, names will indeed serve as tools to divide existing names in order to discover, or discern, the past names and the meaning hidden therein; creation arises from this destruction.

### 3.4 THE “SHUTTLE”

This paradoxical movement of creation-through-destruction also resonates throughout the argument’s central analogue, one which Plato frequently uses as a paradigm for language and logic: the shuttle.<sup>40</sup> But in order to understand this tool’s role in the argument, it is first important to recognize that what I have been translating as “to shuttle” and “shuttle” are mistranslations of the Greek κερκίζειν and κέρκις. As I will elaborate below, the part the κέρκις plays in the weaving process is different from the part played by the shuttle. Yet this mistranslation has been universal throughout the centuries and across language traditions. In fact, all of the English translations of the *Cratylus* (Taylor, Jowett, Fowler, Reeve, and Sachs) translate κέρκις and κερκίζειν as

---

<sup>40</sup> In case the reader supposes that this is too liberal a hermeneutic tactic, or that it is anachronistic, this analogue will dispel such ideas. Think, e.g., of Proclus’ treatment of the shuttle: “Whence even initiates into the mysteries, when they ensure by such an [analogical] relationship that things here are sympathetic with the gods, use these instruments as signs of the divine powers – for example, *the shuttle as a sign of the discriminating powers*” (56.25, 1-4, trans. Duvick). Since antiquity, the shuttle has symbolized the movement of dialectic.



“shuttle.”<sup>41</sup> This is partly because the practice of κερκίζειν has long been misunderstood and partly because there is no exact counterpart to the tool in modernity.<sup>42</sup> So, because “shuttle” is erroneous and loads the reader with incorrect assumptions, and because the alternatives are less-than-desirable (e.g., “pin-beater” and “weaver’s rod”), I will transliterate κέρκις (as *kerkis*) for the remainder of this paper.

In fact, a correct understanding of the *kerkis* is conceptually decisive. This is primarily because the analogical argument depends on our understanding of the *kerkis*: “A name, then, is some instrument fit for teaching and for discerning being, just as a *kerkis* is fit for doing these things to a web” (388b-c). Thus, in order to understand *how* a name discerns being, we must first understand how a *kerkis* operates. Yet, every interpretation I know of assumes that what Socrates means here is straightforward.<sup>43</sup> For example, note how Joseph 2000 explains the analogy: “This definition follows a frequent pattern in Plato, making an abstract term (in this case, ‘word’) understandable by drawing it into an equation with some everyday concrete object (a shuttle)” (28). This is thoroughly ironic, given the almost universal misunderstanding of this “everyday concrete object.”<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> I have yet to do an exhaustive search of how other translators have treated this term, but my initial reading shows that this seems to be true across language traditions (e.g., Méridier and Dalimier both use “navette,” “passer la trame,” etc.). Hence, the mistranslation evidences an extensive conceptual error.

<sup>42</sup> Except possibly in an especially antiquated and remote Scandinavian practice which even few Scandinavians would recognize, See Landercy 1933 and Crowfoot 1936.

<sup>43</sup> E.g. Sedley 2003, 60; Sallis 1996, 206 and 307; Ewgen 2013, 81; Barney 2001, 42; Baxter 1991, 40-41; etc. The only exception I know of, a strong exception indeed, is Ademollo 2011, which I deal with below.

<sup>44</sup> Indeed, details of the weaving operation was one of cultural significance and even cultural identity to the Greeks, as evidenced by Herodotus’ remarks about the perverse order of Egyptian life:

The Egyptians in agreement with their climate, which is unlike any other, and with the river, which shows a nature different from all other rivers, established for themselves manners and customs in a way opposite to other men in almost all matters: for among them the women frequent the market and carry on trade, while the men remain at home and weave; and whereas others weave pushing the woof upwards, the Egyptians push it downwards: the men carry their burdens upon their heads and the women upon their shoulders: the women make water standing up and the men crouching down... (II.35)

This irony is especially evident if we read closely Socrates' claim that "what do we accomplish when we use the *kerkis*? Don't we separate the weft and the warp when they have been mingled?" (388b). But Socrates cannot be speaking of a shuttle here, as *shuttles don't perform this action*—they don't separate the warp and weft. Instead, they carry (or *shuttle*) the warp through the weft—apparently the opposite of separating warp and weft.

A related problem caused by assuming Socrates is talking about a shuttle is the failure to recognize that Socrates is making a novel point when he says that the *kerkis* divides. Likely because Plato elsewhere makes the same point about the *kerkis* being a sort of separation (*Sophist* 226b-c, *Statesman* 282b-c, cf. Aristotle's *Physics* 243b3-9), readers might be led to see this as a commonplace observation. However, Plato is innovating. His comment here would have made his contemporaries do a double-take: because weaving is obviously combination, why would Plato have Socrates describe it as separation? This can be discerned in, e.g., Theaetetus' uncomprehending reaction to the Athenian Stranger's suggestion that weaving practices (ξάινειν, κατάγειν, κερκίζειν) are like other more obvious dividing practices (διαττᾶν, βράττειν, διακρίνειν): "In asking about all of these, what sort of things do you wish for these examples to make clear?" (*Sophist* 226c). And we see the same sort of surprise in the *Statesman*, where the Stranger proposes the paradoxical idea that, in discussing weaving, we are actually discussing separation—his interlocutor (this time Young Socrates) is perplexed. Note how Plato

---

In other words, the fact that the Egyptians weave in the wrong direction would have been just as apparently contrary to nature as their gender urination norms. Cf. "O, true image of the ways of Egypt that they show in their nature and their life! For there the men stay at home weaving, but the wives go forth to win the daily bread" (Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 337–342).

reflects the paradoxicality of creation and destruction, or combination and separation, in his very language:

Stranger: But this is not the end of what was said, my boy. For the one who sets about the work of *creating* clothes appears to do the *opposite* of weaving.

Young Socrates: How so?

Stranger: I suppose weaving is some sort of *combination* (συμπλοκή)?

Young Socrates: Yes.

Stranger: But it is a sort of *destruction* (διαλυτική) of what is *combined* (συνεστώτων) and felt *together* (συμπεπιλημένων).

Young Socrates: What on earth are you saying? (280e-281a)

How can the stranger claim that the *kerkis* is a destructive or divisive tool, when it is so manifestly in the service of combination? Indeed, there is no user of the *kerkis* that is not also a weaver, and the *Cratylus* unequivocally describes the κερκίς as a weaving tool used by a weaving expert in the process of weaving. And elsewhere, Plato describes the *kerkis* as a tool that “shares in the *creation* of garments” (*Statesman* 281e) and as weaving fibers closely *together* (συγκερκίζοντα, 310e). Even Aristotle describes the

*kerkis* as a tool that creates (ὄργανα ποιητικὰ): “from the *kerkis* comes something else—something other than its use” (*Politics* 1254a1-4). Clearly, the claim that the *kerkis* is a tool for division is intended to strike readers as paradoxical, in line with the suggestions made above about the other parts of the analogical argument; creation and destruction, or combination and division, are inseparable.

### 3.4.1 Functions of the *Kerkis*

Understanding the actual use of the *kerkis* will help us make sense of this paradoxicality, of Socrates’ argument, and, hence, of naming.<sup>45</sup> The *kerkis* is a tool used in the warp-weighted loom.<sup>46</sup> This system interlaced two sets of threads (the warp and weft) at right angles to each other, the vertically-oriented set (the warp) being held under tension by a weight. The shuttle works in this system similar to how it works in other weaving-systems, by carrying the weft as it is woven through the warp. But the *kerkis* plays a unique and complex role in the process of Ancient Greek weaving. I follow the pluralism of Edmunds 2012 (who expands on Landercy’s 1933 innovation) in distinguishing three interrelated functions of the *kerkis*: (1) Strumming: the *kerkis* was used to even out the warp threads by strumming across them. Because the threads tend to clump, the weaver would use the *kerkis* to separate the clump by strumming across the warp. (2) Picking the shed: the *kerkis* is used to separate the warp threads (this opening is called a shed) so that the weft can pass through (carried by a shuttle, by hand, etc.). (3)

---

<sup>45</sup> Pace Ademollo 2011, who recognizes some of the interesting difficulties regarding the *kerkis*, but ultimately does nothing “I leave these questions unanswered and follow Socrates as he moves on...” (110).

<sup>46</sup> See Crowfoot 1936, Vogt 1938, Edmunds 2012. For an archaeological account of the method, see Carroll 1983. The use of this sort of weaving could have gone out of practice as early as the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.E.

Beating the weft: the *kerkis* is used to beat the weft row into place once it has been woven—to push the thread up snug with the others.

In what follows, I will demonstrate how each function contributes to the thesis I have been arguing for so far. That is, that the *kerkis* is paradoxical like other tools; it appears destructive—or in this case, divisive—but it is actually creative and uniting. To put it in a Heraclitean fashion, it combines by separating.<sup>47</sup>

### 3.4.2 Strumming

When the *kerkis* is used to strum across the threads of the warp, it separates them one from another. But this separation creates a sort of harmony. The very terminology, “strumming,” is chosen because the process looks and perhaps even sounds like strumming the vertical strings of a harp.<sup>48</sup> And indeed, the metaphor is more than visual. The aural nature of the *kerkis* is prominent in ancient literature. For example, Sophocles’ Fragment 890 describes the use of the *kerkis* in this manner: “The songs of the kerkis, which awakens sleepers” (κερκίδος ὕμνοις, ἥ τοὺς εὐδοντας ἐγείρει). Aristophanes’ *Frogs* describes someone who cares for the singing of the *kerkis* (κερκίδος ἀοιδοῦ μελέτας, 1315). And Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Tauris* describes the “beautiful sounds of the loom made by the *kerkis*” (ἱστοῖς ἐν καλλιφθόγγοις κερκίδι, 222–224). And, as Crowfoot 1936 has indicated, the *Anthologia Graeca* has numerous references to the musicality of

---

<sup>47</sup> Cf. “it rests by changing” (D84).

<sup>48</sup> See Pomeroy 1978, 19, which evaluates the representation of both of these actions in Ancient Greek vase painting and McIntosh and Snyder 1981, 194–195, which compares looms and lyres in the context of Ancient Greek lyric. Cf. Keuls 1983, 219, and Power 2010, 122–134.

the *kerkis*.<sup>49</sup> Even Aristotle compares the *kerkis* to the action of the plectrum (*Politics* 1253b34-1254a1).

And indeed, this sustained analogy between weaving and music is apparent in the very terminology. Related to *κερκίς*, the word *κρέκειν* (literally, “striking”) is used for weaving *and* playing a musical instrument—i.e., striking the web with the *kerkis* or striking the lyre with the plectrum.<sup>50</sup>

Again, this is partially because of the visual similarity between the two actions. But it is also because the two actions similarly produced sound. This is either because the strummed threads actually resonated (Restani 1995, 99-100) or perhaps because the strumming caused the dangling loom weights to knock together (Edmunds 2012, §49). Either way, scholars have observed that the outcome could have actually been harmonious: “we might imagine that in the ‘flatland’ of Greek music, the *κερκίς* truly did ‘sing’” (Crowfoot 1936, 45).

Because the paradoxical opposition of combination and separation has been prominent throughout the analogical argument, it is hard not to take this reference to musical harmony in a deeper sense. And indeed, Plato’s readers could have naturally taken the image as invoking another prominent influence on the *Cratylus*, Heraclitus:

---

<sup>49</sup> For example, “To Athena, Bitto dedicated her *kerkis*, which was fond of singing” (Κερκίδα τὴν φιλαοιδὸν Ἀθηναίῃ θέτο Βιττῶ ἄνθεμα, VI.47), “the well-made *kerkis*, a nightingale for the weavers” (κερκίδα δ’ εὐποίητον, ἀηδόνα τὰν ἐν ἐρίθοις, VI.174), “the *kerkis* is alike in voice to the early-twittering swallows” (Κερκίδας ὀρθρολάοισι χελιδόσιν εἰκελοφώνους, VI.247), “the *kerkis*, the singing and dancing girl of the loom” (κερκίδα, τὰν ἱστῶν μολπάτιδα, VI.188).

<sup>50</sup> See *Etymologicum parvum* K.33. The recent Fanfani 2017 does an excellent job of demonstrating this poetic and etymological relation between musical and weaving themes and terminology. This follows on the important Nagy 2008: “the idea of making song is expressed metaphorically through the idea of making fabric” (§92).

The counter-thrust brings together, and from tones at variance comes perfect attunement (*harmonia*), and all things come to pass through conflict. (D8)

They do not comprehend how a thing agrees at variance with itself; it is an attunement (*harmonie*) turning back on itself, like that of the bow and the lyre. (D51)

Plato was certainly well-aware these lines of Heraclitus, as he relates in *Symposium* 187a, where he has Socrates interpret Heraclitus' "manifestly absurd" (πολλὴ ἀλογία) idea as meaning, rather, that harmony is the result of when notes that are at variance (διαφερομένων) come together. But they don't come together in the sense of unity—they don't resolve into the same notes. Rather, they come together *as opposed*.<sup>51</sup> So it is with the threads struck by the *kerkis*; they must be opposed by the strumming before they are combined by the weaving.

Again, the idea that order results from a regular strumming motion is utterly Heraclitean: "even the potion [κυκεὼν] separates unless it is stirred" (D125). This drink (the κυκεὼν) was a nasty-sounding mixture of wine, cheese, barley, and sometimes even other ingredients. When left to itself, there is a natural sedimentation that occurs, and the drink becomes a pile of barley and cheese sitting at the bottom of a glass of wine. For the mixture to constitute a unified drink, it must be stirred constantly. Just so, the warp threads tend to form clumps that aren't amenable to weaving. For the creation of a unified

---

<sup>51</sup> διαφερόμενον δὲ αὐτὸ καὶ μὴ ὁμολογοῦν ἀδύνατον ἁρμόσαι...

and orderly tapestry, the *kerkis* must strum those clumps apart continually. Such strumming is indeed a separating and a combining—or a unification through separation.

### 3.4.3 Picking the Shed

The artistic and archaeological evidence for Ancient Greek looms suggests that there was a center bar that was used to create space between the different layers of warp threads. This space is called the “shed.” To add complexity to the weaving pattern, the weaver would have needed to create additional temporary sheds (sometimes called “counter-sheds”). Edmunds 2012 suggests that the *kerkis* was used for this purpose. Or, more precisely, the *kerkis* was one of the possible ways of picking a temporary shed (a weaver could use various heedle devices such as threads, a bar, or even his or her hand for this purpose).

This is a straightforward case of separation: the warp treads are held open and apart in readiness for the introduction of the weft. However, as a merely temporary moment of the weaving process, this too is a separation for the sake of a combination. Perhaps this is a fitting image for the creation of a name, which opens the space for meaning to emerge. Or perhaps it, too, foreshadows the etymologizing to come, where names will be temporarily separated before being meaningfully recombined. Indeed, etymons are discoverable only when names are held apart, just as the path is open for the weft by the *kerkis*’ temporary sheds.

### 3.4.4 Beating the Weft



Perhaps the main function of the *kerkis* is to beat the weft into place: once the weft thread has been distributed across the warp, the *kerkis* is used to beat the recent thread snug up against previous weft threads, finalizing the woven row.<sup>52</sup>

This function of the *kerkis* is both divisive and creative. In fact, just as it does in the *Cratylus*, it often figures prominently in ancient literature as analogous to language: beating the weft into place with the *kerkis* represents the creation of meaning in language. Perhaps because the weft is woven through the vertical-hanging warp, the process of beating the weft up the warp looks a lot like writing with a stylus. This is frequently testified in ancient literature. For example, Helen weaves the story of the Trojan war in *Iliad* iii.125-128, and Andromache weaves flowery love charms at xxii.440-441. Barber 1991 even suggests that weaving was instrumental in recording important historical or cultural information (311–382).<sup>53</sup> Indeed, the *kerkis* was represented as the voice of this weaving language. In Sophocles' *Tereus*, for example, Tereus raped Philomela and cut out her tongue to prevent her from telling what he had done. But Philomela found a new voice in the *kerkis*—she wove a tapestry showing what had happened and showed it to her sister. This display is described as the κερκίδος φωνή (Fragment 595). This use of the *kerkis* is far from destructive, but represents the creation of something meaningful. As the dominant function of the *kerkis*, this beating motion is paradigmatic of the sort of διαίρεσις evinced by Plato. That is, it is a movement that is simultaneously a separating

---

<sup>52</sup> This is why “pin beater” is the preferred translation of *kerkis* for scholars who are attentive to the tool’s actual function (to boot, “pin beater” is etymologically more adequate to the function of the *kerkis*, as κρέκειν means “to beat”).

<sup>53</sup> I.e., long before Dickens’ *Tale of Two Cities*! Presumably, this constituted a code interpretable only by the women who weave the cloth (see Nosch 2014).

and a combining. In a single motion, the *kerkis* separates the warp threads while driving the weft threads together.

However, it is also disputed whether or not Plato had this function of the *kerkis* in mind in the *Cratylus* passage. For instance, Ademollo 2011 claims that

Our passage and the other sources agreeing with it do not mention beating up the weft as part of the job of a κερκίς. Indeed, Aristotle contrasts the κέρκισις, as a kind of ‘pushing apart’ and separation, with the σπάθισις, i.e. the action of beating up the weft by means of the σπάθη or ‘sword-beater’, which is instead a kind of ‘pushing together’ and combination. (108-109)

Indeed, there were many weaving devices employed in Ancient Greece, as is evidenced by the different terminology; the σπάθη, mentioned by Aristotle at *Physics* 243b3–9, is only one of them. Authors, including Plato, also mention the κανών, a weaving rod or “heedle bar,” and the ἄτρακτος, a bobbin used for carrying thread, both of which also overlap with the function of the *kerkis*. This does not mean that the *kerkis* was never used to beat the weft, create a shed, or even to introduce the warp.<sup>54</sup> Rather, all it means is that different tools had overlapping functions, an idea I hardly find surprising.

Another way of resolving this apparent disparity is Edmunds 2012: “the sword takes over one function that the pin beater might have in one type of weaving, such as

---

<sup>54</sup> Barber 1991 actually maintains this idea (“Among the Greeks, the *kerkis* seems at least sometimes to have carried the weft on it...” 273) but gives no evidence. Cf. Ademollo 2011: “By contrast, at *Plt.* 283ab Plato says that weaving (ὕφαίνεῖν) consists in intertwining warp and weft so as to produce a web. Hence κερκίζειν cannot be weaving, in these texts at least, and the κερκίς cannot be a shuttle, i.e. the tool which carries the weft thread across between the warp threads” (108).

pattern weaving, and the pin beater itself becomes more specialized” (§47). This agrees with Landercy 1933: “La σπάθη est un instrument difficile à manier et son action est fort imparfaite. Il ne peut à lui seul tenir lieu du peigne ou battant actuel. Son action doit être complétée ou corrigée par un instrument nécessairement pointu... la κέρκις” (360). In short, there is no inconsistency in maintaining that the *kerkis* functioned, perhaps even mainly, to beat the weft.

Why, then, do interpretations oppose this function of the *kerkis*? It seems to me that these interpretations are trying to make sense of Plato’s text, which only describes the tool as separating (whereas beating up the weft seems to be more prominently a sort of combining). But as I have now demonstrated, this goes against the scholarship on the tool and it also goes against what Plato is actually suggesting. Plato is making a novel point about practices which seem to combine, but do so through a paradoxical sort of separation. In this case, the *kerkis* seems to combine warp with weft, but this is only accomplished as the warp threads are drawn apart by the weft—an action at the same time separating and combining.

This goes some way to resolving a more difficult puzzle in how Plato describes the action of the *kerkis*. Again, Ademollo 2011 identifies the problem:

In our passage Socrates says that by means of the κέρκις ‘we separate the *weft and the warp which are confused*’, whereas the scholarly accounts identifying the κέρκις as a pin-beater usually refer only to the job of separating the *warp* threads from each other. Does it make sense to suppose that the κέρκις also separates the

*weft* threads from each other? Would it make any sense to suppose, instead, that the κερκίς somehow separates *the weft and the warp from each other?* (109-110)

Now that we have become clearer on what the *kerkis* does, there are several ways to solve this puzzle. When a warp and weft are confused (συγκεχυμένους, s.v. συγχέω), they are comingled or, quite literally, dissolved together (συν-χέω, to become liquid, dissolve into another, or diffuse). In the weaving context, this happens when it becomes unclear which is the warp and which is the weft. This must occur once the weft has been introduced into the warp, but before it has been beaten into its final place. In this intermediary stage, the two threads could become entangled. And while strumming the warp may accomplish the purpose of separating the two from each other, I propose that the two are separated when the weft is beaten home.

By driving the current weft thread up against the previous weft thread, the *kerkis* is manifestly combining the warp and weft. But in doing this, the *kerkis* also drives the current weft thread tight up against the perpendicular warp threads, and this is a sort of dividing action. That is, by bringing the warp and weft close together, the weaver brings them away from their mingled state into a proximity—and that proximity makes it clear which is which. It helps us *discern* or *distinguish* the strands (i.e., the διακρίνω of Socrates' κερκίζοντες δὲ τί δρῶμεν; οὐ τὴν κρόκην καὶ τοὺς στήμονας συγκεχυμένους διακρίνομεν;, 388b). Indeed, this is the sense of διακρίνω as Plato intends it here: the threads are not necessarily *separated* by being brought to a distance with each other, as

when a shed is picked.<sup>55</sup> Rather, they are *distinguished* or divided by being brought together, just as someone might hold two colors up next to each other in order to see the difference. Hence, when the weft is beaten up into the warp, the two threads are indeed snugged, but they are snugged as separate. They are made distinct by being brought together. They are separated by being combined.<sup>56</sup>

### 3.4.5 The *Kerkis* and the *Statesman*

Now that we have discussed the specific functions of the *kerkis*, the central puzzle of the instrument has come into view: how can it be both a combining and a dividing? To further confirm the above conclusions, let us turn to the *Statesman* to see how Plato there presents the two seemingly opposed functions of combining and dividing. The stranger proposes a classification system to make sense of these seemingly opposed functions: wool working has two parts, and each part is itself divided into two:

Stranger: There are two sections of the art of wool-working, and each such section is, at the same time, by its nature, part of two arts.

---

<sup>55</sup> What is more, διακρίνω is also used as “to part,” as in “to part hair” (e.g., Plutarch, *Romulus* 15). Parting is done with a comb, which, in weaving, is the modern counterpart to the ancient *kerkis*—both snug the weft up.

<sup>56</sup> Landercy 1933 proposes yet another understanding of the *kerkis* that would not contradict this account: as a weaver proceeds down the loom, the warp and weft tend to be woven together with increasing tension. The result of this is that fabric tends to become narrower and narrower as the weaver proceeds. The top of the loom would have held the warp threads apart, but there is no mechanism for maintaining this distance in the body of the fabric. Hence, the *kerkis*, presumably both by strumming and by beating the weft, would have deliberately separated warp from weft and allowed some play between the threads: “*La κερκίς servira donc à distancer également les fils et à conserver ainsi au tissu largeur et longueur uniformes*” (360).

Young Socrates: How so?

Stranger: Carding and half of the art-of-the-*kerkis* (κερκιστικῆς) and as many others as separate the things that are joined together (ὅσα τὰ συγκείμενα ἀπ' ἀλλήλων ἀφίστησι)—all this, I suppose, is as one, and is said to be part of wool-working. And according to all these things, we have two great arts: combination (συγκριτική) and division (διακριτική). (282b)

This passage has confused interpreters of the *Cratylus*, who misunderstand the passage because of their misunderstanding of the *kerkis*. To make this clearer, I will map it out here. But first, let's look at how it has been misunderstood. One of the more careful readers of the *Cratylus* is forced to do some creative philological gymnastics to make sense of the passage:

I doubt whether the Greek phrase means 'Carding and one half of the craft of the κερκίς' (so Campbell 1867 and Rowe 1995), which would imply that there is another, unmentioned half of the craft of the κερκίς. The meaning, I submit, should rather be 'the half [i.e. the segment of the wool-working craft] that contains carding and the craft of the κερκίς'. Thus the whole craft of the κερκίς would be included in the separating craft, as *Cra.* and *Sph.* suggest. (Ademollo 2011, 108n28)

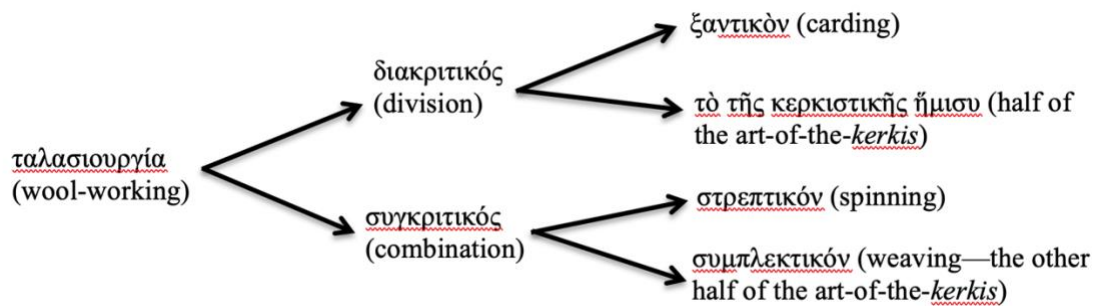
But by this point in the investigation, it ought to be clear (a) why commentators are so strained to force the entire art-of-the-*kerkis* into the ‘division’ category, and (b) why this cannot be correct. As for (a), commentators find here what seems to be a discrepancy. Plato says in the *Cratylus* that the *kerkis* is a sort of division, but here in the *Statesman* he seems to complicate matters. And because commentators are dedicated to the ‘*kerkis*-as-separation’ model, doing violence to the text seems like a better alternative. Indeed, the Greek for the contested “one half” idea is τὸ μὲν ξαντικὸν καὶ τὸ τῆς κερκιστικῆς ἥμισυ—this straightforwardly means, as I translated it above, “Carding and half of the art-of-the-*kerkis*.” To take it otherwise would require more of a defense than Ademollo here provides. Finally, as to (b), the preceding analysis has demonstrated that in each of Plato’s use of “*kerkis*,” he invokes the complex combination *and* division that is a part of the nature of this instrument.

So let’s try and make the *Statesman* passage clear. The two parts of wool-working are (1) carding and (2) the art-of-the-*kerkis* (but only half of it). These are properly actions of *division*, and they are only half of the story. The other half are those arts concerned with *composition*, which are identified in 282d as (1) spinning (or “twisting threads,” στρεπτικόν) and (2) weaving (or “braiding together,” συμπλεκτικόν).<sup>57</sup> This συμπλεκτικόν is Ademollo’s mysterious other half of the art-of-the-*kerkis*. But Plato does not think it is mysterious. In fact, he thought the combining aspect of the *kerkis* was so evident as to obviate the need for mentioning it here as serving this function.

These divisions will doubtless be more readily sensible if rendered graphically:

---

<sup>57</sup> συμπλεκτικόν comes from πλέκω, which, like κρέκειν above, frequently has metaphorical uses in music and poetics (e.g., πλέκω ὕμνον or ῥήματα: Pindar *Ode* 6.86 and *Nemian Ode* 4.94; Cf. Critias Fr.1, Plato *Hippias Minor* 369b, Aristotle *Poetics* 1456a9, 1452a12, 1452b32, 1459b9, etc.)



As the *Statesman* demonstrates, even in its final analysis, weaving is understood principally as an art of combination (283a). But this conclusion could only be reached, as the stranger points out, through a discussion of division:

Stranger: So let it be. But why in the world then did we not straightway come to the answer that weaving is an interlacing of warp and weft, but instead we went about in a circle, dividing each and every thing in vain? (283b)

Young Socrates replied that it was not in vain, and the Stranger commends him for his understanding of dialectic. Separation and division are inextricably bound. The paradigm case of this, weaving, demonstrates how one is necessary for the other—the *kerkis* combines, but it does so by separating.

### 3.4.6 A New Interpretation

Because the tool analogy is designed to show that what names accomplish is like what tools accomplish, let us now turn to names and see what difference this renewed



understanding of the *kerkis* makes for the argument. What, exactly, does a name accomplish?

Socrates: As a name is a tool, what do we do when we name with it? ... Don't we teach each other something and separate things according to the way in which they are? ... A name, then, is some tool fit for teaching and for separating being, just as a *kerkis* is fit for doing these things to a web. (ὄνομα ἄρα διδασκαλικόν τί ἐστιν ὄργανον καὶ διακριτικὸν τῆς οὐσίας ὥσπερ κερκὶς ὑφάσματος, 388b-c)

According to Socrates, a name is used for *teaching* and for *separating* being. What this means is far from straightforward, and the scholarly battleground of this question lies upon the grammar of this final sentence. That is, because it is ambiguous whether “teaching and separating” is meant to describe one or two aspects of naming, a correct understanding of the function of “and” is the key to this sentence’s meaning.

The more natural reading is, as I have translated it, conjunctive (“teaching *and* separating”).<sup>58</sup> However, scholars who address this passage have almost unanimously read it as explicative or epexegetical.<sup>59</sup> That is, they argue that “separating” is meant as an explanation of “teaching,” and not as a separate function. (Reeve’s translation

---

<sup>58</sup> Although it is the less popular position, this view is not without its implicit supporters. For instance, Kretzmann 1971, who doesn’t go into any detail, recognizes the dual function when he distinguishes between “instruction” and “taxonomy” (128). Guthrie 1978, 19 does something similar, but again without his justification for doing so. And Sachs translates the passage as “Therefore a name is a certain kind of tool meant for teaching and for the disentangling of being.” However, it is unclear whether these are deliberately taking a stand on the issue I identify here or just uncritically adopting what is a more natural reading of the Greek.

<sup>59</sup> Following Ackrill 1997, 41-42; Barney 2001, 42-45; Sedley 2003, 60-61; van den Berg 2007, 3-4; and Ademollo 2011, 111. I am actually unaware of anyone who deliberately draws attention to the καί as conjunctive.

exemplifies this reading: “a name is a tool for giving instruction, that is to say, for dividing being.”) Because the tools of the analogical argument have a single function, as they suppose, so too must names. If scholars understand tools as having performing simple actions in this way, they must conclude with Sedley 2003 that “There is no indication in what follows that instructing on the one hand, and separating being on the other, are two independent functions that a name has” (60).

However, there are textual and theoretical reasons for opposing this reading. First, rendering this single, crucial καί as epexegetical requires scholars to be inconsistent in translating other parts of the analogical argument. For instance, in the parallel sentence—the *immediately preceding one*—even those scholars who adopt the epexegetical reading are obliged by the text itself to render the καί as conjunctive: ἄρ’ οὐ διδάσκομέν τι ἀλλήλους καὶ τὰ πράγματα διακρίνομεν ἣ ἔχει; (Don’t we teach each other something *and* separate things according to the way in which they are?, 388b). In fact, nobody renders this sentence as epexegetical.<sup>60</sup>

This same confusion is evidenced in how scholars translate the final three words of the paragraph (ὥσπερ κερκὶς ὑφάσματος). Because the parallel with naming is implied but elided, scholars must make a decision on whether to render the *kerkis* parallel as conjunctive or epexegetical. And every single translator (and every scholar I am aware of), even those who adopt the conjunctive reading earlier, render this elided phrase in line

---

<sup>60</sup> Actually, Reeve does. His translation of this sentence is no doubt consistent with the epexegetical interpretation, but to my mind is unacceptably violent to the text: “Don’t we instruct each other, that is to say, divide things according to their natures?”

with the epexegetical reading by identifying a single unified function of the *kerkis* (i.e., separation).<sup>61</sup>

This exemplifies the further theoretical problem with the epexegetical reading: it threatens to reduce the action performed by a tool to separation. But as I have demonstrated above, each of the analogues so far suggests a twofold dialectical movement between destruction and creation, or between separation and combination. The final analogue in the series (the name) makes this twofold nature most explicit (i.e., by spelling out the name as an instrument for the twofold separation and teaching), and it should be read as such with the remainder of the analogues.

So, while the grammar of the passage may help elucidate the argument, it is obviously problematic to take it as the administrator of the argument's philosophical possibilities. (For example, by claiming that teaching explains separation because it is a grammatical possibility that the two words are related epexegetically.) As I have shown, the relationship between the two opposed functions in διαίρεσις is more complex than that one explains the other, whatever that might mean. It is also more complex than the empty conjunctive reading that I have been using to push back on the epexegetical reading. Clearly, the link between the two opposed functions of διαίρεσις exceeds the grammatical relationship within which it is expressed.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup> Fowler: "as a shuttle is an instrument of separating the web," Jowett: "as the shuttle is of distinguishing the threads of the web," Reeve: "just as a shuttle is a tool for dividing warp and woof." But perhaps the passage *should* be translated, despite its awkwardness, as parallel to the case of naming: "just as the *kerkis* is fit for X-ing and for separating," or more vaguely, as I have translated it above, "just as a *kerkis* is fit for doing these things to a web."

<sup>62</sup> On both these points, I depart from Sedley 2003, whose account otherwise sounds just like my own: "it is by separating being that a name instructs" (61). Unfortunately, Sedley does not elaborate except by reiterating Ackrill's 1997 suggestion that one is meant to explain the other, a suggestion that I think oversimplifies the dialectical relation between the two and perhaps even threatens to collapse the distinction entirely.

Indeed, just as the *kerkis* is a tool that ultimately combines through its division, so too does a name ultimately teach through its division. But as with the *kerkis* (and as with the auger), what this means is more complex than the common claim that names teach by distinguishing between *things*. For first of all, in the context of the nuanced διαίρεσις developed throughout the argument, a name's function, διακριτικὸν τῆς οὐσίας, is not exhausted by "distinguishing between things" any more than διαίρεσις is exhausted in the elaboration of genus-species trees. Language involves a much more profound conceptual discernment of *being*.

And second, Socrates' claim that a name is a tool for teaching (διδασκαλικόν) cannot mean that names simply instruct as to the difference between things (see, e.g., Ackrill's 1997 "communication" model). Such a position downplays the fact that it is *Plato's Socrates* who is making the argument, and that Socrates never teaches merely by conveying information.<sup>63</sup> Instead he guides his interlocutor to understanding through a destruction of false beliefs—the same sort of dialectical movement discussed so far, creation through destruction.

That names work in this way is also evidenced in what the analogical argument is ultimately meant to do: to show us how the correctness of names will be demonstrated in the etymologizing that will follow. In Socrates' etymologizing, names will be used as tools for the *creation* of meaning. But in order to achieve this, Socrates will have to divide (and thus *destroy*) those names. Indeed, as etymology is the main way Socrates claims to demonstrate correctness, it is by *dividing* names that Socrates will *teach* something about the correctness at work in those names.

---

<sup>63</sup> Sedley 2003 recognizes this and mentions that whatever teaching Plato has in mind here must be interrogative, Socratic teaching (62).

Of course, Plato doesn't etymologize or even talk about etymology here, but this idea (of creating meaning by cutting apart words) is suggested already in the wordplay of the *kerkis* pericope:

Socrates: The weaver (υφαντικον), then, will do well with the *kerkis*, which is to say in a weaver-like fashion (υφαντικως); and the teacher (διδασκαλικος) will do well with a name, which is to say in a teacher-like fashion (διδασκαλικως). (388c)

While Plato is demonstrating by analogy that language is creative in its destruction, he is enacting the same. In this instance, his use of διδασκαλικως and υφαντικως would have been readily understood, but unusual. For example, υφαντικως is not attested again until the 3rd century rhetorician and grammarian Julius Pollux included it in his antiquarian dictionary/thesaurus, *Onomasticon* (7.33,35). Thereafter, it only appears in quotations of the *Cratylus*.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, διδασκαλικως is strange and has a similar paucity of usages, none of which occur until centuries after Plato. Indeed, the noun from which this adverb is formed, διδασκαλικος, is not the usual word for teacher (διδάσκαλος). It is itself a nominalized adjective which Plato then additionally makes into an adverb. Plato is likely coining the word to make it parallel its analogues in the argument—he adds the “craft” suffix (-ικη) to the noun διδάσκαλος to form διδασκαλικος, which matches his other invented terminology in these passages, words like κερκιστική.<sup>65</sup> Hence, to parallel the

---

<sup>64</sup> Thus, I consider it to be yet another of the many hapax legomena in the *Cratylus*.

<sup>65</sup> κερκιστική is also a hapax. διδασκαλικος is used only a few times before Plato, and the antiquity of these usages is questionable: Anaxagoras, Fragment 54 (from Simplicius' *Physics* 154, 29); Philolaus Fragment 11.12 (from Theon of Smyrna 106.10); Isocrates, *Panathenaicus* 271.7; Xenophon *Memorabilia* 1.2; etc.

analogical argument's suggestions about creation and destruction, Plato enacts a linguistic combination and division.

### 3.5 THE LANGUAGE-MASTER

Unfortunately, the scope of this chapter will not allow an extended discussion of the intriguing role played in the *Cratylus* by the *nomothētes* and dialectician. However, I will here briefly note the implications of my interpretation for their presence in the dialogue.

In terms of the present analogy, the creator of names, the *nomothētes*, is like the carpenter, whose occupation is ancillary to an expert user of a tool (e.g., an auger or a *kerkis*). And the expert user of names is identified as the dialectician (390c-d). This final extension of the analogy strikes many readers as abrupt, incidental, or even erroneous. Sedley 2003, 10 even suggests that the dialectician is a later emendation. But the exegetical gymnastics and philological speculation required for this interpretation should alert us to the need for a more careful reading of the text. And given my above interpretation of the analogical arguments, the presence of the dialectician is not unexpected, unnecessary, or incoherent. Rather, as an individual who combines and separates, the dialectician is the natural end of the argument. Likewise, the dialectician is not abruptly absent following this argument.<sup>66</sup> At the very least, the word “dialectician” is not absent from the remainder of the text (see, e.g., 398e). But even as unnamed, the

---

<sup>66</sup> “Despite the great fanfare with which the dialectician is introduced, however, Plato quite abruptly ceases talking about him. If the dialectician's activity were in fact central in the way initially suggested, Plato would be expected, even compelled, to provide him with a more sustained presence in the dialogue” (Levin 2000, 86).

dialectician is present in the figure of Socrates, who enacts the questioning identified at 390c as the trademark of the dialectician. Furthermore, Socrates shows himself to be a masterful user of names in the sense suggested by the analogies: through etymologizing, he creates names by destroying them.

### 3.6 CONCLUSIONS

Plato's arguments at *Cratylus* 386e-390d are more robustly analogical than is generally understood. By engaging in the complex background information implicit in Plato's chosen analogues, I drew out the deeps structural relations advanced by the argument—the paradoxical idea that something is creative through destruction—and I argued that Plato intends this as a development of dialectic and διαίρεσις. Moreover, especially when actually applied to language, this procedure reveals more profound conclusions than those normally advanced (i.e., that words are tools or that actions have stable natures): language is creative through its destructiveness.

In other words, Plato uses these arguments to cut to the core of Cratylus' concern over the destructive nature of language. But instead of going silent in protest of such inevitable linguistic misrepresentation, Socrates uses a poetic form of language that is creative in such misrepresentation—etymology generates meaningful words by destroying extant words. And in the analogical arguments establishing the theoretical framework for this practice, Socrates maintains that correct language, just like the correct use of a tool or a correctly-performed action, is creative through its destructiveness.

#### 4.0 OF GODS AND MEN: RADICAL CORRECTNESS

Human nature has no insights,  
but the divine has them  
Heraclitus, D78

In the previous chapter, I discussed how Socrates used analogical arguments to demonstrate language's paradoxical movement through destruction to creation of meaning. In what immediately follows those analogical arguments, Socrates enters the dialogue's main endeavor: etymologizing. I will address these initial steps into etymologizing in this chapter and show how Socrates uses the language of the gods to demonstrate my thesis that correctness is resonance.

I will begin at 390e, where Hermogenes responds to Socrates' analogical arguments with confusion. Because he has not understood Socrates' purposes in those arguments, Socrates attempts a second beginning of sorts:

Hermogenes: Socrates, I am not able, in such a manner as is necessary, to oppose you. Indeed, perhaps it is not easy to be persuaded in this way so suddenly, but I would seem thus to myself to be more persuaded by you, if you would show me that which is, as you say, the natural correctness of names.

Socrates: But I, marvelous Hermogenes, *say nothing*, but did you forget the things which I said a little earlier, that I did not know but that I would investigate with you? And as we are now investigating, you and I, such a thing already appears beside what was said before: the name exists by having some correctness by



nature, and indeed not all men know how to give it well to anything whatsoever.

Or is this not the case?

Hermogenes: Very much so.

Socrates: Then it is necessary to investigate what comes after this, if you desire to know, again what sort is its correctness? (390e-391b)

Hermogenes is not persuaded, but he is not even sure how to respond to Socrates. As we saw in Chapter 3, this is because Socrates' argument is neither straightforward nor spelled out; Socrates nowhere just says "correctness is X." Hermogenes asks him to do so, but Socrates' response is instructive: "I say nothing." But because Socrates has actually said a great deal on the subject, and given that Socrates is speaking for Cratylus here, we can understand his "saying nothing" as an imitation of Cratylus' position—an attempt to avoid assertions that would misrepresent. (As demonstrated in Chapter 2, Socrates does not actually say nothing as Cratylus does, but rather, in imitation of Cratylus, he says nothing directly.)

In the present chapter, I will investigate this indirection in what immediately follows the above pericope: Socrates' exposition of how to discover the correctness of names. Now that Socrates has established the principles that will account for natural correctness (i.e., that correctness is a literary concept, that correct language avoids misrepresentation, and that destructive language can be restorative and creative of meaning), he here claims to address his methodology. Socrates does so, first, by

suggesting that they pay the sophists to teach them and, second, that they turn to the poets for understanding. I will make sense of what Socrates is proposing with each of these options, and I will demonstrate what is going on with the frequently dismissed or misunderstood proposal that results: that god-given names are more correct than man-given names.

Following my discussions of meaning in Chapters 1 and 2, I will argue that the case of god-given names shows that correctness is not what is commonly understood (i.e., as some kind of correspondence between the semantic content of a name and a true description of the name's referent). Instead, correctness is like Socrates' exposition of it: qualitative and concerned with resonance. What this means is that words can be more or less correct by virtue of having more or less resonance, and the language of the gods is exemplary in this respect.

Furthermore, understanding this section in the way I propose will provide a better foundation for understanding the remainder of the dialogue's etymologies and how those etymologies are intended to demonstrate correctness: the etymologies are a supreme tool for opening up a word's multiple resonances. However, they are only one tool. Indeed, it is instructive that here, in this overtly paradigmatic case of showing how to find correctness, Plato does not have Socrates etymologize.

#### **4.1 PAY THE SOPHISTS**

Socrates describes how we ought to proceed, first suggesting that we consult experts on the matter. In this section, I will show how Socrates' allusion to the sophists in

the context of methodology suggests something specific about how he wants to proceed: he initiates an inquiry that will go beyond exposition to interpretation. Note first Socrates' meta-language about the way they will investigate:

Socrates: Then it is necessary to investigate what comes after this, if you desire to know, again what sort is its correctness?

Hermogenes: But indeed I desire to know!

Socrates: Investigate accordingly, then.

Hermogenes: How then is it necessary to investigate?

Socrates: The most correct way of investigation, my companion, is with those who know, by paying them money and granting favors. These are the sophists to whom your brother Callias paid lots of money and now appears to be wise. But since you are not master of your father's estate, it is necessary that you persist in entreating your brother and begging him to teach you the correctness about these things which he learned from Protagoras.

Hermogenes: Such an entreaty would indeed be out of place for me, Socrates, if on the one hand I don't entirely welcome the truth of Protagoras but on the other

hand I should desire the things said with respect to such truth as if they were of value. (391b-c)

Because of the reference to Protagoras and because of Hermogenes' dismissive tone, Socrates' suggestion might seem to be blatantly tongue-in-cheek. But there is good reason for taking the sophists in this dialogue seriously as a profound source for this dialogue's philosophical reflection. The sophists are a pervasive influence on the entire *Cratylus*, and as we shall see below, sophistic practice dominates even this section, which is allegedly dedicated to Homer. The sophists' efforts to take seriously and analyze various linguistic practices are the starting points for many Platonic dialogues, including the present one. But besides this, the sophists were the vanguard of Athenian education, so it is entirely natural that an Athenian intellectual would turn first to the sophists to understand an issue for which they had declared expertise: the correctness of names.

And that is precisely what Socrates suggests. Following Hermogenes' request for a definition (or an exposition of what sort of thing correctness is), Socrates essentially tells him that he needs to ask the sort of people who give such expositions—the sophists. This might sound ironic, as Socrates couples this suggestion with a remark about paying them money, a proposal that is frequently sarcastic if not caustic and hostile elsewhere in Plato. Nevertheless, care must be taken, as casting this discussion in terms of “irony” is too simplistic to account for Socrates' suggestion here. Rather, Socrates' words have specific performative force for Hermogenes, and we should carefully understand what that is before making the above conclusions. Socrates does not simply suggest that Hermogenes study with the sophists. Rather, he suggests that Hermogenes learn

indirectly about a specific sophist (Protagoras) through Callias. Callias was infamous in his own day for his greed and scandalous behavior (s.v. “Callias III,” Nails 2002). And Hermogenes was Callias’ brother, but only his paternal half-brother. What is worse, Callias was the legitimate and Hermogenes the illegitimate son (s.v. “Hermogenes,” Nails 2002). Because of this, Callias was the sole heir to his father’s estate (a fact which Socrates openly alludes to multiple times in the dialogue). So, while Hermogenes made it clear earlier that he disagrees with Callias’ teacher Protagoras, there are complicated, personal reasons why he would not want to proceed as Socrates suggests.

Socrates knows this. He knows that this situation will make Hermogenes unwilling to ask his brother to teach him. Hence, Socrates’ words are more of a goad than a sincere suggestion. Socrates is provoking Hermogenes to engage in the current conversation in a certain way—he is leading Hermogenes to an intermediate state of *aporia*. That is, he creates *aporia* in the literal or etymological sense of the term—he exhausts Hermogenes’ resources. He shows Hermogenes that all of the alternative methods of inquiry are not practically possible. Hence, Socrates reminds Hermogenes that they are in a similar financial position (remember, Socrates just a little earlier mentioned his financial inability to study with Prodicus, 384b), and by doing so, he is trying to bring Hermogenes to his same theoretical position—to an aporetic state.<sup>1</sup>

Looking ahead shows us why Plato would do this. Because the investigation that will follow will be poetic and perhaps unfamiliar to Hermogenes, Socrates has to break Hermogenes’ expectations for the sort of exposition-instruction he is used to and has already requested several times (384a, 384e, 391a, etc.). Clearly, Hermogenes was

---

<sup>1</sup> Besides Hermogenes’ representation here, he is consistently portrayed in Xenophon as being destitute, s.v. “Hermogenes,” Nails 2002.

previously ill-prepared for this sort of thing (e.g., he did not understand Cratylus' strange and poetic pronouncements at the outset of the dialogue), and Socrates is trying to turn him from his expectation of a straightforward exposition to a more interpretive mode of understanding language.

Finally, there is symbolic value in Socrates' invocation of inheritance. From the first lines of the dialogue, Hermogenes' inheritance has been at stake (although etymologically, as questioning whether he is truly the 'son of Hipponicus' or the 'son of Hermes'). Later in the dialogue, the question of inheritance will be raised explicitly with reference to the 'House of Atreus' and implicitly with the etymologies (words are born of older forms of words and inherit some of their meaning). Thus, Socrates' present suggestion that Hermogenes petition a legitimate heir is more than a stage direction—it parallels his more profound advice that Hermogenes seek a legitimate intellectual father. As we shall see, this is Homer.

## 4.2 THE HOMERIC TURN

Following Socrates' suggestion that Hermogenes learn from the sophists, he makes the further suggestion that he learn from poets like Homer. Again, this suggestion is methodological in nature. As I will show, it is intended to help us see that we will need to look to the *use* of names created by master craftsmen such as Homer:

Socrates: But again, if these things do not please you, it is necessary to learn from Homer and from the other poets.

Hermogenes: And what does Homer say about names, Socrates, and where?

Socrates: All over the place: for there are great and beautiful things in the passages in which he distinguishes the names by which men and gods call the same things. Or do you not suppose that he says great and even amazing things about the correctness of names in those passages? For it is clear that the gods call the same things by names which are correct by nature. Or does it not seem so to you?

Hermogenes: I know altogether well that if they call something, they do so correctly. But what sort of things are you saying? (391c-e)

This idea, that we could learn anything philosophically useful from Homer, is frequently seen as axiomatically false in Plato scholarship. This is likely because of the discussions in the *Republic*, which seem to portray Homer as philosophically vacuous. Although I cannot address it here, this interpretation of the *Republic* is changing as scholars understand that Plato has a much more nuanced, and reverential, relationship with Homer. Nevertheless, scholarship on the *Cratylus* continues to assume Socrates' remarks here are dismissive or pejorative. For example:

the pompous tone of Socrates' appeal to Homer ... strongly suggests that he is being ironical [... and that] such questions are of meagre importance. (Ademollo 2011, 151)

this section has revealed how hopelessly muddled, self-contradictory, and absurd is Homer's opinion about linguistic correctness. (Joseph 2000, 42).<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, scholars argue that if there were a divine language it would be unspeakable, so it is hubristic of Homer to claim insight into said language and hence insincere of Socrates to make this suggestion (Baxter 1992, 12; Sallis 1996; etc.). Some scholars do not go so far as to attribute hubris to Plato, but see him as making an ironical appeal to authority:

The very fact that he is discussing Homer's "*opinion* about the correctness of names" ... indicates that he is not, in this passage, seeking the truth but playing an ironic game of turning to the "authorities," a game which he undermines at numerous points. (Nightingale 2003, 237)

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Goldschmidt 1940, 98 and de Vries 1955, 293. Ademollo uses weak support for his argument, referencing *Protagoras* 347b–348a: "we must ... put the poets aside and carry out our conversations with each other drawing only on our own resources, testing the truth and ourselves." But this, again, is a hopelessly naïve interpretation of Plato's *Protagoras*—and of Plato. For Plato never puts the poets aside; he is constantly returning to them and looking through them.



This use of Homer's authority to bolster one's argument is a case of Plato using a characteristic stratagem of Greek thinkers which he would elsewhere deplore; his use of it here is thus presumably ironical. (Baxter 1991, 50n81)

But if the invocation of Homer is categorically deplorable or dismissible as insincere, then scarcely a single Platonic text would remain fit for philosophers to take seriously. As I will demonstrate below, this appeal to Homer is not so simple. And indeed, in this specific case, it is entirely sincere.

#### **4.2.1 An Unsurprising Turn**

Just as it would have been natural to turn to the sophists, so too is this turn to Homer not unexpected—Plato has Socrates and his other characters appeal to Homeric wisdom throughout his oeuvre. This is enacted all over the place, but Plato often explicitly tips his hat to Homer. Think, e.g., of Socrates' description of Homer in the *Ion* 531c, where the poet is described as having discoursed about many different subjects, all of which are philosophically interesting to Plato and many of which are central to the *Cratylus*, such as mortal language (ὁμιλιῶν πρὸς ἀλλήλους ἀνθρώπων), conversations between gods and men (περὶ θεῶν πρὸς ἀλλήλους καὶ πρὸς ἀνθρώπους ὁμιλούντων) and the origin of gods and heroes (γενέσεις καὶ θεῶν καὶ ἡρώων). Or think of what happens in the *Lysis* when a similar impasse is reached: Socrates recommends holding off on the sophistic discussion with Menexenus and being led by the poets, who are—sincerely—described as “the fathers and guides of our wisdom” (οὗτοι γὰρ ἡμῖν ὥπερ πατέρες τῆς

σοφίας εἰσὶν καὶ ἡγεμόνες, 214a). Finally, the *Alcibiades* 2 (although likely an apocryphal work) expresses a Platonic sentiment when Socrates calls Homer a θεϊότατόν τε καὶ σοφώτατον ποιητήν (147c).

Furthermore, the turn to Homer here would be unsurprising, given Homer's central status in Athenian education (see Marrou 1981, 25). As Plato has Protagoras describe it,

The greatest part of man's education is to be skilled in verses, that is, to be able to distinguish, in that which is said by the poets, the verses which were correctly and incorrectly composed, and to know how to divide and reproduce the requested *logos*. (*Protagoras* 338e-339a)

Other poets like Hesiod, Pindar, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides also eventually became part of the educational canon (see Levin 2000, 8)—but aside from Hesiod, these poets were themselves largely writing in the Homeric context. In fact, even after the sophists became a prominent part of Athenian education, the study of Homer remained central (think, e.g., of Hippias). Even the later philosophical tradition, especially the Neoplatonists, took Homer seriously as an inspired sage.<sup>3</sup> While not all of the ancients

---

<sup>3</sup> Demetrius acknowledges that Homer was a master at creating names (95), and Dionysius of Halicarnassus calls Homer “the most plurivocal of all poets” (πολυφωνότατος πάντων ποιητῶν, *De compositione verborum* 16). The Neoplatonists even took Homer's poems for divine revelations, which in turn might inspire others (van den Berg 2008, 162, cf. Proclus lxviii). But this same reverential attitude dominated even in Plato and Aristotle's day. Think, e.g., of Aristotle's criticism of Protagoras: “The knowledge or ignorance of such matters brings upon the poet no censure worth serious consideration. For who could suppose that there is any fault in the passage which Protagoras censures, because Homer, intending to utter a prayer, gives a command when he says, ‘Sing, goddess, the wrath’? To order something to be done or not is, he points out, a command” (*Poetics* 1456b, translated by W.H. Fyfe). In short, Protagoras, prodigious thinker though he may have been, was grammatically correct but intellectually hubristic for criticizing Homer.

revered Homer's wisdom equally,<sup>4</sup> Homer was indisputably a *sine qua non* of Ancient Greek education.

Given this intellectual context, and given Plato's own respect for Homer, we cannot, at least not without further proof, read Socrates' invocation of Homer at this point in the *Cratylus* as irreverently dismissive. And in fact, the context of Socrates' invocation of Homer is wholly favorable to Homer. But likely because we tend to read Plato's dialogues in chunks, the reader might forget that only a few *lines* before the invocation of Homer, Socrates offered an extended analogical argument for the value of word-craftsmen and concluded:

Then the giving of names chances to be risky, Hermogenes, and is no common matter (as you suppose), nor the matter for some common man or for someone operating on chance. And Cratylus speaks the truth when he says that names exist by nature for things, and that not everyone is a craftsman of names, but only he who looks toward the natural name for each thing and who is able to put its form into letters and syllables. (390d-e).

---

<sup>4</sup> Think, e.g., of Heraclitus, whose thoughts about Homer cannot be disregarded in the *Cratylus* context: he famously criticized Homer as an untrustworthy authority (A23) and even claimed that "Homer deserves to be expelled from the competition and beaten with a staff" (D42; cf. Xenophanes B10-B12). Regarding the very passage we are dealing with in this chapter, Dio Chrysostom writes sardonically: "To these claims, [Homer] has added nearly a capstone: for, in order that we might be uncertain how he came to understand the gods, he implies that he apparently knows the language of the gods, and that it is not the same as ours: they do not use the same words we do for every individual things. He indicates this, for example, for some bird, whom he claims the gods call *chalkis* while men call it *kumindis*. The same difference applies to a place in front of the city which men call the *Bateia* but gods call the Grave of *Murinê*. In telling us about the river, he says the gods don't call it *Skamandros* but instead *Xanthus*, as he himself has already dubbed it in his verses, as if it were not only possible for him to mix the various dialects of the Greeks, now using Aiolic, now Doric, then Ionic, but *he can also use the divine language too!*" (Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 11. 22, translated by SENTENTIAE ANTIQUAE, <https://sententiaeantiquae.com/2017/03/27/homer-and-the-language-of-the-gods/>).

Homer is that man, and Socrates has clearly been leading Hermogenes to this conclusion. Thus, it should really come as no surprise that Socrates moves to talking about those who are master craftsmen of language: the sophists and, more so, the poets.

#### **4.2.2 A Turn from Sophistry?**

How is this turn from the sophists to Homer to be understood? When Socrates says “if these things do not please you [i.e., asking Callias to share what he learned from Protagoras], it is necessary to learn from Homer and from the other poets,” he might be seen as turning away from sophistry to poetry. Given that Protagoras is not mentioned again for the remainder of the dialogue, and given scholars’ disposition to read Plato as superseding the sophists at every point, this seems decisive. However, read more carefully, we can see in this gesture a nuanced movement that embodies a central movement of the entire dialogue: a deepening of the sophists’ inquiry into language.

The sophists were the first intellectuals to make a theoretical investigation into the correctness of names. Socrates invokes Prodicus, Protagoras, and Euthydemus at the beginning of the *Cratylus* precisely because he recognizes that he owes the provenance of his inquiry to them. But while their theories are philosophically valuable, they are still to be questioned on independent philosophical grounds. This is what Socrates attempts, but Hermogenes fails to see that that is what Socrates is up to: “Such an entreaty would indeed be out of place for me, Socrates, if on the one hand I don’t entirely welcome the truth of Protagoras but on the other hand I should desire the things said with respect to such truth as if they were of value.” Like Hermogenes, Socrates isn’t entirely convinced

by the sophists. But unlike Hermogenes, Socrates sees what is valuable in the sophists' theories and is able to expand on and evaluate them impartially.

Because Hermogenes is unable to do this, Socrates suggests a different tact—a turn Homer. But because the Sophists (like Protagoras and Hippias) were themselves experts in Homer (as they are described later: οἱ νῦν περὶ Ὅμηρον δεινοί 407a-b), this is not so much of a turn away from sophistic investigation as it is a deepening of it. This is confirmed, not without complication, in what Socrates says following the section dealt with by this chapter:

So, it seems necessary to me that we go about it in this way: today, we must make use of [Socrates' etymological inspiration] and search out the remaining things about names, but tomorrow, if it seems good to you also, we should conjure it away and purge ourselves once we find someone who is clever in these things, be it one of the priests or sophists. (396e-397a)

Hence the present discussion turns from the sophists to Homer, but eventually, Socrates says, it will return to the sophists. In other words, the inquiry was theoretically colored by the sophists all along. The investigation of Homer is accomplished indirectly through the sophists—just as Socrates has suggested dramatically (that Hermogenes learn from Protagoras indirectly through Callias). In other words, what is at stake is not poetry or sophistry, but an intellectual interpretation of the poetic tradition.

#### **4.2.3 Hermogenes' Surprise**

Although there should be no surprise in this turn to Homeric expertise, Hermogenes is surprised: “And what does Homer say about names, Socrates, and where?” Because Hermogenes is part of a culture so thoroughly familiar with Homer, we should be attentive to his surprise. Why is it surprising that Homer has something to say about the correctness of names?

The answer is: because Homer doesn’t. Homer never teaches about the correctness of names, nor does he claim to. At least in the way the sophists teach and claim to teach. So, when Socrates answers Hermogenes by saying that Homer teaches about correctness “all over the place,” he means to get Hermogenes to see something more than an obscure passage where Homer mentions a theory about correctness; he wants Hermogenes to see something that is right in front of his face—Homer’s usage.

In other words, the “the passages in which [Homer] distinguishes the names by which men and gods call the same things” (391d) are only some examples where Homer’s skill with words stands out—they are not where Homer hid his theory of correctness, but they are exemplary of Homer’s usage. Indeed, even following the examination of this particular aspect of Homer, the remainder of the *Cratylus* will engage in exemplary imitation of Homeric etymologizing. Because Homer does not teach or expound, Socrates suggests that we can learn about the nature of language by being attentive to what Homer does do: his use of language.

However, this might sound, again, ironic. For instance, Friedländer 1964 expresses a common sentiment when he describes how Socrates “suggests that we can learn from Homer what he has to say about language; yet we know since the *Protagoras*

that an exegesis of poetry does not yield knowledge” (204). But Friedländer has missed the point: we know that a *certain sort* of exegesis (rationalistic, simplistic, etc., cf. *Phaedrus* 229) does not yield knowledge—but that is not a wholesale rejection of Homer. Indeed, Plato demonstrates throughout his oeuvre that certain (mis)understandings of Homer should be avoided as routes to knowledge. But insofar as the dialogues are themselves routes to knowledge, most of them pass through the Homeric text in one way or another. There is a knowledge-yielding interpretation of Homer, and this is by being attentive to Homer’s expert usage.<sup>5</sup>

So, the Homeric turn is not a turn from sophistry, nor is it an ironic rejection of poetic authority. Instead, it is Socrates’ preparatory action, showing how we can discover language’s correctness by being attentive to master-craftsmen, especially Homer. Because Homer was himself attuned to linguistic correctness, we can see correctness enacted in his language. In this case, we can see it in his use of language given by the gods.

#### 4.3 THERE IS NO SINGLE PRINCIPLE

In response to Hermogenes’ surprise at hearing about Homer’s thinking about the correctness of names, Socrates gives Hermogenes some examples of where Homer used the two names for the same thing—one name that was given by men and another that was

---

<sup>5</sup> Proclus’ comments here are instructive. While they trivialize the sophists (as I have shown, unjustly), and while they perhaps make too grand of a claim for the poets, they are nevertheless in the right spirit: “Socrates has good reason to mention both [sophists and poets] for his examination of names. In the case of the former, he condemns their fanciful opinion and the emptiness of their imagination; of the latter, he reveals their inspiration and demonstrative power concerning the objects of inquiry, that power which they extend by inspiration to anyone who can understand” (29/68).

given by the gods. The reason for Socrates' examples here is a vexed, as scholars have struggled unsuccessfully to find a single principle that can account for why the language of the gods is more correct than the language of men. In this section, I will show how this is the case and propose that my understanding of correctness as resonance solves the problem. Here is the text:

Socrates: Do you not know that, regarding the river in Troy which fought in single combat against Hephaestus, he says that  
the gods call it Xanthus, but men call it Scamander

Hermogenes: I do.

Socrates: What, then? Do you not know that it is a revered thing to recognize when it is correct to call that river Xanthus rather than Scamander? Or if you'd rather, that which he says about the bird:

gods name it Chalcis, but men Cymindis

Do you suppose this is a base lesson —how much more correct it is for the same bird to be called Chalcis rather than Cymindis? Or about Batieia and Myrina, and many other things by this poet and by others? (391e-392b)

Socrates here suggests quite clearly that the gods name in a way superior to, or more correct than, man's naming. However, Socrates does not say what it could be that makes this the case.



Unfortunately, scholarship on the *Cratylus* largely ignores this question.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, such neglect seems justified by Socrates, who himself quickly moves beyond this issue with an apparently dismissive remark, claiming that we should stick to man-given names. I will address Socrates' apparent dismissal, or rather, change in focus, below.

But on the other hand, this question has been quite popular among Homer scholars (especially linguists). A number of theories accounting for the difference between god-given and man-given names have been proposed. Nevertheless, it is fairly well-accepted that no account satisfactorily explains Homer's practice here.<sup>7</sup>

Socrates must have been attentive to this fact, that no single principle can account for Homer's comments on the correctness of names. For, in his own practice, Socrates repeatedly refuses to give, or defers giving, a single principle for the correctness of names (391a, 426a, etc.).<sup>8</sup> Despite this refusal, Socrates also repeatedly claims to have shown what correctness is (390e, 393b, 400e, 422c-d, 427d, etc.). Hence, Socrates is less concerned with stating the nature of correctness and more concerned with demonstrating it. As such, it is important to try and understand what Socrates shows with his examples here. In what follows, I will look at the Homeric phenomenon in light of what Socrates wishes to show about correctness. I will confirm the conclusion that there is no single principle that can account for correctness in these instances, precisely because these instances evidence the complexity of correctness; the divine names are more correct because of their varied and dynamic resonance.

---

<sup>6</sup> The only real exception I am aware of is Ewgen 2013, whose interpretation is unsatisfactory for reasons addressed below. The omission of this passage is especially surprising in Nightingale 2003 and Levin 2000, who are otherwise seriously attentive to the literary tradition.

<sup>7</sup> The commentaries of Krieter-Spiro 2018 and Kirk 1985 both recognize this fact, and I will address detractors to this position throughout.

<sup>8</sup> There are possible exceptions, like 428e and 433b, but these are too vague to constitute a strict definition of correctness.

Here is a table with all of the Homeric instances of this phenomenon:<sup>9</sup>

|   | god-given name | man-given name | reference             |
|---|----------------|----------------|-----------------------|
| mentioned in the<br><i>Cratylus</i>     | σημα Μυρίνης   | Βατίεια        | <i>Iliad</i> ii.813   |
|   | χαλκίς         | κύμινδης       | <i>Iliad</i> xiv.290  |
|   | Ξάνθος         | Σκάμανδρος     | <i>Iliad</i> xx.74    |
| not mentioned in the<br><i>Cratylus</i> | Βριάρεως       | Αιγαίων        | <i>Iliad</i> i.403    |
|   | μῶλυ           | no counterpart | <i>Odyssey</i> 10.305 |
|   | Πλαγκταί       | no counterpart | <i>Odyssey</i> 12.61  |

Linguistic theories have been unsuccessful in accounting for the difference between these names, and, as will become evident, theories arising from the linguistic paradigm are philosophically unenlightening. For example, one might be led to thinking that the divine names are simply older linguistic forms than the mortal names. (For example, Göttling proposes that the names given by the gods are remnants of Pelasgic language). This seems reasonable, given the obscurity of names like Μυρίνης and μῶλυ. But, as Kirk 1985 suggests, at least one of the human names (κύμινδης) is pre-Greek, as well (I.94). So, the god-given names are not more correct by virtue of being more ancient.

---

<sup>9</sup> Unless Mawet 1973 is right in making the case that ἄλγεα δίδωμι also belongs to the language of the gods. Even if it does, it is not formulaic in Homer like the above names, so I omit it as an instance of the specific trope referred to here.

Similarly, it might appear that the god-given names are non-Greek, while the man-given names are straightforwardly Greek. (Van Leeuwen 1892 goes so far as to claim that the gods' words are Indo-European and men's words aren't.) This seems plausible, given that god-given words like μῶλυ have no evident Greek origin.<sup>10</sup> But others, like Μυρίνης, χαλκίς, and Πλαγκταί are indeed Greek (Kirk 1985, I.94). Indeed, Kirk 1985 claims that Βριάρεως and Αἰγαίων (the god-given name and the man-given name for the same thing) are both Greek (I.94). Hence, correctness as ἑλληνισμός cannot be what Homer, or Plato, has in mind.

Perhaps more surprising to scholars of the *Cratylus* should be that semantic theories also struggle to make sense of this phenomenon. For, the dominant understanding about correctness in the *Cratylus* is that a name is correct if there is a correspondence between the semantic content of the name (via its etymology) and a true description of the name's referent (see Chapter 1). Given this dominant interpretation, one would naturally be led to assume this is what Socrates means to suggest with the above examples.

This idea, that the god-given names are etymologically significant and the man-given names aren't, is possible in the cases of χαλκίς and *maybe* Ξάνθος, whose etymologies seem more straightforward than their mortal counterparts. However, at the very least, this cannot be the case with the Βριάρεως/Αἰγαίων pair.<sup>11</sup> As I will show in detail below, the etymologies of even the god-given names have been a matter of unresolved controversy since antiquity, so they weren't readily etymologizable by the

---

<sup>10</sup> s.v. Beekes μῶλυ: "This has a non-Greek suffix (cf. κόνυζα, ὄρυζα), which means that our word is probably Pre-Greek, too."

<sup>11</sup> Neither is the related semantic solution, that man-given names operate on a lesser principle than etymology (like eponymy), true. For σῆμα Μυρίνης is just as apparently eponymous as Σκάμανδρος.

ancients, either. And indeed, Socrates' comments suggest that we shouldn't think that the god-given names are somehow clearer in their meaning—if anything, the opposite should be the case: “perhaps these things [i.e., the god-given names] are greater than you and I can discover...” (392b).

Some scholars have suggested an alternative to this, that Homer “bestowed the more popular name to men and the true name to the gods” (scholia Σb to *Iliad* 2.813-814). In other words, the more usual, everyday name belongs to the language of man, whereas the more unusual name comes from the language of the gods. This has historically been an extremely popular position to hold.<sup>12</sup> However, besides the fact that it is unclear how to understand the contrast between “ordinary” and “true” (or sometimes “marked” or “poetic”), it is impossible to confirm whether the man-given names were in greater circulation in everyday speech. This is because our only evidence of 8<sup>th</sup>-century language comes from literary works.<sup>13</sup> And even if we did allow later usage as our guide to these specific words, the “everyday use” thesis would seem even more doubtful.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> “In these cases we have a metalinguistic poetic figure setting forth explicitly a hierarchy in the lexicon: the relation between the designations of the same entity on two levels of discourse. The lower level, that of ordinary language, is figured as the ‘language of men,’ while the higher and more restricted level of formal, poetic, or otherwise exotic language is figured in this ancient metaphor as the ‘language of the gods’” (Watkins 1970, 2). Cf. Güntert 1921, 111; Heubeck 1984; Herzhoff 2000, 280; West 2007, 162; Watkins 1995, 38-9. These scholars approach the problem from a linguistic perspective and assert that the god-given name is semantically marked, i.e., divergent of regular linguistic forms, in comparison with the man-given name, which is unmarked. Cf.: “Homer's language of the gods is clearly part of a broader Indo-European tradition of recognizing different, hierarchical levels of language, with the semantically unmarked term assigned to men and the poetic or marked term attributed to the gods” (Levine 2003, 52). Also: “The language of the gods, considered exalted, uses pre-existing synonyms, or perhaps dionyms, archaisms or rare words, or its own coinages (here adjectival as at 1.403, 20.74), whereas the corresponding human terms are frequently extracted from everyday language, as here” (Krieter-Spiro 2018, 142). This is understood as meaning various things, from the word being lesser-known (Watkins 1970, 4-5), a “scholarly reference” (2), “sacred metaphors” (Lazeroni 1957, 3), etc.

<sup>13</sup> To challenge this skeptical idea, Watkins 1995 makes a clever argument from the absence of what would have been everyday words (e.g., “merchant”) in the poetic texts.

<sup>14</sup> A TLG frequency analysis does not show that the words are especially common, and certainly not distinctively more so than their counterparts.

Indeed, the vaguer solution to this problem is actually the more appropriate: the gods' language is more poetic.<sup>15</sup> This solution is related to the previous one, but differs in how to understand the semantic markedness in the relevant terminology. In the following paragraphs, I will give reasons why the markedness of the divine terms signifies a heightened poetic register (as opposed to merely a formal unfamiliarity), and why that is significant for Socrates' invocation of the terms in the *Cratylus*.

First, calling the language of the gods more poetic embraces the inevitable plurality of criteria required to make sense of why their language is more correct; it is more correct because it has greater poetic power—or resonance. Scholiast speculation certainly confirms this: Homer “gave the more euphonious name to the gods” (Scholiast ΣT to *Iliad* 14.291).<sup>16</sup> There is good reason for this observation. Homer certainly would have used this device like other poetic devices: for different purposes in different instances. If this is so, then to understand what is at stake requires an evaluation of the particular circumstances of each invocation of the trope. Each god-given name would then be correct for a different reason, and unearthing that reason would require evaluating the word in its poetic context.

This suggests that Socrates' reference to these instances ought not to be taken as a lump—as a brief reference or illustration to be passed over and then forgotten in the face of the more explicit etymologizing. Indeed, Socrates gives multiple warnings that what he says regarding the god-given names is not to be taken lightly: “Do you not know that it is

---

<sup>15</sup> Levine 2003 is the only scholar I have found who truly recognizes this fact: “The divine names are meant to belong to a higher, more poetic register” (52), although this idea is perhaps implicit in the *Derveni Papyrus* (cf. fragments 83 and 91).

<sup>16</sup> This is perhaps also confirmed by the idea that Homer “gave the more perfect names to the gods” (Scholiast ΣbT to *Iliad* 1.403) and even by the scholium cited earlier, that Homer “bestowed the more popular name to men and the true name to the gods” (Scholiast Σb to *Iliad* 2.813-814).

a revered thing to recognize when it is correct...?”—“Do you suppose it is a base lesson to know how much more correct it is...?”<sup>17</sup>

So, in what follows, I will try to make sense of the allusion to the divine-mortal names motif and see what it might suggest for the correctness of names. As I will show, several familiar principles arise to account for the greater poetic correctness of the god-given names. For instance, it is the representational inadequacy of human language that causes the poet to look to divine language as a vehicle that surely wouldn't misrepresent. But these sorts of words do not misrepresent because, as instances of a poetic trope in specific poetic contexts, they require the reader to dig more deeply to find their hidden meaning. In other words, divine language is not immediately available as correct; it *requires* interpretation. When interpreted, these words have a great resonance, echoing important themes from their context, suggesting multiple correct meanings, and so on. In what follows, I will demonstrate that this is true for the god-given names in both Homer and Plato.

#### 4.4 XANTHUS AND SCAMANDER

In Socrates' first example of human-divine name pairs, Socrates claims that the divine name (Xanthus) is more correct than the human name (Scamander). I will show how Socrates refers to this name pair, as he does each of the pairs discussed below, to

---

<sup>17</sup> There is at least one alternative to my reading of this situation: “There is a distinct boundary between what men and gods can know, scholars contend, and gods apparently have a language of their own to accommodate their higher wisdom” (Levine 2003, 53). Alternatively, some scholars claim that the function of this trope is to reveal the special knowledge possessed by the poet (Güntert 1921, 90; Fowler 1988, 98; Scodel 2002, 91).

confirm the idea of correctness as resonance. In other words, the name pair suggests that the god-given name will be more correct by virtue of its greater resonance. Furthermore, this name pair illustrates how we must look below the surface to discover this greater resonance.

While Plato does not tell us this explicitly, he immediately hints at the fact by suggesting that we be attentive to the context in which this name pair appears:

Socrates: Do you not know that, regarding the river in Troy which fought in single combat against Hephaestus, he says that

The Gods call it Xanthus, but men call it Scamander

Hermogenes: I do.

Socrates: What, then? Do you not know that it is a revered thing to recognize when it is correct to call that river Xanthus rather than Scamander? (391e-392a)

Plato does not have Socrates simply state the superiority of the god-given name. Additionally, he has him reference Xanthus/Scamander (a river that is prominent *throughout the Iliad*) specifically as “the river in Troy which fought in single combat against Hephaestus” (391e). In other words, Socrates refers to one of the many scenes in which Xanthus/Scamander appears.

Given Socrates’ reference to the context, given that Socrates is ostensibly telling us something about correctness, and given that he has said nothing about this matter

besides a reference to the context of a specific episode in which this river is prominent, it is important to evaluate the significance of this context for Socrates' exposition of correctness. In the scene referred to, the gods all square up against each other in single combat. They do this because the whole Achilles affair has raised a stir among the gods, whose divided allegiances eventually cause war to break out among the gods to parallel the war between Trojans and Achaeans:

against Leto stood forth the strong helper, Hermes, and against Hephaestus the great, deep-eddying river, that god called Xanthus, and men Scamander (ὃν Ξάνθον καλέουσι θεοί, ἄνδρες δὲ Σκάμανδρον). Thus, gods went forth to meet with gods. But Achilles was fain to meet with Hector, Priam's son, above all others in the throng, for with his blood as with that of none other did his spirit bid him glut Ares, the warrior with tough shield of hide. (xx.73-76, translated by A.T. Murray)

As this passage says nothing directly about linguistic correctness, we should see what the context indicates indirectly. Most immediately, this passage describes war. But as the entire *Iliad* can be said to describe war, this passage must indicate something specific about the war. I take my interpretive cue here from Heraclitus, who is referenced throughout the dialogue as responsible for the ideology at play below the surface of



language. Heraclitus is fascinated by war, and uses it as a paradigm of his theory that there is some kind of unity or stability in opposing forces.<sup>18</sup> For example,

One must realize that war is shared and Conflict is Justice, and that all things come to pass in accordance with conflict. (D80)

War is father of all and king of all; and some he has shown as gods, others men; some he has made slaves, others free. (D53)

The counter-thrust brings together, and from tones at variance comes perfect attunement, and all things come to pass through conflict. (D8)

Homer was wrong when he said ‘Would that Conflict might vanish from among gods and men!’ (*Iliad* XVIII.107). For there would be no attunement without high and low notes nor any animals without male and female, both of which are opposites. (D22)

Heraclitus seems to have in mind the idea that there is some productivity, stability, or unity that results from that which appears to be totally destructive, instable, and disunified: war or conflict.

---

<sup>18</sup> I recognize that this is not an uncontroversial interpretation of Heraclitus. It is outside of the scope of this dissertation to give a global interpretation of Heraclitus; so, for a defense of the sort of theory I am suggesting, see Graham 1997.

It is striking that this Heraclitean principle is precisely why the Homeric Xanthus/Scamander passage is remarkable. That is, Achilles has entered the battle and thrown the whole thing out of balance by his presence. The gods try and encourage mortals to check this balance, but they are unwilling, even when backed by a god, to make the venture. Think, e.g., of Aeneas' plea to not have to face Achilles, even when he knows he will be backed by Apollo. In fact, it is not until he is surrounded by Hera, Athena, and Poseidon that he gets the courage to face Achilles. And even this fails and Aeneas must be rescued by Poseidon.

Finally, it is none other than Xanthus who stands up against Achilles. He has been most immediately thrown out of balance by Achilles' onslaught—his clear waters ran red with blood and his free flow is choked by the bodies Achilles threw in.<sup>19</sup> Hence, Xanthus enters the battle for the overt reason of reestablishing balance. This river (or water) god attempts to extinguish the fire for war that burns in Achilles:

But the other half [of Achilles' victims] were packed in the silver-whirling river.  
into its foaming depths they tumbled, splashing, flailing—  
the plunging river roaring, banks echoing. roaring back  
and the men screamed. swimming wildly. left and right,  
spinning round in the whirlpools. Spun like locusts  
swanning up in the air, whipped by rushing fire.  
flitting toward a river-the tireless fire blazes,  
scorching them all with hard explosive blasts of flame

---

<sup>19</sup> “And now Ares the slashing god of war has swirled their dark blood in Scamander's deep clear stream” (vii.378).

and beaten down in the depths the floating locusts huddle so  
at Achilles' charge the Xanthus' swirling currents  
choked with a spate of horse and men—the river roared. (xxi.9-19)

This opposition of fire and water—or rather, this holding open of the opposition between fire and water—is sustained throughout the chapter. Just when Achilles' flame is about to be scorched, or just when the imbalance of Achilles' advance is about to be checked too far in the other direction, all of the gods pair themselves in battle to reestablish the balance.<sup>20</sup> And Homer chooses these pairs deliberately to demonstrate this point. For example, Poseidon (the lord above the earth) squares with Hades (the lord below the earth). But in none of the opposing pairs is the opposition more clearly presented than in the case of Xanthus/Scamander (the river god), who was opposed to Hephaestus (the god who works with fire). Later on, Homer even has Hera make the opposition explicit:

To arms, my child-god of the crooked legs!  
You are the one we'd thought a worthy match  
for the whirling river Xanthus! (xxi.377-380)

---

<sup>20</sup> After a council where Zeus *gathers* all of the gods, he says:

The rest of you: down you go,  
go to Trojans, go to Achaeans. Help either side  
as the fixed desire drives each god to act.  
If Achilles fights the Trojans-unopposed by us not  
for a moment will they hold his breakneck force.  
Even before now they'd shake to see him coming.  
Now, with his rage inflamed for his friend's death,  
I fear he'll raze the walls against the will of fate. (xx.29-36)

In other words, the gods' entry into battle was explicitly intended to re-establish balance and order in the battle. Indeed, that is why the gods are mentioned in opposing *pairs*.

Hephaestus is a worthy match for Xanthus because there is no more paradigmatic opposition than fire and water. Water can quench fire and fire can boil water into to nothing. What is more, each of these forces in itself is emblematic of flux, and the opposition between the two restores the balance that Heraclitus thinks emerges from flux.<sup>21</sup>

Plato certainly recognized this, but to see how, and to see what this has to do with the correctness of names, we must first appreciate how Plato's use of this Homeric episode transfers to the context of the *Cratylus*. And to understand this, I will briefly describe a Homeric poetic technique that Plato adopts here: transference. Tsitsibakou-Vasalos 2007 concisely describes this complex practice:

The etymological pointers and lexemes of names are sometimes transferred from the person they naturally etymologize to another, closely affiliated person, who is thus invested with *dynameis* and features that may or may not belong to him. In this poetic technique, Homer uses the etymological elements of one name in the context of another name. The result is that these elements, when applied to a

---

<sup>21</sup> One of Heraclitus' central images for the cosmic order is fire: "The ordering, the same for all, no god nor man has made, but it ever was and is and will be: fire ever living, kindled in measures and in measures going out" (D30). And Homer makes the flowing nature of the river evident in the way "Xanthus" is expressed in the *Iliad*—the name is almost always formulaic: "swirling Xanthus," "rushing Xanthus," "Xanthus' swirling rapids," "Xanthus' rushing rapids," or "Xanthus' rapids." In the present context, this is, of course, prominent: "deep-swirling river immortals call the Xanthus, mankind calls Scamander" (μέγας ποταμὸς βαθυδίνης, xx.74). And, of course, the Homeric names of rivers (Oceanus, Tethys, etc.) will be emblematic of fluxy names later in the *Cratylus*. For more on this aspect of Heraclitean war-flux, see Chapter 5. I should note, finally, that my reading is exactly opposite of the only other scholar I know of who addresses this question. Ewegen 2013 claims that this battle "could be said to present, in tragic/poetic terms, the dissolution of oneness implicit in Protagoras's doctrine that 'the human being is the measure of all things.' In this Homeric passage the gods, who occupy the realm of true Being, are divided" (101). As I have described, there is no such dissolution, as the gods are divided throughout the *Iliad*.

person who is somehow affiliated with the source-name, grant powers to the person that don't belong to him (60).<sup>22</sup>

This sort of transference occurs etymologically throughout the *Cratylus*. For instance, Plato (and indeed, as this etymologizing transcends characters, this is a very good example of *Plato's* poetic technique) does this by showing Socrates to be invested with the powers attributed etymologically to Hector:

Socrates: But then, good man, didn't Homer himself give a name to Hector?

Hermogenes: Why do you ask?

Socrates: Because it seems to me that this name is also similar to Astyanax, and it is likely that both names are Greek. For “lord” (ἄναξ) and “holder” (ἑκτωρ) almost signify the same thing, both are kingly names. For if someone is lord over something, he is also a holder of it; it is clear that he both rules it and possesses it and has it. (οὐ γὰρ ἄν τις ‘ἄναξ’ ἦ, καὶ “ἑκτωρ” δήπου ἐστὶν τούτου: δῆλον γὰρ ὅτι κρατεῖ τε αὐτοῦ καὶ κέκτηται καὶ ἔχει αὐτό.) Or do I seem to you to say nothing, but I forget even myself supposing as to have laid hold of some trail of Homer's opinion regarding the

---

<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, as Tsitsibakou-Vasalos 2007 notes, this technique occurs in precisely the sort of Homeric situation I am dealing with here: “Elaborate evidence of the transference of etymology occurs at critical moments of fighting, when the gods take an active part, defending their protégé” (61).

correctness of names? (ἐφάπτεσθαι τῆς Ὀμήρου δόξης περὶ ὀνομάτων  
ὀρθότητος;)

Hermogenes: By Zeus you do not, as you seem to me, but perhaps you have  
laid hold of it. (μὰ Δί' οὐ σύ γε, ὥς ἐμοὶ δοκεῖς, ἀλλὰ ἴσως τοῦ ἐφάπτη, 393a-  
b)

In other words, Hector (who is etymologized from holding, ἔχω) has powers that are  
transferred to Socrates (who is described as having laid hold of, ἐφάπτεσθαι, the  
argument, just as Hector holds or commands his city). And Plato uses transference in the  
reverse, as well: Hector is described as a savior (σωτήρως) and as in power (κρατεῖ), thus  
echoing the etymology of Socrates' own name (which is readily etymologized from σώζω  
and κρατέω).

All of this is to say that Plato shows us how a given word has various possible  
resonances in a given context that are particular to that context. And when a word is  
transferred to another context, it opens up a new set of resonances. But this does not only  
occur etymologically. I.e., The same sort of transference occurs here with the Homeric  
names in question, Xanthus and Scamander. The first way this happens is, as noted, with  
the Heraclitean notion of stability and flux. That is, Plato takes the contextual meaning of  
the Xanthus/Scamander name pair (something like: balance in war), and transfers it to the  
*Cratylus* context, which appropriates this principle as a way of understanding linguistic  
correctness (something like: a word is more correct when it contains hidden or deeper  
meanings that resonate with the current context). Think, e.g., of later in the dialogue in

the etymological section when all sorts of words are transferred from their everyday context to the *Cratylus*-context; in these cases, the words are shown to be correct because of their capacity to suggest something that is appropriate to the context and also beyond or beneath their everyday meaning (e.g., flux).<sup>23</sup>

Another way in which Plato transfers the meaning of the Homeric context to the *Cratylus* context is noted by Lazzeroni 1957, who argues that, in the *Ilaid*, the name “Xanthus” is mentioned as the divine name for “Scamander” because Homer is indicating the deification of the river.<sup>24</sup> That is, Homer is himself transferring the value of an oft-mentioned river into the sphere of the divine for the purposes of a new context.<sup>25</sup> In turn, Plato transfers the meaning of the Homeric episode to the *Cratylus*. But because Plato is concerned in his context with the correctness of names, he adopts the general principle at work in the deification of the river (i.e., that something might have dimensions that exceed the apparent; see the section on “metamorphosis” below). This comes to bear on the current discussion by confirming Socrates’ methodological principle: meaning must be sought beyond the apparent.

I have taken this route because the etymology of the Xanthus/Scamander name pair is not decisive in establishing why the god-given name is more correct. Instead, it is

---

<sup>23</sup> I recognize that the sincerity of Socrates’ etymologizing is highly contested. I cannot defend the entirety of the etymological section here, but I will merely state my thesis that Plato presents all sorts of genuine insights into the nature of reality by virtue of this transference. I.e., by etymologizing diverse aspects of reality (understanding, ethics, etc.) in terms of Heraclitean ideas, Plato generates legitimate insights about both flux and the aspect of reality in question.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. “both divine and human names are mentioned here to show that the river-god is assuming a new status and character” (Kirk 1985, V, 298).

<sup>25</sup> “Pare dunque possibile, fin da ora, supporre che il riferimento alla lingua divina sia determinato dal valore che il fiume assume in una certa situazione contestuale” (Lazzeroni 1957, 8). Remarkably, Plato perhaps suggests this deification by using the word *σεμνόν* to describe the value of understanding the correctness involved in the god-given name.

in the possibility of greater resonance that the god-given name is more correct. So while etymology may be illuminating, it is ultimately only one aspect of a name's correctness.

For instance, "Scamander" has been etymologized a variety of unconvincing ways throughout the centuries. Of course, the name may be non-Greek (as with other similarly-named rivers in the region such as Meander and Alander). And others claim that the name is merely eponymous.<sup>26</sup> However, the "-ander" certainly sounds like ἀνδρός, and could have a range of meanings based on that root. E.g., the *magna etymologici* suggests that the river was the result of a trench dug by Heracles, hence it is named from the "human digging" (σκάμμα ἀνδρός) of Heracles. Similarly, Proclus suggests that "the human name Σκάμανδρος only concerns the appearance of the river—as water (ῥόδωρ) moving through a basin (σκάφη)" (34/71). More recently, and more convincingly, Tsitsibakou-Vasalos 2007 has defended this sort etymology on narratological grounds: "The poet alludes to the ominous connotations of the human name in the compass of a narrative capsule, in which Scam-andros acts out the individual lexemes of his name: he pushes the dead out on the shores" (91). And furthermore, "*Scam-andros* will function as an undertaker, and 'dig' a grave for the 'man'—i.e., σκάπτω + ἀνὴρ" (92; cf. the name's synonyms in *Iliad* xxi.316-23). Hence, "the poet moulds and tailors his narrative so as to accommodate both the divine and human names and their essence" (92).

"Xanthus" has also garnered divergent interpretations. For example, its ostensible connection with the word "yellow" (ξανθός) has led scholars to suggest that the river is so-named because it made women's hair lighter colored when they washed in it (scholiast

---

<sup>26</sup> E.g., Plutarch wrote that someone named Scamander (the son of Coribus) was drowned in Xanthus and the river was renamed. There are various "Scamander" and "Scamandrius" names in Homer (e.g., *Iliad* v.549, etc.). The *Iliad* refers to "Scamander Plain" and "Scamander meadow" (e.g., ii.552). These might have their names from the river that runs through them, but the reverse might also be true.



on *Iliad* xxi)<sup>27</sup> or because it made sheep's wool yellow (Aristotle, *History of Animals* 519a18-19). Tsitsibakou-Vasalos 2007 digs a little deeper and points out how Homer uses the yellow resonance to draw the contrast between the usually golden and divine river with the same river when Achilles causes it to run dark with blood (i.e., not golden) and choke its flow with the most mortal (i.e., non-divine) object of all: dead bodies (90). And Proclus digs perhaps even deeper:

They thus name the river Xanthus not after its superficial qualities which are always in flux, but because it itself is an internal and constant cause, whose essence becomes manifest in the quality of tawny skin tone (xanthos) in the people nurtured by it. The Xanthus is both an ancient cause of generation and a constant source of nourishment for the Trojans. (34,25)<sup>28</sup>

Hence, “Xanthus” is indeed productive for its amenability to poetic development, but, solely by virtue of its etymology, it is not decisively more so than “Scamander.” And what is more, even the etymological meaning of these names is interesting only if it is further probed for its resonance, e.g., by being narratively incorporated. In other words, the correctness of these names is a matter of searching for meanings that exceed the apparent.

---

<sup>27</sup> Alternatively, “The river Scamander also has the reputation of making lambs yellow, and that is the reason, they say, why Homer designates it the Yellow River [Xanthus] instead of the Scamander.” (Δοκεῖ δὲ καὶ ὁ Σκάμανδρος ποταμὸς ξανθὰ τὰ πρόβατα ποιεῖν· διὸ καὶ τὸν Ὅμηρον φασιν ἀντὶ Σκαμάνδρου Ξάνθον προσαγορεύειν αὐτόν, *History of Animals* 519a18-20).

<sup>28</sup> See also Proclus, in *Tim.* 2,274,1 ff., where Proclus uses the Xanthus-Scamander etymology to argue that different names may be assigned to the same object depending on whether the name-giver's understanding of it is based on knowledge or imagination.

#### 4.5 CHALCIS AND CYMINDIS

The second pair of names demonstrates the same principles: that Plato is using contextual transference to indicate that names are correct when they require us to look for the deeper meaning of a word. In this way, the god-given name (Chalcis) is more correct than the man-given name (Cymindis) because of its greater resonance.

As noted above, the traditional interpretation of these name pairs is that they should be passed over quickly or, worse, that they somehow suggest that Homer will be no help. Indeed, the *only* scholar I know of who spends any length interpreting these name pairs gives a reading of the Homeric context (of the Chalcis/Cymindis pair) that upholds the traditional interpretation:

this passage serves to indicate a certain disruption of λόγος akin to that which was seen to unfold from Protagoras's doctrine. In the Homeric passage, the seductive Hera is shown to be speaking to Zeus with "false lying purpose".... Thus, although the purported intent of this Homeric passage is to illustrate that the gods call things by their correct names..., it actually demonstrates that gods, like human beings, can lie. (Ewegen 2013, 101)

In other words, Ewegen argues that Socrates' Homeric references undercut the idea that Homer will be of any help.

This view is mistaken. As with the above name pair, Plato transfers the meaning of the Homeric context to the *Cratylus* context in a way that is relevant to the question of the correctness of names. And as with the above name pair, this will become evident with an evaluation of the context of the name pair.

Following his discussion of Xanthus and Scamander, Socrates then asks Hermogenes:

Or if you'd rather, that which he says about the bird, "gods name it Chalcis, but men Cymindis"—do you suppose this is a base lesson, how much more correct it is for the same bird to be called Chalcis rather than Cymindis? (392a)

Of course, it is always possible to attribute irony to Socrates in passages like this. But as noted above, the reasons for doing so are weak. Scholars who have characterized Socrates as insincere at this point have done so in the service of their interpretations. But the passage itself gives no indications of insincerity, and I will demonstrate how the Homeric context is actually totally suggestive of why god-given names are more correct.

#### **4.5.1 War**

To see this, let us turn to the *Iliad* context. Hera made a deal with Sleep so that, after she had seduced Zeus, Sleep would cause Zeus to fall asleep. Hera planned all of this so that she could meddle in the Trojan war without Zeus noticing. Sleep executed his end of the deal while disguised as a bird hiding in a tree, so that Zeus would also be

unaware of his doings. In other words, the immediate context is deception, but the prominent context is war. Indeed, the context of the entire book is war, and war is usually the motivating factor for every episode, even ones that do not involve someone hurling a spear at someone else.

And as with the Xanthus/Scamander pair above, this name pair is mentioned in the context of reestablishing a balance in war. Because Zeus has allowed the Trojans the upper hand, Hera contrives a plan to remove Zeus from the fray for a short time to reestablish balance. In the midst of this contrivance, Hera tells Zeus that she plans to go away to reestablish the same sort of balance, a harmony in strife, between Tethys and Oceanus:

I am off to the ends of the fruitful, teeming earth  
to visit Ocean, fountainhead of the gods, and Mother Tethys  
who nourished me in their halls and reared me well ...  
I go to visit them and dissolve their endless feud how  
long they have held back from each other now,  
from making love, since anger struck their hearts (xiv.245-250).

In other words, Homer recognizes that Hera's ultimate purposes (reestablishing balance in the war) are parallel to her covert purposes (to reestablish balance between Tethys and Oceanus—or to even more indirectly suggest that she and Zeus reestablish a balance of their own amidst their own opposition).

The parallels with the *Cratylus* are too many to adequately discuss, but suffice it to note that Tethys and Oceanus have refrained from making love (really the only thing they are known for) because of their anger, just as Achilles has refrained from war (the only thing he is known for) because of his anger, just as Cratylus has refrained from language (the only thing he is known for) because of his anger; see Chapter 2 and Chapter 5. Furthermore, Oceanus and Tethys are identified later in the *Cratylus* as paradigmatic of flux, and Hera's intention is to draw out the unity in that flux. Hera is described in this action as "full of cunning" (δολοφρονέουσα < δολοφρονέων). But as such, she uses a lie that is, like all good lies, part truth. Hera does not intend to visit Oceanus and Tethys, but she does want to establish a harmony—in and through war. Plato doubtless notices this and uses it to suggest the unity that exists in flux.

#### 4.5.2 Metamorphosis

Another way in which Plato transfers the meaning of the *Iliad* context to the *Cratylus* is through the metamorphosis of Sleep:

There Sleep did halt, or ever the eyes of Zeus beheld him, and mounted up on a fir-tree exceeding tall, the highest that then grew in Ida; and it reached up through the mists into heaven. Thereon he perched, thick-hidden by the branches of the fir, in the likeness of a clear-voiced mountain bird, that the gods call Chalcis, and men Cymindis" (14.290-291, translated by A.T. Murray)

The god changed form and became a particular bird. I will unpack the significance of this particular bird below, but here I will show how this metamorphosis itself is significant for our understanding of language. When Sleep took the form of a cymindis, something physical and everyday (the bird) is invested with something divine. This is precisely what happens when sound (something physical and everyday) is invested with meaning (something beyond the physical, something of a higher register).

Indeed, this is precisely what Socrates does when he demonstrates the correctness of names through his etymologies. Etymologies are employed in order to demonstrate how something can change its visible form in order to achieve a certain effect. The identity of the altered form is veiled and only obtainable by someone with the knowledge of the transformation in question. So, Socrates can see the meanings etymologically codified in the names, just as Hera (but not Zeus) can see that it is Sleep and not a bird that is roosting in a tree.

#### **4.5.3 Dissimulation**

Plato transfers this metamorphosis for a further purpose: Socrates will be demonstrating the correctness of names in etymologizing, which will require looking past the initial appearance of a word to how it has been dissimulated. When something is dissimulated, it is removed from itself. There is an intermediary, a layer of added meaning. Something with one meaning is covered by something with another (usually related) meaning. As such, the bird (like the other analogues) represents hidden multiple meaning in this passage. And Plato transfers this meaning to the *Cratylus* context for a

methodological purpose: in order to see the resonance that names have, to unpack all the layers of meaning a word can have, one must look beyond the surface appearance.

Indeed, Homer chose a bird well-suited to represent this sort of hidden meaning. The chalkis is a sleepy bird. It is frequently identified with a sort of owl that still inhabits Ionia.<sup>29</sup> And owls are known for being active under the cover of darkness and sleeping during the visible day. This is appropriate for both the daytime sleep of Zeus and the covert activity of the god. In other words, there is a superficial similarity (sleeping during the day) that is used to embody a deeper similarity—acting in secrecy or away from the sight of another.<sup>30</sup>

Hence, the bird represents the hidden meaning (such as Hera's hidden purpose), a point that is further confirmed by Homer's mention that the gods have a special name for the bird. In other words, there is more than meets the human eye. Plato's invocation of this idea in the context of the question of how to find the correctness of names, thus, means that are embarking on an investigation of language that will be concerned with reading deeper into the nature of words than what is offered by their superficial manifestation in everyday use.

#### 4.5.4 It Works While Hidden

---

<sup>29</sup> See Kirk 1985, IV, 197. Aristophanes' *Birds* 1181 says that it has talons, and the T scholia to the *Birds* (261) also identifies it as an owl.

<sup>30</sup> The *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, Apollo says this of the poetic arts (of Hermes' lyre music): "For verily here are three things to hand all at once from which to choose, —mirth, and love, and sweet sleep" (450). Indeed, sleep was understood as the temporary suspension of sensation (Aristotle's *On Sleep*)—something needed in order to glimpse the Platonic forms.

To see why this is so involves more than noticing what is encoded in the etymologies, but seeing the deeper resonance the names have in their own context. In the *Iliad* context, the bird represents a power that is hidden and apparent only to those who know what to look for. Because this is the same account Plato gives of the power of language, I suggest that Plato invokes the name of the bird as an example of correctness for the point I have been reiterating: we will have to look beyond what is apparent.

But there is a further point: the bird, just like language, works from a position of concealment. It is able to lull Zeus to sleep only as concealed—just as words convey meaning, in their everyday use, while remaining largely invisible. If we are to see the bird in action, we have to venture into the obscurity of night (or in the *Iliad* instance, a mist that simulates night). Just so, to understand the workings of words, we will need to defamiliarize ourselves with language. So, in this case the fact that the bird has a divine and a mortal name is meant to signify the fact that there is a different linguistic register that operates through concealment and disclosure—but that such can be concealed even from the gods. Through simple instruction, however, we are able to see the artifice and understand why the separate name. This echoes the dialogue's esoteric theme as well: the bird is invisible even to Zeus, unless one knows what to look for.

That the bird works from concealment but is not ultimately invisible is further illustrated by the bird's dark color. According to Aristotle, "The cymindis is seldom seen, as it lives on mountains; it is black in color" (Aristotle, *History of Animals* 615b6). However, χαλκίς is obviously related to χαλκός, which suggests the bird had a sort of copper color. This doesn't necessarily disagree with Aristotle; perhaps the bird had a shiny bronze hue to its blackness, analogous to the *blue* shimmer of an American



*blackbird*. Aristotle repeats at 619a14 that the bird “is seldom seen”—perhaps the bird avoids detection by its dark color, but with the appropriate gaze is available for those in the know and, if illuminated, it shows its black shows its copper glimmer—it shines out in color and not merely in the absence of its color.

Similarly, language remains hidden for the most part and becomes visible only in the correct lighting. This is why Plato has Socrates suggest they look to Homer in the first place: he never says what correctness is, but he nevertheless shows it “all over the place” (391d). And it is why Socrates says that “But perhaps these things are greater than you and I can discover” (392b)—they are *μείζω*, beyond or exceeding what is readily apparent or discoverable. To see why the god-given names are more correct requires digging deeper.

Finally, the bird’s ability to work from its concealment is evident in Homer’s description of the bird’s haunt: it is hidden in the branches in the highest fir at the topmost forest of Mount Ida. Not only is the tree tall, it is so tall that its peak emerges from the mist, thus representing a sort of transcendence (much like the lotus flower emerges in beauty from a mucky swamp and represents a sort of transcendence in the Buddhist literature). Furthermore, tall coniferous trees are literally shaped like arrows and would have served as a naturally appropriate symbol of directionality.

The transference of these resonances to the Platonic context are many. Below, I will unpack how this god-given name points to what is beyond the scope of normal human vision, just as words point beyond their sensory shell. For this is accomplished not only by the specifics of this bird’s characteristics, but also by the trope evoked by most of the mentions of birds in the *Iliad*: augury.

#### 4.5.5 Bird Signs

That the bird represents language in this way is further confirmed by the fact that it echoes the same literary trope as almost every reference to birds in the *Iliad*: as part of augury or interpretation of the divine register. In short, this resonance, which the mention of a bird-gone-divine would most certainly have had, suggests an understanding of meaning as I have been developing so far. That is, meaning as resonance with multiple aspects of reality. *A bird sign is precisely that: an occurrence which appears one way but also shows itself to be portentous and to have a deeper meaning that requires interpretation.*

The *Iliad* is full of examples of augury, most of which are iconic and crucial to the work. For example, as Ajax made a threatening speech to Hector: “As he was thus speaking a bird flew by upon his right hand, and the host of the Achaeans shouted, for they took heart at the omen” (xiii.821, translated by Samuel Butler).<sup>31</sup> Or, in the last bird scene in the *Iliad*, King Priam prays to Zeus for a bird sign from the right to confirm that he will be safe in his embassy to Achilles, and not much later an eagle appears from this side (xxiv.292-321). But in perhaps the most memorable of these scenes, the Trojans receive a remarkable warning that what they are about to attempt is not a good idea:

---

<sup>31</sup> Similarly: “So he prayed and the Father filled with pity, seeing Atrides weep. The god bent his head that the armies must be saved, not die in blood. That instant he launched an eagle truest of Zeus's signs that fly the skies—a fawn clutched in its talons, sprung of a running doe, but he dropped it free beside the handsome shrine where Achaean soldiers always sacrificed to Zeus whose voice rings clear with omens. Seeing the eagle sent their way from Zeus, they roused their war-lust, flung themselves on the Trojans with a vengeance” (vi.380-390).

As they prepared to cross, an eagle high in the sky wheeled across their left, grasping a long blood-red snake alive and writhing. It still had fight in it, arching back to strike the eagle on its breast, and the bird in pain, letting it fall among the troops, flew swiftly down the wind with a loud cry. most were fain to break through the wall and burn the ships with fire, these still tarried in doubt, as they stood by the trench. For a bird had come upon them, as they were eager to cross over, an eagle of lofty flight, skirting the host on the left, and in its talons it bore a blood-red, monstrous snake, still alive as if struggling, nor was it yet forgetful of combat, it writhed backward, and smote him that held it on the breast beside the neck, till the eagle, stung with pain, cast it from him to the ground, and let it fall in the midst of the throng, and himself with a loud cry sped away down the blasts of the wind. And the Trojans shuddered when they saw the writhing snake lying in the midst of them, a portent of Zeus that beareth the aegis. (*Iliad* 12.198-208, translated by A.T. Murray)

Not only were bird signs an important part of how the divine communicated through veiled signs with mortals in the *Iliad*, but they were also a prominent way in which Plato's contemporaries would have sought the will of the divine. For example, Xenophon famously describes how he did not set out on his journey until consulting Socrates and the Delphic Oracle. But at every move during his journey, he consulted the gods, frequently by interpreting (and thoroughly trusting) bird signs:

when he was setting out from Ephesus to be introduced to Cyrus, an eagle screamed upon his right; it was sitting, however, and the soothsayer who was conducting him said that while the omen was one suited to the great rather than to an ordinary person, and while it betokened glory, it nevertheless portended suffering, for the reason that other birds are most apt to attack the eagle when it is sitting; still, he said, the omen did not betoken gain, for it is rather while the eagle is on the wing that it gets its food. So it was, then, that Xenophon made sacrifice, and the god signified to him quite clearly that he should neither strive for the command nor accept it in case he should be chosen. Such was the issue of this matter. (*Anabasis* 6.1.23-24; cf. the frequent mention of this practice in Herodotus—hawks and vultures in the omen of Darius)

Finally, reading bird signs was not the domain of the mere literary or military or superstitious. Plato himself is interested in how it is that birds can carry divine messages. As with Socrates' attitude towards the Delphic Oracle, which values the message as somehow true while also submitting it to inquiry to understand how it is true, Plato prizes the inspired nature of the bird sign, but within the context of rational inquiry.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the most prominent example of this is Socrates' etymologizing of the words for prophecy and bird-augury in the *Phaedrus*. Strikingly, this passage is also perhaps more like the etymologizing of the *Cratylus* than in any other instance of etymologizing in Plato's oeuvre:

---

<sup>32</sup> For his complicated relationship to Augury, see especially *Philebus* 67b. Also, in exemplifying the proper office of a diviner in the *Ion* (539c-d), Plato has Socrates quote an augury passage from *Iliad* xii.200–207. The takeaway is that understanding the will of the divine is given the paradigm case of reading bird signs.

The prophetess in Delphi and the priestesses in Dodona, when crazed (μανεῖσαι), work many and good things both in private and before the people for the benefit of the Greeks—being in their right minds either briefly or not at all. And if we should speak to the Sybill and others, who, foretelling many things by making use of prophetic inspiration (μαντικῇ), set things straight in the future for many people, we would certainly spend a lot of time talking. But this is worthy of being brought to witness: that the ancient name-setters did not think that madness (μανίαν) was shameful or worthy of reproach; otherwise they would not have called it “manic” (μανικὴν), weaving the very name with the most beautiful art, which is discerning the future. So they put the name in this way, but although it is beautiful when it happens by godly endowment, those tasteless people nowadays throw an extra letter in there calling it “mantic” (μαντικὴν). Since even the sane discerning of the future, which is done through birds and other signs, was named “οἰονοῖστικὴν,” since it is thought to provide intelligence (νοῦν) and narrative (ἱστορίαν) to human thought (οἰήσει). People nowadays give it a long “ο” and call it “augury” (οἰωνιστικὴν); insofar as madness (μαντική) is better than augury (οἰωνιστικῆς), in both name and deed, the ancients testify that madness (μανίαν), which comes from god, is more beautiful than sound-mindedness, which comes from men.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> But note that Plato’s word for “augury” (οἰονοῖστικὴν) here is less common than the words οἰωνοσκοπική and ὀρνιθομαντεία. The former is uncommon and requires an even less-common etymology

The parallels are too numerous to examine here. I will only note that the question of bird signs is connected to the domain of etymology and hidden meaning elsewhere in Plato's work. And as in these instances, Plato transfers the practice of interpreting bird-signs to the context of the *Cratylus*, where words are shown to be correct when they have messages hidden beneath their apparent meanings.<sup>34</sup>

#### 4.5.6 This is Not Etymology

When Socrates claims that the god-given name (χαλκίς) is more correct than the man-given name (κύμινδις), one would expect there to be an underlying etymological account. For as shown, *Cratylus* scholarship almost universally accepts that Socrates judges correctness by showing that the semantic content of an etymology matches a

---

(οἰονοῖστικὴν= οἰήσει + νοῦν + ἱστορίαν). The latter are more common words, and they also have more obvious etymons (οἰωνίζομαι and ὀρνιθεύομαι), which come, more straightforwardly, from bird-words (ὄρνις and οἶωνος). Sedley 2003 points out that Plato would have had to be “so blinkered as to overlook this palpable fact” (34). Of course, Plato did not overlook anything. He would have been well-aware of this more straightforward etymology (*Pace* Ademollo 2011, 250). Neither Sedley nor Ademollo says why this fact is interesting for the *Cratylus* (apart from the ‘should we take the etymologies seriously?’ question). But it is no mystery for close readers of the *Cratylus* that Plato doesn’t feel the need to elaborate on obvious etymologies (e.g., Apollo and Persephone), which he is content to merely allude to. He is more concerned with etymologizing (making significant conceptual connections based on the resonances the word has). In the current case, he is involved in etymological *transference*—he is transferring the meaning this word has in other contexts into the context of the present dialogue. One example of this is how, in the *Cratylus*, -ιστικὴ words are frequently connected with νοῦς (e.g., τέχνην as ἔξιν νοῦ)—and νοῦς is one of Plato’s favorite etymons to employ in such a practice: E.g., Dionysius as οἰόνους (=οἶεσθαι νοῦν ἔχειν), Ouranos as ὀρώσα τὰ ἄνω in order to have a καθαρὸν νοῦν, Kronos as being καθαρὸν because of his ἀκήρατον τοῦ νοῦ, and Athena as Θεονόην (=τὰ θεῖα νοούσης) or as Ἥθονόην (=τὴν ἐν τῷ ἥθει νόησιν).<sup>34</sup> A further parallel with the *Cratylus* is the fact that Hermes (in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*) became the lord over birds of omen. And finally, the bird’s divine name is χαλκίς, which is doubtlessly related to the Κάλχας from the *Iliad*, the Achaean seer at Troy, who is adept at reading bird flight (ὁ γε Κάλχας ἐστὶ θεοπρόπος οἰωνιστής, xiii.70). He correctly identifies the cause of Apollo’s plague and recommends the return of Briseis, and he is also prominent in the pre-Trojan War myths, as he prophecies to Agamemnon, requiring his sacrifice of Iphigenia.

description of the thing named. But in these key examples, no such account is forthcoming.

For instance, as discussed above, χαλκίς comes fairly straightforwardly from χαλκός and is probably meant to signify either the copper hue of the bird or, more probably, the bird's resounding cry.<sup>35</sup> These descriptions of the bird come to a head in an understanding of the noise the bird makes. According to Proclus, "The bird 'chalcis' was so named after its clear and tuneful singing that sounds like echoing bronze" (71/35).<sup>36</sup>

In a completely different context, Aristotle says that some fish are named because of the noises they make—one of these fish is spelled identically to the bird in question, χαλκίς (*History of Animals* 535b). And because it seems strange that a fish would make a copperish noise, some scholars cling to the idea that its relation to χαλκός means that the fish *must* have been named for its copper color (e.g., Le Feuvre 2011). But given that the other fish mentioned in this passage, the κόκκυξ, does indeed make a sort of grunt (and was probably onomatopoetically-named from that noise), other interpreters take the fish's superficial etymology and Aristotle's explanation at face value. This leads some to understand the χαλκίς bird in the *Iliad* as named in the same way—from the copper sound it makes: "since χαλκός is nowhere assigned a color value... and since determinations of

---

<sup>35</sup> χαλκός indeed has an obscure etymology, although "The similarity with the word for 'purple', κάλχη, also χάλκη and χάλχη, is hardly accidental" (s.v. Beekes). There is no reason given for this, but I would guess that it comes from the multicolor shell from which the Phoenicians produced purple. At any rate, this sort of speculation is not any help here because whatever Homer was doing, even if etymological, it was not *this sort* of etymological inquiry. Similarly impotent interpretations of this name's origin attribute the name to eponymy: it comes from the "eponym of the Euboean Chalkis, Kombe (which not incidentally echoes κύμνιδις), who is depicted as a bird on coins and is called Χαλκίς" (Krieter-Spiro 2018, 290-291, cf. Kirk 1985 on this passage), but this conjecture is almost certainly anachronistic.

<sup>36</sup> Notably, this fact is taken allegorically also by Proclus: "It thus is likely that, according to the excerptor, the bird chalcis has been named after the ringing bronze (*khalkos*) because it is, in the realm of life and generation, both an harmonious and flying representation of the intellectual harmonies and revolutions of the celestial bodies, which are the source and principle of its own essence" (Duvick 2007, 141n197).

color overall play a much smaller role than acoustic phenomena in Homeric epic, a connection with the bird's metallic, intense voice, made already in antiquity... is likely" (Krieter-Spiro 2018, 290-291).<sup>37</sup> And indeed, this seems to be what Homer had in mind when he called the bird λιγυρός (clear or shrill).

Hence, one might be led to think that this god-given name is better because its etymology is readily available and straightforwardly signifies something true of its referent. However, as shown above, what might seem obvious—that the word identifies the bird because of its color—turns out to be quite questionable. And even an understanding that the bird's name means "copper" is fairly unilluminating and does nothing special to enhance the passage in which the name appears.

And what is more, it does not seem much more etymologically insightful than the contrast case, κύμινδις. This man-given name has garnered several doubtful and admittedly lame etymologies throughout the centuries: that it is an unetymologizable foreign word because of its perhaps Anatolian *vδ*-suffix,<sup>38</sup> that "it is called 'cymindis' because the bird is nearly as small [as cummin]" (Proclus 71/35), that it indicates the bird's cumin-color (Joseph 40), and that it is perhaps eponymous (to the cities in Euboea and Aetolia; *Iliad* 2.627 and 2.734).

But perhaps Homer (or Plato) intended to highlight the mimetic nature of the name. That is, like the previously-mentioned κόκκυξ, and as described later in the *Cratylus* (τοὺς τὰ πρόβατα μιμουμένους τούτους καὶ τοὺς ἀλεκτρούνας καὶ τὰ ἄλλα ζῷα,

---

<sup>37</sup> Cf. the scholiast on Aristophanes' *Birds*, 261. However, at least one scholiast makes the same claim for "kumindis": καλεῖται κύμινδις ἀπὸ τῆς φωνῆς (ΣD *Iliad* 14.291).

<sup>38</sup> s.v. Chantraine; "probably a colloquial, originally Anatolian loanword, with the characteristic suffix – (*i*)nd and the *i*-stem common in Anatolian animal names" (Krieter-Spiro 2018, 291); "Clearly a loanword, because of the suffix -vδ-; perhaps of Anatolian origin, or Pre-Greek, which may amount to the same" (Beekes).



423c), names are frequently onomatopoeic. And, as it turns out, the Greek language contains many such words that bear striking resemblance to κύμινδης. If we focus only on words with a reduplication of κυ- or κι- (which is a standard way in Greek of creating mimetic expressions), we find a number of possible etymological links.<sup>39</sup> For example, κίκιρρος (a rooster or the noise a rooster makes), κίχλη (a thrush), κιχλίζω (to chirp like a thrush), κιχλισμός (a chirp), κλαγγάζω (the shrill cry of a crane), κικκαβαῦ (the cry of a screech owl). But most probable is κυκυμῶϊς, which is the cry of a κυκυμῖς (screech owl). Not only does this word share the κυμ- root with the κύμινδης, but, as mentioned above, the κύμινδης is also usually identified as an owl.<sup>40</sup> Socrates will reject mere onomatopoeia later in the *Cratylus*, so it is far from insignificant that he should invoke a possibly

<sup>39</sup> Incidentally, my familiarity with the English word “cuckoo” and the Spanish word “cocoloco” led me to suspect that the onomatopoeic etymology here. Indeed, it turns out that the same sort of sound is adopted by many other languages: kuku-kookoo (Arabic), coo-coo-ree-coo (Armenian), kukuruku (Basque), kuk-ku-ruk-kooo (Bengali), kukuriku (Croatian), kykiriki (Czech), kykkeliky (Danish), kukeleku (Dutch), kukeleegu (Estonian), kukkokiekuu (Finsih), cocorico (French), ku-kudu-koo (Hindi), Hungarian (kukurikú), kukuruyuk (Indonesian), cuc-adiú-dil-ú (Irish), coccodè (Italian), kko kko daek (Korean), ko ko ko kō (Latgalian), cocococo (Latin), kikerigū (Latvian), kud kudak / ko ko ko (Lithuanian), kukuriku (Macedonian), kokarakkoo (Malaysian), kukooch-koo (Marathi), kukhuri kaa (Nepali), kykkeliky (Norwegian), qūqūli qū-qū (Persian), kukuryku (Polish), có có có (Portuguese), cucurigu (Romanian), ko-ko-ko / ku-ka-re-ku (Russian), kuku kūk kuu (Sinhalese), kuckeliku (Swedish), ko-ko-ro-kok (Tagalog), kokkara-ko-ko (Tamil), kokkaro-ko (Telugu), kuk kuk (Thai), and koo-ku-ri-koo (Ukrainian). Besides this, there are almost identical adoptions of the bird cry “kra kra” in Croatian, Czech, Dutch, Danish, Estonian, Finish, French, German, Hebrew, Hindi, Hungarian, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Latvian, Lithuanian, Macedonia, Malaysian, Norwegian, Persian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Slovene, Spanish, Swedish, Tagalog, Tamil, Telugu, Thai, and Vietnamese. Wikipedia contributors, “Cross-linguistic onomatopoeias,” Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Cross-linguistic\\_onomatopoeias&oldid=841038772](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Cross-linguistic_onomatopoeias&oldid=841038772) (accessed May 19, 2018).

<sup>40</sup> κικκαβαῦ (LSJ): “Meaning: natural sound of the screech-owl (Ar. Av. 261); Derivatives: κικκάβη screech-owl (sch.) and κικκαβάζω cry as an owl (Ar. Lys. 761 coni. Dobree for κακκαβάζω, -βίζω). Further κικκάβη (gloss.), κίκυμος, -υβος (H.), κυκυμῶϊς (Call. Fr. 318), -ωνίς acc. to Latte id.; cf. Heubeck Wu z. Jb. 1949-50, H. 2, 208ff. Note κυκυμῶνεν δυσβλεπτειν H. Further κίκυμος λαμπτήρ η γλαυκός ὁμοίως καὶ κίκυβος. Origin: PG [a word of Pre-Greek origin] Etymology: Onomatopoeic words, partly with expressive gemination (Schwyzer 315); on the β-suffix Chantraine Formation 261. Cf. κακκάβη and κίκιρρος; s. also κίκκαβος and κύμινδης; also W.-Hofmann s. cucubiō, the sound of the screech-owl. The words κυκυβ\μος show the Pre-Greek interchange β\μ; but Fur. 221 rejects κικκαβ\μη as too late. Also Lat. cicuma screecht-owl. I have no explanation of the interchange (κικκ-)αβ\μ- ∨ (κικ-)υβ\μ-. The word is clearly Pre-Greek.”

onomatopoetic name as less-correct than a semantically resonant one. Nevertheless, as shown above, there is more at stake than this.<sup>41</sup>

#### 4.5.7 Conclusions

Bird imagery in the *Iliad* is dominated by augury. The gods who dwell above communicate their favor to men who dwell below, and that communication is emblemized in a figure that is part of both worlds—a bird. So when Homer invokes the two names of this particular bird, he is invoking the idea that there are different levels/registers of meaning and at the same time the process by which one can come to be understood by the other—interpretation. And as demonstrated, the god-given name works like the divine-infused bird: it operates on many levels. Furthermore, the more powerful level is not necessarily the apparent one, but the one that works from its position in concealment. Ultimately, the god-given name is more correct precisely *because* it works in this way. Socrates is showing us how to find correctness: recognize that the deep meaning that transcends the apparent

### 4.6 BATIEIA AND MYRINA

---

<sup>41</sup> There are, of course numerous scholiast speculations here. For example, εὐεπίφορον δὲ εἰς ὕπνον τὸ ὄρνεον (the bird adroitly carries one to sleep, ΣD 14.291). Or, ἐκ τούτου δὲ καὶ κύμινδης καλεῖται, παρὰ τὸ κοιμᾶσθαι (it is called kumindis even from this, from “falling asleep,” ΣGen 14.291), or Eustathius writes that κύμινδης comes from κοίμημα (sleeping, vol. 3, p. 643). Scholiasts also identify it with its concealment (κρύψις): ἀεὶ δὲ τὴν κεφαλὴν ὑπὸ τοὺς κλάδους κρύπτει (it always hides its head under branches, ΣD 14.291); or, ἢ ὅτι κατὰ νύκτα ὁρᾶται (or because the bird is seen at night, ΣT 14.291a); see also Eust. Il. 14.291 (vol. 3, p. 643). For another discussion of these points, see Mayhew 2015).

This same idea of multiple levels of meaning is a part of the final name pair mentioned in the *Cratylus*: Batieia and Myrina (Βατίεια and σῆμα Μυρίνης). And the pair demonstrates the principle thesis of the chapter: that the god-given name is more correct because of its resonance, and that to see this we must look beyond the immediately apparent.

Again, let's look to the context to see this. This name pair occurs as the Trojan army and its allies gather for war. Zeus sent Iris to spur the Trojans into general warfare with the Achaeans. To accomplish this, Iris assumes the form of the Trojan sentinel Polites, describes a massive approaching army, and encourages them to rally. Hector, not recognizing the goddess, rallies by gathering both Trojans and their Allies at the hill:

Now there is before the city a steep mound afar out in the plain, with a clear space about it on this side and on that; this do men verily call Batieia, but the immortals call it the barrow of Myrine, light of step. There on this day did the Trojans and their allies separate their companies. (2.813-816, translated by A.T. Murray)

As with the above name pairs, war is the central motivating context here. And as above, this name pair is mentioned in the context of establishing some kind of order in the war. For that is precisely what a rally is intended to do.

Furthermore, this rally parallels the *Cratylus* in several ways. The Homeric passage occurs at a part in the war where the Trojan army is summoning their forces for a great encounter. Like the rally of the Trojans, there is a point in the *Cratylus* where Socrates pauses to gather his strength (and inspiration) before entering full-throttle into

the discussion of the etymologies—the point we are presently dealing with. In the *Iliad*, the army poured out of the city’s walls *en masse*; in the *Cratylus*, Socrates will pour all of his resources into the project with a mass of etymologies.

But this gathering has a significance for the *Cratylus* beyond merely an amassing of forces. It is a gathering with linguistic significance:

Inasmuch as there are allies full many throughout the great city of Priam, and tongue differs from tongue among men that are scattered abroad; let each one therefore give the word to those whose captain he is, and these let him lead forth, when he has marshalled the men of his own city. (804-806, translated by A.T. Murray)

Directed by the messenger-god Iris, Hector causes a gathering of all of the allies, but in a way that is peculiar to the *Iliad*: by language-tradition. Different languages are very seldom mentioned in the *Iliad* (cf. 4.437f, and 2.362f). Because of this, the hill is chosen as a conspicuous place of meaning, where the parties are divided into natural linguistic groups and then unified by sharing a common message.<sup>42</sup>

This is like the διαίρεσις that occurs in etymology as described in Chapter 3. But although the current passage does not say anything about the etymological content of the divine language, it nevertheless does show an important aspect of language that will be

---

<sup>42</sup> This is essentially the Heraclitean theme that I demonstrate throughout: not only do the troops divide in unity as stated, but the place itself seems to be described along the same formal lines: It is a hill, i.e., it is distinct, but it is also only distinct as marking a place of gathering. The hill is described as “Now there is before the city a steep mound afar out in the plain, with a clear space about it on this side and on that”—it is marked by a mound, but with a clear space all about for the gathering of troops. It is distinguished and plain; it is condensed but open; it serves as the location for gathering because it is a place set apart. And it is at this hill that Hector gathered and separated (διέκριθεν—from διακρίνω) his armies.

fundamental to the etymologizing that will follow: that there are different levels of meaning.

Another way in which the context of this name pair resonates with the *Cratylus* is that, similar to the previous name pair, there is a divine-guided dissimulation at work. Iris “stood near and spake to them; and she made her voice like to that of Polites, son of Priam, who was wont to sit as a sentinel of the Trojans, trusting in his fleetness of foot” (790-791, translated by A.T. Murray).<sup>43</sup> So just as Hera deceived Zeus in the previous name-pair through the dissimulation of Sleep, so did Iris deceive Hector. And in both cases, the name-pair is mentioned in this context to invoke the same theme: that a name has different levels of meaning, and that a deeper meaning can be found with penetrating insight.

This is reflected in the etymologies of Βατία and σῆμα Μυρίνης. Kirk 1985 is confident that Βατία simply comes from βάτος (bramble): this is the “workaday descriptive name of the hill” (I, 247). The same interpretation is given by Leaf 1900 on 2.813 and has been dominant since antiquity (see Proclus 71/35). This would indeed demonstrate the banality of man’s language: “that hill over there is covered with brambles. Let’s call it ‘bramble hill.’” The etymology may be straightforward, but it is poetically inert.<sup>44</sup>

The god’s name for the hill, on the other hand, is poetically allusive. It is generally agreed, following several ancient sources, that Μυρίνη is the name of an

---

<sup>43</sup> What is more, this metamorphosis is accomplished etymologically, as Πολίτης is both linguistically and characteristically likened to Iris (as ποδωκείησι and πεποιθώς)—overall the word πόδας in various invocations is conspicuous in the passage. This is the Homeric etymological technique called “transference.” What is even more, πολυσκάρθοιο is associated with dancing, bounding, and being fleet of foot, from πολυ-σκαίρω

<sup>44</sup> Alternatively, Βατία was supposedly also a historical individual: the daughter of the first Trojan King Teucer and of the nymph Idaea, and the wife of Dardanus (s.v. *Brill’s New Pauly*).

Amazon.<sup>45</sup> This already suggests that the divine meaning of the name is something hidden or extraordinary like the mythical Amazons themselves. But nevertheless, etymologically, this alone would be a fairly banal sort of eponymy. But Homer doesn't suggest the etymology of Μυρίνη alone, but of σῆμα πολυσκάρθμοιο Μυρίνης as a whole unit. Strabo recognizes this in his interpretation:

Myrina, who, historians say, was one of the Amazons, inferring this from the epithet “much-bounding”; for they say that horses are called “well-bounding” (εὐσκάρθμους) because of their speed, and that Myrina, therefore, was called “much-bounding” (πολύσκαρθμον) because of the speed with which she drove her chariot. (12.8.6)

This god-given name is more complex than most single-word etymologies and has, consequently, resulted in a variety of creative interpretations throughout the centuries.<sup>46</sup> In other words, there are complex resonances involved in σῆμα πολυσκάρθμοιο Μυρίνης. Not only is the name of the mythical Myrine invoked, but the idea that she is buried beneath the hill and the idea that she was somehow πολυσκάρθμος. This latter term is

---

<sup>45</sup> As noted above, the scholiast to this passage says “τὴν μὲν δημωδεστέραν ἀνθρώποις τὴν δὲ ἀληθῆ θεοῖς προσάπτει” (bT on *Iliad* 2.813-4). And Strabo elaborates: “It is agreed, however, that the name of the city was derived from an Amazon, as was Myrina from the Amazon who lies in the Trojan plain below Batieia, ‘which verily men call Batieia, but the immortals the tomb of much-bounding Myrina’” (*Geography* 13.3.6, cf. 12.8.6).

<sup>46</sup> For instance, Proclus says that the name pair demonstrates “how the gods transcendentally both know and administer even the life which transcends generation” because “‘Myrine’ is derived from the soul that was allotted this location from the gods” (71/35).

interpreted by Kirk as associated with ritual dancing. This would have made the site sacred.<sup>47</sup> Proclus even sees in Plato's transference of this name a sort of theurgy (31/25).

In short, the idea is that there is something that is hidden from the knowledge of the everyday man. The hill is just a hill to those who know not what lies beneath (a mythical, ancient tomb). This echoes the description of etymology in the *Cratylus*: we normally use words in ignorance of their more profound resonances. But etymology is not special in this respect; language just operates in this way. It works while hidden from our view. Etymology is one way of making it conspicuous, but in the case of σῆμα πολυσκάρθοιο Μυρίνης (as in the case of the other god-given names), etymology was not needed.

Hence, there are good reasons for rejecting the reading of the preeminent commentary on the *Iliad*, which suggests that Homer does this merely “for the sake of realism” (Kirk 1985, I, 246).<sup>48</sup> For the passage sets itself up as being more than descriptive; Iris' prefatory speech is conspicuously rhetorical in nature, and not simply like the report of some sentry who has walked down from the wall. It is not indicative in tone, but a speech act of a much more sophisticated sort. The speaker rebukes Priam, asserts his own experience in battle, uses effective imagery and contrast to give the impression of a large army approaching, then offers advice to Hector.<sup>49</sup> Thus, we are led

---

<sup>47</sup> That σῆμα πολυσκάρθοιο Μυρίνης is suggested as a unit would have been familiar to the ancient poetic and religious sensibilities, as epithets were integral parts of the divine names. Epithets gave the names additional power and resonance that the name itself did not. So, instead of just contrasting Βατίειαν with Μυρίνης, we see that the contrast is between Βατίειαν and σῆμα πολυσκάρθοιο Μυρίνης. This is not uncommon in ancient etymological practice. Tsitsibakou-Vasalos 2007 shows several places where an “epithet etymologizes and explains the noun it qualifies” (for example, the μερόπων ἀνθρώπων of *Iliad* i.250, which is used a dozen or so times in Homer, 38).

<sup>48</sup> Or Lazzeroni 1957, 12 suggests it may be an interpolation because it does not meet Lazzeroni's own interpretation of the device.

<sup>49</sup> All of which are rhetorical themes that will echo throughout the tradition and culminate in the deliberative rhetoric of, for example, Demosthenes.

in multiple ways to expect something extraordinary, and the name pair mark this juncture. It tells us that there is a hill that is just a hill to men but that has an additional name, one given by the gods, that is because of its deeper meaning and, of course, because of its resonance. Plato's reference to this name pair does what he says it does: it demonstrates how to find correctness, by recognizing the deep meaning that transcends the apparent.

#### 4.7 THE "OTHERS": *Βριάρεως, Αἰγαίων, Πλαγκταί, AND μῶλο*

Finally, what about Socrates' reference to the "many other things by this poet and by others" (392b)? By mentioning these, Plato designates the importance of the other name pairs in Homer and alludes to others' use of the same poetic trope. So, I will continue to argue below that Plato's transference of the Homeric trope demonstrates the methodological principle of this section: that the god-given names are correct because they possess a greater resonance that is gained only by looking beneath the surface. I will do so briefly in each case, with short treatments only of the remaining Homeric instances of this trope.<sup>50</sup>

##### 4.7.1 Briareus and Aegaeon

---

<sup>50</sup> Treating the trope in Pindar, let alone in all of the poets of antiquity, far exceeds the scope of the present endeavor. For an impressive gathering of such instances, see West 1966, 387. For what it is worth, in *Phaedrus* 251c-252c, Socrates gives his own instance of this poetic trope (mortals and gods use different names for the same thing). In this case, as in all of the Homeric instances, the mortal name is more familiar and the gods use a poetically-revelatory name that requires a deeper reading of an unfamiliar word.



There are four instances of god-given and men-given name pairs in the *Iliad*. Because Plato has Socrates voice three of these, it is expressly conspicuous that the fourth is omitted but alluded to. This is especially so, given the aural nature of the poetry and the fact that this instance uses the same wording as the others: “P καλέουσι θεοί, ἄνδρες δέ Q.”<sup>51</sup> Hence, this is like the significant silences of Chapter 2: the reference to the “many other things by this poet and by others” (392b) makes significant the fact that these “other things” are not spoken about.

This final name pair comes first in *Iliad* i.403, just after Achilles’ wrath has been ignited, and after his bargaining with humans has been rejected. He then turns to his mother Thetis for help, reminding her of her salvific deeds toward Zeus and her consequent bargaining power with The Olympian:

But, you, if you are able, guard your own son; go to Olympus and make prayer to Zeus, if ever you have gladdened his heart by word or deed. For often I have heard you glorying in the halls of my father, and declaring that you alone among the immortals warded off shameful ruin from the son of Cronos, lord of the dark clouds, on the day when the other Olympians wished to put him in bonds, even Hera and Poseidon and Pallas Athene. But you came, goddess, and freed him from his bonds, when you had quickly called to high Olympus him of the hundred hands, whom the gods call Briareus, but all men Aegaeon; for he is mightier than his father. (i.393-403, translated by A.T. Murray)

---

<sup>51</sup> This is obviously with slight variations, but only very slight: (1) ὃν Ξάνθον καλέουσι θεοί, ἄνδρες δὲ Σκάμανδρον, (2) ἦν τ’ ἐν ὄρεσσι χαλκίδα κυκλήσκουσι θεοί, ἄνδρες δὲ κύμινδιν, (3) ἄνδρες Βατίειαν κυκλήσκουσιν, ἀθάνατοι δὲ τε σῆμα πολυσκάρθμοιο Μυρίνης, (4) ὃν Βριάρεων καλέουσι θεοί, ἄνδρες δὲ τε πάντες Αἰγαίον.

Perhaps this is not mentioned in the *Cratylus* because the name pair seems simple enough to interpret: the fact that this giant existed before men were created implies the obvious fact that his name would have been assigned by the gods and later given a name by men as they discovered him. But obvious as this fact may seem, it explains little of why it is mentioned here in the *Iliad* or why it is omitted in the *Cratylus*.

Another possible explanation is that perhaps this instance is etymologically too obvious to be interesting: the mortal name Αἰγαίων is mere eponymy (from the Aegean Sea where the monster lives).<sup>52</sup> And on the other hand, the divine name Βριάρεως is etymologizable—albeit superficially—from the prefix Βρι- (strong). Indeed, this is spelled out explicitly in the same passage: “for he is mightier (ἄμείνων) than his father.” But this is also explanatorily unsatisfactory, as there are puzzles that result: the father of Βριάρεως is variously said to be son of both Poseidon and Ouranos, and yet the episode he is famous for (and which is alluded to here) is overpowering neither of these (in other words, whatever “mightier than his father” might designate remains unknown).

All of these considerations should lead us to suspect that, as with the other cases, there is a depth of meaning intended both by Homer and by Plato’s adoption of the Homer. And indeed, Homer includes “mightier than his father,” a phrase which does not directly contribute to the name’s etymologizing, but refers to a context.

---

<sup>52</sup> Although there is another etymology that is frequently proposed: the doubtful and confusing derivation from οβριμος (strong) + αιγ- referring to a goat (see Kirk on the passage). Furthermore, Αἰγαίων could be a patronymic, an epithet of Poseidon (lord of the Aegean), or both. Most scholarship on this merely tries to solve the verisimilitude/coherence issues implied here, as Hesiod also says that the giant was the son of Ouranos and Gaia (*Theogony* 147-9).

Although this context is not directly invoked in the *Cratylus*, and although Briareus and Aegaeon are not mentioned therein, Plato makes it clear in other works that he knows the giant referred to by Homer—and by the giant’s divine name. In fact, he provides *the only 2 extant references to Βριάρεως that come between Homer/Hesiod and the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE*. Because the giant was traditionally referred to as a ἑκατόγχειρ—a creature with a hundred hands (and 50 heads)—Plato has his characters mention the giant’s ability to wield many weapons. In *Laws* 795c, the Athenian stranger mentions how a Briareus, with his hundred hands, ought to be able to throw a hundred darts. And in *Euthydemus* 299c, Ctesippus says to Euthydemus: “would you also arm Geryon and Briareus in this way?” (i.e., with only one shield and one spear).

Plato could indeed have intended to transfer the idea of resourcefulness in war to the *Cratylus*. As I will develop in Chapter 5, the entire *Cratylus* is modelled after a scene from the Trojan War, and Plato frequently creates parallels between conversations and war. What is more, Cratylus is a type of Achilles, and Socrates will make his interlocutors dizzy with his superhuman, resourceful etymologizing.

Furthermore, the reference to Briareus’ divine name also fits the *Cratylus*’ inspiration context: Achilles mentions the divine name of the giant in distinction with the mortal name to suggest his special connection with the divine (his semidivine parentage). To parallel this, Hermogenes’ divine lineage is put into question, Plato suggests Cratylus’ special connection with the divine (because of his prophetic utterances), and, in the same way, Socrates (who is standing in for Cratylus) will soon explicitly identify himself as having a special inspired relation to the divine. He makes this special relationship even

more explicit by identifying the inspiration with Euthyphro, who himself claims such a privileged relation with the divine.

These observations also confirm what has been said about the other name-pairs above: not only are the meanings of names hidden and must be unearthed, but such deciphering will require a certain privileged knowledge. It will also require a certain resourcefulness because meaning in language, like the ἑκατόγχειρ, exists in multiplicity beyond what is normal. The giant has many hands just as words have many meanings.

#### **4.7.2 God-Given Names in the *Odyssey***

There are two further passages in the *Odyssey* that Plato does not specifically cite. Because they are part of the trope, and because they have a number of implications for the *Cratylus*, they merit mention. In these instances, Homer produces the divine name for something, but without any known mortal name. The fact that the mortal name is absent—or silent—is still wholly appropriate to the *Cratylus* context and would doubtless have also been on Plato's mind. Furthermore, it is not entirely surprising that Plato would refrain from invoking these instances. He frequently has Socrates lead through a list of examples without being exhaustive, presumably to challenge his interlocutor (or the reader) into completing the task. In fact, this happens in the *Cratylus* at a critically important part of the inquiry: Socrates omits none other than the dialogue's central concern, "Hermes," from the etymologies of the gods in 407e.

As I will show, there is no good thematic reason for excluding these names; in fact, they further confirm my thesis: that the god-given names possess multiple levels of meaning that must be searched for below the surface.

#### 4.7.3 The Moly Plant (μῶλυ)

Both instances in the *Odyssey* occur with reference to Odysseus' encounter with Circe, and both involve the gods giving a sort of privileged knowledge to Odysseus. The first of these passages appears in *Odyssey* 10, where Odysseus is preparing to rescue his men from the charms of Circe. Hermes intercepts him in his attempt, and offers him protection against Circe's spells in the form of a plant that lacks a mortal name, but the gods call it "moly" (μῶλυ, 10.305):

Thus speaking, the slayer of Argus offered me the drug, drawing it from the ground, and showed me its nature. With respect to its root it was black, and its flower was white as milk: the gods call it "Moly"; it is dangerous for mortal men to dig it up, but gods can do all things. (my translation)

It is noteworthy that no interpretation of this name is based on etymology.<sup>53</sup> Some interpretations try to understand which plant is being referred to.<sup>54</sup> But this has failed to

---

<sup>53</sup> This is because the etymology is universally accepted as obscure (s.v. Chantraine, who writes that it is probably a loan word from a now-lost language). For the only etymological speculation I know of with reference to this word, see Lang 1893, 143ff.

<sup>54</sup> "Commentators go through the usual routine in dealing with the word, either (1) allegorising its meaning altogether, as Eustath. does, and making it symbolise the general instructions given to Odysseus to resist sorcery; or (2) regarding it as a fanciful creation of the poet, which seems far the most natural solution; or (3) attempting to identify it with some known plant" (Merry, Ridell, and Monro 1886, 423n305).

yield any further understanding of the *Odyssey* passage, and what is worse, it disregards Homer's hint in the text that it is not a part of the mortal realm at all.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that Odysseus is able to access the plant and that Homer is able to speak about it means that it is not entirely transcendent. Indeed, it is not described as "impossible for men," but as "dangerous for men." "Dangerous" here is *χαλεπὸν*, a word or concept which I have previously demonstrated to have an important role in the dialogue, from its invocation in the opening proverb *χαλεπὰ τὰ καλὰ* (see Chapter 2). Hence, access to the plant is not impossible, but difficult or dangerous. Hence, the idea that the *Odyssey*'s god-given names "points to the existence of a sphere of knowledge accessible solely to the gods" (Clay 1972, 131) cannot be correct. With divine help, it is accessible even by men.

This is reflected in the colors of the parts of the plant: white above and black below. Like Circe, and like language, that which is above ground is clear, simple, and apparently undeceptive. However, what is beneath the surface is obscure, has hidden purposes and powers, and must be found with a suitable guide.<sup>56</sup>

This color variation also echoes the *Cratylus* description of Pan as having a smooth upper body and a shaggy lower body. And as Pan symbolizes language in the *Cratylus*, we can understand this too as naturally suggesting language. And indeed, the moly's powers are effective against a spell—the special words pronounced by Circe.

---

<sup>55</sup> "Moly and the Planktai remain nameless among men because they are unknown to mortals" (Clay 1972, 128), and "attempts to locate the Planktai geographically and to identify the mysterious herb botanically neglect the most salient peculiarity of these two names: they afford the only instances in Homer of divine *mononumia*" (Clay 1972, 127). That the plant is still unknown intensifies this interpretation—it is part of the divine realm.

<sup>56</sup> The color white, at least in Ancient Greek clothing, symbolized simplicity and unadornment (i.e., it was worn by the poor), see Gerschel 1966.

Furthermore, the fact that it is Hermes who guides Odysseus to this plant which has only a divine name is thoroughly appropriate to the *Cratylus*, where the dialogue revolves around the question of whether or not, with respect to language, Hermogenes has the attributes of Hermes. And what is more, either Hermes, Iris, or some other intermediary god is instrumental in every single Homeric name pair.<sup>57</sup>

Finally, in this instance, Hermes takes the form of a young man—echoing the transformations of the previous name-pairs (the river Scamander becomes a god, the god Hypnos becomes a bird, etc.). This transformation also echoes the *Odyssey* context, as Circe has metamorphized Odysseus' men. In all instances, this sort of change suggests that there is something beyond what is apparent and that it will be difficult to uncover.

#### 4.7.4 The Πλαγκταί

The second instance comes in the *Odyssey* xii.61 where Circe tells Odysseus how he can sail safely to his destination. After teaching him how to pass the Sirens undeterred, she tells Odysseus to avoid the Πλαγκταί:

For on the one hand are beetling crags, and against them roars the great wave of dark-eyed Amphitrite; the Planctae (Πλαγκτᾶς) do the blessed gods call these.

Thereby not even winged things may pass, no, not the timorous doves that bear ambrosia to father Zeus, but the smooth rock ever snatches away one even of

---

<sup>57</sup> With Socrates, I regard whatever differences there are between these two gods as incidental. Both are messengers between gods and men, and both carry a caduceus or winged staff, as any role given to Iris in the *Iliad* is given to Hermes in the *Odyssey* where Iris is never mentioned.

these, and the father sends in another to make up the tale. And thereby has no ship of men ever yet escaped that has come thither, but the planks of ships and bodies of men are whirled confusedly by the waves of the sea and the blasts of baneful fire. One seafaring ship alone has passed thereby, that Argo famed of all, on her voyage from Aeetes, and even her the wave would speedily have dashed there against the great crags, had not Here sent her through, for that Jason was dear to her. (59-71)

As with other instances of god-given names, etymology is not decisively helpful in understanding Plato's question (why the name is given correctly).<sup>58</sup> However, the immediate context of the reference is, as with the other instances, instructive: Circe is giving Odysseus instructions on how to pass these rocks (and a host of other dangers, like the Sirens) unscathed.<sup>59</sup> So, just as with the moly plant, a passage by these rocks is accessible only to the immortals—but not impossible to the mortals with divine guidance; χαλεπὰ τὰ καλά. And the parallel with Socrates' investigation into language follows also for this name pair: the resonance of words may be obscure and difficult, but it is not impossible with guidance.

---

<sup>58</sup> “‘πλαγκτέ’ must either be ‘vagabond;’ or, possibly, ‘distracted in mind:’ and ‘πλαγκτοσύνη’ (*Od.* 15. 343), is the word used to describe the ‘wanderings’ of a beggar. ‘Πλαγκτός’ is also used ... as the epithet of ships, Aesch. *Pers.* 277; of a cloud, Eur. *Suppl.* 961; of the tides in the Euripus, *Anthol.* P. 9. 73; of an arrow, ib. 6. 75.... Most modern editors prefer the interpretation ‘striking’ rather than ‘wandering’ (the root ‘πλαγ’ belonging both to ‘πλάζω’ and ‘πλήσσω’)” (Merry, Riddell, and Monro 1886, 12.61). So, the rocks may be wandering (the ships can’t successfully map or navigate them) or striking (onto the ships that try and pass). This also possibly echoes Heraclitean themes; rocks are models of stability, yet these rocks move about.

<sup>59</sup> In fact, the Sirens, which Odysseus must pass before attempting the *Planktai*, serve as a type for the dangers that follow. They are supremely χαλεπὰ τὰ καλά. In fact, in *Cratylus* 403d, the Sirens are mentioned in connection with Hades’ enchanting power of logos. And in *Symposium* 216a, Alcibiades claims that he must plug his ears as Odysseus’s crew in order not to stay all day listening to Socrates. In *Phaedrus* 259a, Socrates again invokes the sirens in the context of listening to speeches (the cicadas are compared to sirens whose voices lull their hearers to sleep). The only other place Plato mentions the Sirens is in *Republic* X.617b-c, where he adopts the myth for cosmological purposes.



#### 4.8 TURN FROM GOD-GIVEN NAMES

It is often thought that Socrates mentions these name pairs briefly in order to dismiss them and move on to a more viable project. For example, Petterson 2016 writes:

As Socrates sets out on his etymological enterprise he does however leave little room for doubt. The names he is talking about are human. Even if Homer seems to offer the opportunity to investigate the names that the gods are using, Socrates makes it clear that “these things are probably greater than what you and I can discover (ἀλλὰ ταῦτα μὲν ἴσως μείζω ἐστὶν ἢ κατ’ ἐμὲ καὶ σὲ ἐξευρεῖν)” (392b1-2). Anticipating his subsequent distinction between human and divine language, Socrates’ avoids discussing the names made for gods. (53)<sup>60</sup>

Based on what I have shown above, I think it is now evident that such a discount is unwarranted. Not only are there numerous thematic resonances and illustrations, but as with the whole of the dialogue, the natural correctness of names and etymology are not given explicit formulation but are only expressed through these illustrations and elliptical allusions. The interpretive situation is similar to scholars’ understanding of Plato’s invocation of Prodicus, Protagoras, and Euthydemus: despite Plato’s apparent dismissiveness and later explicit avoidance of these thinkers, they nevertheless

---

<sup>60</sup> Many authors just take Socrates’ claims at face-value (which is ironic given their readiness to dismiss the brunt of the dialogue as farcical): “For even if Homers’ language appears to contain ‘great and wonderful information about the correctness of names’ (391d6-7), this is not something that Socrates considers to be within *his* reach” (Petterson 2016, 53-54).

profoundly influence the content and approach of the entire dialogue. Likewise, this brief reference to divine names does much more work than serve as a contrast-case. Let's look at Socrates' own conclusion, which is often cited in defense of a dismissive position:

Socrates: But perhaps these things are greater than you and I can discover; instead, "Scamandrius" and "Astyanax" (which he says are the names of Hector's son), and the sort of correctness he says these names have, are more appropriate for mortals to investigate, as it seems to me, and easier. For you know how these verses in which what I say are.

Hermogenes: Indeed I do. (392b)

On first glance, it does appear that Socrates intends to move beyond these obscure Homeric references to god-given language. And indeed, following this comment, Socrates and Hermogenes do turn to investigating mortal names. A superficial reading would readily conclude that Socrates really did mean that investigating god-given names is not possible. Besides, there are so few divine names in circulation (Socrates has already given 3 of the 6 in Homer)—and Socrates is going to need a lot of names to work with.

Nevertheless, as I have shown, the understanding of these names is not impossible. It is only difficult (again, *χαλεπὰ τὰ καλὰ*). None of the reasons given here require the abandon of the enterprise suggested in this section. Of the three reasons Socrates gives (that these names are greater than our power of discovery, that mortal

names are more appropriate for mortals to investigate, and that mortal names are easier to investigate), not even the ἀνθρωπινώτερον suggestion implies impossibility. In fact, the opposite is the case: we should now be ready to hear what is difficult and try our best to achieve it. Socrates is not so much abandoning this question as he is leaving it for us to pursue.<sup>61</sup>

Furthermore, we need divine help or, as it were, special access. So instead of saying *this is too great*, we should say *this is for us to get some help on*. Even if Socrates did accept that mortals cannot *by themselves* access the divine, his claims here are clearly prefatory to the inspired state he will soon enter.

So, I think that a stronger claim is in order—that *Socrates never turns from what he has suggested in this section*. That is, he maintains that correctness is a sort of resonance that occurs best when meaning transcends what is apparent and requires us to search for it, and he leads his interlocutor accordingly. Socrates continues to analyze other names, but he does so in light of the methodological principles suggested through an investigation of these human/divine name pairs.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup> Remember, Plato is going to enter the etymologizing with *divine* names—or at least, names of the divine. These are not always simply names invented by mortals, but they are, as Socrates himself acknowledges, names of which the gods have shown their approval (400d ff.).

<sup>62</sup> I must note here that I am in full support of Sedley’s straightforward observation that this passage suggests an important point about correctness: that it is a “comparative attribute” (2003, 78-9). Hence, I also disagree with Ademollo 2011: “There are only a few occasions on which Socrates speaks of a name as being ‘more correct’ than another; and they can all, I think, be explained away as cases in which he adopts an innocuous *façon de parler* devoid of any serious theoretical significance” (151). Ademollo does not offer a robust argument for this conclusion. Instead, he argues something like this: My thesis is X. I have proved X elsewhere. X contradicts with this comparative business. Because my argument for X elsewhere is strong, this comparative idea is not important. Furthermore, Ademollo’s suggestion that the comparative [μᾶλλον ἢ] is not a “real” comparative is not in line with his usual philological insightfulness. I hope to have presented a contrary argument with at least as much force: I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation that correctness is the sort of thing that would readily be comparative. Cf. Proclus 31,25 for an ancient support for this idea of plural correctness.

## 5.0 THE EMBASSY TO CRATYLUS

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION: ARGUMENTATIVE UNITY

There is a manifest disconnect in the *Cratylus*. The dialogue is traditionally understood as an effort to understand whether names are correct by nature or by convention. But Socrates gives no clear verdict on this question. And what is more, he spends the first 80% of the dialogue developing a naturalist account only to refute that account in the final pages of the dialogue. This is a great challenge for commentators, who want to understand Plato as having offered a unified argument—why does he have Socrates argue for both sides?

The problematic turn in the argumentation coincides quite obviously with Cratylus' reentry into the dialogue. Cratylus has remained conspicuously silent throughout the dialogue, and his entrance into the conversation (which coincides with Hermogenes' departure from the conversation) seems to cause this unmistakable turn. However, commentators almost unanimously ignore this dramatic fact or give it a superficial interpretation. The result is that multiple inconsistent views emerge.

By far, the most common of these interpretations is to take the turn at face-value: Socrates turns on his previous arguments. For example, Sallis 1996, 275 claims that Socrates was playing with Cratylus and that Cratylus agrees with Socrates in total ignorance of this ruse. Ewgen 2013 likewise claims that Socrates' early arguments were merely playful (160f.). Levin 2000 claims that Socrates speaks hypothetically in the first part of the dialogue and then dismantles all his previous 'conclusions.' Joseph makes the

supposedly unproblematic assertion that the “conclusions which appeared to support linguistic correctness are now presented to Cratylus with a view toward their refutation” (65). And Ademollo 2011 writes, “The suggestion is plainly that there was something wrong in Socrates’ discussion with Hermogenes and that we must now find out what it was” (319).

The other main option is to ignore the dramatic event and proceed as if there were no significant turn at all. For example, Baxter 1992 reads the etymologies as commensurate with the later arguments—both attack Cratylus (Cratylus agrees with much of what Socrates says, but then Socrates uncovers where they disagree). Similarly, Barney 2001 reads Socrates as presenting a sincere view of naturalism, and then refuting Cratylus as a further honing of that view. Sedley’s 2003 approach is likewise similar; he argues that Socrates maintains his earlier views while signaling areas where they disagree with Cratylus.

How one falls on this issue is far from inconsequential. Perhaps the most vexed philosophical question of the dialogue is how to understand the etymologies. Are they given in earnest, or are they set up for refutation? Do they support, contradict, or even undermine the arguments that follow? The reason these questions are so riddled is that Plato gives us no unambiguous statement of how we are to value the etymologies. Instead, we are left only with how they are presented in the dialogue—i.e., with the dialogue’s drama. Hence, understanding the etymologies *requires* correct understanding of the drama of this critical juncture.

Also, the way the final arguments are interpreted hangs in the balance. Scholars go to great lengths to show how these arguments are motivated. And as Baxter 1992

points out (176f.), the arguments tend to be treated in isolation precisely for want of this sort of motivation. It is difficult to make sense of them as fitting with the remainder of the dialogue.

Largely for this reason, the entire philosophical problematic hangs in the balance of this dramatic episode. That is, the question of whether names are correct by convention or by nature is thoroughly tied up in whether we understand the Socrates of the final pages as refuting, confirming, elaborating, or honing his previous arguments. And this depends on whether or not he was previously sincere and whether or not he changes his approach in this brief exchange. In short, the dialogue's entire philosophical stake hangs on how one reads Cratylus' reentry.

Nevertheless, Scholars fail to carefully address this transition scene. A common sentiment is that of Barney 2001:

in the absence of any explicit reversion to the central question of correctness, these arguments can at most serve to reinforce and elaborate the conclusion I have just cited. The problem—and it is one of the most consistently vexatious problems in the Platonic corpus—is to determine what this conclusion amounts to. *The answer must depend on the interpretation of the arguments of the reexamination...* (107, emphasis added)

This view is mistaken. The reverse is the case: the final arguments are incomplete in themselves and require the dramatic episode which precedes them to help us understand their relative weight.

In what follows, I will argue for the coherence of the dialogue by paying close attention to the brief dramatic episode that marks the supposed turn in argumentation. I argue that the hopelessly diverse interpretations of the *Cratylus*' unity are largely the result of not paying attention to Plato's cues in this crucial scene. In fact, a critical element of this scene has, as far as I have found, been entirely overlooked: what seems to be an uncontroversial passing reference to Homer's *Iliad* is actually a sustained and profound influence on the *Cratylus*.

When Cratylus enters the dialogue after his long and conspicuous silence, he quotes a passage from the 'Embassy to Achilles' episode of the *Iliad*.<sup>1</sup> Those few scholars who note this scene unanimously interpret the reference as agreement, albeit poetic agreement, with Socrates.<sup>2</sup> However, an understanding of the Homeric episode (which Plato's readers would surely have had) suggests the *opposite*—that Cratylus sympathizes with Socrates, but emphatically rejects Socrates' proposal.

I will show how a correct understanding of this dramatic juncture solves the problem of the dialogue's unity: throughout, Socrates is consistent in arguing for a moderate version, and against a radical version, of Cratylus' position. In other words, Socrates argues that Cratylus, who has carefully attempted to use (or avoid using) language in a way that misrepresents what is spoken about, misjudges language's paradoxical ability to generate meaning in this misrepresentation.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hereafter, I will frequently refer to this scene simply as the "Embassy" or "Embassy Scene."

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, all of the diverging interpretations reference above claim that Cratylus' agreement supports their claims. The only exception to this is Nightingale 2003, which I discuss below. And perhaps, though ambiguous and suggestive at best, Weingartner 1970: "And to render the agreement doubly dubious, it is Ajax, none other, to whom Socrates is compared" (22).

Finally, this chapter raises the perennial question of how seriously we are to take the literary or poetic aspects of Plato's writing. In fact, I argue that this episode is a paradigm instance of a rampant misreading of Plato that results from unproductive assumptions regarding his literary practice. That is, we cannot assume Plato's literary fabrications were mere flourishes or that they serve only to illustrate or confirm the dialogue's more explicit arguments. Rather, the appropriation of this Homeric episode in the *Cratylus* shows us how Plato used literary elements philosophically, as integral to his argumentation. Hence, I will argue for taking Plato's use of Homer seriously in a very strong sense: as I will show, the entirety of the *Cratylus* shows itself to be structured on the 'Embassy to Achilles' episode.

## 5.2 INTRODUCTION TO THE EMBASSY

Because there is so much at stake with Cratylus' entry into the dialogue, the nature of this dramatic element merits a closer examination. In this section, I will pay special attention to the lines preceding his entry, which are characterized by Hermogenes' important allusion to Hesiod. Following Socrates' etymologizing, Hermogenes complains that he still does not understand and begs Cratylus to return. Because I will be reading these lines closely in what follows, I here include the entire passage:

Hermogenes: Truly, Socrates, Cratylus frequently offers me many challenges, just as I was saying at the beginning, when he says that there is a correctness of names, about which he says nothing clear, with the result that I am unable to know whether each time he speaks unclearly about these things willingly or



unwillingly. Now then Cratylus, as you are standing before Socrates, tell me whether the way Socrates speaks about names appeases you, or do you have some other more beautiful way of speaking? And if you have, speak, so that now surely you might learn from Socrates or you might teach both of us.

Cratylus: And what, Hermogenes? Does it seem easy to you to learn and teach anything so swiftly, not to mention so great a thing, which in fact seems to be greatest among the greatest?

Hermogenes: By Zeus, I do not. But the saying of Hesiod sounds beautiful to me which says “even if someone stacks little upon little, it is profitable” (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 359f.). If, therefore, you are able even to do some small thing completely, then grow not weary, but show kindness to this here Socrates—if you are just—and to me.

Socrates: And Indeed, Cratylus, I myself can lay my strength on nothing which I have said, but it seemed to me in this way after I investigated the matter with Hermogenes. So, be courageous on account of this and speak, if you have something better, as I would welcome it. If you have something more beautiful than these things to say, I would not be amazed—for you seem to me to have investigated these things yourself and to have learned them from others. So, if you will say something more beautiful, then write me down as one of your students on the correctness of names. (427d-428b)

Hermogenes' allusion to Hesiod is one of Plato's numerous short allusions, and as a result almost nobody takes notice of it. The only exception I have found is Ewegen 2013, who rightly points out that the "little" (σμικρὸν) in the quotation is a play on Cratylus' patronymic "son of Smicrion" that will be uttered a few lines later at 429e. However, Ewegen 2013 reads into this that "very little will be accomplished by the addition of Cratylus to the conversation" (160). In other words, he repeats the dominant understanding of Cratylus as not having philosophically interesting things to say, an interpretation which I have gone to great lengths to disprove (see especially Chapter) and which I will also show here to be mistaken.

What is more, this interpretation is advanced in apparent disregard of the Hesiod text, which proposes that adding little upon little really does make progress: "He who adds to what he has, will keep off bright-eyed hunger; for if you add only a little to a little and do this often, soon that little will become great" (*Works and Days*, 360-362). Both the Hesiod passage and Hermogenes' sincere invocation of it suggest that Cratylus' participation in the conversation is viewed as potentially productive.

But this quotation does much more. It gives thematic suggestions that will become philosophically significant, and it signals how we are to understand the more decisive allusions that will follow.

In the above passage, Hermogenes, Cratylus, and Socrates all play off of this Hesiod quotation—and they do so in a conspicuous way that suggests that we pay closer attention. I will briefly trace the themes that are repeated: (a) adding little upon little, (b) difficulty, and (c) the resulting beauty, goodness, or justice. Hermogenes initiates this

thematic chain by claiming that Cratylus submits him to many difficulties (b) and by asking Cratylus if he has some other more beautiful way of proceeding (c) that he can add (a). Cratylus then complains that Hermogenes expects a quick and easy answer (b) to so great a thing (c)—even the “greatest of the greatest.” This μέγιστοις μέγιστον is a deliberate echo of the Hesiodic σμικρὸν ἐπὶ σμικρῷ... μέγα γένοιτο, so (a). Hermogenes then cites Hesiod (a, b, and c) and directly asks Cratylus to do what is difficult (ἀποκάμνω, b) and do justice (c) by completing some small thing (a). Hermogenes even plays with words here (saying εὐεργέται to riff on Hesiod’s προὔργου). Socrates then backs up Hermogenes’ request by signaling his lack of strength (b) and calling on him to take courage (b) and say what is beautiful (c), which he repeats several times.

What this shows is that a set of themes from the Hesiod allusion are significant to what is going on in the dialogue—that the allusion was appropriate and resonates in various ways. But what is more, the fact that these resonances read quite conspicuously tells us to look deeper into the meaning of the allusion—and, as we shall see, into the allusions that follow.

The *Works and Days* passage seems to be about staving off hunger by adding to your larder little by little. But the passage should be read in its larger thematic context:

Give is a good girl, but Take is bad and she brings death. For the man who gives willingly, even though he gives a great thing, rejoices in his gift and is glad in heart; but whoever gives way to shamelessness and takes something himself, even though it is a small thing, it freezes his heart. He who adds to what he has, will

keep off bright-eyed hunger; for if you add only a little to a little and do this often, soon that little will become great. (358-362)

Thus, the passage we are dealing with turns out to be part of a larger section on the good of giving and the evil of withholding. In other words, Hermogenes has chosen an especially apt passage to present to Cratylus. For, in remaining silent, Cratylus has refused to give. And Hermogenes is trying to get Cratylus to share his *logos*, just as he did at the beginning with his first words, βούλει οὖν καὶ Σωκράτει τῷδε ἀνακοινωσώμεθα τὸν λόγον;. Furthermore, besides suggesting that Cratylus could greatly benefit the conversation, even if he says little, Hermogenes gives the more veiled suggestion that if Cratylus should withhold, even if he withholds little, he will bring his own destruction.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, in a dialogue so attentive to etymology, one would expect that the play on Cratylus' patronymic (σμικρός—Σμικρίων) here carries a deeper significance. And indeed, the Hesiod quotation indicates the etymological significance of Cratylus' full name, Κρατύλος Σμικρίωνος. "Cratylus" is readily etymologizable from its root (κράτος, καρτερέω—strength, power) and its diminutive suffix (-ύλος); "little strength." And the etymology of his patronym parallels this. Σμικρίων is clearly derived from σμικρός, which is itself simply an older form of μικρός (s.v. Beekes). And like -ύλος, the suffix -ίων is diminutive. So, what we have is a name that makes a diminutive of an already diminutive word—a small version of small—in short, adding little upon little, just as the Hesiodic σμικρὸν ἐπὶ σμικρῷ suggests.

---

<sup>3</sup> A frozen heart is what happens to people when they die. This is the literal meaning that Hesiod trades on figuratively here. Indeed, παγχώσω is a rare word, and the *Etymologicum magnum* glosses it as the unambiguous φθείρω.

By this point in the dialogue, we are veritably forced to be attentive to etymology. Because of this, and because the patronymic is given shortly after the extended play on the Hesiod passage, it is almost imperative that we take the etymology of “Smicrion” as related to the themes suggested in the Hesiod quote. Thus, Cratylus is at a turning point, and Hermogenes is signaling this to him. He could contribute greatly to the dialogue should he participate even a little. Indeed, so far, he has only given little, but it has been immensely powerful. He has spoken only 3 words, but they have enthralled the first 80% of the dialogue. And as Hesiod says, even contributing a little will make the giver rejoice κατὰ θυμόν—words which will be extremely important in Cratylus’ reply below. But there is a danger. Should he continue in silence, we would be compelled to understand Smicrion as like the Σμικρίνης from Menander’s *Epitrepontes*—a niggard or miser. That is, if he should withhold *even a little*, he will destroy himself (καί τε σμικρὸν ἔόν, τό γ’ ἐπάχνωσεν φίλον ἦτορ, Hesiod *Works and Days* 360).

The fact that this brief quote by Hesiod has so many prominent resonances in the Platonic text should lead us as readers to approach the quotations in this dialogue, especially those that will follow shortly, as more than merely ornamental or moralizing. This citation signals to us as readers that we are at a decisive point in the dialogue. It signals that the characters in the dialogue will speak allusively and indirectly, and that we must take that indirect path to understand what is meant. Indeed, we are being fairly well slapped in the face with the idea that Plato will be speaking through quotation and allusion.

And this is confirmed by what follows, when both Cratylus and Socrates in turn respond to Hermogenes by offering their own allusions. Hermogenes has initiated a string

of allusions, and those that follow are to be taken just as seriously. Indeed, the very fact that Hermogenes quoted a poet is itself entirely noteworthy. As developed in Chapter 2, his style throughout the dialogue is utterly simple and unliterary.<sup>4</sup> Thus, all the more can we expect Cratylus, whose style is consistently enigmatic and profound, to be speaking on multiple levels when he uses a quotation. Indeed, as constituting Cratylus' first words in response to Socrates, Cratylus' reference to *Iliad* ix will turn out to be entirely thoughtful and sustained.

### 5.3 A NEW INTERPRETATION OF THE *ILIAD* QUOTE

Following Hermogenes' above entreaty, Socrates joins the petition to get Cratylus to return to the conversation:

Socrates: .... So, if you will say something more beautiful, then write me down as one of your students on the correctness of names.

Cratylus: But indeed, Socrates, just as you say, I have been concerned about these things and perhaps I will make you a pupil. However, I fear lest it be the complete opposite of this, as it comes upon me to speak to you the saying of Achilles, which he speaks in the "Prayers" to Ajax. He says

---

<sup>4</sup> And with this little bit of literary flourish, Hermogenes goes out with a flash. These are his last words in the dialogue, and they go beyond what he has said so far in depth and style. This may suggest that he has understood more than he let on with his above complaint, and, instead of acting in genuine befuddlement, is now being Socratic.

“Ajax, Zeus-borne son of Telamon, chief of the people, you seem to have said all things to me according to my own spirit.”

To me, Socrates, you appear to prophesy fittingly, according to my own mind, whether you became inspired by Euthyphro, or whether some other ancient muse, being in you, escaped notice. (428b-c)

A cursory reading of this passage takes Cratylus’ remarks here at face value—that he agrees with what Socrates has heretofore said. And again, this is how almost all interpreters understand the passage. For example, the most recent and nuanced commentary on the *Cratylus* reads,

In any case, Cratylus has finally been led to take a stand. By means of Achilles’ words he approves the *whole* of Socrates’ exposition ... presumably referring both to its theoretical parts and to the etymologies and mimetic analyses. (Ademollo 2011, 319, emphasis in original)

Indeed, commentators from a variety of interpretive approaches all confirm this interpretation: Baxter 1992 observes that Cratylus “has no qualms about accepting the results of the etymological section” (165), Ewegen 2013 claims that Cratylus accepts Socrates’ etymologizing as “to his liking” and even that his comments were meant and accepted as a “compliment” (161), and Sedley 2003 writes that “Cratylus has been impressed” (131).<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Of course, the list goes on, and I have mentioned only a few prominent examples. Compare Joseph 2000, 64; Weingartner 1970, 22; and Riley 2005, 122.

But there are various reasons why we should not accept this interpretation. First, as discussed above, this poetic allusion is immediately prefaced by an especially conspicuous allusion, thus suggesting that we read this quotation carefully. Furthermore, this allusion is conspicuous in itself. To make it so, Cratylus does something that is unusual in Plato. He calls attention to the quotation he will offer: "...the saying of Achilles, which he speaks in the 'Prayers' to Ajax. He says..." (428c). The "'Prayers' to Ajax" is the scene we now refer to as *Iliad* ix. This is one of the most iconic and significant scenes in the *Iliad*, and a quotation from it would have needed no introduction for Plato's readers. For example, Socrates refers to the same scene in *Crito* 44a-b, but without any indicator:

Socrates: Then I do not think it will arrive on this coming day, but on the next. I take to witness of this a dream I had a little earlier during this night. It looks as if it was the right time for you not to wake me.

Crito: What was your dream?

Socrates: I thought that a beautiful and comely woman dressed in white approached me. She called me and said: "Socrates, may you arrive at fertile Phthia on the third day." (44a-b)<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> The *Crito* passage comes from *Iliad* ix.363, where Achilles, responding to Phoenix, threatens that he will return home to 'fertile Phthia.' Likely, Socrates is suggesting that he too will go home, i.e., die, in three days. This is possibly ironic, given that Achilles's return to Phthia would save him from immanent death. But regardless of the specific interpretation, it is notable that this passage introduces a theme that will play out in the *Crito* just like the reference to *Iliad* ix will play out in the *Cratylus*: Crito's appeal to Socrates is very much like Odysseus' appeal to Achilles. In other words, Plato uses this very passage for a sort of extended allegory, which is exactly what I will be arguing happens in the *Cratylus*.



The Platonic corpus abounds in integrated references like this one—were it not for a translator’s quotation marks or an editor’s reference, these would escape the notice of many modern readers. But Plato’s audience would immediately grasp such references, so in most cases Plato left the reference inexplicit.

This *Crito* passage also references the scene from *Iliad* ix that is the focus of the present chapter, and it is one of at least five places in the corpus where Plato makes an unannounced reference to *Iliad* ix.<sup>7</sup> These passages are important examples in their own contexts, but, with one exception, Plato does not draw attention to them as he does here in the *Cratylus*. The exception comes in the *Hippias Minor*, the only other place in Plato’s corpus where he wants to be clear that he will be engaged in an *extended* interpretation of *Iliad* ix. Indeed, the *Hippias Minor* centers on the scene presented in *Iliad* ix, so it is not strange that Plato would make his quotation of it explicit. So, when Plato makes his quotation of *Iliad* ix explicit in the *Cratylus*, we as readers ought to pay special attention to it.

Furthermore, this quotation is made even more explicit because it is part of Cratylus’ breaking his silence. For almost 80% of the dialogue, Cratylus has been noticeably silent as his ideas have been discussed by Socrates and Hermogenes—a great deal of dramatic tension has built up as a result. Thus, this *Iliad* quotation, given as Cratylus’ first words to Socrates, would have been focal. What is more, we should expect that when Cratylus does break his silence, he will speak as he did at the beginning of the

---

<sup>7</sup> Other inexplicit references to *Iliad* ix include *Gorgias* 485d-e / *Iliad* ix.441, *Republic* 364d-e / *Iliad* ix.497–501, *Republic* 390e / *Iliad* ix.602–5, and *Laws* 10.906d-e / *Iliad* ix.500.

dialogue: calculated, profound, oracular, mysterious, and not at all straightforward (see chapter 2).

There is also dramatic evidence that we should question the dominant interpretation of this *Cratylus* passage. Hermogenes has told us that Cratylus is standing opposite Socrates, and this dramatic clue is unusual for the *Cratylus*, which does not abound in physical descriptions of the conversation: “Now then Cratylus, as you are standing before Socrates, tell me whether the way Socrates speaks about names appeases you...” (427e). What I have translated as “standing before Socrates” is simply ἐναντίον Σωκράτους. But this ἐναντίος can mean “face to face with,”<sup>8</sup> “contrary to,”<sup>9</sup> or even “opposite” or “contrary.”<sup>10</sup> But perhaps more frequently, especially in the Homeric context, ἐναντίος means “in hostile opposition to.”<sup>11</sup> So, Cratylus’ dramatic opposition Socrates further suggests a deeper philosophical opposition. Cratylus confirms this when he responds, only a couple lines later, to Socrates’s suggestion that he become Cratylus’ pupil by saying “However, I fear lest it be the complete opposite (τοῦναντίον) of this” (428c). In other words, we are not to read this as Cratylus wishing to be Socrates’ pupil (one possible sense of “opposite”), but rather as not wanting to have Socrates as a pupil at all. So great is Cratylus’ disagreement.

But the most significant reason to see Cratylus as in disagreement with Socrates is the quotation itself. That is, Plato’s audience would have recognized the quotation in its context, which veritably shouts his disagreement. In the *Iliad* context, the Achaean army

---

<sup>8</sup> See *Iliad* ix.190 and *Odyssey* xxiii.89. But in Plato’s *Symposium* 190a, the two heads of Aristophanes’ creature are said to look in opposite directions—τοῖς προσώποις ἐναντίοις κεκλιμένοις—as far from *face-to-face* as possible.

<sup>9</sup> This is certainly prevalent in Plato; see especially *Republic* 491d, *Protagoras* 323d, *Laches* 184d, and *Apology* 39c.

<sup>10</sup> This is how Aristotle uses it in *Metaphysics* 986b3 and 1018a25, respectively.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Iliad* v.497 and Sophocles’ *Ajax* 1284.

is in so beset by the Trojans that Agamemnon agrees, finally, to attempt reconciliation with Achilles. Agamemnon sends an embassy (composed of Odysseus, Phoenix, Ajax, and two heralds) with promises to deliver incredibly generous gifts to Achilles if he should agree to enter the battle (169-170). It is at the end of this embassy, after Ajax's final challenge to Achilles, that Achilles speaks the words quoted by Cratylus:

Ajax, Zeus-borne son of Telamon, chief of the people, you seem to have said all things to me according to my own spirit. (428c)

But the complete pericope runs thus:

Ajax, royal son of Telamon, captain of armies, all well said, after my own heart, or mostly so. But my heart still heaves with rage whenever I call to mind that arrogance of his—how he mortified me, right in front of the Argives—that son of Atreus treating me like some vagabond, like some outcast stripped of all my rights! You go back to him and declare my message: I will not think of arming for bloody war again, not till the son of wise King Priam, dazzling Hector, batters all the way to the Myrmidon ships and shelters, slaughtering Argives, gutting the hulls with fire. (788-798)

This doesn't sound at all like agreement. Achilles does say that Ajax has spoken according to his own θυμὸς,<sup>12</sup> but then he unambiguously pronounces his disagreement.

---

<sup>12</sup> Cratylus is adroit at quotations. His *Iliad* quote, πάντα τί μοι κατὰ θυμὸν εἰσὼ μνησασθαι, is a multi-layered response to Hermogenes' previous Hesiod quote, ὃ γε, κεί μέγα δοίη, χαίρει τῷ δώρῳ καὶ τέρεται

And this “but” is the strongest contrasting conjunction available in Greek: ἀλλά.

Furthermore, the τί of the πάντα τί (“all things”) indicates that it is only πάντα to an incomplete degree.

What is more, Cratylus’ omission of the second half of the quotation would have been notable to Plato’s reader and would have sounded out of place with how Achilles is presented throughout the *Iliad*. Plato knew this would be the effect, and it is coherent with the way Plato uses quotations thus far in the dialogue (e.g., see Chapter 4) and with the way he utilized the Hesiod quotation above. Thus, Cratylus not only disagrees, but he doesn’t admit his disagreement directly. This is consistent with the picture of him in Chapter 2, and, as I will show further below, it bolsters an aspect of my thesis: the *Cratylus* uses language indirectly to preclude the illusion that we can have easy access to the nature of language.

Furthermore, this *Iliad* passage has interpretive significance on a larger scale: the *Cratylus* is structurally modelled upon this scene—i.e., the argument of the *Cratylus* parallels the plot of the Embassy to Achilles. This might seem too ambitious, but think of how Socrates interprets the Simonides quotation in *Protagoras* 342ff.: he shows how the entire Simonides ode in question revolves around its seemingly insignificant quotation of Pittacus. And then the Pittacus quotation serves as a focal point for interpreting the Simonides ode. In Socrates’ interpretation, there is a hidden doctrine (being/becoming) that comes to light only by grasping the nuanced difference between what the ode says

---

ὄν **κατὰ θυμόν**. Indeed, he seems to be saying not only that Hermogenes has said the same things he would (κατὰ θυμόν εἰσώ), but that he has spoken just in the same indirect, oracular way that Cratylus would (μυθήσασθαι).

and what is contained in the brief quote. Socrates' ability to discern this in Simonides strongly suggests Plato's ability to write in this way himself.

And indeed, I understand this passage as a rare glimpse into Platonic methodology with respect to his use of quotations. And it is my argument that the same thing is going on with the quotation of *Iliad* ix—that the entire *Cratylus* revolves around, and is structured upon, this scene from the *Iliad*. For the remainder of this chapter, I will demonstrate how Plato did this and what the philosophical consequences are. I will center on the character parallels (Cratylus = Achilles, Socrates = Ajax, and Hermogenes = Odysseus) before moving to the broader dramatic parallels (how the *Iliad* plot parallels the *Cratylus* argument) and the philosophical implications of this reading.

#### 5.4 INITIAL OBJECTIONS

But before doing this, I will here pause to address some possibly obtrusive objections to taking these parallels seriously. There are two overlapping reasons why these parallels may not have been taken seriously. First, it seems wrong to identify Socrates with Ajax and Hermogenes with Odysseus. And second, it seems out of place in the Platonic context to contrast Achilles with Ajax.

Hermogenes is in many ways unlike Odysseus. He is simple, accepting, subservient and not a great speaker. This is markedly unlike Odysseus, who is distrusting, wily, a great leader, and a cunning speaker. Indeed, it seems more correct that Socrates should be identified with Odysseus for these very reasons.<sup>13</sup> Or perhaps Socrates should

---

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Socrates defends (or appears to defend) Odysseus in the *Hippias Minor*, though the nature of this defense is called into question: Lampert 2002, Silvia 2011, Kohen 2012, etc.

be identified with Achilles, since he is generally agreed to be Plato's strongest warrior (he is, as mentioned above, identified with Achilles at *Crito* 44a-b).

But it is not un-Platonic to cast an interlocutor of Socrates as Odysseus:

Socrates: But have you only heard Nestor's and Odysseus' skill with words, which they wrote down when at leisure in Ilium? And have you become ignorant of Palamades'?

Phaedrus: Indeed, by Zeus, I am ignorant even of Nestor's, unless by Nestor you mean Gorgias or by Odysseus you mean Thrasymachus or Theodorus. (*Phaedrus* 261b-c)

Comparing the Homeric heroes and their speechmaking to contemporary rhetorical and philosophical speakers is a common theme in Plato. Furthermore, this passage is coherent with various places in ancient literature where Odysseus symbolizes sophistry and rhetoric (see, e.g., *Philoctetes*), and this is likely why Hermogenes, the paradigm of a rhetorically-educated Athenian, is cast as Odysseus.

What is more, Plato identifies Socrates with Ajax elsewhere. In the *Apology* 40e–41c, Socrates compares his death to Ajax's, and mentions how the latter's death was caused by the declaredly unjust treatment he received at the hands of Odysseus.<sup>14</sup> And in a similar though fictitious court scene, Socrates is compared to Ajax by Alcibiades (*Symposium* 219e): Just as Ajax is unconcerned with enemy weapons because of his

---

<sup>14</sup> The injustice of this is widely accepted in ancient literature, especially since Sophocles' *Ajax*. Compare, however, *Apology* 28b-d, where Socrates also likens himself to Achilles in a strong sense.

fortitude (and giant shield), so too Socrates is unmoved by the all-night advance made by Alcibiades.

As for the question of which characters are contrasted, the more dominant contrast by far is between Achilles and Odysseus. Achilles is the undisputed main character of the *Iliad* and Odysseus is the central figure in the *Odyssey*—a fact which Plato explicitly acknowledges in *Hippias Minor* 363b. Even apart from the Homeric context, these two characters are frequently contrasted in ancient literature.<sup>15</sup> Again, this is explicitly acknowledged by Plato in the *Hippias Minor* by Hippias, who bears authority on this issue as a Homer specialist. And the fact that it is mentioned by Plato, in a dialogue that is centrally concerned with *Iliad* ix, causes us to expect an Achilles-Odysseus parallel in the *Cratylus*.

Nevertheless, Socrates is not only identified with Ajax, but he is elsewhere opposed to Achilles. For example, when Socrates debates Protagoras over the aforementioned Simonides ode:

Turning toward Prodicus and calling him, I said “Prodicus, you share Simonides’ hometown; you would be just in coming to the man’s aid. Thus I seems justified in calling upon you, just as Homer says Scamander called on Simois when he was beset by Achilles....” (*Protagoras* 339e-340b)

---

<sup>15</sup> For example, the *Posthomeric*, the *Aethiopis*, the *Little Iliad*, Sophocles’ *Ajax*, probably Aeschylus’ *Achilles* trilogy, and certainly Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*, where Philoctetes is a type of Achilles.

In other words, Socrates is portrayed here as the opponent of Achilles. And this portrayal is basically sincere—Achilles is a great respectable warrior, just as Prodicus is respected by Plato as a great intellectual.

Furthermore, rather unexpectedly, a scene where Ajax competes directly with Achilles over a board game is frequently attested in Ancient Greek vase painting.<sup>16</sup> In fact, this scene is portrayed in dozens of 5<sup>th</sup>-century vases.<sup>17</sup> In most instances, the heroes have words coming from their mouths indicating their status in the game. Achilles is usually portrayed as saying “I have four,” while Ajax says either “I have two” or “I have three.” I will indicate relevant interpretive details about these vases below, but what is significant here is that Achilles and Ajax had a well-recognized tradition of competing with or being in opposition with each other. And it is this opposition that Cratylus invokes with his *Iliad* quotation.

## 5.5 CRATYLUS AS ACHILLES

It is Cratylus who speaks the words of Achilles and thus identifies himself with the greatest of the Greek heroes. This self-characterization is truly rich and perhaps even hubristic. Careful readers of the *Cratylus* might hence be tempted to think this quotation is Cratylus’ fanciful self-characterization as a great intellect—one who could make a pupil even of Socrates.

---

<sup>16</sup> There is a great deal about the origin of this scene, many favoring the idea that it was a scene from a now-lost literary work. See Chapter 2 for my conclusions.

<sup>17</sup> Momsen 1980 catalogues no fewer than 155 vases with Ajax and Achilles playing a game of dice.



However, as I will show, this invocation of *Iliad* ix is not a fleeting fancy belonging only to Cratylus. Rather, the parallels suggested by the quotation are sustained by *Plato* throughout the dialogue.

The first indication of this is how Cratylus doesn't invent this parallel, but raises it as an appropriate response to Hermogenes' above Hesiod quote. Remember, the Hesiod quotation suggested that whoever would keep something valuable to itself, that person would "[freeze] his heart" (τό γ' ἐπάχνωσεν φίλον ἦτορ, 363)—a description which, intended for Cratylus, would also be appropriate for Achilles, whose heart indeed froze with his decision to refrain from battle.<sup>18</sup> It might seem like Cratylus is owning up to Achilles' pride, anger, and stubborn refusal of appropriate offerings. But as a response to Hermogenes' quote, his Homer quote makes more sense as saying "no, holding back is not death to me, but is a heroic action, like Achilles."<sup>19</sup> Presumably, Cratylus believes something like that Achilles maintained his resolve and his principles even when his allies tried to talk him out of it.

Next, the dramatic action of both works confirm the parallel: the *Iliad* begins when Achilles' prized Briseis is taken from him, just as the *Cratylus* begins when Cratylus' *logos* is taken from him. The entire *Iliad* is an attempt to resolve Achilles' consequent anger, just as the entire *Cratylus* is an attempt to resolve Cratylus' silence. Indeed, after the initial offense, Achilles removes himself from battle until late in the poem; so, too, does Cratylus absent himself until late in the dialogue.

---

<sup>18</sup> One thinks most immediately of Phoenix's *Iliad* ix plea to Achilles to not have a pitiless heart, "ἄλλ' Ἀχιλεῦ δάμασον θυμὸν μέγαν: οὐδέ τί σε χρὴ νηλεὲς ἦτορ ἔχειν:" (9.496) or the various characterizations of Achilles' angry heart, e.g., Nestor's "if so be Achilles shall turn his heart from grievous anger" (εἴ κεν Ἀχιλλεὺς ἐκ χόλου ἀργαλέοιο μεταστρέψῃ φίλον ἦτορ, 10.106; cf. 24.585).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. his actual words: "And what, Hermogenes? Does it seem easy to you to learn and teach anything so swiftly, not to mention so great a thing, which in fact seems to be greatest among the greatest?" (427e)

Likewise, Achilles' refusal to return to battle becomes more and more powerful as the war continues. So, too, does Cratylus' silence become more and more prominent. And in both cases, the decision to enter seems simple, but actually is quite difficult. Achilles, e.g., knows—he really does *know*, as his goddess mother told him so—that if he enters the battle he will die in glory, but that if he returns home he will live to old age (ix.499-505). So, it is not simply a question of swallowing his pride. Similarly, Cratylus is not simply offended that Hermogenes and Socrates are discussing his ideas without his approval. Rather, he is dealing with fundamental questions about meaning and the limits of language. Entering the discussion, i.e., using language, would *be* his answer to those questions, so he is hesitant to do so and cautious in how he does so.

The difficulty of this decision is manifest in the ambiguous answers both Achilles and Cratylus give to their respective embassies. That is, both say that the proposals made to them are κατὰ θυμόν—fitting to their own disposition, as if one were to say “you are a man after my own heart.” Both recognize that there is something agreeable, yet both vehemently disagree. Nevertheless, both are clearly wavering in their resolve, and this is evidenced in their responses. Following the Embassy, Achilles is moved to say he will fight if the situation gets so bad that the Trojans reach the ships. Cratylus, too, now agrees that he will enter the conversation, but only on the defensive.

Both characters' decisions are presented as decisive for the outcome. Achilles is the strongest warrior, so much so that his presence in the battle veritably guarantees the Achaean advantage. When he is absent, the Achaeans begin to fall to the Trojans. Cratylus is also consistently portrayed in this way, even from the first lines of the dialogue: Cratylus “knows something... about this correctness, which, if he should say it

clearly, he would bring it about that I would agree and that I would say just what he says” (384a). This might seem ironic, given that Hermogenes says that Cratylus εἰρωνεύεται and that he is προσποιούμενός about knowing something. But besides the arguments I have made about this passage and about respect for Cratylus earlier (Chapter 2), such an interpretation bears the burden of explaining why Cratylus is consistently looked to as one who could sincerely help his interlocutors understand the nature of language. Indeed, immediately preceding Cratylus’ entry into the dialogue, Hermogenes sincerely claims that Cratylus could help even if he were to contribute little.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, the decisions that Achilles and Cratylus do make are both radically at odds with the custom—or convention—of their culture. That is, Achilles is veritably inhuman in his rejection of Agamemnon’s offer of appeasement. In the heroic honor culture of the *Iliad*, Agamemnon’s atonement was more than adequate, but Achilles nevertheless rejects it. And in doing so, he rejects the entire value system of the Greeks. In short, it is no longer the supreme heroic value, κλέος, that Achilles fights for. A similar rejection is present in Cratylus’ decision. As we shall see throughout the remainder of the dialogue, he holds stubbornly to his position that language is natural, thus refusing to admit the value of any convention. And as we know from Aristotle (again, see Chapter 2), Cratylus also eventually rejects language altogether. His thought and action both would have seemed to the oral Athenian culture radically inhuman. Indeed, Ajax describes Achilles’ rejection of the Embassy in the final lines of book ix as ἄγριον (ix.629)—in other words, “wild,” “beast-like,” or “inhuman.” Similarly, Socrates

---

<sup>20</sup> For views opposed to mine on this issue, see Ewegen and Nightingale, who argue that Cratylus has little to contribute and is presented as an intellectual weakling.

describes Cratylus' departure in the closing lines of the dialogue as εἰς ἄγρόν (440e)—“into the country,” or, perhaps, “into savagery.”

This is echoed in Achilles' style, especially in book ix. Among all the speakers, Achilles is arguably the most eloquent but violent of the bunch. He is forceful, just as Cratylus' style is forceful (see Chapter 2). Aristotle recognizes this when he claims that “Hyperboles are for young men to use; they show vehemence of character; and this is why angry people use them more than other people” (*Rhetoric* 1413a28-30), and then goes on to cite *Iliad* ix 385 and 388–9 (where Achilles vehemently responds to Odysseus with strident language). Cratylus' response to Hermogenes is similarly vociferous: “And what, Hermogenes? Does it seem easy to you to learn and teach anything so swiftly, not to mention so great a thing, which in fact seems to be greatest among the greatest?” (427e).

## 5.6 SOCRATES AS AJAX

The Socrates-Ajax parallel is, like the Cratylus-Achilles parallel, taken seriously not only by Cratylus, but also by Plato, as Plato sustains the parallel throughout the dialogue. The first indication of this is that both Socrates and Ajax fight the battles of their counterparts Cratylus and Achilles. In the *Iliad*, Ajax fights several times with Achilles' sworn personal enemy, Hector. He does so first in response to Hector's challenge to send an Achaean champion to meet him in single combat, and second when Hector breaches the Achaean barrier and fights amidst the Greek ships. In both instances,

Ajax clearly has the advantage, but is ultimately unable to finish Hector off. In both cases, Achilles should have been the one to rise to the challenge.

The parallel with the *Cratylus* is clear: the question of the nature of language is Cratylus' domain; nevertheless, it is Socrates who does most of the dialectical work throughout the dialogue, while Cratylus silently looks on. And though Socrates is powerful in this, he is ultimately in need of Cratylus.<sup>21</sup>

That this is most appropriately Cratylus' domain is nowhere more suggestive than in what else Ajax does for Achilles. Patroclus, Achilles' closest companion, dons Achilles' armor to give the illusion that Achilles is returning to the fight. But Patroclus engages Hector and is slain. Not only was Hector Achilles' man, but it would have also been Achilles' job to fight for Patroclus' body. Fighting for a warrior's dead body is what the fallen warrior's closest kinsmen and comrades do. Nevertheless, Achilles, because he is absent, is unable to do this. And again, it is Ajax who fights another of Achilles' battles; at great peril, he defends and retrieves the body of Patroclus.

What this further shows is the important point that Socrates and Cratylus are *on the same team*. They are not diametrically opposed, but in competition for the same cause. Both Achilles and Ajax want to kill Hector, and it is a sort of contest to see who will do so. Just as Socrates and Cratylus attempt to understand language. It is important to see that Socrates is not Hector or Paris; he is not trying to fight with or destroy Cratylus, as interpretations tend to suggest. They are on the same team and fighting against a common enemy. This is illustrated in a formulaic description of the Achaean

---

<sup>21</sup> Again, this is likely a biographical sort of comment: Plato was much more influenced in his views on language by Cratylus than by Socrates, even though the latter was plenty powerful and more valiant a philosopher.

camp: Ajax's camp was on one side of the army and Achilles' on the other (ἐπ' Αἴαντος κλισίας Τελαμωνιάδαο ἡδ' ἐπ' Ἀχιλλῆος, viii.224 and xi.8). And it is more literally illustrated in the vase paintings mentioned above: the two warriors are in competition over a game of dice. But the greater competition—the war—does not divide them. Their spear tips are inclined away from each other as they engage in the game.

Finally, that the two are sincerely on the same team is evidenced further by Ajax's actions following Achilles' death—just as he had done with Patroclus' body, Ajax (this time accompanied by Odysseus) fights to retrieve Achilles' body and has it burned with Patroclus' body. Ajax fights Achilles' battles even after Achilles has died.

This Achilles-Ajax relation has a great impact on our understanding of the *Cratylus*. Socrates is not set on refuting Cratylus, as is commonly thought. Instead, he is to be seen as trying to get Cratylus to engage so they might together try to understand the nature of language. This further suggests that their understanding of language is quite similar (Cratylus' κατὰ θυμόν).<sup>22</sup>

This is confirmed in a further parallel, perhaps the most obvious: Ajax is consistently portrayed as second-best to Achilles:

Achilles, the best of the Achaeans (i.490)

But best by far of the men was Telamonian Ajax while Achilles raged apart.

(ii.873-4)

---

<sup>22</sup> Moreover, although it is not a perfect parallel, Ajax and Odysseus fight for Achilles' magic armor after his death, just as Socrates and Hermogenes fight over what Cratylus meant by the power of words when he has fallen silent.

And again, this is illustrated in the vase paintings, where Achilles is usually portrayed as saying “I have four,” while Ajax says either “I have two” or “I have three.” Achilles always holds the upper hand. Clearly, Ajax was best only while Achilles was absent from battle. And this has significant implications for the parallels in the *Cratylus*. It suggests that Socrates is second best to Cratylus—a total reversal of what is commonly thought. Socrates, great though he doubtlessly was, was second best to Cratylus on the pertinent aspect of this dialogue: language. And Cratylus would show himself to be more powerful than Socrates, if he would do philosophy.

Nevertheless, Ajax was the best at one thing: changing Achilles’ mind. Whereas Odysseus’ speech met with *utter* rejection, Ajax’s speech met with a weakening of Achilles’ resolve. To Odysseus, he said “No, Odysseus, let [Agamemnon] rack his brains with you and the other captains how to fight the raging fire off the ships” (ix.419-420). But to Ajax, he said “You go back to [Agamemnon] and declare my message: I will not think of arming for bloody war again, not till the son of wise King Priam, dazzling Hector batters all the way to the Myrmidon ships and shelters, slaughtering Argives, gutting the hulls with fire” (794-8). In other words, because of Ajax, Achilles lessens his severity and agrees to help, if the situation is dire enough.

So it is in the *Cratylus*. Socrates is able to elicit the most from Cratylus. Hermogenes’ attempts have resulted in only a few words. But Socrates successfully got Cratylus to enter the dialogue as a legitimate participant, at least for some time. Like

Ajax with Achilles, Socrates is able to move Cratylus who, like Achilles, is still on the defensive and willing to give very little.<sup>23</sup>

## 5.7 HERMOGENES AS ODYSSEUS

As the other main member of the embassy, Odysseus represents the other character in the *Cratylus*, Hermogenes.<sup>24</sup> This parallel is perhaps surprising. But as with the other two characters, we see sustained parallels here, some of which I have already touched on (e.g., that Hermogenes is not as effective at getting anything from Cratylus, that he is on the same team but in competition with the others, etc.).

It is first noteworthy that the dramatic parallels between the *Iliad* and the *Cratylus* follow here as well. Just as Odysseus was the first of the embassy to speak to Achilles, so too did Hermogenes first entreat Cratylus. Hermogenes was the first one to speak in the entire dialogue, and, even specifically in the Embassy scene of the *Cratylus*, Hermogenes is the first to entreat Cratylus to return to conversation.

Furthermore, the pleas made by the two characters are rhetorically similar. In fact, it is the rhetorical nature of their speeches in general that upset their respective addressees. Odysseus' speech to Achilles in book ix is widely-recognized as one of

---

<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, Ajax spoke in a way appropriate to Achilles—warrior to warrior: “Ajax, Zeus-borne son of Telamon, chief of the people, you seem to have said all things to me according to my own spirit.” So, too does Socrates speak in a way appropriate to Cratylus (see Chapter 2). Both Socrates and Cratylus have been oracular and elusive, speaking with veiled and multiple meanings. Like Ajax, Socrates did not try to convince or manipulate, as Odysseus did, or to speak as having a quasi-paternal authority, as Phoenix did.

<sup>24</sup> A prominent theme in the *Cratylus* is the effort to evaluate whether or not Ἑρμόγενης is the γένος of Ἑρμῆς. Here, Hermogenes is identified with Odysseus, who is traditionally regarded, literally, as the γένος Hermes (he was Hermes' great grandson, Apollodorus, *Library* 1.9.16).



Homer's finest rhetorical displays—a paradigm of ancient rhetoric.<sup>25</sup> But this is precisely what upsets Achilles: “I hate that man like the very Gates of Death who says one thing but hides another in his heart” (378-9).<sup>26</sup> Hermogenes, on the other hand, is a rhetorically-educated Athenian, and his approach is consequently unacceptable to Cratylus (See Chapter 2).

The power of both speakers relative to their addressees is also similar. That is, Odysseus is not in competition with Ajax and Achilles to be best of the Achaeans. Neither is Hermogenes under any pretense that he is a match for either Cratylus or Socrates. Hermogenes consistently makes it clear that he really needs Cratylus' help, just as the Embassy needed Achilles' help. In this respect, the language and appeal of Hermogenes' plea sounds much like Odysseus':

Hermogenes: If, therefore, you are able even to do some small thing completely, then grow not weary, but show kindness to this here Socrates—if you are just—and to me. (428a)

Odysseus: But you, you hold in check that proud, fiery spirit of yours inside your chest! Friendship is much better. Vicious quarrels are deadly—put an end to them, at once. Your Achaean comrades, young and old, will exalt you all the more. (309-312)

---

<sup>25</sup> Kirk 1985, III, 92ff. and Kennedy 1963, 9-14. See also Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* 10.1.46 and Plutarch's *Lives of Homer* 169-72.

<sup>26</sup> This is where the embassy to Philoctetes is obviously a type of this scene, and Odysseus is portrayed in precisely this way. Furthermore, it is possible that Achilles despised Odysseus' complicity in Agamemnon's actions—a very believable idea given the etymology of Odysseus' name, made more explicit in many places in the *Odyssey*, see Stanford 1952.

Thus, both Hermogenes and Odysseus are in a similar position of power relative to their addressees, and this is reflected in the sort of appeal they make (i.e., to the demand made by friendship and camaraderie).

Achilles' and Cratylus' response to these pleas is also remarkably similar. Achilles thoroughly and unambiguously refuses to help Odysseus, just as Cratylus repeatedly refuses to help Hermogenes. Some of the first lines of the dialogue demonstrate this fact:

Hermogenes: And although I am asking and am very desirous to understand what the hell he is saying, he makes nothing clear... (383b-384a)

Cratylus reaffirms his refusal to help Hermogenes in this Embassy scene, as well. But he does so indirectly. The few words he does say to Hermogenes are reproachful and make it clear that he doesn't want to help. But his refusal is manifest in his actions: he does not address any more words to Hermogenes for the remainder of the dialogue, speaking only to Socrates.

Finally, the content of Achilles' response to Odysseus echoes Cratylus' response to Hermogenes:

Cratylus: And what, Hermogenes? Does it seem easy to you to learn and teach anything so swiftly, not to mention so great a thing, which in fact seems to be greatest among the greatest? (427e)

Achilles responds to Odysseus similarly, by reproachfully enumerating the reasons why it would be so difficult for him to return to war (e.g., his anger at Agamemnon, the loss of his honor, and the futility of warfare; the fact that he is destined to die if he returns; etc.). And Achilles' response to Odysseus is the harshest of his responses, just as Cratylus speaks more severe words to Hermogenes than to Socrates.

What is more, these heated words had similar effects in both cases. After Achilles' first response to Odysseus, "He stopped. A stunned silence seized them all, struck dumb—Achilles' ringing denials overwhelmed them so" (431-432). Odysseus' usual verbosity is so checked that he remains silent for the remainder of the Embassy. Cratylus' rebuke similarly strikes Hermogenes dumb—Hermogenes doesn't say another word for the remainder of the dialogue.

## **5.8      CONFIRMATION FROM THE *HIPPIAS MINOR***

The above parallels are strengthened by association with another, more prominent reference that Plato makes to the 'Embassy to Achilles' in the *Hippias Minor*. In this dialogue, Socrates evaluates the adequacy of Hippias' claim that "Homer made Achilles the bravest man of those who went to Troy, and Nestor the wisest, and Odysseus the wiliest" (364c). The two discuss this thesis with reference to the 'Embassy to Achilles.' The conversation focuses on whether or not Odysseus is the only wily, or deceitful, hero. Specifically, Socrates pushes back against Hippias' thesis that Achilles is a straight-talker and proposes that Odysseus is really the more honest of the two.

There are multiple relevant points of comparison. For example, both dialogues question the coherence of word and deed. In the *Hippias Major*, this is discussed explicitly with respect to Achilles, who acts differently than he speaks. In the *Cratylus*, we are meant to understand Cratylus' thesis in comparison with his action—both his silence within the dialogue and his eventual abandonment of language in his real life. Also, in both dialogues, it is the sincerity of Achilles that is in question. Again, this is openly put to question in the *Hippias Minor*, and it is suggested in the *Cratylus* through Cratylus' partial quotation of Achilles' words.

But the most striking parallel between the two dialogues is the coupling of the 'Embassy to Achilles' with the question of actions done willingly or unwillingly (ἐκὼν ἢ ἄκων). In the Embassy scene, Achilles responds to Odysseus by claiming emphatically that he will not help the Achaean army, but will actually leave the field of battle entirely and sail home the next day. Of course, Achilles does not do this, and indeed in his following remarks to Phoenix and Ajax he says he will take different courses of action. Much of the discussion in the *Hippias Minor* is dedicated to these disparities, asking whether or not Achilles was willingly or unwillingly false, and whether it is better for people to lie *willingly or unwillingly* (οἱ ἐκόντες ψευδόμενοι βελτίους ἢ οἱ ἄκοντες; 371e ff.).<sup>27</sup> Socrates says that Achilles is of the same mind throughout but that he tells different stories to different people (i.e., he lies willingly). But Hippias claims that Achilles changed his mind, either because of the losses sustained by the Greek army or because of

---

<sup>27</sup> The reference to falsity here also parallels the *Cratylus*. Not too long after the Embassy passage, Cratylus will show himself to be committed to the view that speaking falsely is impossible. But even here, Cratylus is not telling the truth in saying he agrees with Socrates. And what is more, he is concealing the fact of his disagreement by not giving the entire quote. What is more, Cratylus' resolve to remain silent is slipping. This is Plato's way of expressing dramatically that Cratylus is losing the argument with Socrates over whether or not false speech is possible. Hence, his failing philosophical position is mirrored in his failure to remain silent. He cannot avoid speaking falsely, just as he is unable to avoid speaking at all.

a feeling of well-mindedness towards the ambassadors, especially Ajax (i.e., he lies unwillingly).

This parallel is unmistakably suggested in the *Cratylus*. In 427d, Hermogenes repeats his complaint about not understanding Cratylus and then claims that “I am unable to know whether each time he speaks unclearly about these things *willingly or unwillingly* (ἐκὼν ἢ ἄκων).” And in response to this a few lines later, Cratylus responds with the quote from the ‘Embassy to Achilles’ (428c). Indeed, the ἐκὼν ἢ ἄκων theme is not uncommon in Plato.<sup>28</sup> But given that the ἐκὼν ἢ ἄκων question is not in play in the *Cratylus* and is introduced somewhat abruptly here in close proximity to the *Iliad* ix reference, it is clear that the use of ἐκὼν ἢ ἄκων in the *Cratylus* is referential and allusive.

The overt meaning of ἐκὼν ἢ ἄκων is to call into question whether Cratylus speaks in his oracular manner willingly or unwillingly. That is, does he do so because he has something profound to express in that way or because he has no understanding and is being evasive? The only other scholar I know of who recognizes this parallel takes the latter of the two options:

[Cratylus’] evasion, then, must be based on an unwitting ignorance rather than knowledge. This kind of evasion is, in essence, a display of ignorance—an ignorance which he cannot hide and is not even aware of. (Nightingale 2003, 230)

---

<sup>28</sup> E.g., *Apology* 25d ff., *Phaedrus* 254c, *Apology* 25-26, etc.

Nightingale's idea is that, just as Hippias has an excessive reliance on the words of Homer, so too Cratylus has none of his own ideas to express.<sup>29</sup> Hence, Nightingale reaffirms a common interpretation of Socrates' practice: "Socrates also calls into question the reliance on the authority of any speaker other than oneself" (230) and posits Cratylus as a foil for this: "Insofar as Cratylus is unable to speak for himself, his discourse is not his own. Cratylus must parrot others because he does not possess the truth" (231).

But there is more going on here. Just as Socrates' analysis in the *Hippias Minor* leaves readers with no unambiguous answer, so too are we left with a mixed message about Cratylus. That is, Plato never allows the Achilles question to be resolved in the *Hippias Minor*, and it is a hot debate whether or not Socrates' ideas about Odysseus are Plato's (or even Socrates'). To get at what is going on here, there are several possibilities we should consider. Plato may have set up this dilemma only to suggest that we don't take either horn or that we split the horns somehow. Or, perhaps, Cratylus is presented as he is—ambiguous.<sup>30</sup>

One way to understand Achilles is that he is undecided and vacillates with the subsequent appeals. It is not clear that he knows what he will do (i.e., he is not willingly undecisive), but it is also not clear that he is totally ignorant (i.e., unwillingly indecisive)—he knows fully well what his choices are, and it is an open possibility that he knows which one he will eventually take.

---

<sup>29</sup> "Socrates: Let us leave Homer alone, since we are powerless to up and ask him what he had in mind when he composed these verses. But since you appear to take his cause upon yourself, and since the things which Homer says seem right to you, answer in common on behalf of Homer and yourself" (365a-b). This references a prominent theme in the *Cratylus*: the inability of spoken speech to defend itself.

<sup>30</sup> Nightingale 2003 recognizes this to some degree: "the dialogue provides firm evidence that there is more than one way to read Achilles' statements—that there is no single interpretation of his words" (229), but what she misses is that the ambiguity is deliberate and to the point, and not a failure of using someone else's words. Indeed, if it is a failure, then it is a failure of language more generally, protracted here in the use of quotation

Likewise, Cratylus is indeed on the fence about whether or not to continue using language. But that is not to say that Cratylus is unwillingly obscure—or that he is willingly so.<sup>31</sup> The reason for his vacillation regarding language is that he is wrestling with profound issues regarding language’s misrepresentation. His oracular utterances are, as I argued in Chapter 2, attempts to use language in a way that does not succumb to that misrepresentation.<sup>32</sup> So there is an unwilling aspect (in his indecision over whether or not to abandon language) and a willing aspect (in his elliptical use of language). Like Achilles, Cratylus really does have some understanding (of Heraclitean flux). But like Achilles, he is undecided regarding what action that understanding requires of him.<sup>33</sup>

## 5.9 WHO, THEN, IS PHOENIX?

So, Socrates is Ajax, Cratylus is Achilles, and Hermogenes is Odysseus. All three of the characters in the *Cratylus* have found a place in the framework of *Iliad* ix. But we have so far skipped over the final prominent member of the ‘Embassy to Achilles,’ Phoenix. This man’s speech surpassed Odysseus’ speech and was a more important factor in altering Achilles’ resolve. Indeed, Phoenix preceded the Embassy, playing a formative role in Achilles’ development since Achilles’ infancy. As Achilles’ formative foster father, Phoenix does represent a character in the *Cratylus*—Heraclitus.

---

<sup>31</sup> The parallels suggested by this ἐκὼν ἢ ἄκων language give further reason to understand that it is not merely the case that Cratylus fancies himself like Achilles, but that Plato sees in him a type of Achilles.

<sup>32</sup> This is further supported by Hermogenes’ above complaint that “I am unable to know whether *each time* he speaks unclearly about these things willingly or unwillingly.” This “each time” (ἐκάστοτε) implies that Cratylus’ oracular speech is his characteristic manner of expression, and not something that happened once.

<sup>33</sup> Hence, I find Nightingale’s 2003 interpretation unacceptable: “Cratylus’s evasiveness, then, stems not from the willed reticence of a radical Heraclitean but rather from the unwilled weakness of a colonized subject” (232).

This might seem like a stretch, given that Heraclitus is not actually a character in the *Cratylus*. But the pervasive and ambiguous presence of Heraclitus in the dialogue matches quite well the mysterious presence of Phoenix in the embassy.

As Phoenix makes clear in his Embassy speech, he was Achilles' tutor from youth; in the absence of his own posterity, he raised Achilles like a son. Similarly, Heraclitus was a formative influence on Cratylus before the dialogue began. Furthermore, Heraclitus had no real disciples (see *Theaetetus* 180b), yet Cratylus is a sort of adopted follower. Because of this dynamic, Phoenix makes his petition to Achilles as the one responsible for Achilles' formation. Again, similarly, this is one of the rhetorical functions played by the invocation of Heraclitus in the *Cratylus*—Heraclitus is brought up as an authority who influenced who Cratylus became.

In both cases, this quasi-paternal appeal is accompanied by an appeal to return to the advice of the former master. Phoenix offers himself as an example of someone to follow. And, as we shall see, Heraclitus is invoked for this same reason: as one who would dissuade Cratylus from his radical position. That is, Cratylus is not rebuked for being a Heraclitean (as is commonly assumed), but rather for being too radical in his Heracliteanism.

What is more, Phoenix's elusive and mysterious part in the Embassy is like Heraclitus' part in the *Cratylus*. Phoenix's role in the Embassy has puzzled scholars. The problem, put briefly, is that Phoenix is initially mentioned as part of the embassy, but in the scene proper, Homer has Achilles speak of the embassy in the dual, which suggests the presence of only Odysseus and Ajax. Some scholars suggest that this is evidence of



emendation (i.e., Phoenix was added later).<sup>34</sup> Others point out that the dual also excludes the two heralds Odios and Eurybates, and that it may have served a focal function (i.e., only the important characters are taken notice of in the presence of familiar or minor characters).<sup>35</sup> This is acceptable as an account of the Heralds. But by all accounts, Phoenix is just as prominent a member of the embassy as Odysseus and Ajax, so I sympathize with another set of interpretations that argue that Phoenix, as a part of the expedition, must have come earlier than Odysseus and Ajax. This makes sense of suggestions like Nestor's: "*And old Phoenix first—Zeus loves the man, so let him lead the way. Then giant Ajax and tactful royal Odysseus. Heralds? Odios and Eurybates, you escort them*" (200-202). Phoenix came before the Embassy proper and remained silent about the Embassy and its purposes. Read in this way, Achilles' duals come as no surprise at seeing the *two* men (196f.).

Perhaps Agamemnon didn't want to send Phoenix as an official ambassador because of the trickiness of the situation or because Agamemnon wanted Phoenix to come across as sympathetic with Achilles as possible (something which his appearance in the service of Agamemnon would undercut). Hence, Phoenix's role in the Embassy is a strange sort of role. He is present as a member of the Embassy, but he is not really a part of the Embassy. This is similar to Heraclitus' role in the *Cratylus*—he is certainly present throughout, but he is not really officially part of the dialogue. Phoenix was there all along, but he only served the purposes of the Embassy upon the arrival and pleas of Odysseus and Ajax. So too is Heraclitus present from the beginning of the dialogue, but he only comes to prominence later in the discussion.

---

<sup>34</sup> E.g., Tsagarkis 1973, 195 and Page 1959.

<sup>35</sup> See Tsagarakis 1973, 194, and Kirk 1985, III, 85ff., for options on how to take the duals.

Moreover, the story Phoenix tells is illustrative of his relationship with Achilles and, hence, of Heraclitus' relationship with Cratylus. But Phoenix's story is too long to serve merely as a reminder of how he cared for Achilles; Phoenix is not only saying "look—I raised you, so do what I say!" The story also serves the further, exemplary function of identifying Achilles with Phoenix. In essence, Phoenix says "In a similar situation, I did the right thing—now you, don't do the wrong thing." Similarly, Cratylus is like Heraclitus in that they face similar philosophical challenges, but unlike him in that Cratylus has not yet figured out how to deal with his challenges. Heraclitus did the right thing; will Cratylus follow his example, or will he further recede from language?

Phoenix also parallels Heraclitus in his manner of speech—Phoenix is not elaborate or rhetorical like Odysseus, but speaks with an allegory. This is remarkable, as 'overt allegory' is a genre extremely uncommon in Ancient Greek literature (although allegorical *interpretations* are common, it is very rare to find a composition that openly suggests itself as allegorical). So, this would have been stylistically conspicuous, and indeed Plato obviously picked up on it, as he references Phoenix's *Λιταί* allegory no less than 12 times throughout his oeuvre.<sup>36</sup> Like Heraclitus' conspicuously stylized and even deliberately ambiguous language, Phoenix's allegory makes only general observations, requiring Achilles to connect the dots.

Phoenix thus encourages Achilles to be reconciled to Agamemnon and accept his gifts—and enter the battle. And Cratylus is in the same situation. All of the characters encourage him to return to the conversation. And if my remarks about Phoenix are correct, then we are left with an important dramatic conclusion: even Heraclitus would

---

<sup>36</sup> Labarbe 1987.

want Cratylus to do otherwise than he is doing. That is, even Heraclitus would censure Cratylus for abandoning language. Indeed, despite Heraclitus' own misanthropy, he nevertheless wrote. Heraclitus may have shared Cratylus' worry about the objectifying nature of language, yet he expressed himself in language. One purpose of Plato's invocation of the Embassy scene is to suggest this crucial point.

What this further suggests is that Plato does not want us to identify Cratylus with Heraclitus.<sup>37</sup> Just as Achilles doesn't agree with Phoenix, so too Cratylus doesn't even agree with Heraclitus, although he seems to affirm the opposite of this. The paradoxical opposition between what is said and what is done is one of Achilles' well-known characteristics, and he demonstrates it in his relationship with Phoenix here:

It degrades you to curry favor with that man, and I will hate you for it, I who love you. It does you proud to stand by me, my friend, to attack the man who attacks me—be king on a par with me, take half my honors! These men will carry their message back, but you, you stay here and spend the night in a soft bed. Then, tomorrow at first light, we will decide whether we sail home or hold out here.  
(749-755)

Achilles disagrees with Phoenix's ideas, but claims several times to have his best interests at heart. Like Cratylus, he wants to take his master with him, but refuses to heed his master's teachings. After Socrates has first given arguments in favor of *Heraclitus*

---

<sup>37</sup> This is indeed the dominant position.

(e.g., 402a-c), and then given his objections to the *followers of Heraclitus* (οἱ περὶ Ἡράκλειτόν, 440c), Cratylus responds:

Surely I will do these things. However, know thou well, Socrates, that at present I am no way unreflective. Rather, as I am reflecting into how things are, they appear to be much more like that Heraclitus says. (440d)

So, Cratylus is in the inconsistent position of agreeing and disagreeing with his master. He is in the paradoxical position of holding stubbornly to a theory of radical change. Even the ideas of Heraclitus as expressed in the etymologies could not dissuade Cratylus from his radical position.

## 5.10 WAR AND *LOGOS*

What begins to become clear, then, is that Cratylus is not as Heraclitean as he himself supposes. What is more, quite surprisingly, Socrates shows himself to be the true Heraclitean. To see this, we need to take a step back from the specific parallels and ask why Plato chooses to portray conversation as war (Cratylus is encouraged to enter the conversation just as Achilles is encouraged to enter the war). In short, the embassy wants to reestablish balance by having Achilles enter the war.<sup>38</sup> Plato likewise encourages

---

<sup>38</sup> This would not only balance the battle (Hector has crossed beyond the open plain where battle is properly done—he has breached the barricade and entered the Achaean camp), but it would also bring a sort of psychological balance to Achilles, whose soul is inhumanly unbalanced at not playing his part in the war, not accepting reconciliation, not responding to supplication, etc. This theme should now be familiar from Chapter 4.

Cratylus to enter the conversation in the search for stability. This idea that war, which is apparently destructive, could itself be a model of stability and structure is a thoroughly Heraclitean idea. And what is more, Heraclitus expresses his ideas on war-as-stability with reference to none other than Achilles:

Heraclitus reproaches the poet for the verse “Would that Conflict might vanish from among gods and men!”<sup>39</sup> For there would be no attunement (*harmonia*) without high and low notes nor any animals without male and female, both of which are opposites. (D22)

Heraclitus, who believes that the nature of things was constructed according to conflict (*eris*), finds fault with Homer [for the above cited verse], on the grounds that he is praying for the destruction of the cosmos. (Scholia A to *Iliad* XVIII.107)

One must realize that war is shared and Conflict is Justice, and that all things come to pass (and are ordained?) in accordance with conflict. (D80)

Heraclitus’ idea seems to be that Achilles’ prayer for war to cease would amount to the destruction of the cosmos, that is, of order in the universe, because order is actually the result of war (or conflict, or strife, or, as it were, flux). Where there is structure, there is

---

<sup>39</sup> *Iliad* xviii.107; this is the prayer uttered by Achilles in his great speech of regret over the quarrel with Agamemnon.

conflict. So, conflict can be eliminated only with the elimination of structure. There is no attunement without war.<sup>40</sup>

The paradoxical nature of finding stability in war is not absent from the Embassy scene. Indeed, the strange nature of this paradox is suggested by the scene's transgression of a common and expected literary trope. When a hero is about to enter battle, it is frequently the case that the hero's kin will try to restrain him at all costs. The more memorable occurrences of this are when Andromache tries to keep Hector from the battle (vi.369ff), when Priam and Hecuba try to keep Hector from fighting Achilles (xx.25-92), and when Hecuba tries to keep Priam from retrieving Hector's body from the Achaean camp (xiv.191-227).<sup>41</sup> Even Achilles didn't want his companion Patroclus to enter the battle, and allowed him only with some restrictive enjoinders (xvi.90ff.). What is astonishing, and would have indeed been conspicuous, is that Phoenix does the opposite of this.<sup>42</sup> Phoenix knows that Achilles will die if he returns to battle— indeed he *knows it*, not only because Achilles just said so, but also because it was prophesied by Achilles' immortal mother. And he nevertheless encourages Achilles to enter the battle. A greater stability is at stake—a stability that will come from war.

As I have already argued, Plato recognizes this principle. In Chapter 3, I argue that the seemingly destructive medical practices of cutting and burning are paradoxically

---

<sup>40</sup> Kahn's 1985 interpretation of this theme is instructive: "The symmetrical confrontation of the two sides in battle now becomes a *figura* for the shifting but reciprocal balance between opposites in human life and in the natural world, for the structure designated *harmonie* in LXXVIII (D. 51). The imagery of the bow and the lyre is thus supplemented by that of two champions or two armies facing one another" (205).

<sup>41</sup> Also, in xi.225-6 a foster-father tries to retain a young warrior and even arranges for him to marry his daughter so as to keep him at home, and in xi.329-32 and a prophet foresees the death of his sons and will not allow them to participate in the war.

<sup>42</sup> See Jensen 2006, who interprets this as saying that Phoenix only cares about the Achaean cause and not about Achilles. But I see no reason to dismiss Phoenix's sincere remarks about his care for Achilles and to dismiss Achilles' nod to this relationship.

what cause the health of the organism—and that Plato is responding to Heraclitus with these references. And in Chapter 2, I argue that language is destructive, but that it can paradoxically be restorative.

This principle is also apparent in the words themselves, as Socrates shows throughout the etymologies. One word in particular shows how Plato had war and stability on the mind: στάσις. This word, translated as “stability,” but also as “strife” or “civil war,” serves the Heraclitean purpose of showing the stability inherent in the flux of war:

And “rest” (στάσις) wishes to be a negation of going (ἀπόφασις τοῦ ἰέναι), and through ornamentation it is called “rest” (στάσις). (426d)

In other words, the word for rest contains the negation of motion.<sup>43</sup> That is, the word for rest contains within it a sort of war—the negation of motion. And, as we shall see, the word is at war with itself semantically as well (meaning both “rest” and “strife”).<sup>44</sup> What is more, this war is reflected even in the very sounds of the word, which require the violent cessation of motion to pronounce:

---

<sup>43</sup> The philology here is fraught, but it amounts to the same conclusion either way. Although from a different root, Beekes 2010 also claims that στάσις comes from the negation of motion, but traces the word from its more apparent root, ἵστημι. And on this passage, Ademollo 2011 writes “Scholars seem to think that στάσις must contain a privative α: e.g. Méridier 115 n.3 ‘la vraie forme serait ἀ-ἰεσις’. The OCT adopts Duke’s correction of στάσις (d1) to στάεσις, presumably suggesting a derivation from ἀ-ἔσις. Hence στ- would be part of the ‘embellishment’. Yet 427a8–b2 suggests that the τ in στάσις might express rest. Could Socrates be anticipating this? ‘Negation of going’ would then mean that στάσις contains τ, for rest, + ἰεσις ‘motion’: something like ‘rest from motion’ (cf. Dalimier 266 n.373)” (307n97).

<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, rest and motion are two sides of the same coin throughout the etymologies. For example: “Next, let us investigate “firm” (βέβαιον), because it is an imitation of position (βάσεως) and rest (στάσεως), but not of motion (φορᾶς)” (437a).

And again, he appears to suppose that the pushing-together of the delta and the straining of the tongue with the tau are a useful power for the imitation of “binding” (δεσμοῦ) and “rest” (στάσεως). (427a-b)

In other words, the smooth movement of the sigma is cut short by the tau. The phonetic stability, in other words, is the result of war. The stillness of στάσις requires the semantic and phonetic opposition.

Plato explicitly recognizes that there is war beneath the surface of stability when he plays with the double meaning of the word by claiming that “names are at war with each other” (ὀνομάτων οὖν **στασιασάντων**, 438d).<sup>45</sup> But perhaps nowhere is this idea clearer than in the etymology of “shameful”:

Socrates: Indeed, “shameful” (αἰσχρὸν) seems to me to be to be thoroughly clear; for this even agrees with the previous [names]. For the one giving names seems to me through all cases to rail at what hinders (ἐμποδίζον) and detains (ἴσχον) beings in their flow (ῥοῆς), and now, to what always detains the flow (τῷ ἀεὶ ἴσχοντι τὸν ῥοῦν) he gave this name “always-detaining-the-flow” (ἀεισχοροῦν). But now, after contracting it, we call it “shameful” (αἰσχρὸν). (416a-b)

---

<sup>45</sup> In other words, Plato makes it clear through his wordplay that stability is conflict. Loraux 1987, 50 notes that in a dialogue where the *nomothetes* is key, the word στάσις must also be conspicuous for its political undertones. With this in mind, she makes a valuable suggestion regarding the word in the *Laws*: “The kind of law that I would enact as proper to follow next after the foregoing would be this: It is, as we assert, necessary in a State which is to avoid that greatest of plagues, which is better termed disruption than dissension” (διάστασιν ἢ στάσιν, 5.744d)—she claims that “d’insinuer que la pertinence de stasis n’est pas du côté politique de la sédition—c’est-dire du mouvement mais de celui, philosophique, où la station debout dit l’être en repos” (57). Furthermore, Loraux 1987 shows how *Theaetetus* 179d-181b again plays extensively with various forms of στάσις, and with the same result: beneath the word there is conflict. Even Parmenideans, who would claim that all is one and at rest, are there called “stoppers of conflict.”



Names are by their nature fixed and stable. But this fixity comes only by stopping the flow which underlies them.

But what does this mean for the interpretation of the *Cratylus*? Cratylus, like Achilles, has refused to enter the conversation, or war. And like Achilles, Cratylus is portrayed as desiring conflict to cease. This idea that conflict could cease is criticized by Heraclitus. Hence, Cratylus is not a true Heraclitean. As Heraclitus writes,

One must realize that war is shared (ξυνόν) and Conflict is Justice, and that all things come to pass in accordance with conflict. (D80)

This ξυνός is the Ionic dialect's form of the Attic κοινός. Heraclitus would have used this word, both because he was Ionian and because of its echo with the Homeric ξυνός Ἐνυάλιος ("the war god is common to all," *Iliad* xviii.309).<sup>46</sup> This passage closely follows the passage of the *Iliad* above that Heraclitus condemned ("Would that Conflict might vanish from among gods and men!" *Iliad* xviii. 107). But where line 107 is spoken by Achilles, 309 is spoken by Hector. And this is appropriate: while Achilles (like Cratylus) wants war to cease, Hector realizes the impossibility of that desire.

This idea that war is common is reflected throughout the *Cratylus* in the dialogue's use of κοινός and its synonyms. This is especially prominent at transition points. For example, in the opening lines of the dialogue:

---

<sup>46</sup> Or perhaps also Archilochus' version, ξυνός ἀνθρώποις Ἄρης (D38), which was also riffing on the Homeric language.

βούλει οὖν καὶ Σωκράτει τῷδε ἀνακοινώσωμεθα τὸν λόγον; (383a)

... συζητεῖν μέντοι ἔτοιμός εἰμι καὶ σοὶ καὶ Κρατύλῳ κοινῇ... εἰς τὸ κοινὸν δὲ καταθέντας χρή σκοπεῖν εἴτε ὥς σὺ λέγεις ἔχει εἴτε ὥς Κρατύλος. (384c)

And later in the dialogue, just after Cratylus enters the discussion, Socrates again pleads with him to share the *logos*, to enter the conversation, to join the war:

ἤδη τοίνυν καὶ σὺ κοινῶνῃ τοῦ λόγου οὐπερ ἄρτι Ἑρμογένης. (434b-c)

Finally, at the end of the dialogue, some of Socrates' last words to Cratylus are an injunction to share the in the conversation:

ἐὰν εὖρῃς, μεταδιδόναι καὶ ἐμοί. (440d)<sup>47</sup>

Clearly, Plato is aware of the Homeric and Heraclitean idea of war being common to all. And in the *Cratylus*, he plays it out with reference to conversation as war. In veiled terms, we are being shown how Cratylus, for all his profession of Heracliteanism, misses the Heraclitean point.

Socrates, on the other hand, recognizes it. Besides his above injunctions for Cratylus to join the war, he frequently reminds Cratylus that they are at the same time not

---

<sup>47</sup> This echoes his earlier plea to Hermogenes for essentially the same thing: τούτων οὖν σοὶ μεταδώσω, ἂν βούλῃ: σὺ δ' ἂν τι ἔχῃς βέλτιόν ποθεν λαβεῖν, πειρᾶσθαι καὶ ἐμοὶ μεταδιδόναι, 426b. Commonality in letters and stuff καὶ Ἀρχέπολις' γε τῶν μὲν γραμμάτων τί ἐπικοινωνεῖ, 394c.

at war. In other words, he understands the Heraclitean idea that there is harmony in war. For example, once Cratylus does enter the discussion, Socrates continually reminds him that they are not fighting and tries to appease him in this. Cratylus continues to fail to see this, and considers them as fighting. The repetition of this theme is thoroughly conspicuous:

Socrates: Come on, Cratylus, and let us see if somehow we can be **reconciled** (430a)

Socrates: So that we do not **fight** with words (since you and I are **friends**), show me...(430d)

Socrates: For it is not at all necessary now to **fight** about this. (431a)

Cratylus: In no way do I intend to continue **fighting**, Socrates; since you do not **appease** me in saying that it is a name but not well-given. (433c)

Socrates: Does this not **appease** you: that a name is what makes clear a matter? .... Or does it **appease** you more the way in which Hermogenes and many others speak.... Does this manner **appease** you? (433d-e)

Socrates both draws Cratylus into war and reminds him that they are friends. He recognizes the Heraclitean idea that there is unity and harmony in conflict. Specifically, that there is harmony in the conflict of language, or at least that there can be. Yet,

Cratylus continues to respond to Socrates just how we would expect Achilles to respond—and indeed, Achilles’ response to Phoenix (745-752, cited above) sounds quite like Cratylus’ response to Socrates’ Heracliteanism. Achilles has mistaken who he really is at war with. He disagrees with Phoenix, despite his love and devotion to him and his desire to keep him with him. So Cratylus, despite his respect for Heraclitus and his desire to keep Heraclitus with him, disagrees with him. But Heraclitus would tell Cratylus not to rage against the *logos*, but to understand the war for what it is.<sup>48</sup>

This quasi-allegorical interpretation is further borne out by how the *Iliad* contrasts correct war with Achilles’ understanding of war. Ajax—who represents Socrates in contrast to Achilles/Cratylus—recognizes the harmony in war. After a valiant battle with Hector (who is or should be Achilles’ man), night begins to fall and the two men are compelled to stop the duel. Ajax yields to Hector’s suggestion:

Come, let us give each other gifts, unforgettable gifts, so any man may say,  
Trojan soldier or Argive, “First they fought with heart-devouring hatred, then they  
parted, bound by pacts of friendship.” (vii.345-348)

Although they fought bitterly, Ajax and Hector respected the order in war and parted as friends. Indeed, this entire scene is a perfect example of the paradoxical progression toward harmony that Heraclitus has in mind. First, the men cast spears at each other, in turn. Then, they exchanged blows. Then each exchanged gifts. There is a sort of balance

---

<sup>48</sup> The vase paintings and the *Iliad* theme here again. Achilles and Ajax are in conflict with each other, but they are also on the same team and working for the same purpose.

in war correctly executed (here, between the greatest warriors currently fighting from either side). And this scene is not unique in that respect.<sup>49</sup>

So, just as Achilles failed to see the harmony that results from war, so Cratylus is unable to see the harmony that results from fluxy language. That is, he doesn't understand Heraclitus. Socrates, on the other hand, understand these principles and opposes Cratylus' radical position.

### 5.11 VIOLENT THEFT: THE INITIAL OFFENSE

Given these character parallels, there are also sustained dramatic parallels between the two works. Understanding these will help us see what greater significance the parallelism has for our understanding of the *Cratylus*, for the dialogue's argument parallels the epic's plot. In other words, we are to understand Plato's parallelism here in a strong sense: Plato argues regarding correctness in the *Cratylus* through the well-known plot of the Embassy to Achilles scene.

This can be seen from the first scene of both the *Cratylus* and the *Iliad*. In the *Iliad*, a confrontation in the first scene causes Achilles to absent himself until the end of the *Iliad*. And in the *Cratylus*, a brief encounter with Hermogenes causes Cratylus to become silent until the end of the dialogue. What is more, Achilles absents himself because his war prize (Briseis) was taken from him and given to someone else, just as

---

<sup>49</sup> E.g., the earlier scene with Diomedes. Of course, we also see how Achilles misunderstands this order: Hector is Achilles' greatest foe, and there was no civility, order, or rest following their deadly encounter. Achilles treated Hector's body with outrageous and inhuman anger. In fact, the *Iliad* becomes thoroughly instable until its final resolution, when Achilles returns Hector's body to Priam.

Cratylus' *logos* was taken from him to be common with others.<sup>50</sup> And just as Achilles concedes but is unhappy about it (showing his contempt by refraining from battle), so too does Cratylus give a weak and resentful sort of assent and then shows his contempt by refraining from conversation.<sup>51</sup> From this, we are to understand that what follows will be done against Cratylus' will; Cratylus doesn't want to give up his *logos* to language's inevitable misrepresentation.

This parallel might seem like a stretch, given that Achilles' prize was a woman, Briseis. But as Phoenix shows in his Embassy speech, the gifts offered are themselves insignificant but are symbolic even in the *Iliad*. So, too, what is taken from Achilles is symbolically significant. In fact, even in *Iliad* ix, we are told that Achilles sleeps with another of his women-war-prizes, and he later says he wishes Briseis had died so he could have avoided his struggle with Agamemnon. So, it is not the absence of a woman or the value he placed on Briseis herself that is at stake, but the fact that she was taken from him by force that caused his anger.

Furthermore, this initial offense in both works is accomplished by way of language. In *Iliad* i.304, Achilles and Agamemnon are said to battle with words (*μαχεσσαμένω ἐπέεσσιν*), and it is by Agamemnon's word that Briseis is removed (he doesn't do this himself).<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, Agamemnon takes Achilles' prize by virtue of his authority, which is explicitly represented by his scepter (i.272 ff.). The scepter was given to Agamemnon from his progenitors—it is an object of inheritance that goes back

---

<sup>50</sup> Again, the first words of the dialogue are: βούλει οὖν καὶ Σωκράτει τῷδε ἀνακοινωσώμεθα τὸν λόγον;

<sup>51</sup> εἴ σοι δοκεῖ; see chapter 2.

<sup>52</sup> Indeed, words are frequently a crucial part of warfare; the analogue between conversation and war is entirely appropriate. In confirmation of this idea, Ajax is portrayed as silent in subsequent literary works precisely because his speech, paralleling his military prowess, is so powerful in the *Iliad*. See Montiglio 2000 for an extended discussion.

to Pelops, who, interestingly, inherited the staff not from his own father (Tantalus) or his father's father (Zeus), but from Hermes. In a dialogue so concerned with inheritance, the idea that this violent authority's provenance is from the god of language is significant and suggests now familiar conclusions (that violence is done by virtue of the power of language, e.g.).

There is intertextual support for this conclusion as well. That is, we can see this same parallel in how Plato interprets a similar passage from the *Iliad* in *Letter VII*. Therein, Plato discusses how Dionysius veritably destroyed the truth by exposing it to fixed language: "If he really committed these seriously-worked things to letters, then indeed, it is not the gods but mortals who 'have destroyed his mind'" (*Letter VII* 344c-d). What is interesting is that Plato expresses this same idea by quoting a similar passage in the *Iliad*, where Paris says that Antenor is crazy in thinking he'll give Helen back: "if in truth you say this in earnest, then certainly the gods themselves have destroyed your mind" (vii.358-360, my translation). In both cases, what is at stake is the theft of a prized possession (in both *Iliad* cases, an abducted woman). And in both Platonic instances, it is *logos* that is forcefully taken away.

### **5.11.1 A Critical Situation**

Following this initial offense, both Achilles and Cratylus recede from the action. In both cases, their absence progressively becomes more and more urgent. And in both cases, the action nevertheless goes on without them until a crucial point.

In the *Iliad*, this crucial point comes when it is clear that the Achaeans will lose the battle without Achilles. This is played out symbolically in the fact that Ajax, great though he is, just cannot defeat Hector alone. He fights Hector several times and, despite frequently winning the upper hand, he is ultimately unsuccessful.<sup>53</sup> This parallels the action of the *Cratylus* and suggests the urgency of Cratylus' contribution to the conversation. At several points, Socrates indicates where they are losing the battle. Before calling in Cratylus to help, Socrates makes one last attempt, but recognizing that he may be fighting a losing battle:

Socrates: What then? Do you trust yourself to be able to divide these in this way?

For I do not think I could do so.

Hermogenes: Then all the more do I lack the ability.

Socrates: Then will we let this alone, or do you wish to proceed as we have power? (425c)

Socrates has fought through the etymologies and now confronts the most difficult implication of these—the first names. He contemplates abandoning the battle by admitting the inscrutability of foreign words (409-410) or by claiming divine origin for the first names (425d), but, as in the *Iliad*, flight is ultimately deemed unsuitable. Because the end goal is too important to abandon, calling for a hero is a more appealing option in

---

<sup>53</sup> In Book xiv, Ajax almost kills Hector with an enormous rock. In Book xv, Ajax almost takes Hector with a giant spear. And in Book xvi, Ajax is finally disarmed by Hector and forced to retreat.



both cases. In other words, the dialogue has reached a crucial point at which Cratylus really could help if he would fully engage.

### 5.11.2 Good Gifts

Before the embassy occurs, Agamemnon concedes to offer Achilles an impressive array of gifts to entice him to return to battle. Similarly, previous to the Embassy scene in the *Cratylus*, Socrates offers an impressive array of etymologies to entice Cratylus to return to the discussion. And just as the offer of gifts was something Achilles really should have accepted,<sup>54</sup> so too Cratylus should have accepted the etymologies. This suggests that, in both cases, the offerings were entirely suitable. Indeed, Agamemnon did not offer them insincerely or with any kind of irony. So, too should we read in this that the etymologies were a sincere attempt at getting at the truth.

Additionally, Agamemnon returns what he took from Achilles—undefiled. (this fact is insistent and formulaic, cf. xix 308). In other words, Agamemnon assures Achilles that the outrage of violating his woman has not been done. So, too, any outrage Cratylus might have felt at having his *logos* misrepresented as presented by Socrates is unfounded. Indeed, in both cases, the size of the gift is so conspicuously large that it gives Achilles and Cratylus no grounds for rejection. So, Cratylus really has no grounds for saying that Socrates did not do justice to his *logos*.

---

<sup>54</sup> Besides the adequacy of the gift itself, Achilles should have relented because it was borne suppliants. This is made clear throughout the Embassy; Phoenix reminds Achilles how his father took him in as suppliant, Ajax rebukes Achilles for refusing to honor their supplication, etc. And as a supplication, the Embassy scene is a type of the familiar Homeric prayer scene (That is why Plato calls it “prayers to Ajax” section), and Achilles is accordingly portrayed as inhuman and impious in rejecting the offers. The parallel abuse in the *Cratylus* is that the supplicants approached Cratylus with language. The very alterity of such a petition requires a response, and Cratylus has forcefully and unjustly withheld one.

### 5.11.3 The Embassy

After the war has driven the Achaeans to desperation and a suitable prize has been prepared for Achilles, it is time for the embassy to convince Achilles to return to battle. I have addressed most of the Embassy proper above, but it merits note here that the order of those who speak is perfectly parallel between the *Iliad* and the *Cratylus*. Odysseus speaks first, as does Hermogenes (at 383a, but also at 427e where the embassy proper begins). After the etymologies have been presented to Cratylus, Hermogenes is the first to petition him to return to the conversation. And just like in the *Iliad*, Hermogenes' proposal is met with petulance and contempt: "And what, Hermogenes? Does it seem easy to you to learn and teach anything so swiftly, not to mention so great a thing, which in fact seems to be greatest among the greatest?" (427e). Socrates follows this entreaty, just as Ajax followed Odysseus. And it is at that point that Cratylus responds by quoting Ajax—Plato made his quotation fitting to the dramatic procedure of the dialogue. This is especially appropriate, as the discussion that takes place in the Embassy to Achilles is the most like a Platonic dialogue of the entire *Iliad* and perhaps in all of Homer.

### 5.11.4 The End

These parallels become more conspicuous in what follows Cratylus' quotation of the Embassy scene. Indeed, the end of the *Cratylus* embodies the end of the Embassy to Achilles. Here are the final lines of the *Cratylus*:

Cratylus: Surely I will do these things. However, know thou well, Socrates, that at present I am no way unreflective. Rather, as I am reflecting into how things are, they appear to be much more like that Heraclitus says.

Socrates: Then hereafter, my companion, you will teach me, whenever you return. But now, just as you have prepared to do, go out into the country. And this Hermogenes will accompany you.

Cratylus: These things shall be, Socrates, but I hope even you will try still to ponder these things again.

So far in the dialogue, Cratylus has refused to change his mind, just as Achilles refuses to fight throughout the *Iliad*. But at the end of the Embassy, Achilles says things that sounds very much like Cratylus. For example, in his response to Phoenix, Achilles says:

These men will carry their message back, but you, you stay here and spend the night in a soft bed. Then, tomorrow at first light, we will decide whether we sail home or hold out here. (753-756)

In other words, Achilles still sends his message that he will never return to battle, but now he has admitted that he will allow for some consideration. Indeed, this vacillation is further present in Achilles' final response, to Ajax:

You go back to him and declare my message: I will not think of arming for bloody war again, not till the son of wise King Priam, dazzling Hector batters all the way to the Myrmidon ships and shelters, slaughtering Argives, gutting the hulls with fire. But round my own black ship and camp this Hector blazing for battle will be stopped, I trust stopped dead in his tracks! (794-801)

In other words, his answer is the same: he will not return. But he does admit that he is wavering in his internal resolve and will consider fighting a defensive battle. This is precisely the situation Cratylus finds himself in. He is obstinately attached to the idea of extreme flux and that requires an extraordinary existence with language. But after the conversation with Socrates, he has been given many good reasons to reconsider his position. His final lines in the dialogue are ambiguous: still stubborn, yet agreeing to reconsider (just like Achilles—we are left with a firm impression of his resolve but with a small hint that he will reconsider).

Furthermore, Achilles wants both to refrain from battle and to keep Phoenix, who has urged him to fight, with him. Just so, Cratylus wants both to refrain from conversation and to keep Heraclitus with him. But both men begin to sense the contradiction in this action and the tension they incur at wanting both things.

Finally, following the Embassy, Socrates assumes the role of Ajax more fully. He does so by assuming Ajax's characteristically straightforward language. After this interim exchange with Cratylus, Socrates almost entirely drops the frequent allusions to Homer,

invocation of the Sophists, loaded analogies, examples, etymologizing, and wordplay. Instead, he engages in a blunt sort of argument against Cratylus.<sup>55</sup>

#### 5.11.5 The After-Story

The actual decision made by Achilles and Cratylus lies outside of the story of the *Iliad*/*Cratylus*. But again, in both cases, the outcome is well-known (and in both cases insinuated in the work itself): Achilles will die in battle and Cratylus will recede entirely from conversation.

It is possible that Plato wanted to suggest an ultimate disanalogy here, i.e., that Cratylus did not perform the more heroic action. But it could also be Plato's suggestion that, despite Cratylus' heroism in refraining from language, he is ultimately defeated. Given Achilles' options between death/glory and life/obscurity, it seems that Cratylus, like Achilles, took the former option: Cratylus is renowned for going all-in—but into silence. Both heroes achieve a complex sort of glory in this respect. Achilles is victorious in what he sets out to do (killing Hector, turning the tide of battle in favor of the Achaeans, etc.), but he is ultimately unsuccessful (Achilles dies before Troy is sacked). And Cratylus is victorious in doing what he sets out to do (avoiding the misrepresentation inherent in language), but he is ultimately unsuccessful (his avoidance means the death of meaning).

---

<sup>55</sup> Given that Ajax is second-best, we have here a suggestion that Socrates' turn of argument here is also second best. Furthermore, Socrates, like Ajax, does not change his alliance, but continues fighting the same enemy with the same resolve as before the Embassy (in other words, he does not disown the etymologies here). The Embassy is about the change wrought in Achilles, not about Ajax, who shows all signs of steadfastness.

## 5.12 SOCRATES' RESPONSE

All of this (i.e., taking Cratylus' *Iliad* quotation so seriously and seeing in it indications of how to read the dialogue) might seem excessively creative. But if there is still any doubt, Socrates' immediate response to Cratylus confirms my interpretation:

Good Cratylus, I myself have long been amazed at my wisdom and I mistrust it. So it seems necessary to me to look again into what I say. For to be deceived by oneself is the worst of all—for if the one who will deceive stands aside not even a small amount but is always present, how is this not terrible? Thus it is necessary, as it seems, to turn about frequently upon the things which have been said and to test the saying of that poet:

to look “at the same time forwards and backwards” (ἅμα πρόσσω καὶ ὀπίσσω, *Iliad* i.343; iii.109)

And indeed, even now let us look at what was said by us. (248d-e)

This passage seems straightforward enough. But it is, again almost universally,<sup>56</sup> understood as Socrates' attempt to get Cratylus to see that there was something wrong with the previous presentation, especially with the etymologies:

---

<sup>56</sup> Loraux 1987 mentions this elliptically: “Comme Cratyle, Socrate a tu ce qui a trait au conflit, mais, comme celui-ci, il a choisi de prélever une citation apparemment anodine dans un contexte d'érès que la mémoire des deux interlocuteurs ne peut manquer de restituer en silence: entre Cratyle et Socrate, la référence à la discorde est un lien aussi présent que sous-entendu” (67).

Accordingly, [Socrates] goes on to illustrate the danger of self-deception and announce a re-examination of his earlier claims. This is as explicit a stage-direction as any can be. The suggestion is plainly that there was something wrong in Socrates' discussion with Hermogenes and that we must now find out what it was. (Ademollo 2011 319)

This statement definitively indicates that Socrates has not been espousing his own views concerning the correctness of names. (Ewegen 2013 160)

Brief though Socrates' remarks are, the stakes could not be higher. As Ademollo 2011 correctly shows, it is the unity of the dialogue that is in question—how we are to understand the dialogue previous to this point hangs in the balance. And given that over 80% of the dialogue has now passed, this is no small matter. Nevertheless, in light of the above discussion, this interpretation should now be suspect as a correct reading of the text.

Even if one disregards the deeper meanings suggested by Cratylus' above quotation of the *Iliad*, there are independent reasons to reject this reading. For example, the standard reading understands Socrates as saying something like “look, Cratylus, let's not agree so quickly, but let's keep trying to figure this out.” But if Socrates were addressing Cratylus in this way, then one would expect Socrates to somehow signal his opposition to Cratylus—i.e., he would need to say something like “no, Cratylus, this is not where we should stop....” Socrates does not do this. Plato uses contrasting conjunctions frequently, but here he has Socrates give a smooth and agreeing transition

(ὦγαθὲ Κρατύλε). Furthermore, if Cratylus were in agreement with Socrates, wouldn't he now oppose Socrates' claim to re-investigate? Or at least point out that such reinvestigation is unnecessary? Certainly Cratylus has shown himself, and will continue to show himself, quite capable of stubbornly holding to his ideas—and he does not restrain himself from disagreeing: think of the opening discussion with Hermogenes, some of the only evidence we have to this point in the dialogue, where he disagreed openly and easily. Or think back only a couple of lines to where he identified himself with Achilles in this respect. If Socrates is at variance with Cratylus, why would Cratylus not oppose Socrates here? In fact, the complete opposite is the case: Cratylus readily accepts Socrates' invitation to investigate all over again. Indeed, he gives his *most enthusiastic assent of the entire dialogue* to Socrates' admission that they must try again: ἐμοὶ μὲν δοκεῖ πάννυ σφόδρα, ὦ Σώκρατες (428e).

Clearly, the dominant interpretation has the dramatic emphasis all wrong. This is largely because of the disregard of Cratylus' half-quote and because they have consequently failed to recognize the importance of the Embassy scene, as discussed above. The more natural way to read this exchange is in line with my interpretation above. That is: Cratylus admits that there is something in Socrates' presentation that he likes, but he rejects it. He disagrees. Socrates' response to that disagreement, then, is conciliatory: "Cratylus, you're right. I was probably wrong, and that is a terrible sort of situation to be in. Self-deception is serious business. So, let's try again."

This interpretation is confirmed on multiple levels by Socrates' response. That is, Cratylus quoted the Embassy scene from the *Iliad* and Socrates responds in like fashion, by quoting from a significant scene in the *Iliad*. Socrates thereby shows both that he has



understood Cratylus' meaning (Cratylus' reason for alluding to the *Iliad*—disagreement), and that he will respond in like fashion (with a quotation).<sup>57</sup>

Socrates' quotation of the *Iliad* (ἄμα πρόσσω καὶ ὀπίσσω) is far too brief to be meaningful without an understanding of the context in which it appears. If the words are to be taken simply, Socrates could have just used his own words to express the same idea, something which he does do, both before (μεταστρέφεσθαι ἐπὶ τὰ προειρημένα) and after (ἴδωμεν τί ἡμῖν εἴρηται) he quotes the *Iliad*. Yet the universal approach has been to take Socrates' quotation and these paraphrases as if they were expressing the trivial idea that people should make sure what they have said is correct.

But the very fact that Socrates makes such a seemingly innocuous quotation so conspicuous should give us pause. Indeed, Socrates says that it is necessary “to turn about frequently upon the things which have been said *and to test the saying of that poet.*” What does it mean to test (πειρᾶσθαι) Homer, unless he means to understand what Homer says and see if it applies to the current situation? With this turn of phrase, Socrates makes it explicit that he will be interpreting the saying and that it is not a passing reference. The only way to follow Socrates' cues and find further significance in the quoted material is to understand it in context.

### 5.12.1 First

---

<sup>57</sup> See Chapter 2, where Socrates shows how he will be committed to responding in a way appropriate to Cratylus' style.

The phrase ἄμα πρόσσω καὶ ὀπίσσω appears twice in the *Iliad*, and both instances resonate with the *Cratylus* context.<sup>58</sup> One of these is at the beginning of Book iii, where the armies draw back in temporary truce while Menelaus and Paris fight in single combat. Menelaus suggests that Priam would be the best one to solemnize the truce and describes the old King, in contrast to young impetuous men, as someone who knows how to see “forwards and backwards” (ἄμα πρόσσω καὶ ὀπίσσω λεύσσει, iii.109).

In this way, Menelaus suggests that wisdom can overcome unnecessary violence. After several years of war, Paris and Menelaus now finally agree to settle the matter hand-to-hand. It is these two whose dispute—whose ἔρις —over Helen caused the war. Menelaus admits that he is sorry that both sides suffered so much violence as a result (πολλὰ πέπασθε εἵνεκ’ ἐμῆς ἔριδος, 99-100). The proposed truce is to refrain from unnecessary violence—from men other than Paris or Menelaus perishing in the fight over Helen.

Socrates’ use of the quotation suggests he is to be identified with Priam from this scene. Besides being the wise moderator of the conflict between Cratylus and Hermogenes, this suggestion might echo the final embassy to Achilles where Priam *is* successful at supplicating Achilles. (This is further probable, as Priam is guided by Hermes on this embassy.)<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> Socrates: βλέπειν ἄμα πρόσσω καὶ ὀπίσσω. Achilles: οὐδέ τι οἶδε νοῆσαι ἄμα πρόσσω καὶ ὀπίσσω. Menelaus: ἄμα πρόσσω καὶ ὀπίσσω λεύσσει.

<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, as Heraclitus made clear above, it is foolish to think that war will cease. Menelaus’ attempt to eliminate the violence insofar as possible is ultimately unsuccessful, as Aphrodite saves Paris from Menelaus and Athena gets a Trojan soldier to get the war going again by shooting Menelaus with an arrow. Therefore, Socrates could be saying something more like “we can take a break from war, but it will come back.” Furthermore, this episode causes confusion, both among the men and among the Olympians, regarding whether or not Menelaus was rightfully victorious. This is the case philosophically as well. The arguments for naturalism seemed overpoweringly strong and that they would inevitably be victorious. But then for some reason the battle begins again, and Socrates turns them back upon the problem. From the perspective of the Argives, which I assume is to be adopted here, this is a turn for the worse. It would have

### 5.12.2 Second

All things considered, however, it is the other use of ἅμα πρόσσω καὶ ὀπίσσω in the *Iliad* that Socrates has in mind. At the beginning of the *Iliad*, in context of the dispute between Achilles and Agamemnon over Briseis, Achilles describes Agamemnon as not knowing how to look forwards and backwards (οὐδέ τι οἶδε νοῆσαι ἅμα πρόσσω καὶ ὀπίσσω, 1.343). In other words, Agamemnon's lack of judgment will cost him dearly—he is too stupid to foresee the consequences of his actions, namely, that the Achaeans will lose the battle without Achilles.

What this has to do with the *Cratylus* should be immediately clear by now: Cratylus has cast himself as Achilles, specifically as the Achilles whose offense has kept him from war. Socrates responds with an allusion to the very offense that kept Achilles from battle. By implication, Achilles (and hence, Cratylus) *does* know how to look ἅμα πρόσσω καὶ ὀπίσσω, so Socrates' invocation of Achilles' words constitutes an admission, in line with what was developed above, that they reinvestigate as Cratylus suggests.

Besides, like Achilles, Cratylus has remained aloof from the dialogue thus far, and he has done so as a result of a fundamental disagreement. Hence, Socrates is returning his attention to this initial disagreement (regarding the correctness of names). Indeed, Socrates' very next words are “The correctness of names, we said, is itself that which will reveal how the matter is; shall we say this has been said sufficiently?” (348e).

---

been nice to settle the matter once and for all in single combat, but such was ultimately not in the favor of the gods. That is, Socrates' god. That is, his injunction to always question.

In other words, Socrates' reference to *Iliad* 1.343 is as if to say "you're right that we must take care with this matter; to do so, let us return to the beginning."

Furthermore, this episode from *Iliad* i is itself another embassy to Achilles. This embassy, however, is of a very different character. Again, Agamemnon sends representatives, but this time he sends them to take from Achilles by force. This is an embassy, but it is one of threatening and force, one which makes demands of Achilles. As noted above, this is akin to the opening of the *Cratylus*, where Hermogenes demands that Cratylus share his *logos* regarding correctness. Socrates brings this up in order to agree with Cratylus about how important it is to be circumspect in these sorts of things.<sup>60</sup>

This interpretation has the further benefit of being consistent with the dialogue's reference to Heraclitus. First of all, Socrates' desire to turn back upon what was previously discussed echoes the supremely Heraclitean idea that "They do not comprehend how a thing agrees at variance with itself; it is an attunement *turning back on itself*, like that of the bow and the lyre" (D51). This is precisely the dramatic aspect of the dialogue that has puzzled commentators—what is going on when Socrates turns back on the previous conversation, and how can we see unity despite that action? As I have shown, the dominant way of interpreting it fails to see this unity, but instead thinks that Socrates is undoing what was never sincerely given in the first place.

This is further demonstrated by Socrates' remarks. Not only is the dramatic motion Heraclitean, but so is Socrates' following claim that "to be deceived by oneself is the

---

<sup>60</sup> This is consistent with the interpretation of the characters' approach throughout. Hermogenes is fairly insensitive to Cratylus' ideas and tries to force them into categories that he can understand. Cratylus, however, remains elusive and oracular. Socrates respects oracles, and even speaks in that way himself, but he submits them to dialectic—to the "back and forth" of re-interpretation.

worst of all—for if the one who will deceive stands aside not even a small amount but is always present, how is this not terrible?” Compare this with Heraclitus’

I went in search of myself. (D101)

It belongs to all men to know themselves and think well. (D116)

As Kahn 1979 points out, this claim is paradoxical because such a search would be meaningful only if the self were somehow absent (116). Socrates is here trading on this very idea, but in reverse—by claiming that the self is utterly present.

Finally, this idea of looking ἄμα πρόσσω καὶ ὀπίσσω is itself Heraclitean. For how can one look simultaneously both forward and backward? Dramatically, Socrates demonstrates this by looking forward to the following conversation by returning to what was said previously. This idea that we need to look backwards for the conversation to move forwards sounds not unlike Heraclitus’ famous “The way up and down is one and the same” (D60).

Whether or not this specific reference is intended, this section shows us how Plato found a profound way to express his relationship to Heracliteanism: by embedding his ideas in the drama of the dialogue. Plato clearly rejects Cratylus’ radical Heracliteanism. But just as clearly, Plato affirms Heraclitean ideas throughout the dialogue, thereby suggesting his support for a moderate or nuanced Heracliteanism. By staging these the Homeric themes of violence and reconciliation, he shows how one can be at war without being in all-out-war. Specifically, his suggestion is that the misrepresentation inherent to

language need not be ultimate—and that a circumspect, or dialogical, use of language can avoid its violence. Hence, just as stasis supervenes on flux, there is a relative or supervenient stability in the midst of inevitable war and, thus, meaning in an inherently misrepresentational language.

### 5.13 CONCLUSIONS

The Embassy scene is a turning point in the *Iliad*.<sup>61</sup> While it was not immediately successful (Achilles continued to refrain from war and the larger dramatic situation changed very little), it nevertheless caused Achilles to vacillate and incline toward his eventual action.

What is more, it brings Achilles (and Cratylus) back to the forefront and refocuses the question of the dialogue. After a lengthy bout of etymologies, this is a welcome reorientation. And, as I have demonstrated above, it certainly does provide an orientation: we are not to read Cratylus as accepting Socrates' previous arguments and etymologies (as is commonly assumed), but as disagreeing with them. As a result, we cannot understand Socrates as then turning on his previous arguments to refute them, but rather we are left with the option of understanding Socrates as reinvestigating what came before for Cratylus' sake, but not as rejecting it. Socrates will continue to defend the positions he advanced thus far.

---

<sup>61</sup> See Whitman 1958, who reads this scene as the center of a ring composition; cf. Kirk 1985, III, 56. Walter Leaf 1900 wrote effusively about the importance of Book ix: "alike in the vivid description of scene, in interplay of character and in the glowing rhetoric, the book is unsurpassed in Homer, perhaps in literature" (i, 371).

Furthermore, this use of the *Iliad* quotation shows us how central references and allusions are in Plato's philosophy, and how decisive they can be for understanding the text. By understanding Socrates' rejoinder, we can see that what is at stake is not the trivial idea that we need to submit our hypotheses to dialectic, true though that is, but rather that we are dealing here with a violence that could have been avoided or mitigated by the right procedure (looking before and after—dialectic). In other words, Cratylus' worry that language is inevitably violent is not necessarily true. A careful, circumspect use of language, one that looks before and after, dialectic, can avoid the problematic violence.

This avoidance is the result of someone breaking the totalitarian tendencies of everyday language (as Cratylus does with his oracular brachylogy, silence, and poetic quotation). Even this part of my reading is confirmed in the Embassy scene. Anyone who has read Homer's Greek can recognize the role of formulaic language. Homer uses a diverse assortment of linguistic formulae, likely because these familiar phrases would have helped him be consistent with line metrics. But as Parry 1956 has shown, analysis of Achilles' diction in this scene shows that he is not only breaking all sorts of cultural norms, but that he is also breaking the model of formulaic language:

Achilles has no language with which to express his disillusionment. Yet he expresses it, and in a remarkable way. He does it by misusing the language he disposes of. He asks questions that cannot be answered and makes demands that cannot be met. He uses conventional expressions where we least expect him to....

(6)

And further, he noticeably violates Homer's usually formulaic speech. Hence, Achilles struggles with his society's norms, and this is reflected in his linguistic struggle.

Although he wavers here, he cannot leave his society or entirely reject its norms, so he is forced to try and find authentic expression by manipulating them. And he does so by expressing himself in language that breaks Homer's usual formulaic structure and diction. This is precisely Cratylus' situation: he is disillusioned with language. (This is just as cultural a disillusionment: just as Achilles departs from the honor/glory-culture, so Cratylus departs from his extremely oral culture). Cratylus wishes to remove himself from it (by remaining silent), but ultimately is compelled to use it. But he does so by manipulating and defamiliarizing language—by making it strange and not readily apprehensible.

In essence, that is the function of Cratylus' allusion to *Iliad* ix—his words do not allow an immediate grasp of his ideas or an easy solution to the problems at hand. His words are indirect and require interpretation. As readers of the *Cratylus*, we must take care not to too quickly assume we understand Cratylus. As Socrates has done, we must ourselves look simultaneously forwards and backwards.

This must be done by not taking words at face value. This is demonstrated by one final Achilles-Ajax-Odysseus parallel which would have been familiar to Plato's readers. Following Achilles' death, Ajax and Odysseus competed for the dead warrior's armor. It was widely agreed in antiquity that Odysseus won the contest through unjust deception.<sup>62</sup> This is why Antiphon represents Ajax as arguing that we should have a profound distrust

---

<sup>62</sup> Socrates alludes to this in *Apology* 40e–41c, where he describes his own legal plight as similar to when Ajax was unjustly outmaneuvered by Odysseus' deft speaking ability. Cf. *Republic* 620a-b.



in clever uses of speech and judge reality instead by deeds and not by words, similar to Socrates' suggestion at the end of the *Cratylus* that "Neither will a man who is in possession of his mind entrust himself to names and give his soul to their care, being persuaded by them and by the ones giving them to affirm that he knows something" (440c, cf. 439a-b).

The many parallels that exist between the literary figures of the Embassy to Achilles and the interlocutors of the *Cratylus* thus demonstrate one way in which Plato communicates through the dramatic dimension of the dialogue. And what is primarily communicated by the use of these parallels is the argumentative unity of the dialogue: Socrates defends a moderate version of Cratylus' naturalism throughout the dialogue and the etymologies are a sincere attempt at supporting this theory.

But more than this, through an imitation of the Embassy to Achilles, Plato demonstrates how drama is integral to the argument. He makes philosophical points that cannot, without loss, be made explicit in the argument: Socrates argues that Cratylus, who has carefully attempted to use (or avoid using) language in a way that misrepresents what is spoken about, misjudges language's paradoxical ability to generate meaning in this misrepresentation. And Plato himself avoids the misrepresentation of this position by bringing it to language in this way.

## Epilogue: What About the Forms?

Sometimes we lose sight of the forest for the trees. I suppose that there are enough trees in this dissertation to elicit this sort of reaction. So, I will here bring into view two implications of my dissertation, implications which I did not dwell on in my dissertation, for more mainstream Platonic and philosophical concerns.

First, there may be some worry that my “resonance” does not result in a robust theory of meaning. I chose the term “resonance” instead of a term already in circulation in *Cratylus* scholarship (like “naturalism,” “meaning,” etc.) in order to draw out some of the complexities of Plato’s account without relying on problematically sedimented concepts. In doing so, of course, there is a danger that “resonance” carries its own presuppositions that undercut what I am trying to do. For instance, if resonance is whatever set of associations the word has with the willy-nilly fancy of an individual, then there are no grounds for correctness and, hence, no correctness. Indeed, making correctness somehow depend on “accidental” sorts of knowledge (be it literary, mythological, morphological, semantic, or whatever) might appear to admit the very Protagoreanism that is eschewed early in the dialogue.

This would be a mistake. For while “resonance” can carry with it Protagorean connotations of seeming and sounding, I have chosen the word for its more literal value. A sonic resonance occurs when a sound elicits a sympathetic vibration in some other medium. This is a *real connection* that the sound has with the other medium—i.e., it is a *natural ground* for the affinity between the two. And the affinity is profound; it occurs at a level more fundamental than what is apparent. Hence, I intended the term to suggest the

sort of multiple and invisible connections that words have with the world without relying on the presuppositions that discourse about “natural correctness” have developed over the centuries.

Understood in this way, the concept of “resonance” has important implications for both Plato’s theory of language and for contemporary theories of meaning. As for prior, Plato’s *Cratylus* expresses ideas familiar from other works (such as the *Phaedrus* or the *Seventh Letter*): correctness or meaning is not stable like the Forms. But what the *Cratylus* adds is an account of how such an imperfect vehicle can also be a successful philosophical vehicle (by using language in a way that is appropriate to the recognition that language is creative through its destructiveness). And as for the latter, Plato’s latent theory of meaning in the *Cratylus* is valuable because not only is it the earliest “systematic” account of meaning, but it is also nuanced beyond many of our contemporary (semantic or pragmatic) theories of meaning. In other words, the *Cratylus* demonstrates how words are meaningful by virtue of a plurality of criteria, from more straightforward semantic representations to pragmatic contextual appropriateness and evocative force to even phonetic association. What is more, these criteria adhere as a matter of degree. While it is clearly outside of the scope of my dissertation to develop this any further, it is suggestive that Plato does what philosophers of language have only recently begun to take seriously in going beyond a theory of meaning that is strictly representational.

The second main implication of my research, one which I did not make explicit in this dissertation, is for Plato’s Forms. The issue of whether the account of stable natures in the *Cratylus* designates the Forms (with a capital F) is a contentious one—and one

which I have no interest engaging in. However, whether this is a variation on, a precursor to, a development of, or unrelated to the theory of Forms, it is clearly concerned with the same fundamental question—the nature of ideality. As has hopefully been clear throughout my dissertation, Plato engages this question through the lens of Heracliteanism and sides with a moderate version and against Cratylus’ radical version. What this means is that the *Cratylus* gives an account of stable natures that are not independently-existing Forms—natures which arise from and through the world of flux.

As a result, Socrates’ big objection at the end of the dialogue is not intended to disprove Heracliteanism or reject language altogether. (Socrates asks, if there is nothing stable, and if language requires an object with some permanence, then how can there be any language at all?) Instead, the answer to this question is much more nuanced, and comes from the recognition that there is stability in and through the world of flux. In other words, the need for stable natures does not preclude flux, but, rather, requires flux. And our language is correct to the degree that it conforms to this idea and establishes resonance with the world.

## Works Cited

- Aeschylus. 2009. *Fragments*. Edited by Alan H. Sommerstein. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Ackrill, J.L. 1971. "In Defense of Platonic Division." In *Ryle*, edited by Oscar Wood and George Pitcher, 373-392. London: Macmillan.
- Ackrill, J.L. 1997. "Language and Reality in Plato's *Cratylus*." In *Essays on Plato and Aristotle*, 33-52. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ademollo, Francesco. 2011. *The Cratylus of Plato: A Commentary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ademollo, Francesco. 2013. "Cratylus 393b-c and the Prehistory of Plato's Text." *Classical Quarterly* 63 (2): 595-602.
- Adler, Jonathan E. 2007. "Asymmetrical Analogical Arguments." *Argumentation* 21 (1): 83-92.
- Agassi, Joseph. 1964. "Discussion: Analogies as Generalizations." *Philosophy of Science* 31 (4): 351-356.
- Agassi, Joseph. 1988. "Analogies Hard and Soft." In *Analogical Reasoning*, edited by D. H. Helman, 401-419. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishing.
- Algozin, Keith. 1977. "Faith and Silence in Plato's *Gorgias*." *The Thomist* 41 (2): 237-246.
- Allan, D.J. 1954. "The Problem of Cratylus." *The American Journal of Philology* 75 (3): 271-287.
- Allen, W. Sidney. 1948. "Ancient ideas on the origin and development of language." *Transactions of the Philological Society* 47 (1): 35-60.
- Anagnostopoulos, Georgios. 1972. "Plato's *Cratylus*: The Two Theories of the Correctness of Names." *The Review of Metaphysics* 25 (4): 691-736.
- Apollodorus. 1976. *Gods and heroes of the Greeks: The library of Apollodorus*. Translated by Michael Simpson. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Apostle, Hippocrates G. 1966. *Aristotle's Metaphysics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Arieti, James A. 1991. *Interpreting Plato: The Dialogues as Drama*. Savage: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Barber, Elizabeth Jane Wayland. 1991. *Prehistoric Textiles: The Development of Cloth in the Neolithic and Bronze Ages with Special Reference to the Aegean*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Barney, Rachel. 2001. *Names and Nature in Plato's Cratylus*. New York: Routledge.
- Bartha, Paul. 2010. *By Parallel Reasoning: The Construction and Evaluation of Analogical Arguments*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bartha, Paul. 2019 "Analogy and Analogical Reasoning." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed February 2019. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/reasoning-analogy/>.
- Bartoš, Hynek. 2012. "The Analogy of Auger Boring in the Hippocratic *De Victu*." *The Classical Quarterly* 62 (1): 92-97.
- Baxter, T.M.S. 1992. *The Cratylus: Plato's Critique of Naming*. Leiden: Brill.
- Beekes, Robert Stephen Paul, and Lucien Van Beek, eds. 2010. *Etymological dictionary of Greek*. 2 Vols. Leiden: Brill.

- Bernadete, Seth. 1981. "Physics and Tragedy: On Plato's *Cratylus*." *Ancient Philosophy* 1 (2): 127-140.
- Bestor, Thomas W. 1978. "Common Properties and Eponymy in Plato." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 28 (112): 189-207.
- Black, Deborah L. 1990. *Logic and Aristotle's Rhetoric and Poetics in Medieval Arabic Philosophy*. Leiden: Brill.
- Brock, R. 1990. "Plato and Comedy." In *Owls to Athens: Essays on Classical Subjects Presented to Sir Kenneth Dover*, edited by E.M. Craik, 39-49. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Burnet, John. 1977. *Euthyphro; Apology of Socrates; Crito*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Bush, George. 2001. "Today We Mourned, Tomorrow We Work." Accessed June 2017. [Georgewebush-whitehouse.archives.gov](http://Georgewebush-whitehouse.archives.gov).
- Campbell, Norman. Robert. 1920. *Physics, the Elements*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Carnap, R. 1980. "A Basic System of Inductive Logic Part II." In *Studies in Inductive Logic and Probability*, vol. 2, edited by R.C. Jeffrey, 7-155. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Carroll, Diane Lee. 1983. "Warping the Greek Loom: A Second Method." *American Journal of Archaeology* 87 (1): 96-99.
- Cassin, Barbara. 1987. "Le Doigt de Cratyle." *Revue de Philosophie Ancienne* 5 (2): 139-150.
- Chantraine, Pierre, Jean Taillardat, Olivier Masson, Jean-Louis Perpillou, Alain Blanc, and Charles de Lamberterie, eds. 1968. *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque: Histoire des mots*. Paris: Klincksieck.
- Cherniss, Harold. 1935. *Aristotle's Criticism of Presocratic Philosophy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.
- Cherniss, Harold. 1955. "Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 987 a32-b7." *American Journal of Philology* 76 (2): 184-6.
- Chroust, Anton-Hermann. 1965. "The Organization of the Corpus Platonicum in Antiquity." *Hermes* 93 (1): 34-46.
- Clanton, J. Caleb. 2007. "From Indeterminacy to Rebirth: Making Sense of Socratic Silence in Plato's *Sophist*." *The Pluralist* 2 (3): 37-56.
- Clay, Jenny. 1972. "The Planktai and Moly: Divine Naming and Knowing in Homer." *Hermes* 100 (2): 127-131.
- Cohen, S. Marc. 1973. "Plato's method of division." In *Patterns in Plato's Thought*, edited by J. M. E. Moravcsik, 181-191. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Copi, I. M. 1990. *Introduction to Logic*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.
- Copi, I. M. and K. Burgess-Jackson. 1992. *Informal Logic*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.
- Crowfoot, Grace M. 1936. "Of the Warp-Weighted Loom." *Annual of the British School at Athens* 37: 36-47.
- Davidson, Donald. 1967. "Truth and Meaning." *Synthese* 17(1): 304-323.
- Davidson, Donald. 1984. *Inquiries into truth and meaning*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Davies, T.R. 1988. "Determination, Uniformity, and Relevance: Normative Criteria for Generalization and Reasoning by Analogy." In *Analogical Reasoning*, edited by D.H. Helman, 227-50. Dordrecht: Springer.

- Davies, T.R. and S. Russell. 1987. "A Logical Approach to Reasoning by Analogy." In *Proceedings of the Tenth International Joint Conference on Artificial Intelligence*, edited by J. McDermott, 264–70. Los Altos: Morgan Kaufmann.
- Derbolav, J. 1972. *Platons Sprachphilosophie im Kratylus und in den späteren Schriften*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Depew, Mary. 1997. "Reading Greek Prayers." *Classical Antiquity* 16 (2): 229-258.
- Driscoll, Sean. 2018 "Linguistic *Mimēsis* in Plato's *Cratylus*." In *The Many Faces of Mimesis*, edited by Reid, Heather, and Jeremy DeLong, 113-125. Fonte Aretusa: Parnassos Press.
- Duhem, Pierre. 1914. *La Theorie physique*. Paris: Rivere.
- Eades, Trent. 1996. "Plato, Rhetoric, and Silence." *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 29 (3): 244-258.
- Edmunds, Susan T. 2012. "Picturing Homeric Weaving." *Harvard Center for Hellenic Studies*, accessed June 2019. <https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/4365>.
- Ewegen, Shane Montgomery. 2013. *Plato's Cratylus: The Comedy of Language*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Falkenhainer, B., K. Forbus, and D. Gentner. 1989. "The Structure-Mapping Engine: Algorithm and Examples." *Artificial Intelligence* 41 (1): 2–63.
- Fanfani, Giovanni. 2017. "Weaving a Song. Convergences in Greek Poetic Imagery between Textile and Musical Terminology. An Overview on Archaic and Classical Literature." In *Textile Terminologies from the Orient to the Mediterranean and Europe 1000 BC to 1000 AD.*, edited by Gaspa, Salvatore, Čzile Michel, and Marie-Louise Nosch, 421-436. Lincoln: Zea Books.
- Forbus, K. 2001. "Exploring Analogy in the Large." In *The Analogical Mind: Perspectives from Cognitive Science*, edited by Dedre Gentner, Keith J. Holyoak, Keith James Holyoak, and Boicho N. Kokinov, 23–58. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Forbus, K., R. Ferguson, and D. Gentner. 1994. "Incremental Structure-mapping." In *Proceedings of the Sixteenth Annual Conference of the Cognitive Science Society*, edited by A. Ram and K. Eiselt, 313–18. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Forbus, K., C. Riesbeck, L. Birnbaum, K. Livingston, A. Sharma, and L. Ureel. 2007. "A prototype system that learns by reading simplified texts." In *AAAI Spring Symposium on Machine Reading*, Stanford University, California.
- Fowler, R.L. 1988. "AII- in Early Greek Language and Myth." *Phoenix* 42 (2): 95–113.
- Franklin, Lee. 2011. "Dichotomy and Platonic Diairesis." *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 28 (1): 1-20.
- Friedländer, Paul. 1964. *Platon: erste Periode. Die platonische Schriften*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Gamboa, Steven. 2008. "In defense of analogical reasoning." *Informal Logic* 28 (3): 229-241.
- Gerschel, L. 1966. "Couleur et teinture chez divers peuples indo-européens." *Annales Économies Sociétés Civilisations* 21 (3): 608–631.
- Gonzalez, F.J. 1998. *Dialectic and Dialogue: Plato's Practice of Philosophical Inquiry*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Gould, Josiah B. Jr. 1969. "Plato: About Language: The *Cratylus* Reconsidered." *Apeiron* 3 (1): 19-31.
- Govier, Trudy. 1985. "Logical Analogies." *Informal Logic* 7 (1): 27-33.

- Govier, Trudy. 1989. "Analogies and Missing Premises." *Informal Logic* II, 3: 141-152.
- Govier, Trudy. 1992. *A Practical Study of Argument*. Belmont: Wadsworth.
- Govier, Trudy. 1999. *The Philosophy of Argument*. Newport News: Vale Press.
- Graham, Daniel. 1997. "Heraclitus' Criticism of Ionian Philosophy." *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 15: 1-50.
- Graham, Daniel, ed. 2010. *The texts of early Greek philosophy: the complete fragments and selected testimonies of the major Presocratics*. 2Vols. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Grams, Laura. 2012. "The Eleatic Visitor's Method of Division." *Apeiron* 45 (2): 130-156.
- Greene, William Chase, Charles Pomeroy Parker, John Burnet, and Frederic De Forest Allen, eds. 1981. *Scholia Platonica*. New York: Georg Olms Verlag.
- Guarini, M. 2004. "A Defense of Non-deductive Reconstructions of Analogical Arguments." *Informal Logic* 24 (2): 153-168.
- Güntert, H. 1921. *Von der Sprache der Götter und Geister. Bedeutungsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur homerischen und eddischen Göttersprache*. Halle: Verlag.
- Guthrie, W. K. C. 1978. *History of Ancient Greek Philosophy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hackforth, R. 1945. *Plato's Examination of Pleasure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hájek, A. 2018. "Creating Heuristics for Philosophical Creativity." In *Creativity and Philosophy*, edited by B. Gaut and M. Kieran, 292-312. New York: Routledge.
- Harrod, R. F. 1956. *Foundations of Inductive Logic*. London: Macmillan.
- Heath, D. D. 1888. "On Plato's *Cratylus*." *The Journal of Philology* 17 (34): 192.
- Hempel, C.G. 1965. *Aspects of Scientific Explanation*. New York: The Free Press.
- Herzhoff, B. 2000. "Homers Vogel Kymindis." *Hermes* 128 (3): 275-294.
- Hesse, M.B. 1964. "Analogy and Confirmation Theory." *Philosophy of Science* 31: 319-327.
- Hesse, M.B. 1966. *Models and Analogies in Science*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Heubeck, A. 1984. *Kleine Schriften zur griechischen Sprache und Literatur*. Nürnberg: Universitätsbund Erlangen-Nürnberg.
- Hippocrates. 1931. *Works of Hippocrates*. Edited and Translated by W. H. S. Jones and E. T. Withington. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Hippocrates. 1983. *Hippocratic Writings*. Edited by Lloyd, Geoffrey Ernest Richard, Geoffrey Ernest Richard Lloyd, John Chadwick, and W. N. Mann. London: Penguin Books.
- Hoerber, Robert G. 1957. "Thrasylus' Platonic Canon and the Double Titles." *Phronesis* 2 (1): 10-20.
- Holyoak, K. and P. Thagard. 1989. "Analogical Mapping by Constraint Satisfaction." *Cognitive Science* 13: 295-355.
- Holyoak, K. and P. Thagard. 1995. *Mental Leaps: Analogy in Creative Thought*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Hussey, George B. 1896. "The More Complicated Figures of Comparison in Plato." *The American Journal of Philology* 17 (3): 329-346.



- Ijzeren, J. van. 1921. "De Cratylo Heracliteo et de Platonis Cratylo." *Mnemosyne* 49 (2): 174-200.
- Juthe, A. 2005. "Argument by Analogy." *Argumentation* 19:1-27.
- Kahn, Charles H. 1981. *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kahn, Charles H. 1985. "Plato and Heraclitus" *Boston Area Colloquium for Ancient Philosophy* 1: 241-258.
- Kennedy, George. 1963. *The Art of Persuasion in Greece*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Keuls, E. C. 1983. "Attic Vase-Painting and the Home Textile Industry." In *Ancient Greek Art and Iconography*, edited by W. G. Moon, 209-230. London: Madison.
- Keynes, J. M. 1957. *A Treatise on Probability*. London: Macmillan.
- Kirk, G.S. et al., eds. 1985-1994. *The Iliad: A Commentary*. 6 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Klinghardt, Matthias. 1999. "Prayer Formularies for Public Recitation. Their Use and Function in Ancient Religion." *Numen* 46 (1): 1-52.
- Kohen, Ari. 2012. "Philosophy Against Poetry: The Complicated Relationship of Odysseus and Socrates." APSA 2012 Annual Meeting Paper.
- Kraus, M. 2015. "Arguments by Analogy (and What We Can Learn about Them from Aristotle)." In *Reflections on Theoretical Issues in Argumentation Theory*, edited by F.H. van Eemeren and B. Garssen, 171–182. Cham: Springer.
- Krieter-Spiro, Martha. 2018. *Homer's Iliad: The Basel Commentary*. Basel: Walter de Gruyter.
- Kripke, Saul. 1980. *Naming and Necessity*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Kripke, Saul. 1982. *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language: An Elementary Exposition*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Kuhn, T.S. 1996. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kuipers, T. 1988. "Inductive Analogy by Similarity and Proximity." In *Analogical Reasoning*, edited by D. H. Helman, 299–313. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishing.
- Labarbe, Jules. 1987. *L'Homère de Platon*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.
- Lampert, Laurence. 2002. "Socrates' Defense of Polytopic Odysseus: Lying and Wrong-Doing in Plato's *Lesser Hippias*." *The Review of Politics* 64 (2): 231-259.
- Landericy, Mathilde. 1933. "La Destination de la ΚΕΡΚΙΣ dans le Tissage en Grèce au IV<sup>e</sup> Siècle." *L'Antiquité Classique* 2 (2): 57-362.
- Lane, Melissa. 2006. "The Evolution of *Eirōneia* in Classical Greek Texts: Why Socratic *Eirōneia* is not Socratic Irony." *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 31: 49-83.
- Lang, Andrew. 1893. *Custom and Myth*. London: Longmans, Green, and Company.
- Leaf, Walter. 1900. *The Iliad, edited, with apparatus criticus, prolegomena, notes, and appendices*. London: Macmillan.
- Leeuwen, J. van. 1892. "Homerica (Continued)." *Mnemosyne* 20: 127-140.
- Le Feuvre, Claire. 2011. "Gr. τρυγών '1. Turtledove; 2. Stingray (Fish)': One Word or Two Words?" *Studia Etymologica Cracoviensia* 16: 23-31.
- Levin, Susan B. 2000. *The Ancient Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry Revisited: Plato and the Greek Literary Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Levin, Susan B. 2014. *Plato's Rivalry with Medicine: A Struggle and Its Dissolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lhomme, Alain. 2001. "Le fils d'Hermès." In *La forme dialogue chez Platon. Evolution et receptions*, edited by Cossutta, F. and Narcy, M, 155-187. Grenoble: Jérôme Million.
- Liddell, Henry George, Henry Stuart Jones, and Robert Scott, eds. 2011. *The Online Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon*. <http://www.tlg.uci.edu/lsgj>.
- Lindenbaum-Hosiasson, J. 1941. "Induction et analogie: Comparaison de leur fondement." *Mind* 50: 351-365.
- Liston, M. 2000. "Critical Discussion of Mark Steiner's The Applicability of Mathematics as a Philosophical Problem." *Philosophia Mathematica* 3(8): 190–207.
- Lloyd, A.C. 1952. "Plato's Description of Division." *The Classical Quarterly* 2 (1): 105-112.
- Longinus. 1890. *On the Sublime*. Translated by H.L. Havell. New York: Macmillan.
- Maher, P. 2000. "Probabilities for Two Properties." *Erkenntnis* 52 (1): 63–91.
- Mansfeld, Jaap. 1980. "Plato and the Method of Hippocrates." *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 21 (4): 341-362.
- Marrou, Henri-Irénée. 1981. *Histoire de l'éducation dans l'antiquité*. 2 vols. Éditions du Seuil.
- Martín, César Sierra. 2012. "Fundamentos Medico-Filosóficos en los Discursos Histórico-Políticos en la Grecia Antigua." PhD diss, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.
- Mawet, Francine. 1973. "ΑΛΓΕΑ ΔΙΔΩΜΙ. Formule de la Langue des Dieux chez Homère." *Revue belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 51(1): 5-12.
- Mayhew, Robert. 2015. "Aristotle's Biology and His Lost Homeric Puzzles." *The Classical Quarterly* 65 (1): 109-133.
- Menander. 1961. *The fragments of Attic Comedy*. Edited by John M. Edmonds. Leiden: Brill.
- Menn, Stephen. 1998. "Collecting the letters." *Phronesis* 43 (4): 291-305.
- Méridier, Louis. 1989. *Cratyle*. Paris: Les belles lettres.
- Merry, Walter W., James Riddell, and D. B. Monro. 1866. *Commentary on the Odyssey*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Michelakis, P. 1999. "The Spring before it is sprung: visual and non-verbal aspects of power struggle in Aeschylus' Myrmidons." Conference paper, accessed at <http://www2.open.ac.uk/ClassicalStudies/GreekPlays/Conf99/michelakis.html>
- Mill, John Stewart. 1843/1930. *A System of Logic*. London: Longmans-Green.
- Milne, John Stewart. 1907. *Surgical Instruments in Greek and Roman Times*. London: Clarendon Press.
- Mommsen, Heide. 1980. "Achill und Aias pflichtvergessen?" In *Tainia: Festschrift für Roland Hampe*, edited by HA Cahn and E. Simon, 139-52. Mainz.
- Montiglio, Silvia. 2000. *Silence in the Land of Logos*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Montiglio, Silvia. 2011. *From Villain to Hero: Odysseus in Ancient Thought*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

- Moravcsik, Julius ME. 1973. "Plato's Method of Division." In *Patterns in Plato's Thought*, edited by J. M. E. Moravcsik, 158-180. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Murray, A.T. 1924. *Homer: The Iliad*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Nagel, E. 1961. *The Structure of Science*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World.
- Nagy, G. 2008. "Homer the Classic." *Harvard Center for Hellenic Studies*, accessed June 2019. <http://chs.harvard.edu/publications>.
- Nails, Debra. 2002. *The People of Plato: a Prosopography of Plato and Other Socratics*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Nehring, Alfons. 1945. "Plato and the Theory of Language." *Traditio* 3: 13-48.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1967. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingsdalb. New York: Vintage Books.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1997. *Twilight of the Idols*. Translated by R. Polt. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2006. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Translated by Adrian del Caro. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nightingale, A. 2003. "Subtext and Subterfuge in Plato's *Cratylus*." In *Plato as Author: The Rhetoric of Philosophy*, edited by A.N. Michelini, 223-240. Leiden: Brill.
- Niiniluoto, I. 1988. "Analogy and Similarity in Scientific Reasoning." In *Analogical Reasoning*, edited by D. H. Helman, 271-98. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishing.
- Niiniluoto, Ilkka. 1981. "Analogy and Inductive Logic." *Erkenntnis* 16 (1): 1-34.
- Nosch, M.L. 2014 "Voicing the Loom: Women, Weaving, and Plotting." In *KE-RA-ME-JA: Studies Presented to Cynthia W. Shelmerdine*, edited by Dimitri Nakassis, Joann Gulizio, Sarah A. James, 91-101. Philadelphia: INSTAP Academic Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. 1992. *Love's knowledge: Essays on philosophy and literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- O'Connell, Peter A. 2017. *The Rhetoric of Seeing in Attic Forensic Oratory*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Page, Denys. 1959. *History and the Homeric Iliad*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Parry, Adam. 1956. "The Language of Achilles." In *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, vol. 87, 1-7. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Pettersson, Olof. 2016. "The Legacy of Hermes: Deception and Dialectic in Plato's *Cratylus*." *Journal of Ancient Philosophy* 10 (1): 26-58.
- Planinc, Zdravko. 2016. "Socrates and the Cyclops: Plato's Critique of 'Platonism' in the *Sophist* and *Statesman*." *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 31 (1): 159-217.
- Plotinus. 2009. *The Six Enneads*. Translated by Stephen Mackenna and B. S. Page. <http://classics.mit.edu/Plotinus/enneads.html>
- Power, T. 2010. *The Culture of Kitharôidia*. *Hellenic Studies Series* 15. Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies.
- Pulleyn, Simon. 1994. "The Power of Names in Classical Greek Religion." *The Classical Quarterly* 44 (1): 17-25.
- Quine, W.V.O. 1960. *Word and object*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

- Restani, D. 1995. I suoni del telaio. Appunti sull'universo sonoro dei Greci. In *Mousike, Metrica, ritmica e musica greca in memoria di Giovanni Comotti*, edited by B. Gentili & F. Perusino, 93-109. Pisa-Roma: Istituti editoriali e poligrafici internazionali.
- Rijlaarsdam, J. C. 1978 *Platon über die Sprache. Ein Kommentar zum Kratylus*. Utrecht: Bohn, Scheltema & Holkema.
- Riley, Michael W. 2005. *Plato's Cratylus: Argument, Form, and Structure*. New York: Rodopi.
- Robinson, Richard. 1955. "The theory of names in Plato's *Cratylus*." *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 9, 32 (2): 221-236.
- Robinson, Richard. 1956. "A Criticism of Plato's *Cratylus*." *The Philosophical Review* 65 (3): 324-341.
- Romeijn, J.W. 2006. "Analogical Predictions for Explicit Similarity." *Erkenntnis* 64 (2): 253-80.
- Rosenmeyer, Thomas G. 1988. "Name-Setting and Name-Using: Elements of Socratic Foundationalism in Plato's *Cratylus*." *Ancient Philosophy* 18 (1): 41-60.
- Roth, Catharine, tr. 2005. "Χαλεπὰ τὰ καλὰ." Suda On Line. <https://www.cs.uky.edu/~raphael/sol/sol-entries/chi/16>
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques and Johann Gottfried von Herder. 1986. *On the Origin of Language*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Russell, S. 1986. "Analogical and Inductive Reasoning." Ph.D. diss., Stanford University.
- Ryle, Gilbert. 1939. "Plato's *Paramenides*." *Mind* 48 (190): 129-151.
- Sachs, Joe. 2011. *Socrates and the Sophists*. Newburyport: Focus Publishing.
- Sallis, John. 1996. *Being and Logos: Reading the Platonic Dialogues*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Săndulescu, C. 1967. "Note Filologice, τέμνειν και καίειν." *Studii Clasice* 9: 219-222.
- Sedley, David. 2003. *Plato's Cratylus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Scodel, R. 2002. *Listening to Homer: Tradition, Narrative, and Audience*. Ann Arbor: University Press of Michigan.
- Shorey, Paul. 1935. *Plato: The Republic*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Smith, Imogen. 2008. "False Names, Demonstratives and the Refutation of Linguistic Naturalism in Plato's *Cratylus* 427 d1-431c3." *Phronesis* 53 (2): 125-151.
- Smith, Imogen. 2014. "Taking the tool analogy seriously: Forms and naming in the *Cratylus*." *The Cambridge Classical Journal* 60: 75-99.
- Smyth, Herbert Weir and Gordon M. Messing. 1965. *Greek grammar*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Snyder, Jane McIntosh. 1981. "The web of song: weaving imagery in Homer and the Lyric Poets." *The Classical Journal* 76 (3): 193-196.
- Speaks, Jeff. 2014. "Propositions Are Properties of Everything or Nothing." In *New Thinking about Propositions*, edited by Jeffrey C. King, Scott Soames, and Jeff Speaks, 71-90. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Speaks, Jeff. 2018. "Theories of Meaning." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed January 2018. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/meaning/>.
- Stanford, William Bedell. 1952. "The Homeric etymology of the name Odysseus." *Classical Philology* 47 (4): 209-213.

- Stanford, William Bedell. 2014. *Greek Tragedy and the Emotions (Routledge Revivals): An Introductory Study*. London: Routledge.
- Steinthal, Heymann. 2013. *Geschichte der Sprachwissenschaft bei den Griechen und Römern: mit besonderer Rücksicht auf die Logik*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Strauss, Leo. 1952. *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Taplin, Oliver. 1972. "Aeschylean Silences and Silences in Aeschylus." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 76: 57-97.
- Taylor, A. E. 1960. *Plato: The Man and His Work*. London: Methuen.
- Trivigno, Franco V. 2012. "Etymology and the Power of Names in Plato's *Cratylus*." *Ancient Philosophy* 32 (1): 35-75.
- Tsitsibakou-Vasalos, Evanthia. 2007. *Ancient Poetic Etymology: The Pelopids: Fathers and Sons*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.
- Uyemov, A.I. 1970. "The Basic Forms and Rules of Inference by Analogy." In *Problems of the Logic of Scientific Knowledge*, edited by P.V. Tavanec, 266-311. Dordrecht: D. Reidel.
- Uyemov, A.I. 1973. "Demonstrative and heuristic aspects of the logical modeling of science." In *Logic, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science IV*, edited by P. Suppes et. al., 407-413. Amsterdam: North-Holland.
- Vogt, Emil. 1938. *Geflechte und Gewebe der Steinzeit*. Basel: Verlag E. Birkhäuser & cie.
- Waller, B. 2001. "Classifying and analyzing analogies." *Informal Logic* 21(3): 199-218.
- Watkins, Calvert. 1970. "Language of Gods and Language of Men: some Indo-European Metalinguistic Traditions." In *Myth and Law among the Indo-Europeans*, edited by J. Puhvel, 1-17. Berkely: University of California Press.
- Watkins, Calvert. 1995. *How to kill a dragon: aspects of Indo-European poetics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Weingartner, Rudolph H. 1970. "Making Sense of the *Cratylus*." *Phronesis* 15 (1): 5-25.
- Weitzenfeld, J.S. 1984. "Valid Reasoning by Analogy." *Philosophy of Science* 51: 137-49.
- West, Martin Litchfield, ed. 1966. *Theogony*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- West, Martin Litchfield. 2000. "*Iliad* and *Aethiopis* on the Stage: Aeschylus and Son." *Classical Quarterly* 50: 338-352.
- West, Martin Litchfield. 2007. *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Whitman, Cedric H. 1958. *Homer and the Heroic Tradition*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1953. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, New York: MacMillan.
- von Wright, G. H. 1951. *A Treatise on Induction and Probability*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

## Appendix: Greek and Latin Translations

\*unless otherwise noted, these translations have been used consistently throughout

### Aeschylus

*Libation Bearers*

Morshead, E. D. A. 1996.  
Mineola: Dover Publications.

### Anaximenes of Lampsacus,

*Ars rhetorica vulgo Rhetorica ad Alexandrum*

Forster, E.S. 1924. Oxford:  
Clarendon Press.

### *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*

Westerink, Leendert Gerrit.  
1962. Amsterdam: North-  
Holland Publishing Company.

### Aristophanes

*Frogs*

Rogers, Benjamin Bickely.  
1998. Cambridge: Harvard  
University Press.

### Aristotle

*Poetics*

Bywater, I. 1909. Oxford:  
Clarendon Press.

*Rhetoric*

Roberts, W. Rhys. 1924.  
Oxford: Clarendon Press

*Politics*

Jowett, B. 1885. Oxford:  
Clarendon Press.

*Magna Moralia*

Stock, George William  
Joseph. 1915. Oxford:  
Clarendon Press.

*Metaphysics*

Ross, W. D. 1925. Oxford:  
Clarendon Press.

*History of Animals*

Thompson, D.W. 1907.  
London: John Bell.

### Cicero

*Brutus*

Hendrickson, G. L., and H. M.  
Hubbell. 1962. Cambridge:  
Harvard University Press.

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <i>De Oratore</i>  | Sutton, Edward William. 1976. Cambridge: Harvard University Press   |
| <b>Demetrius</b><br><i>De Elocutione</i>                                     | Roberts, W. Rhys. 1995. Cambridge: Harvard University Press         |
| <b>Dionysius of Halicarnassus</b><br><i>De Compositione Verborum</i>         | Usher, Stephen. 1985. Cambridge: Harvard University Press           |
| <i>De Thucydide</i>  | ---   |
| <i>De Demosthenis diction</i>  | ---   |
| <i>De Lysia</i>  | ---   |
| <i>Antiquitates Romanae</i>  | Cary, Earnest. 1945. Cambridge: Harvard University Press            |
| <b>Heraclitus</b><br><i>Fragments (in The Art and Thought of Heraclitus)</i> | Kahn, Charles H. 1981. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.       |
| <b>Hermogenes</b><br><i>Περὶ ἰδεῶν λόγου</i>                                 | Wooten, C.W. 2012. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. |
| <i>Progymnasmata</i>   | Kennedy, George A. 2003. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.   |
| <b>Herodotus</b><br><i>The Histories</i>                                     | Macaulay, J.C. 1890. London: MacMillan                              |
| <b>Hesiod</b>  |   |

|                                      |  |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| <i>Works and Days</i>                | Evelyn-White, Hugh G. 1914<br>Cambridge: Harvard<br>University Press           |
| <b>Homer</b>                         |  |
| <i>Iliad</i>                         | Fagles, Robert. 1990. New<br>York: Penguin Books.                              |
| <i>Odyssey</i>                       | Murray, A.T. 1975.<br>Cambridge: Harvard<br>University Press.                  |
| <b>Isocrates</b>                     |  |
| <i>Antidosis</i>                     | Norlin, George. 1928. New<br>York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.                        |
| <i>In sophistas</i>                  | ---  |
| <b>Diogenes Laertius</b>             |  |
| <i>Lives of Eminent Philosophers</i> | Hicks, R.D. 1925. Cambridge:<br>Harvard University Press                       |
| <b>Longinus</b>                      |  |
| <i>De sublimitate</i>                | Fyfe, W.H. and Donald<br>Russell. 1999. Cambridge:<br>Harvard University Press |
| <b>Nicolaus</b>                      |  |
| <i>Progymnasmata</i>                 | Kennedy, George A. 2003.<br>Atlanta: Society of Biblical<br>Literature.        |
| <b>Olympiodorus</b>                  |  |
| <i>Life of Plato</i>                 | Griffin, Michael. 2015. New<br>York: Bloomsbury.                               |
| <b>Plutarch</b>                      |  |
| <i>Moralia</i>                       | Babbitt, Frank Cole. 1936.<br>Cambridge: Harvard<br>University Press           |
| <b>Proclus</b>                       |  |
| <i>On Plato Cratylus</i>             | Duvick, Brian. 2007. New<br>York: Bloomsbury.                                  |
| <b>Strabo</b>                        |  |



*Geography*

Jones, Horace Leonard and  
John Robert Sitlington  
Sterrett. 1967. Cambridge:  
Harvard University Press

**Aelius Theon**

*Progymnasmata*

Kennedy, George A. 2003.  
Atlanta: Society of Biblical  
Literature.

**Xenophon**

*Anabasis*

Brownson, Carleton L. 1922.  
Cambridge: Harvard  
University Press