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Abstract:

In the light of Socrates' largely neglected etymological account of the name Hermes, this article reexamines the dialogue's perplexing conclusion that reality should not be sought through names, but through itself. By a close scrutiny of three claims made in this etymology – that language is commercial, thievish and deceptive – it argues that Socrates' discussion about the relation between names and reality cannot only be meaningfully understood in terms of his characterization of language as deceptive and therefore tragic, but that this point is also confirmed by the dialogue's larger comedic structure and by Cratylus' framing joke about Hermogenes' name. As a consequence, the article also suggests that a closer examination of the etymology of Hermes can both help to assess a certain unwarranted optimism common in contemporary scholarship and the claim that the dialogue's overarching purpose, rather than being an explanation of how human language grants access to the truth about the existing things, is a critical examination of such a project and of its hubristic assumptions.

Keywords: Cratylus, Plato, Etymology, Language, Hermes, Tragedy, Comedy, Names.

Introduction

Although Socrates' etymology of the name Hermes (407e5-408b3) is largely neglected in the research literature,¹ it is important for at least three reasons. First, it can help elucidate the

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dialogue's main subject matter and Socrates' concluding claim that an investigation into names cannot be used to understand reality. Second, it is important for understanding the dialogue's comedic framework by connecting Cratylus' joke about Hermogenes' name with Socrates' discussion of name-use and name-making.² Third, the etymology can also help to assess a certain unwarranted optimism common in contemporary scholarship. Regardless of whether Socrates' etymological enterprise is taken to be serious or parodic, it is often assumed that the dialogue's overarching purpose is to explain how human language grants access to the truth about existing things.³ Yet, insofar as there are reasons to doubt this purpose, the debate is

helped me develop my argument, as did to the members of the Plato reading group at the University of Bergen and the assiduous participants of the History of Philosophy seminar, chaired by Pauliina Remes, at Uppsala University. All of its flaws are, of course, still my own.

¹ One important exception is Sean D. Kirkland, "Logos as the Message from the Gods: On the Etymology of Hermes in Plato's *Cratylus*," *Bochumer Philosophisches Jahrbuch Fur Antike Und Mittelalter* 12, 1 (2007): 1-14; See also Shane Montgomery Ewegen, *Plato's Cratylus: The Comedy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 38; John Sallis, *Being and Logos: Reading the Platonic Dialogues* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 250-254; Michael Riley, *Plato's Cratylus: Argument, Form, and Structure* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005); Rachel Barney, *Names and Nature in Plato's Cratylus* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 78-79. However, Francesco Ademollo, *The Cratylus of Plato: A Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), offers no discussion of this passage, despite his comprehensive ambitions, neither does Franco Trivigno, "Etymology and the Power of Names in Plato's *Cratylus*," *Ancient Philosophy* 32, 1, (2012). But see David Sedley, *Plato's Cratylus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 95-96.

² Discussions about Hermes and the joke about Hermogenes' name are brought to the surface at least three times in the dialogue, first, at 383b-384c, where it is used to introduce the problem of natural naming, then, at 407d-408b, where the joke is explained and the name Hermes gets its etymology, and, then, finally, at 429b-e, where the dialogue is brought to a close by introducing the final matter of discussion. Barney, *Names and Nature*, 160 wants to add 440e to the list. There Socrates claims that Hermogenes shall *conduct* Cratylus. The verb used is πορεύειν, a word often used to describe Hermes and his role as a divine escort and guide.

³ Scholars that take the etymologies to be seriously meant philosophical accounts, include John N. Findlay, *Plato: The Written and Unwritten Doctrines* (New York: Humanities Press, 1973); David Sedley, "The Etymologies in Plato's *Cratylus*," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 118 (1998), 140-154; Sedley, *Plato's Cratylus*; Sedley, "Plato on Language," in *A Companion to Plato*, ed. H. Benson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007); George Grote, *Plato and the Other Companions of*

confused. As I hope to show, we have cause to entertain the idea that Plato's purpose in the *Cratylus* cannot be understood as an attempt to establish how language is the key to reality and that the etymology of Hermes can help to ascertain this point.

I begin with a brief analysis of Socrates' concluding remarks about the relation of names and reality. I then examine this conclusion in the light of Socrates' etymology of the name Hermes and put it in context. I analyze three of the etymology's central suggestions: that language is commercial, thievish and deceptive. I examine how these suggestions are vindicated and conclude by asking how they concur with the general purpose of the dialogue.

Names and Reality

At the end of the *Cratylus*, Plato makes Socrates claim that it is a mistake to think that names contain infallible information about reality (439b4-8). Socrates argues that the names do not have divine origin (438c5-6; see also 436b9-11) and that the very subject matter may have distorted their inquiry.⁴ "He who in his inquiry after things (τὰ πράγματα) follows names (ἀκολουθοῖ τοῖς ὀνόμασι)", Socrates explains, "and examines the meaning of each one runs no small risk of being deceived (ἐξαπατηθῆναι)" (436a9-b2).⁵ Although Socrates eventually goes

Socrates, Vol. 2, (London: J. Murray, 1867). Scholars that take them to be comic, playful or parodic, include Sallis, *Being and Logos*; Roger Brock, "Plato and Comedy," in *Owls to Athens: Essays on Classical Subjects Presented to Sir Kenneth Dover*, ed. E. M. Craik (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 39-49; James A. Arieti, *Interpreting Plato: The Dialogues as Drama* (Savage: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991); Francisco J. Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue: Plato's Practice of Philosophical Inquiry* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998); Andrea Nightingale, "Subtext and Subterfuge in Plato's *Cratylus*," in *Plato as Author: The Rhetoric of Philosophy*, ed. A. N. Michelini (Leiden: Brill, 2003). On the other hand, Trivigno ("Etymology and the Power"), Ewegen (*Plato's Cratylus*) and Barney (*Names and Nature*) move beyond this dichotomy and suggest that the serious purpose of the etymologies must be seen in the light of their parodic intention. See also Rachel Barney, "Socrates Agonistes: The Case of the *Cratylus* Etymologies," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 16 (1998).

⁴ For a more extensive account, see Olof Pettersson, "The Legacy of Hermes: Deception and Dialectic in Plato's *Cratylus*," *Journal for Ancient Philosophy* 10, 1 (2016).

⁵ The text I have used is Burnet's *Platonis Opera* from 1900 (rep. 1967) published in Oxford by Clarendon. All translations are based on C. D. C. Reeve's version in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper & D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).

on to suggest that the matter may be too great a question for them to determine, he nevertheless insists that it is “worthwhile to have reached even this conclusion, that they [sc. τὰ ὄντα] are to be learned and sought for, not from names but rather through themselves than through names” (439b4-8). If we are to learn or discover (μανθάνειν ἢ εὐρίσκειν, 439b4) anything about reality, Socrates concludes, we should go directly to the source, and stop investigating how we talk. In light of the preceding discussion, and its long and elaborate investigation into the etymological origins of names, this is an odd conclusion. Why does Plato make Socrates express these doubts about the reliability of the preceding examination? And how far is Plato willing to go in disqualifying the examination of language as key to reality?

Socrates’ Etymology of Hermes

Socrates’ etymology of the name Hermes offers an important clue. The analysis of the etymological origins of names is not to be trusted because human language is deceptive. This deceptive feature is part of a more general characterization of language, and is, as we shall see, indispensable to assess what is at stake. It foreshadows the pessimistic character of the dialogue’s concluding argument and it anchors Socrates’ final claims about names and reality, with subtle allusions, in earlier parts of the dialogue.

The etymology is introduced as a part of Socrates’ general analysis of the names of the gods. After a number of attempts to etymologize their names, Socrates explains that he does not want to pursue the matter. He is afraid, he says, to talk about the gods in this way. However, Hermogenes is not satisfied with this and insists that Socrates should analyze at least one more divine name. He reminds Socrates of Cratylus’ initial joke on his behalf and of how the whole discussion started. Hermogenes really wants Socrates to talk about the god related to his own name. Finally, Socrates also agrees to risk one more and puts it like this:

Well then, ‘Hermes’ (ὁ Ἑρμῆς) seems to have something to do with language (ἔοικε περὶ λόγον τι εἶναι). And to be an interpreter (τὸ ἐρμηνεῖα εἶναι), a messenger (τὸ ἄγγελον), to be thievish (καὶ τὸ κλοπικόν), deceptive in speech (καὶ τὸ ἀπατηλὸν ἐν λόγοις), and to be commercial (καὶ τὸ ἀγοραστικόν) – all this activity involves the power of language (περὶ λόγου δύναμιν ἐστίν). Now, as we mentioned before, to talk (εἶρειν) means to use language (λόγου χρεῖα ἐστίν); and the other part of the name says – as Homer often does – contrived (ἐμήσατο), which means to devise (μηχανᾶσθαι). And it

was out of these two words that the lawgiver established the name of the god who devised speech and language, since to talk (εἶρειν) means the same as to speak (λέγειν). It's just as if he told us: "Humans, it would be right for you to call the god who has contrived speech (τὸ εἶρειν ἐμήσατο) Eiremes (εἰρέμης)." But we, beautifying the name, as we suppose, call him Hermes (407e5-408b3).

The etymology goes back to 398d6-8 and to Socrates' analysis of the name hero (ἥρωος).⁶ There we learned that εἶρειν (to talk) means the same as λέγειν (to speak) and that this, as our present passage also makes plain, involves the use of language (λόγος). By combining εἶρειν with ἐμήσατο, the aorist of μήδομαι (meaning: plan and do cunningly), which, according to Socrates, means to contrive or to devise (μηχανᾶσθαι), we get εἰρέμης.⁷ This word has however been modified, we learn, and transformed into Ἑρμῆς.⁸

In order to prepare for these derivations, Socrates begins by articulating a set of general observations. Apart from the less controversial point that language has something to do with interpretation and messaging, he also identifies three more puzzling characteristics.⁹ Language is associated with being commercial (ἀγοραστικόν), with being thievish (κλοπικόν) and this, apparently, involves deception in speech (ἀπατηλὸν ἐν λόγοις). Although the connection between language and these characteristics may seem to be somewhat loose, there are no reasons to mistrust Socrates. Hermes is said to be the father of speech and talk. When we speak and talk we use language and language has thus inherited some of Hermes' main characteristics. The question is not *if* Socrates draws on the character of Hermes to describe language, but *why*. Let us take a closer look.

⁶ Here, strangely enough, the wisdom of the rhetoricians is equated with the wisdom of the dialecticians: Socrates suggests that the word ἥρωος means that the heroes "were wise and clever orators and dialecticians (σοφοὶ ἦσαν καὶ ῥήτορες καὶ δεινοὶ καὶ διαλεκτικοί) [...] for εἶρειν is the same as λέγειν" (398d6-8).

⁷ At 415a4-9 μηχανή gets its own explanatory etymology, an etymology that Socrates calls the head (κορυφή) of them all! It means "ἄνειν ἐπὶ πολὺ (much accomplishment); for μῆκος (length) has about the same meaning as τὸ πολὺ (much), and the name μηχανή is composed of these two, μῆκος and ἄνειν".

⁸ For a slightly different account, see Ewigen, *Plato's Cratylus*, 45-49.

⁹ For discussion about these less controversial points, see Kirkland, "Logos as the Message," 9-10; Barney, *Names and Nature*, 78-79; Ewigen, *Plato's Cratylus*, 40-49.

The Commerce of Language

Socrates' suggestion that language has to do with commerce goes back to 384b6-384a7 and to the dialogue's beginning. Here Hermogenes asks Socrates to explain why Cratylus claims that his name is wrong and why this is funny. Since Cratylus is not himself willing to clarify, Socrates steps in.¹⁰ Cratylus, Socrates explains, is trying to have some fun on Hermogenes' account, because "you, in wanting to make money and riches (χρημάτων ἐφιέμενον κτήσεως), fail every time" (384c5-6). Socrates does not say much more about this until he comes to the etymology of Hermes. Here, however, the point is made clear. Hermogenes' name is wrong, because *Hermogenes* – that is, the son or offspring of Hermes – has not inherited his ancestor's sense of business. For Hermogenes' name to be correct, he would have needed to show some commercial (ἀγοραστικόν) orientation.¹¹ But in contrast to his rich brother Callias, Hermogenes is not even in control of his own inheritance (391c2).

Although this joke undeniably trades on Hermogenes' lack of money, it also makes another, more subtle, point. Hermogenes' name may not contain sufficient descriptive information to pick him out, yet both Socrates and Cratylus know who they are talking about.¹² The use of the name works in its given context, even if it does not correspond to what its etymological analysis reveals. As this goes to show, the passage does not only suggest that Cratylus assumes that names are self-enclosed and use-independent entities, it also offers us

¹⁰ In line with his general evasiveness, evidenced by his unwillingness to say more than three words in the first 65 pages of the 86 page dialogue (see 383a3), Cratylus refuses to say what he means. Nightingale observes: "Note that Cratylus never offers his own account of the 'natural correctness of names' [...] It is Hermogenes who states Cratylus' basic position." ("Subtext and Subterfuge," 226). At 429b12-c5, Socrates returns to the peculiarities of Hermogenes' name, and again asks Cratylus what he means when he says that Hermogenes does not have the correct name. At this point, Cratylus is more willing to speak than before. As we shall see, this is an important dramatic change that pertains to the thievish (κλοπικόν) nature of language.

¹¹ Reeve translates ἀγοραστικόν, in context, as *wheeler-dealer*. Others have it differently. Sallis (*Being and Logos*, 250) has *bargainer*. I suppose *monger*, *entrepreneur*, *trader* or *peddler* would also work. As pointed out by Ewgen (*Plato's Cratylus*, 14), Hermes is the god of the *agora*, a word that of course resounds in ἀγοραστικόν. Barney (*Names and Nature*, 78), has the more literally accurate adjective *commercial*.

¹² See 434c-435d and the discussion of σκληρότης (hardness).

reasons to think that Socrates is problematizing this position and that his ensuing argument relates to this point.

That Socrates talks about a use-independent understanding of language and naming in commercial terms should not be overly surprising. Just as in the *Protagoras*, where Socrates warns the young Hippocrates against involving himself with sophists and their commercial treatment of doctrine (313c), the *Cratylus* concerns the well-established sophistical practice of etymological analysis.¹³ In the *Cratylus*, the analogy may be more covert than in the *Protagoras*, but the basic idea is nevertheless the same. Just as we treat merchandise, Cratylus treats names. Just as the sophists reportedly consider doctrines as possible to sell and buy in the *Protagoras*, Cratylus is here taken to treat the names as entities that can be transferred from one person to another without the names being affected by the transaction, in the sense that he thinks that the names are dependent on neither the person who is to use them nor the context in which they are to be used.¹⁴ That Socrates has some reasons to show why and how such a commercial treatment of names and language is as common as it is problematic is also clear from his own take on the matter a few pages before the etymology of Hermes is introduced.

The Function of Names

The argument to this end culminates at around 390c3 where Socrates suggests that the natural correctness of the names should be judged in terms of use, but that this is rarely the case. Socrates' argument begins as a refutation of the conventionalist position ascribed to Hermogenes.¹⁵ Based on the assumption that *as things seem to each, so they also are*,

¹³ So, e.g., Ademollo, *Commentary*, 428.

¹⁴ Isocrates may be thought to suggest something similar. See Andrea Nightingale, *Genres in Dialogue: Plato and the Construct of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 34; Leslie Kurke, *The Traffic in Praise: Pindar and the Poetics of Social Economy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 227.

¹⁵ Rachel Barney correctly argues that Hermogenes' actual position is much more reasonable and commonsensical than the position Socrates actually comes to refute. "Plato on Conventionalism," *Phronesis* 42, 1 (1997). See also Imogen Smith, "Taking the Tool Analogy Seriously: Forms and Naming in the *Cratylus*," *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 60 (2014).

Hermogenes' Protagorean view contends that the correctness of a name is whatever each individual person says it is (384d2-3).¹⁶

In order to refute this view, Socrates starts in the familiar way. He asks if there are good and bad people. Hermogenes answers that there certainly are and Socrates goes on to inquire if “the very good [are] very wise and the very bad very foolish” (386b10-12). Again Hermogenes says yes. This, Socrates concludes, is enough. Insofar as it is unlikely that all men share the same beliefs, one cannot at the same time think that things are as they seem to each and that some have it wrong (386d2-6). Instead, Socrates suggests, Hermogenes' consent has other implications. If one is to maintain that there are both wise and ignorant people, one must also accept that “things (τὰ πράγματα) have some stable being (οὐσίαν ἔχοντά τινα βέβαιόν)” (386e1-2). The beings of things do not depend on us, Socrates suggests, “nor [are they] caused by us” (386e2). Hermogenes agrees also to this and Socrates goes on to apply this principle to three cases: action, speaking and, most importantly, naming. As with things, Socrates argues, each action has its own stable being. Since speech is a part of action, and naming is a part of speech, the principle also applies to naming. The act of naming or name-use – not to be confused with name-making – is not to each what they find fit. Instead, it has its own distinct nature. With this established, Socrates goes on to claim that it is thus reasonable that we “name things in a natural way for them to be named and with what is natural for naming them” (387d4-5). Hermogenes agrees and Socrates goes on to investigate to what this natural use of the names amounts.

Socrates argues by analogy. Just as in cutting and burning, he suggests, naming is performed with a tool (ὄργανον, 388a8) – just as one needs a knife to cut, one needs a name to name. In order specify what this entails, Socrates begins by focusing on the tool and asks what it is that the name is supposed to do (ποιεῖν, 388b8). Just as a shuttle is a tool for weaving, he continues, so a name is a tool for teaching (ὄνομα ἄρα διδασκαλικόν τί ἐστὶν ὄργανον).¹⁷ As a tool to analyze the things that are (διακριτικὸν τῆς οὐσίας), the teachers use names in

¹⁶ I have borrowed the characterization of the Protagorean position, in italics, from M. M. Mackenzie, “Putting the Cratylus in its Place,” *The Classical Quarterly* 36, 1 (1986), 129. My argument, just as McKenzie's, requires that 385b-c is in the right place in the text. This has been disputed by Malcolm Schofield, “A displacement in the text of the Cratylus,” *The Classical Quarterly* 22 (1972): 246-253. On Hermogenes' Protagorean point of view, see Sallis, *Being and Logos*, 196.

¹⁷ Ademollo, *Commentary*, 129, has *pin-beater* instead of *shuttle* for κερκίς.

accordance with the nature of their practice (388b13-c1).¹⁸ Even if the notion of teaching, here at stake, is controversial, two things are nevertheless clear. A name has a practical function and its natural correctness is to be judged by its ability to perform this function.

Socrates' ensuing argument confirms these points. In order to establish a distinction between the name-users and the name-makers, Socrates introduces the term lawgiver (νομοθέτης, 389a2). Is it not the law, Socrates asks, that gives us the names?¹⁹ Confirmed by Hermogenes' conventionalist consent, Socrates goes on to ask how the specific action of the lawgivers is supposed to be performed. Again, Socrates answers by analogy. Just as the carpenters make the shuttles to be used in weaving, so the lawmakers make the names to be used in naming. Just as in the case of the shuttles, the names must be made in accordance with the practical *function* that they are supposed to have in each specific context.

[I]t seems that there is a form (εἶδος) of shuttle that is naturally suited to each type of weaving. And the same holds of tools in general. (389d1-2)

Depending on the tool's function, it has a specific shape or form. In naming, or name-use, this form corresponds to the individual name's specific function; and it is in terms of this function-form that the name-makers' ability is to be judged.

On this basis, then, you will judge the lawgiver [or name-maker], whether he be here or in foreign land, so long as he gives each thing the proper form of the name (τὸ τοῦ ὀνόματος εἶδος), in whatsoever letters. (390a4-6)

These passages have led some scholars to introduce the concept of a name-Form.²⁰ In order to encompass the claim that a naturally correct name is sound-independent ("here or in foreign

¹⁸ Here, I take τῆς οὐσίας to parallel τὰ πράγματα, used a few lines above (386e1). Both are said to be stable, but neither of them is used in any stronger technical sense. Presumably, Socrates is not talking about the Forms. As the examples of cutting, burning and weaving make clear, the stability at stake is not exclusive to superhuman reality. For the view that Socrates has a different priority and that he wants to say that the real function of the names is to describe ultimate reality and that teaching is subordinate to this function, see Sallis, *Being and Logos*, 208. See also Sedley, *Plato's Cratylus*, 61-66; Trivigno, "Etymology and the Power," 70.

¹⁹ Supposedly, this is a pun: ὁ νομοθέτης is very much like ὄνομ[α]-οθέτης.

²⁰ Sedley, *Plato's Cratylus*, 82.

land”), but still established in accordance with a form, it has been considered necessary to introduce a mediating notion that could explain how the names identify the real things without being the things they are names of.²¹

Judging by how Socrates talks about shapes or forms in this context, it is however not necessary to make this interpretative move.²² As we shall see, there is another explanation, that does not need to introduce a concept foreign to the text (i.e. the name-Form), but that still can explain Socrates’ talk about shapes or forms.

Socrates’ discussion of how the name-makers’ work is to be judged and superintended is decisive. Even if Socrates does say that the art of name-making aims at making names that pick out the things they name (“so long as he gives each thing the proper form of the name”), their natural correctness is not established on the basis of the name-maker’s competence alone. The correctness of names is instead to be judged in practice and by their ability to perform their function. Socrates argues by analogy:

²¹ Sedley argues that the name-makers use these so-called name-Forms when they make the names and that these name-Forms do not only have the same origin as the other Forms (see 439b10-d1 and onwards), but that they are also somehow metaphysically bound to the things they name. Sedley further analyses the name-Forms in a generic and a specific category. While the generic name-Form is the very Form-Form of the name, the specific name-Form is, “say, the Form of the name of dog”. The function of this specific name-Form “is giving instruction by vocally separating what a dog is”. Sedley, *Plato’s Cratylus*, 82. And this is necessary, he argues, because if one would try to embody the Form-Form of a dog directly, one would not end up with a name, but with a dog. On this view, a name is thus not an embodied thing, but the embodiment of a (specific) name-Form. This embodiment can be more or less comprehensive, but in order to be correct it must always, at a minimum, express some aspect of the name-Form, and thus indirectly of the reality which this name-Form is a name of. In this way he also argues that the same name-Form can be expressed by different sounds and, in effect, in different languages: “Just as the precise wood or metal used by an ordinary manufacturer may vary without detriment to his product, so the sound system in which the name-maker creates names will vary according to his nationality”. Sedley, *Plato’s Cratylus*, 66.

²² With some reservations, others have endorsed a similar view, suggesting that even if it is not the sounds that carry the load, Socrates does think that the names are naturally correct insofar as they have a stable connection with the Forms they refer to. See, e.g. Trivigno, “Etymology and the Power,” 43-44.

Now, who is likely to know whether the proper form (τὸ προσήκον εἶδος) of shuttle is embodied in any piece of wood? The carpenter who made it (ὁ ποιήσας, ὁ τέκτων) or the weaver who is to use it (ὁ χρησόμενος ὁ ὑφάντης)? (390b1-3)

Hermogenes answers that it is “the one who is to use it” and Socrates agrees. In order to make the names in accordance with the forms, then, the name-makers need to adapt their creations to the user (ὁ χρησόμενος, 390b2-3). This means that the name-users judge the creations of the name-makers independently. If the name-user, in analogy with the weaver, considers a name to have the wrong shape or form, it cannot perform its function and is not correct (see 390c1-3). Accordingly, the creations of the name-makers are to correspond to the proper form (τὸ προσήκον εἶδος) of the name, not by independent correspondence to something external to the name-users’ needs, but by catering to these needs.

To get this point straight, it is important to keep one thing in mind. Name-making is described as a fallible endeavor. Even if Socrates’ soon will come to suggest that there is a realm of divine names (391d8), the names Socrates is talking about here are made for human use. This is presumably also why Socrates insists that the name-makers are supervised by the name-users. Even if each name ideally is informed by the function-form it is supposed to perform, it cannot be taken for granted that a given name has been suitably formed so that it performs its function effectively. Instead, names must be evaluated in practice by someone with the proper skill.

As we have seen, this means that the natural correctness of names is to be judged in terms of how well they function, which is measured by how closely they correspond to the needs of the users. This does not mean that the users make the names, of course. This is still up to the name-makers. But it does mean that the name-makers cannot start making names alone. When Socrates talks about form (εἶδος) to explain the correctness of the names (389d1), or when he explains what “the proper form (τὸ προσήκον εἶδος)” of a name is (390b1-2), it thus seems unlikely that he is talking about how the name-makers are making names by embodying Forms in some independent way, because this would make all talk about the user unnecessary. If the name-makers were to make names by directly embodying (name-)Forms, they would not need to have the users “in view” (βλέπων, 389a7), as Socrates insists, only the Forms. In such a scenario, the users would also need to adapt to the name-makers’ creations and use the names they were given. But this is not how Socrates describes the situation. What he says, instead, is

that the name-makers must look to the name-users and make the names so that they correspond to the form of the tool that the users need in a specific context.²³

Whether or not the name-users – or dialecticians, as they eventually are called (390c11) – are supposed to have some independent or direct relation with the Forms themselves is a vexed question without an explicit answer in Plato’s writings.²⁴ But as long as the art of the name-users is supposed to amount to some kind of search or investigation (e.g. 384c2, see also 391a6) that involves teaching by means of questions and answers (390c10-11), two things are nevertheless reasonably clear. On the one hand, if the name-users have a clear vision of the Forms, the names they are in need of are supposed to function as tools in teaching, and thus to be used in conversations with people who do not share their vision. In that case it would not seem to matter if the names are embodiments of Forms or not, because the pupils would not be able to appreciate that relationship anyway. On the other hand, if the name-users do not have a clear vision of the Forms, and are still searching for them, as seems more likely, they would not be able to judge whether the names are embodiments of Forms or not. The names would however still have shapes or forms, and the name-users would still be able to talk about stable things. The only difference would be that forms and stability would correspond less to something over and above and more to something close at hand, such as when Socrates uses the name Hermogenes, with the specific shape of its combined letters, to talk about a person who does not constantly change, namely Hermogenes.

At the end of the day, these points are also reinforced by Socrates’ discussion of Forms at the end of the dialogue (439b4-440e7), the only passage that explicitly address Forms as such. Here he suggests that the name-makers “have fallen into a kind of vortex” since the names they have made indicate that all things are in motion and thus impossible to have knowledge about. Insofar as form, in the context of the discussion about name-use, is understood as Form or name-Form, this suggests that name-makers have some kind of prior knowledge about the Forms that they embody in the names. But this presupposes that the names they have made refer to stable things, a claim that Socrates rejects in the concluding discussion.

²³ In referring to Socrates’ shuttle analogy, Gonzalez draws a similar conclusion: “[T]his analogy is of extreme importance in showing that the nature of a name is to be found in its use”. Gonzales, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 68.

²⁴ For discussion and references, see Pettersson “The Legacy of Hermes” or Kirkland, “Logos as the Message From the Gods”. For discussion of form and use in this context, see Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 68-69.

When it comes to the details, the analogy with the shuttle may be somewhat deceptive, but the basic point should be the same. The user, or weaver, can presumably discriminate the worst exemplars by sight alone, but as it comes to the subtleties, the tools must be put to the trial of use. It is thus using, and not making, that decides what works. For most weavers and dialecticians, similar tools should do, but ultimately the point is still that the tools are to be crafted in accordance with the users' more specific needs. In the case of names, the situation is, of course, more complex than in the case of shuttles, and the needs of the users depend on the context, in the sense that it matters to whom one is talking, the purpose of the talking and the knowledge of the addressee. In general, however, it should not be too farfetched to suggest that when Socrates talks about the names as tools in terms of how they have shapes or forms, the analogy suggests that these forms are not something over and beyond the users' practical needs, but correspond to the names' ability to be used in asking and answering questions in specific contexts.

In other words, and to sum up, the natural correctness of the names does not seem to be a matter of the name-makers' ability to encapsulate descriptive contents in sounds and letters, at least not if Socrates' talk about the user is to make any sense.²⁵ Their correctness is not determined by their inherent or independent ability to refer to some transcendent reality. The names are in fact not supposed to be understood as independent and self-sustained entities at all. A name can certainly have a referent and refer to some specific stable phenomena, even if it is not able to encapsulate it, but this capacity of referring cannot be judged by looking at the name as an isolated entity. The names are not independent in the sense that their correctness can be judged by their discrete ability to embody or encapsulate some descriptive content. They

²⁵ If the names are not confined or defined by their material constituents, each should be able to have many meanings and many the same meaning. This is also exactly what Socrates suggests. There are two telling examples: (a) *knowledge* and (b) *king*: (a) Substantiated in terms of his two etymologies of ἐπιστήμη, Socrates concludes that most, if not all, names are ambiguous (ἀμφίβολος, 437a3). See Trivigno, "Etymology and the Power," 62. (b) Around 394a7, Socrates points out that even if two potions (φάρμακα) can have different appearances, a true doctor can see that they have the same powers. The same goes for names: "[In] Astyanax and Hector, none of the letters is the same, except *t*, but nevertheless they have the same meaning. And what letters has Archepolis (ruler of the city) in common with them? Yet it means the same thing; and there are many other names which mean simply king" (493b6-c4).

are instead dependent, and their correctness is to be judged in terms of how well they function in the context they are to be used in.

Evidenced by Socrates' complex argument to this end, the point is however difficult to make and hard to uphold. Yet, it can nevertheless help to explain what he means when he says that language is commercial. Cratylus' joke, that Hermogenes is wrongly named, assumed that names are self-enclosed entities that encapsulate descriptive contents independently of how they will be put to use. In this sense, the names are treated as merchandise that can change hands without loss of meaning. In the *Protagoras*, Socrates warns the young Hippocrates about the sophists' commercial treatment of doctrine (313c), in the *Cratylus* about their commercial treatment of names.

Stolen Words

Another of the peculiar characteristics that Socrates associates with language in his etymology of 'Hermes' is that it is thievish (κλοπικόν). In view of Socrates' suggestion that Hermes is the contriver of speech, this may be explained in terms of origin. Two interpretative alternatives are available. Hermes is either the originator of the language of the gods or, like the name-makers, a father of human language. As has been pointed out, since the language of the gods contains no falsehoods, and Hermes is a trickster, the latter is more likely.²⁶ The truth of such a mythical identification cannot perhaps be ultimately established, but it is nevertheless possible to draw one minimal conclusion. Even if the origin of the language of the gods is unclear, it is reasonable to assume that human language is said to be contrived by a thief. In accordance with the general principle, common in Plato, that character traits are inherited, human language has thus inherited the thievish character of its father. But what, then, is this supposed to mean?

As has been argued by Andrea Nightingale, one of the *Cratylus*' most important messages is that human language has a propensity for inauthenticity, intellectual theft and imitation.²⁷ One passage that plays a central role in Nightingale's argument is 413d7-8. Here,

²⁶ "[W]ith his propensity to theft and deceit, [he] is mythically identified with the original lawgiver [or name-maker] who instituted human speech", Sallis, *Being and Logos*, 253. So also Ewgen, *Plato's Cratylus*, 40. On Hermes as the god of thieves, see Norman O. Brown, *Hermes the Thief: The Evolution of A Myth* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1947).

²⁷ Nightingale ("Subtext and Subterfuge") often uses the term 'borrow', but I think 'steal' and 'theft' are more on target, since there is no consent involved.

Socrates claims that his words are not his own and warns against their deceptive force. “Perhaps I may deceive (ἐξαπατήσαιμι) you”, he says, “into thinking that all I am going to say is my own” (413d7-8). Insofar as Socrates is to be trusted here, there are reasons to suspect that his words are stolen. To any reader of a Platonic dialogue, where Socrates is the main speaker, this should come as no surprise. But what may be more surprising is the degree to which the *Cratylus* is permeated with this type of thievish argumentation. Let us take a brief look.

Socrates’ affirmative reply to Hermogenes’ suggestion that Socrates may be “uttering oracles (χρησιμωδεῖν) [...] like an inspired (ἐνθουσιῶντες) prophet” is a telling example.

Yes, Hermogenes [Socrates says], and I am convinced that the inspiration came to me from Euthyphro the Prospaltian. For I was with him and listening to him a long time early this morning. So he must have been inspired (ἐνθουσιῶν), and he not only filled my ears but took possession of my soul with his superhuman (δαιμονίας) wisdom. (396d4-8)

Not only does Socrates here affirm that he is uttering oracles like an inspired prophet, but he also locates the source of this inspiration in Euthyphro, who himself was inspired. Even if Socrates leaves the source of Euthyphro’s inspiration in the shadows, there are certainly reasons to be suspicious. Indeed, Socrates is quite suspicious of the performance himself, and says:

I think this is our duty: we ought today to make use of this wisdom [i.e. the inspiration] and finish the investigation of names, but tomorrow, if the rest of you agree, we will conjure it away and purify ourselves, when we have found someone, whether priest or sophist, who is skilled in that kind of purifying. (396d8-397a1)

As Nightingale suggests, Socrates’ claim that his soul has been possessed is “deeply ironic”.²⁸ Socrates bases his attempts to uncover the genuine properties of names on a stolen point of view. The general Heraclitian tendency of the etymologies is no less proof of this than his explicit claim that he does not even believe his own arguments:

²⁸ Nightingale, “Subtext and Subterfuge,” 232.

My excellent Cratylus, I myself have been marveling at my own wisdom all along, and I cannot believe it. (428d1-2)²⁹

Even if Socrates signals that the words he is articulating are not his own, Cratylus does not seem to understand the complexity of Socrates' position. Cratylus does not manage to see Socrates' evasiveness. Instead he is deeply impressed.

And so, Socrates, your oracular utterances seem to me to be much to my mind, whether you are inspired by Euthyphro or some other Muse has dwelt within you all along without our knowing it. (428c5-7)

In this sense, Socrates and Cratylus are however very similar. When Cratylus now finally begins to speak, it becomes clear that his position is also stolen. It all starts to unravel at 429b12. In order to examine if Cratylus really subscribes to a naturalist theory of names and naming, Socrates asks if Cratylus thinks that Hermogenes' name "is not his name at all, unless he belongs to the race of Hermes, or that it is his name, but is incorrect?" (429b12-c2). Cratylus answers that it is not his name (429c3-5). In the ensuing discussion, there are three telling statements. First, at 429a1, Cratylus claims that the original name-makers are *lawgivers* (νομοθέται). As we have seen, this was a notion Socrates introduced at 389a2 in order to pick up on, and contest, Hermogenes' conventionalist inclinations. Cratylus does not make any comments about this, but presents the point as his. Second, at 434d9-13, Cratylus repeats Socrates' claim from 414c4-d6 and says that the etymological science may sometimes need to add or remove letters in order to get at the original construction.³⁰ And third, at 435d4, Cratylus claims that the function of the names is *to teach* (διδάσκειν), a notion that Socrates introduced at 388b13.

²⁹ This point is also repeated at 391a4-6: "I, my dear Hermogenes, do not say that there is any [natural correctness of names]. You forget what I said a while ago, that I did not know, but would join you in examining [the matter]" and at 428a6-8: "For that matter, Cratylus, I would not positively affirm any of the things I have said. I merely expressed the opinions which I reached with the help of Hermogenes".

³⁰ This, of course, is a trick that Socrates however immediately claimed would result in the fact that "we would be able to fit every word to every thing" (414d7-9). Trivigno's translation, in his "Etymology and the Power".

In the light of these passages, Nightingale suggests that Cratylus' "language seems [...] not to be 'in himself'".³¹ Like Socrates' preceding account, large parts of Cratylus' stated position are stolen.³² But why, then, did Socrates not prevent this from the beginning? As we know from other dialogues, this would not be unsocratic behavior.

According to Nightingale, the answer is a laugh. Socrates, she writes, "mimics and mocks Cratylus' evasiveness" in order to illustrate "the dangers of [stolen] words".³³ Socrates does not only allow Cratylus to go on as an echo, but, to a large extent, also becomes such an echo himself.³⁴

When Plato makes Socrates say that one of the central characteristics of human language is its thievish nature, this is likely supposed to function as a warning. The *Cratylus* seems to be designed to make the reader experience the consequences of a discourse solely inhabited by dissembling strangers. Instead of being staged as a friendly conversation between persons with views that emerge from reason and their own serious considerations – the *Cratylus* is a play with stolen voices and words borrowed from others.³⁵

Deception in Speech

The third noteworthy characteristic that Socrates ascribes to language in his etymology of 'Hermes' has to do with "deception in speech" (ἀπατηλὸν ἐν λόγοις, 408a1).³⁶ The etymology

³¹ Nightingale, "Subtext and Subterfuge," 231.

³² Nightingale, "Subtext and Subterfuge," 231: "[t]he most obvious illustration of this notion is the fact that his views are put in the mouth of Socrates, who, in turn, ascribes them to Euthyphro".

³³ Nightingale, "Subtext and Subterfuge," 233.

³⁴ Alternatively, one may think that Cratylus' position is not stolen from Socrates, but from Heraclitus. Socrates just manages to capture it in a way that Cratylus can endorse. Even if there might be problems with some of Socrates' word choices, e.g. νομοθέτης, since they seem to be chosen to pick up on Hermogenes' conventionalist inclinations, there are reasons to take this line of thought seriously. I owe this remark to Alesia Preite.

³⁵ See Nightingale, "Subtext and Subterfuge," 235.

³⁶ One important and interesting problem that the etymology of Hermes raises in this context concerns its truth and seriousness. If language is deceptive, to what extent can we trust Socrates' words about this? In the literature, we find various solutions. One scholar puts it like this: "Would it [...] be possible that in examining the name 'Hermes' we are being deceived about the deceptive power of [language]? Clearly not, for then we would be in the impossible situation of being deceived by [language] into

itself – that Ἑρμῆς comes from εἶρειν and ἐμήσατο – contains no further information that could explain this. But Socrates’ subsequent remarks about the name Pan (Πᾶν) do. Pan is the son of Hermes and since it is no surprise “that brother resembles brother”, Pan is “either speech (λόγος) or the brother of speech” (408d2-3). Accordingly, we are not only dealing with everything (τὸ πᾶν), because language or speech means everything (ὁ λόγος τὸ πᾶν σημαίνει), but this is also a twofold (διπλός) phenomenon (408c2-3): As language makes all things circle around (408c2-3), it has both a true and a false part (408c3). The true part resides up among the gods (408c6) and the false, below, with the human multitude (408c6-7). In contrast to the smooth and divine (408c5) nature of the true part, the false is rough, goatish and tragic (τραχὺ καὶ τραγικόν, 408c7).³⁷ In contrast to the language of the gods, our language pertains to the tragic life (περὶ τὸν τραγικὸν βίον, 408c8) and is full of tales and falsehoods (οἱ μῦθοί τε καὶ τὰ ψεύδη, 408c8).

To clarify what he means, Socrates goes on to explain that Pan, or the personified all (ὁ πᾶν), is just like speech. Pan always moves around (ἀεὶ πῶν, 408c10) and is thus “rightly called goat-herd (αἰπόλος)” (408d1). As the double-natured (408b8) son of Hermes, Pan is smooth in his upper parts and rough and goat-like in his lower (τραχὺς καὶ τραγοειδής, 408c10-d2).

Even if a reader may not be fully satisfied with these playful justifications, they are nevertheless explanatory. Language is deceptive because it is double. We humans only have access to the lower realm, but fail to appreciate this fact. As pointed out by Rachel Barney, “we mistake one kind of language for the other, [confuse] the lower discourse for the higher, and take its objects to be the true realities”.³⁸

thinking that deception on the part of [language] is impossible”. Sallis, *Being and Logos*, 252. Another alternative is to think about this in terms of the so-called war of names, a point I owe to David Ebray. Sedley (*Plato’s Cratylus*, 98), for example, divides the etymologies into cosmological (397c-410e) and ethical (411a-421c) and claims that only one half of them are seriously meant. On this view, the etymology of Hermes would be one of the serious ones, and language, for Plato, would be deceptive. For discussion, see Trivigno, “Etymology and the Power,” 42. As I take it, the dubious or undecided status of Socrates’ words is not coincidence. If Plato wanted to show that language can only get us that far and that it cannot ultimately help us to decide what is true and what is false, what better way is there than to make the reader experience exactly that?

³⁷ LSJ has: “[τραγικός] in a double sense, ‘τὸ ψευδὲς τραχὺ καὶ τ.’ goatlike and tragic”.

³⁸ Barney, *Names and Nature*, 79.

The premises for this tragic conclusion are already established at the dialogue's outset. Regarding language and the correctness of names, Socrates explains, Homer says many great and wonderful things (391d6, see also 432b-e). One thing he says is that there is an important difference between human and divine language. While our names are often mistaken, the names used by the gods are always correct (391d8).

The river humans call Scamander (Σκάμανδρον), for example, should really be called Xanthus (Ξάνθον); and even if we call the bird cymindis (κύμινδις), the correct and divine name is chalcis (χαλκίδα).

As Socrates continues his etymological enterprise, he leaves little room for doubt. Even if Homer offers the opportunity to investigate the names used by gods, we are left on our own. The names used by the gods are not our business, because these matters are “greater than what you and I can discover” (ἀλλὰ ταῦτα μὲν ἴσως μείζω ἐστὶν ἢ κατ' ἐμὲ καὶ σὲ ἐξευρεῖν) (392b1-2). As humans, we are left with what is human. Our language is permeated by the shadows of lies. Its deceptive duality constantly misleads us. It does not contain any accessible divine information, and however much we try, it seems, our situation remains tragic.³⁹

Conclusion

The *Cratylus* is an evasive dialogue. Not only are there reasons to be suspicious of the etymological practice it outlines, but the dialogue's discussion of the relation between reality and language is also ambivalent. Socrates suggests both that we can weave names and verbs together to make beautiful wholes (425a1-2), and that the tragic nature of language makes all such efforts vain. In one sense, however, these perspectives do converge. As we learn from the *Phaedrus*, humans are birds without wings. We know what we would like our language to do. We can imagine what the language of the gods does. But we cannot fly. The commercial, thievish and deceptive characteristics of language correspond to both experiences, and Socrates' etymology of 'Hermes' seems to be designed to make exactly that point. The commercial treatment of language is not odd. We all want our words or names to be perfect, context-independent encapsulations of ultimate reality. This would make things so much easier. But they are not. And we cannot use someone else's words without a loss of meaning. But we still do, because language is thievish and deceptive. This does not mean that all hope is lost, but

³⁹ Pace Kirkland, “Logos as the Message”.

it does mean that Socrates might be right. Reality is to be sought through reality and names through names.

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