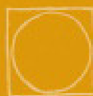

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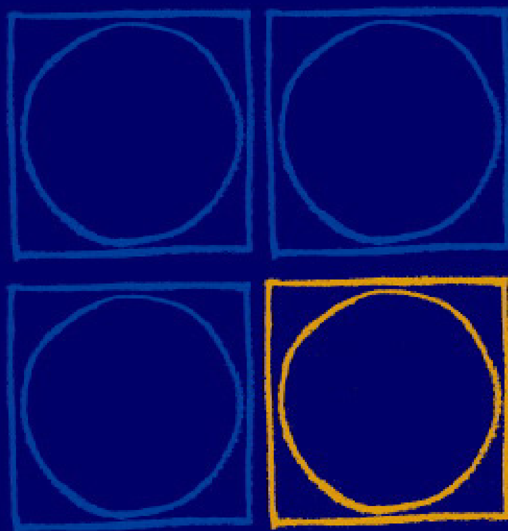

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DAVID SEDLEY is Laurence Professor of Ancient Philosophy at the University of Cambridge. His work has ranged over most periods and subject areas of Greek and Roman philosophy, including a number of editions of philosophical texts preserved on papyrus. He has been a visiting professor at Princeton, Berkeley, Yale and Cornell, and in 2004 will be the Sather Professor at Berkeley. He is the author of *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom* (Cambridge 1998) and (with A. A. Long) *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge 1987), as well as editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Philosophy* (Cambridge 2003). He has been editor of *Classical Quarterly* (1986–92) and, since 1998, of *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy.* He is a Fellow of the British Academy and a Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

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PLATO'S *CRATYLUS*

DAVID SEDLEY

Laurence Professor of Ancient Philosophy, University of Cambridge

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For the Classics Department of Cornell University,
with gratitude

Contents

Preface *page* ix

1 Author and text 1
  1 Plato and the dialogue 1
  2 An outline 3
  3 Date 6
  4 Late features 14
  5 Cratylus 16
  6 Plato's name 21
  7 Cratylus' etymological legacy 23

2 Plato the etymologist 25
  1 Etymology in the *Philebus* 25
  2 Taking etymology seriously 28
  3 The anthropological basis 30
  4 The skill of decoding 34
  5 *Eudaimonia* 38
  6 Not a joke 39
  7 Etymology as an expertise 41

3 Linguistic science 51
  1 Conventionalism 51
  2 Against Protagoras 54
  3 Names as instruments of instruction 59
  4 The dialectical function of names 62
  5 The variable quality of names 64
  6 The function of a name 65
  7 Linguistic lawmaking 66

4 Etymology at work 75
  1 Tradition and innovation 75
  2 Degrees of correctness 78
  3 Some principles of codification 80

4 A Platonic semantics 81
5 The limitations of personal names 86
6 Cosmological etymologies 89
7 Cosmic intelligence 90
8 Soul and body 96
9 Interim conclusion 97

5 The dominance of flux 99
1 Flux and being 99
2 Plato and flux 101
3 Flux etymologies 103
4 Dizziness over values 108
5 Flux and relativity 109
6 The ethical agenda 113
7 Change as a force for the good 114
8 Understanding as tracking change 119
9 The instability of values 121
10 Motion and rest 122
11 Retrospect 122

6 The limits of etymology 123
1 Introduction 123
2 Halting the regress 123
3 The taxonomy of sounds 128
4 Cratylus and falsity 131
5 Interim findings 138
6 The need for convention 138
7 Breaking the deadlock 143
8 Resemblance vindicated 145

7 A Platonic outcome 147
1 The principles of etymology 147
2 Moral semantics 151
3 Words and things 153
4 Personal and foreign names 154
5 The philosophical curriculum 156
6 No knowledge through names 159
7 Names and descriptions 162
8 Forms and flux 164
9 The parting of ways 171

References 174
Index locorum 179
General index 188

Preface

This book has a triple origin.

First, it is the book-length version of an article which I published in 1998, 'The etymologies in Plato's *Cratylus*' (*Journal of Hellenic Studies* 118). That article itself had grown out of a long-held conviction that the main obstacle to an adequate understanding of this under-appreciated dialogue was – and had been for a century and a quarter – the refusal to accept as seriously meant the long series of etymologies which occupies nearly two thirds of the dialogue. The conviction had been strengthened by a seminar on the dialogue at Cambridge over a six-month period in 1994–5, at which a division on this issue dominated much of our discussion. Consequently the book's genesis owes a good deal of its impetus to my Cambridge colleagues of the time, on whichever side of the divide they may happen to have taken up arms: especially Malcolm Schofield, Geoffrey Lloyd, Robert Wardy and Myles Burnyeat, the last of whom helped develop a number of the core ideas that have gone into my argument.

Second, the book is a monograph planned and designed for the new Cambridge University Press series which it is helping to inaugurate, 'Cambridge Studies in the Dialogues of Plato'. Its conception and execution owe a great deal to the advice and encouragement of the series editor, Mary Margaret McCabe, as also to Pauline Hire and Michael Sharp as successive Classics editors for CUP.

Third, it is the book of the Townsend Lectures which I gave under the title 'Plato's *Cratylus*' at Cornell University in the fall semester of 2001. Its seven-chapter structure retains the format and the greater part of the content of that seven-lecture series, even though it has been substantially revised since. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to the Classics Department at Cornell both for inviting me and for providing so congenial and stimulating an environment in which to pursue the project; to Hayden Pelliccia, the departmental Chair, for his kindness and support; and to him and many other members of both this and other Cornell departments for their

perceptive and probing contributions to discussion during the lecture series. In particular, among these last, I must mention Fred Ahl, Charles Brittain, Gail Fine, Terry Irwin, Christopher Minkowski, Piero Pucci, Zoltan Szabó and Jennifer Whiting; but many others, including the excellent team of graduate students, contributed illuminatingly to my interrogation. I also learnt a great deal from the reading group on the *Cratylus* which Charles Brittain organised and ran during my stay. It was a cause of sadness that Norman Kretzmann, whose seminal article on the *Cratylus* published thirty years earlier gives Cornell a special place in the history of this dialogue's interpretation, did not live to be there during my stay.

Apart from Cambridge and Cornell, parts of my argument have been aired over the years to audiences at Ann Arbor, Berkeley, Bristol, Chicago, Claremont (Pomona College), Macerata, Montreal (McGill University), Notre Dame, Oxford, Pittsburgh, Princeton, and Washington DC (Center for Hellenic Studies). Numerous people present on those occasions contributed, interrogatively or constructively, to the evolution of my ideas.

Individuals who have supplied helpful comments or advice on particular issues include Francesco Ademollo, Barbara Anceschi, Catherine Atherton, Bert van den Berg, Gabor Betegh, David Blank, Fernanda Decleva Caizzi, Antonio Carlini, Cathérine Dalimier, Sylvain Delcomminette, Helma Dik, Alice van Harten, Amalia Herrmann, Richard Hunter, Jim Lennox, Tony Long, Dave Mankin, Glenn Most, Reviel Netz, David Reeve, Malcolm Schofield, Alan Silverman, Imogen Smith, Voula Tsouna, Alexander Verlinsky, Robert Wardy, Linda Woodward (as copy editor), and an anonymous referee for the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*.

Terry Irwin sent me extensive comments, week by week, on the Townsend Lectures, and Mantas Adomenas, Christopher Bobonich, Myles Burnyeat, Gail Fine, Mary Margaret McCabe and Ronald Polansky were kind enough to read, and supply comments on, a complete first draft of the book. Whether or not the result goes any way towards satisfying them, they have made a significant difference to the finished product.

Those who have been kind enough to let me read their unpublished work on the *Cratylus* include Francesco Ademollo, Mantas Adomenas and Ronald Polansky.

Although in the course of the book I engage with a certain cross-section of the modern literature, it has not been part of my aim to examine existing interpretations systematically (fortunately Derbolav (1972) 221–312 includes a most helpful survey of literature on the *Cratylus* over the preceding 150 years). I would therefore like to single out here three recent books which set a high standard for anyone attempting to write about the *Cratylus*.

Timothy Baxter's *The Cratylus: Plato's Critique of Naming* (1992), which I first encountered when I served as an examiner for his Ph.D. thesis, is an unfailingly skilful interpretation of the dialogue. It has the further merit of allocating extensive space to the etymologies, and is in many ways the best available development and defence of the approach which I oppose, the one which takes the etymologies as fundamentally non-serious and satirical. Cathérine Dalimier's 1998 French translation with commentary in the Flammarion Plato series is a valuable tool of scholarship, and one with whose interpretations I repeatedly find myself in sympathy. And Rachel Barney's *Names and Nature in Plato's Cratylus* (2001) is a study which for its sheer quality and capacity for illumination should be read by everybody interested in this dialogue; it appeared only after I had completed my first draft, but I have learnt a lot from it during the revision process.

Especial thanks are due to the University of Cambridge and to Christ's College for the leave granted me in 2001–2, without which I would have struggled to get the book written at all.

During the writing of this book my wife and children have shown their usual amused tolerance of my obsessive working habits. I cannot begin to express what their love and support have meant to me over the years.

CHAPTER I

Author and text

I PLATO AND THE DIALOGUE

Why did Plato write dialogues? His motive for favouring this format has sometimes been construed as a kind of radical self-distancing:[1] as the mere dramatist of the conversations rather than a participant in them, Plato enables himself to suppress his own authorial voice, avoiding any degree of commitment that might obviate further thought by himself or the reader. I am reluctant to go all the way with this. Plato is an overwhelming presence in his dialogues. Most of his readers over two and half millennia have found it hard not to speak of, think of, and criticise the ideas and arguments defended in the dialogues as Plato's own, and we too should feel no embarrassment about talking that way.

Plato's real reason for persisting with the dialogue form is, I think, a very different one, his growing belief – more than once made explicit in his later work[2] – that conversation, in the form of question and answer, is the structure of thought itself. When we think, what we are doing is precisely to ask and answer questions internally, and our judgements are the outcome of that same process. Hence it seems that what Plato dramatises as external conversations can be internalised by us, the readers, as setting the model for our own processes of philosophical reasoning. More important still is the converse, that these same question-and-answer sequences can legitimately be read by us as *Plato thinking aloud*. And that, I suggest, is in the last analysis how Plato maintains the dominating and inescapable presence in his own dialogues that few if any mere dramatists can rival.

[1] M. Frede 1992, Wardy 1996: 52–6, most chapters of Press 2000, and Blondell 2002: 18–21; a more nuanced version in Cooper 1997: xviii–xxv. The more traditional view, which I broadly favour, is expounded by Kraut 1992: 25–30, Irwin 1992: 77–8, Barney 2001: 18–20. In Sedley forthcoming I argue for a separation of main speaker from author in the *Theaetetus*, but even there I maintain that the authorial voice is a strong presence throughout.

[2] *Tht.* 189e–190a, *Sph.* 263e–264b, *Phlb.* 38c–e.

They are an externalisation of his own thought-processes.[3] Plato's very word for philosophical method, 'dialectic', means quite literally the science of conducting a conversation in this question-and-answer form, and it is vital to appreciate that the inter-personal discussion portrayed in the dialogues is not the only mode in which such discussion can occur: internal discussion is another, and perhaps even more fundamental, mode.

One might at first feel inclined to restrict any such description of the dialogues, as Plato thinking aloud, to the stretches of co-operative dialectic portrayed in his writings, the ones where questioner and respondent are engaged in a joint search for the truth: surely that is the only kind of interrogation that can plausibly be thought to have its counterpart in one person's internal reasoning? But no, Plato imposes no such restriction. In his *Charmides* (166c–d), at a point where Critias has just complained about Socrates' attempt to refute him, Socrates remarks that what he has been doing to Critias is no different from what he might well do to himself, namely cross-question himself out of fear that he may inadvertently think he knows something which in fact he does not know. Thus even adversarial questioning aimed at refutation is a proper style of internal reasoning. You or I may well have a tendency to some belief, along with the intellectual resources to challenge and refute that very same belief: to bring the two into opposition is simply to think self-critically.

In the *Cratylus* this issue of the relation of dialectic to Plato's own thought becomes crucial for two reasons. First, both styles of dialectic – the co-operative and the adversarial – play their part in it. Second, there is a very particular circumstance that enables Plato's own thinking to be read off from the flow of the conversation. I mean by this the fact that the two main points of view that, as the dialogue proceeds, come increasingly into conflict, represent two main elements of Plato's own intellectual background. For the confrontation is between the thinker who was the first major intellectual influence on Plato, namely Cratylus, and Socrates, to whom Plato in due course definitively transferred his allegiance. In writing a dialogue in which the second of these interrogates the first and puts him in his place, Plato

[3] Although Plato's dialogues had their historical origin in the genre of the Socratic dialogue, there is no reason to think that any other practitioners of this genre developed their own philosophy by means of it in a way comparable to Plato. (On Plato's relation to this background, see the excellent chapter 1 of Kahn 1996.) What for him no doubt started out as the external imitation of Socratic questioning gave way in time to the conviction that Socratic dialogical conversation *is* philosophy. Cf. *Gorg.* 505c–507b, where, in the absence of a willing interlocutor, Socrates still keeps the argument going in question-and-answer form, and *Hippias Major*, where the anonymous dialectician continually cited as challenging Socrates turns out at the end to be, in effect, his own inner voice, even though it says only what anyone might have said (298d6).

is thinking aloud in a very particular way: he is sorting out the relation between two major components in his own intellectual make-up. That is, at any rate, how I shall be attempting to read the dialogue. And it is among the reasons why, in my final chapter, I will not hesitate to attribute the dialogue's conclusions to its author.

2 AN OUTLINE

At this point it is a good idea to recapitulate the contents of the *Cratylus*, because even to seasoned readers of Plato it is not always a very familiar text.[4]

The conversation, which carries no adequate indication of dramatic date,[5] involves three parties: Socrates, Cratylus and Hermogenes. Of these, Socrates needs no introduction, and Hermogenes was likely to be familiar to readers as an inner member of the Socratic circle, later present at Socrates' trial and execution.[6] Of Cratylus I shall have much more to say later in this chapter, although Hermogenes will have to await Chapter 3 for his own day in court.

Part I (383a–390e)

Cratylus and Hermogenes have already been engaged in heated debate, and as the dialogue begins, without any of the usual prefatory material, we find them approaching Socrates and inviting him to act as umpire. Their dispute is about the 'correctness of names' – what makes a name a *correct* name? The two positions that quickly emerge are ones which commentators on the dialogue label linguistic 'naturalism' and 'conventionalism'.[7] Cratylus

[4] The only translation into accessible modern English is Reeve 1998. However, all translations in this book will be my own. The text followed, except where otherwise indicated, will be the excellent new Oxford Classical Text – Duke et al. 1995 – which I shall refer to as OCT^2. I also follow its line numbering, which differs slightly from previous editions.

[5] Allan (1954) dates the dialogue dramatically to 399, on the evidence of Socrates' playful suggestions that his etymologies have been inspired by Euthyphro, with whom he says he spent time this very morning: Allan takes this to be a reference to the dialogue *Euthyphro*, set in 399 just before Socrates' trial. Against Allan's arguments, see those of Owen summarised by Baxter (1992: 28 n. 73): (a) on the day of *Crat.* Socrates was with Euthyphro 'from dawn' (396d5), whereas the *Euthyphro* conversation cannot be held nearly so early because dramatically it follows the *Theaetetus* conversation (*Tht.* 210d2–4, *Euthyphro* 2a1–b11); (b) in *Euthyphro* we are shown the entire conversation between Socrates and Euthyphro, and it includes no etymology at all. If I am right, §5 below (pp. 18–21), that the conversation predates Cratylus' full conversion to Heracliteanism, it therefore predates by longer Plato's own Cratylean phase, which itself predated his years with Socrates, putting the dramatic date at least a decade before Socrates' death in 399.

[6] Trial: Xen. *Apol.* 2. Execution: Plato, *Phd.* 59b.

[7] This terminology was, I believe, introduced by Kretzmann (1971).

holds that all names – a loose linguistic category, understood as including common nouns and adjectives as well as proper names – belong naturally to their nominata. Each thing has its own natural name (whether just one, or potentially more than one, he never specifies): call it anything else, and that is not its name at all. He has, before the start of the dialogue, intensely annoyed Hermogenes by informing him that Hermogenes is not his real name.

Hermogenes himself replies that, on the contrary, nothing but arbitrary convention determines what is the name of what. If his parents named him Hermogenes, he means, that is all it takes or could take to make Hermogenes his name. Any given human group, of whatever size, has complete power to determine for itself its names for things. When pressed, Hermogenes accepts as the limiting case of his conventionalist position that we may each legitimately have our own private name for each thing, kept distinct from that same thing's public name. There is no reason in the world why my own private name for the thing whose public name is 'man' should not be 'horse'.

Thus far Hermogenes' position seems, at least as far as Plato's own intentions are concerned, totally unobjectionable.[8] It is only now that Socrates launches a critique of his stance, in several stages.

385e–386d: In the first stage, Hermogenes is helped to see why he disbelieves in the kind of relativism preached by the sophist Protagoras, according to which each individual's viewpoint is decisive in determining what is true for that individual.

386d–387c: Hence Hermogenes goes on to accept, against Protagoras, that things have their own objective natures, and that there are therefore objective skills for dealing with them. Speaking is one such skill, and naming too, being one part or species of speaking, must also be an objective expertise.

387c–388c: Naming is in fact a skill analogous to cutting or weaving. Like other skills, it has its own tools, viz. names. A name is a tool used for instructing by separating being, much as a shuttle is a tool for separating the threads of a web.

388c–390e: Being a tool of this kind, a name needs to be properly made to do its job. We must therefore postulate a name-making craftsman, the 'lawmaker' or *nomothetēs*, who looks to the Form of name, and embodies it in letters and syllables. Different languages arise from the fact that different sounds can be used for embodying the same Form or function, just as a

[8] This, however, is controversial: see Ch. 3 §1 below (pp. 51–4).

drill can be made out of more than one kind of metal. Finally, just as any manufacturer must take instructions from the expert who will be using the tool once it is made, so the name-maker must take his instructions from the name-user *par excellence*, who is the dialectician.

Part II (390e–427d)

390e–427d: The final stage of Hermogenes' refutation (for that is surely their strategic function in the dialogue)[9] is the etymologies, which constitute the large central section of the dialogue. Socrates demonstrates over a massive range of terms how names can be judged to have been expertly manufactured in ancient times so as to impart information about their nominata. First he dissects a set of Homeric names, as establishing a strong *prima facie* case for the principle that names are expertly encoded descriptions. Then he works systematically through a series of cosmological terms, starting with theology and continuing with physics, before turning to the vocabulary relating to virtues and vices, both moral and intellectual, which he interprets as conveying the picture of everything as being in flux. Finally, in this section, he asks how the atomic names of which longer names are composed get their own meaning, and concludes that this comes from the imitative significance of primary sounds, corresponding to single letters of the alphabet.

Part III (427d–440e)

Socrates donates this whole etymological survey to Cratylus. Cratylus welcomes it as confirming his naturalist stance. But from now on Cratylus is himself put in the line of fire. Socrates shows that, however well a name may describe, it is likely to be less than a perfect description of its nominatum, and linguistic convention must play some part. He goes on to argue that names are not a secure route to the truth about their nominata, (a) because the name-maker may not have known the truth, (b) because they do not tell as coherent a story as Cratylus hoped. Rather than channel our inquiries through names, we should directly investigate the things themselves. Besides, the thesis that everything is in flux, which the etymologies supported, must be false about at least one set of entities, namely the Forms.

[9] At 390d9–391a3 Hermogenes accepts that his original conventionalist position has been defeated, and the etymologies then follow in response to his request for further elucidation of the naturalist position which Socrates has now vindicated in its place.

3 DATE

I apologise both for the length and for the brevity of the above summary. One feature which it brought out was that the Socrates portrayed in this dialogue is a proponent of Forms – Platonic separated Forms, often called the Ideas. These are, moreover, presented in terms which most readers recognise as typical of Plato's so-called 'middle-period' dialogues – dialogues like the *Phaedo* and *Republic*, in which what one may dare call a 'classical theory' of Forms is in evidence.[10] Is the *Cratylus* itself a middle-period dialogue? That is a favoured, but not unanimous, view among modern scholars.[11]

Platonic chronology has been a major industry over the last century and more,[12] and although it remains contentious in certain aspects what remains most remarkable is, I think, the degree of consensus that has emerged. What the vast majority of scholars would agree on is that Plato started out, probably soon after Socrates' execution in 399 BC, by joining in the current fashion for writing Socratic dialogues, seeking to capture and keep alive whatever it was that had been unique and compelling about Socrates' way of so conversing with people as to force them to rethink their own lives and values. At some point, the consensus continues, Plato became more optimistic than Socrates had been about finding the answers to the key questions regarding value and knowledge, and increasingly put into Socrates' mouth positive doctrines about the soul, about the nature of justice, and about the metaphysical nature of the objects of inquiry, a process which culminated in the postulation of a separate realm of transcendent entities, the Forms. This constitutes his middle period. His late period, finally, is marked by a variety of characteristics – the disappearance of Socrates from the lead role in most dialogues, major reconsideration of his earlier utopianism, a new concern with systematic conceptual analysis by the method of division, a foray into the study of physics in his supremely influential dialogue the *Timaeus*, and much more besides. In some sense this is a developmental hypothesis, but whether that development involved

[10] Irwin (1977: 2) argues that the forms at 439c–440d are not separated Platonic Forms, merely stable natures, believed in as much by the historical Socrates as by Plato. On this, see Ch. 7 §8 below (esp. p. 167 n. 36).

[11] Pre-*Republic*: many, including Ross 1955, Luce 1964, Calvert 1970, Kahn 1973, Levin 2001: 4 n. 4. Close to the *Theaetetus*: Kirk 1951, Allan 1954, Barney 2001: 3–4 n. 4. From the late 'critical' group of dialogues: Owen 1953: n. 39, Mackenzie 1986.

[12] For judicious recent surveys, especially regarding how much we can hope to learn from stylometry, see Young 1994, Kahn 2002.

Plato actually recanting any of his earlier views is a separate question, on which I shall have a little to say later.

The science, or quasi-science, of stylometry – the statistical analysis of an author's style as a dating tool – has to some extent fostered or confirmed this picture. The supposedly late group of dialogues – *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Timaeus*, *Critias*, *Philebus* and *Laws* – have certain stylistic features in common, including most famously a systematic avoidance of hiatus between words. That, of this group, at least the *Laws* was a late product – indeed, Plato's last – was already a matter of consensus in antiquity. A further group – *Republic*, *Theaetetus*, *Parmenides* and *Phaedrus* – have enough of these same features to be classified as somehow transitional to the late period. And that is all: the remaining dialogues cannot be convincingly ordered on the basis of stylistic evidence, and for these we have to fall back on our better- or worse-founded preconceptions about how Plato's development is likely to have proceeded. Nevertheless, as far as it takes us the stylometric evidence is in encouraging agreement with the chronological hypothesis.[13]

There have been some recent proposals to jettison this whole chronological structure,[14] but in my view they represent, so far at least, little more than the understandable fact that people are getting bored with it. There is actually much to lose if we say goodbye to it. For by reading Plato's development along the lines I have summarised, we are enabled to understand how the youthful admirer of the maverick critic Socrates became in time the teacher of Aristotle and the august founder of a metaphysical system which was to dominate philosophy for the last half-millennium of antiquity and well beyond.

Such, at any rate, is my justification for continuing to assume the traditional chronology. The present question is simply, where does the *Cratylus* fit into it? And my answer is: not in any one place. Regardless of when it may have been first composed, I see very good reason to assume that the *Cratylus* which we have is a second or later edition, incorporating changes made by Plato himself in later life. There are two initial items of evidence that point this way.

Towards the end of the dialogue, at 437d–438a, one major manuscript, the Vindobonensis, carries an extra passage which was clearly intended as a

[13] The lack of a stylistic criterion to separate 'early' from 'middle' should not be invoked as counter-evidence to this thesis. There was no reason for major philosophical changes to coincide with detectable stylistic changes.

[14] Notably Annas 2002.

direct alternative to what the whole tradition has in the lines 438a3–b7. The new Oxford Classical Text of Plato rightly recognises the intrusive passage as a genuine variant from Plato's own pen.[15]

The version preserved by the main tradition reads as follows (438a3–b4):

SOCR. . . . but let's go back to where we were before we got here. A little earlier, if you recall, you said that one who assigns names must necessarily possess knowledge when assigning names to the things he assigns them to. Is that what you still think, or not?

CRAT. I still do.

SOCR. Are you saying that even the person who assigned the *first* names possessed knowledge when assigning them.

CRAT. Yes.

SOCR. Well from what kind of names had he either learnt or discovered about things, if the first names had not yet been assigned, and if, furthermore, we say that it is impossible to learn and discover about things in any way other than by learning about their names or by finding out for ourselves what the things are like?

CRAT. I think you've got a point there, Socrates.

The variant version (437d10–438a2) reads like this:

SOCR. . . . But let's consider whether or not you agree on the following too. Listen, weren't we recently agreeing that those who at any given time assign names in cities, Greek and foreign cities alike, are lawmakers and practise the expertise which has the capacity to do this, namely the legislative art?

CRAT. Absolutely.

SOCR. Well tell me, did the first lawmakers assign the first names with knowledge of the things, or in ignorance of them?

CRAT. With knowledge, I'd say, Socrates.

SOCR. Yes, they presumably didn't do it in ignorance, my friend Cratylus.

CRAT. I don't think so.

Apparently both versions then resume with the mainstream text, as follows (438b4–7):[16]

SOCR. Then how are we to say that they possessed knowledge when they assigned names, or that lawmakers exist before any name whatsoever has even been assigned

[15] The passage's Platonic authorship has now been fully and convincingly argued by Valenti (1998). For a conspectus of other views on its authorship, see Dorandi 2000: 169–72.

[16] I am thus not following Kapp and the OCT[2] in transferring these lines to the variant version, nor the latter in its consequent deletion of δοκεῖς τί μοι λέγειν, ὦ Σώκρατες after b3. It is quite true that the use of the plural at 438b4–7 goes more smoothly with the variant version than with our mainstream text, but I take that to be a vestige of the imperfect editorial process whereby Plato supplanted the former with the latter. See also Valenti (1998) on this question.

and they have knowledge, if it is impossible to learn about things other than from names?

It is, I think, easy enough to see that the variant version could not belong to the *Cratylus* as we now have it, and must in fact belong to an earlier, superseded edition. In our text, Cratylus has already asserted a few pages earlier, at 436b–c, that the original namegivers had the advantage of privileged knowledge, which they embodied in the names they assigned to things. Socrates' new question is: if – as Cratylus immediately confirms – that assumption applies even to the very first of all the namegivers, where did *he* get the knowledge from? In order to launch the new question, Socrates simply refers back to Cratylus' recent assertion. The variant version, by contrast, was evidently written for an edition of the *Cratylus* in which that previous part of the conversation had not taken place;[17] which is why, in it, Socrates initiates his new move by first reminding Cratylus of their earlier agreement that names are produced by specialist namegivers or 'lawmakers', then proceeding to *ask* him – apparently for the first time – whether or not the original lawmakers had knowledge. To this extent, the change is simply a mechanical adjustment designed to accommodate changes made elsewhere in the dialogue.

But Plato has also taken the opportunity to introduce a philosophically significant correction. In the superseded version, Socrates and Cratylus both *agree* that the lawmakers who introduced the very first names must have had knowledge about the things they were naming. This is completely out of tune with the *Cratylus* as we have it, in which the lawmaker is a specialist in name-design alone, while understanding of the objects named, if available at all, is the province of his natural overseer, the dialectician (388c–390e). Nowhere is it so much as hinted by Socrates, on his own behalf, that the early linguistic lawmakers themselves had knowledge of the things they were naming.[18] In the revised version the unwanted implication has been edited out. The lawmakers, those specialists whom Socrates himself originally brought into the discussion, are no longer mentioned here, and the assertion that the first name-maker must have had knowledge is now put into Cratylus' mouth alone, just as elsewhere in the dialogue (e.g. 436b5–d4), without Socrates indicating his agreement. It seems, then, that in the

[17] The variant version at 437e3–4 refers back to a passage in which Socrates and Cratylus agreed on the existence of a 'legislative art', νομοθετική τέχνη. This may be a reference to 428e–429a, but the impression given is that the passage cited is one that used the term νομοθετική explicitly, in which case once more it is a passage no longer in our text.

[18] The knowledge possessed by name-makers at 424b–d, according to Socrates, is only knowledge of how to correlate sounds to things, not knowledge of the things.

earlier edition which shows through in the variant passage Plato had not yet introduced the separation of roles between the linguistic lawmaker and his overseer, the dialectician, but had postulated the former as a specialist embodying both roles. Here it may be significant that the separation of their roles is based on a hierarchical distinction between manufacturer and user which – leaving aside the *Cratylus* itself – does not occur in Plato's dialogues until *Republic* x (see Chapter 3 §4 below (pp. 62–4)).

Here then we have a rare glimpse of an editorial process which has every chance of dating from Plato's own lifetime. Some Platonic scholar in antiquity, we may conjecture, came across an early edition of the *Cratylus* and copied variant versions of passages into the margin; in due course, it seems, one of them got mistakenly copied into the text, and survived in one branch of the subsequent tradition. Whether this earlier *Cratylus* was one that had been published and had entered the public domain, or a draft preserved privately in the Academy, is likely to be and remain a matter for pure speculation.[19]

Once we recognise that this has happened, a rather more interesting second case springs to light. A passage at 385b2–d1 looks thoroughly out of place, since it interrupts a continuous argument[20] with which it has no apparent connection. In an influential article, Malcolm Schofield[21] pointed this out and proposed that it should be transposed to a slightly later position, immediately after 387c6. Like the editors of the new Oxford Classical Text, among others, I agree with Schofield that the passage cannot belong where it now stands,[22] but also agree with them that it cannot with sufficient

[19] In the Roman literary world, for which we have much better evidence on publication procedures, there would be no doubt that two successive published editions were a possibility (Cicero's *Academica* being probably the best-known case so far as philosophical works are concerned). For the Greek world we have less evidence, but still sufficient. See Emonds 1941, Dorandi 2000 (esp. ch. 6), Heyworth and Wilson 1997. Regarding Plato, there is one partial parallel in the variant proem to the *Theaetetus* which was said to be 'in circulation' (φέρεται: anon. *In Tht.* 3.28–37) around the time of the early empire; whether it was genuine or (as the source believes) spurious, it provides some evidence for the continuing circulation of variant drafts of Platonic texts; and it may well represent an earlier edition (προέκδοσις) of the *Theaetetus*. Plato himself refers to premature publication of a work at *Prm.* 128a6–e1, where his character Zeno complains that his youthful treatise was published in a pirate edition without his consent; Zeno does not, however, give any indication that he has subsequently revised it.

[20] Omitting it, we get a completely smooth transition from 385a1–b1 (whatever each person calls a thing is its name) to 385d2 (therefore, what each person says is a thing's name is its name).

[21] Schofield 1972. His transposition is adopted by Reeve (1998), and endorsed by Barney (2001: 28 n. 9).

[22] Baxter (1992: 32–7) and Ademollo (forthcoming) argue for its appropriateness to its present context, but it seems to me that their arguments can at best show that it is appropriate to the dialogue as a whole, and not to the exact location.

plausibility be transposed to the position suggested by Schofield,[23] or indeed anywhere else in the dialogue as we have it. Given the parallel we have already encountered, I find it an almost irresistible further conclusion that this passage too is an accidental survivor from an earlier edition of the *Cratylus*, differing from the previous passage only in that it has intruded into the entire MS tradition, not just one branch of it.

Moreover, the content of the intrusive passage tells a singularly intriguing story. It is far from being a mechanically transposed stretch of text, comparable for example to what happens when a single leaf of a codex gets displaced. Untypically of mere accidents in textual transmission, the floating passage is a complete argument with a beginning, a middle and an end. It reads as follows:

SOCR. Now tell me: is there something which you call speaking truly and falsely?
HERM. Yes.
SOCR. So there can be a true statement (*logos*), and another can be false?
HERM. Certainly.
SOCR. Is it then the one which states things that are as they are that is true, and the one which states them as they are not that is false?
HERM. Yes.
SOCR. So this is a property of a statement, to state things which are and things which are not?[24]
HERM. Certainly.
SOCR. Now take a true statement. Is all of it true but its parts not true?
HERM. No, its parts are true too.
SOCR. Are its large parts true but not its small parts? Or all of them?
HERM. All, I think.
SOCR. Well then, is there anything else that you call a smaller part of a statement than a name?
HERM. No, that's the smallest.
SOCR. So in a true statement, even the name is stated?
HERM. Yes.
SOCR. And it is true, according to you?
HERM. Yes.
SOCR. And in a false statement isn't the part false?
HERM. That's what I say.
SOCR. Then it is possible to state a false or a true name, if one can also do so with a statement?
HERM. It must be.

Here Socrates maintains that, since a whole statement (*logos*) can be true or false, so can its minimal components, individual 'names'. The principle

[23] See below, p. 59 n. 18.
[24] I place the comma in this line, 385b10, after rather than before λόγῳ.

applied is that if the whole is true then so is *any* of its parts, large or small. These parts include at the lowest level its individual component words ('names'), but also, by implication, any larger phrases or other units contained in the statement.

With good reason, no one has doubted that this little argument was written by Plato for the dialogue in which it now appears, where the capacity of individual words to embody truths is after all a key issue. In Plato's late dialogue the *Sophist*, on the other hand, it is argued on the contrary that truth and falsity belong to complete statements (*logoi*), and are *not* traceable down to their individual component words, but depend on their asymmetric *combination* of a naming expression with a predicate expression.

While it seems harmless for Socrates, later in the *Cratylus*, to call individual words 'true' to the extent that they provide true information about the objects they name (437d5–6, 438d7–8),[25] the presuppositions of the reductive argument used here have no parallel elsewhere in the *Cratylus*, and, unlike anything else in this dialogue, are in direct and overt conflict with the *Sophist*. Part III of the *Cratylus* explicitly analyses statements as combinations of names with predicates (431b–c, cf. 425a), to all appearances doing its best to make allowance for the distinctions clarified in the *Sophist*.[26]

By contrast, the intrusive passage that we have encountered early in the *Cratylus* equally explicitly traces the truth and falsity of statements all the way down to those of individual words as such, in a way which Plato, with the hindsight of his work set down in the *Sophist*, must have found hard to endorse. For not only does the passage describe individual words as true or false in themselves, but its underlying assumption is that truth and falsity belong to the whole statement and to its parts *in exactly the same way*, as when one describes both a stick and each part of it as likewise wooden. It is a familiar fact that to infer from the properties of the part to the properties of the whole, or vice versa, is a frequent source of fallacy

[25] Fine (1977) argues that the 'truth' attached to names in our passage is properly explicated by later passages like 431a, in which names are said to be truly or falsely attached to things in ordinary linguistic acts. If so, the relevance of this kind of truth to the present passage would be even harder to fathom, since it would appear to have nothing whatsoever to do with Hermogenes' refutation (he had no reason to deny that language is used to make both true and false statements). However, it is much likelier that the usage looks forward to the passages (437d5–6, 438d7–8) where names are themselves actually called 'true', with reference to their true informational content about their nominata. That kind of truth *is* directly relevant to the refutation of Hermogenes (if names aim to be informative about their nominata, it will no longer be the case that any name is as good as any other), and can therefore, on the hypothesis I am defending, at least explain why the intrusive passage was thought to belong somewhere in this part of the dialogue.

[26] See further, Ch. 7 §7 below (pp. 162–4).

(the so-called fallacies of Composition and Division),[27] as it would for instance be fallacious to infer that because I am now eating lunch a part of me, my left knee, is now eating lunch. But even regardless of the potential fallacy, the argument explicitly endorses a view which is positively rejected in the *Sophist*, namely that the truth which we associate with statements is traceable down to their individual component words. There is surely some link between the obvious facts that the passage on the truth and falsity of names (a) fails to fit structurally into the *Cratylus* as we now have it, and (b) appears, unlike any other part of the dialogue's linguistic theory, in blatant conflict with Plato's findings in the *Sophist*.

If I am right, a passage carrying a self-contained argument which Plato must have later come to think of as seriously mistaken appeared in an early edition of the *Cratylus* but was meant to be excluded from the later edition which we possess. The text, it seems, underwent enough other alteration for the gap left by this surgical excision to close up seamlessly, so that the passage cannot be satisfactorily reinserted into the text as it has come down to us, and instead has survived by being mechanically copied in at a point where it plainly does not fit. The likely explanation is once again that an early Platonic scholar, coming upon the first edition of the dialogue, copied the offending passage into the margin, presumably as close as he could get it to the part of the dialogue in which it originally occurred, and that, as in the previous case, it got inadvertently copied into the text.

We have now met two intrusive passages apparently written for a version or versions of the *Cratylus* which differed from ours. Either one of these oddities might perhaps have been somehow discounted or explained away, but in combination they seem to me to make an exceptionally strong case for the revised-edition hypothesis that I am proposing. There is little evidence to support any similar story for other Platonic dialogues, although we do know that a variant proem to the *Theaetetus*, possibly authentic, was in circulation in antiquity.[28] It could be that other dialogues too are, as we now have them, revised editions but that their first editions or drafts were, for whatever reason, unavailable to Platonic scholars and therefore left no trace on the MS tradition. However, I somehow doubt this. It is surely no coincidence that it should be of all Plato's writings the *Cratylus*, a dialogue that modern scholars have found peculiarly hard to date, in which, equally peculiarly, evidence of two different strata presents itself. I strongly favour

[27] Cf. R. Robinson (1956: 123, 131), although I agree with Fine (1977: 295 n. 17) against Robinson that the fallacy of composition is not committed at 431b. See *Hipp. Ma.* 300a–303c for Plato's own exposition of these fallacies.

[28] Above, n. 19.

the hypothesis that the hard core of the dialogue as we have it belongs not later than the middle of Plato's middle period – as is suggested by the combination of the stylometric data, the presence of the middle-period Form theory, and, although I hesitate to speak so impressionistically, the overall feel of the dialogue – but that at least some of it was rewritten late in his career, quite possibly close to the date of the *Sophist*. Because the dialogue's concern with language, truth and signification was untypical of Plato's early and middle periods, but close to his heart at the time he wrote the *Sophist*, the decision to issue a revised and corrected edition makes ready sense.

4 LATE FEATURES

Once one starts off down this road, the prospect of finding other late changes or insertions becomes an alluring one. I have two to offer, and hope that in time more may materialise.

The first is the concept of aether. It is well known that Plato, in his late dialogue the *Timaeus*, adheres to the traditional list of four elements – earth, air, fire and water – and that it was Aristotle who added a fifth, aether, which he considered the stuff of the heavens. In the *Timaeus* 'aether' is still simply one species of fire (58d), not a distinct element in its own right. I say it is well known, but actually it is open to doubt. Plato's pupil Xenocrates, at any rate, reported that his master had already himself considered aether a distinct element.[29] And that prior claim to ownership finds some confirmation in the *Epinomis*, which continues the conversation of Plato's last dialogue, the *Laws*. It was already believed in antiquity that this little appendix to the *Laws* was written after Plato's death by his secretary Philip of Opus. To judge from its heterogeneity of styles, the probability seems to me to be that Philip compiled it partly out of authentic material left over by Plato from the writing of the *Laws*, to which his job gave him possibly unique access, partly from Philip's own somewhat appalling literary efforts. But he clearly wanted to claim that all of it was, in some sense, Plato's work, and I see no reason to doubt that, broadly speaking, so it is. Now one prominent feature of the *Epinomis* is its inclusion of aether as a fifth element. Combined with Xenocrates' report, this seems to me to be rather good evidence that Plato was already interested in separating aether as a distinct element, even if the idea never found its way into his dialogues as a formal proposal.

[29] Xenocrates frr. 264–6 Isnardi Parente = fr. 53 Heinze: a verbatim quotation from Xenocrates' *Life of Plato* preserved by Simpl. *In Ar. Phys.* 1165.33–8, *In Ar. De caelo* 12.21–6, 87.20–6. For a survey of modern dismissals, see Isnardi Parente (1981: 433–5).

But there is one apparent exception to this last concession. In the *Cratylus* (408d), when listing the names of the elements as subjects for etymological analysis, Plato slips aether in along with the traditional four. Partly because it is initially not Socrates but the philosophically passive Hermogenes who includes it in the list, this is done so quietly that it has gone virtually unnoticed.[30] But added to the evidence we have already met, it looks very much like another late insertion by Plato into the text of the *Cratylus*.

This may be confirmed by a further observation. Socrates proceeds to offer an etymology of 'aether' (*aithēr*) as that which 'always runs' (*aei thei*, 410b). Now this was an etymology to which Aristotle – as we will see in Chapter 2 §3 – attached enormous significance, since it supported his postulation of aether as an element with an eternal, because naturally circular, motion. No such doctrine about aether's essential motion is detectable in the Platonic *Epinomis*, and it is normally assumed to be Aristotle's distinctive contribution.[31] Yet here it is already acknowledged by Socrates' etymology of *aithēr* in the *Cratylus*. Since its insertion into the *Cratylus* list of the elements is in any case likely to be late (to repeat, there is no hint of aether as a distinct element in the *Timaeus*, where the heavens are fiery), there is a real possibility that this buried clue shows the influence of the young Aristotle, by this date Plato's prodigious and no doubt vocal student.

Another doctrine that can be associated with Plato's old age is the earth's motion. Theophrastus, who like Aristotle started out as Plato's student, reported that Plato in his old age came to sympathise with the Pythagorean doctrine that the earth is not stationary at the centre but itself orbits a central fire.[32] Now in the *Epinomis* the earth is casually mentioned along with the heavenly bodies as being in motion (983b–c). This may be oblique allusion to the same doctrine. Alternatively it could allude to the thesis that the earth rotates, which some scholars think they can detect in the *Timaeus*.[33] Either way, it is striking that the single further occurrence of this idea in

[30] Although Hermogenes' list at 408d–e includes the sequence earth, aether, air, fire, water, it does not formally separate these from the items that precede and follow. However Socrates, when he sets out to etymologise them, quite clearly at 410a–c treats the five element names as constituting a distinct group, albeit in the variant order fire, water, air, aether, earth.

[31] On the other hand, I am convinced that aether *is*, contrary to the favoured reading of *Epin.*, located at the outer periphery of the cosmos. The reference to aether coming 'after fire', *Epin.* 984b6, concerns the stuffs that living beings are made of, not their cosmic location, and there is no reason to deprive aether of the outermost position which, even if not regarded as a distinct element, it had always held.

[32] Plutarch, *Q.Plat.* 1006c reports this story from Theophrastus in the course of answering the question why, at *Ti.* 42d4–5, Plato lists the earth as an 'instrument of time' along with the moon: apparently, it is suggested, Plato believes the earth to move.

[33] *Ti.* 40b8–c1, with Cornford 1937: 120–34; cf. Aristotle, *DC* 290b30–2, 296a26–7.

Plato's writings is, once more, in the *Cratylus*, where, again with a degree of casualness which has allowed it to pass almost unnoticed,[34] Socrates suggests that the word 'gods' (*theoi*) originally meant 'runners' (*theontes*), so named because early mankind observed that 'sun, moon, *earth*, stars and heaven' were constantly moving (397c–d).

If I am right about these clues and their implications, the *Cratylus* is a possibly unique hybrid, a product of more than one phase in Plato's thought. This would mean that we should not without great circumspection use it as evidence for Plato's development. Although it reads and feels like a middle-period dialogue, no single sentence or passage in it (apart from the two intrusive passages which I have picked out as vestiges of the first edition) can be guaranteed not to represent a late revision to the text. This conclusion is one which some Platonic scholars might even find disconcerting, but to my mind it is enormously liberating. Here, for once, we have a Platonic text which is debarred from forcing chronological or developmental questions on us, instead leaving us free to enjoy the *Cratylus* for what it is: an intriguing and challenging display of Plato's mind at work.

5 CRATYLUS

I earlier described the *Cratylus* as displaying Plato's mind, not merely at work on some philosophical problem, but thinking out, in the discussion between Socrates and Cratylus, a confrontation between two primary components in his own intellectual formation. What everyone knows about Plato is that he was a devoted follower of Socrates. But Aristotle (*Metaphysics* A 6, 987a32–b7) is quite explicit that an even earlier influence on Plato was Cratylus,[35] along with his Heraclitean doctrine of flux.

> At an early age he first became acquainted with Cratylus and the Heraclitean doctrines, which held that all the objects of perception are in perpetual flux and that there is no knowledge about them. This was what he believed later too. But Socrates devoted his inquiries to ethics and did not discuss nature as a whole but sought what is universal in ethics and was the first to focus on definitions, and Plato, who became his pupil, believed that this is done with regard to something else, and not with regard to the objects of perception, for the above sort of reason. For he took it to be impossible for the universal definition to be of any of the objects of perception, given, at any rate, that they are in perpetual change.

[34] It is however noted by Boyancé (1941: 146). It was Geoffrey Lloyd who first drew my attention to the oddity.

[35] For the testimonia on Cratylus, see Mouraviev 1999: 23–55.

Scholars have devoted hundreds of pages to looking this particular gift horse in the mouth.[36] It is a singularly precious reconstruction by Aristotle of his master's intellectual formation, and contains a rare biographical datum which it would be an enormous pity to dismiss. Aristotle does not make it explicit that – as some less reliable ancient sources claim – Plato was actually Cratylus' pupil,[37] and it may even be that their relative ages did not make that a very appropriate relation.[38] But that Cratylus was an early philosophical influence on Plato he does make explicit; and Aristotle was, after all, in an excellent position to find out about his master's philosophical background if he wanted to.[39] Moreover, Aristotle is surely right to present

[36] Much of the doubt was prompted by Kirk (1951), but I shall cite just its most powerful recent spokesman, Kahn (1996: 81–3). At 83 n. 24 Kahn writes 'The picture of Plato as a student of Cratylus seems to be one of the earliest examples of the Peripatetic tendency . . . to construct lines of philosophical succession . . .' There is clearly some truth in this, given the context in *Met.* A 3–6. But for that very reason we should hesitate to dismiss Aristotle's evidence regarding Cratylus. In constructing the lineage of his teacher Plato, Aristotle will have been acutely aware that he was at the same time constructing his own. It is hard to imagine a motive for him to insert someone as eccentric as Cratylus *falsely* into his own lineage, and indeed by avoiding calling Plato Cratylus' actual 'pupil' (see n. 37 below) he may be showing some sensitivity on that very issue of lineage. If so, all the more reason to believe the underlying story. Kahn also argues for the unhistoricity of Aristotle's account by pointing to its silence about Parmenidean eternal being as an influence on the theory of Forms. Against this, note that Aristotle has already at 984a27–b8 argued that Parmenides' relevance to his present inquiry into causes is limited to his *Doxa*; likewise, Plato's Forms are brought into the story only for their role in formal *causation*, not as subjects of eternal (Parmenidean) being. Besides, there is no good reason to think that Plato had a Parmenidean teacher who *could* have been named had Aristotle so wished. Kahn may be right to doubt whether Cratylus' early influence can account for Plato's middle-period interest in flux (p. 81), but the question of what motivated that interest is likely to be one on which there was no simple fact to report, and Aristotle is in any case cautious of making a direct causal link with Cratylus: see 987b4, where we have seen him remark that Plato located the objects of definition outside the sensible realm 'for the above sort of reason', viz. the flux of sensibles, which he first learnt from Cratylus and believed 'later too'; this avoids any direct derivation from Cratylus.

[37] For Plato as 'pupil' of Cratylus (*after* his Socratic phase!), see DL III 6, Anon. *Prolegomena* 4.4–9, Olympiodorus, *Vit. Plat.* 192 Hermann. Cf. Allan (1954: 275–6) for the linguistic point that when Aristotle says that the young Plato became συνήθης with (dative) Cratylus and his flux doctrine, this does not mean 'pupil', a sense limited to συνήθης + genitive. However, in the dialogue Cratylus, unwilling to expound his doctrine in conversation with the impoverished Hermogenes, is nevertheless willing to take on Socrates as his pupil (428b4–c1). We might infer that you had to become his pupil in order to learn his doctrines, in which case it would follow (on Aristotle's evidence) that Plato *was* his pupil. (*Tht.* 180b–c could be read as evidence that Plato wanted to play down his status as Cratylus' pupil: these obsessively fluxist Heracliteans don't really *have* pupils.) Cratylus appears to have been an Athenian, and there was an apparent preference among some Athenians for becoming pupils only of other Athenians, however minor: thus Socrates was the pupil of the Athenian Archelaus. If Plato's two teachers were the Athenians Cratylus and Socrates, that would fit this pattern.

[38] If at 428b Cratylus offers to take on Socrates, his senior, as a pupil, that is no doubt meant as a comic instance of misplaced condescension.

[39] Cf. n. 36 above. Kahn (1996: 82) is surely, at all events, over-sceptical in calling it 'gratuitous' to suppose that Aristotle acquired this biographical information from Plato, whose pupil he was for two decades. It would be more gratuitous to assume that Aristotle never got round to asking him.

Plato as believing in the flux of the sensible world – although just what that amounts to is a topic which must be reserved for Chapter 5.

One reason why many scholars have been reluctant to accept Aristotle's evidence is that as presented by him Cratylus does not sound very much like the figure portrayed by Plato in the dialogue. Aristotle's Cratylus is above all a preacher of universal flux, and in fact, as we shall see shortly, even by Heraclitean standards an extremist on the matter. Plato's dramatic character Cratylus does likewise believe in some version of Heraclitus' flux thesis, but this emerges almost accidentally in the course of the dialogue, and in fact I side with the interpretation of G. S. Kirk that Cratylus, influenced by Socrates' etymologies, becomes a believer in flux for the first time during the course of the dialogue.[40] The theory that drives Cratylus in the dialogue is not that but his commitment to the natural correctness of names: according to him, each thing has a name that belongs to it by nature, and no non-natural name can succeed even in designating it. As some scholars have already seen,[41] there is no problem here provided we heed the clear indications given by both Plato and Aristotle that what views we attribute to Cratylus must depend on the stage of his career that we are referring to.

Plato's dialogue portrays Cratylus as still a young man (440d5), hence quite possibly predating the period of his influence on Plato.[42] Encouraged by Socrates' etymologies, he is just now for the first time finding himself attracted to the flux doctrine and the scene at the end of the dialogue shows him refusing to heed Socrates' warning about the theory's dangers and limitations. There is surely a predictive element in this. We are being shown a young Cratylus just beginning his flirtation with the doctrine that

[40] I am thus backing Kirk (1951: 236), *contra* the reply of Allan (1954: 279–80). Cratylus declares his support for the flux thesis only at 436e2–437a1 and 440d8–e2. Socrates at no point implies that he already knows Cratylus to be sympathetic to it, and even when speaking to Cratylus refers to the Heracliteans in the third person without a hint that they include Cratylus himself in their number (440c). 440d8–e2 is normally translated as Cratylus' declaration that he has already in the past thought over and approved the Heraclitean position (thus e.g. Reeve 1998), but I agree with Kirk that this is merely the conclusion he is now coming to as a result of reflecting on the etymologies today. Socrates has here urged him to think carefully before deciding whether or not to endorse Heracliteanism, and the amusingly hasty Cratylus says he has already done enough thinking to incline towards it: 'But let me assure you, Socrates, that even now my view of it is not unconsidered, but as I consider it and turn it over in my mind it seems to me that things are much more the way Heraclitus says.' That this is (*pace* Allan) his meaning seems to me fully confirmed by the parallelism of the language here to that at 391a6–7, where the reference is indisputably to the present conversation only.

[41] Allan 1954, Baxter 1992: 27–8.

[42] This would be ruled out if Allan (1954) were right to date the dialogue dramatically to 399, when Plato was certainly already a member of the Socratic circle. Against this, see n. 5 above.

will turn him into the extreme flux theorist about whom Aristotle in due course presumably heard from Plato.

Moreover, Aristotle himself is aware that Cratylus has to be presented as becoming progressively more extreme about flux. This accounts for our most famous testimony on Cratylus, in *Metaphysics* Γ 5 (1010a7–15), where Aristotle names him as an exponent of radical Heracliteanism, adding that in the end Cratylus' belief in the world's flux became so extreme that he decided one should not speak at all: he simply moved his finger. Aristotle goes on to report that this same ultra-extremist Cratylus went so far as to criticise Heraclitus for expressing his flux doctrine with the celebrated dictum that you cannot step in the same river twice: what he should have said, according to Cratylus, was that you cannot step in the same river even once! This is clearly a Cratylus who has come to believe that things change so rapidly that you cannot engage with them, either by naming them or by stepping into them, in any way that takes any time at all: during the time taken, however short, they have become something else. So the only way to engage with them is one that is complete at an instant: just point your finger.

Plato's dramatic portrayal includes an almost comic prescience about this later development.[43] At the end of the dialogue, Socrates is shown by Plato persuading Cratylus that if everything is in total flux then it will turn out that there is no time even to speak of a thing correctly. Referring to the example of 'the beautiful', he asks (439d8–11):

> Then is it possible to speak of it correctly, if it is always slipping away? First, to say that it is that thing, next to say that it is of that kind? Or is it inevitable that, as we speak, it is instantaneously becoming something different, and slipping away, and no longer the way it was?[44]

'Yes, inevitable' is Cratylus' reply. And yet just a page later Cratylus declares that he is becoming wedded to the flux thesis.[45] This quasi-prophetic closure is surely informed by hindsight: Plato at the time of writing knows just how Cratylus ended up, and fictionally portrays it as the result of his taking an early wrong turning, one against which Socrates had been in a position to warn him.[46]

[43] In the opening part of the dialogue Cratylus is sullenly uncommunicative, and the opening words, 383a1–2 in which Hermogenes says to him 'Then do you want us to share what we are saying (τὸν λόγον) with Socrates here?', may already hint at Cratylus' eventual abandonment of language as a tool of communication. Cf. for comparable speculations Silverman 2001: 8 n. 10, Burnyeat 1997: 12.

[44] For the context, see Ch. 7 §8 below (p. 168).

[45] 440d8–e2, see n. 40 above.

[46] This point is made in an unpublished paper by Mantas Adomenas, 'The theme of discipleship in Plato's *Cratylus*'. For similarly prescient historical ironies about Platonic characters in *Rep.* 1, see

Aristotle, by stressing that this fanatically extreme flux doctrine is what Cratylus came to believe 'in the end', is allowing that earlier in his life Cratylus had been much more recognisably like the figure portrayed by Plato – the Cratylus who, far from despairing of language as condemned always to trail behind reality, held that language itself succeeds in accurately capturing the natures of the items it tracks through time and space. How it might achieve this, even if the world turns out to be flux-ridden, is made fairly clear by Socrates in the dialogue, with Cratylus' approval: fluidity is itself the nature of the things named, and their names are so framed as to describe and capture it.[47] Such may well be the view on flux that Cratylus had come to hold by the time he became an influence on the young Plato.

Between the younger Cratylus, with his faith in the power of language to convey the essentially fluid nature of things, and the fanatical-sounding older Cratylus, for whom the world's flux is such as to incapacitate language by making it perpetually out of date, seems to lie an intermediate Cratylus indirectly reported by Aristotle. In his *Rhetoric* (III 16, 1417b1–3), Aristotle quotes the Socratic writer Aeschines of Sphettus, who described Cratylus as waving his hands and hissing while he spoke. This semi-independent testimony can be interpreted as showing us a Cratylus who still believes in the power of language – he does, after all, still speak – but who is already adjusting language to accommodate the extreme fluidity of its objects. His motion of the hands, and likewise his hissing of the tongue, which according to the analysis of primary sounds in Plato's dialogue (427a1–8) is one way in which the human voice conveys motion, look like part of Cratylus' increasingly desperate struggle to fit language to the world's fluidity, before his final decision to give up and just point.

In short, on the basis of Aristotle's evidence we can compile a consistent account of Cratylus' development as a flux theorist, and Plato's dialogue too fits into that picture provided only that we bear in mind that it portrays an early stage in the same process of development, before the flux thesis has fully entered the equation, and reflecting instead what we must take to be his actual historical starting point, a thesis about the correctness of names. Plato is telling us that the flux thesis developed out of the naming thesis. As dramatically portrayed at the end of the dialogue, Cratylus took a wrong turn. He had the opportunity to follow the model set by Socrates by graduating from the study of language to the study of stable realities, but

Gifford 2001; the portrayals of Critias and Charmides in the *Charmides* are another well-known example.

[47] This seems an adequate answer to the question pressed by Kirk (1951), how Cratylus can have reconciled flux with the fixed correctness of names.

instead chose to stay focused on language and to marry this to the doctrine of Heraclitean flux to which, as Socrates himself points out in the dialogue, the study of language seems to point. This is important because it obviates the need, often felt by interpreters, to explain how Cratylus' linguistic thesis was somehow a product of his Heracliteanism. Plato makes it clear that in fact it was precisely the other way round.

Just what the linguistic thesis amounted to is hard to guess, because Plato portrays Cratylus as almost comically laconic about it, and leaves it to Socrates to flesh it out. All we learn about Cratylus' own version of it is the following. Each thing has a correct nomenclature, which belongs to it by nature. If you try instead to refer to it by some other name, you are bound to fail, because, if you utter a sound which is not the thing's name, you are *ipso facto* not naming it. That is why, to Hermogenes' intense annoyance, Cratylus has already before the start of the dialogue told him that Hermogenes is not his name, even though when pressed for a reason he has refused to elaborate (383b6–384a4).

6 PLATO'S NAME

It may indeed by wondered why, if Plato really was influenced by Cratylus, it was not this linguistic doctrine that he learnt from him. My answer is that it was. I say so on the basis of a remarkably neglected snippet of evidence. One of the least discussed biographical facts about Plato is his change of name. His given name was Aristocles, and he is reported to have changed it to Plato. This information is extremely widespread in the sources,[48] and there is good reason for not dismissing it as a mere invention of his biographers. On the contrary, the biographers were hard put to it to explain why he should have chosen the name Plato. It sounded to them as if it had something to do with *platos*, 'breadth', and this led to utterly feeble suggestions such as that it was a nickname alluding to his broad forehead or broad chest, although some did do a little better by connecting it with his breadth of intellect. In a sense conjectures of this kind are pointless, because 'Plato' was an extremely common name in the Attica of his day.[49] Changing your name from Aristocles to Plato was a bit like changing it from

[48] For a full list of occurrences, see Riginos 1976: 35–8.

[49] See Notopoulos 1939. In fact, Osborne and Byrne 1994: s.v. Πλάτων now list no fewer than twenty-seven Platos from Attic inscriptions and other sources in the fifth and fourth centuries BC (Notopoulos had already counted sixteen). Notopoulos' mistake, in my view, is to infer that the story of Plato's name change was itself a fiction arising *from* the later attempts to etymologise the name. This seems to me to get things the wrong way round. Finding explanations for philosophers' names is by no means a normal part of the ancient tradition of philosophical biography (for example, as far

Johnson to Jenkins. Why then bother to change it at all, especially as name changes are fairly unusual in the ancient Greek world, and the only other philosophers known to have changed their names did so because their given names were either considered ungainly (Theophrastus, né Tyrtamus)[50] or non-Greek (Clitomachus, né Hasdrubal, and Porphyry, né Malcos)?[51]

I have long suspected that the curious decision of the young Aristocles to rebrand himself as Plato reflects, once again, the influence of Cratylus. He himself, in his *Apology*, implies that it had occurred before he was twenty-eight, the age at which Socrates, during his trial, is made to refer to him as 'Plato'; and that would at least fit with the suggestion that the change dates from his early Cratylan period. But my positive reason for proposing it is the following. The opening scene of the dialogue fosters the impression that Cratylus was someone who was liable to tell you *that your given name was not your real name*. What better explanation, then, for Plato's very unusual decision, than the influence of someone with the peculiar knack of alienating him from his given name?

I have no very interesting hypothesis to offer as to what was wrong with 'Aristocles', or for that matter what was right about 'Plato'. My one, tentative suggestion is that Cratylus may have objected to any name that picked out an accidental feature, not guaranteed to correspond to a lifelong attribute. 'Aristocles' means 'best fame', indicating an external and perhaps ephemeral aspect of the nominee;[52] whereas the names 'So<u>crat</u>es' and '<u>Crat</u>ylus', both of which he approves,[53] presumably indicate the possession of some kind of 'power' (*kratos*),[54] while 'Plato' indicates some kind of 'breadth', both of these being interpretable as intrinsic properties. Names, if they are to do their job of singling out things or people, must connote intrinsic features

as I know Aristotle's name, 'best end', is never etymologised, despite being uncannily appropriate to the great exponent of teleology). Only a tiny handful of philosophers were reported to have chosen pseudonyms, and, as I note below, for relatively mundane reasons. And even in a rare case where a name – that of Pythagoras (DL VIII 21) – *was* etymologised, it did not lead to stories of a name *change*. The best way to explain the biographical tradition about Plato's name change is to accept that he really was known to have changed his name from Aristocles to Plato. We can then regard the somewhat banal competing guesses as to what the name Plato was supposed to mean as having been prompted by the hope of finding some significance in this biographical detail.

[50] Strabo XIII 2.4.

[51] DL IV 67; Porphyry, *Vit. Plot.* 17.6–15.

[52] Cratylus' objection to the name 'Hermogenes' cannot be made on a similar ground, since he thinks that it is *somebody's* name, albeit not Hermogenes' (429c4–6).

[53] 383b2–4.

[54] Cf. Proclus *In Crat.* 18, and Reeve 1998: xiv n. 2. The humorous speculation about Cratylus' rejection of Hermogenes' name, at 384c and 407e–408b, reflects and thereby emphasises Cratylus' own failure to divulge his reasoning. We have no reason to assume that it captures Cratylus' real reasons for the rejection.

like strength and breadth, not such accidents as reputation. That is no more than a conjecture. It is Plato himself who emphasises to us how maddeningly secretive Cratylus is about his reasons for pronouncing on nomenclature, and it might be unwise to go very far in second-guessing him. My main point here is not to reconstruct Cratylus' lost theory of naming, but to show that, whatever it may have been, it is likely to have exerted a profound influence on the young Plato, more perhaps than his flux doctrine did.[55]

7 CRATYLUS' ETYMOLOGICAL LEGACY

I shall be arguing in the next chapter that, contrary to an almost universal perception, Plato in his mature work – including the *Cratylus* – remained thoroughly committed to the principles of etymology, that is, to the possibility of successfully analysing words as if they were time capsules – encoded packages of information left for us by our distant ancestors about the objects they designate. This finding, although it may well come as no surprise at all to most classicists, is I am afraid calculated to cause apoplexy among many of Plato's philosophical admirers.

Plato's ultimate aim in our dialogue is, it is true, to show why it is that, when the approaches of his two mentors Cratylus and Socrates are brought into confrontation, Socrates has the edge. The study of names, for all its heuristic value, cannot be the highroad to philosophical truth that Cratylus proclaimed it to be. Socrates' competing proposal is to study the stable essences of things directly in their own right. And Socrates' defeat of Cratylus, in the no doubt fictional dialogue named after the latter, represents both Plato's own graduation from the Cratylan to the Socratic perspective, and his reflection on the meaning and upshot of this complex philosophical legacy. But unless we see where Plato was coming from – what Cratylus' linguistic legacy to him amounted to, and how seriously he took it – we have no chance of understanding the full significance of this dialogue. That legacy, I shall argue, includes the conviction that names can be successfully decoded as messages about the nature of their nominata.

Although there is a vast literature on the *Cratylus*, the dialogue plays extraordinarily little part in the global interpretations of Plato published over the last century and more. It is most frequently handled by Plato scholars on a need-to-know basis. Plato's linguistic philosophy – and I mean linguistic

[55] I have argued above (§5) that Cratylus' flux doctrine grew out of his linguistic naturalism. Since, as Aristotle attests, he had already arrived at the flux doctrine by the time he associated with Plato, *a fortiori* he was by then a linguistic naturalist.

philosophy in a sense of the term that we recognise today – is extracted from its context in two or three short passages of the *Cratylus*, and taken away for examination in its own right. A lot of extremely valuable work has been done on this basis, and it deserves to be fed back in. But what I shall attempt in this book is something more holistic and for that reason I hope more satisfying, namely a reconstruction of what Plato himself is up to in writing such a dialogue. Although nearly two thirds of the dialogue is taken up with the elaborately constructed set of etymologies, Platonic scholars have queued up to ignore or downplay these, on the assumption that they are little more than a satire on somebody or something, and therefore not (it is usually inferred) a positive part of Plato's own philosophical project. The question of who might be being satirised[56] then becomes a side issue, and the overall purpose of the dialogue is rarely investigated satisfactorily. I am convinced that, on the contrary, the etymologies are the true heart of the dialogue. My next chapter will be aimed at showing how much we miss in Plato's thought if we fail to take due account of the deep significance he attaches to them.

[56] Cf. Levin (2001: ch. 2), who, along with a defence of her own view that the targets of attack are literary, surveys a wide range of alternative targets that scholars have claimed to identify.

CHAPTER 2

Plato the etymologist

I ETYMOLOGY IN THE *PHILEBUS*

I want to start this chapter from somewhere unexpected – not Plato's *Cratylus*, but his late dialogue the *Philebus*.[1] In the opening part of this dialogue, Socrates recommends a method which he calls 'a gift to mankind from the gods', maybe transmitted, along with fire, 'through some Prometheus', to our forebears, who were themselves superior to us and lived closer to the gods (16c5–8). The Prometheus in question has long been suspected of being Pythagoras, and at all events the method, as sketched by Socrates, is likely to be of Pythagorean inspiration.[2] But the allusion to the mythical figure Prometheus, especially as portrayed by Aeschylus in *Prometheus Bound*, remains direct and significant. For Aeschylus' and Plato's Prometheus have it in common that they both passed to mankind, along with the gift of fire, all of the arts, prominently including the understanding of number.[3]

The gift transmitted by Plato's Prometheus is based on number in the following way: between the single genus from which a scientific investigation might start, and its infinite range of individual members, the true scientist will be concerned above all with systematic *enumeration* of the intervening kinds or species. Asked for an explanation, Socrates illustrates the method with three examples, all concerned with the classification of sounds. The first, literacy, need not detain us now, but the second, musical expertise, deserves close attention (17c11–e6).

SOC. But you will be an expert, my friend, once you have learned how many intervals there are in high pitch and low pitch, what character they have, by what notes the intervals are defined, and all the combinations formed from

[1] In coming to understand this passage of the *Philebus*, I have benefited from discussions with Sylvain Delcomminette.

[2] In view of what I shall go on to argue, there must be a close connection between this passage and the Pythagorean *akousma* at Iamblichus, *De vita Pythagorica* 82, 'What is the wisest? Number. But second, he who assigned names to things.'

[3] Cf. Aesch. *PV* 459–60.

them. These our forebears have discovered, and they have passed down to us, their successors, the tradition of calling them 'harmonies'. And again the motions of the body display other and similar characteristics of this kind, which, since they are measured by means of numbers, they say we should call rhythms and measures. And they tell us at the same time to keep it in mind that one should inquire into every one-and-many in this way, since just as it is when you grasp them in this way that you become wise, so when you investigate and grasp any other unity in this way that is how you acquire understanding about *it*. But the indefinite (*apeiron*) multitude of each set of things and in each area never fails to make you inexperienced (*apeiron*) in understanding and neither one who counts (*ellogimon*) nor one to be reckoned with (*enarithmon*), since you have never focused on so much as one number in so much as one thing.

There is nothing novel about noticing the flood of arithmetical wordplays towards the end of this passage: one who doesn't focus on number is *apeiron* (inexperienced, but also numerically indefinite), and is neither *ellogimos* ('one who counts', with reference to *logistikē*, the science of counting) nor *enarithmos* ('to be reckoned with', with reference to numeracy), having not found the number in so much as *one* thing. But no commentator to my knowledge has noticed the place of etymology in this linguistic barrage. At d5–6 the ancients are said to have instructed us, with regard to dance, to use the terms 'rhythms and measures', *rythmous kai metra* (d6), because these things are *di' arithmōn metrēthenta*, 'measured by means of numbers' (d5). That is, the description of them as 'measured by means of numbers' is etymologically conveyed by the technical terminology of 'rhythms and measures' which our Promethean ancestor chose for dance. Moreover, in doing so he did not intend to pick out the numerical regularities merely of dance steps as such, but rather the role of number in their classification. That is why, at d6–e3, the ancients are said to have been telling us, by means of these terms, to think in the same systematically enumerative way about *every* one-and-many that we investigate.

Once we have recognised the role of etymology in the passage, it should become clear that what look like innocuous wordplays at the end of it are themselves further etymologies: our inherited vocabulary for intellectual evaluation of people, it turns out, is shot through with recognition of the link between understanding and number. Moreover, further probable etymologies now begin to present themselves. At c11–d3 we are told that musical expertise arises when you grasp how many in number (*arithmon*) the intervals are, and that the ancients have for this reason told us to call them *harmoniai*: surely another etymological derivation.

Similarly in Socrates' third example (18b–d), where he returns to the alphabet, he speaks of our divine forebear who, just as Theuth did in Egypt,[4] first distinguished the classes of alphabetic sound. Within the indeterminate (*apeiron*) mass of sound, he counted three classes – vowels, unvoiced and mute[5] – and then enumerated the specific sounds that fell under each. Next, Socrates goes on (18c6–d2)

> to each of them individually, and to all of them jointly, he assigned the name *stoicheion* (letter/element). And seeing that none of us could learn even one of them all by itself independently of all of them, he reckoned this link between them, for its part, as being one, and as making *them* all one, and nominated one expertise as being set over them, calling it *grammatikē* (grammar/literacy).

Although this time the etymological derivation of the chosen terminology is not signalled, following so close on the previous passage the above account too is surely meant to announce our ancestors' selection of, once again, appropriately significant terms. It is just that by now we are being expected to do the work of derivation on our own. It seems, indeed, obvious enough that our forebear's choice of the word *stoicheion* was based on a (perfectly correct)[6] derivation from *stoichos*, a 'rank', so that letters of the alphabet are, etymologically speaking, 'rankings' – yet another recognition that systematic enumeration under headings is the essence of scientific understanding. Finally, the word *grammatikē*, 'grammar' or 'literacy', is said to embody our ancient benefactor's recognition that, despite their segregation into ranks, letters could be understood only jointly, as a unity (the notion of unity being heavily emphasised by repetition). I suppose that *grammatikē* is being derived, not merely from *gramma* ('letter'), but also from yet another mathematical term, *grammē*, a line: all those separate rankings, *stoicheia*, must in the last analysis be joined up into a single line if they are to be understood, and that task falls to the science, *grammatikē*, as such.

Regardless of these details – and the latter suggestions are inevitably more speculative than the former – the passage as a whole must surely be recognised as bringing out some vital etymological strands in Plato's

[4] It is usually thought that this passage is about Theuth himself, but the text does not say that unless one follows the (needless) punctuation of Burnet's OCT, and it is hardly plausible that the Egyptian Theuth is being named as the originator of the Greek alphabet and its Greek nomenclature. For the correct construal, see Benardete 1993: 12.

[5] 18c2, τὰ νῦν λεγόμενα ἄφωνα ἡμῖν: that is, the terminology of 'mutes' etc. is not here assumed to go back to the original namegiver, presumably because it has no detectable mathematical significance.

[6] Burkert 1959; also Aesch. *PV* 484, where Prometheus 'ranked' or 'ordered' (ἐστοίχισα) the modes of divination.

thought. Socrates is conveying to us that the vocabulary which we have inherited from our forebears can be expected to embody important scientific insights, having in fact been devised by them precisely in order to encode and thus transmit those insights.

2 TAKING ETYMOLOGY SERIOUSLY

This brings me to a position on Plato's attitude to etymology which I regard as fundamental to a historically sound reading of the *Cratylus*.[7] The long series of etymologies which occupies the central part of that dialogue should not be read, as it almost invariably is, as Plato's send-up of the entire etymological enterprise. On the contrary, Plato fully shares the presupposition endemic to his culture that languages were consciously devised by early members of the human race, who can be assumed to have constructed each word as a brief description of its nominatum, just as present-day name-makers demonstrably continue to do. Words therefore really are encoded descriptions, and there is no reason whatsoever why we should not set about decoding them. By doing so, we can aspire to recover the beliefs of those early name-makers. Since any of their beliefs may have been false, nothing can be assumed in advance about the power of etymology to lead us to philosophical truths. As I would like to put it, the etymologies are, broadly speaking, *exegetically* correct, in that they do recover the original beliefs of the name-makers, but it remains a moot point whether they are also *philosophically* correct, that is whether (as in the *Philebus* passage) the beliefs they recover for us are true beliefs. In the event, the early name-makers turn out to have had considerable insights into divine and cosmic nature, but to have done very poorly in analysing key terms for moral and intellectual virtues, betraying their mistaken impression that the items named are inherently fluid and unstable. Thus the very area of discourse which Socratic–Platonic dialectic has by now made its own is exposed by the *Cratylus* as the one least adequately served by the cultural legacy to which Socrates is heir.

That is the reading of the *Cratylus* which I shall continue to defend in this chapter, and in the remainder of the book. But by starting from the methodological passage in the *Philebus*, I hope to have shown that the very

[7] I have previously argued this in Sedley 1998a. For recent work of similar tendency see Dalimier 1998, Ademollo forthcoming, and Grintser 1994, the last of which I have unfortunately not be able to see. The serious philosophical content of certain etymologies is also recognised by Gaiser 1974, Montrasio 1988, and Wohlfahrt 1990. Boyancé (1941) argues effectively that the etymologies cannot be entirely ironical, but then, disappointingly, proceeds to attribute them to Euthyphro rather than Plato.

same principles are at work there too. The language which we have inherited contains not only the cosmological insights uncovered in the *Cratylus*, but also a set of methodological insights which in the author's view we would do well to take to heart when developing any discipline of our own. The vital evidential value of the *Philebus* passage lies in the fact that it can hardly be dismissed as ironic or otherwise fanciful. Far-fetched as the etymologies may look to us in the light of modern philology, they are not treated as such by their author. On the contrary, they stand at the heart of Plato's weightiest discourse on method.

What I am saying is unlikely to cause consternation to specialists in ancient literature.[8] The presence of implicit, as well as explicit, etymologies in classical texts – often thoroughly fanciful ones to our eyes – is ubiquitous and largely uncontroversial. Nor for that matter is it likely to sound at all surprising to aficionados of such a philosophical writer as Heidegger, for whom the etymological roots of words are a matter of deep philosophical significance. Yet scholars of Plato have remained almost entirely deaf to similar etymologies in his corpus. The widespread refusal to take the *Cratylus* etymologies as reflecting Plato's own serious assumptions about names is mirrored by the fact that, in the hundreds if not thousands of pages that have been written about the methodological passage in the *Philebus*, the etymologies have (to the best of my knowledge) never once been noticed.

I have mentioned etymological strands (plural) in Plato's thought. Let me try to separate three.

1. The names of things can be assumed, by and large, to have been deliberately assigned to them by our distant ancestors.
2. The ancestors who assigned these names embodied their understanding – which was in some cases superior, in other inferior – in the names they assigned.
3. The early names are still with us, but usually in a corrupted form, so that recovery of their original form and meaning requires expertise.

Not only can all these beliefs be found in Plato's writings, but in my view all are an equally strong presence in the writings of Aristotle. Just as Plato no doubt absorbed some of the assumptions about language which he learnt from his earliest philosophical influence Cratylus, so too at least some of those same assumptions appear to have entered the intellectual bloodstream of Plato's own foremost pupil Aristotle. In what follows, I intend to consider the Platonic and Aristotelian evidence together as representative of a single school of thought. One reason for doing so is tactical. With Plato's Socratic

[8] See for example O'Hara 1996, esp. 7–56; Ahl 1985.

dialogues you can rarely – as I have tried to do in the case of the *Philebus* passage – appeal to textual evidence as plainly meaning what it says. For those who find some assertion not to their taste, or inconsistent with their overall interpretation, the resort is nearly always available of downplaying it as ironic or as otherwise playful. With Aristotle things are very different. Few of his readers have even suspected that he has a sense of humour, and, although he is capable of putting forward an idea dialectically rather than doctrinally, the default position is always that he is saying what he means. In his uses of etymology, there is really very little doubt that he is doing just that.

3 THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL BASIS

We can start with 1 and 2, the anthropological strands. First, that language originated as the deliberate contrivance of one or more gifted individuals was almost certainly the regular assumption until the end of the fourth century BC, when Epicurus came up with his alternative proposal that names started as the human version of animal cries, and were correlated to the objects that provoked them only subsequently. I say 'gifted' individuals, but Plato's Socrates in the *Philebus*, as we have seen, views the name-makers responsible for the terminology of the arts more explicitly and extravagantly as 'superior to us and living closer to the gods', or even as themselves gods or divine human beings. In the *Cratylus*, Socrates twice voices the latter suspicion (397c1–2, 416c4; cf. Cratylus at 438b–c). Similarly Aristotle in *De caelo* 1 9, describing the *aiōn* – lifetime or eternity – that characterises the heavens, writes as follows:

> Hence neither are things there naturally in a place, nor does time cause them to age, nor is there any change in the things positioned beyond the outermost orbit, but they continue without alteration or being affected, having the best and most self-sufficient life, for the whole of eternity (*aiōn*). For it was under divine inspiration that the ancients voiced this name. For the end which encompasses the time of each individual's life, beyond which there is by nature nothing, is called each individual's *aiōn*, and analogously the end of the whole heaven and the end which encompasses the whole of time and infinity, is *aiōn*, having obtained its title from *aiei einai* ('always being'), immortal and divine. (*De caelo* 279a18–28)

That is, the word *aiōn* was forged by the ancients in the sense of an ordinary human lifetime. But it can be applied, as it is by Aristotle and others, to the eternity enjoyed by the heavens, and, when it is, the degree of insight already shown by the ancients is laid bare. For the word *aiōn* turns out, through its decoding as 'always being', to characterise cosmic eternity even better

than it does a finite human lifespan. The decoding thus reveals a divinely inspired and prescient insight shown by the ancients in constructing the name.

The spirit of this anthropological thesis, which I find entirely Platonic, is fully confirmed by other etymological remarks in which Aristotle makes similarly explicit the superior insight of the ancients.[9] I have already mentioned in Chapter 1 §4 (pp. 14–15) his full agreement with the *Cratylus* about the etymology of *aithēr*, the stuff of the outer heavens. At *De caelo* I 3 (270b16–25) and *Meteorologica* I 3 (339b16–30) he exploits the etymology of *aithēr* as that which 'always runs', *aei thei*, following *Cratylus* 410b. Here is the *De caelo* version:

> It seems that the name [*aithēr*] has been passed down from the ancients, right down to the present time, and that they held the same belief as we too are now propounding. For we must suppose that the same opinions come down to us not once or twice but infinitely many times. Hence, holding that the first body was a distinct one over and above earth, fire, air and water, they called the highest region *aithēr*, assigning it this name because it runs always (*thein aei*) for an everlasting time. Anaxagoras misapplies this name: he uses the name *aithēr* for fire.

Very significantly, Aristotle here implicitly rejects an alternative etymology, the one which philologists now tell us is the correct one: the derivation of *aithēr* from *aithein*, 'to burn'. And he rejects it not on linguistic but on philosophical grounds, namely that it is less successful in capturing the essential nature of aether: Anaxagoras was *cosmologically* mistaken to associate the upper region with fire. Aristotle is evidently operating with a specific version of the principle of charity: provided only that the linguistic or exegetical data permit us to do so, we must give the ancients the benefit of the doubt and assume above all that they were *philosophically* astute in their choice of nomenclature. That same assumption is pervasive in Plato's own use of etymology. Like Plato, Aristotle does not assume the ancients to be authoritative, and where necessary will dismiss some view of theirs as mistaken;[10] but that fact should not blind us to the veneration with which Plato and Aristotle both regard them.

[9] E.g. he derives Aphrodite from ἀφρώδης, 'foamy', observing that the choice of name reveals the ancients' recognition that sperm is foamy in nature: *GA* 736a18–21. Here he follows the (fairly obvious) derivation from ἀφρός at *Crat.* 406c, but differs from the explanation offered there that the name reflects the goddess's birth from the sea. As Palmer (2000: 195 n. 21) rightly remarks, Aristotle's other etymologies may not explicitly mention the ancients, but he must be assuming the opinions revealed by these etymologies to be at least as old as the names themselves. For a comprehensive list of Aristotle's etymologies, see Bonitz 1870, s.v. ἐτυμολογικά.

[10] Cf. Palmer 2000, esp. 201.

If we want to locate this tendency within a broader cultural pattern, it might help to associate it with the ubiquitous and extremely familiar Greek habit of citing poets as authorities. The poems preserved and cherished by classical Greek society included its second most ancient surviving artefacts, the works of such early poets as Homer and Hesiod. No wonder, then, that they were plundered as a source of ancient insights. I call poems the *second* most ancient surviving artefacts, because the Greek language itself was an even more ancient and venerable artefact, and its exploitation by the burgeoning etymological industry in the fifth century attests recognition of that fact. Etymology was less the study of linguistic history in its own right than the cognitive archaeology of those precious relics, words. Like any relics they had to be expertly handled, cleaning away the phonetic accretions and distortions that they had acquired over the centuries in order to recover their underlying form and, via that form, access to the mindset of the ancestors who made them.

What is much less clear to me is what cosmological or anthropological assumptions underlie their conviction that the ancients either were divine or had divine sources of information. Both Plato, at least in his later works, and Aristotle, as when we saw him just now saying that 'the same opinions come down to us not once or twice but infinitely many times', have cyclical views of history, according to which the advance of civilisation is periodically interrupted by cataclysms, with at best just vestiges of its former accomplishments carried over by the survivors when it restarts.[11] For Aristotle there was no absolute beginning to human history. Plato in the *Timaeus* speaks in semi-mythical terms as if there was. Although many of Plato's interpreters take him in reality to share Aristotle's belief in the eternity of both the world and its resident species, the human race included, it is easier to make sense of what the *Philebus* says about our early ancestors' proximity to their divine origin if one takes the *Timaeus* narrative relatively literally. For Aristotle, the ancient ancestors to whom we are indebted may be those who restarted civilisation after the last cataclysm, but in doing so they preserved some pre-cataclysmic insights. Whether Plato believes this latter thesis is open to doubt,[12] but less important, because both philosophers present divine inspiration, not inheritance, as our ancestors' principal source of knowledge.[13] Neither Plato nor Aristotle reveals how these distant ancestors might have

[11] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Λ 8, 1074a38–b14; cf. Plato, *Ti.* 22b–23c, *Critias* 109d–110c, and *Laws* 677a–679e.

[12] *Critias* 109d–110c and *Laws* 677a–679e deny that any knowledge is preserved from one civilisation to the next beyond a bare record of some names of great dynasts.

[13] Plato, *Phlb.* 16c; Aristotle, *DC* 279a22–3, *Met.* Λ 8, 1074b8–10.

obtained their divine insights. It is hard not to feel that we are here not entirely in the territory of rational prehistory, and that both are writing under the spell of Golden Age mythological narratives, which had been endemic in Greek culture since Hesiod and which Plato himself occasionally develops in his own myths. But it is no part of my project to reconstruct their thought about the sources of our ancestors' insights, and I rest content with remarking that belief in the superior wisdom of our distant ancestors is pervasive and cross-cultural, ensnaring such supposed rationalists as Isaac Newton just as effectively as it ever ensnared Plato and Aristotle.[14]

In both Plato and Aristotle there are plenty of further cases in which some piece of superior understanding is attributed to the ancients on the basis of etymology. Sometimes, as in the *Philebus*, it is the terminology of one or other of the arts that is cited as manifesting such insights. For instance, in the *Phaedrus* (244b6–d5) Socrates' second speech, in order to demonstrate that there is a creditable kind of madness, distinguishes two brands of divinatory art in etymological terms, namely *mantikē* (prophecy) and *oiōnistikē* (augury):

> It is worth citing the fact that those among the ancients who assigned names did not consider madness disgraceful or blameworthy. Otherwise they would not have attached this very name, *manikē* (the 'mad' art), to the finest of skills, the one by which the future is judged. They assigned it this name in the belief that it is a fine thing when it comes about by divine apportionment. It is the moderns who have boorishly inserted the T and called it *mantikē*. For also inquiry into the future by sane people, achieved through birds and other signs, because it uses reasoning to bring understanding (*nous*) and research (*historia*) into human thought (*oiēsis*), they entitled *oio-no-istikē*, which more recent people nowadays call *oiōnistikē*, lengthening the O. Hence the ancients testify that, to the extent that *mantikē* is more perfect and honourable than *oiōnistikē*, both the name than the name and the activity than the activity, to the same extent the madness which is sent by god is more admirable than soundness of mind which is of human origin.

To summarise this, *mantikē*, 'prophecy', is derived from *manikē*, the 'mad' art, while *oiōnistikē*, 'augury', is by origin *oio-no-istikē*, the skill which provides human 'thought' (*oiēsis*) with 'understanding' (*nous*) and 'research' (*historia*): all three words are contracted into the single term *oiōnistikē* (244c–d). Once more, the insights involved are credited to the ancients.

[14] The same assumption, that certain names are of divine origin, surfaces from time to time elsewhere in Plato's writings. In the *Laws* (654a), curiously enough, the terminology of dance is once more (as already in the *Philebus*) etymologised: this time we learn that the gods who bestowed dance on us assigned it the name χορός, 'dance', to convey its essential component of χαρά, 'joy'. And at least once in the *Timaeus*' creationist narrative the gods who designed and built our bodies are said to have assigned an appropriately descriptive name to a body part (73c–d).

Now it is true that this speech by Socrates in the *Phaedrus* is a display of rhetoric, and he will later admit that very little indeed of it is methodologically serious.[15] Undoubtedly that includes the use of etymology. Nevertheless, the speech is proclaimed as thoroughly *plausible*, as rhetoric indeed should be, and we must infer that the etymologies are included under that description too. This is therefore good evidence that elaborate etymologies, entirely in keeping with those displayed in the *Cratylus*, did not sound ridiculous to Plato's ear, or, we may assume, to those of his readers, but, on the contrary, inherently plausible. The lack of methodological seriousness which he acknowledges corresponds, in its turn, to the eventual finding of the *Cratylus* that etymology is not a dependable route to the truth. But my contention is not that Plato thinks etymology an adequate basis for good philosophical method, just that he assumes by and large that it *works*, that is that it really can recover the beliefs of our early ancestors, and that they had enough privileged sources of understanding to be well worth listening to.

4 THE SKILL OF DECODING

The *Phaedrus* example brings me smoothly to the third strand that I have distinguished (§2) in Plato's and Aristotle's etymological assumptions:

3 The early names are still with us, but usually in a corrupted form, so that recovery of their original form and meaning requires expertise.

Only by the appropriate expertise can names be successfully analysed as the coded descriptions of their nominata that they undoubtedly are.

In his speech, we saw Socrates interpreting the name of the second divinatory science, *oiōnistikē*, as a highly elaborate encryption, very much in the same spirit as some of the *Cratylus* etymologies. One reason why it may be hard to take him seriously is that *oiōnistikē* is in reality derived from *oiōnos*, 'bird of omen'. Could Plato have been so blinkered as to overlook this palpable fact?

The answer is in two parts. First, it is a prerequisite of understanding the role of etymology in ancient thought that one set aside almost all of what has been taken for granted since modern linguistic science emerged two centuries ago. Before the rise of comparative philology in or around the early nineteenth century, the *Cratylus* etymologies were regularly assumed to be serious. It was only when it began to become clear what a real linguistic science would look like that it dawned on scholars that Plato must have

[15] 264e–266b.

been joking all along. The almost universal assumption ever since has been that Plato must think the etymologies as ridiculous as we do. Virtually no modern interpreter since Grote in the mid nineteenth century has seen that Plato may actually have believed them.[16]

It is a mistake to assume that an ancient Greek ear, even an educated one, could tell a fanciful etymology from a historically sound one. In ancient writers, fanciful and sensible etymologies (as we would diagnose them) are again and again juxtaposed without the slightest recognition that they are different in kind. Let me take two examples more or less at random. The medical writer known as Anonymus Londinensis, who survives in a fragmentary papyrus, explains that diseases, *nosēmata*, are so called because they are 'nested' (*enneneosseukenai*) in the body (3 21–2). Just lines later (29–32) he explains that another word for illness, *arrōstēma* or 'infirmity', is derived from the body's loss of *rhōsis*, 'strength'. The second of these etymologies is boringly correct, the first wildly speculative. Again, Sextus Empiricus, despite being a sceptical critic of the very grammarians who use etymology, not only assumes the power of this technique to decode words, but similarly juxtaposes obvious and far-fetched etymologies without seeming to notice the difference. Thus he accepts without evident discrimination both that *lychnos* ('lamp') means something which dissolves night (*lyei nychos*), and that *proskephalaion* ('pillow') means something put close to (*pros*) the head (*kephalē*). Of these, the first – although a commonplace in the ancient etymological literature – is historically fanciful, the latter trivially correct.[17]

That we cannot rely on our own too highly educated ear to tell us what, to an ancient Greek, was or was not a far-fetched etymology is crucial to bear always in mind, and is the first half of my answer to the objection that Plato cannot have seriously entertained the proposed etymology of *oiōnistikē*. The second half is as follows. Plato almost certainly did realise that it was related to *oiōnos*, but in no way would he have inferred from that that it could not a*lso* contain the elaborately coded message he finds in it, to the effect that this is an essentially rational art. For one thing, he may well have thought that *oiōnos* was itself derived from the prior term *oiōnistikē*. But even supposing he did not, we must bear in mind that in the *Cratylus* some of

[16] Grote 1865 vol. II, ch. 29. Grote's admirable arguments deserve to be read by everyone interested in the interpretation of this dialogue.

[17] Sextus Empiricus, *M* I 243–5. Similarly Damascius, *Princ.* I 231.14–16 combines in a single list two trivial derivations (χορός from χορεύειν and στρατός from στρατεύειν) and two fanciful ones: the ἄνθρωπος etymology from the *Cratylus* (cf. below in this section), and 'ἵππος ἀπὸ τοῦ ἵεσθαι τοῖς ποσίν'. There are innumerable further examples.

the most highly vaunted etymologies are, precisely, those which identify two or more co-existent meanings in the same word,[18] and especially those which find substantial and elaborate messages concealed in a few syllables. To understand what etymology at its best means to Plato, we would do well to think, not of modern etymology, but of modern acronyms. Plato's complex analysis *oio-no-istikē*, like the best acronyms, has the feature that in addition to the significance of the individual components the whole too spells out a simple description. An example is BASIC, the computing language, whose letters spell out 'Beginners' All-purpose Symbolic Instruction Code'. In Plato's matching example, the whole word means 'bird-science', but that simple information is elaborated and deepened once one has worked out the significance of the individual phonetic elements composing it.

There is nothing the least bit outrageous about assuming words to be telescoped descriptions of their nominata. In fact it is largely true, for ancient Greek as for modern English. It is an inescapable fact to any of us who opens a Greek lexicon that many words in the Greek vocabulary are compounds, deliberately formed to describe the objects they name. Examples come easily to mind: *stratēgos*, 'general', means 'army-leader', and *dēmokratia*, 'democracy', means 'people-rule'. In short, in classical Greece, as in our own day ('hair-dryer', 'PC', 'corkscrew', 'spaceship' . . .), in the vast majority of cases where a new word was introduced it was a descriptive encapsulation of its object, and it is doubtful whether these words would ever have succeeded in coming into circulation if they had not been. For the Greeks to make the further inference that the earliest names were generated and disseminated on that same basis, or on a comparable one, was almost unavoidable before the arrival of Epicurus' alternative theory of an animal-like origin for words. That the underlying meanings of the ancient words could not be so easily read off as those of later coinages made the task harder, but no less legitimate for that. Similarly, most of our modern acronyms have well-documented meanings, but even where they do not – think of the many competing theories about the origin of 'OK' – we readily assume, rightly or wrongly, that they must have originally encapsulated *some* apposite phrase or expression.

[18] Notably 395b–e on Atreus and Tantalus, 404e–406a on Apollo, and 409a on *hēlios* ('sun'). Cf. 406b, where the competing etymologies of Artemis may be either complementary *or* alternatives. In other cases we are offered straight alternatives: 402e–403a (Poseidon), 407b–c (Athena), 410b (*aēr*), 411d (*phronēsis*), 420b–c (*doxa*). See the valuable comments of Dalimier (1998: 43–4). One obvious reason for regarding a pair of etymologies as alternative rather than complementary is if they are perceived as conflicting with each other: cf. 418e5–419b2, where the choice between conflicting alternatives is made on the criterion of coherence with the messages revealed by the broad run of related etymologies.

The reason why the *Cratylus* etymologies are not usually viewed as similarly innocuous is that most of them are far more ingeniously inventive and, to us, implausible than the examples I have just given. I shall be looking at many of these etymologies in Chapters 4 and 5, but to glance ahead, one example frequently cited by critics as *obviously* ridiculous is the analysis of *anthrōpos*, 'man' or (more correctly) 'human being', which according to Socrates in the *Cratylus* originally went *anathrōn ha opōpe*, one who 'reviews (or "reflects on") what he has seen' (399c). Notice first that, philosophically, the etymology embodies what Plato considers a profound truth about the difference between humans and other animals, namely the capacity of the former to respond to sensory information by reflective interpretation. I shall return to that in Chapter 4 §7. But more important for present purposes is the fact that *no one* in antiquity ever thought Plato was joking here. His etymology of *anthrōpos* is repeated with approval by many later authors, by no means all of them Platonists.[19] There even seems to me a very good chance that it was endorsed by Aristotle. I suggest this because in his *De partibus animalium* Aristotle proposes an etymology which looks like the twin of Plato's. Discussing the word *prosōpon*, 'face', he remarks (*PA* 662b17–22) that this term is applied only to human beings, because, he suggests, man alone walks upright and therefore *prosōthen opōpe*, 'looks straight ahead'. Aristotle's philological analysis, although less extravagant than Plato's, clearly mimics and builds on it. And the impression that both etymologies come from the same stable is strengthened by their shared theme, that of distinguishing what is unique about humans.

One difference between Plato and Aristotle that has become evident by now lies in the sometimes greater complexity and ingenuity of the etymologies proposed by Plato.[20] But it is only in the context of what *we* call 'etymology' that this feature amounts to diminished plausibility. We would do well to treat the discipline explored by Plato as more closely analogous to modern literary criticism than to modern etymology. As in literary criticism, an interpretation which detects a complex web of meanings may well earn higher praise than one which settles for a relatively transparent reading.

[19] Ammonius, *In Porph. Isag.* 57.15–17, *In De int.* 38.10; Damascius, *Princ.* I 231.15–16; Elias, *In Porph. Isag.* 2.5–6; Eusebius, *Pr. Ev.* XI.6.16.2–5; Proclus, *In Crat.* 16.41–3; Simplicius, *In De caelo* 281.20–1; Stobaeus, *Anth.* I 47.3; Syrianus, *In Herm.* Stas., 48.6–7. In addition to these, many etymological compendia (e.g. Orion, *Etym.* 16.10–15, *Etym. genuinum* 885.1–7, *Etym. magnum* 109.16–25, *Etym. Symeonis* 62.10–13) list Plato's among three or more possible etymologies for ἄνθρωπος, which also include derivations from ἄνω ἀθρεῖν, 'looking upwards' (only man does that) and having ἔναρθρον ἔπος or ὄπα, 'articulate speech'.

[20] This is not to suggest that Aristotle's etymologies are, by and large, any more plausible historically than Plato's. Cf. his derivations of φαντασία, 'appearance', from φάος, 'light' (*DA* 429a2–4), and of μακάριος, 'blessed', from χαίρειν 'enjoy' (*EN* 1152b7).

5 *EUDAIMONIA*

To close this part of my discussion, I would like to focus on the etymology of a term which is dear to the hearts of both Plato and Aristotle, *eudaimonia* or (approximately) 'happiness'. If Plato is the only one of the two to etymologise *eudaimonia* in his writings, he may well nevertheless be speaking for both of them. It is not always appreciated that Plato, much like Aristotle after him, has a double concept of happiness – one political, one intellectual. The key to understanding both kinds is, in his view, to see that happiness consists in being governed by *nous* – intellect or intelligence. In book IV of the *Laws*, the political type of happiness is elucidated through the myth of the reign of Cronos. This deity represents *nous*, and when in power he provided mankind with good government through the intermediacy of daimons, thus producing in the human race complete *eudaimonia* (713d–e): the etymology of this word as 'being well (*eu*) governed through daimons' is no more than implicit in the text of the *Laws*, but, it seems to me, beyond doubt.[21] The meaning of the myth is that modern human beings, to achieve happiness, must imitate the reign of Cronos, both in their private and in their public lives.[22] The role of the daimons who were instrumental in producing *eudaimonia* in the age of Cronos – that is, the role of mediating between divine intellect and human life – will be performed instead by laws. This latter connection is itself in the same passage confirmed by etymology, *nomos* or 'law' being analysed as *nou dianomē*, 'distribution of intelligence' (714a2).[23] Thus Plato calls on an interrelated pair of etymologies – that of *eudaimonia* and that of *nomos* – to confirm his analogy between the daimons in the reign of Cronos and the laws in a modern city, both being rational mediators between divine intellect and human life, there to guarantee human *eudaimonia*. It is worth adding a third etymology, not repeated here in the *Laws* but already familiar to Plato's readers from the *Symposium* and *Cratylus*: in Plato's eyes, the word *daimon* itself has at its root the notion of intelligence or understanding, being derived from *daēmōn*, 'knowing', as is confirmed by our tendency to call good and wise

[21] My appreciation of this owes a lot to discussions with Alice van Harten.

[22] 713e8–714a1, δημοσίᾳ καὶ ἰδίᾳ. I take this to indicate that what are covered are both the personal and the political varieties of justice explored in the *Republic*.

[23] Fred Ahl and Mantas Adomenas have both independently pointed out to me that νοῦ διανομή is close to being an anagram of εὐδαιμονία, while England (1921) ad loc. similarly connects διανομή to δαίμονες. The links may well be conscious (see Ahl 1985 for numerous potentially significant anagrams in classical texts), and if so I suspect that the latter link is the more important of the two, given that laws are here being interpreted as surrogate daimons.

human beings *daimonioi*, 'brilliant' (*Crat*. 398c), especially those skilled in communication with the divine (*Smp*. 203a).

In addition to this complex web of etymologies underlying the political notion of happiness, there is also an etymological route to understanding intellectual *eudaimonia* – Plato's counterpart to the contemplative form of happiness extolled by Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* x. According to *Timaeus* 90b–c, the immortal intellectual component of each human soul is assigned to it as its guardian spirit or daimon,[24] so that true happiness consists in the good condition of that daimon or intellect, once again *eu-daimonia*.[25]

It thus emerges that in *eudaimonia* Plato recognises a word which has been expertly fashioned on the basis of privileged information, and one which with considerable subtlety encodes a complex guide to both varieties of human happiness. Among other things, the example illustrates how dense semantic complexity can, if the name is well made, be achieved without any correspondingly complex analysis of the word's phonetic components.

6 NOT A JOKE

At this point I am tempted to rest my case for recognition of Plato the etymologist. But, it will be objected by many, doesn't Plato himself make it abundantly clear in the *Cratylus* that he regards the etymologies as a joke? I don't think so.[26] First, if Plato was joking, the joke flopped. Neither Socrates' pupil Hermogenes[27] within the dialogue nor (as we have seen) Plato's pupil Aristotle outside it shows the least awareness that it is all a gigantic leg-pull. Nor for that matter does any other ancient writer who

[24] A similar analysis already underlies Democritus' account of *eudaimonia* in his B25.

[25] Cf. Sedley 1999, where I argue that for Plato, much as for Aristotle, intellectual *eudaimonia* is even greater than political.

[26] References by Socrates to etymologies sounding 'ridiculous' are often cited in favour of a non-serious reading, at least of the specific etymologies on offer. But, of these, one is about how ridiculous the postulated original forms of names would sound to *us*, who are used to their debased forms (400b6–7); at 425d1–3 and 426b5–6 the prediction that the analysis of primary sounds will seem 'ridiculous' and 'over the top' (ὑβριστικά) is an acknowledgement of its novelty (see Ch. 4 §1 below, p. 76); and at 402a1 the etymology announced sounds ridiculous but actually, according to Socrates, has a certain plausibility, which he brings out at 402c–d by applying the principle that even what, taken in isolation, seems a far-fetched etymology may acquire credibility when taken jointly with kindred ones: cf. 415d5–e2 (this principle can be invoked to mitigate, for example, the implausibility of the etymology of Tethys at 402c–d, on which see Ch. 5 §3 below, p. 105).

[27] For Hermogenes as an intimate member of the Socratic circle, see p. 3 above. Note too that he is familiar with the theory of Forms (*Crat.* 389a–390e).

responds to or echoes the *Cratylus* etymologies.[28] This ancient consensus should be enough in itself to shift the burden of proof firmly onto any modern reader who wishes to downplay Plato's seriousness in the matter.

The impression that the etymologies are a joke – and therefore, presumably, a satire on some cultural trend or on one or more individuals – is the result of wrongly connecting two facts: (1) most of the etymologies are, to anyone with our presuppositions, wrong; (2) Socrates, while working them out, frequently indulges in irony, mock boasting and other forms of playfulness. The linking of these two facts has fostered the natural but hasty assumption that the irony and fun are directed at the etymologies. It seems to me rather that Socrates is getting the fun out of his virtuoso performance[29] in an arena, the decipherment of names, which he has never entered before. It is that, I believe, that best explains his frequent expressions of amazement at his newly discovered prowess. In order not to claim the credit for this surge of brilliance, he ironically pretends that he has been inspired by Euthyphro, to whom he was listening early the same day.

Of course, since Euthyphro is portrayed in the dialogue Plato named after him as a religious bigot, it is easy to infer that fingering him as Socrates' source of inspiration is tantamount to dismissing the etymologies purportedly inspired by him. But it need not be so.

For one thing, we should not too readily assume that Plato considers Euthyphro to have been as bad at etymology as he was, in the eponymous dialogue, at understanding the nature of holiness. Plato is quite happy with the idea that people who prove to be morally confused under Socratic cross-examination may nevertheless be genuinely accomplished in their own specialist disciplines – for example, the craftsmen whom Socrates describes himself questioning at *Apology* 22c–e. Euthyphro's reputation in the discipline of etymology may well have been unimpeachable. As it happens our own information about him comes mainly from the negative portrayal in the dialogue named after him. We should not forget that the references to him in the *Cratylus* draw not on that portrayal but on contemporary knowledge about him and his work which we cannot hope to recover.

For another thing, even supposing that Socrates is indulging in irony here, that irony could very well consist of the typical self-deflation involved

[28] For acceptance of the *Cratylus* etymologies as at least exegetically serious, see e.g. Plut. *De Iside et Osiride* 375C–D; Dionysius Hal. *De comp. verborum* 62.18–63.3; Proclus *Schol. In Crat. passim*; cf. Alcinous, *Did.* 159.44–160.30, as well as the examples cited in n. 19 above.

[29] Cf. Barney 1998, 2001 on Socrates' 'agonistic' performance in the dialogue.

in pretending that his superior etymological skill is inspired by, and therefore derivative from, what is in reality the inferior skill of Euthyphro.

At the same time, the motif of Socrates acting under inspiration is a device by which Plato acknowledges that etymology was not the kind of enterprise that his teacher Socrates actually went in for. We can compare the *Phaedrus*, where Socrates' new-found prowess in rhetoric is similarly attributed to inspiration. His promise in the *Cratylus* to 'exorcise' this alien wisdom the next day (396d–397a) may be a further recognition of its non-Socratic character, rather than, as often taken, yet another device for expressing Socrates' disapproval of it.

Against the assumption that Socrates' professed belief in the etymologies is ironic, it is worth recalling from our earlier examples that etymology is similarly exploited by Plato's speakers Timaeus[30] and (in the *Laws*) the Athenian stranger, neither of whom shares Socrates' tendency to irony.[31] However, the strongest single piece of evidence *against* the dismissal of the etymologies as ironic comes very near the end of the dialogue (439c1–4, translated pp. 164–5 below), where Socrates explicitly and, it can hardly be denied, non-ironically affirms his belief that the main overall outcome of the etymologies, that the early name-makers believed that everything is in flux, is correct. That is, as the dialogue draws to its entirely serious close, Socrates reaffirms his confidence that the etymologies are by and large what I call 'exegetically correct': they really do recover for us the beliefs of the original namegivers. Whether or not those ancient beliefs further turn out to be true – whether, that is, the etymologies are also philosophically correct – is a separate question. My present contention is just that Socrates regards the etymological decipherments as by and large exegetically sound.

7 ETYMOLOGY AS AN EXPERTISE

I have spoken of this decoding of names as an expertise. The Greek for expertise is *technē*, and the final, vital question to ask in this chapter is whether Plato really does regard etymology a *technē*. As any reader of his *Gorgias* knows, technicity is for the Platonic Socrates (as for most Greeks) a vital criterion by which any purported method secures approval or disapproval. So is etymology, as portrayed in the *Cratylus*, a *technē* or not? Among those

[30] ἐγκέφαλος, *Ti.* 73c–d; αἴσθησις, 43c5–7; ἡμέρα, 45b4–6; θερμόν, 62a2–5; cf. πόλις at *Rep*. 369c1–4, where no one is likely to suspect Socrates of irony or playfulness. For the *Laws*, see §5 above, p. 38.

[31] This vital point, that not all Plato's speakers use irony, was well recognised in antiquity (see Sedley 2002), but tends to go unnoticed in modern Platonic scholarship.

who think that etymology is ridiculed by Socrates in this dialogue, there is a widespread perception that it is being condemned precisely for its total lack of a sound methodology – in short, as Plato would put it, for not being a *technē* at all.[32] It is this perception that I want to challenge.[33]

We must start with a clear distinction between the skill of linguistic encoding and that of linguistic decoding. That the former, i.e. name-making, is a *technē* is made very explicit indeed by Socrates in the *Cratylus*,[34] even though some may, I suppose, wish to read the claim as ironic.[35] That name decoding or decipherment, i.e. etymology, is also presented as a *technē* is much less explicit, and therefore requires some argument. Whether or not etymology is itself formally a *technē*, Socrates makes it plain that it has its own technicity, which it borrows from the name-making craft – much, we might think, as the ability to read (although not normally itself called a *technē*) draws on the *technē* of writing. The key passage is 424c–426a. Analysing names into their primary phonetic components, Socrates speaks in the first person plural about how 'we', like expert painters mixing the appropriate colours, can on this basis attach the right sounds to the things which they resemble, building up from elementary components to whole words and even sentences. He then corrects himself (425a5–b3):

Or rather, not 'we' – I got carried away by what I was saying. It was the ancients who composed names in their actual composition. Our job, if we are going to have expert (*technikōs*) knowledge of how to look at them, is to divide them on the same basis, and thus to see whether or not the first names, and the later ones, are properly coined. I'm afraid that to proceed in any other way is shabby and unmethodical, my dear Hermogenes.

That is, *our* job as etymologists is not to repeat the work of the name-makers, but to reverse it, decomposing what they composed and thereby decoding what they encoded.[36]

[32] This is argued, for example, by Levin 2001: 81–9.

[33] Cf. the valuable remarks to this same effect by Dalimier 1998: 44–7.

[34] 388e4–6, 423d8, 428e6–429a3, 431e6–8, cf. 400b4–6.

[35] It might be wondered whether the actual name-makers who devised the Greek language *succeeded* in practising this art. Socrates leaves little doubt that they did. In particular, they evidently understood the function of names correctly, since their encoding of the word 'name' (*onoma*) itself at 421a–b (see Ch. 5 §8 below, pp. 120–1) shows their recognition that a name is an attempt to capture (literally a 'search for') a 'being' (*on*), anticipating Socrates' own definition of a name as an instructive tool for separating being (388b–c).

[36] This passage may appear to be interpreted in a completely different way by Barney 2001: 97 (cf. 126): Socrates has abandoned any pretence of investigating the composition of actual Greek words, and instead is asking 'what *we* must do if we set out to name correctly'. However, on p. 99 it becomes clear that she does read it as I do, leaving me unsure how to interpret the words quoted.

Socrates goes on to repeat twice more that only by extending the analysis all the way down to primary sounds can one analyse names 'expertly' (*technikōs*, 425c4,[37] 426a7). In this way, without ever actually calling etymology a *technē*, he makes it explicit that it can and should be carried out 'expertly', by re-applying exactly the same principles as used by the practitioners of the name-making *technē*.

Overtly, then, Socrates asserts and defends the technicity of etymology. However, it is undoubtedly a widespread modern assumption that, if he does so, it is only in a spirit of irony, and that his long journey through the territory of the etymologists serves in reality to mock and undermine their entire enterprise. In order to make their case, it seems to me, the proponents of such an interpretation would need to identify ways in which etymology as illustratively practised by Socrates contravenes acknowledged principles of technicity.

The belief that the etymologies do offend against the principles of technicity rests primarily on the observation that the rules applied by Socrates are so comically loose and flexible that, as one might say, anything goes. If you are free to ignore those letters in a word that don't suit you, and to expand the remaining letters *ad lib* into whatever coded message you set out to find there, all methodological rigour will have been thrown to the winds. Against this assumption, it is necessary to emphasise that Socrates himself points out the 'anything goes' danger in order to warn against it, without for a moment conceding that he is succumbing to it (414d–e). On the contrary, he uses the following argument (393c–394b) to show that his method here fully accords with scientific practice. First, he points out, in a simple case *anyone* can learn to ignore irrelevant letters in a word and to decipher it on the basis of its significant core. Thus, taking the names of the letters of the alphabet – alpha, beta, gamma, etc. – we all recognise that the first sound is the dominant component, and are not in the least put out by the presence of further letters, which have no doubt been added to facilitate diction or memory. Etymological expertise is a refined and developed version of this same ability: the trained eye or ear should in principle be able to pick out the significant core of a word, no matter where it is located or how it is distributed within it, and to ignore the insignificant remainder. The analogy which Socrates offers is that of a doctor who has been trained to recognise the real power of a drug no matter how it has been coloured and flavoured; that is, he can isolate its significant essence from any superficial

[37] Following Reinhard's reading τεχνικῶς, with the revised OCT, where the MSS and Burnet have τι χρηστόν.

accretions which it has acquired in order to make it palatable to patients or easy to swallow. There is no reason why word decipherment should not be like that. The medical model invoked here by Socrates makes it clear that etymology is being assimilated to respectable scientific practice.

To confirm this, we must ask what Socrates would regard as the minimal requirements of technicity. In particular, must a *technē* operate by rules which guarantee unfailing accuracy, as the critics I am targeting apparently assume it must? Not as far as I am aware. The *Gorgias*, to which I shall return shortly, includes no such criterion among the hallmarks of technicity, and in a world where medicine often served as the paradigmatic *technē* there were strong reasons for not insisting on any such success criterion. Although there was a device for vindicating the success of such arts by redefining their goals as stochastic ones, that move was post-Platonic. In Plato's Socratic writings, it is the Sophist Thrasymachus, and not Socrates, who proposes that a craftsman, *qua* craftsman, never gets anything wrong (*Rep*. I 340d–341a). Socrates himself frequently makes the claim of unerringness for 'knowledge' (*epistēmē*) and 'wisdom' (*sophia*),[38] but, by contrast, never does so for a mere *technē* as such.[39] In the *Cratylus* itself, while Cratylus does advocate the view that naming is done either with total correctness or not at all (429a–c), Socrates argues, in response, that this is just as false for naming as for other *technai*, and that most if not all *technai* are practised more successfully by some practitioners, less so by others.[40]

It must be admitted that the notions of success and failure here run together two or more different conceptions. A doctor might succeed in restoring a single patient's health, but incompletely; or he might cure some of his patients but not all of them. Similarly in etymological decipherment, one might spot some but not all of the hidden meaning of a word, or one might get some words right but others wrong. However, the two forms of failure were recognised as forming a continuum at least as early as the Hippocratic treatise *On ancient medicine*. As its author observes (ch. 9), a navigator who makes minor errors in calm conditions is the same one who is liable to lose the ship in rough conditions, and likewise a doctor

[38] E.g. *Charmides* 171d–172a, *Euthydemus* 279e–280b, *Meno* 97c, *Republic* V 477e, *Theaetetus* 207d–208a. I am not denying that possession of an art may *include* 'knowledge' about its subject matter, just that the art itself would normally be viewed as having that same status.

[39] Cf. esp. *Philebus* 62a–b for the contrast. At *Rep*. 342b3–4, Socrates' suggestion that no art has any πονηρία or ἁμαρτία is making the different point that no art, if properly developed, needs to engage in any self-improvement; it says nothing about whether the art, even at its best, ever fails.

[40] Although at 387b11–c5 Socrates may seem to start out from an all-or-nothing view of linguistic success, I take this to be a preliminary sketch which leaves the matter open for the subsequent discussion to refine.

who makes minor mistakes in minor health matters is also the one who is likely to lose his patient in major ones. I assume the same to apply to etymology. If it were an exact science it could not make either kind of error, but being inexact it can make both. Its being less than completely accurate in individual cases, and its on occasion mistaking the entire meaning of a word, if it ever does that, will be merely two manifestations of the same imprecision.[41]

In the *Cratylus* Socrates develops his point, as regards the incomplete accuracy of the *technē* of naming, by means of an analogy with painting. Both skills are attempts to portray by likeness: the one by colour resemblance, the other by vocal resemblance. A painter who gets one or more colours wrong is still a painter, and may well still be judged to have succeeded in depicting his subject, even if less correctly than another painter. Likewise the name-maker may still succeed in naming something by means of an encoded description, even if that description gets some elements wrong. Naming and depicting are in this regard, he points out, different in kind from, say, arithmetic, where every sum arrived at might be argued to be straightforwardly either right or wrong (432a8–b4).[42]

The approximative nature of such *technai* as naming and painting, far from being an *ad hoc* postulate, lies at the very heart of Platonic metaphysics. The task of any craftsman, Socrates has argued back at *Cratylus* 389a–390a, is to embody in the available materials the ideal Form of the artefact under construction, be it a shuttle, a drill, a name, or (we may infer) a portrait. Thus the name-maker turns his mind's eye to the Form of the name in question – to its ideal function, we might say – and embodies this in the materials at his disposal, namely (it appears) the sound system of his own culture. That any craftsman's embodiment of a Form in matter is necessarily less than perfect is a fundamental tenet of Platonism. If instead of the Form the craftsman had simply imitated an existing exemplar of the artefact in question, the reproduction might after all have been perfect, but his failure to work from the ideal model would disqualify his activity from counting as a *technē* at all in Plato's eyes, as we shall see shortly when we turn to his criteria of technicity.[43]

No doubt the principle at issue here is most familiar to Plato's readers from *Republic* x's contrast between the Forms of Table and Couch and

[41] For an exceptionally helpful discussion of this topic, albeit with partly different conclusions, see Allen 1994.

[42] For classifications of *technai* which set the mathematical ones radically apart from the remainder, cf. *Rep.* 533b, *Phlb.* 55d–e.

[43] Cf. *Crat.* 389b1–4, *Ti.* 28c–29a.

the inferior material tables and couches created by a carpenter.[44] But we should also recall the *Timaeus*, where even a divine craftsman, working from an eternal model, cannot altogether match that model's perfection when embodying it in matter. My point is that the palpable absence of rigour that pervades the etymologies does not disqualify them from technical status, but on the contrary, as Plato is at pains to make us see, exemplifies a pattern which for fundamental metaphysical reasons is ineliminably present in most if not all of the familiar *technai*.

Some interpreters of the *Cratylus*[45] have taken Plato's account of language to be essentially prescriptive, rather than descriptive of the actual Greek language: its main aim would, on this account, be to formulate the rules which an ideal language would observe, while conceding that Greek does not do so. Although I do not go along with this as a reading of the *Cratylus*,[46] it does seem to me to capture something about the dialogue's approach, its recognition that actual Greek words have varying degrees of success in satisfying the norms laid down. Again, however, the language's acknowledged failure fully to live up to the ideal does not point to some kind of linguistic utopianism: it simply reflects Plato's principle that *technai* in general are structured by a conceptual model towards which they strive but which they cannot count on fully attaining.

If, then, absolute precision is not a feature expected of a *technē*, what is? I have already mentioned one such feature, the craftsman's use of an eternal model, the appropriate Form. This already occurs in the *Gorgias* (503e–504a), albeit without the overtly transcendental metaphysics of some other dialogues, and in that dialogue it is found in company with two other criteria (501a–b). A *technē*, as well as (a) looking to this ideal model, also (b) studies the nature of its objects and can consequently give an account of the causes of what it brings about, and (c) aims for what is best, where this good is (503e–504a, 506d–507a) further identified with the proper

[44] *Rep.* x 596a5–598d6. The same passage adds the yet lower-grade beds and couches constituted by an artist's depictions of these latter. This, however, makes a rather different point. A painting falls short of its original, not through any inherent deficiency, but because if it did not do so – e.g. by being in only two dimensions instead of three – it would fail to be a painting at all. This is the point of the Two Cratyluses argument (432b–c, see Ch. 6 §4 below, pp. 137–8): 'on the contrary, nor is it even at all *proper* for it to represent every quality of the subject it portrays, if it is going to be a portrait' (432b2–4). The argument which ensues, that if a portrait of Cratylus reproduced every detail the result would be not Cratylus plus his portrait, but two Cratyluses, relies on the fact that this product would not be a portrait, and that the artist would have failed for this reason, not on the impossibility of producing such a result (remember the two Helens in Euripides' *Helen*).

[45] Esp. Weingartner 1973, Baxter 1992, Barney 2001. Cf. n. 36 above, and my remarks at the beginning of Ch. 7.

[46] Cf. esp. Ch. 6 and 7, where I argue that the norms for 'correctness' laid down are assumed by Socrates to fit the existing Greek language.

order or *arrangement* which the *technē* imposes on its materials or objects. For example, a doctor (a) looks to health as such as his model, (b) has studied the nature of the human body and can therefore tell you how the treatment he administers causally contributes to health, and (c) aims for a good end, which can be identified with the proper ordering of the body and its components. With regard to name-making, we have already seen that it satisfies criterion (a), by looking to an ideal model or Form. Let us next take criteria (b) and (c) in turn.

First (b). Causality is not an issue centrally addressed in the *Cratylus*. However, as is well known, Plato is committed to the widespread principle that causation, properly understood, is of like by like, a principle which in passing he invokes in the *Cratylus* too (416b–d). Now, the whole etymological enterprise is founded on a principle of likeness: both simple sounds and, derivatively, complex sounds, systematically resemble the items they connote. If then the name-maker can tell you, in line with the dialogue's quite elaborate phonetic analyses, how the ontological composition of a given object earns it a name which, element by element, suitably resembles that structure, there is no reason to doubt that in Plato's eyes he will be successfully explaining the causes of his product, the name, thanks to his expert understanding of its constituent matter, vocal sound.

It must be admitted that the causality aspect is never made explicit. However, this same second criterion of technicity recurs in the later *Phaedrus* (270b) with a somewhat altered emphasis: the *technē*'s required study of the nature of its object is no longer presented explicitly in terms of causality, but in terms of its ability to *divide* the subject matter with which it deals. This reflects Plato's growing emphasis on the methodological importance of taxonomic division at the time of writing the *Phaedrus*. The *Cratylus*' account of etymological technicity, founded on formal classification of primary sounds (424c–425b) fully and explicitly shares this altered emphasis with the *Phaedrus*.[47]

Now take criterion (c): a *technē* aims for some good, namely the proper order which it imposes on its materials or objects. In the *Gorgias*, this is contrasted with pseudo-*technai* like cookery and rhetoric, which in reality aim not for good but for pleasure. While the *Gorgias*' dual value-system

[47] See Barney 2001: 98–101 for a helpful discussion of the technicity of naming which properly emphasises this aspect. (One disagreement: on p. 139 she takes this technicity to be undermined by 435e2–3, 'there is one and the same *technē* for all things which are like each other', which would leave it impossible to maintain the earlier distinction between the *technai* of name-making and dialectic; I think this interpretation an over-reaction, especially as the principle quoted is attributed to Cratylus and never explicitly endorsed by Socrates.)

of the good and the pleasant is not an explicit feature of the *Cratylus*, one can see more or less the same distinction at work throughout the etymological section. Again and again we are led to rediscover the original formulations of the namegivers. While Socrates admits that these will often sound ridiculous to us (400b, 425d), he nevertheless deplores the way in which generations of subsequent users of the names have distorted their pronunciation, motivated by considerations of euphony rather than truth.[48] This contrast conveys very effectively how the good work of the original name-makers rests on a degree of devotion to truth not usually shared by ordinary speakers, who instead are more concerned with the superficial embellishment (*kallōpismos*, 414c) of the language they speak.[49]

In short, the *Cratylus* offers us every inducement to conclude that name-making, really and non-ironically, is a *technē*. And I have been proceeding all along on the principle, made virtually explicit by Socrates, that name-decipherment, i.e. etymology, must derive its own technicity from the art of name-making, whose principles it re-applies in order to crack the name-makers' code. However, this now needs several qualifications.

First, decipherment is if anything even harder than name-making, because, as already noted, the names have been distorted by generations of use. This additional cloak of distortion does not necessarily invalidate the etymologies, since, as Socrates explains, one can learn to strip away the more recent accretions and ignore the sound-shifts, instead identifying and concentrating on the original hard core of each sound-complex. It simply means that the skill of decipherment, already necessarily approximative like most other skills, is even more demanding than the name-maker's own art – we might compare it to being simultaneously a restorer and an interpreter of old masters. A further limitation is that for some words etymological analysis is bound to fail because they are foreign imports, composed on non-Greek principles (409d–410a). Again, and for the same reasons, this limitation need not be fatal to the entire enterprise, which, like all skills, should never have aspired to 100 per cent success.

Second, we have to bear in mind that in the etymological section Socrates is not fully practising the art of etymological analysis. At 425b–c,

[48] Socrates' own view about what is ridiculous is the opposite one: it is the euphonic accretions that are 'absurd' (ἄτοπον, literally 'out of place'), as he observes with regard to the intrusive first ρ in κάτροπτρον, 'mirror' at 414c; for this as the correct spelling in Plato's text, including here, see West 2002. The significance of the example is that the intrusion is one that occurred in living memory; hence the phenomenon he is describing is not an opportunistic fiction, but evidence that what he says about euphonic accretions is based on his own awareness of language changes going on around him.

[49] Cf. 400b3, 402e6, 404d7, 407c1–2, 408b3, 409c8–9, 412e2, 414c8, 417e4, 426d2.

immediately after insisting (in the words which I quoted on p. 42) that truly expert etymology must be a process of bottom-up analysis, based on the primary sounds, Socrates confesses that he is incapable of carrying through such an enterprise, although he will do the best he can. He does proceed to offer some illustrations of the methodology, but we are thereby also reminded that the entire preceding etymological section falls short of the ideal method he envisages.

It would, however, be a mistake to conclude that this gap between theory and practice invalidates the method itself. Socrates is a tyro at etymological science, relying, as he keeps reminding us, on inspiration rather than training. (As I suggested in §6, this is Plato's way of flagging the fact that the discipline is in reality foreign to Socrates' own practices.) That in the *Cratylus* Socrates should not, on his very first attempt, succeed in practising the etymologist's art with full expertise is no condemnation of the method itself. As so often in Plato's dialogues – and Socrates' account of dialectic about the Good in *Republic* VI–VII is one of the parallels that immediately spring to mind[50] – Socrates sketches to us in full seriousness a method which, with his characteristic disavowal of knowledge, he admits he himself has not learned to practise to a satisfactory standard. And as so often, we would be well advised to take that disavowal itself as tinged with irony. But even those who do not see irony here should at least avoid the mistake of taking Socrates' overt modesty about his own attainments to imply a dismissal of the method itself. Etymology ranks far lower than dialectic as a truth-finding method,[51] but *mutatis mutandis* the treatments of the two are not dissimilar.

In short, none of the conceded weaknesses or limitations of the etymological method employed by Socrates need lead readers to doubt its fundamental technicity. And I have tried in the earlier part of this chapter to show it up as a discipline which Plato not only respects but also practises elsewhere in his philosophical works.

The *limits* of etymology, which are the topic for Chapter 6, will be philosophical limits, not such as to cast doubt on its status as the authentic science of decoding words. The way we may most usefully, in the mean time, preview those limits is as follows. Etymology, we have seen, acquires its

[50] See *Rep.* VI 506b2–e7 on Socrates' admitted ignorance about the Good, ignorance which he would not have if he had successfully practised the dialectical method he advocates (VII 534b3–d2).

[51] The fact that even the etymological section of the conversation is conducted in question-and-answer format ultimately mirrors Plato's conviction (p. 1 above) that question and answer is the structure of thought. Dialectic, however broadly or narrowly defined, is much more than mere question-and-answer discussion: minimally, it involves systematic conceptual analysis with a severely curtailed empirical content.

technicity by unravelling the products of the name-making expertise. Now the name-making expertise is itself presented by Socrates as a subordinate one: the name-maker takes his orders from the dialectician, who alone is qualified to determine what information needs to be encoded in each name.[52] This already implies that etymology, the expertise which is the exact mirror image of name-making, will prove to be correspondingly inferior. For etymology can decode the very same messages that the name-making art has encoded, but, like the name-making art, it cannot pronounce on their philosophical rationale. It is this subordinate status (and *not* any suggestion that etymology does not work) that prefigures the grounds on which Socrates will eventually dismiss the decoding of names as a route to philosophical truth.

[52] See further Ch. 3 §4 below. Even Socrates' most elaborate account of how the name-making art proceeds, at 424c–425a, avoids any implication that the division of beings onto which it maps its division of sounds is the outcome of its own dialectical prowess.

CHAPTER 3

Linguistic science

I CONVENTIONALISM

As the *Cratylus* opens, Hermogenes is begging Socrates to intervene in a quarrel which has already been running heatedly off-stage. This device is our first intimation that the topic to be addressed is not one from the historical Socrates' regular repertoire.

Cratylus has been affirming his doctrine that each existing thing, including each human individual, has one naturally correct name: the mere fact that people may customarily call it something else does not make that its name. No one is likely to doubt that Cratylus, for all his reticence about explaining it, has a worked out theory of names, the one which has come to be known as linguistic 'naturalism'. It is an easy and regular assumption that Hermogenes is an adherent of the other wing, the 'conventionalist' party. In a way this is true: he *is* the voice of linguistic conventionalism, and, as he says, he holds his opinion after having often discussed the question with Cratylus and others (384c–d). But we should not go too far in calling him the adherent of any theory. For he declares his readiness to abandon his view if anyone can explain to him how and why to do so (384d–e), and, as good as his word, he does exactly that as soon as Socrates provides the required lead. What makes his response so interesting is precisely the fact that his reaction to the naturalist thesis is to say what you or I might well have said if confronted with it, even if we had never thought about it before: surely names are just a human imposition on the world, and the very way we assign and use them confirms that nothing more than our own consensus determines that a given word should be applied in a given way. How else, Hermogenes wants to know, are we to explain the fact that the names of things differ, not only from country to country but even from city to city? Or the fact that we have the power to change a thing's name?

Hermogenes illustrates this last point by referring to the common Greek practice of giving one's slaves new names (384d). In doing so, he seems

incidentally to have given a cue to the late fourth-century BC logician Diodorus Cronus, who, to confirm his own version of linguistic conventionalism, named one of his slaves with the conjunction 'Allamēn', 'However' (this was not a randomly chosen word, but a logician's standard connective for introducing the minor premise of a syllogism).[1] Diodorus was undoubtedly promoting a *theory* on the relation of language to the world. But Hermogenes' own role at this stage of the dialogue is to voice common sense, not theory. It is the very fact that Hermogenes in a way speaks for us all that makes Socrates' achievement all the more significant when he persuades him to rethink the question.

Yet far from being recognised as the voice of common sense, Hermogenes is widely held to be some kind of extremist. Having never understood the grounds for this reading, I am encouraged in my incomprehension by Rachel Barney's outstanding recent work on this topic, in which she fully articulates the appropriate doubts.[2] The alleged extremism emerges when Socrates quizzes him. Hermogenes agrees that he believes the following propositions.

1 A thing's name simply is whatever it gets called,[3] whether by an individual or by a city.
2 If I choose to call 'horse' what is normally called a 'man', that same thing will have both a public name, 'man', and my private name, 'horse'.
3 A thing's name is therefore whatever each person *says* is its name.
4 A thing has precisely as many names as anyone says it has, and has them at the times at which anyone says that it does.[4]

It is his endorsement of private (and potentially fluctuating) vocabularies that has been seen as representing some kind of corner into which Hermogenes has either been driven or painted himself – either a *reductio ad absurdum* of his position by Socrates, or a misguided concession on his part.[5] Minimally his is presented as a Humpty Dumpty view according to which you can use words however you like,[6] and some have, even more

[1] Sedley 1977: 102–4; Diodorus II F 7 *SSR*.
[2] Barney 1997, 2001: ch. 1. Much of what I say here is anticipated and/or influenced by Barney.
[3] I phrase this to leave open the textual choice at 385a2 between ὃ ἂν φῇς καλῇ τις (Burnet and OCT²) and ὃ ἂν θῇ καλεῖν τις (Méridier 1931), supported by Barney. The former implies mere use of a word, the latter baptism. But I have considerable doubts as to whether the latter is acceptable Greek (note that, at all events, it could not be a reference to the θέσις of names, which is expressed only by the middle form τίθεσθαι), and have some sympathy for Schanz's conjecture ὃ ἂν φῇ καλεῖν τις, 'whatever someone says he is calling . . .', which would have the attraction of making the transition to (3) even smoother.
[4] 385a–d, omitting the interpolated 385b2–d1 (see Ch. 1 §3 above, pp. 10–13).
[5] Kretzmann 1971: 127.
[6] Kahn 1973: 158–9, Williams 1982: 90; Baxter 1992: 18–19.

misleadingly, assimilated Socrates' move in interrogating him to Wittgenstein's critique of private languages.

It seems that this reading may rest partly on a confusion between two senses of the English verb 'call'. To call something by some word may mean to use that word of it, as when I call Plato a philosopher. But it may also mean to assign that name to it in a kind of baptism, as when Plato chose to call his dialogue '*Cratylus*'. If, in order to convey to you the fact that Plato is a philosopher, I were free to call him by just any word that came to mind, that would amount to linguistic anarchy and threaten to destroy communication. On the other hand, Plato could just as well have called his dialogue not '*Cratylus*' but '*Hermogenes*', and that licence imports no kind of anarchy at all. The former kind of calling is name *use*, the latter kind name *assignment*.

Hermogenes' own terminology is, fortunately, both clear and consistent. He uses 'call' (*kalein*) only to indicate the habitual *use* of a name for some object or class of objects; when he wants to speak of baptism, he switches to the standard verb for 'assign', *tithesthai*.[7] And he makes clear his assumption that, if someone privately calls a thing 'x', that is in virtue of the fact that they have already, prior to that, assigned the name 'x' to it (385d7–9).[8]

I can make a private decision to assign the name 'horses' to human beings, and thereafter, until such time as I retract the assignment, that is *ipso facto* my own name for them, though not their public name.[9] In this Hermogenes is stating a simple truth, familiar to anyone who has ever indulged in the use of private nicknames. It represents, as it were, the limiting case of his common-sense claim that every individual and group has the power to assign whatever names it chooses. While thus to legitimise a single individual's private assignment of a name may seem to stretch Hermogenes' notion of 'convention' or 'agreement' as the basis of naming (you might have thought that it took at least two to reach an

[7] Reeve's 'set' for τίθεσθαι is a useful alternative.

[8] At 385d2–6 Socrates gets Hermogenes to endorse an inference from his initial assertion, that whatever someone calls (or says he is calling, see n. 3 above) a thing is its name, including separate public and private usages, to the reformulation that whatever someone says is a thing's name is its name, and that a thing has as many names as someone says it does and has them when that person says so. (I am assuming the deletion of 385b2–d1, see n. 4 above.) Here Socrates is trying to make Hermogenes' position look weak by emphasising the whimsical and transient nature of names thus conceived. It is in response to this threat that Hermogenes emphasises, at 385d7–e3, that the names by which things are 'called' are those which have been 'assigned' to them, whether the authority agreeing the assignment be a national group, a local one, or even an individual. The consistency of Hermogenes' usage is recognised by Ackrill (1977: 36).

[9] Barney (2001: 28) rightly points to Hermogenes' words at 385d8–9, '. . . that I can call each thing by one name, *which I have assigned*, you by another, *which you have assigned*'.

agreement), it does not altogether erase it, since Socrates will himself later point out (435a7) that one can make an agreement *with oneself* to use a word in a certain way. What is most important, however, is that Hermogenes' recognition of private naming constitutes no threat at all to successful public communication within large social groups, since he is quite clear about the distinction between a private name and a public name, and plainly associates inter-personal communication only with the latter.

2 AGAINST PROTAGORAS

Why then does Socrates push Hermogenes to concede that naming can, at an extreme, be at the transient whim of an individual? The answer emerges as soon as Socrates starts to construct his own argument. For his first move (385e) is to ask Hermogenes whether he subscribes to Protagoras' thesis 'Man is the measure of all things.' It may well be that the historical Protagoras in saying this had in mind primarily the power of human groups to determine for themselves the facts of such matters as religion and morality. But in Plato's hands, as we know from the *Theaetetus* as well as the *Cratylus*, Protagoras' dictum becomes above all an affirmation of individuals' power to determine the truth for themselves at any given time. All truth is relative, in the particular sense of being relative to the judging subject. As Socrates puts it here, 'How things appear to me to be is how they are for me, how they appear to you to be is how they are for you' (386a1–3). Socrates' suggestion to Hermogenes is that, since he believes in the private individual's power to determine names by mere fiat, he might also, with Protagoras, believe in the private individual's power to determine how all other things are too.

It must be made very clear that in no way is it insinuated that Hermogenes' linguistic conventionalism entails Protagorean relativism, so that the rejection of relativism will lead to that of conventionalism. Socrates is right to avoid suggesting this, because while overall relativism like that of Protagoras may entail a relativistic analysis of naming, the converse is clearly untrue: one could be relativistic about naming while holding that most other truths are absolute and/or objective.[10] Avoiding this false path, Socrates aligns linguistic conventionalism with Protagoreanism only loosely, just enough to make the transition from the former to the latter a natural one.

[10] I add 'objective' because, although 'relative' properly contrasts with 'absolute', Protagoras' relativism is specifically about relativity to a judging *subject* (not just to any relatum, e.g. left/right).

Nevertheless, what he has foreseen is that, if only he can get Hermogenes to reject Protagorean relativism, he will have started a process which, if all goes well, will end up with Hermogenes abandoning linguistic conventionalism too. For that is what happens in the following pages. In barest outline, the rejection of Protagoreanism will entail that things have their own intrinsic natures and hence that there are naturally correct and incorrect ways of acting with regard to each of them. One way of acting with regard to a thing is to name it; hence there are naturally correct and incorrect ways of naming things.

First, though, the refutation of Protagoras. This is swiftly accomplished by an argument which elsewhere, in the *Theaetetus*, is explored by Plato at much greater length. If everyone is the measure of their own truth, *ipso facto* no one is ever wrong about anything; in which case, no one is wiser than anyone else. Anyone who rejects that consequence must reject the measure doctrine from which it follows, it is argued.

Brief though the argument is, by focusing on wisdom or expertise it appears to make Socrates' current point very effectively. For, once Hermogenes has been persuaded to regard naming from a non-Protagorean viewpoint, he is ready to be further persuaded that it, *like other actions*, can be done either expertly or inexpertly. However, he may be suspected of allowing himself to be moved too fast. As Plato recognised in the *Theaetetus*, one might refute Protagoras' measure doctrine simply by showing that *wherever there is an expertise* the truth cannot be determined at the whim of each individual, but still leave it an open possibility that in some areas, for example for values like justice, each society determines its own truths, and that there simply is no pertinent expertise to override the preference of a group or individual.[11] If that were so, why shouldn't naming be another area in which there is no expertise, and in which anyone's fiat is as good as anyone else's?

Whether Socrates' argument is vulnerable to this objection will depend on exactly how we read it, which we must now decide. Socrates and Hermogenes, in the light of the rejection of Protagoreanism, have just agreed that things have their own objective natures. They also agree in passing that the same starting premise, that some people are wiser and better than others, likewise rules out the alternative thesis promoted by the sophist Euthydemus, that each thing simultaneously has both of two opposite natures.[12] It remains that 'things have a certain fixed being of their own', so that they

[11] *Tht.* 172a1–b8.

[12] This is not, as it might have been, because on Euthydemus' account everyone would be equally right whatever property they attributed to a thing, but because one pair of opposite properties is good

are 'not relative to us, and not dragged up and down by us according to how they appear, but having an intrinsic natural relation to their own being' (386d9–e4). Socrates' next move is the crucial one (386e6–8): 'Could it be the case that things themselves have such a nature, *but the actions* (*praxeis*) *belonging to them do not likewise*? Or aren't these – I mean actions – also one kind of beings (*tōn ontōn*)?' (I shall return to this curious formulation in a moment.) It is agreed that actions, like things, have their own natures. An example is that there are natural and unnatural ways of cutting. The natural way is done 'in accordance with the nature of cutting and being cut', and involves using the right tool; the unnatural way of cutting is to cut the thing just however you feel like doing it. You will succeed at cutting things only if you do it in the natural way (387a). It then follows by analogy that speaking of things is likewise an action that can be done in a natural or unnatural way, with only the natural way being a successful one (387b–c).

Socrates' argument has sometimes[13] been read in what amounts to the following way:

1 Since Protagoras is wrong, everything has its own nature.
2 Since everything has its own nature, all actions (being included within the scope of 'everything') have their own nature.
3 Therefore speaking, being a kind of action, has its own nature.
4 Therefore speaking can be done in accordance with, or contrary to, its own nature, i.e. well or badly.

That would be an unsatisfactory argument for the reason I have already indicated: the refutation of Protagoras is insufficient to establish the first step, that *everything* has its own nature. Speaking could have proved to be among the exceptions. Perhaps speaking *is* a more expert matter than most of us care to appreciate, and those Sophists who offered expensive courses in 'correctness of names' were professionally committed to just that view; but since the current issue between Hermogenes and Socrates is precisely whether there is any such correctness, Socrates could not justifiably help himself to the assumption at this stage.

and bad, so on this thesis everyone would be both good *and bad*. Neither version of the objection to Euthydemus would be cogent if he held (with Plato himself?) that something may have more of one compresent opposite than of the other. But one might well interpret him, as portrayed in the *Euthydemus*, as not intending that.

[13] E.g. Reeve 1998: xvi, 'Hermogenes agrees that if things have fixed natures that are independent of us, the same is surely true of *actions*, since actions are "included in some one class of the things that are" (386e6–8).' Similarly Ackrill 1997: 38. The summary in Kretzmann (1971: 128) leaves it unclear whether or not he takes it this way too. I take Baxter (1992: 39) to favour the interpretation I advocate below: 'In any action one will succeed if one performs it according to the natures of the things involved, and fail if one performs it contrary to their natures.' Barney (2001: 42) takes it *both* ways: 'actions involve existing things, and anyway constitute a class of things themselves'.

However, that is not, I think, how the argument runs. Rather, Socrates' inference is that if X has its own nature, then any action which is a way of dealing with X has its own nature. That seems to be the meaning of the curious question 'Could it be the case that things themselves have such a nature, *but the actions* (*praxeis*) *belonging to them do not likewise*?' Actions, Socrates means, get their own nature derivatively from the things *in relation to which* the agent acts. For, as his unusual wording carefully brings out, the way that it is natural to act on something is identical to the way it is natural for that thing *to be acted upon*.[14] The principle, a controversial one, is enunciated explicitly in the *Gorgias* (476b–d): if I hit you hard, you are hit hard; and so on for all comparable cases. Thus too here, the way in which it is natural for a surgeon to cut his patient's flesh is identical to the way in which it is natural for the flesh to be cut. The latter – the way it is natural for the flesh to be cut – must inevitably derive primarily from the nature of flesh. So too, therefore, must the way it is natural to cut flesh. And that is why Socrates' inference moves in the direction it does – *from* the fact that things have objective natures, to there being natural ways to act in relation to them.[15]

It should now be becoming clearer that the argument as a whole is not fatally flawed. It can be reformulated as follows:

1* Since Protagoras is wrong, (some, most or all) things have their own natures.

2* Since (some, most or all) things have their own natures, all actions focused on those things have their own natures.

3* Therefore speaking, in so far as it is a kind of action focused on those things, has its own nature.

4* Therefore speaking can be done in accordance with, or contrary to, its own nature, i.e. well or badly.

[14] Socrates repeatedly represents corresponding active and passive events as sharing a single nature: 'according to the nature of cutting and being cut' (387a5–6); 'in the way in which it is natural for each thing to be burnt, and to burn it' (b4, where this must be the meaning, despite the grammatical strain – a point of translation on which I agree with Dalimier (1998) against Fowler (1926) and Reeve (1998)); 'in the way in which it is natural to speak of things, and for them to be spoken of' (c1–2); 'in the way in which it is natural to name things, and for them to be named' (d4–5).

[15] I believe that the alternative reconstruction rejected above relies on a misunderstanding. When Socrates at 386e7–8 adds, as quoted above, 'Or aren't these – I mean actions – also one kind of beings (τῶν ὄντων)?', he does not mean to infer a truth about them by bringing them under his generalisation that 'things' (πράγματα) have their own nature. The point of the question is to establish that, since actions are ὄντα, 'things that there *are*', they have their own 'being' (οὐσία), and hence can be included under the description of things with their own nature as having that nature 'not relative to us, and not dragged up and down by us according to how they appear, but having an intrinsic natural relation *to their own being* (οὐσία)' (386e1–4). He does not call actions 'things' (πράγματα), and hence does not take step 2 of the argument I have hypothetically formulated.

If, as according to (4*), speaking of things is to be among the actions that can be performed naturally or unnaturally, that will depend primarily on its being done in accordance with the natures of the things in question, that is, the natures of the things spoken about. Hence all that is required is that a reasonable proportion of the things talked about should have natures. Since the refutation of Protagoras has shown that at the very least everything that is the proper object of some expertise or other has a nature of its own, that condition may seem already to be comfortably met. And although it is open to discussion whether very simple tasks, such as washing your hands or peeling an apple, should be dignified as matters of 'expertise', it seems clear that the notion might well be so understood as to cover the vast range of human activities.[16]

If we grant to Socrates, in accordance with (1*), that at least the objects on which this potentially very wide range of skills are practised must have their own natures, does (2*) then follow, i.e. that all actions focused on those objects have their own natures? Not if we take 'focused on' (what I have translated 'belonging to', conveyed in Greek by a rather unusual genitive) to cover actions related in just any way to the objects, such as walking past them or spitting on them. But if we take the locution to imply actions correlated to their objects in such a way that the identity of the object helps to characterise the action, then (2*) becomes highly credible. And on any understanding of what this kind of correlation might be, speaking will surely, as (3*) maintains, be among the actions thus correlated to their objects: even Hermogenes could hardly deny that the way we speak about the world somehow correlates to how the world is.

The inference does admittedly leave one rather large gap, namely the objects of *ethical* discourse. Plato is only too well aware that according to one prominent school of relativistic thought these have no fixed objective nature. And, towards the end of the etymological section of the dialogue (I shall return to the problem of ethical discourse in Chapter 7 §2) Socrates will indeed try to show that this misguided belief, that ethical entities have no fixed nature, has helped to vitiate the way that they have been named (see Chapter 5 §§4–9), thus providing a good example of speaking which is to some degree incorrectly done because it does not accurately reflect the natures of its objects. But before he can turn to that, Socrates has a long way to go in showing just what correct, that is, natural, naming consists in.

[16] Cf. *Prot.* 327e3–328a1 and *Alc. I* 111a1–4, where Socrates' interlocutors cite speaking Greek as a skill of which there are abundant teachers.

3 NAMES AS INSTRUMENTS OF INSTRUCTION

We have reached the point (387c) where Socrates claims to have established that speaking can be done naturally and correctly, which I am taking to mean in accordance with the natures of its objects, or unnaturally and incorrectly. His actual words at 387b11–c3 are:

> Then will one speak correctly by speaking however one thinks one should speak? Or is it that if one speaks in the way that it is natural to speak of things, and for them to be spoken of, and with the natural instrument, one will speak successfully, but otherwise one will go wrong and fail to achieve anything?

Hermogenes selects the latter option.

Down to here Socrates' contention may look entirely innocuous. Whether that impression is true must depend on which of several possible ways one chooses to interpret this idea of speaking in the way that it is natural for things to be spoken of. Rather than dwell on that question now, however, we should wait for Socrates' own understanding of the notion to emerge, and in the mean time move on to the case that actually engages his interest, that of naming. Naming, they agree, is one part of speaking,[17] and so it too is done correctly only if done in the way in which it is natural for things to be named, and with the appropriate instrument.[18] The appropriate instrument for naming things is a name, and it is on names that the discussion will henceforth focus – reasonably enough, since Socrates is seeking to answer Hermogenes' question, what is 'correctness of names' (*orthotēs onomatōn*)?

Since naming is introduced as one part of speaking, we must take the term here to refer, not to the linguistic act of baptism, the original assignment to things of their names, but to name use in ordinary sentences.[19] The term will carry much of the sense attached to it in the *Sophist* (262), where naming a subject is the first stage of successfully making a statement (*logos*), followed by a second stage, the attachment to that subject of a predicate. But unlike the *Sophist*, in the *Cratylus* Plato's interest is almost exclusively in the correctness of the naming act, and barely at all in the further attachment of

[17] Cf. *Sph.* 262d4–6.

[18] The pivotal analogy between cutting and burning on the one hand, and speaking and naming on the other, here exploited in detail, would be obscured if, with Schofield (1972) we were to insert after 387c5 the displaced passage from 385b2–d1 (pp. 10–11 above), and to no apparent gain, since the tenet that names are true or false plays no part in the analogical argument.

[19] This is confirmed by the fact that naming is treated in the immediate sequel (387d–388c) as analogous to the *use* of a shuttle, so must there amount to name use. It is only thereafter (388c–390e) that Socrates turns to the craft of whoever *creates* shuttles and names, and he does not call this latter creative act 'naming'.

a predicate to the name. That corresponds to the fact that the etymological analyses which follow will be almost entirely of nouns,[20] the part of speech standardly used for designating the subject of a sentence.

The choice of the right name as the instrument for an individual act of naming is, according to an analogy which Socrates now develops, like a weaver's choice of the right shuttle as the instrument for a particular weaving job. The analogy exploits the idea that both shuttles and names are tools for separating threads. A shuttle separates the threads of a web, while a name separates, i.e. distinguishes, the threads of being (*ousia*) (387d–388c). How does a name do that? There are at least three available answers:

1 *Designation*. A name picks out some item every time it is used. Thus when I say 'A woodpecker is singing,' the name 'woodpecker' indicates a member of one species, woodpeckers, as the subject of my reference.
2 *Taxonomy*. A name, in virtue of being a fixed part of the vocabulary of a given language, *marks off* some species as a species. Thus the fact that we have names to distinguish the woodpecker from the crow, the cormorant and the swan enshrines and displays our knowledge that the woodpecker exists as a distinct species. This kind of marking off is dear to Plato's heart in his later dialogues, where it is known as the method of division.[21]
3 *Analysis*. A name, by describing its object, separates that object's nature into, as it were, its ontological or definitional components. Thus the name 'woodpecker' separates the nature of a woodpecker, not primarily from those of other birds, but internally into 'wood' and 'pecker', indicating that it is something which is distinguished by its activity of pecking wood. This interpretation has the merit of staying much closer to what actually goes on in the central part of the *Cratylus*.

I shall not try to eliminate any of these three interpretations, since I believe that they will all turn out to be in a way correct. In order to see why, we need to start by examining Socrates' full definition of a name (388b13–c1): 'A name, then, is a kind of instructive (*didaskalikon*) instrument, which separates being as a shuttle separates a web.' 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, and the Greek permits the

[20] A number of what we would call adjectives are included, but these were never to be fully distinguished from nouns by Greek grammarians, and they are picked out for etymological analysis under their substantival description, 'the beautiful' (416b7, τὸ καλόν), etc.

[21] The label 'taxonomy' is due to Kretzmann 1971: 128. Cf. the critical remarks of Schofield 1982: 61–2 n. 2.

preferable interpretation, often advocated,[22] that it is *by* separating being that a name instructs.

One might expect the prospective users of names to be you and me, ordinary speakers of the language in our daily lives, and that is indeed the initial impression given: at 388b10–11, where a name is said to be an instrument which *we* use to 'instruct (*didaskein*) *each other*, and to separate (or distinguish) how things are'. Since the casual 'we' here ostensibly points to the activity of ordinary language-users, there will be little doubt in readers' minds that the 'instruction' in question need amount to no more than the mundane imparting of information. Consequently, when in Socrates' next sentence a name is, as we have seen, defined as 'a kind of instructive instrument, which separates being (*diakritikon tēs ousias*) as a shuttle separates a web', we should have equally little hesitation in taking the 'being' in question to be mundane being, such as features explicitly or implicitly in virtually any declarative sentence: either identifying what the subject of the sentence is, or attaching predicates to it so as to indicate what it is like, what it does, and so on.[23] These are perfectly familiar Platonic uses of the notion of 'being',[24] and names are, in a fairly obvious sense, tools used in conveying them. However, within a few lines the profile of the 'instruction' in question has been significantly raised: 'So a weaving expert (*hyphantikos*)', says Socrates, 'will use a shuttle well, and "well" means "with weaving expertise" (*hyphantikōs*); an instruction expert (*didaskalikos*) will use a name well, and "well" means "with instructive expertise" (*didaskalikōs*)' (388c5–7). Socrates is now focusing on 'instruction', not as an everyday activity of language users, but as a specialist skill directly analogous to that of weaving. It will later (428d–e) become explicit that this 'instruction' operates through the power of each name to communicate the nature of its nominatum. We will, then, have to bear in mind the likelihood that the 'being' (*ousia*) which the instructor separates by his use of names is, correspondingly, no longer mundane being, but something more like 'essence' or 'reality' – a semantic range in which Plato frequently employs the term *ousia*.[25]

[22] This same interpretation underlies the translation of Reeve (1998), 'a name is a tool for giving instruction, *that is to say*, for dividing being' (my italics), and has been proposed by others too, e.g. Ackrill 1997: 41–2; Barney 2001: 45.

[23] In the *Sophist*, a name is a communication (δήλωμα) concerning being (οὐσία) (261e5–6), but it does not actually 'communicate being' until a predicate has been attached (261c2–5).

[24] Cf. *Crat.* 401c6–7, 'we say "is" of what shares in οὐσία', 423e1–5, '. . . doesn't οὐσία belong to . . . everything . . . deemed worthy of this predicate, "to be"?'

[25] There is a much discussed slide of this kind at *Tht.* 185–6, where it is argued that οὐσία is accessed by the soul through its own resources, and not by use of the senses. This 'being' is at first mundane being, as in ordinary predications, but gradually takes on the profile of Platonic 'being'. Cf. also

4 THE DIALECTICAL FUNCTION OF NAMES

Provided that we are aware of the distinctive nature of Plato's teleology, we should not be surprised by this development. It is a characteristic Platonic mode of thought to locate the true purpose of some item not in its most basic daily use, but in the highest good that it can help realise. Thus in the *Timaeus* (46e–47c) the teleological function of eyesight is not, as one might have expected, to save us from bumping into things, to help us find food, and the like, but to enable us to practise mathematical astronomy and thus progress towards philosophy, itself the greatest good available to mankind. And the very same explanation, Timaeus adds, applies to our acquisition of speech: it too exists ultimately in order to facilitate philosophy. The same clearly applies to names in the *Cratylus*. The paradigmatic name-user should be expected to be whoever achieves the highest good with names as instruments, and this good is, once again, to be identified with philosophy.

It is precisely in the light of this consideration, it seems to me, that the relevant user of names is finally identified. When the 'instructor' reappears at 390, he is this time further specified as the person who knows how to ask and answer questions, or, in other words, the dialectician (390c) – the ultimate 'instructor' in Plato's eyes, provided we bear in mind his principle advocated in the *Meno* that real 'teaching', 'education' or 'instruction' is to ask questions which extract answers from the pupil's own inner resources. Hence it is important to notice that here in the *Cratylus* the expert under consideration is assigned this privileged position primarily in his capacity as the person who knows how to *ask* questions (390c6). Only thereafter (c8–9) do Socrates and Hermogenes agree that this same person is also expert at answering questions, and it is as a result of his twin talent that he is finally identified as being, in fact, none other than the dialectician; but the two key descriptions of him *qua* name-user are (i) as the 'instruction expert', or 'educationalist', who teaches by separating the 'being' of things, and (ii) as *asker* (not answerer) of questions. This pairing should leave us in no doubt that the thoroughly Socratic notion of interrogative teaching is in the frame. The supreme function of names, we are being told, is to facilitate the questioning process by which alone, in the eyes of the Platonic Socrates, genuine philosophical teaching can be properly carried out. The fact that

Phdr. 266b3–5, where Socrates loves collection and division 'in order to be able to speak and think (λέγειν τε καὶ φρονεῖν)' – another mundane characterisation, but which in context can refer only to an *expert* (because dialectical) mode of speaking and thinking.

the dialectician is also the person most likely to know how to answer those questions is for the time being a strictly ancillary consideration.[26]

Now to find out what his instructive or educational function is, we have to look ahead to the run of the argument which ensues at 390a5–d8. Here Socrates will insist that to do his job properly the name-maker needs this educationalist or dialectician as his overseer. The broad principle applied is that every manufacturer should be overseen and advised by the prospective user of the artefact in question, who alone can judge whether the craftsman has imposed the appropriate form on his materials.[27] The dialectical instructor, as paradigmatic name-user, is the natural overseer of the name-*maker*. Now the dialectician, as usually conceived by the Socrates of Plato's dialogues, is someone who by apposite questioning brings out knowledge, above all about concepts related to value. Towards the end of the *Cratylus*, we become increasingly conscious that the original name-makers, especially when it came to the terminology for values, must have been obliged, by and large, to function without the benefit of this specialist's advice. That very consciousness may encourage us to speculate on what kind of orders he would have given, had he been there.

On the one hand we might speculate that, according to Plato's assumptions, no dialectician would have requisitioned names which straightforwardly announced the correct definitions of their nominata, for example a name for justice from which *Republic* IV's entire complex definition of the term could be directly read off. To do that would, arguably, have defeated the object of Socratic questioning: what we think we already understand, we don't bother to inquire into. The original names as later analysed by Socrates were, it is true, clearer than their modern debased forms, but still such as to require close scrutiny and reflection.

On the other hand, the dialectician might well have commissioned a supply of names which, by their encrypted meanings, steered the interlocutor in the right direction, or, to employ the recollective language sometimes favoured by Plato, names which helped 'remind' interlocutors of those truths which were already innate in their souls. To obtain such high-quality names – pronounceable strings of sound hinting with a suitable obliqueness

[26] Knowing how to answer questions is not necessarily the same as already knowing the definitions which will, at least ideally, be the outcome of the interrogative process; it could be, or include, answering truthfully, appropriately and co-operatively *during* the process, cf. *Meno* 75d. It may nevertheless be that the dialectician's role in the *Cratylus* does presuppose his knowledge of the definitions which are (at least ideally) to be encoded; but what is emphasised is not that, so much as his ability to use the resultant words fruitfully in dialectical *questioning*.

[27] Cf. *Rep.* X, 601c3–602a2, with partial anticipation at *Gorg.* 517c7–518a5.

at the true essences of their nominata – would certainly have required the specialist phonetic services of the professional name-maker.

Indeed, there is at least one example where something like this proper partnership of dialectician and name-maker appears to have been operative. I mean the word *eudaimonia*, 'happiness', which we have seen (Chapter 2 §5, pp. 38–9) to be an immensely rich storehouse of profound truths about the nature of happiness. The word seems perfectly constructed for the facilitation of dialectic, being such as to nudge the pupil in the right direction, yet without making redundant the interrogative process which lies at the heart of dialectical method. Here at least, it seems, the original name-maker must have had privileged access to the truth, and encoded it with just the degree of obliqueness demanded by the task, forcing the rest of us to work out its true meaning through our own inquiries. For *eudaimonia* is certainly not a word which had enabled Plato's philosophical predecessors, let alone ordinary Greeks, to read off what happiness is. It contained the truth much in the way that oracles were thought to: they get you puzzling about the right questions, and, if and when you find out the answer, with hindsight you will be able to appreciate exactly what they meant all along.

This finding can now be grafted onto the one with which I opened Chapter 2. There we saw in the *Philebus* that the divine forebears who bequeathed to us at least some of the sciences also left for us, in the terminology they adopted, clues as to the true nature of dialectical method. We have now been able to add that also when assigning a name to the most fundamental of all the ethical terms on which that dialectical method would have to be exercised by posterity, *eudaimonia*, our forebears were able, thanks perhaps to the theological insights that their divine nature bestowed, to encode further authentic clues.

5 THE VARIABLE QUALITY OF NAMES

Eudaimonia is, if so, a very rare case of expertly guided naming in the ethical sphere. That Plato intends it to be recognised as such is to some extent confirmed by the term's omission from the long series of philosophically incorrect ethical etymologies which Socrates catalogues at *Cratylus* 411a–421c. The overall outcome of his survey of names, as I shall read it, is that in theology and cosmology the early name-givers proved themselves to have privileged access to numerous important insights, but that in the area of discourse which Socrates and Plato were later to make their own, and which is the proper domain of the dialectician, namely the vocabulary of moral and

intellectual value, they shared the relativism characteristic of early Greek thought, and embodied this mistaken outlook in a series of names which placed radical instability at the root of goodness and understanding. We must conclude that since these name-makers were, in the main, compelled to act without dialectical advice, they simply did the best they could, encoding into names their own best shot at what the corresponding things are.

But, reverting to another topic from Chapter 2, does it follow that the early name-makers failed, after all, to practise a true *technē*? It does not. Socrates is quite explicit that it is if the manufacturers are to make their products *well* (*kalōs*, 390d6) that they must be overseen by the destined user. Nowhere does he specify that such supervision is necessary if the manufacturer's activity is to be counted as a *technē* at all. Here then we have the materials for distinguishing, not in the manner of the *Gorgias* between a real and a bogus *technē*, but between two degrees of success in the practice of a *technē*. The distinction between on the one hand the supervised or well-informed name-maker who encodes important truths, and on the other the unsupervised and ill-informed name-maker who encodes a poor and misleading depiction of reality, can be translated into two matching levels of etymological *decipherment*. To put this in the terminology which I have tried to advocate, the etymological decoding of an ignorantly encoded name must satisfy itself with being, at most, exegetically correct. But the decoding of a name which, whether through dialectical supervision or thanks to some other source of privileged information, embodies important truths may achieve more than that: it can aspire to be not only exegetically but also philosophically correct. Thus analysed and ratified, the name gains in utility as a teaching tool – not as a source of knowledge in its own right, but as a dialectician's prompt to his interlocutor in their joint search for the essence of its nominatum.

6 THE FUNCTION OF A NAME

In jumping ahead in this way in order to consider the supervisory role of the instructor or dialectician, I hope to have shed a little light on the question, what is the function of a name? Earlier (p. 60) I offered three competing interpretations of why a name is said to instruct by separating being. It now seems that we cannot definitively choose between them. A name is first introduced with reference to its most generic or minimal function in mundane speech, viewed as the simple imparting of information. That presumably requires nothing stronger than the first sense I listed, the

designatory one whereby it picks out a subject or object as part of the overall act of speaking. But in the course of the argument it graduated to its highest function, that of enabling dialectical respondents to learn by questioning them about how to divide up *reality* correctly. In this, we seem closer to the *taxonomic* function. Moreover, it seemed plausible that the taxonomic function is being assumed in the *Cratylus* to be achieved partly by the name's success in encrypting the object's ontological or definitional components. And that brings in the third, *analysing*, function that I listed, and with which the central part of the dialogue is concerned.[28] So all three interpretations were, in their own way, correct. We will, however, see in Chapter 4 §4 a reason to consider the first two more fundamental than the third.

7 LINGUISTIC LAWMAKING

It is now time to turn from the supervisory giant, the dialectician, to the dwarf who sits on his shoulders, that relatively humble technician the name-maker. We have already, in Chapter 2 §7 (pp. 41–50), encountered this very unusual brand of craftsmanship, name-making. How the name-maker functions is explicated once more by an analogy with his equivalent in the weaving industry (389a–390a). A carpenter making a shuttle looks to the genus-Form,[29] Shuttle, and, more specifically, to the species-Form of shuttle naturally appropriate to the particular weaving job undertaken by his overseer the weaver. He then embodies the species-Form in the materials at his disposal, namely this or that wood. Analogously a name-maker looks to the genus-Form, Name, and more specifically to the species-Form of name appropriate to the particular naming job undertaken by his overseer the dialectician. He then embodies this species-Form in the materials at his disposal, namely sound. 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. This last point can only mean that, whether he is creating

[28] The extent to which the analytic function depends on the taxonomic becomes clear at 424c6–425a2, on which see Ch. 6 §3 below, pp. 128–9: in order to construct a properly analytic name, you must first divide up the elementary beings (*onta*) and assign a sound to each, then build the name from these sounds. However, as will become clear in due course, it does not prove to be the case that the analysis of a word need express its taxonomy, i.e. reveal its genus and differentia. This follows not only from the fact that most of the etymologies do not hint at any effort to attain this structure, but also from the fact (Ch. 4 §4 below, pp. 84–5) that a single item can be referred to by two non-synonymous names, which could not both embody the *same* genus and differentia.

[29] For the role of Forms, see Ch. 4 §4 and Ch. 7 §8.

words for Greek, Persian or any other language, they can all in their own way be equally successful in embodying the correct Form. Regional differences of language do not have to imply, as Hermogenes initially assumed (385d–e), that the choice of words must be merely arbitrary.

I have saved till last the most intractable question about this part of the dialogue. With surprising speed and ease, Socrates and Hermogenes agree at 388d–390a that the name-making craftsman is to be identified as a 'lawmaker' or 'legislator' (*nomothetēs*). Why?[30] We can set the ball rolling by returning to Hermogenes' original statement of his linguistic conventionalism. The terms of art for 'convention' in this context are *synthēkē* (agreement) and *thesis* (assignment, fixing, setting, imposition, coining): all that makes a name a name is the fact that it has been fixed, assigned and agreed on, irrespective of any natural fit to its nominatum, so that no one name is inherently better than any other. But along with these terms, Hermogenes also finds it appropriate to invoke the word *nomos*: 'For it is not the case that any individual thing has a name naturally belonging to it, but it is due to the *nomos* and habit (*nomōi kai ethei*) of those who habitually so call it' (384d5–7).

Thus it is that the *Cratylus* debate has long been recognised as an instance of the celebrated opposition of nature (*physis*) and convention or custom (*nomos*), indissolubly associated with fifth-century Sophistic thought. Moreover, there is a possibility that this application of the antithesis to names represents one of its earliest roles in ancient debate. Although its most familiar incarnation is in the late fifth-century debate about the values – are they context-relative or absolute and objective? – as early as the mid fifth century we find Empedocles attributing names to *nomos*: according to his fragment 9, when people talk of things being born and dying, they are speaking incorrectly of what is really no more than mixture and separation; but, Empedocles adds, he himself will go along with the convention (*nomos*). Here we can already glimpse the antecedents of the thesis, espoused by Plato's Hermogenes, that names are a matter of mere convention and for that reason a poor guide to the nature of their nominata.[31]

In the *Cratylus*, however, it quickly becomes clear that the *nomos–physis* opposition is neither simple nor clear cut. For the account of names as natural (*physei*) which Socrates proceeds to develop relies on the assumption that they are the product of *thesis*, 'assignment' or 'setting'. It simply adds to that assumption the further principle that when a name is imposed

[30] The best discussion I have read is R. Robinson 1955: 110–16. See also the useful remarks in Schofield 1982: 66 n. 3.

[31] For futher discussion of these antecedents, cf. Kahn 1973: 154–7.

additional criteria must be applied in order to determine whether or not it is a 'correct' name: some names are more correct than others, and these correspond to the ones which are 'natural' in the sense that they capture the nature of their nominata. Thus the opposition underlying the debate, as Socrates constructs it, is not to be understood as one between *nomos* and *physis* as such, but as one between *mere* custom on the one hand, and custom founded on nature on the other.

Now although in the opening pages the actual term *nomos* puts in no more than a cursory appearance (384d6), it takes centre stage in the passage on which we are now focused. Whereas shuttle-making was a familiar craft, name-making was not, and that consideration may help us understand the turn which Socrates' argument takes at 388d. Who, he asks, is it that passes names down to us? Hermogenes cannot answer, but Socrates himself suggests, to Hermogenes' approval, that it is law or custom, *ho nomos*, that does so.

It is not to law or custom, but to its author the *nomothetēs* – now identified with the expert who actually creates and disseminates names – that attention immediately turns. The following data quickly emerge.

1 A *nomothetēs* is an expert in his own field (388d4–6).
2 His job, or at any rate one of his jobs, is to create names (388e1–2, 388e7–389a2; cf. 428a–429b).
3 The creation of names by the *nomothetēs* is not just something that happened once at some earlier point in human history, for the craftsman in question is throughout spoken of in the present tense.[32]
4 The *nomothetēs* is, however, 'the rarest of craftsmen in the human race' (389a2–3).
5 The skilled *nomothetēs* does his job, as we have seen, in a manner analogous to any manufacturing craftsman.

Why does Plato's Socrates feel the need to postulate this bizarre-sounding expert?

One possible interpretation can be dealt with straight away. On this first view, the reference is quite literally to legislators in the political sense of the word, and Socrates is assuming that only these legislators, at the time

[32] This, perhaps the least appreciated aspect of the portrayal, also concurs with the variant passage at 437d10–438a2 which in Ch. 1 §3 I argued to be an authentic variant interpolated from an earlier draft. Here Socrates recapitulates the preceding discussion as follows: 'Listen, weren't we recently agreeing that those who *at any given time* assign names in cities, Greek and foreign cities alike, are lawmakers and practise the expertise which has the capacity to do this, namely the legislative art?' (437e1–4). He then immediately goes on to ask a question about those whom, among these, he singles out as the 'first *nomothetai*'. It could hardly be clearer that some name-making *nomothetai* are assumed still to exist and function.

when the bulk of language came into being, had the power to impose new usages on the populace at large. Such an interpretation has, it is true, the possible advantage of providing a target for later critics, like the Epicureans Lucretius and Diogenes of Oenoanda,[33] who ridiculed the idea of the first names having been deliberately coined, asking how, at the likely time of the original emergence of language, anyone could have had access to the necessary political structures to impose linguistic norms on the masses, let alone exploited those structures when addressing a populace that did not already understand the language in which it was being addressed. Although it is certainly on the cards that the Epicureans should have thought this the correct interpretation of the *Cratylus*, it surely cannot be that Plato has in mind so overtly political a concept of *nomos*. Even if he were thought to conjecture that the earliest name-makers used their status as (literal) legislators in order to bring a nomenclature into currency, he can hardly have thought that the equivalent function in his own day, that of generating neologisms, was still the preserve of legislators. Yet, as we have seen, the name-making function of *nomothetai* is assumed to survive in his own day. When Socrates calls the *nomothetēs* 'the rarest of craftsmen', he cannot be referring to political legislators, of whom there were undoubtedly plenty in contemporary Greek cities, but to the postulated linguistic legislators, the people who succeed in bringing neologisms into circulation. New words do enter the language, so *someone* must be devising and launching them. But how many of us have ever met him?

Of course, anyone can create a neologism, as was sometimes done by Plato himself and constantly by the likes of Aristophanes. But that does not in itself bring a new word *into currency*. Perhaps to make this very point, in the passage we are now considering Plato has Socrates introduce an apparent neologism, *onomatourgos*,[34] 'name-maker', then immediately drop it in favour of *nomothetēs*, as if in recognition that the skill of institutionalising a name is something far more than the simple ability to string meaningful sound together into new forms. Plato did himself score one or two successes in this regard – 'dialectic' and 'quality' are among his permanent contributions to our vocabulary – but even those rare successes may not have been evident to him in his own lifetime.

Rather than think of literal legislation, therefore, it seems better at this stage to associate the *nomos* component of *nomothetēs* with *nomos* in the familiar sense 'custom' or 'convention', and to assume it to be chosen at

[33] Lucretius v 1050–5, Diogenes of Oenoanda 12 II 11–V 14.
[34] I am grateful to Charles Brittain for pointing this out.

least partly in deference to Hermogenes' attribution of naming to mere convention.[35]

Despite what we have seen to be Socrates' postulation of contemporary, as well as ancient, linguistic *nomothetai* (plural), there is in the *Cratylus* a recognisable use of the singular, 'the *nomothetēs*', along with other equivalent singular locutions, to refer historically to a supposed single original namegiver.[36] The significance of this usage is greatly strengthened by an isolated parallel altogether outside the etymological context of the *Cratylus*. In the *Charmides*, at 175b, Socrates expresses to Critias his frustration at not being able to find a definition of *sōphrosynē*: 'But as it is we are defeated on all sides, and are unable to find what on earth the thing was to which the *nomothetēs* assigned (*tithesthai*) this name, *sōphrosynē*.' Few scholars have thought the *Charmides* to postdate the *Cratylus*, and even supposing that it does it seems very unlikely that Socrates' casual remark to Critias can have been intended to rely on prior acquaintance with the theory developed in the latter dialogue. Rather, we seem to have here evidence of an established assumption about the origin of language: we owe it to some anonymous *nomothetēs*. And, if so, the ready and unargued assumption in the *Cratylus* that names were and still are assigned by one or more *nomothetai* will have to be explained as borrowing from that tradition.

Given the apparent silence of our poetic and mythological sources about any such tradition, I am reluctant to infer that it was a popular one. A better bet might be that it was a product of the fifth-century etymological industry, a large-scale Sophistic enterprise[37] of which Plato's *Cratylus* is no more than a faint echo. The suggestion has the following basis. Anyone seeking to etymologise the actual word *onoma*, 'name', was only too likely to link its origin to 'the law', *ho nomos*, and thus to look for and emphasise ways in which naming is a kind of lawmaking.[38] I suspect, for this reason, that the lost Sophistic discussions of 'correctness of names' had already come to postulate a role for one or more linguistic *nomothetai*, and that

[35] In case it should be thought that the term νομοθέτης can be used only of one who imposes νόμοι in the literal sense 'laws', so interpreted as to exclude 'custom', see *Pol.* 295a, where a νομοθέτης is described as imposing νόμος (singular), explicitly including not only written laws but also ancestral customs.

[36] 393e, 402b, e1, 404b4, c2, 406b4, 407b3, 408a7, 416b3, 419a5; cf. *Ti.* 78e2–3. Contrast the plurals at 400c4–5, 411b4–5, 418a2 etc.

[37] For recognition of this, see *Crat.* 391b–c, cf. 384b.

[38] Socrates' own etymology of ὄνομα at *Crat.* 421a in terms of 'searching' (see pp. 120–1) has a strictly localised purpose, to link ethical and logical vocabulary to constant change. But it may help explain why he does not openly endorse a *different* etymology of ὄνομα when introducing the figure of the *nomothetēs*.

that is why Critias, Hermogenes and (in due course) Cratylus are all familiar enough with the same assumption to endorse it without question.

The suggestion that this etymology underlies the *nomothetēs* hypothesis gains some support from the text. An oddity which I previously passed over in silence is that at 388 Socrates introduces the *nomothetēs* by asking who hands down names (*onomata*) to us, and then prompting the answer from Hermogenes that it is *ho nomos* that does so. It is only derivatively from this that they agree that the name-maker must be a *nomothetēs*.[39] The intrusion of *nomos* itself into Socrates' argument at this point looks unmotivated until we see that it is his way of bringing out an implicit etymology. What passes down names, *onomata*, to us is none other than *ho nomos*. The etymology is not spelt out – how could it be, at a stage of the argument before the etymological 'correctness of names' has been formally broached? But all parties to the discussion are likely to be responding to this *implicit* etymological link, which (as I tried to emphasise in Chapter 2) is an established device in classical Greek literature.

Nevertheless, the *Charmides* seems to confirm that the link between names and legislation which this etymology underwrites was not Plato's invention but the subject of an existing tradition. What that tradition actually held is hard to reconstruct. At one extreme, to speak of one or more individuals as the originators of some human institution might be little more than a *façon de parler*. If I say to you 'Where were you when they handed out the brains?', or remark of a historical figure 'They don't make them like that any more', it would be unwise to interpret me as endorsing some unscientific theory of human generation. Or, to switch to a less popularising model, even subscribers to one or another version of the 'social contract' theory may speak in those terms without for a moment being misunderstood as holding that on some historic occasion an actual contract was drawn up and signed. Likewise, talk of the *nomothetēs* who gave things their names could have been present in Sophistic thought as nothing more than a convenient fiction.

On the other hand, the assumption that language was a deliberate contrivance by primeval individuals (human or superhuman) was virtually universal before Epicurus formulated an alternative explanation a generation after Plato's death. It therefore may have seemed to follow that some

[39] *Nomos* is thus invoked to answer, not a 'What?' question, but a 'Who?' question, and is, it seems, being personified into the status of our original benefactor in linguistic matters. The personification of *nomos*, most familiarly as 'king', was well established by this date (cf. Pindar fr. 169a, νόμος ὁ πάντων βασιλεύς), and in itself need cause no surprise, especially after Plato's personification of the Laws of Athens in the *Crito*.

individual or individuals really did devise and propagate it; and indeed that very presupposition runs throughout the *Cratylus*, where no alternative mechanism for the origin of names is so much as hinted at.

But if it was an established practice, even outside Plato's writings, to call these people *nomothetai*, what sense of the word was in play? A small but valuable clue can be found in the Hippocratic treatise *De arte*, which has long been recognised as a product of Sophistic thought. In his introductory remarks (chapter 2), its author argues that each of the arts spotlights some forms or essences (*eidea*), and that the art's nomenclature itself reflects those same forms, rather than imposing them. This insistence that names are derivative from the forms of things and not vice versa is then secured with the further remark that the forms of things cannot 'grow' from names because names are themselves 'legislations (*nomothetēmata*) of nature', while the forms are not legislations but 'growths'.[40] The logic of this is obscure, so much so that it has even provoked emendation.[41] However, that may not be necessary: the way things are is a 'growth', i.e. objectively given in nature, while names are in some sense derivative. The best way I can find to make sense of this is to interpret 'legislations of nature' as meaning that names are enactments *embodying* the facts of nature. That is, names follow and reflect nature in so far as they *codify* it. We seem to have here as striking a symbiosis of *nomos* and *physis* as the *Cratylus* introduces when it assigns to a *nomothetēs* the task of giving things their 'natural' names.

As for this notion of *nomothetēmata*, we can presumably exclude from the Hippocratic context any reference to literal legislation, as we have already seen reason to do in the *Cratylus*. But what then *is* the operative notion of *nomos*? Here are some possibilities.

1 Custom or habit, as contrasted with nature. The Hippocratic corpus (for example, *Airs, Water and Places*) often exhibits this standard antithesis between *nomos* and *physis* as competing explanatory factors regarding human anatomy, pathology and the like. On such an account, what is emphasised by appealing to *nomos* is that names are arbitrary impositions on things, their form not dictated by the nature of reality. That was, of course, Hermogenes' idea in the *Cratylus* when he made *nomos* the

[40] οἶμαι δ' ἔγωγε καὶ τὰ ὀνόματα αὐτὰς διὰ τὰ εἴδεα λαβεῖν· ἄλογον γὰρ ἀπὸ τῶν ὀνομάτων τὰ εἴδεα ἡγεῖσθαι βλαστάνειν, καὶ ἀδύνατον· τὰ μὲν γὰρ ὀνόματα φύσιος νομοθετήματά ἐστι, τὰ δὲ εἴδεα οὐ νομοθετήματα, ἀλλὰ βλαστήματα.

[41] See DK II 339: Diels excised φύσιος, while Gomperz transposed it to after βλαστήματα. Further discussion in Heinimann 1945: 157. A more orthodox formulation is no doubt that in Hipp. *De nat. hom.* 5: names are νόμῳ assigned to body components in a non-overlapping way, and likewise φύσει the corresponding components have non-overlapping 'forms' (ἰδέαι).

principle of name assignment, and, as I have remarked, it has a longer history which already surfaces in fragment 9 of Empedocles. But both the author of the *De arte* and the Socrates of the *Cratylus*, by presenting linguistic *nomothetēmata* as themselves embodiments of nature, appear to be rejecting the entire antithesis.

2 Codification. As a lawgiver encapsulates a complex body of conduct in a single enactment, so a name encodes the nature of its nominatum in a single string of sound.

3 Rules. The essence of a language lies in a shared set of labelling rules to which all users tacitly subscribe, and in virtue of which they are able to understand each other. The notion of rules imposed on an entire population, as by a legislator, captures the required uniformity of practice.

4 Distribution. The noun *nomos* is derived from the verb *nemein*, to 'distribute', as Plato was very well aware, given his own etymology of *nomos* in the *Laws* as *nou dianomē*, 'distribution of intelligence'.[42] Perhaps then the linguistic *nomothetēs* is above all, at least in Plato's eyes, a distributor or assigner – either because he assigns names to things, or because he brings names into circulation among the public.

5 Authority. Although names cannot be disseminated by political decree, the task requires a rare degree of authority among one's fellow citizens. The metaphor of a lawmaker is an appropriate one for bringing this out.[43]

I do not see much advantage in trying to narrow down this range of options, each of which in its way may help us understand the metaphor. But the last item in the list, authority, deserves special emphasis. As I remarked earlier, anyone at all can come up with a neologism, but by no means every neologism secures a foothold in the language. The skilled linguistic legislator is, I therefore suggest, not merely someone who knows how to construct compound words – any Greek could do that, and the dialectician could presumably do it for himself without contracting the job out to anyone. Rather, this 'rarest of craftsmen' is someone with the enviable knack of devising words which are not only suitable encapsulations of their objects, but which will actually catch on. As distinct from all the innumerable amateur name-makers in our society's history, it is people

[42] *Laws* 714a2; see p. 38 above.

[43] Baxter (1992: 41) takes the *nomothetēs* to represent the authorship of the ideal language which, in his view, the *Cratylus* is postulating as a model. This interpretation rests, not on the concept of the *nomothetēs* as such, but on his description as 'the rarest of craftsmen'. As far as I can see, however, *nomothetai* are assumed throughout to be the source of actual, non-ideal languages; it is the overseeing dialecticians who would make a language ideal, or closer to ideal.

with his rare skill of inaugurating new customs that we have to thank for our current vocabulary.

For readers of the *Cratylus*, it would be hard to exaggerate the importance of this last consideration. Unless the historically proven superior capacity of some names to gain currency is to be held simply mysterious, there should be systematic criteria for constructing such names. Not only does this ensure a civic niche for a name-making expertise, it also gives credence to the expectation that successful names will be the ones which, in addition to the necessary qualities of succinctness, memorability, pronounceability, etc., display an appropriate *fit* to their nominata. And it may, further, be hard to imagine what fit that could be, if not the power to evoke their nominata by capturing their nature. In many cases – 'egg-timer', 'waterfall', etc. – the explanation is obvious enough. But when we enthusiastically adopt into our vocabulary a word which somehow just *feels* right, such as 'nerd', it may even after reflection be far from obvious to us what makes them so satisfyingly appropriate. What wouldn't we give for a science which explained to us just why it is that *those* combinations of sound evoke the concepts to which they have attached themselves? The linguistic lawmaker, and his interpretative counterpart the etymologist, are the rare exponents of just such a science.

CHAPTER 4

Etymology at work

I TRADITION AND INNOVATION

We now move from Part I to Part II of the dialogue. At 390d11–e5, Socrates and Hermogenes agree on the following proposition:

> Cratylus is right to say that things have their names by nature, and that not everyone is a craftsman of names, but only one who looks to the name that belongs by nature to each thing and is able to put its[1] Form in letters and syllables.

Hermogenes is not resistant, but needs this newly emerging principle of the correctness of names to be explained and illustrated to him. Socrates, reasserting his own ignorance of the topic, refuses the requested explanation, but offers in its place a joint investigation of the matter. This disavowal of knowledge is, not untypically of Plato's Socrates, partly ironic. In the event he will not just pour forth a veritable flood of illustrations, but will make it clear, by rejecting etymologies he disagrees with,[2] that he is not entirely ignorant of the practice of etymology. Indeed, he will pretend to have been inspired by Euthyphro whom he says he heard – presumably etymologising – earlier this very morning,[3] even though none of the actual etymologies he will propose or consider is attributed to Euthyphro. In fact the question of his familiarity or unfamiliarity with existing etymological practice is kept teasingly unsettled throughout. At the end of Socrates' disquisition

[1] There is an oddity here which tends to go unnoticed. When Socrates speaks of 'the name that belongs by nature to each thing' (τὸ τῇ φύσει ὄνομα ὂν ἑκάστῳ, 390e3), that has by this point become his standard locution for a name species-Form – the Form of the name of man, or of dog (cf. 389c4, τὸ φύσει ἑκάστῳ πεφυκὸς ὄργανον, along with 389c1, 10–11, d1–2, 4–5, e3, 390a6–7, b1–2, which jointly should leave no doubt that species-Forms are being alluded to; see further n. 13, p. 82 below). So the Form which the name-maker puts in letters and syllables might appear to be *the Form of the Form*. However, the pleonasm, scarcely detectable in the Greek, is probably both unintentional and harmless. It is better to settle for this than to reinterpret 'it' as referring to 'each thing': Socrates' consistent position is that the Form which the name-maker puts into letters and syllables is the species-Form of the thing's name, never that of the thing itself (see p. 82 below).

[2] Note in particular 400c, σῶμα as σῆμα; 403a, Ἅιδης as 'unseen'; 405e–406a, Apollo as 'destroyer'.

[3] See p. 3 n. 5 above.

on the word 'justice', in which he explicitly invokes etymologies which he claims to have heard 'secretly' from a whole series of physicists, Hermogenes will remark, somewhat redundantly (413d3–4): 'You seem to me to have heard this from someone, Socrates, and not to be improvising,' adding that, in this respect, the treatment of justice stands in complete contrast to the other etymologies. Yet to this apparently obvious truth Socrates replies mischievously (413d7–8) 'Listen on then. Perhaps I can trick you into believing that the remainder of what I say too is not things I have heard.'[4]

Overall then, it would be fair to say that we get pointedly mixed signals about the originality or lack of it manifested in the long etymological excursus. But the full theory that he will construct, completed as it is with the reduction of simple names to primary sounds, will certainly be one for which he admits no antecedents, and for which we too know of none. His way of signalling this will be to introduce the primary-sounds theory, when he gets to it, with a confession of how ridiculous it will seem (425d, 426b) – not, as has been too readily assumed, a device for condemning it before he has even articulated it, but one for signalling its novelty (recall that in the *Republic* the innovative but vitally serious proposal that philosophers should be kings is introduced with the same admission that it will incur ridicule).[5] However, the theory's novelty may be, as it were, a historically retrojected one. It is a possibility we cannot afford to ignore that Cratylus was himself the author of the primary-sounds theory (remember the phase of his life in which he accompanied his speech with hissing sounds, presumably to convey motion),[6] and that Plato is trumping his first mentor by fictionally portraying a Socrates who has hit upon his ideas before him only to point out their philosophical disadvantages or limitations. That is, after all, more or less how Plato handles the flux thesis, which in reality we are told he first learnt from Cratylus, but which in the dialogue he makes Socrates develop directly from the etymological theory, thereby leading the unwary Cratylus into its acceptance. It may be that in historical reality the main outlines of the etymological theory itself were, similarly, ones which Plato first learnt from Cratylus, and that transferring primary ownership of it to Socrates is

[4] In saying this, Socrates may want to advert to the etymology of Zeus, through his accusative *Dia*, as implying 'cause', an etymology which he had earlier proposed on his own account (396a–b), but now admits (413a) to having heard, in part, secretly from these physicists. On the other hand, the 'secret' divulging may itself be a fiction, see Ch. 5 §7 (pp. 114–19) below.

[5] *Rep.* 473c; cf. *ibid.* 452a–b. Cf. p. 39 n. 26 above.

[6] See p. 20 above.

part of the same game. Presenting Cratylus as studiously silent about his own theory may be a device for fictionally enabling Socrates to work it out as his proxy.

To return to the beginning of Part II: Socrates remains in ironic mode when, before undertaking the joint investigation with Hermogenes, he advises the latter to satisfy his curiosity by asking his richer brother Callias to divulge to him what he has learnt about correctness of names from his teacher, who turns out to be none other than Protagoras. This is our second reminder in the dialogue that 'correctness of names' was a subject on the curriculum offered by leading Sophists of the day, not only Protagoras, in fact, but also Prodicus. The mention of Prodicus in this connection has already occurred in the opening exchange of the dialogue (384b), where Socrates explained to Hermogenes that the only reason he cannot tell him everything there is to know about the correctness of names is that he could not afford to attend Prodicus' de luxe fifty-drachma course on the subject, and had to make do with the one-drachma version. These ironic references to Sophistic wisdom on correctness of names, added to the later ones to Euthyphro and his followers, give us the vivid impression that what Socrates is about to try his hand at is *the* current intellectual fashion. But we must not assume that this small army of intellectuals were all attempting the same kind of systematic approach as Socrates offers. There is every reason to assume that Prodicus and Protagoras meant by 'correctness of names' something closer to an improved command of vocabulary than research into words' hidden origins. Prodicus in particular is a familiar figure in Platonic dialogues, and his standard role is that of a walking dictionary. He can always tell you exactly how two near-synonyms differ in their precise shades of meaning. It would be surprising if etymological analysis had not been one of the methods by which he achieved this end, but we should not assume, in the absence of evidence, that his enterprise was etymological in its essence.

Euthyphro, on the other hand, although one might have conjectured that he took up etymology as a route to the arcane knowledge of the gods on which he prided himself, almost certainly treated the subject more globally than that project in itself would have warranted, to judge from the frequency throughout most of Socrates' discourse with which he invokes Euthyphro as the alleged inspiration or umpire of his own efforts. We cannot begin to reconstruct the style or method of etymology that Euthyphro employed, and there is no reason whatsoever to suppose that any of the interest in flux goes back to him; but we must assume that the precedent which he set

consisted, if in nothing else, in an exceptionally ambitious project in the discipline of etymology. Indeed, Socrates expresses the hope that his own etymologies will satisfy 'the followers of Euthyphro' (399e–400a), and this, whether or not read as ironic, encourages the impression that Euthyphro's status in the discipline was sufficiently high to make him some kind of leader in it.

2 DEGREES OF CORRECTNESS

Socrates introduces his own version of the project with a survey of Homeric and other poetic names (391c–397b). I take this introduction to make four main points.

The first point is to enable us to get a hold on the notion of a 'correct' name, and to appreciate that correctness is a comparative attribute. To this effect, two or three polarities are invoked: gods use names more correctly than humans do, men than women, and perhaps also – but if so it is only by implication – Homer than other poets. Homer himself is cited as several times distinguishing the gods' name for something from its human nomenclature. The river Scamander, at Troy, is so called by humans, while the gods call it Xanthus. A certain bird is called 'chalkis' by the gods, 'kymindis' by humans. And so on. Being human, we cannot expect to understand what makes the divine names more correct, but we can be sure that *something* does.

Then there is the male–female contrast (392b–d). Socrates half- remembers lines of Homer in which the alternative names of Hector's son are alluded to. He is citing *Iliad* XXII 506–7, where Andromache, addressing her recently fallen husband Hector, refers to their son as 'Astyanax, as the Trojans call him'. Socrates has remembered that the boy's alternative name was Scamandrius, but has forgotten that this is the name that Hector himself called him (VI 402–3). The lapse of memory leads him to the wrong inference, that the masculine noun 'Trojans' (*Trōes*) refers to the *male* Trojans, as distinct from the Trojan women – not an altogether stupid guess, given that it is one of the Trojan women, Andromache, who is speaking. Thus Socrates mistakenly cites the passage as evidence that, according to Homer, the Trojan men and women differ in some of the nomenclature they use. Some might see this misreading as deliberate subversion on the part of Plato or Socrates. I cannot see what the point of the subversion would be, and assume rather that it is a simple error (whether on Socrates' part or on Plato's), encouraged by the desire to find differentiations between the competing names used by different groups.

Trading on the semi-misquotation, Socrates secures Hermogenes' agreement that in cities men are wiser than women when one considers the two classes as a whole (392c). Although we may find this offensively sexist, note at least the pointed resemblance to *Republic* v 455d, where Socrates similarly maintains that *taken as a class* men are superior to women, but does so in the course of arguing that nevertheless many individual women are superior to many individual men, making this latter the basis for a radically egalitarian treatment of the sexes in his ideal city. Here in the *Cratylus*, however, since Homer is assumed to have agreed that men are on the whole the wiser sex, Socrates infers that he must consider the nomenclature they choose the more correct. Thus we learn, purportedly from Homer, a second gradation: the name used by the men is 'more correct' (392d8) than the women's equivalent.[7] This time, moreover, because we are dealing with human and not divine names, we can work out why the name Astyanax is better. As Homer says in a line quoted – almost correctly! – by Socrates (*Iliad* xxii 507, *Crat.* 392e1), the name arose because the boy's father, Hector, alone protected the city; and the name Astyanax means literally 'City Lord'. So, Socrates infers, Homer is telling us that, provided the course of nature is followed and the offspring retains the quality of the parent, it is proper for the offspring to inherit the parent's name too.

For the moment I want simply to note the implication of this, drawn by Socrates (392d8–9), that on Homer's authority there are degrees of correctness in names, which we ourselves can learn to recognise and explain methodically.

A third observation added by Socrates concerns the name Hector. It literally means 'Holder', and surely, Socrates argues, this is a name assigned to the hero by Homer himself as a virtual equivalent to Astyanax or 'City Lord'. It is the fact that both names sound Greek in origin that Socrates cites as his ground for suggesting that Homer made them up. If so, he infers, we can attribute to Homer himself the theory of correctness that seems to underlie the names of Hector and Astyanax. This could be interpreted as, if only implicitly, the basis for a third point of comparison as regards degrees of correctness. Just as gods use names more correctly than humans do, and as men use them more correctly than women do, so Homer – the great cultural authority for all Greeks – can be assumed to use names more correctly than his lesser competitors do, and therefore to set a standard which we could investigate to our own profit.

[7] This can be set against the curious later assertion (418b–c) that women are more conservative in their speech, and so likelier to preserve the older forms.

That there are differing degrees of correctness in naming is thus a rather pronounced finding of the passage. Socrates keeps it up his sleeve for now, but it will become vital later when he turns to the refutation of Cratylus.

3 SOME PRINCIPLES OF CODIFICATION

The second general point to emerge from the section on poetic names lies in its demonstration of how etymology works. There was nothing new or surprising about the fact that personal names are descriptively significant. Already in Homer and Hesiod many personal names had been explicitly analysed on this basis, using the term 'eponym'[8] to indicate a descriptively significant name – a terminology which, along with its cognates, is repeatedly used in the *Cratylus* too.[9] Familiar examples had included explanations of the eponyms Odysseus ('hated') and Cyclops ('round-eye'), as well as the many titles of Aphrodite. For Socrates, not only is it already obvious that the name Astyanax has an intended meaning, but Homer actually explains to us *why* the boy was so called and why this was a correct name for him. Socrates continues with a series of further mythological names, whose meaning, we are urged to agree, is readily found. For instance Pelops, literally 'near-sighted', was appropriately so called because he committed a murder which revealed his lack of foresight regarding the curse that would fall on his descendants (395c–d). Tantalus has a name which, according to Socrates, wonderfully fits his predicament. What could be more appropriate, for someone utterly wretched (*talantatos*) who was punished with the balancing (*talanteia*)[10] of a rock over his head than to be called Tantalus (395d–e)?

This last example illustrates a principle which is made explicit in the present context (394a–b) and will be important in the later etymologies: the codification which goes into naming may well include addition, subtraction or transposition of letters: clearly the conversion of 'talanteia' and 'talantatos' to 'Tantalus' involved both subtraction and transposition, but, so we are asked to agree, neither alteration prevents us discerning the core meaning.

A further key principle, already at work in the Tantalus etymology, is brought to the fore by the decoding of the name Atreus (395b–c). This combines in a single string of sound the words *ateires* ('tough'), *atrestos*

[8] E.g. *Il.* IX 562, *Od.* XIX 407–9; Hesiod, *Th.* 144–5, 195–200.

[9] 394d9, 395b6, 397b3, 398c1, 409c7, 412c5, 415b5, d3, 416b10, d8, 417c9.

[10] At 395e1 I am accepting Spalding's emendation of ταντaλεία to ταλαντεία.

('fearless') and *atēros* ('ruinous').[11] As I have already stressed in Chapter 2, it is a vital methodological principle that a single name may be a portmanteau word, combining two or more different meanings. And, as Socrates points out with regard to the name Atreus, such a synthesis makes the name this time a great deal harder to decode, thus demanding real etymological expertise on the part of its interpreter (395b).

In such ways as these, the survey of poetic and/or mythological names introduces the main principles on which the remaining etymologies will be conducted, at the same time conferring authority on the method by associating it with the name of Homer.

4 A PLATONIC SEMANTICS

A third general lesson of the section is brought out at 394b–c. Just as Hector and Astyanax (and for that matter Archepolis, 'City-ruler', 394c1–4) are near-synonyms, so too are many other names which, phonetically speaking, have equally little in common with each other. Thus, says Socrates (394c4–9), at least three popular personal names describe their bearer as a general: Agis ('Leader'), Polemarchos ('Warlord') and Eupolemos ('Good at War'). And there are likewise alternative names that denote a doctor: Iatrocles ('Doctor Fame') and Akesimbrotus ('Curer of Mortals'). It would be easy to dispute that these names are actual synonyms, but that is not the point. What ensures that within each set all the names are equally correct is that all succeed in picking out one and the same feature of the nominee. As Socrates puts it, they all have the same power (*dynamis*). Much later (435d) this 'power' or 'force' of a name will be specified as its power to 'instruct', and, as we saw in Chapter 3, the power to instruct combines the capacity of names to single out individuals and kinds with their further capacity to describe those things analytically. What we are being told in the present passage is that even what are phonetically very different names may share the same designatory power.

This appears to be the equivalent, in Platonic semantics, of the earlier metaphysical thesis that one and the same species-Form of name may be embodied by the name-making craftsmen in quite different letters and syllables, just as the same Form of a tool may be embodied in different metals (389d–390a).[12] At that earlier occurrence, this metaphysical point was invoked to justify the presumption that there may be 'correctness of

[11] The text supports the reading that the name *combines* these three senses, rather than that, as in Reeve's translation, they are alternatives.

[12] Cf. Ketchum 1979.

names' in many different languages, despite the fact that they use quite different sounds for the same things. One good reason for Socrates to emphasise the point about linguistic variety at that stage was, I suggest, that it injected sense into what would otherwise seem a disturbing feature of his metaphysical account. That the genus-Form, shuttle, should have various further Forms as its species seems unproblematic: there is one type for linen, one for wool, and so on. But the analogue in the case of names proves to be the positing of one specific Form for every word – one for the name of man, one for the name of dog, etc.[13] The text makes it quite clear that these are the Forms of the names, and not the Forms of the things themselves doing double duty – and rightly so, since anyone trying to embody the Form of table in matter, even if that matter were vocal sound, would in theory be making a table (albeit in this case unsuccessfully), not making a name. Now it might seem disturbingly uneconomical to posit a vast multitude of Forms each of which gets used just once, in that man, dog etc. each was given its name just once in human history, after which the Form of that particular name could be ignored. What made the scheme sound less extravagant was Socrates' reminder that each of these Forms guided not just the Greek name-makers but also the name-makers in all other countries, each of whom has embodied it in different materials, that is, the local sound-system – 'dog', 'chien', 'cane', 'hund' etc. What makes all these names equivalent is their shared embodiment of one and the same name-Form.

What is this name-Form? The *generic* Form of Name, we must take it, is the function of a name as a tool for instructing by separating being. Presumably, then, a specific name-Form – say, the Form of the name of dog – is to be understood as, roughly, the function of giving instruction by vocally *separating what a dog is*, whether that be understood at the mundane level as the name's function in singling out a dog as the subject or object

[13] Although it is controversial, I side with the majority view (e.g. Kahn 1973, 1986, Ketchum 1979), that these are Forms, as seems to me unmistakably clear both from the passage's terminology – εἶδος (389b3, 10, 390a7, b1), αὐτὸ ὃ ἔστιν . . . (389b5; cf. *Phd.* 75c10–d4, *Rep.* VI 507b5–7), and αὐτὸ ἐκεῖνο ὃ ἔστιν . . . (389d6–7) – and from the description of the craftsman as 'looking to' them (389a5, b2, d6, 390e2–3; cf. *Rep.* X 596b7). Although these locutions are here used mainly of the genus-Forms (Shuttle, Name), both εἶδος (390a7, b1) and 'looking to' (390e2–3) are used for the species cases too. Moreover, a little reflection will reveal why the remaining locutions were not available for the species-Forms: one can say 'αὐτὸ ὃ ἔστι x' only when x has a name, which in this passage the species-Forms, e.g. the precise type of shuttle, do not. Socrates' favoured locution for the species-Forms is (in the shuttle example) τὴν φύσει κερκίδα ἑκάστῳ πεφυκυῖαν (389c10–11). This may not be Plato's most typical Form-language, but note that the genus-Form of shuttle (389b3, 5–6) is also called τοιοῦτόν τι ὃ ἐπεφύκει κερκίζειν (389a7–8): this strongly supports the assumption that the former locution also designates a Form.

in a sentence, or, as it might be, at a scientific level as the zoologist's use of the term 'dog' in a taxonomy of mammals. However that function may be understood, it is one to which all the world's words for 'dog' aspire.

As Socrates puts the same point in the passage currently under consideration, at 393c–d, it does not make any difference what syllables are used, so long as the 'being' (*ousia*) of the object, indicated in the name, remains in force (*enkratēs*). Here too the 'being' which the name indicates or separates will amount to *what the object is*, bearing in mind that this latter is a sufficiently elastic concept to range from, at one extreme, merely distinguishing it from other things, to conveying its essence at the other.

To appreciate what the minimal function of a name is, we can usefully compare it with cases which fall below that minimum. Much later, the primary power of primary names to describe will turn out to lie in their imitation of their objects. But other items, Socrates will warn Hermogenes (422e–424a), may imitate their objects *without* managing to be their names. Thus the art of naming differs from, for example, those of music and painting, in that these latter produce imitations of, respectively, things' sounds and their colours and shapes, whereas the products of the naming art imitate things' *being*. (Even the names of colours and sounds imitate the being of those colours and sounds, not the colours and sounds themselves.) Socrates is here drawing implicitly on his principle that every skill is defined, at least in part, by its own special object,[14] and using it to single out just what is unique about the kind of imitation performed by names. Certainly, he argues, that uniqueness cannot lie in the *instrument* of imitation, that is, in the fact that names are *vocal* imitations, both because music too uses the voice imitatively, and because if mere vocal imitation were sufficient to constitute naming even those who mimic animal sounds would thereby be naming the animal species in question.

A name, then, is not just a vocal imitation, but a vocal imitation of something's *being*. As usual, however, this notion of being (*ousia*) is an elastic one, especially as each thing is here said to have its own *ousia* merely in virtue of the fact that we can truly say of it that it 'is' (423e1–5). A name might indeed, in an optimal case, aspire to capture the very 'essence' of its object. But at bottom what is required of a name is that it should convey, by imitation, what the thing *is*, even if that amounts to no more than marking it off from other things. A common misreading of the theory sketched in the *Cratylus* takes it that a name, in order to be a name at all, must describe the essence of its object. In reality, a name's minimal function concerns the

[14] E.g. *Gorg.* 449c–451d.

identification of the object's being in a much weaker and more inclusive sense than that. However, even this broad notion of being is by no means devoid of content. In making the distinction that a thing's name must capture its being, i.e. what it is, rather than, say, its sound, shape or colour, Socrates might even be said to be foreshadowing the Aristotelian doctrine of categories.[15]

At its earlier occurrence (389b–390e), the account of the functions of words (there cast in terms of name-Forms) was presented as a point about semantic equivalences between different languages, but in the present passage on proper names it recurs as a primarily[16] intra-linguistic thesis: even within a single language, two or more names (personal proper names in the examples offered, but chosen to pick out *types*, not individuals) may succeed in having one and the same force or power. While, as we shall now see confirmed, neither in its inter-linguistic nor in its intra-linguistic form is this a doctrine of simple synonymy, it certainly must amount to some kind of functional equivalence between words. Two words share the same power provided only that they both succeed in descriptively singling out one and the same entity, that is, by being *extensionally* equivalent. When they do, we must assume that they both embody one and the same species-Form of name. That they are not necessarily synonyms – that is, intensionally equivalent – is suggested by the fact that they may achieve their designating function by providing partly different information in the process of identifying the nominatum: thus 'good at war' and 'leader' differ in informational content, but both succeed in designating a general. The same would apply to the incomplete semantic equivalence between 'dog', 'hound' and 'man's best friend'.

Later in the dialogue, when Socrates needs to convey the notion of strict synonymy, or intensional equivalence, he will do so by a different locution. At 412a, two nouns for 'understanding' – *synesis* and *epistēmē* – are shown to be equivalent by appeal to the cognate verbs for 'understand' – *synienai* and *epistasthai* respectively. Both verbs are analysed as meaning 'keep up with things'. That is, in addition to picking out one and the same mental state, the two pairs of cognate terms do so by semantically equivalent descriptions of it. As Socrates puts it there, when the noun *synesis* says (or 'means': *legei*) that somebody 'understands' (*synienai*), 'the result is that *precisely the same*

[15] I am thinking here especially of that theory as sketched in the *Topics* (I 9), a work widely recognised as reflecting dialectic in the Academy. There Aristotle makes much the same point as *Crat.* 423e1–424a1: the 'What is it?' question that marks the first category can be answered with regard not only to substances but also to colours and other non-substantial items.

[16] The partial exception is that Agis is, although Greek, a *Spartan* name.

thing (*tauton pantapasin*) is meant (or 'said': *legomenon*) as *epistasthai*'. The change of locution here confirms the impression that for two words to have the same 'power' or 'force' is a broader and more permissive concept than strict synonymy, and amounts to no more than extensional equivalence. It is, nevertheless, only this latter, weaker relation that is required if two or more words are to succeed in signifying the same nominatum.

It does, then, seem that an unstated Platonic semantics lies in the background. Words obtain their meanings, not by signifying thoughts (as for Aristotle, at least as usually understood),[17] nor by simply signifying things. Rather, the way the word 'x' signifies an x is by embodying in a string of sound the ideal function of the name of x, a function which is summed up as that of 'separating the being' of x. This function may be discharged in a number of different but equivalent ways, and this is not only because the sound-systems of the languages being used can vary, but also because even within a language there may be a number of alternative ways in which the same function, that of separating a particular kind of being, can be discharged.

It seems to follow that the power of a word does not lie in its informational content as such. If it did, names with the same designation but different informational content, such as Agis and Eupolemos, could not be said, as they are, to have the same power. Rather, the power of a name lies in its success, *by means of its informational content*, in separating the being of its nominatum. The informational or descriptive content of names is not itself their function; it is the means by which they fulfil that function. However, nothing that we have encountered so far in the text suggests that, for Socrates, that means is dispensable – that there is any other way that a name could separate being than through description.

A possibly helpful analogy is passport photos. The function of your passport photo is to represent you, not to resemble you, but it could not represent you *without* resembling you. Two alternative passport photos may both succeed in representing you – i.e. have the same power – despite the fact that they resemble you in different ways due to different lighting, camera angles etc. Similarly, the function of your name is to separate your being, not to describe you, but it could not separate your being *without* describing you. Two alternative names may both succeed in separating your being, and hence have the same power, despite the fact that they describe you in different ways – e.g. 'leader', 'good at war' etc.

[17] In Sedley (1996) I argue that this principle from *De interpretatione* 1 in fact applies only to sentences, not to single words.

In Chapter 3 §3 I distinguished three possible accounts of what is involved in a name's 'separating being': designation, taxonomy and analysis. And in Chapter 3 §6 I argued that all three play a part. However, the third account, analysis, now proves to be subordinate to the first two.[18] For we have seen that the descriptive or analytic work done by a name is not as such its function, but rather the *means* by which it discharges that function. Two names may have the same 'power' simply because, in accordance with the first two accounts, they separate one and the same thing *from other things*; yet these two names may, as in the case of 'leader' and 'good at war', fail to give the same analysis of their shared nominatum. This, however, does not in itself prove that analysing is not an indispensable part of designating. If, by the end of the dialogue, it were to turn out that names can succeed in marking off their nominata without analysing them *at all*, this third account of separating being would drop out of Plato's semantics. But in fact analysis will remain a vital, if subordinate, element in his semantics right to the end.

5 THE LIMITATIONS OF PERSONAL NAMES

So far we have seen the positive lessons about etymological science that can be learnt by starting from personal proper names. But there is a negative lesson to learn as well, and this is the fourth and final item on my list. The assignment of personal names is a chancy business. Where the name is appropriate, that may be due to mere accident (394e9, 395e5), or may be because it was assigned by a poet with the wisdom of hindsight (394e10). It *may* alternatively be that the name was, as in the case of Astyanax, assigned to the son on the basis of the father's or an ancestor's qualities, but even in such cases the name's natural appropriateness depends on the presumption that nature will take its course, that is, that the family will breed true – just as the offspring of a horse is appropriately called a horse only because the horse has bred true and not given birth to a freak (393b–c, 394a, d–e, 397b). If, as does happen, the son is a disappointment and lacks the father's good qualities, an inherited name commemorating those qualities will, if retained, be unnatural and a poor fit. Indeed, many names are given to children as expressions of nothing more than the *hope* that they will turn out so (397b).

The point about the individual appropriateness of personal names, not necessarily transmitted from generation to generation, is developed

[18] Cf. p. 66 n. 28 above.

(394e–396c) by studying a long genealogy, whose members over seven generations were all, it turns out, appropriately named on the basis of their own characters or functions. Orestes, first, was a wild and rugged type, hence aptly described by his name, which appears to derive from *oros*, 'mountain', and to mean something like 'hillbilly'. His father, Agamemnon, was above all the type to stick to a task through thick and thin – he did after all devote ten years to besieging Troy – and his name captures just *that* quality: he was *agastos*, 'admirable', for *menein* (or *mimnein*?), 'staying put', hence 'Agamemnon'. His father, Atreus, was as we have seen (§3) named in correct recognition of his broadly negative combination of qualities. So was *his* father, Pelops, as we also saw, but this time named for his short-sightedness, his failure to foresee the curse he was bringing on his family. Pelops' father was Tantalus, whose name too we saw to be an apposite one. But the genealogy does not stop there. Tantalus' father was Zeus, and the etymologies are therefore continued through the names of Zeus, his father Cronos, and *his* father Ouranos. Even at that point, Socrates gives up only because – or so he claims – he cannot remember what Hesiod says regarding any earlier ancestry that even Ouranos himself may have had.[19]

I shall come back in §7 to the etymologies of these last, divine names. First, though, what is the strategic aim of the genealogy? Nothing is made explicit, but its effect seems to me to be the following. At the junior end, we notice the radical instability of family nomenclature: each generation is different, and if their names turn out to fit, that is due either to luck or to poetic hindsight. But as we move into the divine names we find a dramatic increase in the names' weightiness: the names of Zeus, Cronos and Ouranos all signify permanently significant facts about the world and the place of intelligence in it. This transition suggests something about how etymologists can best concentrate their efforts.

For that is how Socrates now proceeds (397a–b). He concludes that the personal names of human beings and heroes are not a safe guide to correctness of names, and should be henceforth abandoned. We have a much better chance of mastering the correctness of names, he says, if we concentrate on things which have an absolutely permanent nature. And this is the ground offered for now turning to the names of such things, which Socrates dubs 'the things which have an everlasting being and nature'

[19] The remaining ancestor was Earth (Gaia), the mother of Ouranos (Hesiod, *Theogony* 126–8). Plato may have decided to omit her here because Socrates is tracing a paternal lineage only, and Hesiod leaves it unclear whether Ouranos even had a father. 'Gaia' will be etymologised, as the name of an element, at 410b–c.

(*ta aei onta kai pephykota*, 397b), a class in which his very first chosen example is the word 'gods' itself.

We must be careful not to assume too narrow a sense for this class name, 'the things which have an everlasting being and nature'. While it does importantly include everlasting beings such as the gods, it could in principle also include any *universal* whatsoever, even 'spade' or 'haddock', provided it is granted that each universal has a fixed nature. It is of no consequence that *tokens* of these types may be transient beings. 'Man' will do as well as 'god' for the purpose.

In practice, nevertheless, 'the things which have an everlasting being and nature' will not be at all randomly chosen, but will prove to be, in effect, the entire stock of entities with which philosophical thought is concerned. Socrates and Hermogenes now focus on these, and in working through them they cover, if selectively, a large part of the philosophical lexicon.[20]

Why, if such is his real interest, did Socrates start with the relatively banal subject of proper names? The motive seems to be methodological.[21] Assigning personal proper names is an activity that anyone listening or reading might have done or expect to do in the future. And in doing so they would almost inevitably think about the meanings of the names considered and the grounds for preferring one to another. This makes starting with these personal names a good specimen of the method which Aristotle later formalised as that of starting from what is 'better known to us' and proceeding from there to what is 'better known absolutely (or 'by nature')'. As Aristotle's comparative terminology concedes, the former of these is likely to fall short of the objective precision to which the latter can aspire, but has the advantage of working from material which we already understand from direct acquaintance.

In keeping with that method, the personal names of human individuals will henceforth be dropped from the discussion, having served their purpose by reminding us of what we already know, or half-know, about naming, and thereby delivering a whole set of principles which will be put to work in the more philosophical discussion that follows. First, name-decipherment works: names really do naturally fit, or fail to fit, in so far as they successfully or unsuccessfully pick out some type. As Socrates remarks at the close of this section (397a), what he and Hermogenes have encountered is an 'outline'

[20] On the systematic character of this sequence, see Ch. 7 §5 below (pp. 156–8).

[21] Socrates' remark at 396c7–d8 about the flood of inspiration that has hit him need not, even if taken at face value (and see pp. 40–1 above for reason to doubt that it should be so taken), be read as in conflict with the presupposition of methodological care. The etymological agenda may well be rationally chosen, even if the actual analyses are helped by a series of inspirations.

(*typos*), which has taught them that names are not randomly chosen but exhibit a certain correctness. And this correctness of names is a comparative matter: some names succeed better than others in picking out a specific type. Second, as the examination of sets of mutually equivalent names has shown, the defining formal aspect of a name is not its phonetic composition but its semantic content, which in turn depends, once more, on its success in picking out a specific type. Third, a name can survive a variety of merely phonetic transformations without losing its power to signify and instruct. Fourth, a name can be more successfully attached to an object to the extent that that object has a fixed type for the name to capture. From here on, the names of entities with permanent characters will be the exclusive focus of the theory.

6 COSMOLOGICAL ETYMOLOGIES

That brings us to the cosmological etymologies. We should start with a synoptic look at their actual sequence; but I shall save for the next chapter the long list of value terms that are scrutinised after the cosmological ones, even though they too are at least implicitly included under the heading 'the things which have an everlasting being and nature'. What is initially, and most directly, covered by this heading is, as one might put it, the cosmos and its entire hierarchy of contents.

Below is the sequence of terms considered. Braces – {} – indicate a digressive or subordinate etymology, square brackets one which is listed but then fails to appear (at least here).

Hierarchy of living beings
397c–399c: gods (*theoi*), daimons (*daimones*), heroes (*hērōes*), humans (*anthrōpoi*)

Animal constituents
399c–400c: soul (*psychē*), body (*sōma*)

Names of deities
400d–408d: Hestia, Rhea, Cronos, Oceanos, Tethys, [Zeus], Poseidon, Pluto, Hades, Demeter, Hera, Persephone/Pherrephatta, Apollo, Muses, Leto, Artemis, Dionysus {wine (*oinos*)}, Aphrodite, Pallas/Athene, Hephaestus, Ares, Hermes,[22] Pan

[22] After Hermes, Iris is etymologised at 408b3, but the sentence is excised in the OCT², following Heindorf, I believe rightly.

Astronomical entities
408d–409c: sun (*hēlios*), moon (*selēnē*), month (*meis*), stars (*astra*), {lightning (*astrapē*)}

The elements
409c–410c: fire (*pyr*), water (*hydōr*), air (*aēr*), aether (*aithēr*), earth (*gē*)

Temporal regularity
410c–e: seasons (*hōrai*), year (*eniautos* or *etos*)

One point needs re-emphasising at once. In turning to etymologise the names of permanent entities rather than personal proper names, Socrates and Hermogenes could have easily chosen everyday items like 'horse' and 'stone' – words which were to be regularly etymologised in the subsequent tradition. Instead, however, they start by selecting items of key *cosmological* importance. Moreover, they work through these items in what the above table displays as a systematic sequence. As we will see in Chapter 5, the same systematic approach is continued into the long section on value terms which follows; and I shall argue in Chapter 7 §9 that Socrates portrays this entire sequence as constituting a semi-formal philosophical curriculum. If etymology is genuinely informative, as has now turned out to be the case, the items on that curriculum are the kinds of things about which philosophers like Socrates and Hermogenes would most welcome information.

Although the structure of this curriculum will prove of considerable interest, in looking more closely at individual divine and cosmological etymologies I want for now to impose a different sequence. These etymologies focus largely on a small set of recurrent themes, and we will learn more by grouping them accordingly.

7 COSMIC INTELLIGENCE

The first theme is intelligence and its place in the world order. Take first the etymologies of the names Zeus, Cronos and Ouranos. These actually occurred prematurely – as part of the genealogy of Orestes – in the section on poetic personal names (395e–396c). When Socrates and Hermogenes turn in the cosmological section to the names of gods, they simply refer back to the earlier account, although they here mention only Zeus (400d), presumably as representative of all three, because, as we will now see, his name can be fully understood only if taken jointly with theirs.[23] So let us take all three gods – son, father and grandfather.

[23] Later, at 401e2–3, Socrates refers back to the Cronos etymology as well, but then adds a different (implicit) etymology of the name.

The name Zeus, itself a nominative, has the variant forms *Zēn* and (in the accusative) *Dia*. These, suggests Socrates, point to the words for 'life' (*zēn*) and 'because of' (*dia*) respectively. As a result, 'Zeus' signifies the 'cause of life always to all things'.

Next, Zeus is himself the son 'of Cronos', *Kronou*, and this genitive form suggests *Korou nou*,[24] with the explanation that this is not 'child' (*kóros*) of intellect, but a use of the rare adjective *korós*, 'pure'. Hence Cronos is 'pure intellect'. (The etymological association of Cronos with *nous*[25] was at least as common as the name's derivation from *chronos*, 'time', but the specific decoding proposed here seems to be Plato's improvement on existing ones.)

This leads on to the etymology of Cronos' own father, Ouranos. The derived adjective *ourania*, 'heavenly', which properly describes astronomy (and which was in fact the name of one of the Muses, who at some point became identified as the Muse of astronomy), is decoded as *horōsa ta anō*, 'looking at things above'.[26] And, Socrates remarks, the 'sky-watchers' (*meteōrologoi*) tell us that astronomy is the source of a pure intellect.

It takes more than a moment's thought to see what all this means. Cronos is 'pure intellect', and he is the son of Ouranos, whose name symbolises astronomy. Thus etymology reveals that *pure intellect comes from astronomy*. This is quite unmistakably meant as the anticipation of a genuine Platonic insight. It is a key theme of both *Republic* VII (527d–528a, 528e–530c) and the *Timaeus* (47b–c, 90c–d) that astronomy, properly practised as a branch of mathematics and not reduced as it often is to a merely empirical discipline, is a privileged route to the perfection of a pure intellect. As for Zeus, he now combines being the offspring of 'pure intellect' with being himself the cause of all life. This closely prefigures another central theme of the *Timaeus*. The teleological structure of the world is there the handiwork of a cosmic intellect or intelligence (*nous*), the creator of the astral divinities which in turn create all mortal life forms.

It would be hard to overstate the importance of this last thesis – that the world is the product of intelligent causation – in Plato's thought. It was without doubt the theme that drove his composition of the *Timaeus*, and the key to his mature theology as expounded in *Laws* X. It is, indeed, his primary reason for including cosmology in the philosophical curriculum at all.

[24] This is well argued by D. Robinson (1995), in accordance with which the OCT[2] reports Robinson's suspicion that at 396b3 the text should read Κορόνου in place of Κρόνου.

[25] For the association of Cronos with *nous*, see also Ch. 2 §5 above (p. 38) on *Laws* 714a, and cf. explication of the name as ὁ κρούων νοῦς, 'the clashing intellect', in the Derveni papyrus, a work probably close in date to Plato's lifetime (Laks and Most 1997).

[26] Cf. *Rep.* 509d for recognition of this link between οὐρανός and ὁρᾶν.

For Plato to credit this seminal insight to his distant ancestors is remarkable, especially when one bears in mind a contrasting passage in the *Phaedo* (96a–99d). There Socrates castigates the great physicist Anaxagoras for not living up to his promise to show how *nous* is the cause of everything. Socrates had assumed that, since that was Anaxagoras' thesis, his book would explain how *nous* had disposed everything in the world *for the best* – for what else is it to do things intelligently, if not to arrange them in the best way? So he had eagerly rushed out to buy Anaxagoras' book, only to find that, to his bitter disappointment, the actual cosmogonic explanations in it were in just the same mechanistic mode with which previous physicists had contented themselves, without a hint of the expected teleology.

The *Phaedo* critique, however, for all its fame, is not typical of Plato. In the *Philebus*, for example, his Socrates says (28d5–9) 'Are we to say, Protarchus, that the universe and this so-called "totality" are controlled by the power of the irrational and random – that is, by chance? Or on the contrary that, as our predecessors used to say, it is intelligence and some marvellous kind of wisdom that organise and govern it?' Here too in the *Cratylus*, the ancients are not denounced for their failure to go all the way, but given maximum credit for the extent of their anticipations. Even Anaxagoras' doctrine that *nous* is the cause of everything is, in a closely neighbouring passage, invoked with specific approval (400a, on the etymology of 'soul').[27] While Socrates does not keep pointing out that the etymologies are uncovering philosophical truths, he does speak throughout the cosmological section as if he is *assuming* that the decoded messages are true ones. It will only be when he turns to the ethical etymologies that he will express his reserve about the veracity of the name-givers' recovered beliefs.

The transmission of intelligence into the world order is, as we have seen, the dominant lesson to be learnt by decomposing and analysing the names of Zeus and his forefathers. When we proceed downward below the level of gods, we will find that same theme maintained. Take the sequence daimons, heroes, human beings (397c–399c). Daimons are normally (including by Plato) treated as a semi-divine order of beings that mediate between gods and mortals.[28] Here in the *Cratylus*, however, Socrates is inclined to an alternative, rationalising explanation of them as wise and good human

[27] The mildly negative implication that Anaxagoras had in fact been anticipated by the name-makers is not brought out at 400a, although a similar slight is cast upon him in connection with the moon's light at 409a. For the Platonic Socrates' ambivalent treatment of Anaxagoras, as also of the 'sky-watchers', cf. Ch. 5 §1 below (pp. 101–2).

[28] See esp. *Smp.* 202d–203a.

beings (he appeals to the fact that we call people we admire *daimonios*, 'brilliant').[29] In this vein daimons – *daimones* – are explained as *daēmones*, 'knowing ones', which Socrates equates in their turn with 'the wise' (398b–c). This equivalence is itself further underwritten with Socrates' suggested interpretation of Hesiod's Golden-Age myth (*Works and Days* 106–201). It is true, he observes, that the daimons were Hesiod's first, golden race, while human beings are the third, iron race; but because the golden race were, in reality, just better human beings, we too can aspire to attain their status, certainly after death (as the poets already acknowledge), but actually in this life too. Much as we saw in *Laws* IV, with regard to the meaning of *eudaimonia*,[30] so too here the decoding of the *daimon* vocabulary and the decoding of myth are mutually supporting activities.

Next, heroes (*hērōes*; 398c–e). The first suggested etymology derives their name from *erōs*, 'love': they are love-children, because produced by the union of one divine and one human parent. But the more interesting alternative to which Socrates quickly proceeds is that the name derives from both *eirein*, 'to speak' and *erōtan*, 'to ask' (whose short first syllable *er-*, he points out, would in the older Attic script be indistinguishable from the lengthened first syllable in *hērōes*).[31] If so, he infers, in reality the heroes were wise speakers, i.e. clever rhetoricians, and skilled questioners, i.e. dialecticians or sophists. His words are (398d5–e3):

> And either it means this [i.e. love-children] about the heroes, or else that they were the wise, and clever orators, and dialecticians with a capacity for asking questions (*erōtan*). For *eirein* means to speak. Hence, as we were just saying, when spoken of in the Attic dialect the heroes (*hērōes*) turn out to be a kind of orators and questioners (*erōtētikoi*). Consequently the race of heroes proves to be a class of orators and sophists.

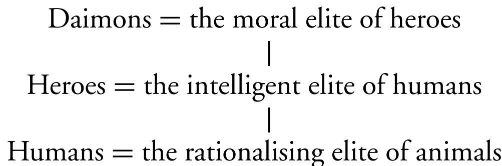
It should be clear that some important Platonic boundaries have been erased in this catch-all description: we would expect a firm distinction between (a) the wise, who may well be dialecticians too, and (b) the *merely* clever, who are more likely to be orators and/or sophists – although in the *Cratylus* the latter word, 'sophists', tends to be used in the broad sense 'intellectuals' which can include the wise.[32] The ironic-sounding pretence that these form a single group looks like a sample of Socratic mischief, but

[29] 398c2–4; cf. *Smp.* 203a4–6.
[30] Ch. 2 §5 above (p. 38).
[31] For this readiness to interpret words in terms of their earlier spelling, cf. 416b–c and Dalimier 1998: 35 n. 2. Compare the modern English fetish for 'ye olde . . .', which typically ignores the fact that the supposed 'y' merely represents an antiquated way of writing 'th'.
[32] See n. 35, p. 95 below.

the conflation actually serves the purpose of making the heroes, as they ought to be, a lower-ranking order than the unambiguously wise and good *daimones*, albeit still distinguished by their intellectual gifts. Their morally indeterminate status reflects what we were reminded of just pages earlier during the decoding of the proper names used in poetry: there the 'heroes' (cf. 397b1) of mythology, such as Atreus and Tantalus, included as many bad characters as good.

Next in the hierarchy of beings come human beings. 'Man', *anthrōpos*, is decoded as *anathrōn ha opōpe*, 'reviewing what he has seen', which we have already met in Chapter 2 §4 (p. 37). Since *anathrōn*, 'reviewing', is itself explained as a doublet for *analogizomenos*, 'calculating', a human being turns out to be one who, unlike other creatures, 'calculates about what he has seen'. This constitutes an extraordinarily strong reminiscence of *Theaetetus* 186b–c. There, in order to show that mere sense-perception cannot be knowledge, Socrates contrasts the way in which all creatures effortlessly perceive from birth with the difficult and protracted path which human beings must follow in order to achieve *analogismata*, rational 'calculations', about the things they perceive. Thus the etymology of *anthrōpos* tells us that the distinguishing feature of all human beings is their capacity, unique among mortal animals, to reflect rationally on the data of sense-experience.

Reviewing the threefold hierarchy – daimons, heroes, humans – in reverse order, we can now see that it is not one of discrete kinds, but rather is ordered by class-inclusion, as follows:



All human beings have the capacity for rational reflection as their defining characteristic. Above them, the class of heroes represents an intellectual elite within the class of human beings – including those who may, like dialecticians, use their talent for good purposes, but also those who may, like orators and (in the more familiar sense of the word) sophists, fail to do so. Finally *daimones*, identified exclusively with the wise and good, are the moral elite of this elite itself, those of its members who use their talents only for the good. The overall message is that the proper way to classify humans is by the extent to which, or the way in which, they make use of the rationality distinctive of their species.[33]

[33] Cf. the nine-fold ranking of lives at *Phdr.* 247c–248e.

The same concern with the place of intelligence in the cosmos is present in many of the further divine etymologies which follow. On one of the three alternative etymologies offered for Poseidon, he is *Poll(a)-eidōs*, one who knows many things (403a). Apollo's name *Apollōn* is said to combine four etymologies, the second of which commemorates his role as god of divination via the associated ideas of 'truth and simplicity', *to alēthes te kai to haploun*, a combined root which Socrates points out is particularly evident in Apollo's Thessalian name, 'Aploun'. The Muses (*Mousai*) are so called because they seek (*mōsthai*): that is, the arts, which are named *mousikē* after the Muses, promote inquiry and philosophy (406a). Athena has three competing etymologies (407b–c), all of which associate her with *nous*, 'intelligence'. The intellectualising pattern is, in short, a very pronounced one.

But most interesting, because treated in greater depth, is Hades, *Aïdēs* (403a–404b). Rejecting the familiar decoding of this name as 'Invisible' which he himself is seen invoking in the *Phaedo* (80d), Socrates associates its root not with *idein* 'to see' but with *eidenai* 'to know'. *Aïdēs* is the one who 'knows all fine things' (404b3).[34] This, Socrates maintains, is because death is a philosopher (403e7–404a3):

> The fact that he is unwilling to associate with people who have bodies, but begins his association with them when the soul is pure of all the evils and desires related to the body – doesn't this seem to you to be the mark of a philosopher . . .?[35]

To readers of the *Phaedo*, this etymology captures a central philosophical tenet – that only in death can the soul be restored to full knowledge and virtue.

Cumulatively, this battery of links between individual divinities and the promotion of the intellect reinforces the by now familiar picture. Virtually the entire pantheon has a nomenclature which recognises that god is the intelligent cause of good in the world.

The two last divine etymologies, those of Hermes and Pan, add a further dimension to this theme. Hermes, according to Socrates, was originally *eire-mēs*, 'the one who devised speaking' (407e–408b). And when we turn finally to Pan (408b–d), the focus is placed firmly on the nature of speech as such. Since Pan is the son of Hermes, and Hermes is the creator of speech,

[34] I take it that, as at 404c–d, the alpha prefix is meant to be the one which signifies '(all) together', rather than the privative.

[35] At 403e4–5, Hades is 'a τέλεος σοφιστής and a great benefactor of those who are with him'. The context makes it clear that σοφιστής here is used in a primarily positive sense, 'sage', as at *Rep.* X 596d1, *Smp.* 203d8, 208c1; this is well noted by Dalimier (1998: 234), and fully argued by Wohlfahrt (1990).

Pan must either himself be speech or be the brother of speech, and either of these will suffice, granted only that brother can be assumed to resemble brother. His name, *pan*, means 'everything', and what signifies everything is, precisely, speech (*logos*).[36] Hence, in short, Pan himself symbolises speech. The reason why he is more fully known as *Pan aipolos*, 'Pan the goatherd', is that speech is that which 'indicates everything and is always on the move' (*ho pan mēnuōn kai aei polōn*). Why is speech always on the move? Because it deviously shifts between truth and falsity. It has a dual nature. And Pan too has a dual nature. His top half is smooth and godlike, his lower half rough and goatlike, clearly symbolising truth and falsity respectively. That his top half does indeed represent truth is confirmed by a quasi-etymological hint: 'smooth', *leion*, and 'godlike', *theion*, jointly suggest 'true', *alēthes* (408c5).[37] Correspondingly, as regards Pan's lower half, 'goatlike' is the literal meaning of 'tragic', *tragikos*, and tragedy is the home of myth, itself closely linked to falsehood (408c6–9).

This is the climax of the divine etymologies, and Socrates is revelling in the sheer complexity of the decoding. But one implicit outcome of which we, as readers, should not lose sight is the following. The divine hierarchy, which started with intellect and its imposition on the world, ends, through Hermes and his son Pan, in speech capable of truth and falsity. This latter is surely the realm of the philosopher, whose understanding must necessarily be developed in discourse, internal or external, and must learn to discriminate truth from falsity. (As if to confirm that the pattern is no accident, the final, ethical section of the etymologies will also end with a focus of truth and falsity (421b1–c2).)

8 SOUL AND BODY

Another key to understanding the world and its occupants is, for Plato, the soul–body duality. For soul, *psychē*, Socrates rejects its familiar etymology as implying the 'cooling' (*psychoun*) exerted on the body by the breathing on which soul depends. In its place, he proposes (399d–400b) a linguistically much more strained decoding, which does, however, have the compensating merit of hinting at another Platonic truth. Socrates and Hermogenes agree

[36] Of this pair of premises, which trades on a use-mention equivocation, only the second is explicit in the text, but the first seems to me presupposed by the reasoning. In the Homeric *Hymn to Pan* 47, his name is derived from his delighting 'everyone' (*panti*).

[37] I call this linguistic device (which was pointed out to me by Mantas Adomenas) 'quasi-etymological' because it does not constitute an actual etymology of ἀληθές to compete with the decoding of ἀληθεία that will be offered at 421b. Rather, it interprets two visual aspects of Pan as indirectly symbolising ἀληθές via its discrete vocal components.

that this new etymology is 'more skilful' (*technikōteron*, 400b5). (Notice how, as usual, considerations of philosophical profundity and complexity are assumed to outweigh those of philological obviousness.) *Psychē* is a contraction of *phys-echē*, 'that which *physin ochei kai echei*' – *carries* our bodily *nature* along and *keeps* it alive. In particular, we are surely meant to notice that the revised etymology identifies the soul as the *mover* of the body. That points to Plato's highly influential identification of soul with the ultimate source of motion, probably first developed in his argument for immortality at *Phaedrus* 245c5–246a2.

As for 'body', *sōma*, here too Socrates rejects two existing etymologies, and opts instead for an interpretation according to which it is the 'safekeeping' (from *sōzein*, 'save') of the soul, with reference to the Orphic doctrine, approved by Socrates himself in the *Phaedo* (62b), that the soul's period of incarnation in the body is a term of imprisonment (400b–c).

The soul–body pair illustrates how Plato is not exclusively focused on his single favourite cosmological theme, the causal role of intelligence. Indeed, some of the etymologies of divine names which I have not listed separately pick out other aspects of the gods in question, ones which have it in common with the preceding ones that they are to be understood as conveying further important *truths* about the gods and thus as having recognisably been 'correctly assigned'.[38] For instance the first and fourth semantic construals of Apollo's name (405a–d) combine to bring out vital non-intellectual features of this god: he is the purifier (*apolouōn*, 'washing away') and the musical harmonist (*a-polein*, 'going together'). But it is always a risky business to separate the non-intellectual from the intellectual in Plato. Apollo's purificatory role, for example, should make Plato's more seasoned readers think of the *Phaedo* (69b–d), where Socrates interprets the true meaning of religious purification, as taught in the mysteries, as an intellectual one: purging the soul of bodily accretions and leanings is tantamount to liberating it to concentrate on philosophical understanding.

9 INTERIM CONCLUSION

So far I have left unmentioned an equally prominent motif in the theological and cosmological group of etymologies, that of flux. This will be my theme in the next chapter. For the time being, we can form the provisional conclusion that the cosmological etymologies systematically demonstrate

[38] Demeter, Leto, Artemis, Dionysus, Aphrodite, Pallas, Hephaestus, Ares, all in the passage 404b–407d.

the high level of understanding already attained by our distant ancestors. Not one of the etymologies that we have met so far in this section reveals a false belief, and again and again they lay bare genuine and even seminal insights. In short, not only does etymology work as an exegetical device, as the first, exploratory decoding of poetic names illustrated; it can also offer us a whole range of decodings which any Platonically attuned reader will recognise as philosophically correct. Whether our ancestors' level of insight will look as good once the flux content of their baptisms has been laid bare is the question to which we must now turn.

CHAPTER 5

The dominance of flux

1 FLUX AND BEING

In his theological and cosmological etymologies, Socrates' very first choice among divine names is Hestia (401c1–d7).

> [I]f one examines foreign names, one does just as well at discovering the meaning of each. For example, even in the case of this thing that we call *ousia* (being), some people call it *essia*, and others *ōsia*. Well first, according to the former of these two names, the being (*ousia*) of things has good reason to be called *Hestia*, and another reason why it can correctly be called Hestia is that we ourselves, for our part, say *estin* ('is') of what shares in being (*ousia*): for it seems that we too, once upon a time, called being (*ousia*) *essia*. And second, even by reflecting on sacrificial practice one could conclude that the name-makers had this thought. It is, after all, quite reasonable that those people who entitled the being of all things *essia* should have made Hestia the first recipient of sacrifice, ahead of all the other gods. But those who, for their part, call it *ōsia* would believe what is tantamount to Heraclitus' doctrine that all the things there are are on the move and that nothing stays still; hence they think that the cause and instigator of things is *to ōthoun* ('that which pushes'), and that that is why it is fine for it to have been named *ōsia* ('pushing').

Hestia's theological primacy is evident in her being the first deity you sacrifice to. It will therefore be of great significance if her name signifies that most basic of philosophical concepts, *ousia*, Being itself – the very thing that names have the function of dividing up, as we learnt earlier (388b–c). Socrates observes that, in one Greek dialect variant (which dialect is unclear to me, as it may have been to him), this association of Hestia with *ousia* is strongly favoured, since its word for *ousia* is *essia*, closely resembling 'Hestia', which itself even for Attic-speakers sounds much like a nominalisation of the verb *esti*, 'it is'. In another variant however, namely Doric, the form is *ōsia*, which sounds like 'pushing', from *ōthein*. Those who favour this latter variant, he points out, would be likely to favour the Heraclitean thesis that everything is in flux. The message appears to be that Hestia is definitely to be associated with Being and symbolises the primacy of Being, but that

at least one dialect form associates Being itself with motion and change. Thus this piece of religious nomenclature embodies a recognition of an important philosophical insight, the primacy of being, along with a further association, that of being with motion and change.

This off-puttingly complex network of associations demands some careful reflection. The theme of flux has here been given special prominence, (a) because Hestia, whose name hints at it, is picked out as the first deity for us to pay our respects to, (b) because, although for the Greeks her name symbolises permanence (cf. *Phaedrus* 247a), the dialectal uncertainty about the exact form of her name insinuates an uncertainty as to whether permanent being and flux can be separated. The need for such a separation is the theme to which Socrates will return at the very end of the dialogue (see Chapter 7 §8), and that fact in itself is enough to show that the prominence assigned to the same theme in the etymologies is no accident.

But how does this conflation of being with flux arise? Socrates' answer is deducible from the otherwise barely intelligible remark with which he introduces his etymology of Hestia (401b7–9): 'It rather looks, Hermogenes, as if the first ones to impose names were no ordinary people but some kind of sky-watchers (*meteōrologoi*) and chatterers (*adoleschai*).' The nearest equivalent to this expression elsewhere in the corpus is at *Phaedrus* 270a1, where Socrates remarks that all great disciplines (*technai)* need 'chatter (*adoleschia*) and skywatching (*meteōrologia*) about nature', and that this was what made Pericles the great orator he was, in that he studied with Anaxagoras, learning *meteōrologia* and coming to understand the nature of intelligence (*nous*) and unintelligence. As usual in such contexts, we encounter here a mixture of irony and earnestness. How far Pericles really was a great orator, and how much Anaxagoras was capable of teaching him about *nous*, is a matter on which Socrates' honest answer would be ambivalent at best, but in this context it suits him to give them both the benefit of the doubt. The expression 'sky-watching about nature' itself acquires ironic overtones due to the fact that, as readers well knew, this was just what Socrates had been effectively accused of in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, a portrayal which was to come back and haunt him at his trial.[1] Elsewhere in the dialogues Socrates calls himself an *adoleschēs*,[2] and takes pleasure in appropriating the mocking characterisation, 'sky-watchers', as a correct one for philosophers, in virtue of a reinterpretation of 'sky-watching' as symbolising the study of Forms.[3] In short, the expression

[1] Cf. *Apol.* 18b6–8; cf. *Pol.* 299b7–8, where there is a strong implicit allusion to Socrates as characterised by his accusers.
[2] *Tht.* 195b10. [3] *Rep.* 488e4–489a1, 489c6.

'sky-watchers and chatterers' is a complex locus of both irony and philosophical approbation.

What is most important for our present purposes is that, for all its ironic overtones, the *Cratylus* reference to 'sky-watchers and chatterers' is Socrates' way of referring, with a degree of approval, to cosmological theorists. This emerges from the earlier etymology of Ouranos, which we met in Chapter 4 §7 (p. 91 above): the sky-watchers were there (396c1–3) credited with the important Platonic insight that 'pure *nous*' comes from astronomy. It is hard to resist the impression that the early namegivers who chose the names of the gods are being credited with the same degree of the understanding that is attained in Plato's great cosmological dialogue, the *Timaeus*. The study of the cosmos does not, in Plato's eyes, lead to an unerringly true account,[4] but rather to a fallible and unstable one, corresponding to the unstable nature of its object, the physical world. Nevertheless, the study of the cosmos is a valuable exercise, above all in so far as, through mathematical astronomy, it can lead us to a direct insight into the divine mind: the etymology of Ouranos has already reminded us of that. This time, however, as we embark on the names of the other and mainly younger gods, much of the stress is going to be on the philosophically less positive aspect of cosmology, namely instability or flux.

2 PLATO AND FLUX

According to the *Timaeus*, the sensible world is a *gignomenon*, something which constantly 'becomes' but never 'is'. It is therefore not an object of knowledge,[5] on the Platonic principle that the contents of knowledge should not, even in theory, admit of being falsified at a later date: items of knowledge are permanent possessions, not subject to revision; their objects must therefore be entities incapable of change, that is, primarily at least, the Forms. The sensible world is, by contrast, the domain of opinion, *doxa*, which shares the instability of its objects and which, even if true now, can be falsified at any time.[6]

[4] See further, §2 below.

[5] D. Frede (1996) has constructed an impressive challenge to this standard interpretation, which however still seems to me overwhelmingly the most natural reading of *Ti.* I favour, equally, the traditional view that this same dualistic epistemology is already argued in *Rep.* v–vii; those who disagree often cite 520c4, but this advice to the philosophers returning to the cave that 'you will know (γνώσεσθε) what the individual images are and what they are of' comes in a sentence cast largely in the figurative language of the cave simile ('go down', 'darkness', etc.), and there is every reason to take 'know' (or better, 'recognise') in that same spirit.

[6] See Aristotle, *Cat.* 5, 4a21–b13 for a formal explanation of how one and the same *doxa* changes its truth value as the world changes.

Just what the sensible world's instability consists in for Plato is a complex question. The paradigmatic cases are to be found in Plato's middle-period dialogues such as *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, and *Republic*.[7] While a property like beauty is stably present in the Form of the Beautiful, all particular beautiful things are beautiful only in some respect or other. In them, beauty constantly jostles for prominence with its own opposite, ugliness, and the equivalent holds for all other pairs of opposed predicates. We will return to these kinds of fluidity later. For the moment, our concern has to be with the instability of the sensible world as the object of physical science. Now for Plato the cosmos is, in one sense, a masterpiece of regularity. Time, the orderly succession of day and night, the seasons and the years, is a 'moving image of eternity' (*Ti.* 37d), the nearest a divine creator could bring his product to the perfection of the Forms. Nevertheless, all judgements about the state and functioning of the world, far from being immune from revision, are in principle perpetually subject to it.

It is, admittedly, somewhat harder to make sense of this as a view concerning universal generalisations about the cosmos – that particles of earth are cubic, that the human rational mind is in the head, that the world has a soul, and so on – than when it is applied to fleeting or perspectival facts such as that the sunset is beautiful or that my action is just. Plato's position is roughly as follows. The opinions of physics are neither primarily founded on reasoning (51e3–4) nor fully consistent (29c5–7), so that they are never immune from rethinking (51e4). Since their instability mirrors the instability of the world which they interpret (29b3–c3), we must take it that the sensible world itself, as a mere copy of the Forms, already incorporates the inconsistencies and imprecisions which show through in opinions about it. These, then, will be traceable once again to the compresence of competing opposites, which ensures that all judgements about the sensible world depend on our choosing to privilege some aspects over others, leaving a change of perspective an ineliminable possibility, even when it comes to understanding the Creator's handiwork. We can therefore aspire to no more than 'likelihood', as in any case befits the study of a world which is a mere 'likeness' of eternal Being (29b–d).

At all events, the clues which accompany the etymology of Hestia should leave us in no doubt that what she symbolises is the kind of 'being' that physics typically associates with the cosmos. Her very name, by its variation across the Greek dialects, reflects an unavoidable conflation of such 'being' with Heraclitean fluidity and instability. In manifesting this understanding of the cosmos, the early namegivers were, once more, proving their

[7] *Phd.* 74b–c, 78d–e, *Smp.* 211a, *Rep.* 479a–d.

possession of authentic insights. What the etymology shows they *lacked* is a clear distinction between being and becoming – their terminology did not adequately separate the two – and Plato's readers are meant to be well aware that that distinction was one held on reserve. It was the destiny of Plato himself to elucidate and vindicate it.

3 FLUX ETYMOLOGIES

In Chapter 4 we saw a range of Platonic themes that runs through the divine and cosmological etymologies. The one theme left over was that of cosmic flux. Having started, as we were instructed to do, with Hestia, we can now briefly chart the other occurrences of the flux theme in this part of the dialogue.

The gods (*theoi*) themselves, recall, are etymologised as 'runners'(397c–d), with special reference to the perpetual motion in the cosmos of sun, moon, earth (!),[8] stars, and indeed the whole heaven. Here, right at the outset, we have a gentle hint that the perpetual change to which these name-makers were drawing attention was not chaotic but, on the contrary, ordered. That theme will recur at the end of the section. But in between lie a series of etymologies which emphasise change itself much more than regularity. The progenitors of the gods are picked out as Rhea and Cronos (401e–402d). It is hardly an accident, Socrates observes, that both of these names mean 'stream', and that their own primeval ancestors, Oceanos and Tethys, are also streams.

The first three of these four names are not explicitly etymologised. 'Oceanos' suggests something about 'speedy', *ōkus*; 'Rhea' can only be from *rhein*, 'to flow', and hence signify 'flow' or 'flux'; and Cronos presumably alludes to *krounos*, a spring. The failure to supply explicit etymologies may to some extent reflect Plato's preference at this point for not complicating things by spelling out an etymology of Cronos which would blatantly differ from the 'pure intellect' reading offered earlier (although, as I have said before, two competing etymologies, even if they may sometimes be offered as alternatives, can in principle *both* be true).[9] But the main reason for the

[8] See Ch. 1 §4 above (pp. 15–16).

[9] Cf. 401e–402a: 'After Hestia it's right to consider Rhea and Cronos, although the name of Cronos, at least, is one we've already dealt with. But I may be talking nonsense.' 'Why, Socrates?' 'My friend, a swarm of wisdom has come into my mind.' 'What's it like?' 'It sounds thoroughly silly to say it out loud, but I do think it has a certain persuasiveness.' 'Namely?' And Socrates continues as quoted below (402a4–b4). Here 'I may be talking nonsense' could be read as a tentative retraction of the earlier Cronos decoding, and Socrates' hesitation about how convincing the new set of etymologies will be leaves that retraction itself in doubt, although what he predicts will sound 'silly' must be more explicitly the first etymology he will actually spell out, the unusually fanciful decoding of Tethys.

omission is surely that both Socrates and Hermogenes find the meanings of these names obvious.

The association of flux with rivers is brought out at 402a4–b4, Plato's fullest attribution of the flux thesis to Heraclitus, explicitly linked by Socrates to the river saying which was to play such a significant part in Cratylus' own philosophical development (p. 19 above):

SOCR. I think I can see that Heraclitus was speaking some ancient wisdom – specifically, the reign of Cronos and Rhea, of which Homer spoke as well.
HERM. What do you mean?
SOCR. Heraclitus says, I think,[10] that 'all things are on the move and nothing remains', and in comparing the things there are to the flow of a river he says 'You could not step in the same river twice.'
HERM. True.
SOCR. Well do you think that whoever assigned the names Rhea and Cronos to the ancestors of the other gods was thinking anything different in kind from Heraclitus? Do you think it was just accident that he assigned them both the names of streams?

The likely historical reality, to judge from Aristotle's testimony, is that Plato had learnt the interpretation of Heraclitus' philosophy as radically fluxist from his first philosophical mentor Cratylus, and the same may well apply to the divine etymologies cited here in its support. Cratylus was after all not only a proponent of Heraclitean flux but also a believer in the deep significance of names.[11] The historical fiction in the dialogue, however, is more or less the other way round: the passive Cratylus, who up to this point has spoken just three words (in the opening exchange of the dialogue), is hearing about Heraclitus' river saying and its interpretation from Socrates, and by the end of the dialogue will himself be on his way to joining the Heraclitean party. (I have worded all this so as to leave open the historical question, hotly disputed among scholars, just what it was that Heraclitus really said about rivers, and whether he meant by it any kind of doctrine of flux.)[12]

[10] που is most commonly translated 'somewhere', but this seems an odd way to cite someone known to have written only one book.

[11] See Chapter 1 §6.

[12] It is not feasible in the present context to enter the long-running debate as to whether the version of the river fragment quoted here is authentically Heraclitean, but given Cratylus' *criticism* of Heraclitus for saying it (Ch. 1 §5 above, p. 19) the onus of proof is clearly on anyone who denies its authenticity. Acceptance of it would not entail the inauthenticity of the other attested versions. In fact, my own view is that from Plutarch's paraphrase at *Q. nat.* 912A, ποταμοῖς γὰρ δὶς τοῖς αὐτοῖς οὐκ ἂν ἐμβαίης, ὥς φησιν Ἡράκλειτος· ἕτερα γὰρ ἐπιρρεῖ ὕδατα, we can plausibly infer the original version to have consisted of δὶς ἐς τὸν αὐτὸν ποταμὸν οὐκ ἂν ἐμβαίης (*Crat.* 402a) followed immediately (with or without a connective) by ποταμοῖσι τοῖσιν αὐτοῖσιν ἐμβαίνουσιν ἕτερα καὶ ἕτερα ὕδατα ἐπιρρεῖ (B12 DK, from Eusebius, *PE* XV 20.2–3).

The one name in the present group that is explicitly etymologised is Tethys, and from this we should infer that Socrates' decoding of it was, unlike the other three, *not* already familiar. *Tēthys*, he proposes, conceals a contraction of two participles, *diattōmenon* and *ēthoumenon*, 'sieved and filtered', which sounds like a description of spring water. Hermogenes is impressed by the sophistication (*kompson*, 402d3) of this proposal, and that is probably the kindest thing he could find to say, especially as from the first component word, *diattōmenon*, just one letter, T, is supposed to survive into the resultant name. Nevertheless, in context the derivation makes sense. Coming as it does hot on the heels of relatively obvious decodings of the other three divine names in the group as designating streams, the more subtle assimilation of the fourth to the pattern they set seems justifiable.[13]

I shall be quicker with the remaining flux etymologies from this section, since it is their cumulative effect that matters most for present purposes. Three competing etymologies are offered for Poseidon (402e–403a), of which the first identifies him with the sea, and the third with earthquakes, both thus picking out well-established features of this god connected with fluidity and motion. Hera (404c), we are told, may have been named after air, *aēr*, which will itself (410b) in turn prove to be named either after its fluidity (it 'always flows', *aei rhei*) or after its power as wind ('gale-flowing', *aētorrhoun*). Persephone is also known as Pherrephatta, interpreted as *Pherepapha*, one who 'touches what moves' (404c5–d8). This allegedly commemorates her wisdom, which in a world dominated by flux would indeed be the ability to keep up with things as they change. Once again, traditional religious associations lend important confirmation to the proposal, because, as Socrates points out, wisdom is likely to be the attribute of the goddess who keeps company with Hades – the latter already having been decoded as 'one who knows all fine things' (404b).[14]

That ends the series of divine names which draw attention to flux. But change and motion are also the keynote of all the remaining etymologies in this cosmological section, among which the sun and moon are honoured with singularly elaborate treatments. The sun (*hēlios*), picked out as the primary cause of cosmic change in the *Republic*,[15] is here dignified with a triple etymology (409a). It is that which, by its rising, 'assembles' (*halizein*) people, which 'always rolls' (*aei eilein iōn*) around the earth, and which by its motion 'variegates' (*aiollein*) the things that grow from the earth.

[13] For the methodological point that even a far-fetched etymology may acquire credibility when taken jointly with kindred ones, see p. 39 n. 26 above. For the association of Tethys with flux, see also *Tht.* 152e, quoted p. 110 below; it is hardly surprising, considering that she is sister, wife and mother of streams.

[14] See p. 95 above. [15] *Rep.* VI 509b2–4.

The moon too is given special treatment. At 409a–c 'moon', *selēne*, preferably in its Doric form *selanaia*, is said to be named in recognition of the fact that it gets its light from the sun. More accurately, at least according to Socrates, the moon both gets new (*neon*) light from the sun and retains its old (*henon*) light, as was thought to be proved by the glow round it during a total eclipse. Hence *selēnaia* expands as *sela-hen-neo-aei-a* – 'light which is old and new always'. Socrates presents this as evidence that the ancients had anticipated those philosophers like Anaxagoras who claimed credit for the discovery.[16] Here we have a clear claim of an etymology revealing the name-maker to have possessed serious cosmological insights at an unexpectedly early date. But in addition, yet again, the constant renewal of the moon's light serves to keep the flux thesis in view.

Flux continues to dominate the remaining cosmic etymologies. After 'moon', it is natural that Socrates and Hermogenes add 'month', *meis*, which is so named because of 'decreasing', *meiousthai*, with evident reference to the moon's waning (409c). The stars, *astra*, are so called after lightning, *astrapē*, presumably because of their twinkling and/or their motion. (*Astrapē* is itself incidentally diagnosed as condensing *anastrephein-ōpa*, 'turning the face upwards', with reference to the effect that lightning has upon onlookers. Whether or not this is itself viewed as a flux etymology does not matter, because it is a digressive one, providing no more than the indirect ancestry of the currently relevant term, *astra*.)

In the list of elements which now ensues, Socrates opts to skip *pyr*, 'fire', and *hydōr*, 'water', suggesting that they are foreign imports and therefore not amenable to Greek analysis (409c–410a). One may suspect the authorial motive for this device to be that no flux etymology is forthcoming and that it would break the chain if a non-flux etymology were to be substituted. The omission hardly matters, because of all cosmic entities water and fire are the two most manifestly fluid and unstable, and the name-makers would not earn much credit for having noticed this fact.

Next (410b) air, as I have already mentioned, is that which 'always flows' or 'gale-flowing'; while aether, *aithēr*, is that which 'always runs', *aei thei*. We have met both of these derivations before, but their juxtaposition reveals an added degree of subtlety. Air merely 'flows', an essentially unstructured or chaotic form of motion, while aether 'runs', namely, we are told, round the outer perimeter of the air. The comparison to a runner on a fixed track

16 See Panchenko 2002. That the moon's light is derived from the sun was already known to Parmenides (B14–15). However, what is here being attributed to Anaxagoras is not just that information, but the additional explanation of the glow during eclipses, as requiring the retention of 'old' light as well as the arrival of 'new'; and this may genuinely have been considered his innovation.

thus emphasises – as we can now see it already did in the earlier decoding of the gods, *theoi*, as 'runners' (397c–d) – that these divine movers have a fixed and endlessly repeatable circuit, one which cannot be matched by the motions of the lower elements.

Finally in the list of elements (410b–c), earth, *gē*, is said to be better examined in its longer form *gaia*, The *ga-* root which this form reveals is the same as the archaic *-ga-* component in the Homeric forms of *gignesthai*, 'become' or 'be born'. Thus earth is the great 'bringer to birth'. This is a timely reminder that 'becoming', *gignesthai*, is the Platonic term *par excellence* for the flux of the sensible world, and that the cycle of birth and death is a potent symbol of that flux. We have by now seen the entire manifold nature of cosmic flux captured in the etymologies. It includes disordered motion, the ordered life cycle, and the eternal regularity of celestial motion, but all of this falls under the catch-all term 'becoming'.

The concluding flourish in this cosmological section is a pair of etymologies that emphasises the ultimate importance of order and measure in cosmic change. The names in question are *hōrai*, 'seasons', and *eniautos* or *etos*, 'year' (409c5–e1). *Hōrai* is derived from *horizein*, 'to bound' (with the help, once again, of the failure in old Attic script to distinguish the short from the long O).[17] *Eniautos* and its doublet *etos* are taken as a linked pair, with explicit comparison to the earlier diagnosis of Zeus by combining his two variant forms *Zēn* and *Dia* into a single complex description (396a–b). Following this model, the year is *to en heautōi etazon*, that which 'keeps a check within itself', a description which commemorates the year's overall containment and control of life cycles.

This closure of the cosmological etymologies thus serves to make a point. The world *is* fluid, and the ancient name-makers recognised it as such. But along with that recognition came the insight that the fluidity is, in the last analysis, an ordered one, in which limits and cyclical order play a key role. The choice of 'season' and 'year' serves to underline how the cycle of time, that 'moving image of eternity', brings the sensible world as near to the changeless order of the Forms as a divine creator could make it.[18] In short, the full picture of the cosmological etymologies is confirmed as

[17] Cf. p. 93 above, on 'heroes'.

[18] Note that two etymologies of time words – 'month' and 'day' – are shifted elsewhere, presumably because they do not fit this theme of limit which provides the climax of the cosmological etymologies. 'Month' (409c) is tagged onto 'moon' (here I owe to Ronald Polansky the helpful suggestion that Socrates' decoding of 'moon' echoes ἕνη καὶ νέα, the Athenian name for the last day of the month). Later 'day' (ἡμέρα) will be etymologised at 418c–d as expressing the 'desire' (ἵμερος) felt for daylight during the night (contrast the etymology of it at *Ti.* 45b4–6, very similar to the one rejected at *Crat.* 418d3–5); but this is included purely by way of making a general point about sound shifts.

a thoroughly Platonic one, and the ancient name-makers emerge with an extraordinary amount of credit.

4 DIZZINESS OVER VALUES

That credit is not directly acknowledged by Socrates, but indirectly, by the use of a strategic contrast, he now proceeds to draw our attention to it. For what happens next represents a dramatic change of tone – indeed, the real turning point of the dialogue. Hermogenes at 411a switches the topic to ethics – 'the names concerning virtue, such as "wisdom", "understanding" and "justice", and all the ones like those'. And Socrates' reply is as follows (411b3–c6):

> And yet, by the dog, I don't think I was wrong in divining the thought that occurred to me just now: that the really ancient people who assigned names were just like the majority of the wise nowadays, who in constantly turning round to investigate how things are, get dizzy, and then think that it is the things which are turning round and moving in every way. Instead of blaming their own internal feeling for causing their belief, they blame the things themselves for being that way in their own nature, holding that none of them is fixed or stable, but that they flow and move and are always filled with every kind of motion and becoming. I say this as a result of thinking about all the names we are now[19] considering.

Socrates has spent just a moment thinking over the ethical etymologies that lie ahead and has already, in keeping with his 'inspired' state, foreseen a pattern. Implausible though his lightning rapidity of forethought may be, there is an authorial purpose in making the remark occur right here, at the watershed between the cosmic and the ethical etymologies, and not just with hindsight at the end of the whole etymological discussion. It alerts readers to the complete change of register which now takes place, maximising the contrast between the two sections.[20]

Like the cosmological etymologies that preceded, the ethical ones too will advert constantly to the theme of instability. But unlike the cosmological cases, Socrates makes clear, the motif will this time be a misguided one. The

[19] 411c5–6, τὰ νυνδὴ ὀνόματα; or 'the names you just mentioned' (Reeve 1998). It could alternatively be translated 'the names we were considering just now', but that even then it refers only to the list of value terms introduced at 411a1–b1, and not also to the preceding etymologies, is fully confirmed by 411c8–d4.

[20] Symptoms of this contrast – possibly unintentional – can be found in comparisons with etymologies offered elsewhere in the corpus. Cosmological terms are etymologised if anything *more* Platonically in Part II of *Crat.* than elsewhere (cf., on Hades, p. 95 above), while ethical terms are etymologised *less* Platonically (cf. n. 34, p. 115 below, and p. 64 above on the absence of *eudaimonia* from the *Cratylus* etymologies).

diagnosis of the error is that those who coined the vocabulary of value were in reality themselves intellectually dizzy, but projected that dizziness onto the items they were naming. Clearly this error had no counterpart in the cosmological section, since the fluidity of the sensible world is a brute fact, not, as Parmenides alone among previous philosophers had held, a human imposition on what is in reality a stable being. In the *Phaedo* (79c) the soul is said to be made 'dizzy' by its use of the senses, because these force it to focus on things which constantly shift and alter. Thus the sensible world in Plato's view really is unstable, and is itself the cause of dizziness in those souls which focus too closely on it. In the case of ethical instability, the direction of causation is reversed: it is the already dizzy soul that projects instability onto the objects, which are themselves in reality stable.

5 FLUX AND RELATIVITY

Before we launch into the details of these new ethical etymologies, we need to clarify what is at issue for Plato. And that in turn requires us to look at the link, in Plato's thought, between flux and relativity.

First take the thesis properly known as relativism, frequently associated with the name of Protagoras in particular. Relativism is a thesis founded on things' relativity to the judging subject: the truth always depends on a relation between a given perceiving subject and some object. In this sense, one might say, most of us are relativists about, for example, what is pleasant. To call something pleasant is not normally to attribute the quality of pleasantness to the thing in itself, but to indicate something about the individual speaker's sensory or emotive relationship to it. Relativism is a thesis which insidiously extends this kind of relativity to other properties. Hot and cold, for example, submit easily to the same treatment as pleasant, and it becomes fairly easy similarly to relativise *all* perceptible properties, and ultimately all values too.

Plato's *Theaetetus* explores and rejects this kind of relativism. But it is vital to notice that in that dialogue Socrates advertises the attractions of relativism, before attacking it, by pointing out the pervasiveness of relativity construed in a broader sense than that of relativity to the judging subject. When something undergoes no internal change, yet passes from being large to being small simply because first a smaller then a larger thing has been juxtaposed with it, the way to make sense of this is to recognise that 'large' and 'small' are purely relative terms, not corresponding to any intrinsic properties. This relativity can be generalised, it is suggested, to all pairs of opposite properties: not only will whatever you call large also turn out to be

small, but the heavy will turn out to be light, and so on.[21] These are primarily relativities between external objects, not between subject and object, and the latter kind of relativity, which underlies Protagorean relativism, is presented as just one special application of the broader metaphysical pattern.

This broad kind of relativity is presented in the *Theaetetus* as a doctrine of universal flux (152d–e):

> [N]othing is one thing, or something, or of some kind. But from motion, change and mixture with each other come all the things which we say 'are' – an incorrect way to speak of them, since they never *are* anything but constantly become. And let this be a point of agreement among the entire succession of the wise other than Parmenides – Protagoras, Heraclitus and Empedocles; and among the poets the leaders in both genres of poetry – in comedy Epicharmus, in tragedy Homer, who in saying 'Ocean the birth of the gods, and their mother Tethys' has called all things the offspring of flux and motion.

This passage has so much in common with what we have already met in the *Cratylus* that the two texts can legitimately be used to illuminate each other. What has long been debated about the *Theaetetus* account of flux is whether Plato himself takes it to be *true* so far as concerns the sensible world. I myself believe that he does, but since many disagree it is important to point out that less problematic texts confirm that he adopted *some* such Heraclitean view of the sensible world.

We saw in Chapter 1 §5 how Aristotle (*Met.* A 6, 987a32–b7) presents Plato not only as a Heraclitean about the sensible world, but as having learnt his Heracliteanism from none other than Cratylus. To borrow a distinction formulated by Terence Irwin,[22] the key to appreciating Plato's Heracliteanism is to see that flux is largely aspectual: things in the sensible world are *aspectually* unstable, or, in Irwin's terminology, subject to 'a-change'. They are not necessarily subject to constant self-change (Irwin's 's-change'), which would involve changes in their intrinsic properties. Thus physical objects need not be subject to constant changes of colour, dimension and shape; but they *are* still inherently unstable, to the extent that they can at any time differ in the properties attributable to them, depending on aspect. What is beautiful in one aspect will be ugly in another – for different observers, and for the same observer from different perspectives, at different times, and in different respects, contexts or relations. Importantly, variations in a property from one *time* to another, although they certainly include s-changes, are not treated as a significantly distinct class from the

[21] Esp. *Tht.* 152d, 154b–155d.
[22] Irwin 1977. For a useful survey of the evidence on Plato's Heracliteanism, see Pradeau 2002: 26–30.

other kinds of variation. And this entire range of variation between opposite properties is, more than once, explicitly portrayed by Plato's Socrates as a kind of 'becoming' or flux (e.g. *Phd.* 78d–e, *Rep.* 508d, 521d). This broad notion of change is, as Irwin points out, one which could even be plausibly presented as Heraclitean in spirit. For whether or not, as the *Cratylus* claims he did (402a8–10), Heraclitus ever compared the whole world to a river, it is certain that he repeatedly emphasised the coincidence of opposite properties in the same things.

When Plato wants to illustrate this broad kind of flux, he typically opts for value terms, most frequently 'beautiful' (*Smp.* 211a, *Phd.* 78d–e, *Rep.* v 479a–d). The 'many beautifuls' – that is, sensible particulars or types[23] considered as beautiful – are bound also to turn out ugly, by contrast with the Beautiful itself, the Form, which, in whatever aspect you try to consider it, is simply beautiful. This is the reason why non-philosophers, who have not achieved access to the difficult value Forms – those of Beautiful, Just, Good, etc. – and are acquainted with the corresponding values only through their manifestations in the sensible world, are condemned to perceiving these values as unstable. A thoroughly typical case of such instability lies in the values' relativity to the judging subject – the beauty of a thing depending on the observer's viewpoint or taste, for example – but other kinds of relation will play their part as well, for example the fact that a given object is beautiful relative to one comparand but ugly relative to another.

The price that a value system is likely to pay for this dependence on context and subjectivity is a total blindness to the existence and nature of absolute, stable values.[24] In Plato's eyes, no one before Socrates had been able to see beyond these relativities. Protagoras (with Heraclitus as his ally) may be paraded as the chief culprit, but, as the *Theaetetus* roll-call of the wise has made clear, virtually everyone before Socrates, to the extent that their wholesale commitment to flux included values in its scope, was complicit in the guilt.

According to this picture, when it comes to the understanding of value Plato claims a radical discontinuity between Presocratic and Socratic thought; or, to put it another way, the true dialectical study of values in their own right is the virgin territory which his and Socrates' predecessors have left for them to chart. The damaging role played by flux in the ethical etymologies elucidates and supports this judgement: the very vocabulary

[23] In the view of Irwin (1977), the kind of change in question here belongs to types only and not to tokens. I prefer not to impose the limitation – cf. White 1978.

[24] Both 'absolute' and 'stable' are combined in Plato's term βέβαιον, which he opposes both to relativity (386a4, e1) and to flux (411c3); cf. Barney 2001: 158.

for value that they have inherited from their forebears, it turns out, has the same mistake written all over it.

That Socrates' predecessors should be lumped together as moral relativists does not require any of them to have had a formal doctrine on the matter.[25] It is probably enough, in Plato's eyes, that none of them sought a stable basis for value, and that what little they said about it tended to relativism. Two illustrations of this latter point may suffice. First, Heraclitus, in emphasising the coincidence of opposites, includes values along with other concept ranges, for example citing the very different meaning of sewage to the lives of pigs and humans, and of sea-water to those of humans and fish.[26] Second, Socrates' own Anaxagorean teacher Archelaus – probably the first physicist to take his cosmogony down late enough to include the early history of civilisation – concluded that justice is a matter of local convention alone.[27] What the value etymologies profess to expose is how similar assumptions are endemic in the culture that produced these thinkers. Indeed, when Plato's Athenian Stranger in *Laws* x speaks of those who say that a whole range of religious and moral beliefs depend on nothing more than local custom,[28] he may well be speaking less of individual philosophers to whom we might hope to put a name than of fashionable intellectual attitudes. In our own culture too, value-relativism is far more widely asserted or assumed by non-philosophers than by philosophers.

That in the ensuing value etymologies Socrates should so continuously and relentlessly uncover the theme of flux, as if that was all his early predecessors ever thought about, may have a strong air of implausibility, and these etymologies have almost invariably in modern times been taken as non-serious. It is therefore vital to bear in mind that this way of characterising the thought of his predecessors was deeply ingrained in Plato's own outlook. Not only in the *Theaetetus*, but also in the *Sophist* (especially 249c–d), he presents the two main strands of thought bequeathed by the preceding tradition as the Parmenidean extreme of seeing everything as static and the more widespread opposed tendency to see everything as changing. And in various ways, both in the *Sophist* and elsewhere, Plato's own ontology emerges as a judicious synthesis of these two traditions. There is therefore no good reason to think Socrates other than entirely serious when he decodes every value term as implying something that bears on the theme of flux.

[25] Apart from Protagoras, for example, it is hard to pin relativism on any of the Sophists; see Bett 1989.
[26] Heraclitus B13, 61 DK, and cf. B9. [27] DL II 16. [28] *Laws* x 889e–890a.

6 THE ETHICAL AGENDA

The seriousness of his approach is once again (as with the cosmological etymologies) confirmed by the systematically ordered sequence of terms considered:[29]

Primarily intellectual virtues

411a–412b: intelligence (*phronēsis*), judgement (*gnōmē*), thought (*noēsis*), soundness of mind (*sōphrosynē*), knowledge (*epistēmē*), understanding (*synesis*), wisdom (*sophia*)

Moral virtues

412c–414b: good (*agathon*), justice (*dikaiosynē*), courage (*andreia*) {male (*arren*), man (*anēr*), woman (*gynē*), female (*thēly*), nipple (*thēlē*), flourish (*thallein*)}

Technical virtues

414b–415a: expertise (*technē*), contrivance (*mēchanē*)

Generic terms of evaluation

415a–419b: vice (*kakia*), {cowardice (*deilia*)},[30] virtue (*aretē*), bad (*kakon*), ugly (*aischron*), beautiful (*kalon*), advantageous (*sympheron*), profitable (*kerdaleon*), helpful (*lysiteloun*), useful (*ōphelimon*), [disadvantageous (*asymphoron*), useless (*anōpheles*), unhelpful (*alysiteles*)], harmful (*blaberon*), hurtful (*zēmiōdes*), {day (*hēmera*), yoke (*zygon*)}, duty (*deon*)

Emotive states

419b–420b: pleasure (*hēdonē*), pain (*lypē*), sorrow (*ania*), distress (*algēdōn*), grief (*odynē*), trouble (*achthēdōn*), joy (*chara*), delight (*terpsis*), delightful (*terpnon*), good cheer (*euphrosynē*), appetite (*epithymia*), spirit (*thymos*), desire (*himeros*), longing (*pothos*), love (*erōs*)

Judgement

420b–d: opinion (*doxa*), thinking (*oiēsis*), deliberation (*boulē*), non-deliberation (*aboulia*)

Will

420d–e: necessity (*anankē*), voluntary (*hekousion*)

[29] Cf. Ch. 4 §6, where my use of bracketing in the list is also explained (p. 89).

[30] *Deilia* is not digressive in the normal way, but is explicitly recognised by Socrates as having been displaced from its natural position, after *andreia*, in the section on moral virtues.

Truth

421a–c: name (*onoma*), truth (*alētheia*), falsehood (*pseudos*), what-is (*on*), [being (*ousia*)], what-is-not (*ouk on*)

It would be a trial of patience – both the reader's and the author's – to go through all of these etymologies one by one. Rather than attempt to do so, I prefer to pick out some salient themes. Most important is the question *how* flux is brought into the equation. There are three main ways.

7 CHANGE AS A FORCE FOR THE GOOD

First, a prominent etymological theme in this section is the belief that motion and change are forces for the good, rest a force for the bad. This is a key theme in the sketch of flux advanced in the *Theaetetus* (153a–d): motion and friction generate heat, which in turn generates life; exercise is good for bodies, idleness bad for them, and something analogous applies to minds too. Similarly here in the *Cratylus*, the 'harmful', *blaberon*, is that which 'wants to touch [and thus hinder] the flow', *boul-hapte-roun* (417d–418a). But more nuanced examples include *agathon*, 'good', which is diagnosed as picking out, not everything that is swift (*thoon*), but the part of it which is worthy of admiration (*agaston*), so that the word *agathon* is a contraction of *agasto-thoon*, 'the admirable in what is swift';[31] another such is *andreia*, 'courage', which is said to be a contraction meaning 'counter-flow', but not, Socrates hastens to add, a counter-flow to just any current, but specifically to unjust currents (413e–414a). Thus although there is some tendency to associate value directly with change in general, the more developed diagnosis to which this leads Socrates is that positive values correspond to *appropriate kinds* of change. This may be his way of indicating that the name-makers did not straightforwardly identify positive value with flux, but rather that they assumed constant change to be the basis of positive values, in addition to the other things (e.g. cosmic entities) that it might also underlie. That would help explain why only some parts or aspects of change are identified with evaluative terms.

There is one particular etymology in this class to which our attention is very deliberately drawn. The other value etymologies are extremely numerous, and rattled off by Socrates at breakneck speed, as he enters the final strait of the chariot race to which he frequently likens his enterprise.[32]

[31] Approximately this etymology seems implicit at *Gorg.* 526a, where the good (ἀγαθοί) deserve to be admired (ἄγασθαι) for what they *become*.

[32] On the race metaphor, see Ch. 7 §5 below (pp. 156–7).

But strategically placed in the middle of them all is a long and elaborate discussion of that key ethical term 'justice' – *dikaiosynē* and, more specifically, its adjectival counterpart *dikaion* (412c–413d), and here at least we must pause for a longer look.[33] *Dikaiosynē* is analysed as *dikaiou synesis*, 'undertanding of what is just'. *Synesis* has already been explained (I shall come to its etymology shortly), so here the attention quickly turns to the other underlying term, *dikaion* itself.[34]

Socrates' interest, in what follows, is in justice conceived less as a personal than as a cosmic force. Those who believe in an entirely flux-ridden universe, Socrates remarks, largely agree that justice is some force – the most rarefied and swift of all things – which pervades the universe. It is this status which is commemorated by the word *dikaion*, originally *dia-ion*, 'running through' or 'pervasive'. It seems clear that he is trying to capture a notion of justice which – in keeping with the interests of the early name-makers – embodies the concerns and priorities of cosmological physics, especially its focus on change rather than stability. As usual, Socrates is treating the name-makers as belonging broadly to the same school of thought as most Presocratic philosophy. And he is starting from what seems to me an accurate characterisation of Presocratic philosophy before Archelaus and Democritus: in so far as it was interested in justice at all, this was (with the exception, as always, of Parmenides) viewed much more as a cosmic than as a personal force. Our very first surviving verbatim fragment of philosophy, from the pen of Anaximander,[35] presents cosmic change on the model of transgression and retribution, in which the transgressing forces come in time to 'pay the penalty for their injustice'. The sometimes personified Dike (Justice) is equated by Heraclitus with his universal organisational principle 'strife' (B80); and it is her handmaidens, the Erinyes, who are said to ensure that 'the sun will not overstep his measures' (B94).[36]

[33] I have benefited from being able to read Adomenas (2001: 68–77) on this key passage.

[34] At *Smp.* 209a5–8 there may be an implicit derivation of δικαιοσύνη from διακόσμησις ('ordering'), which Helma Dik has kindly pointed out to me. This is thoroughly Platonic, combining as it does the *Gorgias* account of virtue as psychic order with the even more Socratic thesis, made explicit in the same sentence, that justice is a part or aspect of wisdom. I am not sure whether the contrast between the two passages (one can hardly call it a contradiction, since the *Smp.* etymology is no more than implicit) is intended, but it is at all events symptomatic of Plato's project in the *Cratylus* of finding as much flux as possible in the Greek vocabulary for values.

[35] Anaximander B1 DK. Wildberg (1993) has worryingly discovered that in the Simplicius MSS this fragment is not marked with the usual device for signalling verbatim quotation. Nevertheless, Simplicius' own accompanying words guarantee that at least some of its vocabulary is verbatim.

[36] The Derveni papyrus, col. IV, now shows that the 'measures' in question correspond to the sun's being one foot across (B3): see Laks and Most 1997: 11 (translation by the editors) and 94 (text by K. Tsantsanoglou).

Socrates concedes (412e–413a) – and I see no reason to disbelieve him, despite the lack of independent evidence – that the etymology of *dikaion* as the 'pervasive' (*dia-ion*) is already widely known and endorsed. What he goes on to offer (413a–d), however, is a further set of refinements on the theme, which he says he has learnt from these same flux theorists only by pestering them until they divulged their 'secret' teachings. There is, once again, an unmistakable parallelism to the *Theaetetus*, where Socrates presents the Heraclitean component which he incorporates into Protagoras' doctrine as a 'secret' one. I agree with those interpreters of the *Theaetetus* who take this device to be Plato's signal that the Heraclitean underpinning represents a departure from actual philosophical history. Here too in the *Cratylus*, we should take what follows to interpret certain unnamed predecessors as identifying cosmic justice with this or that entity, not as an explicit thesis that any of them had propounded, but as a speculative or even creative way of reading their thought.

The first 'secret' that these Presocratics divulged to Socrates was that justice is to be identified with 'cause', the link invoked being that Zeus, that supreme dispenser of justice,[37] is himself etymologically associated with causation. The specific etymology is one whereby the accusative form of Zeus's name, *Dia*, is connected with the preposition *dia*, which, in addition to its sense 'through' (as in *dia-ion*) when followed by a genitive, can also, if followed by an accusative, mean 'because of'. This is an etymology of Zeus that Socrates has already himself proposed back at 396a–b, a fact which might further encourage the impression that the present passage is a historical fiction on his part. However, the main burden of the fiction is what follows, namely the further identification of justice with four competing items: (a) the sun, (b) fire, (c) heat, and (d) intelligence (*nous*): the flux theorists disagree among themselves as to which of the four is justice.

The claims of the sun are put to Socrates by their unnamed advocate as follows (413b3–5): 'One of them says that what the just (*dikaion*) is is the sun, because the sun is the only thing that governs things by "running through" (*dia-ionta*) and "burning" (*kaonta*).' This proposal has three merits. First, the earlier association of *dikaion* with *dia-ion* had been obliged to explain the intrusive K as added simply to facilitate diction (412e), whereas this new refinement is able to include a reference to 'burning' – *kaon* or *kaion*[38] – thus

[37] E.g. Homer, *Il.* XVI 385–8, Aesch. *PV* 186–7; discussion and defence of this characterisation in Lloyd-Jones 1971.

[38] I can see no good reason here for Plato to write κάειν, as in the codices, and not καίειν, closer to the middle syllable of δίκαιον, and the form standardly used in Attic inscriptions (Dalimier 1998: 252). Its assimilation, in the course of transmission, to what is the regular orthography of the Platonic codices would be anything but surprising.

giving the middle syllable an integral role. Second, the sun is, in a fairly obvious sense, something which does constantly 'run through' and which, as cause, governs all natural change. This causal function of the sun was made famous by Plato in the *Republic*'s analogy between the sun's causal governance of all becoming in the sensible world and the causal role of the Good in the intelligible world.[39] But it also plays a key part in the defence of universal flux attributed to the wise in the *Theaetetus*, where Socrates suggests that Homer's Golden Chain, that favourite subject of allegory, is in reality the sun (153c–d): 'It shows', he says there, 'that so long as the rotation and the sun are in motion, everything among gods and humans has its being and is preserved, but if it were to stand still as if bound down all things would be destroyed, and, as the saying goes, everything would be turned upside down.'

I know no evidence that this identification of justice with the sun had any actual Presocratic author – certainly not Heraclitus, who portrays the sun as itself subject to the constraints of justice.[40] But the second proposal, which now trumps this first one, *can* plausibly be associated with Heraclitus. When Socrates expresses his approval of the 'sun' proposal, he is laughed at by the next Presocratic in the queue, who, Socrates tell us, 'asks whether I think there is no justice among mankind when the sun sets' (413b7–c1), echoing Heraclitus' question 'How could one escape the notice of that which never sets?'[41] This critic, when pressed, proposes that justice is to be identified, not literally with the sun, but with 'fire as such'.[42] Clearly this second thinker retains the advantages of the double etymology (*dia-ion* plus *kaion*), without the conceptual crudity of a literal reference to the sun. And this time it seems plausible that the anonymous speaker is a representative of Heraclitus' philosophy, in which fire is widely recognised as playing this governing role – most famously in the saying 'Thunderbolt steers all' (B64).

Socrates remarks darkly that 'This is not easy to know' (413c2), perhaps referring to the lack of empirical support for any view which gives fire itself a governing role throughout nature. It is well recognised, however, that in ancient thought one manifestation of fire is as heat, including the vital warmth that animates living beings. That is no doubt what lies behind the next stage, in which Socrates goes on to report a third anonymous expert. This third Presocratic abstracts still further: justice is not 'fire as such', he says, but 'heat as such'. Since he has now abandoned the link with fire, understood as the familiar caustic variety, this speaker may be suspected of

[39] *Rep.* 508a–509d. [40] Heraclitus B94.
[41] B16. Its link to our *Crat.* passage is well explored by Kahn 1979: 274–5.
[42] 413c2, αὐτὸ τὸ πῦρ: not, in context, a Platonic Form locution, but a way of abstracting from sun to fire.

having lost the useful etymological link to *kaiein*, 'burn'. If he has not, it will no doubt be because in his view fire, which does burn, is still present in the word *dikaion*, but is invoked to *symbolise* the real cosmic power, which he calls 'heat as such'.

It would be worth investigating, on some other occasion, whether in this heat doctrine we might not have an allusion to Socrates' own teacher Archelaus – a follower of Anaxagoras but distinguished from his own master by, among other things, the doctrine that heat, not intelligence, is the cause of all change in the cosmos.[43] Socrates' coy references to what he has had divulged to him 'in secret' might fit nicely with a reference to his own (presumably paid) Athenian teacher. Even here, however, the further connection of heat to justice is less likely to be due to Archelaus, who, as I noted earlier (p. 112), is reported to have written on justice but to have considered it a matter of pure convention, not nature.

At all events, what we have witnessed in the succession sun–fire–heat is a progressive deliteralisation which Plato may rightly judge to be, however historical or unhistorical in detail, thoroughly characteristic of Presocratic cosmological explanations.

The final Presocratic in the queue is the most recognisable of the four, because he explicitly identifies himself as a follower of Anaxagoras. We have already, in Chapter 4, seen how hospitably Socrates treats Anaxagoras and his followers on cosmological matters. The picture is fully confirmed here. The crowning proposal to emerge from the Presocratic accounts of justice fits that pattern. Socrates' earlier introduction of the entire cosmological interpretation of justice had already included a strong hint at Anaxagoras' doctrine of intelligence, *nous*, as supreme cosmic cause, explaining the etymology of *dikaion* as *dia-ion* ('running through') by saying that justice has to be the 'swiftest and most rarefied' of things (412d). There 'most rarefied', *leptotaton*, will have been easily recognised by readers as one of the attributes which Anaxagoras claimed for *nous* (B12 DK). Now, when Socrates turns explicitly to his Anaxagorean source, he builds on this early allusion: *nous*, according to this Anaxagorean, achieves its causal supremacy in the cosmos by pervading all things while remaining 'unmixed' with them, a celebrated thesis of Anaxagoras (B12 DK).[44] However, the further

[43] 60A12, A14 DK. A1 (DL II 16) and A8 attribute to Archelaus two causes or principles, hot and cold (cf. the anonymous doctrine at Plato, *Sph.* 242d that hot and cold are the two ὄντα); it seems from Hippolytus (A4 (2)) that heat was associated with change, cold with lack of change. *Nous*, itself apparently dependent on mixture (A4(1)), features only as the 'mind' present in animals (A4 (6)). (A10 and 11 weigh against this restriction, but they include suspiciously much Anaxagorean content, and should not be preferred to the evidence of Aetius in A12 and 14.)

[44] Cf. Aristotle, *DA* III 4, 429a18–27.

identification of this cosmic intelligence with justice is, and is effectively labelled by Socrates as, a creative rather than a historical interpretation.

If there is an overall lesson to be learnt from this complicated excursus into doxography, it is as follows. The previous philosophical tradition, to which Socrates and Plato are heirs, is a thoroughgoing cosmological one. Regardless of how far, as a matter of historical fact, that tradition went in recognising justice as an objective reality, the best it *could* have offered, given its approach through physics, was an identification of justice with some cosmic principle of change – the sun, fire, heat, or (best of all) intelligence, even this last being viewed as a swift-moving physical presence in the universe. The limitation of any such approach, real or imagined, is that it has to treat justice, that supremely positive value, as inherently engaged in change, by stark contrast to the Platonic reality of a justice (or rather Justice) that stands above and outside all change. The very etymology of the word *dikaion* shows that the original name-makers, themselves already locked into a cosmological approach to reality, were victims of that same limitation. The *Republic*'s successful definition and elaborate exploration of justice as an absolute value, the pinnacle of Plato's middle-period achievements, makes this contrast with Presocratic thought all the more telling.

8 UNDERSTANDING AS TRACKING CHANGE

So much for the first theme that runs throughout the value etymologies, the metaphysical association of positive value with change. A second and constantly recurrent theme is epistemological: a positive mental state is analysed as one which enables us to *track* the changes which underlie all reality, a negative mental state one which blocks that activity. The idea here is that, in a world governed by constant change, all positive intellectual and moral states must somehow consist in keeping up with the flow. This is revealed as the name-makers' belief regarding not just cognitive states themselves but also, as is appropriate, the objects of those states. Hence, at the very end of this section, Socrates turns finally to 'truth', 'falsity', 'what-is' (*to on*), and 'what-is-not' (*to mē on*), familiar from the *Sophist* as the basic terminology for understanding what makes a statement true or false; and he decodes these as associating truth and being with motion, falsity and not-being with rest.

Bear in mind once again that, on the Platonic understanding of flux, it includes not just intrinsic changes in things, but also constantly shifting perspectives and contextualisations. The ancients admired, and were

commending in their vocabulary, those who could stay constantly abreast of such developments in an unstable world. The contrast with a Platonic value system, founded on the enduring grasp of eternal truths and entities, lies very near the surface.

Those who have difficulty believing that Plato can have taken this set of etymologies seriously might be helped by reflection on their natural analogue in modern English. Think of the range of success words and phrases in our own cognitive vocabulary which, like the cases diagnosed by Socrates, emphasise the constantly changing nature of the objects of cognition: we praise people for being up to speed, quick-witted, in touch, or *au courant*, for keeping abreast, and for being in the swing or up to date. Among our common synonyms for 'understand' are 'follow' and 'get the drift'. Better still, in the eyes of some, is actually to be ahead of your time. On the negative side, failures of comprehension may be conveyed with metaphors like having a mental block, getting out of touch, and being slow, or even altogether stuck. It would not be at all far-fetched to associate this whole vocabulary set with the conviction that the world we inhabit is constantly changing, and that intellectual success lies in adapting our cognitive state to those changes with all due speed. Plato's diagnosis of the Greek cognitive vocabulary is not very different.

Some examples. At 411d–412a, *phronēsis*, 'intelligence' is a contraction of *phoras kai nou noēsis*, 'thinking about motion and flux'. From that we can work down to one of the word's own components, *noēsis* or 'thinking', which itself further decomposes into *neou hesis*, 'pushing the new'. Alternatively, again from *phronēsis*, we can build up to a more complex word, *sōphrosynē*, 'soundness of mind', which incorporates it. *Sōphrosynē* is (more or less correctly) analysed as 'saving one's *phronēsis*'. Hence cumulatively 'soundness of mind' turns out to be saving that state of mind which pushes – in the sense 'pursues' – the new, namely motion and flux. *Epistēmē*, 'knowledge', is like the previous examples associated with keeping up with things as they change: its root is suggested to be *hep-* as in *hepesthai*, 'to follow' (412a). This stands in partial contrast to a later example, *doxa*, 'opinion', a less straightforwardly laudable state, since the word implies some degree of fallibility. To convey this lesser status, *doxa* is associated either with *diōkein*, 'to pursue', or with *toxou bolē*, 'having a shot' (literally 'firing an arrow'). Such connotations seem chosen to emphasise its character as a kind of intellectual *hunting*, in which we may or may not on any given occasion catch up with our prey.

Finally, we may take the word which in a way encapsulates the entire inquiry conducted in this dialogue: *onoma*, or 'name', itself (421a7–b1): 'It

[i.e. *onoma*] is like a collapsed statement (*logos*), which states that a being (*on*) is that for which the name is a hunt. But you'd recognise it more easily in what we call "the named" [*onomaston* = *on ho maston*, "a being which is hunted"], because here it clearly states that a being (*on*) is that for which it [a name] is a hunt (*masma*).'[45] The point of this prize exhibit among the etymologies is that *onoma* is a telescoped assertion which recognises the cardinal principle (asserted back at 388b13–c1) that a name's function is to separate being, but assumes – wrongly in Socrates' eyes – that in order to do so it must keep pursuing an ever-moving quarry.

Now some negative counterparts. *Deilia*, 'cowardice', is (415b–c) 'extreme[46] tying down', *desmos lian*, which holds the soul back when it ought, presumably, to be following the flow, and is thus its major source of vice. Along the same lines, *aischron* – 'ugly' or 'disgraceful' – was originally *aei-ischo-rhoun*, that which forever holds back the flow (415a–b).

9 THE INSTABILITY OF VALUES

We have now dealt with two regularly recurring themes: (1) the metaphysical thesis that change is a positive force for the good; (2) the epistemological thesis that positive mental states are those that manage to *follow* change. The third and final motif, once again metaphysical, is found when the object or value named is itself treated as an unstable entity. This is in fact already the fundamental idea brought out by Socrates' blanket condemnation of the value lexicon at 411b3–c6, quoted in §4 above, as based on the belief that the objects named are in flux, and is confirmed when he adds (411c8–10), with reference to the names *phronēsis* ('intelligence'), *synesis* ('understanding'), *dikaiosynē* ('justice') and the like, 'Haven't you noticed, perhaps, that the names just listed have been assigned to things in the belief that those things are in a state of motion, flux and becoming?' Yet all of those names are shortly afterwards analysed as the mental states which succeed in constantly keeping up with the changes in their objects. To reconcile these two assertions, we have to appreciate that if a mental state entails constantly keeping up with change, it is itself a constantly changing state. Whereas in Plato's eyes knowledge, wisdom and allied qualities are above all stable conditions, to the early namegivers they were every bit as unstable as their cognitive

[45] At a8–9 I am reading ζήτημα τὸ ὄνομα without the punctuation marks added in the OCT².

[46] Why does Socrates gloss λίαν, normally 'excessive', as 'strong'? Perhaps because the former would imply that *some* degree of tying down is good. However, in the later etymological tradition λίαν frequently serves in this way as a mere intensifier, and one may suspect that the use of it here betrays Plato's familiarity with the tricks of the etymological trade.

objects. In a world where all judgements are subject to perpetual revision, the states of mind which we value most must themselves be the most volatile.

10 MOTION AND REST

Finally a word about 'motion' and 'rest' themselves. These two words are not included anywhere in the curriculum we have been taken through by Socrates, but they do get etymologised later, at 426c–d, just as he is embarking on the theory of the primary sounds which underlie all words. From this segregation we can infer that, when we are reconstructing the mindset of the name-makers, we cannot treat motion and rest as just two more concepts co-ordinate with all the other objects of analysis. Rather, they are to be treated separately as meta-concepts. It is in terms of them that more or less everything else is understood.

11 RETROSPECT

What we have seen in Chapters 4 and 5 is that early Greek intellectuals' concentration on cosmology, a concentration whose effects are still written all over the Greek vocabulary, has had both its successes and its failures. However much or little the ancients may have mastered the tools of argument and proof, they clearly understood or half-understood a huge amount about the physical world. What work remains to be done by Plato in this physical domain will complete and refine what the ancients sketched, without any radical change of direction. But that very same concentration on cosmology has insulated these early intellectuals from understanding real values. By blinding them to the significance of anything that does not share the constant change which underlies the cosmos, it has excluded from their gaze an entire domain of stable values, the very items that make a human life worth living.[47] Since names are riddled with this mistake, it is self-evident that the study of names cannot be a route to rectifying it. This realisation underpins the closing pages of the dialogue, to which we will come in Chapter 7. Before we can do that, we must turn to Socrates' final verdict on the discipline of etymology itself.

[47] Cf. *Smp.* 211d1–3.

CHAPTER 6

The limits of etymology

1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter's title has a double reference. First, after completing his main etymological survey, Socrates sets out to halt a regress, which threatens to derive each name from component names, and those from sub-components, and so on *ad infinitum*. He does so by sketching a theory of primary, non-derivative sounds from which compound names are built up. The limit which he here sets is an entirely beneficent one, designed to save the etymological method from incoherence. Second, in Part III Socrates, in discussion now with Cratylus, scrutinises the method in order to see whether it can yield the truths which Cratylus believes can be extracted from words. This time the limits are negative: names can never be relied on as totally accurate depictions. But in no way does this latter limitation threaten to undermine etymology as an exegetical device, only as a philosophical one. So, at any rate, I shall argue, in this chapter and the final one.

2 HALTING THE REGRESS

At 421c, Socrates has at last completed his survey of the Greek philosophical vocabulary, emphasising above all the theme of fluidity. Hermogenes now quizzes Socrates about the small words which repeatedly recur in these etymologies, choosing, as suggested by the flux theme, the components *ion*, 'going', *rheon*, 'flowing', and, on the opposite side, *doun*, 'binding'. These are not all monosyllables, and nothing excludes the possibility that they might be further dissected into *their* components. But it is becoming evident by now that this reductive process is nearing its limit, and the question is looming of how the regress can be decently terminated. As Socrates says (421d9–e4), 'If, concerning whatever descriptions[1] are used in

[1] I am, as consistently as I can manage, translating ῥῆμα as 'description' (see Ch. 7 §7 below, pp. 162–4); here at 421d9 and e2, I take the verb λέγειν to be functioning as the verbal counterpart of ῥῆμα, and my translation reflects this conviction.

the name, someone is always going to ask about those descriptions, and again inquire about the ones used in *those* descriptions, and is not going to stop doing this, won't the person answering eventually have to give up?' Hermogenes agrees. 'Then,' asks Socrates, 'when could this person who resigns justly quit?' (422a1–2).

Socrates is raising a familiar problem about how, non-viciously (= 'justly'), to halt a regress. His first considered option, although already rejected by this point, is of some interest. It consists in observing that these primitive ('primary')[2] names might be unanalysable to us, either because they are foreign imports, or because they are so ancient as to be, by now, as unintelligible to us as if they *were* foreign (421c–d, cf. 425e–426a). Methodologically speaking, this looks like a perfectly serious option. It may well be that, as we trace any item backwards through its ancestry, our cognitive grasp will progressively weaken, and finally give out altogether. Whether in evolutionary or in cultural history, explanations of more recent states of affairs by appeal to antecedent states of affairs are not usually thought to be rendered worthless by the fact that, as the distance from the present increases, our information and explanatory grasp gradually weaken, and may eventually fade away. On the contrary, the gradualness of the fading can itself encourage us to believe that what has worked for more recent cases would have worked for the more distant ones too, had we only had better information. There was a good example of this fade-out mode of terminating a regress earlier in the *Cratylus* when Socrates traced a divine genealogy back from Zeus, through Cronos, to Ouranos, and gave up at that point on the excuse that he could not recall what Hesiod had to say about Ouranos' own parentage (396c).[3] In any discipline tracing the history of language, it may even be hard to see how one could hope for better. It is therefore of some interest that Socrates does in fact reject this fade-out option, which he characterises both as special pleading (421d) and as methodologically unsound (425a–b, 426a). Equally importantly, he rejects anything that looks like an attempt to halt the regress by appeal to mere authority – specifically, any suggestion that the primary names are correct simply because they have divine authority (425e). Instead of any of these options, he seeks to establish irreducibly primary word-components from which all actual words have been built up.

It is of considerable interest, for understanding both the *Cratylus* and Plato's thought more generally, to identify the methodological principles underlying this decision. Does Socrates' alternative and preferred approach

[2] See n. 11, p. 128 below. [3] See Ch. 4 §5 above, p. 87.

rely on the assumption that the requirement for explanation is such that *A is explained by B only if B is itself explained by something*?[4] We can call this the Principle of Groundedness. (I have so worded it as to leave it open whether the 'something' is B itself, regarded as self-explanatory, or some further thing, C.) If such a principle *is* operative, the likelihood is that only a somehow primitive and self-explanatory factor is going to halt the vicious regress that threatens. A familiar parallel would be the regress-halting Form of the Good in *Republic* VII, which, by accounting for all other Forms, in the end accounts for good things quite generally, all the way down to sensible particulars; Socrates there remarks that if you don't know the Good itself you don't know any other good thing either (534c).

An alternative way of developing this model, sometimes attributed to Plato, is a non-hierarchical one based on the mutual support that obtains between all parts of the system.[5] I do not think that any such principle can be operative in the *Cratylus*. Not only is it not hinted at in the present context, but later, at 436c–d, where Cratylus suggests a similar principle as vindicating the philosophical truth of the etymologies, namely that they form a fully coherent set,[6] Socrates will reject it on the ground that even an interlocking system of this kind can be systematically *wrong*. For this reason, he will insist there, every discipline requires a firmly established starting point (*archē*) – in other words, he will undermine it by invoking the Principle of Groundedness.

That some such assumption as the Principle of Groundedness operates in the *Cratylus* too may seem evident from the following facts. In his long disquisition on etymologies, Socrates has had no regular terminology for the descriptive relation which words bear to their objects. But he does now make two importantly related moves.

(a) He makes explicit his assumption that whatever relation obtains at the secondary level of name-analysis must also apply at the primary level (422d1–10, to which we will come shortly).

(b) Turning now to the explanation of the atomic or primary names, he devises a systematic account according to which these, and even the elements which compose *them*, are 'imitations' of their objects.

[4] This is at least a close relative of Gail Fine's principle KBK ('knowledge must be based on knowledge'), in Fine 1979, although it does not necessarily make any specific claims about knowledge. Cf. Annas (1983), who reads the present passage in terms of KBK.

[5] See esp. Gail Fine's 'interrelation model', in Fine 1979.

[6] Plato's musical metaphor συμφωνεῖν, 'be concordant', regularly amounts to more than merely 'be consistent' but less than 'follow (from)', see e.g. *Phd.* 100a3–7. The idea of telling one and the same story is closer to capturing its force, and fits *Crat.* 436c–d well. I intend 'cohere' and 'coherent' in this sense.

From the combination of these two moves we can already predict that:

(c) This 'imitation' relation between sounds and things will be found not just the primary level, but all the way up the chain.

And that is exactly what happens: for the remainder of the dialogue, Socrates will allow himself the assumption that the imitation relation, which he has found at the primary level, is operative at all other levels too, so that all words, of whatever degree of phonetic and semantic complexity, will henceforth not merely be treated as descriptions but also be subsumed under the more precise term 'imitations'.[7]

It remains, however, to see what underlies his assumption (a) that the same relation between sound and thing must obtain all the way down. The key passage is at 422c7–d10:

SOCR. That there is one correctness of every name, both first and last, and that none of them differs in virtue of being a name, I think that you too agree.
HERM. Absolutely.
SOCR. But with the names we have just run through, at any rate, their correctness claimed to be one such as to indicate what each being is like.
HERM. Clearly.
SOCR. Then this must be just as true of the primary names as of the secondary ones, if they are going to be names.
HERM. Absolutely.
SOCR. But the secondary names, it seems, acquired the power to do this through the names that precede them.
HERM. Apparently.

And Socrates goes directly on from this to seek the source of the correctness possessed by the ultimate, atomic names which such a regress must eventually reach.

As I read his sequence of reasoning, the governing principle with which Socrates opens is that all correctness of names must operate on one and the same basis, at whatever level of linguistic complexity or simplicity it may occur. We can call this the Principle of Uniformity. And it is something on which he and Hermogenes turn out already to be in agreement, an agreement that is, as far as I can see, based on nothing more than the uniformity of the analyses to date: in both complex and relatively simple names, the same descriptive power has been revealed by the etymologies. From this Principle of Uniformity it is already taken to follow that the descriptive power of secondary names must recur in primary names too.

[7] Esp. 423b9–11, 427c8–d1, 430a12–b1, 431d3; and cf. the role of 'likeness' at 434a–b. It is common practice in the modern literature, but not in keeping with Socrates' own usage, to restrict 'imitation' to the primary sounds alone.

It is only after that, at the end of the passage just quoted, that Socrates mentions the Principle of Groundedness: by now we already know that the primary names, like the secondary names, signify by description, and it is from that knowledge, rather than from any prior principle of Groundedness, that he works out that this power occurs at the secondary level *thanks to* its prior occurrence at the primary level. So at least the direction of argument seems to suggest. If so, the Principle of Groundedness is not treated as axiomatic from the start, but is first brought in to supplement the prior Principle of Uniformity.

Yet despite what might on this evidence have seemed to be its secondary status, the new-found Principle of Groundedness will in due course be made to do the most vital methodological work. For at 426a3–b9 Socrates will insist that understanding the correctness of the primary names is actually *more* important than understanding that of the secondary names, in that the latter understanding depends on the former:

> And yet to the extent that[8] one is ignorant of the correctness of the primary names, it is presumably impossible to know that of the secondary ones, since these have to be made evident on the basis of those things which one knows nothing about. But it is clear that one who professes to be an expert about them must be able to give the clearest proofs about the primary names above all, or else must rest assured that he will *ipso facto* be talking rubbish about the secondary ones.

By this point, then, it seems that the Principle of Groundedness has taken centre stage. Why? The answer appears to be that the shift of emphasis from Uniformity to Groundedness has a clear strategic purpose in the dialogue as a whole.[9] When it comes to the refutation of Cratylus (pp. 138–9 below), this will turn vitally on the Principle of Groundedness. It will be only because Cratylus explicitly endorses Groundedness (434a3–b9) that, when confronted with a case where just one letter of a word is misleading, he will be forced to admit that the same lapse compromises the word as a whole.

When we look at Socrates' detailed thinking on the imitation relation, it will be easier to see why the principles of Groundedness and Uniformity are to some extent permitted to merge. Socrates' account is based on an analogy between word-making and painting (424c–425b). The painter builds up from primary colours – sometimes kept simple, sometimes mixed – to

[8] 426a4, ὅτῳ . . . τρόπῳ: I have failed to find out the exact meaning of this, but I think the general sense is clear.

[9] This strategic purpose may be seen as Plato's rather than Socrates', to the extent that it depends on his authorial foresight about the later argument with Cratylus.

representations of complex objects and ultimately complete scenes.[10] It is in similar fashion that the word-artist builds up from simple sounds, i.e. letters, to syllables, whole names (*onomata*),[11] descriptions (*rhēmata*), and finally complete statements (*logoi*). What he has said about the painter, Socrates maintains, applies by analogy to the word-artist, and, derivatively, to etymologists, who must be able to reconstruct and interpret the word-artist's creation at every level from the bottom up.

Now the primary pigments which the painter uses already imitate the simplest objects of vision. At higher levels, mixed colours and juxtapositions of different colours not only maintain this same imitation relation to their own visible objects (the Principle of Uniformity), but also do so in a way which plainly *depends on* the imitative work carried out by the primary pigments contained in them (the Principle of Groundedness). In the case of vocal imitation, something so closely analogous is envisaged that both principles are, once again, assumed to coincide.

3 THE TAXONOMY OF SOUNDS

We can witness the painting analogy at work in Socrates' exposition of his theory of phonetic imitation, to which I now turn. Its most important feature is the suggestion that a classification of primary *sounds* and a classification of primary *kinds of being* might somehow be mapped onto each other (424c6–425a2):

Shouldn't we too in the same way first distinguish the vowels, and then, of the remainder, distinguish species by species those that are unvoiced and mute – I think that's what they're called by the experts on these things – and again those which are not vowels but not mute either? And of the vowels themselves, distinguish all those that are different in species from each other? And shouldn't we, when we have divided these, next divide all the beings (*onta*) to which names have to be assigned, to see if, as in the case of the letters, there are classes to which they can all be reduced, proceeding from which we can view them in their own right, and, if they contain species, survey all these, just as we did with the letters, and have a science of applying each one [i.e. each letter] on the basis of likeness, whether they need to be applied one to one or a mix of many to one – just as painters, aiming to

[10] At 425a3, ζῷον is not an 'animal' (Reeve 1998), but a 'picture' – hence my paraphrase 'complete scenes'.

[11] 424e4–425a2 makes it clear both that (*pace* Baxter 1992: 76–8), and why, the primary sounds are not themselves 'names'. If they were, the incongruous result would be that many syllables, without yet themselves being names, consisted of parts which were already names. Socrates' 'primary names' are the short words exemplified at 421c4–5 and 424a7–b6. The distinction is entirely clear at 434a3–6.

produce a likeness, sometimes apply just purple, sometimes some other pigment, sometimes a mixture of several, for example when they are making a pigment to represent human skin or something of the sort, however each picture seems to require each pigment, I suppose? In this way we too will apply letters to things, both one to one where that seems needed, and combinations of several, producing what are known as syllables, and combining syllables so as to create both names and descriptions (*rhēmata*).[12]

This passage contains the dialogue's only reference to the Platonic method of division. Classifying alphabetic letters runs parallel to classifying beings, and Socrates' hope is that a one-to-one correlation can be found between individual sounds or amalgams of them on the one hand, and individual kinds of being on the other. There is no explicit suggestion that the two taxonomies might map onto each other all the way down, so that the species of a given genus of letters would correspond one to one to the species of a single genus of beings.

It is hard to know whether Socrates might have anything so specific in mind, because in the immediate sequel (425b–c) he admits that he has little idea how to work out the details, and that the illustration he will go on to offer is merely his best current shot at it. The illustration when it comes is indeed a very partial affair at best, because it chooses to concentrate almost exclusively on the sounds which can be thought relevant to describing motion and rest (426c–427d). The choice is natural, given the overwhelming focus on flux in the etymologies which preceded, added to the fact that imposing a basic ontological division between motion and rest is, so far as it goes, thoroughly Platonic (the same polarity underlies not only Plato's middle-period two-world view, but also the identification of the five Greatest Kinds in the *Sophist*). Clearly the name-makers had an obsession with this theme, and no fewer than ten of the twenty-four alphabetic letters are taken to bear on it in one way or another. The letter rho (R), described as produced by vibration of the tongue, is ideal for imitating motion, as in *rhein*, 'to flow', *trechein*, 'to run', and countless other words. Other letters are noted – thanks to either their sound or the mouth movements required for their production – as imitating blowing (S, Ps, Ph, Z), sliding (L) and fineness (I), all of these likewise explicitly or implicitly associated with motion. On the other side, there are letters imitating binding (D), rest (T), and stickiness (G). But that leaves the other fourteen letters for

[12] My translation assumes different punctuation from the OCT: commas after εἴδη in 424d4 and στοιχείοις in d5, and a question mark after φαρμάκου in e3. For a survey of more drastic solutions (none of which, however, seems necessary to me), see Barney 2001: 94 n. 15.

other purposes,[13] including just four that are explicitly mentioned – as imitating internality (N), largeness (A, E (epsilon)) and roundness (O). More important, we will learn later (433b–c) that even for the letters which he has interpreted Socrates has not exhausted their imitative powers: R, it will turn out, imitates not just motion, but also in certain contexts hardness. The current concentration on the powers of letters to convey motion and rest has simply picked out one – in context the most directly relevant and topical – aspect of their imitative powers.

As I observed in Chapter 2 §7, the sketchiness from which Socrates, a novice at etymology, admits his account suffers is hardly to be taken as his admission that the method does not work. Why, then, have scholars been so ready to see the primary-sounds thesis as undermining his theory, and not as providing it with the completeness which Socrates himself has argued it needs?[14] One suggestion has been that it damages the preceding etymologies by blatantly *conflicting* with the method employed in them.[15] For these relied heavily on the principle that it does not matter what letters are used in a word, so long as the 'being' of the object is successfully marked off. The main point there, however, as we saw in Chapter 4 §4, was that in a single language two *non-synonymous* descriptions – such as 'leader' and 'good at war' in the case of a general – might pick out one and the same kind. There is no reason whatsoever why each of these should not be analysable down, via its components, into different but equally appropriate primary sounds.

The other case we must bear in mind is semantic equivalences between two languages, since here too, Socrates has remarked (389d–390a), the same name-Form can be embodied in quite different letters and syllables. And it might indeed be thought odd if R, the primary sound that indicates motion in Greek, were in Persian to indicate rest. But I suspect that this worry too would be misplaced. It is a datum of common experience that foreign languages do not sound to us like the familiar vowels and consonants of our own language rearranged to produce gibberish. They seem, rather, to reflect the application of a different sound system from our own

[13] Or twelve if, as in the older Attic script which Socrates sometimes cites (see p. 93 on 'heroes', p. 107 on 'seasons') – the short and long forms of E and O are not being distinguished.

[14] One assumption that occasionally surfaces is that the primary-sounds theory is in itself sufficiently ridiculous to condemn the entire etymological account, at least as one capable of describing the Greek language. This is implied even by Baxter (1992: 45, 77 and 172), a little surprisingly in view of his chapter 3, which fascinatingly charts the later history of the same mimetic principle – as applying at least in part to actual languages – and thereby illustrates its enduring appeal. On Socrates' reasons for saying that the primary-sounds theory will sound ridiculous (425d1, 426b6), see p. 39 n. 26 above.

[15] Schofield 1982: 64–5.

(surely other nationalities did not roll their Rs just like the Greeks?). In such a sound system, corresponding differences in the resemblance relation between sounds and objects would be inevitable, but that relation could still easily be a natural one.

We have now reached the climax of Part II of the dialogue. The theory of correctness of names, worked out by Socrates with Hermogenes' help, has been filled in, albeit tentatively and illustratively, all the way to its foundations. Language as a whole acquires its significance by imitating things. That imitative power is in fact at its most evident below the level of even atomic words, in the irreducibly simple sounds composing them, sounds which imitatively pick out matchingly simple properties of things. Once we have seen how that imitation works – in a manner that can be illuminatingly compared to the function of primary colours in painting – we can work up to syllables and whole words, and see that they, as complexes of these same imitative elements, derive from the primary sounds their own power to mark off the being of complex objects by *imitating* what they are. This imitative power is identifiable with the *descriptive* power which has been illustrated at great length in the etymologies. The principles of Uniformity and Groundedness, which have brought us this far, must inevitably take us further too, so that the imitative function will spread upwards to complexes of words as well, in particular to whole sentences. But the structure and function of whole sentences are a topic for another dialogue (the *Sophist*), and in Part III the focus remains firmly on single words.

4 CRATYLUS AND FALSITY

It is now, at the beginning of the third and final part of the dialogue, that Cratylus finally breaks his long and enigmatic silence. Despite himself, and despite his continued confidence in his own superior understanding of the matter (such that he takes seriously Socrates' ironic proposal to become his student), Cratylus has been impressed. His main interest proves to be in the informational content that names possess thanks to imitating their objects. Because Cratylus regards the study of names as the privileged route to knowledge, Socrates quickly turns to probing whether he can be persuaded to admit some degree of fallibility in that informational content, for any element of fallibility would threaten to drive a wedge between etymology and the acquisition of knowledge. Unfortunately, Cratylus is adamant that names cannot contain any errors. An imperfectly fitting name would not be a name at all – at least, not the name of the object which it fails to fit.

This is not a piece of opportunism on his part, because it was the ground on which, before the dialogue even began, he had been telling the other main interlocutor that Hermogenes was not his real name. Just what advantage he hopes to gain from the thesis is less clear. It is quite true that, if none but perfectly veridical strings of sound are names, all real names are guaranteed to impart pure truths. The apparent drawback is that we will have no way of telling which strings of sound *are* real names, unless we already antecedently know the relevant truths. If Cratylus is not worried by this thought, that is no doubt because, as transpires later, he sees the broad run of Greek vocabulary as an interlocking and self-guaranteeing system, whose very coherence of informational content confirms that, unlike present-day individuals assigning personal proper names like 'Hermogenes', its creators had privileged and probably divine sources of information. Socrates will be able to point out the flaw in that reasoning too, but not just yet.

The question that at this stage interests Socrates is what follows from the supposition that an inappropriate name, like 'Hermogenes', is not really that individual's name at all. If it is not his name, it presumably fails to refer to him, which seems to mean that you cannot say anything, true *or* false, about him by using that name. In which case the very statement 'This is Hermogenes,' although *ex hypothesi* not true, cannot be false either. Cratylus, once he sees the point of this questioning, agrees that he is committed to such a consequence: to speak falsely is to say what-is-not, whereas if you succeed in saying anything at all you have on the contrary said something that *is* (429c–d).

This denial of falsity re-opens an old battle, for, as Socrates observes, there are and long have been many people who insist that falsity is impossible for just this kind of reason (429d). As a result we have here one of the few features of the *Cratylus* that have regularly drawn the close attention of Platonic scholarship, since Socrates' response to Cratylus' position has been plausibly regarded as representing one of Plato's steps on the long road to accounting for falsity.[16] This was a road that started in Socrates' encounter with two sophists in the *Euthydemus*, continued in the *Cratylus* and *Theaetetus*, and ended triumphantly in the *Sophist*, with some further related thoughts in the *Philebus*. It is no part of my purpose here to reconsider that history, but simply to see how the debate about falsity impacts on the argument of the *Cratylus* itself.

Note, first, that what Cratylus has aligned himself with is not the Protagorean denial of falsity that we encountered early on in the dialogue

[16] There is a large literature on this, but see especially Denyer 1991 and Burnyeat 2002.

(see pp. 54–5 above), according to which no judgement can be wrong because the judging subject is the sole determinant of truth. It is on the contrary a denial of falsity which presupposes that there is an objective truth to be captured, and which adds that a sentence's failure to map onto that truth amounts to a failure to speak significantly at all. Hence there is objective truth, but no falsity.

What is perhaps most striking about Socrates' response in this dialogue, especially when compared to the *Sophist*, is Plato's lack of concern with the syntactic structure of the specimen sentence. The question is simply, is there some way or other in which I can utter an incorrect name for you, yet succeed in getting that name to attach to you, instead of its doing what Cratylus thinks it must, namely miss you altogether or bounce off? Socrates' paradigm for such naming is *addressing* you, by using your name in the vocative – as happens, in his chosen example, when someone who recognises you greets you by saying 'Hello, so and so' (429e). Socrates will later switch to putting this in terms of that someone's saying to you 'Such and such is your name' (430e–431a). But in this latter usage he can hardly be envisaging the bizarrely abnormal act of actually uttering those words to you, since you already know your own name and don't need telling it. Rather, telling you that such and such is your name is how Socrates characterises the very same speech act that I perform when, in greeting you, I address you in the vocative.[17] It is not that I address you by your name in order to *inform* you that that is your name, but rather in order to indicate *my own* (actual or purported) *recognition* that that is your name.

What Socrates wants to show is that this kind of addressing is a speech act which can be performed correctly or incorrectly, and that 'incorrectly' entails 'falsely'.

His first shot is with a speech act which combines correctness with incorrectness. He envisages Cratylus abroad, greeted by someone who indicates his recognition by saying 'Hello there, visitor from Athens, son of Smicrion Hermogenes' (429e4–5). My somewhat unnatural English is chosen to preserve the order of the Greek words, because we are meant to appreciate that the first descriptive elements are true: Cratylus *is* a visitor; he *is*

[17] This seems to me sufficient for respecting the important criterion supplied by Williams (1982: 88): according to Socrates, allocating a name, *unlike* allocating a picture, is done truly or falsely (430d), so the way in which we interpret the former must be able to explain that difference. Allocating a picture to someone may, I take it, simply be handing it to them, or *using* it as if it were a picture of them, neither of which need involve any linguistic act. This would then leave the door open for *any* linguistic 'allocation' to be, by contrast, truth-evaluable, and we are given no reason to restrict such allocations to declarative sentences, although no doubt these would be included too.

from Athens; and he *is* the son of Smicrion (or so readers have regularly inferred, since we know from elsewhere in the dialogue that Hermogenes is the son of Hipponicus). But Cratylus is not, of course, the final item on the list, Hermogenes. That the foreigner has succeeded in addressing Cratylus seems plausible not only from the preponderance of accurate elements in the address but also from the fact that he was clasping Cratylus' hand as he spoke. But has the foreigner said something false? To persuade Cratylus of this, Socrates runs through a sequence of 'saying' words (*legein, phanai, eipein, proseipein*) the last of which means 'address'. If Cratylus won't admit that there is false saying, stating or speaking, will he at least admit that there is false *addressing* (429e–430a)? Specifically, is the foreigner saying something true, something false, or a combination of the two? But Cratylus will endorse none of these options. In his view, the foreigner is making a mere empty noise, like banging a brass pot (430a).

To show, against this, that there *is* false addressing, Socrates reverts to the analogy between names and pictures (430a–c). Suppose, he says, I have a portrait of a man and one of a woman. I can *allocate* (*dianemein*) the man's portrait to the man and the woman's to the woman, but clearly I could also allocate the man's to the woman and the woman's to the man. That is, I can allocate portraits correctly *or incorrectly*. In order to maximise the analogy with addressing people by name, we may take Socrates' talk of my allocating a portrait to someone to mean indicating my (actual or purported) recognition that it is that person's portrait.

Socrates' analogy works as follows. Just as the allocation of a portrait can be correct or incorrect, so can that of a name. But when a name is incorrectly allocated, we should call that allocation not only 'incorrect' but also 'false' (430d). The names envisaged here by Socrates, to maintain the parallel with the two portraits, are not now personal proper names, but the common nouns 'man' and 'woman'. When Cratylus resists the portrait-name analogy, the following exchange ensues (430e3–431c2):

SOCR. What do you mean? What is the difference between the two cases? Isn't it possible to go up to a man and say 'This is your portrait' and to show him what might be a picture of him, or might alternatively be a picture of a woman? By 'show' I mean put before the sense of eyesight.

CRAT. Certainly.

SOCR. Well then, is it possible next time to go up to him and say 'This is your name' – assuming a name too to be an imitation, just as the portrait is? What I mean is this. Wouldn't it be possible to say to him 'This is your name' and then to put before his sense of (this time) hearing what might be the one which imitates him, by saying that he is a man, or what might alternatively

be the one that imitates the female species of the human race, saying that he is a woman? Don't you think that this can sometimes happen?

CRAT. I'm prepared to agree with you Socrates. So be it.

SOCR. You're right to do so, my friend, if that's the way things are: we don't need a long fight about it. If, then, the same kind of allocation does occur in this case too, we want to call one of these 'speaking truly', the other 'speaking falsely'. And if that is so, and it is possible to allocate names incorrectly, and not to represent what is appropriate to each person but, on occasion, what is inappropriate, one could do this same thing with descriptions [or 'predicates': *rhēmata*]. But if it is possible to impose descriptions and names in these ways, the same must apply to statements (*logoi*), since I take it that what statements are is the combination of these two.

As I have already said, it seems best to take some of the direct speech envisaged by Socrates as his way of describing certain speech acts, and, moreover, those speech acts are likely to consist typically in the use of appropriate or inappropriate forms of address, or, grammatically speaking, vocatives. So this initially weird description of saying to someone the words 'This – i.e. the name "man" – is your name' need amount to no more than addressing him with a masculine vocative, or, in the case of an incorrect address, with a feminine vocative. It could alternatively involve the vocative forms of address 'man' and 'woman', rare in modern English but commonplace in ancient Greek. What it need not involve is any syntactical predication such as 'You are a man' and 'You are a woman'. What Plato is envisaging would be as well satisfied by my addressing a man as 'Gladys' as it would be by telling him in so many words that he is a woman.

The last part of the passage I have translated seeks to build up from the capacity for falsity found in individual words to the presence of the same capacity in whole sentences. I shall save discussion of that and its implications for Chapter 7 §7. For now I would like to limit myself to a brief comment on the notions of truth and falsity used here. First, Socrates is careful not to say that names themselves are true or false: the truth or falsity lies in the way they are allocated to things when deployed in speech.[18] Second, although that allocation is called 'true' or 'false', this is little more than an aside, Socrates' contribution in passing to the old debate about false statement. What he is really interested in for present purposes is just three outcomes.

First, names can be more, or less, *correct*: that this, rather than truth, becomes henceforth the main issue is a simple reflection of the fact that the

[18] Cf. Fine 1977 for this point.

whole discussion is about Socrates' proposed account of the 'correctness' (not the truth) of names. The correctness of a name it now turns out, like that of a portrait, lies in the degree of its resemblance to the object to which it has been allocated. In the case under investigation, this allocation occurs in ordinary *use* of the name. But the lessons are meant to carry over to the original question, whether the present names of things were correctly assigned to them, by baptism, in the first place.

Second, we can now see why Socrates has concentrated on cases of incorrect addressing, rather than incorrect statement. Incorrect addressing, involving as it does the direct attachment of names to things without the intermediacy of the copula or other syntactical devices, is the kind of naming, or name-allocation, most closely analogous to inaccurate correspondence between words and the objects we attach them to in our lexical usage.

Third, although the outcome we have just read demonstrates that there are incorrect as well as correct name-allocations, the primary relevance of that finding lies in its implication for Socrates' earlier question at 430a. When you address someone in terms which are partly appropriate, partly inappropriate (as in the foreigner's ill-informed greeting of Cratylus), Socrates wanted to know whether that address is wholly true, wholly false, or a mixture of truth and falsity. It is this last option, although now to be reformulated in terms of correctness rather than truth, that really matters to the ensuing argument. The central issue is going to be what the consequences are for a theory of correctness of names if names turn out to be correct in some respects but incorrect in others. This is the right moment to remind ourselves that Socrates' preliminary discussion of poetic proper names has already built into his theory the recognition that some names are 'more correct' than others,[19] which can itself be taken to imply that the less correct names incorporate some degree of incorrectness.

The same point is next pursued by Socrates with a further application of the painting analogy (431c–432d). A painting may have all the right colours and shapes to match its subject, or may have some right but others wrong. The exact equivalent surely applies to that vocal portrait which we call a name, Socrates argues: it can have all the appropriate sounds, or a mixture of appropriate and inappropriate, and hence can be well or badly made. 'Maybe', replies Cratylus (431d9); but it would be hard for him to wriggle out of this one, because he has already approved the

[19] See Ch. 4 §2 above, pp. 78–80.

entire foregoing package of etymologies, in which Socrates – as he will remind Cratylus shortly (432e–433a) – conceded the intrusive presence of potentially misleading letters in words which were nevertheless successful overall descriptions of their objects. Socrates is already pressing home his conclusion that the linguistic legislators vary in the quality of their output (431e).

Cratylus' last stand in this battle lies in an analogy with spelling mistakes (431e–432a). When you misspell a word, you haven't written that word at all: you have written something else. Socrates, in response, allows this as a possible diagnosis of arithmetic, where an inaccurate answer to a sum quite simply is *not* the answer to it. But he cannot see how it could apply to a representational expertise like painting. Representational art is not the business of making perfect replicas – otherwise, he argues in a famous passage, a fully successful portraiture session with Cratylus would not result in Cratylus plus his portrait, but in two Cratyluses (432a–c).[20] Since word-art, like visual art, also represents its subjects in a different medium from its originals, in this case vocal sound, it is no more capable than painting is of producing perfect likenesses (432c–d).

There is an apparent leap in the reasoning here. A painting of Cratylus cannot, it is true, be Cratylus, since it must be made out of canvas, paint etc., not flesh and bones; but it could nevertheless be a perfect external two-dimensional likeness of him, which is all it ever set out to be. Similarly, why cannot an extreme linguistic naturalist like Cratylus cling to his high standard for each name, demanding that it should be, while not of course identical with the being of its object, a perfect encapsulation of that being?

Socrates openly agrees that a portrait, or a name, can be a completely accurate depiction in this sense – when, as he puts it, all the appropriate elements are present (431c, d, 433a). So the Two Cratyluses argument cannot be intended to dispute the point. Rather, as I read it, it is analogical in spirit. Since Cratylus' portrait succeeds in resembling him without *even* including any of his internal organs and other invisible parts, or for that matter his third dimension, depth, it can, analogously, succeed in resembling him despite the fact that the skin colour is slightly too pallid or the chin a bit too angular. Likewise words. As mere strings of sound, they differ even more profoundly from most of the objects they name than portraits do; so here too something as minor as a discrepancy of descriptive detail should

[20] Cf. p. 46 n. 44 above.

hardly be enough to disqualify them from being semantically correlated to their objets.[21]

5 INTERIM FINDINGS

Although this implicit argument remains open to challenge, note how Socrates reinforces it. He appropriately rephrases one of his earlier conclusions, from the discussion with Hermogenes (393d–e): as he now puts it, a word succeeds in getting a hold on its object provided only that the 'outline' (*typos*) of the object is present in it (432e–433a). This metaphor draws our attention to the fact that the initial version of a painting of Cratylus may succeed in being a likeness of him despite being only an outline sketch, certainly inferior to the final painting. Correspondence in bare outline, and not perfect resemblance, is the necessary condition for a picture to be a picture of X, or for the name 'x' to be the name of an x.

Throughout this extended analogy between names and pictures, Socrates continues to assume, in line both with the analogy itself and with the foregoing theory of correctness of names, that although names may fail to be entirely accurate portrayals they, like pictures, cannot continue to be the names of the objects to which they have been assigned without at least a *conspicuous* degree of likeness. Moreover, he sticks with the idea that, as he puts it, names are like their objects 'so far as possible', contrasting it explicitly with the 'mere convention' alternative from which Hermogenes started out (433d–e).

6 THE NEED FOR CONVENTION

This is important to bear in mind as we broach the argument which many readers see as the death knell of the likeness theory (434a–435d). Cratylus is first reminded of, and assents to, the Principle of Groundedness, according to which the success of a word in imitating its object implies, and depends

[21] Socrates' argument is: (1) A portrait *cannot*, without ceasing to be a portrait, have all the features of its original, e.g. internal organs, intelligence (432b1–d4); (2) in the same way, a name *cannot* have all the features of its nominatum, e.g. (implicitly) internal organs, intelligence (432d5–10); (3) therefore a name *need not* (although it *may*) have all its letters appropriate to its nominatum (432d11–433a6). While (2) speaks of a class of features in respect of which a name *cannot* resemble its nominatum, (3) draws an inference about a class of features in respect of which a name *can*, but need not, resemble its nominatum. Since the latter class is not included in the former, (3) does not follow from (2) by any direct entailment. Rather, (2) is meant to curb Cratylus' expectations as to what degree of resemblance a name can aspire to, and (3) is then meant, by force of analogy, to capitalise on his lowered expectations.

on, the success of its ultimate components, individual letters, in imitating their respective objects (434a3–b9):

SOCR. . . . So if the name is going to resemble the object, mustn't there be in the letters out of which one is going to compose the primary names a natural resemblance to the objects? Here's what I mean. Could anyone have composed the painting we were just talking about, so as to be like some being, if there were not, in the pigments out of which the contents of the painting are composed, a resemblance to those things which the painter's art imitates? Or would that be impossible?

CRAT. It would be impossible.

SOCR. In the same way, would names too ever come to resemble anything, if there weren't first going to be those components of names that bear a certain resemblance to the things of which the names are imitations? And these appropriate components are letters?

CRAT. Yes

Socrates, in the light of this assent, turns to the example of the word *sklērotēs*, 'hardness'. Does Cratylus agree that the letter R imitates motion *and hardness*? (Actually hardness was not mentioned in the original discussion of primary sounds, at 426d–e, but some of the examples cited there for R in action – such as *krouein*, 'to crush', and *thrauein*, 'to fracture' – do support the association.) Cratylus does agree. But he also agrees with the finding that L imitates smoothness and softness. So what is an L doing in the word for 'hardness', *sklērotēs*?

Cratylus is not initially bothered, because by now he has consented to the story developed by Socrates and Hermogenes that some words have acquired intrusive elements which have to be ignored (434d9–12).[22] The difficulty for him of this particular example ought to be that the intrusive letter is not merely redundant, as in previously considered cases: it actually runs counter to the word's meaning. What Socrates next wants to know is how we manage to understand each other when one of us uses this word, *sklērotēs*. Cratylus' reply is his fatal mistake: it is 'custom' (*ethos*), he says, that permits us to do so (434e). For what, Socrates now wants to know, is the difference between 'custom' and what Hermogenes introduced as 'agreement' (*synthēkē*). The minimum condition for X's understanding the word *sklērotēs* when Y voices it – that is, for successful communication (*dēlōma*) of the

[22] Indeed, better, the word could well be not a primary but a complex name, and the letters before the L might then somehow function to negate the softness which this represents. This is one of several ways in which the discussion of *sklērotēs* is hasty. Its value should be taken as no more than illustrative.

associated concept to take place – is that when Y says it X recognises what Y has in mind (434e–435b). And custom will suffice for that.[23]

What has happened? Has Socrates so quickly and suddenly come round to reviving and vindicating Hermogenes' original conventionalist thesis, at the expense of the entire theory of natural correctness that he has elaborated and defended? So it is widely thought.[24] And there is, it must be admitted, one short stretch of text in which just that may appear to be happening (434e5–435b3):

SOCR. By 'custom' do you suppose that you mean anything different from agreement? Or do you mean by 'custom' anything other than that I, when uttering this [i.e. *sklēron*, 'hard'], have that [i.e. 'hard'] in mind, and that you recognise that I have it in mind?

CRAT. That's right.

SOCR. If when I utter it you recognise [what I have in mind], is a communication (*dēlōma*) from me to you happening?

CRAT. Yes.

SOCR. It is happening on the basis of something dissimilar to what I have in mind as I make the utterance, if L is dissimilar to hardness according to you. But if that is so, what has happened if not that *you have made an agreement with yourself, and the correctness of the name for you becomes agreement*, seeing that both the similar and the dissimilar letters are communicating, thanks to custom and agreement? And even if custom is not at all the same thing as agreement, *it still wouldn't be right to say that similarity is the means of communication, but that custom is*. For custom it seems, is communicating both by what is similar and by what is dissimilar.

It really may look, at this stage, as if Hermogenes – the original, conventionalist Hermogenes – has secured an outright victory. There is no correctness of names beyond arbitrary agreement, and the imitative powers of names are irrelevant. But it is important not to overlook the fact that this entire account applies only to the *sklērotēs* case – a fact which translations tend to obscure[25] – and is not being generalised to describe all signification. Moreover, see how Socrates now continues (435b3–d1):

[23] It is hard to see what, if not this, Socrates could intend at 434e5–8, translated below. He can hardly mean to define 'custom' merely as one person's understanding another in the way described there, because custom thus interpreted could easily be accommodated even by a full-blown version of the naturalist theory of signification.

[24] See e.g. Annas 1982: 106–9 for an account of how this concession would bring down the entire naturalist edifice.

[25] I have translated throughout with the present continuous, 'is communicating' etc., to bring out that, as the text makes clear, the whole of 434e1–435b3 is solely about the *sklērotēs* case. Other English translations favour the frequentative 'communicate' etc.

But since we agree on this, Cratylus – because I shall set down your silence as assent – it is presumably inevitable that agreement and custom should also *make some contribution* to the communication of what we have in mind when we speak. After all, my friend, if you'd like to consider the case of number, where do you think you're going to get, to apply to numbers, a supply of names which resemble every single one of them, if you don't allow your consent and agreement *to have some authority* concerning correctness of names? I myself too like the idea that so far as possible names do resemble their objects. But what worries me is that this is, to use Hermogenes' word,[26] a 'sticky' trail that resemblance has to travel, and that it may be unavoidable *to add the use of this nasty thing, agreement, for the correctness of names*. Because it may well be that things can be spoken of in the best possible way when spoken of with all or as many as possible of the sounds resembling them – that is, with appropriate sounds – but worst when the opposite is true.

Any initial impression that conventionalism had suddenly and dramatically triumphed over the natural imitation theory has here turned out to be premature. Socrates takes himself to have proved no more than that convention makes some contribution. He is clearly assuming that, as previously demonstrated at length, imitation still plays the major part in the way that language gets its hold on things.

But what does he mean? He could in principle mean either of the following:

(a) For *any* name, its success as a tool for communication depends, at least largely, on its imitative powers, but may also depend on a degree of convention;
(b) For *most* names, their success as tools for communication depends on their imitative powers, but there may be some names whose communicative powers depend purely on convention.

The *sklērotēs* example might have been thought to point to (b), since Socrates seemed to conclude from it that, at least in this case, its 'correctness' consisted in nothing but custom or agreement. But it was still a case where *some* resemblance obtained (the letter R), and therefore not in fact good evidence that resemblance can be dispensed with altogether. I shall return to this point shortly.

[26] 435c4–5, ἀλλὰ μὴ ὡς ἀληθῶς, τὸ τοῦ Ἑρμογένους, γλίσχρα ᾖ ἡ ὁλκὴ αὕτη τῆς ὁμοιότητος. The back-reference is to 414c3, where Hermogenes remarked, of Socrates' decoding of *technē*, καὶ μάλα γε γλισχρῶς, 'and very stickily'. For discussion of this metaphor's meaning, cf. Williams (1982: 93). As Socrates' reply at 414c4–d5 shows, the stickiness in question is the tendency of words, during their passage through time, both to get extra letters accruing to them and to have old ones rub off (*technē*, on Socrates' diagnosis, has had both these mishaps befall it). So in the present context at 435c4–5 the allusion is almost certainly once more to the L that has intruded into *sklērotēs* and the element of semantic convention which that accrual has made necessary.

We must first ask whether any help can be obtained from the further illustration that Socrates has now offered, the case of number? It is mysterious exactly why he thinks that convention must *inevitably* play a part in the names of numbers in particular.[27] Presumably this expectation somehow derives from the fact that there are infinitely many of them ('where do you think you're going to get a supply of names to attach *to each single number* . . .?'); but that does not make it any clearer why they should not, at least in principle, bear names that entirely succeed in imitating them. Provided that the numbers 1–10 were named imitatively,[28] the other numbers might all be successfully described (as in e.g. 'four-teen', 'six-ty-two' etc.) as their combinations or multiples. In fact, the number system, in ancient Greek as in modern English, looks like a uniquely good advertisement for the power of names to signify by description. And not just that. It is actually quite hard to envisage how a system of names for numbers could work *without* being built on descriptive power, since otherwise an infinite series of names would have to be learnt, one by one, before the student had a complete command of arithmetic. Socrates was apparently acknowledging as much when he said '. . . where do you think you're going to get, to apply to numbers, a supply of names which resemble every single one of them, if you don't allow your consent and agreement to have some authority concerning correctness of names?' (435b7–c2). That is, an element of convention must be permitted *in order to ensure that the names of the numbers resemble them*. This is far from being an outright abandonment of the imitation theory.

Why then does Socrates appeal in particular to the task of naming numbers in order to establish that convention must play a part? Only on an implausibly literal version of the resemblance thesis, e.g. one where the name for a million had to consist of a million sounds, would Socrates' point make ready sense. But for that very reason, it must be suspected that what he intends here is something very like that, in other words something in the spirit of the Two Cratyluses argument (pp. 137–8 above): the names of numbers could not *totally* resemble them, or they would (among other things) have to be indefinitely long. Much as in a painting of Cratylus his third dimension, his movements, and various other of his features have to be conveyed by the devices available to the art of static two-dimensional

[27] There has been some high-quality discussion of the numbers example, especially Schofield 1982: 78–9, Reeve 1998: xxxix–xl, Barney 2001: 132–4. My own conclusions are closest to those of Barney.

[28] That numbers, like many items etymologised earlier, are non-sensible entities seems no bar to their being imitated. Cf. the holding up of fingers for counting: there is no reason why this familiar act should not have a counterpart in letters and syllables, whatever the precise mode of representation might prove to be (Socrates not having included numbers in his etymological survey).

representation, so too the length of a large number has to be captured through the devices of multiplication and addition; and it is the established conventions for the formation of compound number-names that provide this vital short-cut. If that is Socrates' point in arguing that resemblance cannot do the whole job, he is very far from conceding that resemblance can ever be dispensed with altogether. In a case like that of the numbers, convention may be needed to establish the rules by which descriptive *economy* is attained, but for all that the system remains fundamentally imitative, and the conventions are strictly subservient to the goal of successful imitation.

7 BREAKING THE DEADLOCK

Then what about the *sklērotēs* case? Didn't that, at least, reduce correctness of names to mere convention? We need to look at it again. Socrates' argument begins with a move whose significance has been missed (434c10–d6). He asks Hermogenes about the Eretrian form of the word, *sklērotēr*, with a particular focus on the differing final letter – R in Eretrian, S in Attic:

SOCR. Then do the R and the S resemble the same thing, and does it communicate the same thing to the Eretrians by ending in R as it does to us by ending in S? Or is there one group of us to whom it fails to communicate that?
CRAT. No, it communicates it to both groups.
SOCR. In the respect in which R and S are alike, or in the respect in which they are not?
CRAT. In the respect in which they are alike.
SOCR. Are they alike in all respects?
CRAT. They are, at any rate, with regard to equally communicating motion.

This has been construed as an independent and uncompleted attempt at derailing Cratylus' theory, by delicately hinting that the Eretrian form of the word is more correct than the Attic form, having in its variant final letter a second occurrence of the sound conveying hardness.[29] But I do not think that can be right. On the contrary, the point of Socrates' questioning is to *disarm* any idea that the Eretrian final R connotes hardness. What he gets Cratylus to concede is that, since the Attic final S is there to connote motion (S having been set down as a sound that indicates blowing, and hence motion), the final R in the Eretrian version, being the counterpart of the Attic final S, must be present for the same purpose. He has carefully prepared for this move by securing Cratylus' agreement that R signifies

[29] Schofield 1982: 74–5; Barney 2001: 124.

both motion *and* hardness (434c). The point is, precisely, that the Eretrian form is *not*, as might at first appear, more correct than the Attic one, since its additional R is there to indicate something other than hardness.

Why did Socrates make this move? We have learnt in the earlier etymologies, especially those of Hestia and Apollo (401c, 405c), that the etymologist should consider a word not just in its Attic form but also in other dialect variants, since those variations may enrich our understanding of the word's overall profile. Thus for example it was by taking account of a regional variant of *ousia*, the Doric *ōsia*, that Socrates and Hermogenes discovered an ancient association between being and flux (401d).[30] In the case of 'hardness' then Cratylus might, had he learnt the lessons of the foregoing etymologies, have gone on to invoke the Eretrian form, with its additional R, to show that hardness is after all dominant in the word, outnumbering softness sounds by a ratio of two to one. By getting Cratylus to agree that the final R has a different function from this, Socrates has forestalled that defensive move.

Once we appreciate that this must be his purpose, we can further see that Socrates has deliberately chosen a word in which the appropriate R sound and the inappropriate L sound are present *in exactly equal numbers*. He did not look for (or at any rate did not find) a word in which the inappropriate sounds outnumber the appropriate ones, but one in which they tie for first place, and he made his pre-emptive move about the Eretrian form in order to ensure that this level score would not be challenged.

Now and only now can we see the precise point of the whole argument. When Socrates gets Cratylus to agree that it is nothing but convention that allows us to understand each other when the word *sklērotēs* is uttered (for the admission that custom has a role at 434e–435a is made solely with regard to this one example), that is because the word resembles hardness and softness in equal measures, so that only an independent awareness of its conventional meaning can *break the deadlock*.

In the painting analogy, the equivalent would be a portrait which looks like some man and like some woman to an equal degree: it has his face, but her ears, hair and smile. It resembles both in equal measures, so that we cannot tell whose portrait it is *until we read the caption*. Likewise *sklērotēs* presents the naturalist with a problem because it vocally resembles two contrary things in equal measures, and we cannot tell which one it is an imitation of *without consulting linguistic convention*.

[30] Cf. p. 106 above, on the exploitation of a Doric form for 'moon' at 409b–c.

This now accounts for the mixed signals we have been given. In the special case of *sklērotēs*, the name's 'correctness' does, as Socrates says at 435a–b, come down to mere agreement, since its imitative powers are insufficient to determine its signification, and convention must be called in to break the deadlock. Nevertheless, as he also says in the immediate context (435b–c), the upshot is only that agreement, custom and convention make *some* contribution to communication, and to the correctness of names. This is because he is still assuming – and makes the assumption clear in his choice of *sklērotēs* as his example – that just as a portrait would not be a portrait at all if it bore *no* salient visual resemblance to its subject, so a name would not be a name at all if it bore no salient vocal resemblance to its object.

8 RESEMBLANCE VINDICATED

Socrates' final position is therefore not the reversion to conventionalism that it has so often been taken to be.[31] Showing that convention must play some part in signification is simply the positive counterpart of his preceding demonstration to Cratylus that a name need not be a *perfect* vocal imitation of its object. But that names are, in their very nature, *some* kind of vocal imitations is a thesis, massively documented in the etymological section, from which Socrates never retreats.

The *limiting case* of successful imitation, the one which gave rise to a deadlock that only an appeal to linguistic custom could break, was the *sklērotēs* example, where there was a 50–50 split between positively appropriate and positively inappropriate sounds. We may infer that if the balance had tipped, however marginally, in favour of the inappropriate sounds, the word would have had to be disqualified from being the thing's name. Returning, in this light, to the choice we earlier faced (p. 141), we can now vindicate formulation (a): 'For *any* name, its success as a tool for communication depends, at least largely, on its imitative powers, but may also depend on a degree of convention.'

Surprising as this result may be, it seems to me clear that it does represent Socrates' view, and not his view of some hypothesised ideal language, but of the actual language of his own culture. The way in which words secure their hold on the objects they name is fundamentally imitative, and *no* exception is admitted to the generalisation. It may at first seem to set an impossible

[31] See the perceptive remarks of Barney 2001: 134–6 as to why we cannot read this part of the dialogue as vindicating conventionalism.

standard for the Greek vocabulary to meet: for example, how can *laas* mean stone, when it contains one softness sound (L) and no hardness sounds at all?[32] But we must here remind ourselves that each letter is assumed to have multiple imitative powers, and it might well turn out that, for someone who had developed the theory of primary sounds further than Socrates has been able to do in one afternoon, the L in this word would – like the final R of the Eretrian *sklērotēr* – turn out to have a contextually determined function that was appropriate to the word's meaning and simply irrelevant to the soft–hard polarity.[33] (Compare the modern use of acronyms, in which every letter signifies, yet none is limited to a single signification.)

It is vital to keep reminding ourselves that Socrates' single afternoon spent on the construction in outline of an etymological science, while richly informative about what he takes to be the principles of word-analysis, cannot aspire to either completeness or systematic rigour when it comes to displaying those principles in operation.

[32] I owe the example to Piero Pucci.

[33] Alternatively the name might, when fully analysed, embody a *negation* of the softness connoted by its L (cf. n. 22 above). We must keep reminding ourselves that Socrates is affording us no more than a glimpse of the full rules that must govern the name-maker's art. For example, although the mere presence of appropriate and inappropriate sounds in a primary name has been the focus, the positions of those sounds ought to play an important part as well. Thus in the names of the letters (393d7–e10) the bulk of the work is done by the *first* sound in each, clearly in virtue of its position rather than its frequency.

CHAPTER 7

A Platonic outcome

I THE PRINCIPLES OF ETYMOLOGY

We have seen Socrates nearing his final verdict on the nature–convention debate. His demonstration that names must rely on some degree of convention in order to succeed in signifying things was not, it turned out, any kind of vindication of Hermogenes' common-sense conventionalist thesis. It was simply one element in his refutation of Cratylus' thesis that names map onto reality with a perfect precision which makes their study the ideal guide to truth. It is that refutation of Cratylus, and the matching advocacy of a different route to truth, that will occupy us as we reach the dialogue's climax. But, on the way to that finale, one of my tasks will be to gather together the series of other Platonic lessons that the dialogue has brought to light.

First let me try to characterise Socrates' final position on the correctness of names. When Socrates argued that convention must play a part, he included the following words: 'I myself too like the idea that so far as possible names do resemble their objects' (435c2–3). The expressions 'I . . . like the idea' (literally 'it pleases (*areskei*) me that . . .') and 'so far as possible' have sometimes led to the impression that Socrates is either presenting little more than a pipedream (wouldn't it be nice if names really were vocal portraits?), or else more formally setting out the norms for an ideal language.[1] There is actually no good reason to think so. The same verb is commonly used by Plato for indicating endorsement of a doctrine,[2] and has by this point

[1] On this latter interpretation, see p. 46 above.

[2] E.g. *Tht.* 157d7, 189d4, 202c8, cf. 202d8. ἀρέσκειν is in fact the same verb as later came, in its participial form ἀρέσκοντα (Latin *placita*), to serve as a technical term for philosophical 'doctrines'. See also Ademollo (forthcoming) for a defence of this interpretation. Hence such translations and paraphrases as 'it pleases me that names *should be* as far as possible like things' (Méridier 1931, Williams 1982: 92, Schofield 1982: 66–7, 80–1, Reeve 1998, Barney 2001: 106, 111) are I think misleading. Nor, I believe, should we gloss 'so far as possible' (κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν, 435c3) as 'if it were possible' (Schofield 1982: 80 n. 6), a sense which the phrase could not bear at the closely matching 422d11–e1. Better are Dalimier

in the *Cratylus* already been used that way by all three speakers.[3] And the qualification 'so far as is possible' is not a new limitation conceded by Socrates, but was built into the etymological theory all along.[4] In short, we need not take anything in Socrates' words here to undermine either the seriousness of the verdict they announce or its intended applicability to language as it actually is.

Certainly that same verdict, that *names are so far as possible resemblances of things*, is exactly what Socrates has argued for consistently throughout the dialogue. That the resemblance is only 'so far as possible' is a limitation which damages Cratylus' position, but not Socrates', and which, as I emphasised in Chapter 2 §7, conforms to a view of the representational arts to which Plato is fully committed.

One question that needs to concern us is what happens at the bottom end of this same scale of linguistic correctness. To find out, we can revisit another part of the same passage from which I have just quoted Socrates' words. At 435c7–d1 he continues:

> . . . it may well be that things can be spoken of in the best possible way when spoken of with all or as many as possible of the sounds resembling them – that is, with appropriate sounds – *and worst when the opposite is true*.

Since the optimal cases are those where 'all or as many as possible' of the sounds are 'appropriate', the 'opposite' – the worst kind of primary name[5] – might be either of the following:

(a) a primary name in which *few or none* of the sounds are *appropriate*.
(b) a primary name in which *all or most* of the sounds are *inappropriate*.

By 'inappropriate' sounds I understand sounds that actually conflict with the nature of the object, like the L in *sklērotēs*, not those which are merely irrelevant to it. The presence of irrelevant sounds is never treated as problematic,[6] not even in the focal case of *sklērotēs*.

It must be (a) that Socrates in fact intends, for two reasons. First, it is supported by his earlier remarks (432e–433a), in which he concluded from close consideration of the painting analogy that a name is a name so long

(1998), 'je me plais à penser que les noms sont, autant que possible, semblables aux choses', and Fowler (1926), 'I myself prefer the theory that names are, so far as possible, like the things named.' What appeals to Socrates is the belief that names *are* like things, not a mere wish that they should be.

[3] 427e1–2, 433c9, d1, e2, 9.

[4] Cf. 422d11–e1.

[5] The counting of appropriate and inappropriate sounds would be less directly relevant to secondary (= complex) names, in that these imitate in a more structured way, by condensing entire descriptive phrases: a mere head-count of the sounds in them cannot determine their meaning.

[6] Cf. 393d7–e10.

as the thing's 'outline' is present in it, and the thing is well named when all the appropriate features are present in the name, 'badly when *few* are' (433a6). Second, we saw in Chapter 6 §§7–8 with the *sklērotēs* example that the most problematic case Socrates could raise against the imitation theory was a name with *one* appropriate element and *one* inappropriate element. If, as I take it, that represents the limiting case for the imitation theory – a word which succeeds in being a name, but only just, and thanks to custom intervening to break the deadlock – it too confirms (a), since it falls well short of the lack of fit implied by (b). However, both these considerations show in addition that (a) must be modified by the deletion of 'or none'. Nowhere in the dialogue does Socrates acknowledge a case where a name bears no resemblance at all to its object.[7] We can thus, finally, formulate the minimal criterion for resemblance between a primary name and its object as follows: *at least one* appropriate (because imitative) element, with the appropriate elements not outweighed[8] by positively inappropriate ones.

A primary name may contain all or only some appropriate components, and thus be more or less correct, but cannot have a preponderance of positively *in*appropriate components. A thing's name is its vocal portrait, in the sense that it is in virtue not just of its having been assigned to that thing but also of its mimetic description of it that the word secures its status as that thing's name. The resemblance may, at one extreme, be minimal, and at least in such cases there is no reason to deny that convention plays a part in linking name to object. The weakness of the resemblance makes such a name a poor one, but still a name. Conversely, the stronger and more detailed the resemblance of name to object, the better the name too becomes, and at the same time, one assumes, the dependence on convention for securing signification grows weaker.

It will be useful at this stage to recapitulate all the main principles of etymology that have emerged in the course of our investigation:

1 The names of things can be assumed, by and large, to have been deliberately assigned to them by our distant ancestors.
2 The ancestors who assigned these names embodied their understanding – which was in some cases superior, in other inferior – in the names they assigned.
3 Those early names are still with us, but usually in a corrupted form, so that recovery of their original form and meaning requires expertise.

[7] On the problematic case of ill-fitting personal proper names, see §4 below.

[8] I say 'outweighed' rather than 'outnumbered' in order to cater for the special case of the names of letters, on which see p. 146 n. 33 above.

4 Words were even in their original forms compressed, sometimes with sounds transposed, and have subsequently undergone sound shifts and accretions for the sake of euphony alone, thus becoming even harder to decipher.
5 A name is a vocal *instrument* whose function is *to instruct by separating the being* of the object to which it has been assigned.
6 A name's *power* lies in its success in separating the being of its object, by whatever vocal or descriptive means.
7 Two names that succeed in separating the same being (extensional equivalence) have the same power, and participate in the same species-Form of name, but do not necessarily mean exactly the same thing (intensional equivalence).
8 A name fulfils its function, i.e. is a *correct* name, to the extent that it imitates the object's being or nature, analogously to a portrait.
9 This imitation is never so perfect as to exclude any role for linguistic custom in securing the name's meaning.
10 A complex name may analyse into either a (predicative) description (*rhēma*) of its object, or a complete statement (*logos*) about it.
11 The component words revealed by such analysis admit of similar analysis, and so on until *primary names* are reached.
12 Primary names do not consist of further names, but of elementary sounds (letters) each of which has its own imitative significance.
13 Each of these elementary sounds may have more than one imitative significance, determined by context.
14 The etymologist must learn to detect the salient phonetic/semantic components of a word, and to ignore the others.
15 Two or more candidate decodings of the same name may be complementary, or may be alternatives.
16 Of two alternative decodings, the more subtle and/or complex is preferable.
17 The range of variants of a single word over the dialects, or over its grammatical inflections, may be examined synoptically to enrich its profile.
18 Even what, taken in isolation, seems a far-fetched etymology may acquire credibility when taken jointly with kindred ones.
19 A primary name may contain all or only some appropriate components, and thus be more or less correct, but cannot have a preponderance of positively *in*appropriate components.
20 Some names may be foreign imports and therefore not susceptible to (Greek) etymology.

Why, as implied by Principle 8, is a name a more correct name in virtue of resembling its object more closely? The answer will depend on the name's function: to instruct by separating its object's being (Principle 5). At the simplest level, this separation of being is the function of helping the sentence containing the name to secure reference to some subject or object – marking off what the thing in question *is*. At this level, the name's function or 'power' is to separate the thing's being, while imitation is the means by which it achieves that separation, the feature of the name that enabled it to become *that* thing's name. The more closely it imitates its object, the better a name it is (in so far as it more successfully marks off the object's being), and it is in its imitative success that a name's 'correctness' is in fact to be located. The most correct names are the most accurately imitative.

At the highest level, as we have also seen, the name's function is one which only a dialectician can discharge – using the name in a search for its object's 'being' in the much richer sense that corresponds to 'essence'. At this high level, the name's resemblance to its object must be assumed to have a greatly enhanced value. If the resemblance is sufficiently accurate, it does not merely secure reference to the object to which it has been assigned, but offers guidance in the investigation of its being. Even then, the resemblance cannot be sufficient to provide knowledge, which (as Socrates will shortly argue) can come only from study of the thing in its own right; but it will facilitate the process of dialectical questioning, which itself does in optimal circumstances lead to knowledge. Unfortunately, very few names are of sufficient quality to be dialectically useful in this special way. In fact, in the area in which Platonic dialectic typically concentrates its efforts, that of moral and intellectual value, the word *eudaimonia* (see Chapter 2 §5) may even be the sole example of a really well-made name.

2 MORAL SEMANTICS

What then about all those innumerable value terms which Socrates himself in the *Cratylus* condemns as misleading portrayals of their objects? How do they succeed in being names at all? Even here, we must not suppose that they lack the minimal resemblance that would give them their signification. It is a frequent theme of Plato's Socrates[9] that the names of the virtues often signify what are in reality no more than pseudo-virtues – which might be either 'demotic' virtues, or natural ones. A demotic virtue is a *habituated* disposition for a proper behaviour pattern – for one of the modes of behaviour

[9] E.g. *Euthyd.* 281b4–e5, *Meno* 88a6–c4, *Phd.* 68c5–69a5, *Rep.* VII 518d9–519a1.

which we call just, brave etc. – while a natural virtue is an *innate* disposition of that same kind. Both are uninformed by any intellectual understanding, and are therefore inherently unstable, since without the support of wisdom they are no more capable of producing correct than incorrect conduct. For example mere fearlessness without rational discretion may lead to a foolhardy act rather than a genuinely courageous one. That kind of instability makes them mere likenesses of real virtue[10] but they *are* still likenesses of it, and in a Platonic context it is no misnomer when, thanks to their likeness, original and copy both get called by the same name; indeed, this relation of 'eponymy' captures for Plato the way in which particulars are entitled to be named after the Forms that they imperfectly resemble.[11] Hence although the original name-makers did partly misdescribe justice, wisdom and other values, it really was justice, wisdom etc. – and not some other items – that they were partly misdescribing.[12]

This outcome may help explain why Plato's Socrates can set out, as he typically does in the dialogues, to define a term which is at present partly misused, without worrying that what he ends up defining will be not the original definiendum at all but something else. At the end of a definitional inquiry into, say, justice, why should we accept that the newly discovered Form is the very same thing we were referring to when, in launching the inquiry, we asked 'What is justice?' This problem, which Plato himself spotlights in the guise of Meno's Paradox,[13] may invite a variety of answers, some epistemological, others ontological. But there are also linguistic avenues to answering it, provided that we are prepared to recognise the *Cratylus*' findings as an integral part of Plato's thought, and not an optional extra that can be safely sidelined. The naming theory, as it finally emerges from the *Cratylus*, offers explicit reasons why even a defective mimetic correspondence of name to object is enough to enable it to be that object's name, and thus to ensure that the word defined is, from start to finish of the definitional inquiry, the name of the definiendum.

[10] Cf. *Smp.* 212a4 on mere 'images of virtue'.

[11] *Phd.* 102b3, 103b8, *Prm.* 130e6, 133d2. Note also Plato's use of 'beautiful' (καλόν, as distinct from 'the Beautiful itself') to span both the Form and its instantiations: *Rep.* 475e9–476a8, 479d4.

[12] The related Platonic thesis that opposites are compresent in particulars may (as Gail Fine suggests to me) explain why a word like *sklērotēs* contains an element imitating softness as well as hardness (see Ch. 6 §§6–7): not a simple oversight in the construction of the name, but an effect of the name-makers' concentration on sensible hardness, which is always compresent with softness. It is a complication for this suggestion that, according to *Phd.* 102d6–9, immanent largeness cannot *itself* be small, and the equivalent might well apply to immanent hardness. (Cf. Irwin 1977: 5 for a partly similar idea with regard to the dizziness of the name-makers about moral concepts, as described at 411a–c.)

[13] *Meno* 80d5–81a2.

3 WORDS AND THINGS

The same outcome also helps account for Plato's attitude to etymology in other dialogues than the *Cratylus*. In these, as I sought to show in Chapter 2, without relying on etymology as a source of knowledge he does nevertheless again and again treat it as offering genuine illumination about its objects. Since, as the *Cratylus* shows, the name-makers may well have encoded a component of potentially misleading information, it was right to wonder why Plato should retain even a minimal degree of confidence in etymology. We now have an answer: although names may mislead, the very fact that they ever succeeded in becoming names guarantees that they display *some* degree of resemblance to their objects. (In this respect, Socrates can endorse an appropriately weakened version of Cratylus' argument that names must be wholly veridical or they would not be names at all (435b–c); Socrates' is the weaker position that they must contain *some* truth or they would not be names at all.) Hunting, by the science of etymological decoding, for the resemblances that bind names to their objects is an entirely legitimate and potentially enlightening procedure, even if its results can never be self-guaranteeing, and will often disappoint.

On the other side, Plato's Socrates is prone to saying that names don't matter – that what is important is not what a thing is called, but what it is. Thus in the *Charmides* he remarks (163d):

> Critias, almost as soon as you started to speak I understood what you were saying – that things which are one's own you call 'good', and acts of producing good things you call 'actions'. You see, on innumerable occasions I've heard Prodicus making distinctions about names. But you have my permission to assign names in whatever way you like: just make it clear to what it is that you are applying any name you use.

It would be easy enough to catalogue further statements of this kind, and it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that one central message of the *Euthydemus*, in reaction to a virtuoso display of sophistry, is the importance of focusing on things, rather than on mere words. Prodicus' fine lexicographical distinctions are regularly treated in Plato's text with the disdain shown in the lines just quoted, or at least with the insinuation that they are of no more than marginal philosophical interest. Nor does Plato, unlike Democritus before him or Aristotle after him, make any significant effort to replace ordinary Greek usage with a philosopher's technical terminology. Even the business of disambiguating words, which many since Aristotle have regarded as a fundamental tool of philosophy, and have for that reason frequently assumed Plato must be practising or at least inviting his readers

to practise, is almost entirely missing from the dialogues.[14] In fact in the *Euthydemus* (277e3–278a7), on the one occasion in the entire corpus when Socrates explicitly points out an equivocation as the key to solving a philosophical problem, he does his level best to devalue it by describing it as the sort of thing you could learn by studying the 'correctness of names' with Prodicus.

I do not see the tenor of remarks like these as in contradiction with the *Cratylus*.[15] On the contrary, despite the imitation theory of names vindicated there, the dialogue's final conclusion is, exactly as implied in the remarks I have quoted, that knowledge comes from the study of things, not of names. The *Cratylus*, properly understood, is the dialogue which can enable us both to see why Plato considers the study of language to be of relatively minor importance, and at the same time to understand why he is nevertheless convinced of the powers of etymology and exploits them for his own ends.

4 PERSONAL AND FOREIGN NAMES

In addition to the above question posed by value terms, two further complications for the natural descriptiveness of names need to be addressed.[16]

The first is as follows. We may recall from Chapter 4 §5 Socrates' observation back at 397b that some personal proper names fit their owners badly, particularly those that are simply inherited from an ancestor and others that – like 'Theophilus', 'god-loved' – express parents' hopes for their child's future, hopes which may well remain unfulfilled. Are we to infer

[14] Two examples. None of the passages held to distinguish senses of 'be' in the *Sophist* says that it is doing that, and arguably all are better explained in other ways. And at *Tht.* 206c7–8 the presumption that Socrates must be distinguishing lexical senses of the word λόγος has led to its regular mistranslation. What he in fact says is 'What does he [the anonymous author of the definition of knowledge as true judgement plus a λόγος] want λόγος to signify to us? He seems to me to mean one of three things.' That is, the only meaning in question is speaker's meaning, and that ranges, not over different lexical meanings of the term, but (as 208c2 confirms) over three *species* of λόγος. Plato's regular distinctions between species of a single genus is not in itself one between *senses* of the genus term (the distinction between man and horse does not make 'mammal' an equivocal term). Eudemus (fr. 37a 26 Wehrli) did, it is true, say that Plato introduced τὸ δισσόν, apparently 'double signification'. But he is, I believe, simply following Aristotle, *SE* 165b30–4, where both the example of a sophism and its solution in terms of homonymy (equated with the διττόν, = δισσόν, at ib.35) are taken from Plato, the Platonic source being the very same passage of the *Euthydemus* which I am here maintaining to be unique in the entire Platonic corpus.

[15] I am aware of just one remark in the corpus which conflicts with the *Cratylus*. This is the comment in the *Seventh Letter* that 'nothing prevents the things that are now called "round" being called "straight" and vice versa' (434b), which sounds uncomfortably like Hermogenes' original position (*Crat.* 385a, recapitulated at 433e2–434a3 with Socrates' express disapproval added). Differing from the main run of the corpus is something this sentence has in common with much of the philosophical material in the Letter, whose authenticity has long been in dispute, and rightly so.

[16] I owe both these points to Charles Brittain.

that these ill-fitting names fail to be names – in other words that Socrates agrees with Cratylus – who has insisted all along that 'Hermogenes' is not Hermogenes' name – that some given names are not really their purported owners' names after all?

It may be significant that, although personal proper names provided him with an easy introduction to the theory of naming, Socrates eventually decided to ignore them, remarking 'I think we should abandon names of this kind: our greatest probability of finding correctly assigned names is in connection with those things *that have a permanent being and nature*' (397b6–8). This may indicate that Socrates' theory of the correctness of names can, even in principle, be expected to work only for things that do not change their nature. In other words, Socrates' linguistic naturalism is a theory that names obtain their hold on things by imitating their natures, and since a thing's nature is standardly understood as something *permanently* characterising it, the only fully natural names for individuals may turn out to be ones that pick out their fixed natures and thus can track them through time, for example 'man', 'human', 'horse'.

As for ill-fitting personal names, Socrates could still insist that it is resemblance to a projected future self that enables them to become names in the first place – much as your passport photo, taken when you were a child, is still your photo in virtue of its likeness to your past self. Theophilus' name described his nature as his parents optimistically saw it, or as it was meant to be by the normal laws of family inheritance – otherwise they would not have assigned it to him. When, to their disappointment, he grew up to be hated by the gods, it must for Socrates remain a serious question whether it did thereafter continue to be his name. If at least in some attenuated sense it did, as common name-usage assumes, that was perhaps thanks to our permissive criteria for attaching diachronic personal identity to a lifetime which is in reality no more than a series of overlapping episodes (criteria which Plato exploits for other purposes in a well-known passage at *Symposium* 207c–208b).

This seems to be an untidy corner of the theory, awaiting more work, but not a difficulty which Socrates himself ever treats as fatal to the resemblance theory. In view of his own early decision to sideline personal proper names, we must not allow ourselves the assumption that the difficulty they create is permitted to undermine his entire theory. Even the emphatically recurrent question whether, and if so how, 'Hermogenes' can function as Hermogenes' personal name is teasingly left by Socrates as unresolved on the last page of the dialogue as it was on the first. His closing words (440e4–5) are that Hermogenes will accompany (*propempsei*) Cratylus to the countryside.

As Rachel Barney has seen,[17] this must be an oblique allusion to Hermes' role as *propompos*, 'accompanier'. It thus leaves us with the suspicion that, despite all the leg-pulling about it, Hermogenes' name may be an appropriate one after all. Perhaps other dubiously appropriate personal names could be rescued by a similar scrutiny. Plato's chosen ending to the dialogue confirms that this particular problem is not one that he has resolved, one way or the other, to his own satisfaction.[18]

The second additional complication that needs to be addressed is the following. As Principle 20 reminds us, foreign loan words constitute a problematic category. Why should we assume that *they* satisfy the minimal resemblance requirement? The answer will be that these foreign imports (including the words for 'fire' and 'water', according to Socrates at 409d–410a) must have been successfully mimetic in their own original languages, since all languages, and not just Greek, are based on the same principle of 'correctness of names', albeit each evidently using a different sound system to achieve that end. An equivalent theory, based on English vocabulary, about language always being descriptive in origin and nature would not be seriously compromised by the discovery of foreign imports like 'savoir faire' and 'festschrift', which could be assumed to be successfully descriptive even if we happened not to know their original meaning.

5 THE PHILOSOPHICAL CURRICULUM

One aspect of the etymological survey now deserves special emphasis. At 415b–c, Socrates is ready to point out when he and Hermogenes have temporarily departed from the correct sequence of topics. He also talks of his procedure as a race, in which he has to keep his chariot on course until the finishing line (420d1–3), and I take this too to refer to the need to work through the entire philosophical curriculum, in the correct sequence of laps, before he is done.[19] (I choose the word 'curriculum' advisedly: this

[17] Barney 2001: 160.

[18] The same authorial intent is no doubt detectable in the closing reply assigned to Cratylus (440e6–7), that Socrates should continue to think this over. Mantas Adomenas has pointed out to me a related subtlety. At 407e1–3, Hermogenes says ἀλλὰ ποιήσω ταῦτα, ἔτι γε ἓν ἐρόμενός σε περὶ ῾Ερμοῦ, ἐπειδή με καὶ οὔ φησιν Κρατύλος ῾Ερμογένη εἶναι. The underlined letters are a near-anagram of his own name, constituting an authorial hint (in view of the context) at yet another way in which he may after all be the 'Hermogenes' that Cratylus says he is not: he is constantly 'asking just one' more question. For anagrams in etymology, cf. p. 38 n. 23 above; they fall under the notion of transposition, for which see principle 4 (p. 150 above).

[19] The chariot-race theme is very well documented and discussed by Barney (1998 and 2001: 60–73), although she herself interprets it differently, as symbolising the agonistic spirit of Socrates' foray into etymology.

metaphor applies exactly the same image of an educational programme as a race-course.) Thus at 414b, having digressed from the virtue of 'courage' or 'manliness' (*andreia*) in order to run through the remaining gender vocabulary, Socrates uses the metaphor of 'driving off the track' specifically to acknowledge this deviation from the correct order. Here then we have an important sign that the huge battery of etymologies to which he turned after the initial sampling of proper names was selected as representing a preconceived philosophical curriculum.

The full sequence started with cosmology and proceeded to consider the whole range of virtues and vices. Since this sequence was determined by an apparently casual mixture of Hermogenes' questions and Socrates' own choices, there is a strong impression that in reality it was controlled, not by either speaker in the dialogue, but by the dramatist, Plato himself. What is its structure, and what can it teach us?

Plato's heirs in the Academy, followed in due course by the Stoics and most subsequent philosophers in antiquity, were to divide philosophy into three parts: physics, ethics and logic, the last of these a much broader philosophical discipline than its modern namesake, often including epistemology and related metaphysical topics. Although Plato did not operate with this full tripartition, the *Cratylus* offers neglected evidence that he did anticipate it to a considerable extent.

The first group of etymologies (Chapter 4 §6) works its way fairly systematically through cosmology or physics: the classification of living beings into divine and human kinds is followed by a descending progression through cosmic entities – first astronomical phenomena, then the elements – followed finally by the cyclical aspects of time which unite these last two classes into a single teleological structure.

Socrates and Hermogenes then, with a fanfare to indicate a major shift of topic (411a–c), turn to ethics, and work through the different classes of virtues in, once again, a descending sequence: intellectual, moral, technical. After these, the underlying constituents of ethical discourse are examined: evaluative terms, emotive states, judgemental faculties, the will, and finally the apparatus of truth and falsity. This last is of particular interest. Logic and metaphysics are not given a separate heading, but the closing set of etymologies in the ethical section clearly corresponds to these two aspects of Platonic philosophy: the final group of terms, 'name' (*onoma*), 'truth' (*alētheia*), 'falsity' (*pseudos*), 'being' (*on*) and 'not-being' (*ouk on*) (421a–c), recognisably represents the subject matter of Plato's *Sophist* at the point where it turns to the analysis of propositional truth and falsity in the light of the preceding metaphysical division of the Greatest Kinds (261c–263d).

It appears, then, that for Plato philosophy is essentially bipartite: cosmology on the one hand, ethics on the other. Logic and metaphysics are a subdivision of ethics, because they represent the objects and contents of wisdom, a predominantly intellectual virtue which is treated along with the moral virtues.

In short, Plato has an embryonic tripartition of philosophy into physics, ethics and logic, but it is contained within a more basic bipartition. This dominant bipartition is based on a seminal distinction set out in the *Timaeus* (29b–c) between two kinds of discourse (*logos*). One kind of discourse is about the sensible world, and, because of that world's instability, yields only opinion (*doxa*). The other kind is about intelligibles, and can yield knowledge (*epistēmē*). This latter kind has to be understood as including all the subject matter considered in Plato's other dialogues: not only ethics, but the metaphysical and epistemological concepts with which ethical research is inextricably bound up.

Reflection on this schema in the *Cratylus* can help us to understand the origins of the eventual tripartition of philosophy within Plato's own school and beyond. Sextus Empiricus[20] is, it now seems, entirely correct when he informs us that the tripartition of philosophy into physics, ethics and logic (note the order) first became implicit (*dynamei*) in Plato, although first explicit only with his pupil Xenocrates, followed by the Peripatetics and Stoics.

Recognition that this semi-formal curriculum is already present and at work in the *Cratylus* is important if we are to understand Plato's different approaches to its two main halves. The existing tradition already embodies superior understanding of divinity and its place in an essentially fluid cosmos. Plato will, with his own contribution to physics in the *Timaeus*, be able to capitalise on that state of understanding: he will not have to tear the legacy up and start again. But that same tradition has, for reasons directly connected with its excessive concentration on physics, made no headway with understanding the values that can actually make a human life worth living. Progress in that search will have to start from Socrates' well-founded intuition that there are unchanging standards waiting to be known by the science of ethics, once that science finally gets under way. And it will have to advance through the work that Plato will do, both on the metaphysical construal of those standards and on the dialectical business of articulating their individual definitions.

20 Sextus Empiricus, *M* VII 16.

6 NO KNOWLEDGE THROUGH NAMES

This consideration brings us seamlessly to the final topic of the dialogue, one that has been looming for some while: *where is knowledge to come from?* Cratylus has still not abandoned his conviction that, thanks to the perfect mimetic match between names and things, the study of names is *the* discipline for securing knowledge (435d–436a). But what, Socrates wants to know, if the original name-makers were ill informed, and encoded their misinformation in the names they coined (436b)? In reply, Cratylus appeals above all to the extraordinary mutual *coherence* of the story told by the etymologies (436c). He means, of course, their constant underlining of flux. Socrates' response is twofold. First he denies that coherence entails truth: you can tell an internally coherent story which is systematically false. Even more important, though, is his second objection, which is to question whether the results of etymology really *are* so mutually coherent.

Actually, Socrates argues (436b–437d), you can find numerous positive value words – especially those relating to knowledge – which, on the same etymological principles as have already been employed, indicate stability and not motion; and likewise many negative value words that imply motion. Socrates proceeds to catalogue and analyse these words.[21]

After completing his examination of this new set of terms (to which I shall turn in a moment), Socrates will present the outcome as an irresoluble contradiction (438d2–4): 'Since names are in conflict, with one set claiming that *it* resembles the truth and the other set claiming that *it* does, what further criterion have we got to settle it?' This has regularly been read as a refutation of the entire etymological procedure: it can just as easily establish 'not-p' as 'p'. But the inference needs more careful stating. Socrates will go on explicitly at the end of the dialogue (439c) to reaffirm his conviction that the flux etymologies are *exegetically* (although not philosophically) correct:

[21] An alert reader of the dialogue may already have noticed this issue looming much earlier. At 414b the word τέχνη is itself analysed etymologically: its significant hard core appears to be the roots of ἔχειν, 'hold', and νοῦς, 'intelligence', 'holding on to intelligence'. Oddly, this example comes in a passage where Socrates is decoding the names of positive states as indicating flux, whose role and value in the world was, he suggests, massively exaggerated by the early namegivers, and interpreting the names of negative states as indicating stability; yet, without comment or explanation from either speaker, τέχνη comes out as a stability word, '*holding on to* intelligence' (for ἔχειν and cognates as connoting stability, cf. σχέσις at 424a9, where it is equivalent to δοῦν, 'binding', at 421c5). Is this an inadvertent admission by the early name-makers of their own lack of respect for *technē*? Or is it that even they, despite their misplaced obsession with flux, could not avoid the fleeting insight that their own activity, in order to be a *technē*, had no choice but to embody some kind of methodological stability?

that is, that they really do capture the beliefs of the name-makers. Moreover, it is highly significant that, with one exception, the new series of 'stability' etymologies are of words which have *not* in the earlier account been etymologised as implying flux.[22] That one exception is *epistēmē*, 'knowledge', which was originally analysed as implying something about 'following': one should aspirate the initial 'e', to make it *hep-istēme*, derived from *hepesthai*, 'to follow' (412a3–4). Now, however (437a5–8), Socrates explicitly rejects that earlier analysis, and argues that it is 'more correct' to put the aspiration in the middle,[23] yielding *ep-histēmē*, which he links to *histēmi*, 'stand': knowledge is now that which presumably has as its object (i.e. is *epi*) that which 'stands' or is stable. In a well-known passage of *Republic* v (477c–478b), this same preposition *epi* is the Platonic term of art for the relation between a mental faculty, such as knowledge, and the objects to which it is correlated. One can readily see why the new etymology is preferred over the old.

All the other etymologies in this section are of terms not covered by the earlier one. Thus, for example, *historia*, 'inquiry', is similarly to be linked to *histēmi*, 'stand', and means halting the flow of information, that is, stabilising its contents. *Mnēmē*, 'memory', is to be connected with *monē*, 'remaining': we remember what *stays put* in our minds. Conversely, *akolasia*, 'indiscipline', implies *following* (*akolouthia*) the flow. And so on. When in Chapter 5 §8 I looked at those etymologies that placed a positive value on flux, I suggested the analogy of our own phrases for intellectual success and failure: getting up to speed, following the drift, etc. on the one side, having a mental block, getting stuck etc. on the other. This time too the analogy may help. Our own language of intellectual success includes 'getting a grip', 'establishing', 'confirming', 'grasping', and even, one might dare add, 'under*standing*'; while that of failure includes 'losing your grip' and 'making a slip'. Here too, as for Socrates, the point would not be to contradict the

[22] The new list, at 437a–c, is: ἐπιστήμη, βέβαιον, ἱστορία, πιστόν, μνήμη, ἁμαρτία, συμφορά, ἀμαθία, ἀκολασία.

[23] Despite the apparent lack of parallels, ἐμβάλλειν here gives the impression of meaning, not simply 'insert' (as elsewhere), but 'insert an aspiration'. Thus 412a3–4, διὸ δὴ ἐμβάλλοντας δεῖ τὸ εἶ ἑπιστήμην αὐτὴν καλεῖν, should mean 'So one should aspirate the e and call it "hepisteme".' And 437a5–8, καὶ ὀρθότερόν ἐστιν ὥσπερ νῦν αὐτοῦ τὴν ἀρχὴν λέγειν μᾶλλον ἢ ἐμβάλλοντας τὸ εἶ ἑπιστήμην, ἀλλὰ τὴν ἐμβολὴν ποιήσασθαι, ἀντὶ τῆς ἐν τῷ εἶ, ἐν τῷ ἰῶτα, should mean 'And it is more correct to say the beginning of it as we now do, rather than to aspirate the e and say 'hepisteme', and to make the aspiration in the i instead of the e [i.e. to say 'ep-histeme'].' (Thus now Reeve 1998 *ad loc.*) If however this is thought unacceptable, see the OCT² for H. Schmidt's simple emendation (represented there by an *ad hoc* typographical device), which yields much the same sense. (I am grateful to Malcolm Schofield, Reviel Netz and David Robinson for help in understanding these two passages.)

lessons of the earlier decodings, but to show that there is a second and contrasting strand present in our vocabulary for intellectual value.

It follows that the new set of 'stability' etymologies is not presented as challenging the *exegetical* correctness of the earlier picture, but as improving and supplementing it. It reveals that the early namegivers did after all, on closer examination, manage at least to glimpse the vital Platonic truth that knowledge and other positive values should have something to do with stability. But that acknowledgement is not enough to overturn their overwhelming concentration on instability.

The most important outcome is the following: the contradiction which Socrates claims to have revealed is not an exegetical but a *philosophical* one: the ancients were not as single-mindedly and coherently convinced of the instability of cognition and goodness as at first appeared.[24] But at no point does he suggest that the exegetical principles of etymology are compromised by the contradiction. The ancients really did mean what the etymological decoding of names says they meant: but they were not as wholeheartedly Heraclitean in their views as Cratylus hoped.

This finding, that the critique at 436b–437d is of any claim the etymologies may have had to *philosophical* correctness, is exactly what the overall strategy of the dialogue demands. For the power of etymology to decode successfully – that is, its claim to exegetical correctness – has already been fully explored, and is by now no longer at issue. What *is* by now at issue is the power of etymology to teach us philosophical truths. Showing that the name-makers are revealed by their incoherence as having been deficient in understanding is vital to this project.

The enormous problem which the name-makers' incoherence poses for Cratylus is not lessened at all by an observation, which he hastily makes and as quickly regrets, that at any rate the *majority* of the etymologies agree in pointing to flux. As Socrates replies, this is not an election, to be settled by a majority verdict (437d). Then there is the question where the original name-makers got *their* knowledge from: obviously not from the study of names, Socrates points out (438a–b). And if instead, as Cratylus now suggests, the name-makers had privileged knowledge because they were divine, we come back to the problem posed by the incoherence that has been exposed in the range of products they created.

It is a short step from here to agreement by both parties that *no* intermediacy, whether that of names or of anything else, is going to do anything

[24] That the earlier impression of coherence, now being overturned, was itself one of *philosophical* coherence is confirmed by 418e–419a.

but hinder the study of the important realities. The superior way to study these realities is to examine them directly, both each in its own right and via the interrelations that exist between them (438e).

There is no reason to infer from this that Socrates is proposing a non-linguistic mode of understanding.[25] That all thought is internal speech – indeed, internal *dialogue*, as I emphasised at the very start of this book – is I believe a deeply held element of Plato's philosophical rationalism, which he never renounces, and which plays a pivotal part in late dialogues like *Sophist* and *Philebus*. Socrates' contention at the close of the *Cratylus* is that the study of reality should not be mediated by the study of words themselves. But such linguistic acts as naming and predication will, as we shall shortly see, remain vitally instrumental to the study of reality as envisaged by Socrates in the closing pages.

7 NAMES AND DESCRIPTIONS

Before we embark on Socrates' final argument, it will be useful to review the dialogue's perspective on the two linguistic acts I have just mentioned – naming and predication. In Plato's late dialogue the *Sophist*, as I have observed before, the formulation of a successful statement (*logos*), capable of truth or falsity, is resolved into two asymmetrical acts: first you 'name' a subject, then you go on to 'say' (*legein*) something about it.[26] A minimal statement, such as 'Theaetetus sits', consists of just a name (*onoma*) plus a further item, the thing said of it, which Plato calls a *rhēma*. It is natural enough to think of these as, respectively, the subject and the predicate of the sentence. What the *onoma–rhēma* distinction would eventually become was to be something different – the grammatical distinction between nouns and verbs. But that postdates Plato. Although Plato had himself always recognised *onomata* and *rhēmata* as the joint components of statements,[27] this tended to amount to 'names and *descriptions*', without any suggestion that a 'description' will typically consist of just a single word. What a statement does is first name something, then *describe* it. The reduction of these 'descriptions' to single words, grammatically identifiable with verbs,

[25] I am thus resisting the interpretation of Silverman (2001).

[26] See Barney (2001: 185 n. 9), for the very attractive suggestion that at *Sph.* 262d there is an implicit etymological derivation of *legein*/*logos* from *symplekein*, 'to combine', referring to the combination of *onoma* and *rhēma*.

[27] *Crat.* 425a, 431b–c; cf. *Apol.* 17b–c, *Smp.* 198b, 199b, 221d–e, *Rep.* 601a; *Tht.* 206c–d. At *Crat.* 425a Socrates wavers, perhaps jokingly, between two identifications of the art which joins up ὀνόματα and ῥήματα into whole sentences: ὀνομαστική, the 'naming' art, and ῥητορική, which, as well as being 'rhetoric', is also the 'descriptive' art, from ῥῆμα.

is never explicitly made by Plato, even in the *Sophist*,[28] although he does sometimes (including *Cratylus* 426e), *exemplify* them with singleton verbs.

In the *Cratylus* Socrates shows his usual recognition that a complete statement requires the presence of *rhēmata* as well as *onomata*, and at least some awareness that these are functionally disparate items within the statement. Thus at 399a–b the personal proper name Diphilos is analysed as *Dii philos*, 'Dear to Zeus', and the contraction of these two words into one is said to turn it from a *rhēma* into an *onoma*, i.e. from a description into a name. Since 'Dear to Zeus' does not even contain a verb, it seems clear that *rhēma* lacks the specific connotations it acquires in the *Sophist*, and amounts either to 'predicate' in its non-grammatical sense, where it is close in meaning to 'property', or to something as linguistically informal as 'description'. In the immediate sequel, the same account is applied to the analysis of *anthrōpos*, 'human', as *anathrōn ha opōpe*, 'reviewing what he has seen', another *rhēma* which then becomes an *onoma* thanks to contraction into a single word (399b7). It is owing to this sense of *rhēma* as, roughly, 'description' that, later in the dialogue, Socrates is able to say that the etymological method as a whole is one of analysing each name into 'the *rhēmata* from which it is said' (421d–e). Nevertheless, when on occasion a name decomposes into a grammatically complete sentence, Socrates is careful to call this a *logos* and not a *rhēma*.[29] Thus, in short, the *Cratylus* is quite meticulous in its use of a fixed terminology for statements and their components.

In no obvious way does this use of terminology fall short of the insights of the *Sophist*. It is true, as I have said, that among *rhēmata* are included descriptive phrases which do not contain any finite verb. Attaching one of these to a subject does not make a complete statement without at least adding the copula to link them. But the copula does not have to be expressed by a separate word in Greek. Besides, it is quite acceptable, as we know from Aristotle's usage, to characterise for example the statement 'Socrates *is* wise' as a case of 'wise' being said of Socrates.

The chief additional refinement introduced in the *Sophist* is that *truth and falsity* enter the picture only at the level of a complete statement, consisting of *onoma* plus *rhēma*. In the *Cratylus* there is no such restriction. Truth and falsity are already found, for example, in the use even of an incorrect

[28] Cf. 385c9: a name is the 'smallest' part of a statement, with the implication that all the components of a sentence are 'names'. The line is from the passage at 385b2–d1 which I argued (pp. 10–13 above) is a survivor from an earlier edition of the *Cratylus*, but I cannot see anywhere in the remainder of the dialogue that this assumption is implicitly rejected.

[29] See 421a7–b1 for such a case: analysis in Ch. 5 §8 above, pp. 120–1. It is less clear that the λόγος at 410d6–e1 is a grammatically complete sentence, because Plato's syntax here resists precise construal.

form of address (430d; see Ch. 6 §4), before any syntactical predication has taken place. Indeed, in the same context (431b–c) Socrates added that not only names but also *rhēmata* can be falsely assigned in a way that falls short of making a full grammatical predication, for example, I suppose, by addressing someone with an ill-fitting description rather than an ill-fitting name. And he goes on directly to infer that, for this reason, a false statement is possible, because statements are simply combinations of *rhēmata* and *onomata* (431b3–c2):

> And if that is so, and it is possible to allocate names incorrectly, and not to represent what is appropriate to each person but, on occasion, what is inappropriate, one could do this same thing with descriptions (*rhēmata*). But if it is possible to impose descriptions and names in these ways, the same must apply to statements (*logoi*), since I take it that what statements are is the combination of these two.

It is implied here that, analogously to a separately assigned *onoma* or *rhēma*, the statement too gets its falsity, not from its predicate's being wrongly attached to its subject, but from the entire statement's being wrongly allocated to something – i.e., presumably, wrongly matched to the state-of-affairs which it purports to represent.

If so, it would be hard to argue that this analysis shows all the refinements of the *Sophist*'s account of falsity, lacking as it does the latter dialogue's full sense of the functional interrelation between subject and predicate. Nevertheless, the *Cratylus* does recognise both that truth and falsity result only when some word is attached to some subject, and that the formulation of complete sentences consisting of both a subject and a predicate is one, perhaps the favoured, way of achieving this. To this considerable extent, the predicational model of truth, elaborated in the *Sophist*, is operative in the *Cratylus* too. It will in fact be put to work in the dialogue's final argument, to which I now turn.

8 FORMS AND FLUX

The final argument is about Forms, and is introduced in the following words (439b10–d2):

> SOCR. Then let's go on to consider the following question, so as not to be deceived by this proliferation of names which point in the same direction. The question is whether, while those who imposed the names really did so with the thought that everything is always on the move and in flux (because that *is* what I, for my part, believe they had in their own minds), nevertheless, if they did, that's

> not the way things actually are, but having themselves fallen into a kind of whirlpool and got into a spin they are dragging us too in after them. For consider, my good friend Cratylus, the thing I often dream of: should we say that there are a Beautiful in itself, and a Good in itself, and likewise each single one of the things that are, or shouldn't we?

CRAT. I think there are, Socrates.

This exchange is important for more than one reason. First, it is here that Socrates definitively announces his conviction that the etymologies have proved, by and large, to be exegetically correct, while immediately adding his suspicion that they are not, at least so far as regards flux, philosophically correct as well. I point this out in passing as confirmation of the overall interpretation I have been advocating throughout this book, but shall not dwell on it now.

Second, the reason why the flux doctrine is probably incorrect in Socrates' view lies in its failure to allow for the existence of Forms. This is the Forms' second appearance in the dialogue, but the contrast between the two occurrences is instructive. From the earlier one (389b–390e), we learnt that any true craftsman turns his mind's eye to the Form of the artefact he is making – whether it be a shuttle, a drill or a name. That account permitted non-intellectuals to have access to Forms, given only a little technical training. At the second occurrence, in stark contrast, the Forms are something that even Socrates himself can do no more than 'dream' of. This metaphor of dreaming does not imply, as it might in modern English, a wish or hope. Rather, it is Plato's device for describing a *hypothetical* grasp of something – trading on the way that in dreams we treat things *as if* they were true or real, without knowing whether they actually are.[30] Formally, it corresponds to the methodology described by Socrates at *Phaedo* 99d–102a, where one or more appropriate Forms are 'hypothesised' as the basis for conducting a specific inquiry.

This depiction may remind us that according to *Republic* V–VII the Forms, which even for a trainee philosopher are still a matter of hypothesis, are entities to which non-philosophers have no cognitive access at all, or at the very least which they fail to distinguish properly from their multiple

[30] This use of 'dream' to indicate hypotheses is virtually explicit at *Rep.* 533b6–c3, and seems to me to be the most appropriate way to interpret the dream metaphor also at *Charm.* 173a, *Meno* 85c9–10, *Rep.* 576b, *Tht.* 201d8, *Pol.* 278e10, *Phlb.* 20b6, *Laws* 746a7, 969b6. Any temptation to read one or more of these as describing an idealising *wish*, rather than, more neutrally, a hypothesis, runs up against the *Charm.* passage, where Socrates admits he does not know whether people would be happy in the world his dream describes. A second, less common, use of 'dreaming' to convey the error of mistaking a copy for its original (*Rep.* 476c–d, 520c7, 534c5–7; *Ti.* 52b–c) is clearly inappropriate to the *Crat.* context.

instantiations.[31] Yet it is later in that same dialogue, book X, that we learn how an ordinary craftsman looks to the appropriate Form, such as that of a table or couch, and proceeds to embody it as best he can in the materials at his disposal.[32] The similar appearance of both accounts of the Forms in the *Cratylus* is strong evidence that Plato had not simply changed his mind in the course of writing the *Republic*, and that any proper understanding of the theory of Forms must accommodate and resolve the apparent conflict.

The recognition that craftsmen have full cognitive access to the Forms of their own artefacts is no more than the equivalent, in Platonic metaphysics, of Socrates' admission in the *Apology* (22c–e) that, when he quizzed the craftsmen to find out how wise they were, it emerged that they really did have knowledge relative to their own crafts, although they had none of the other knowledge they thought they had. The Forms to which, by contrast, Plato believes philosophers alone have adequate access are the very difficult but all-important value Forms, standardly exemplified as Good, Beautiful and Just, to which Socrates is now turning at the end of the dialogue. Plato never denies that we all, at least in principle, can come to know such basic Forms as equal, large and small.[33] And that same ease of access, *mutatis mutandis*, is found in the carpenter's access to the Form of table, as also in the name-maker's access to the Form of Name, despite the admission that the name-maker lacks the dialectician's grasp of the being of things.[34]

The presence of these two levels of Forms in the *Cratylus* supports the assumption that the classical theory of Forms is in view. If more evidence is needed, we should look at the locutions used by Socrates in the passage just quoted: 'Should we say that there are a Beautiful in itself (*phōmen ti einai auto kalon*), and a Good in itself, and likewise each single one of the things that are?' (439c7–d1). This existential question is very close to the language used by Socrates in the *Phaedo* to introduce Forms for the

[31] Esp. *Rep.* 476c–d.

[32] For discussion, with bibliography, of problems related to these craft Forms, see Silverman 1992: 36 n. 21.

[33] In Sedley 1998b: 127–8 I argue that Plato regards the trio large–equal–small as easily definable, and as being, unlike the value Forms, already known to Simmias and the others present in the *Phaedo* conversation. The Forms of which no one but Socrates himself appears to have knowledge, at *Phd.* 76b–c, are a now enlarged group which includes the value Forms (75c–d). The first group of Forms distinguished by Parmenides at *Parm.* 130b3–5 – likeness, one, many etc. – is often characterised as e.g. 'logico-mathematical': my preferred designation would once again be 'easily known'.

[34] The original name-makers were, we have learnt, seriously under-informed about the stability of the objects they were naming. Nevertheless, they did understand what the function of a name is, viz. to separate being. This emerges (Ch. 5 §8 above, pp. 120–1 from their own chosen name for 'name'. Their mistake, a characteristic one, was to suppose that names are necessarily as unstable as the objects they name – a mistake taken to comic extremes by Cratylus in the final phase of his life.

first time 'Do we say that there is a Just in itself, or none (*phamen ti einai dikaion auto, ē ouden*)? . . . And a Beautiful, and a Good?' (65d).[35] The one significant difference is that where in the *Phaedo* those present already do say (albeit hypothetically) that there are Forms, in the *Cratylus* we meet a more tentative Socrates who asks only 'Should we say . . .?' But that the same doctrine is in the frame is surely not to be doubted. The parallelism is important because in the *Phaedo*, more than perhaps anywhere else in Plato, these difficult value Forms have to be construed as transcendent entities, to which our souls can expect to have full cognitive access only once they have altogether left behind the sensible world.

Despite these strong indications, it has on occasion been doubted whether the entities mentioned here at the end of the *Cratylus* are the classical Platonic Forms.[36] One consideration in particular might be thought to make the hesitation prudent. When asked if he agrees that there are such things, Cratylus readily assents. Yet in no way can the Cratylus of this dialogue be seen as a member of the Socratic inner circle, like the interlocutors of the *Phaedo* gathered in Socrates' death cell, especially given what will shortly be revealed as his new-found sympathy for a radical Heraclitean ontology which denies that there are any stable natures. While to Platonically attuned readers the reference is unmistakably to the intelligible world postulated by Platonic ontology, to Cratylus Socrates' question need mean no more than whether, in addition to the beautiful things in the world, there is also such a thing as what it is for them to be beautiful. This difference in levels of understanding between the two speakers (for which there are plentiful parallels in the *Hippias Major*) is in fact strategically vital, and may be largely responsible for the inexplicit formulations which have tended to frustrate close analysis of the whole passage.

[35] I agree with Reeve (1998) that the τι should not be construed as the complement of εἶναι, but that τι . . . δίκαιον αὐτό functions as a unitary phrase. In Plato's usage, when this τι is present in existential assertions about Forms the definite article (αὐτὸ <u>τὸ</u>) is absent from the Form-locution, and vice versa (e.g. contrast this line with 440b5–6), and that is because the meaning is 'there is *an* X *itself*'. This locution, by no means ordinary Greek, is in Plato's usage equivalent to 'There is a Form of X.' Cf. the corresponding indefinite τι at *Phd.* 76d7–9, ἃ θρυλοῦμεν ἀεί, καλόν τέ τι καὶ ἀγαθὸν καὶ πᾶσα ἡ τοιαύτη οὐσία, and *Prm.* 130b7–8, δικαίου τι εἶδος αὐτὸ καθ' αὑτό. Variants of this indefinite formula are Aristotle's standard way of referring to Platonic Forms, especially in the fragments of his *On Ideas*.

[36] I am relying on the presence of the Form locution documented in the previous note as evidence against the minimalist reading proposed by Irwin (1977: 2), according to which the reference here in the *Cratylus* is not to separated Forms, just to the stable natures whose existence was argued back at 386d–389b. But I do agree with Irwin that the present passage contains no argument for the existence of Forms (for a tentative contrary suggestion, cf. Kahn 1973: 171) – necessarily, on the view I am proposing, if its content is to be acceptable to Cratylus. Mackenzie (1986: 13) points out that, if this *were* an argument for the existence of Forms, it would be a particularly poor one.

Certainly the ensuing argument, to which I shall turn in a moment, studiously avoids relying on any prior assumptions about the metaphysics of Forms, including their all-important eternity and unchangingness.[37] That self-denial caters for the current interlocutor's innocence of Platonic metaphysics. But it is equally important that, from Plato's own point of view, the entities which Socrates postulates as his escape route from the incoherence of universal flux are identical with the transcendent value Forms, whose mode of being it was to be Plato's own job to explain.[38]

These, then, are the entities of which Socrates often dreams. Although his dreamlike awareness of them no doubt means that he lacks definitional knowledge of them, he now goes on to show that he nevertheless has some *a priori* understanding of what *kind* of things they must be (439d–440a). The text here has caused considerable interpretative headaches,[39] but I think it is perfectly intelligible as it stands, so long as we realise that Socrates opens by picking out a very specific topic, that of self-predication.

The vital first move is at 439d3–12:

SOCR. Let's consider that thing in its own right, then. Let's not consider whether some face, or anything of that kind, is beautiful, and whether all these things are in flux.[40] [**A1**] The question is rather, are we to say that the Beautiful itself is not always such as it is?

CRAT. It must be.

SOCR. [**A2**] Then is it possible to speak of it correctly, if it is always slipping away? First, to say that it is that thing, next to say that it is of that kind? Or is it inevitable that, as we speak, it is instantaneously becoming something different, and slipping away, and no longer the way it was?

CRAT. Yes, inevitable.

At first sight, this is an inconsequential line of questioning. If in **A1** Cratylus already agrees that the Beautiful itself is unchanging, why does Socrates follow up with **A2** '*Then* is it possible to speak of it correctly, if it is always

[37] Kahn (1996: 363–6), discussing the presentation of Forms in this passage, points out in addition the absence of any reference to the intelligible-sensible dualism. This reticence too I would explain in terms of the need for sufficient common ground with Cratylus. The comments of Barney (2001: 151–2) are very helpful here.

[38] Note the availability of strong and weak readings of 439d5, '. . . are we to say that the Beautiful itself is not always such as it is?' For Socrates that may cater for the Form's eternity, but for Cratylus it need not ('X is always F' commonly means 'X is F so long as X exists').

[39] The apparatus criticus of the OCT², in a long note which reads like the minutes of an emergency meeting, airs the editors' several doubts about the damaged state of the text in this vicinity: 'd8–440 a 5 argumenta mire elliptica; posses (I) lacunam ante d 8 suspicari (Stokes); (ii) e 1–5 in alium locum transferenda suspicari (Robinson); (iii) lacunam post ἔχει (e 2) suspicari (Strachan); verendum est ne in codd. habeamus disiecta fragmenta longioris horum argumentorum versionis'.

[40] I am here agreeing with Irwin (1977: 2) that 'all these things are in flux' should be construed as within the scope of the 'whether'.

slipping away?', as if he still had to prove that it is unchanging? The key, I think, is to realise that Socrates' first question, '. . . are we to say that the Beautiful itself is not always such as it is?', has a very specific meaning. He is securing Cratylus' agreement, not that the Form is unchanging, but that, if nothing else, it will always be true to say of the Beautiful itself *that it is beautiful*. This 'self-predication'[41] assumption, that any property is truly predicable of itself, is one of the enduringly controversial elements in Plato's metaphysics, but what does seem clear to me is that Plato considered it the most self-evident of all possible truths. As Socrates remarks with express indignation in the relatively early dialogue *Protagoras*, 'It would scarcely be possible for anything *else* to be holy, if holiness itself weren't going to be holy!' (330d–e). The vital importance of this parallel passage lies in its testimony that the transparently obvious truth of self-predication statements is, for Plato, quite independent of the hypothesis of Forms. That is why even a metaphysically uncommitted interlocutor like Cratylus is bound to agree to it.

Once we see this, the point of **A2** becomes clear. Socrates means 'Given, then, that the Beautiful itself is always beautiful, would we even be able to state *that* about it if it were always changing? Would we be able to *start* by naming it as the subject of our sentence ["that it is that thing"] by saying "The Beautiful itself . . ." and to *go on* to attach the self-evidently correct predicate to it ". . . is beautiful" ["that it is of that kind"]?'[42]

Notice that the dialogue's careful precision about the structure of statements (§7 above, pp. 162–4) is being put to good work. Even a self-predication, that most self-evident of true statements, is a *predication*: it requires the temporally separate utterance of the subject and the predicate terms, and that takes time which the speaker could not afford in a world of total flux.

The first challenge, then, in **A**, is about how a totally unstable object could be the subject of even the most self-guaranteeing of all *predications*. The immediately following challenge, in **B**, asks how it could even have *being* (439e1–6):

SOCR. [**B1**] How could that which is never in the same state *be something*? [**B2**] For if it is *ever* in the same state, it is clear that during *that* time it undergoes no transition. [**B3**] And if it is *always* in the same state and is the same thing, how could this thing alter or change, given that it does not depart from its own form (*idea*)?

CRAT. There's no way it could.

[41] The term was introduced by Vlastos 1954: 324.
[42] Cf. Reeve 1998: xlv.

Note that no new subject is introduced.[43] The Beautiful itself, which was the subject of **A**, evidently continues as the subject of **B** and **C** as well, and the topic of its self-predication is kept in view by the assertion in **B2** that, if unchanging, it could not depart from 'its own form'. But **B1** does introduce a new question, at least: how would the (predicative) *being* expressed by the self-predication 'The Beautiful itself is beautiful' be possible in a world with no stability? [44] The implied answer is that it would not be possible, and the function of **B2** is to supply the reason for this: *any* degree of being brings with it a corresponding absence of change. Thus, **B2** points out, the hypothesis of the Beautiful's bearing the same predicates *over some period of time* entails its not undergoing change *during that period.*

B3 then adds, by parity of reasoning, a consequence which Platonically attuned readers will understand to point to the changelessness of Forms: assuming the premise – already agreed in **A1** – that the Beautiful itself is *always* the same subject ('always . . . the same thing') bearing the same predicate ('the same state' = 'its own form', i.e. beautiful), it must, at least in that respect, *never* change. I have supplied the qualification 'at least in that respect', but this is not made explicit, and it is possible that Socrates assumes beauty to be the only predicate that the Beautiful itself as such possesses. If so, we have the option of interpreting **B3** as his argument for the total changelessness of Forms. Socrates himself may well intend that, but Cratylus' assent does not require it.

After predication and being, Socrates turns, thirdly, to *knowability* (439e7–440a5):

SOCR. [**C1**] But actually it[45] couldn't be known by anybody either. [**C2**] For at the very time that the person who was going to know it was approaching it,[46] it would be becoming a different thing and of a different kind. [**C3**] Hence it would still not be known what kind of thing it was or what state it was in. [**C4**] I'm taking it that there is no knowledge that knows what it knows if that thing is in no such state.

CRAT. It's just as you say.

[43] Not 'that which is never in the same state', in **B1**, since this cannot continue as the subject of **B2**.

[44] Cf. Fine 1993: 136, referring to **B:** 'He argues that if the form of beauty ceased to be beautiful, it would cease to exist'; cf. also Barney 2001: 153.

[45] For reasons given above, I take the subject still to be 'the Beautiful'. Mackenzie (1986: 138) argues for the substitution of a new subject, to be supplied from **B3**, i.e. what does not change. In my view, **B2–3** as a whole formally serves simply to explore the reasoning underlying **B1**, and does not introduce any new subject, either grammatically or logically.

[46] The tenses in this clause seem to me to militate against the interpretation of Mackenzie (1986), that the Form itself faces the paradox of being changed by the act of someone's coming to know it (comparing *Sph.* 248d–e). The changing object is said here to change *before* the act of coming to know it can take place.

The predicative model is still in play here. On the unstated assumption that knowledge is of truth and that truth is propositional,[47] even to know something will require a subject-predicate structure: you must know of some subject that it bears some predicate.[48] If the Beautiful itself were undergoing constant change, you could not know that it was beautiful, since in the time it took you to acquire the knowledge both subject and predicate would vanish (**C2**, 'it would be becoming a different thing and of a different kind'). That is, it would cease both to be the Beautiful itself and to be beautiful. There might be some new subject, with a new predicate, but that possibility would be of no relevance or help.

9 THE PARTING OF WAYS

In the next phase (440a6–b4), both predication and the Forms recede from the argument, and the spotlight falls on the concept of knowledge itself. It is, after all, the question how knowledge is to be attained that is driving the discussion at this point. If literally everything changes, Socrates maintains, that must include knowledge itself. And, if so, there cannot be such a thing as knowledge: knowledge itself could not *be* knowledge if it were constantly changing into something else.[49] The argument here is, once again, closely parallel to the *Theaetetus*, which argues (181b–183b) that, if the definition 'Knowledge is perception' entails a world of total instability, it becomes unstatable, since the very thing that has been identified as knowledge will as we speak be changing into something that is *not* knowledge.[50]

Socrates' final move is a rejection of the flux thesis (440b4–d4), and, along with it, of trust in the name-makers. Assuming that there are enduring subjects and objects of knowledge, and also, as this presupposes, enduring beings such as the Beautiful itself and the Good itself, we would have to reject flux as an adequate account of being. Socrates does not claim to have definitively refuted flux, but he does claim at the very least to have shown how unwise it would be to believe in it merely on the say-so of the original name-makers.

Socrates' advice to Cratylus is to continue reflecting on the flux issue – he is, after all still young and has plenty of time (440d4–7). Cratylus, wedded

[47] The assumption has obvious affinities with the contentions of *Tht.* 186c–d.

[48] Could you know, at least, what it *was* or *will be*? Not if the subject, as well as the predicate, is constantly being replaced, since that would leave no time to add any predicate, however tensed.

[49] '. . . into something else' is legitimate, because the hypothesis is that *nothing* stays as it is (440a7), and that must include the fact of something's being knowledge.

[50] For discussion of the parallelism, cf. Silverman 2001: 8–10.

as he is to the authority of the name-makers, ominously replies that he is already finding himself leaning strongly towards Heraclitean flux[51] – and that despite Socrates' warning to him moments earlier that taken literally the thesis of total flux will render speech itself impossible. That way lies Cratylus' own future destiny – his commitment to total flux, culminating in his eventual abandonment of speech. In the wake of Cratylus' decision in favour of Heracliteanism will come Plato's own earliest initiation into the ways of philosophy, the literally pre-Socratic phase of his own development.

Cratylus promises to share with Socrates the results of his future researches on the flux question, and urges Socrates to reciprocate. Readers may want to reflect that, if there will be any such future pooling of ideas, it will take place in Plato's own philosophy. For Aristotle is surely right that some version of the thesis that the sensible world is in flux, which Plato first learnt from Cratylus, became a permanent part of his ontology, once supplemented by the stable ontology of the Forms – the doctrine that Socrates, in however dream-like a fashion, already has in view in the dialogue.

On such a note the dialogue draws to a close, with Cratylus urged by Socrates to set off on his journey to the countryside, accompanied by Hermogenes.[52] This is a literal parting of the ways: Cratylus will now head out of the city which Socrates himself virtually never left. It no doubt mirrors, or prefigures, the philosophical parting of ways which has never been far from view in the closing scene.

What I have tried to do throughout this book is to show what can come to light if we decide, in line with the evidence of the text, to read the *Cratylus* as a serious exploration of etymology and its lessons. Among other things, this perspective enabled us to read the long etymological section, not as a series of semi-private jokes, but as Plato's own historical survey of the field in which he works, displaying the existing degrees of philosophical enlightenment and unenlightenment present in the culture to which he belongs. What followed this, in the closing part of the dialogue, has now proved to be Plato's corresponding adjudication of the dual philosophical legacy from which his own work directly emerged.

Plato's transfer of allegiance from his first philosophical mentor, Cratylus, to his second, Socrates, is dramatically symbolised by the confrontation that the dialogue engineers between these two. As the conversation closes, both Socrates and Cratylus are at what I have called a philosophical crossroads,

[51] See p. 18 n. 40 above for the meaning of 440d8–e2.
[52] For the significance of this, cf. pp. 155–6 above.

each indicating which turning he intends to take. Socrates, we know, is the one who will follow the real highway to philosophical enlightenment. Plato's masterly dramatisation represents not only this historic parting of the ways, but something more personal as well: his own youthful decision that, of the two, it was to be Socrates whom he would accompany on his long journey.

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Index locorum

(bold numerals indicate a translation of the passage listed)

Aeschylus
Prometheus vinctus
186–7 116
459–60 25
484 27

Alcinous, *Didaskalikos*
159.44–160.30 40

Ammonius
In Aristotelis De interpretatione
38.10 37
In Porphyrii Isagogen
57.15–17 37

Anaxagoras (Diels–Kranz)
B12 118

Anaximander
B1 115

Anon., *In Platonis Theaetetum*
484–60.1 38

Anon., *Prolegomena in Platonis Philosophiam*
4.4–9 17

Anonymus Londinensis
III 21–2 35
III 29–32 35

Archelaus (Diels–Kranz)
A1 118
A4 (1) 118
A4 (2) 118
A4 (6) 118
A8 118
A10 118
A11 118
A12 118
A14 118

Aristotle
De anima
429a2–4 37
429a18–27 118
De caelo
270b16–25 **31**
279a18–28 30–1
279a22–3 32
290b30–2 15
296a26–7 15
Categories
4a21–b13 101
De generatione animalium
736a18–21 31
De interpretatione
1 85
Metaphysics
A 3–6 17
984a27–b8 17
987a32–b7 **16**, 110
987b4 17
1010a7–15 19
1074a38–b14 32
1074b8–10 32
Meteorologica
339b16–30 31
Nicomachean ethics
1152b7 37
X 39
De partibus animalium
662b17–22 37
Rhetoric
1417b1–3 20
De sophisticis elenchis
165b30–4 154
165b35 154
Topics
I 9 84

Damascius
De principiis
I 231.14–16 35

Diodorus Cronus (G.Giannantoni, *Socratis et Socraticorum Reliquiae*)
II F 7 52

Diogenes Laertius
II 16 112, 118
III 6 17
IV 67 22
VIII 21 22

Diogenes of Oenoanda (Smith)
12 II 11–V 14 69

Dionysius of Halicarnassus
De compositione verborum
62.18–63.3 40

Elias
In Porphyrii Isagogen
47 37

Empedocles (Diels–Kranz)
B9 67, 73

Etymologicum genuinum
885.1–7 37

Etymologicum magnum
109.16–25 37

Etymologicum Symeonis
62.10–13 37

Eudemus (Wehrli)
37a 26 154

Eusebius
Praeparatio evangelica
XI 6.16 37
XV 20.2–3 104

Heraclitus (Diels–Kranz)
B3 115
B9 112
B12 104
B13 112
B16 117
B61 112
B64 117
B80 115
B94 115, 117

Hesiod
Theogony
126–8 87
144–5 80
195–200 80
Works and Days
106–201 93

[Hippocrates]
De arte
2 72
De vetere medicina
9 44
De natura hominis
5 72

Homer
Iliad
VI 402–3 78
IX 562 80
XVI 385–8 116
XXII 506–7 78
XXII 507 79
Odyssey
XIX 407–9 80

Homeric *Hymn to Pan*
47 96

Iamblichus
De vita Pythagorica
82 25

Lucretius
V 1050–5 69

Olympiodorus
Vita Platonis (Hermann)
192 17

Orion
Etymologicum
16.10–15 37

P. Derveni
IV 115

Parmenides (Diels–Kranz)
B14 106
B15 106

Pindar, fragments
169a 71

Plato
Alcibiades I
111a1–4 58
Apology
17b–c 162
18b6–8 100
22c–e 40, 166

Charmides
163d **153**
166c–d 2
171d–172a 44
173a 165
175b **70**
Cratylus
383a–390e 3
383a1–2 **19**
383b2–4 22
383b6–384a4 21
384b 70, 77
384c 22
384c–d 51
384d–e 51
384d 51
384d5–7 **67**
384d6 68
385a–d 52
385a 154
385a1–b1 39
385a2 52
385b2–d1 **10–13**, 52, 53, 59, 163
385b10 11
385c9 163
385d–e 67
385d2–6 53
385d2 10
385d7–e3 53
385d7–9 53
385d8–9 **53**
385e–386d 4
385e 54
386a1–3 **54**
386a4 111
386d–389b
386d–387c 4
386d9–e4 **55–6**
386e1–4 **57**
386e1 111
386e6–8 **56**
386e7–8 **57**
387a 56
387a5–6 **57**
387b–c 56
387b4 **57**
387b11–c5 44
387b11–c3 **59**
387c–388c 4
387c1–2 **57**
387c5 59
387d–388c 59, 60
387d4–5 **57**
388 71
388b–c 42, 99
388b10–11 **61**
388b13–c1 **60**, 121
388c–390e 4, 9, 59
388c5–7 **61**
388d–390a 67
388d 68
388d4–6 68
388e1–2 68
388e4–6 42
388e7–389a2 68
389a–390e 39
389a–390a 45, 66
389a2–3 **68**
389a5 82
389a7–8 82
389b–390e 84, 165
389b1–4 45
389b2 82
389b3 82
389b5–6 82
389b5 82
389b10 82
389c1 75
389c4 75
389c10–11 75, 82
389d–390a 81, 130
389d1–2 75
389d4–5 75
389d6–7 82
389d6 82
389e3 75
390 62
390a5–d8 63
390a6–7 75
390a7 82
390b1–2 75
390b1 82
390c 62
390c6 62
390c8–9 62
390d6 65
390d9–391a3 5
390d11–e5 75
390e–427d 5
390e2–3 82
390e3 75
391a6–7 18
391b–c 70
391c–397b 78
392b–d 78
392c 79
392d8 79
392d8–9 79
392e1 79
393b–c 86

393c–394b 43
393c–d 83
393d–e 138
393d7–e10 146, 148
393e 70
394a 86
394a–b 80
394b–c 81
394c1–4 81
394c4–9 81
394d9 80
394e–396c 87
394e9 86
394e10 86
395b–e 36
395b–c 80
395b 81
395b6 80
395c–d 80
395d–e 80
395e–396a 90
395e1 80
395e5 86
396a–b 76, 107, 116
396b3 91
396c 124
396c1–3 101
396c7–d8 88
396d5 3
396d–397a 41
397a–b 87
397a 88
397b 86, 88, 154
397b1 94
397b3 80
397b6–8 **155**
397c–399c 89, 92
397c–d 103, 107
397c1–2 30
398b–c 93
398c–e 93
398c 39
398c1 80
398c2–4 93
398d5–e3 **93**
399a–b 163
399b7 163
399c–400c 89
399d–400b 96
399e–400a 78
400a 92
400b–c 97
400b 48
400b3 48
400b4–6 42
400b5 97
400b6–7 39
400c 75
400c4–5 70
400d–408d 89
400d 90
401b7–9 **100**
401c1–d7 **99**
401c 144
401c6–7 **61**
401d 144
401e–402d 103
401e–402a **103**
401e2–3 90
402a 104
402a1 39
402a4–b4 **104**
402a8–10 111
402b 70
402c–d 39
402d3 105
402e–403a 36, 105
402e1 70
402e6 48
403a–404b 95
403a 75, 95
403e4–5 95
403e7–404a3 **95**
404b–407d 97
404b 105
404b3 95
404b4 70
404c–d 95
404c 105
404c2 70
404c5–d8 105
404d7 48
404e–406a 36
405a–d 97
405c 144
405e–406a 75
406a 95
406b 36
406b4 70
406c 31
407b–c 36, 95
407b3 70
407c–408b 22
407c1–2 48
407e–408b 95
407e1–3 156
408a7 70
408b–d 95
408b3 48, 89
408c5 96

408d–409c 90
408d 15
408d–e 15
409a–c 106
409a 36, 92, 105
409b–c 144
409c–410c 90
409c 106, 107
409c5–e1 107
409c7 80
409c8–9 48
409d–410a 48, 156
410a–c 15
410b–c 87
410b 15, 31, 36, 105, 106
410c–e 90
410d6–e1 163
411a–421c 64
411a–412b 113
411a–c 152, 157
411a1–b1 108
411a 108
411b3–c6 **108**, 121
411b4–5 70
411c8–10 **12 1**
411c3 111
411c5–6 108
411c8–d4 108
411d–412a 120
411d 36
412a 84, 120
412a3–4 **160**
412c–414b 113
412c–413d 115
412c5 80
412d 118
412e–413a 116
412e 116
412e2 48
413a–d 116
413a 76
413b3–5 **116**
413b7–c1 **117**
413c2 **117**
413d3–4 76
413d7–8 76
413e–414a 114
414b–415a 113
414b 157, 159
414c 48
414c3 141
414c4–d5 141
414c8 48
414d–e 43
415a–419b 113
415a–b 121
415b–c 156
415b5 80
415d3 80
415d5–e2 39
416b–d 47
416b–c 93
416b3 70
416b7 60
416b10 80
416c4 30
416d8 80
417c9 80
417d–418a 114
417e4 48
418a2 70
418b–c 79
418c–d 107
418d3–5 107
418e–419a 161
418e5–419b2 36
419a5 70
419b–420b 113
420b–d 113
420b–c 36
420d–e 113
420d1–3 156
421a–c 114, 157
421a–b 42
421a 70
421a7–b1 **12 0–1**, 163
421a8–9 121
421c–d 124
421c 123
421c4–5 158
421c5 159
421d–e 163
421d 124
421d9–e4 **12 3–4**
421d9 123
421e2 123
422a1–2 **12 4**
422c7–d10 **12 6**
422d1–10 125
422d11–e1 147, 148
422e–424a 83
423b9–11 126
423d8 42
423e1–424a1 84
423e1–5 **61**, 83
424a7–b6 128
424a9 159
424c–426a 42
424c–425b 47, 127
424c–425a 50

424c6–425a2 66, **128–9**
424d4 129
424d5 129
424e3 129
424e4–425a2 128
425a–b 124
425a 12, 162
425a3 128
425a5–b3 **42**
425b–c 48, 129
425c4 43
425d 48, 76
425d1–3 39
425d1 130
425e–426a 124
425e 124
426a 124
426a3–b9 **127**
426a4 127
426a7 43
426b 76
426b5–6 39
426b6 130
426c–427d 129
426c–d 122
426d–e 139
426d2 48
426e 163
427a1–8 20
427c8–d1 126
427d–440e 5
427e1–2 148
428a–429b 68
428b 17
428b4–c1 17
428d–e 61
428e–429a 9
428e6–429a3 42
429a–c 44
429c–d 132
429c4–6 22
429d 132
429e–430a 134
429e 133
429e4–5 **133**
430a–c 134
430a 134, 136
430a12–b1 126
430d 134
430d 133, 164
430e–431a 133
430e3–431c2 **134–5**
431a 12
431b–c 12, 162, 164
431b 13
431b3–c2 **164**
431c–432d 136
431c 137
431d 137
431d9 136
431e–432a 137
431e 137
431e6–8 42
432a–c 137
432a8–b4 45
432b1–d4 138
432b–c 46
432b2–4 **46**
432c–d 137
432d5–10 138
432d11–433a6 138
432e–433a 137, 138, 148
433a 137
433a6 149
433b–c 130
433c9 148
433d–e 138
433d1 148
433e2–434a3 154
433e2 148
433e9 148
434a–435d 138
434a–b 126
434a3–b9 127, **139**
434a3–6 128
434c 144
434c10–d6 **143**
434d9–12 139
434e–435b 140
434e–435a 144
434e 139
434e1–435b3 140
434e5–435b3 **140**
434e5–8 140
435a–b 145
435a7 54
435b–c 145, 153
435b3–d1 **140–1**
435b7–c2 **142**
435c2–3 147
435c3 147
435c4–5 141
435c7–d1 **148**
435d–436a 159
435d 83
435e2–3 **47**
436b–437d 159, 161
436b–c 9
436b 159
436b5–d4 9

436c–d 125
436c 159
436e2–437a1 18
437a–c 160
437a5–8 **160**
437d 161
437d5–6 12
437d10–438a2 **8**, 68
437e1–4 **68**
437e3–4 9
438a–b 161
438a3–b4 **8**
438b–c 30
438b4–7 **8–9**
438d2–4 **159**
438d7–8 12
438e 162
439b10–d2 **164–5**
439c–440d 6
439c 159
439c1–4 41
439c7–d1 **166**
439d3–12 **168**
439d5 168
439d8–11 **19**
439d–440a 168
439e1–6 **169**
439e7–440a5 **170**
440a6–b4 147
440a7 171
440b4–d4 171
440b5–6 167
440c 18
440d4–7 171
440d5 18
440d8–e2 **18**, **19**, 172
440e4–5 155
440e6–7 156
Critias
109d–110c 32
Epinomis
983b–c 15
984b6 15
Euthydemus
277e3–278a7 154
279e–280b 44
281b4–e5 151
Euthyphro
2a1–b11 3
Gorgias
449c–451d 83
476b–d 57
501a–b 46
503e–504a 46
505c–507b 2
506d–507a 46
517c7–518a5 63
526a 114
Hippias Major
296d6 2
300a–303c 13
Laws
654a 33
677a–679e 32
IV 93
713d–e 38
713e8–714a1 38
714a 91
714a2 38, 73
746a7 165
X 91
889e–890a 112
969b6 165
Letter VII
434b **154**
Meno
75d 63
80d5–81a2 152
85c9–10 165
88a6–c4 151
97c 44
Parmenides
128d6–e1 10
130b3–5 166
130b7–8 167
130e6 152
133d2 152
Phaedo
59b 3
62b 97
65d **167**
68c5–69a5 151
69b–d 97
74b–c 102
75c–d 166
75c10–d4 82
76b–c 166
76d7–9 167
78d–e 102, 111
79c 109
80d 95
96a–99d 92
99d–102a 165
100a3–7 125
102b3 152
102d6–9 152
103b8 152
Phaedrus
244b6–d5 **33**
244c–d 33

245c5–246a2 97
247a 100
247c–248e 94
264e–266b 34
266b3–5 62
270a1 99–100
270b 47
Philebus
16c 32
16c5–8 25
17c11–e6 **25–6**
18b–d 27
18c2 27
18c6–d2 **27**
20b6 165
28d5–9 **92**
38c–e 1
55d–e 45
62a–b 44
Politicus
278e10 165
295a 70
299b7–8 100
Protagoras
327e3–328a1 58
330d–e **169**
Republic
340d–341a 44
342b3–4 44
369c1–4 41
IV 63
V–VII 165
452a–b 76
455d 79
473a 76
475e9–476a8 152
476c–d 165, 166
477c–478b 160
477e 44
479a–d 102, 111
479d4 152
488e4–489a1 100
489c6 100
506b2–e7 49
507b5–7 82
508a–509d 117
508d 111
509b2–4 105
509d 91
518d9–519a1 151
520c4 **101**
520c7 165
521d 111
527d–528a 91
528e–530c 91
533b 45
533b6–c3 165
534b3–d2 49
534c 125
534c5–7 165
576b 165
X 166
596a5–598d6 46
596b7 82
596d1 95
601a 162
601c3–602a2 63
Sophist
242d 118
248d–e 170
249c–d 112
261c–263d 157
261c2–5 61
261e5–6 61
262 59
262d 162
262d4–6 59
263e–264b 1
Symposium
198b 162
199b 162
202d–203a 92
203a 39
203a4–6 93
203d8 95
207c–208b 155
208c1 95
209a5–8 115
211a 102, 111
211d1–3 122
212a4 152
221d–e 162
Theaetetus
152d–e **110**
152d 110
152e 105
153a–d 114
153c–d **117**
154b–155d 110
157d7 147
172a1–b8 55
180b–c 17
181b–183b 171
185–6 61
186b–e 94
186c–d 171
189d4 147
189e–190a 1
195b10 100
201d8 165

202c8 147
202d8 147
206c–d 162
206c7–8 154
207d–208a 44
208c2 154
210d2–4 3
Timaeus
22b–23c 32
28c–29a 45
29b–d 102
29b–c 158
29b3–c3 102
29c5–7 102
37d 102
40b8–c1 15
42d4–5 15
43c5–7 41
45b4–6 41, 107
46e–47c 62
47b–c 91
51e3–4 102
51e4 102
52b–c 165
58d 14
62a2–5 41
73c–d 33, 41
78e2–3 70
90b–c 39
90c–d 91

Plutarch
De Iside et Osiride
375C–D 40
Quaestiones naturales
912A 104
Quaestiones Platonicae
1006C 15

Porphyry
Vita Plotini
17.6–15 22

Proclus
In Platonis Cratylum
16.41–3 37
18 22

Sextus Empiricus
Adversus mathematicos
I 243–5 35
VII 16 158

Simplicius
In Aristotelis De Caelo
12.21–6 14
87.20–6 14
281.20–1 37
In Aristotelis Physica
1165.33–8 14

Strabo
XIII 2.4 22

Stobaeus
I 47.3 37

Syrianus
Commentarium in Hermogenis Librum περὶ στάσεων
48.6–7 37
199.23 37

Xenocrates (Isnardi Parente, Heinze)
frr. 264–6 IP = fr. 53 H 14

Xenophon
Apology
2 3

General index

Academy 157
Aeschines of Sphettus 20
Aeschylus 25
aether 14–15, 31, 90, 106–7
Agamemnon 87
agathon ('good') 113, 114
air (*aēr*) 90, 105–7
alēthes, alētheia, see 'true'
Anaxagoras 31, 92, 100, 106, 118
Anaximander 115
andreia ('courage', 'manliness') 113, 114, 157
anthrōpos, see 'man'
Aphrodite 31
Apollo 75, 89, 95, 97, 144
Archelaus 17, 112, 115, 118
Aristophanes 100
Aristotle
  aether 14–15
  categories 84
  on Cratylus 16–20
  etymologies 29–33, 37, 39
  eudaimonia 39
  methodology 88
  name of 22
  on Plato 16–18, 172
  on predication 163
  semantics 85
  technical terminology 153
art, *see technē*
astronomy 62, 91, 101
Astyanax 78–9, 81, 86
Atreus 80, 87, 94

being (*ousia*) 60–1, 83–6, 99–100, 102, 114, 130, 137, 144, 150–1, 166

Charmides 20
Cicero 10
Clitomachus 22
courage, *see andreia*
craft, *see technē*
Cratylus (historical figure) 2, 16–23, 76, 104, 133–4, 172
Critias 20
Cronos 38, 87, 89–91, 103–4, 124

daimons 38–9, 89, 92–4
Democritus 39, 115, 153
description, *see rhēma*
dialectic, dialectician 2, 5, 9–10, 49, 50, 62–5, 69, 73, 84, 93–4, 111, 151, 166
dialogue form 1 49
dikaion ('just'), *dikaiosynē* ('justice') 113, 115–19, 121
Diodorus Cronus 52
division, method of 47, 60, 129
doxa ('opinion') 101, 113, 120, 158
dramatic date of *Cratylus* 3, 18

earth 90, 107
earth's motion 15–16
Epicurus 30, 36, 71
Epinomis, see under 'Plato'
epistēmē (knowledge) 84, 101, 158
  etymology of 113, 120, 160
eponyms 80
eudaimonia (happiness) 38–9, 64, 108
Euripides 46
Euthydemus 55
Euthyphro 3, 28, 40–1, 75, 77–8
expertise, see technē

falsity 114, 131–8, 157, 163–4
fire 90, 106, 116–17, 119, 156
Forms 5–6, 14, 17, 45–7, 66, 81, 83–4, 100–2, 107, 111, 150, 164–72
  of Good 125, 165

gods (*theoi*) 89, 103, 107
good, *see agathon*; also 'Forms'
Groundedness, Principle of 125–8, 131, 138

Hades (*Aidēs*) 75, 89, 95, 105
heat 116–19
Hector 79, 81
Heidegger, Martin 29
hēlios, see 'sun'
Heraclitus, Heracliteanism 16–19, 21, 99–100, 104, 110–12, 116–17, 161, 167, 172
Hermes 89, 95–6, 156
Hermogenes (historical figure) 3
heroes 89, 93–4
Hesiod 32, 33, 80, 87, 93
Hestia 89, 99–100, 102, 144
Hippocratic corpus 72–3
Homer 32, 78–81, 104, 110, 117
humans, *see* 'man'

just, justice, *see dikaion*

knowledge, *see epistēmē*

lawmaker, legislator, *see nomothetēs*
logos (statement, sentence, discourse) 11–13, 59, 96, 121, 128, 135, 150, 154, 158, 162–4

man (*anthrōpos*) 37, 89, 94, 163
moon (*selēnē*) 90, 103, 105–7

Newton, Isaac 33
noēsis (thought) 113, 120
nomos–physis (convention–nature) antithesis 67–8, 72, 147
nomothetēs (lawmaker, legislator) 4–10, 67–74
nous (mind, intelligence, intellect) 38–9, 90–7, 116, 118–19
numbers 141–3

Oceanos 89, 103
onoma (name) 4, 11, 42, 59–61, 65–6, 70, 82, 120–1, 157, 162–4, 166
Orestes 87
Ouranos 87, 90–1, 101, 124
ousia, see 'being'

painting, portraiture 42, 45–6, 83, 127–9, 131, 134–9, 142–5, 150
Pan 89, 95–6
Parmenides 17, 109, 110, 112, 115
Pelops 80, 87
Peripatetics 158
Philip of Opus 14
phronēsis ('intelligence') 113, 120, 121
physis, see nomos–physis
Plato
  Aristotle, relation to 7, 15, 29
  division of philosophy 158
  early career 2, 6–7, 16–18, 20–3, 29, 76, 104, 172–3
  etymologies outside *Cratylus* 25–8, 33, 41, 73, 107, 108, 114, 115, 153, 162
  individual dialogues (*see also* Index locorum)
    Charmides 20
    Critias 7
    Crito 71
    Epinomis 14–15
    Euthydemus 132, 153
    Euthyphro 3
    Gorgias 41, 44, 47–8, 65
    Hippias Major 2, 167
    Laws 7, 14, 41, 91
    Meno 62
    Parmenides 7
    Phaedrus 7, 41
    Philebus 7, 25–30, 32, 64, 132, 162
    Republic 7, 10, 38, 119
    Sophist 7, 12–14, 112, 129, 131–3, 162–4
    Statesman 7
    Theaetetus 1, 7, 10, 13, 54, 55, 109, 111, 112, 116, 132
    Timaeus 6, 14–15, 32, 41, 46, 91, 101, 158
Porphyry 22
power (*dynamis*) of a name 81, 84–6, 150–1
Proclus 33
Prodicus 77, 153–4
Prometheus 25, 27
Protagoras 4, 54–7, 77, 109–11, 132
Pythagoras 22, 25
Pythagoreans 15, 25

relativism 4, 54–7, 65, 109, 112
relativity 109–12
Rhea 89, 103–4
rhēma ('description') 123, 128, 129, 135, 150, 162–4

seasons (*hōrai*) 90, 107
sentence, *see logos*
Simplicius 115
sklērotēs (hardness) 139–41, 143–6
Socrates
  ethical focus 16
  Plato's teacher 2, 7
  pupil of Archelaus 17
  trial and execution 3, 6
sōphrosynē ('soundness of mind') 113, 120
soul (*psychē*) 6, 89, 92, 96–7
Stoics 157–8
statement, *see logos*
stylometry 6–7
sun (*hēlios*) 90, 103, 105, 116–17, 119
synesis (understanding) 113, 115, 121

Tantalus 80, 87, 94
technē (expertise, skill, craft, art) 41–50, 55, 58, 65, 100, 113, 141, 159, 165–6
Tethys 89, 103–5, 110
Theophrastus 15, 22
Thrasymachus 44
true (*alēthes*), truth (*alētheia*) 96, 119, 157

understanding, *see synesis*
Uniformity, Principle of 126–8, 131

water 90, 106, 156
Wittgenstein, Ludwig 53

Xenocrates 14, 158

year (*eniautos*, *etos*) 90, 107

Zeno of Elea 10
Zeus 76, 87, 90–2, 107, 116, 124