PLATO'S *CRATYLUS*

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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.

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[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

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[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

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[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 OCT². 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

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[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.

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[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

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[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

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[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

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[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 OCT² 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

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[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', νομοθετικὴ 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

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[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

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[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

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[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

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[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.

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[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

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[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.

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[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

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[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.

[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]

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[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 Adomėnas, '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

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[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 'Socrates' and 'Cratylus', 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

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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

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[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.