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Joseph F. Graham

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## I

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 Philosophy in the *Cratylus*


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In the dialogue that gave its name to the topic, there lies a lesson often ignored; it concerns the relation between the question of substance and the question of method. When he is asked to settle the quarrel between Hermogenes and Cratylus as to whether human language is natural or conventional, Socrates begins with the sense of the question and the basic requirements for any true answer. And he finds no answer plausible and no inquiry possible if language does not meet certain conditions. But then he shows that both Cratylus and Hermogenes are wrong inasmuch as their views do not even allow for the debate they are so eager to conclude. Their own actions and intentions argue against them. For it is impossible to disagree, and so actually say different things about the same thing, without having common nouns to describe or truly denote, as well as proper names to designate or arbitrarily refer. Thus if only in that sense, language is both natural and conventional. But that is only part of the answer, because that is not the only or even the primary sense of the question; there is another that is ontogenic rather than epistemic.

### What the *Cratylus* means

In view of its posterity, the *Cratylus* would seem especially enigmatic if not simply equivocal. It has been taken by tradition as the opening statement in a long and often obscure debate about the origin and function of language.<sup>1</sup> The terms for debate are given by the issue that figures in the dialogue as the difference of opinion between Hermogenes and Cratylus. It is the question of whether language is essentially natural or conventional, a matter which has really never been resolved. The historical debate thus appears doomed to repeat the

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original dialogue, even to the point of failing to reach any resounding conclusion. With that failure, both the dialogue and the debate can easily convey an impression of futility. The task may just be difficult, but it could also be difficult enough to be impossible. That sort of futility seems to characterize most discussions of a philosophical nature, for they are notoriously difficult to conclude. Their topics are typically large and wooly; some would say perennial, others would call them hopeless. They may well be quite profound, they are all too often intractable. Philosophy thus stands in contrast to the example of science where problems are strictly defined and eventually solved for that very reason.

So it is small wonder that the issues raised by the *Cratylus* have never been resolved, if indeed they have never been properly understood or clearly stated.

There is evidence for such a view of the difficulty with the *Cratylus*, inasmuch as the dialogue itself poses a serious problem of interpretation. The debate that prolongs the discussion in the *Cratylus* also contains various differences as to the claims being made by the *Cratylus*. Those who would contest what Plato contends already fail to agree on just that. Thus critics often accuse him of being doctrinaire or dogmatic, though very seldom for the same doctrine or dogma. And scholars argue not *against*, but *about*, Plato in an attempt to establish his position or identify his opponents with a reconstructed version of the initial controversy. But when the main point of dispute turns more historical than theoretical, philosophy dwindles, or becomes exegesis: not so much footnotes to Plato as various speculations about what he may have really meant by what he actually wrote. Here science seems very different, not only because its method is empirical and its history dispensable, but again because its hypotheses are made fully explicit and thus readily subject to falsification. The reason is quite simply that a truly rigorous use of language should leave no doubt, since you cannot begin to know whether a given claim is true or false until you know what it really means, and thus exactly what it claims.

Assuming that the *Cratylus* means what Plato meant, the task and actual problem is to infer what he meant from what he wrote. All interpretation requires some inference, but in this

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case the derivation seems especially long and difficult. Plato hardly ever said or simply wrote what he meant – not literally and directly, that is. He preferred a more oblique mode of expression, and he worked mostly with a dramatic form that reported the speech of someone else, someone different in name at least. He also wrote dialogues with more than one character to represent his meaning or intention. And even if Socrates generally says what Plato means, the same problem of interpretation remains; only it now occurs at one remove, for Socrates does not always mean what he says, and does not always say what he means. Such is the case in the *Cratylus*.

Like many of the early dialogues, the *Cratylus* presents a Socrates who is maieutic in method, at times ironic, and more aporetic than thetic. The discussion begins when he is asked to resolve a difference between friends. Hermogenes and Cratylus cannot agree about the true basis for the relation of names to things. They seek the help of Socrates who is most obliging. He considers their views in turn and criticizes both in detail, but he reserves his own opinion. He insists throughout the discussion that his position remains tentative, open to question and subject to doubt, because hypothetical or provisional, only assumed for the sake of argument. Thus he tries to understand what the others could possibly mean by their claims, and even tries to establish their validity, but always subject to the same restriction. He is speaking more for them than for himself. His disclaimers become most explicit, and rather comic, during all the talk about folk etymology, when he assumes the greatest burden of interpretation and attempts to discover hidden meanings in the Greek language. He seeks to know what the words themselves were meant to say, but he can hardly believe what he finds. He is so amazed by his own ideas that he mocks the marvel of their inspiration. He must be possessed, for he says more than he actually knows. He somehow speaks the mind of someone else, someone who surely knows much more than Socrates.

The dialogue ends more sedately and quite modestly. Its main results seem mostly negative. Some good points have been made and some weak positions have been abandoned. That much is obviously encouraging, but the last words are still very cautious. The only real conclusion seems to be that no

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final conclusion of substance has been reached. For as they prepare to go their separate ways, Cratylus and Socrates agree to continue the discussion at another time. They both acknowledge a need for some more serious thought on the matter, so that the reader is left to imagine, perhaps to wonder, just how or what that could possibly be.

Now different readers often have different expectations, and their responses usually depend upon their expectations, at least to some extent. Those who read the *Cratylus* in search of doctrine may well disagree about its substance and yet judge the dialogue according to a common standard. Hence they may find that it fails to meet its most basic obligation, which is to provide some definite conclusion, whatever that may be. Others see it differently. Some read the Platonic dialogues more for the dialectic or the drama – not so much for any final product or result as for the process or method. Such readings may appear more literary inasmuch as they follow the course of an action rather than an argument. But they can also be considered philosophical, in an admittedly different sense of what constitutes the real function of philosophy. The *Cratylus* may then seem to succeed in the only way that philosophy has ever succeeded: it purges the mind of some error and develops intellectual vigor. That idea of purpose would also explain why the dialogue had no real thesis. Philosophy is not just different from science, but particularly effective against the intellectual presumption and false satisfaction that comes with having a set doctrine or theory. Its lesson is primarily or characteristically therapeutic and thus Socratic.

There is good evidence for such a reading of the *Cratylus*. Its scenario has all the right elements arranged in all the right ways to suggest a major concern for the psychology of inquiry. The subject of the dialogue is the opposition between nature and convention in the theory of language, and each position has its own protagonist. Hermogenes defends convention against Cratylus who champions nature. But the dichotomy runs even deeper, for it divides people into different types. Hermogenes and Cratylus have different characters as well as different convictions, and their convictions actually correspond to their characters. Cratylus is a rigid naturalist who remains aloof and mostly enigmatic. Though he gives the impression

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of having good reasons for his belief, he does not explain or justify his position so much as simply repeat his original assertion. He is often compared to some oracle or prophet whose words require interpretation because their meaning is deep or obscure. Hermogenes is almost the opposite. He is sceptical if only in the sense of being quizzical. He certainly has many more questions than good answers or ready suggestions. Thus he cannot imagine what Cratylus could possibly mean, though he is eager to know. Hermogenes appears not only willing but able to learn, since he can admit the force of an argument and readily change his mind. He is very easy – perhaps too easy – to persuade. Hermogenes comes much closer to Socrates, and their conversation occupies most of the dialogue. Cratylus is hardly as cooperative and certainly not as amenable or malleable as Hermogenes. But then nature is different from convention in much the same way.

The correlation between persons and their positions has a force and a significance that extends well beyond this particular dialogue. All three of the characters mention Euthyphro by name with specific reference to his prophetic inspiration. They also compare Socrates to the same Euthyphro, whenever Socrates becomes equally inspired. As indeed he does in an attempt to understand what Cratylus means by nature in language. They could easily have alluded to the *Ion* or the *Phaedrus* as well as to the *Euthyphro* or to any of the other dialogues where the same type of character appears. Cratylus is definitely cast in that role. He represents the kind of person that Plato so often, and so clearly, opposes to Socrates, the kind that resists and finally blocks inquiry rather than surrender or even question a cherished belief. He is the kind who has no inner source and thus no real warrant for his conviction. The kind that does not really know what he is saying and seems rather as if he were merely repeating the words or thoughts of someone else. Cratylus stands for all the stubborn force of ignorance in that general and finally moral psychology of knowledge which shapes so many of the Platonic dialogues.<sup>2</sup>

On this reading of the *Cratylus* what counts most is the plot that unfolds as Socrates interacts with the other two characters. The meaning of the dialogue is found not in any one assertion, but in the entire series of questions and answers considered as

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a sequence of actions with certain results. Those results are more psychological than theoretical, in that they concern the proper method – or, even better, the right set of mind – for all sorts of inquiry, rather than represent any particular thesis or theory about language. The Socratic mind then seems not so different from the analytic method of modern philosophy which does no more than analyze so as to criticize the language or logic of science. They are both parasitic though they cure rather than kill their host. They are always reflexive because only corrective. And they promote the same idea of what it is that philosophers rightly do. Their vocation has no definite position; they neither initiate nor complete the work of empirical inquiry. They are consultants and trouble-shooters, the ones who find what has gone wrong but never say or know what is finally right.

I have now described two different readings of the *Cratylus*, a reading for doctrine and a reading for drama. As presented they are incompatible, for they are clearly intended to be exclusive and exhaustive. They render opposing judgments of the dialogue, the one positive the other negative, and they offer conflicting interpretations of what Plato means by philosophy. And yet such readings are true to the dialogue inasmuch as they argue issues of the dialogue. Only they fail to argue with the same fullness. They are partial in the sense that they favor some part or aspect, and reject, or simply neglect, others. They also take part in the dialogue and take sides in the discussion. But as readings, they make it seem as if the dialogue as a whole actually behaved like one of its characters in conversation with Socrates. They make it look either dogmatic and distant like *Cratylus*, or agnostic and shallow like *Hermogenes*. As a result, they also make it seem as if the task of interpretation was either impossible, or simply unnecessary.

By stressing the oppositions and the alternations in the dialogue, most readings miss the connections and the mediations that contribute to a fully coherent and comprehensive argument. If Socrates is indeed the central and pivotal character, it is surely significant that he takes both sides and plays both roles in turn. When he talks with *Hermogenes* he defends *Cratylus*, but then becomes the advocate of *Hermogenes* in talk with *Cratylus*. And yet neither of the original positions can

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safely allow or admit the other. The intolerance is both logical and practical. If language were natural as Cratylus supposes, then Hermogenes would understand without any need for interpretation. And if language were conventional in the sense that Hermogenes claims, then Cratylus could not understand without some kind of radical translation. Both the difficulties and the possibilities of their discussion argue against such extreme positions and argue against exclusive readings as well. The most forceful argument in the dialogue is the very fact of dialogue. Socrates clearly insists upon our having both true and false, both right and wrong, as necessary conditions of language use. But he also suggests that both nature and convention are required for any real difference of opinion. What remains to be said is exactly how those pairs are related, which is to say just how the abstract structure of dialectic and the actual substance of both doctrines are related.

I read the *Cratylus* as an object lesson in philosophy, with specific reference to language. It teaches by example, showing not only *how* rigorous inquiry works but also *what* it yields in a particular case. The dialogue gives a lesson that is both formal or logical and substantial or material, and also a lesson in how both aspects of inquiry are related through language. It shows just why partial readings are wrong in the very ways that both Cratylus and Hermogenes are wrong; they cannot explain their own activity, its success and its failure, because neither alone can explain what they are doing together. They simply cannot explain the ordinary function of language in their very own discussion of language. Inquiry itself then becomes the object and the evidence, as well as the frame or the method for a study whose result is to reveal what must be really true about language for there to be a real truth about language or anything else. The dialogue can thus serve as an allegory for the enterprise that has come to be known as natural science. And so it pertains to modern linguistics.

My reading of the *Cratylus* may seem anachronistic, for it may seem abusive to compare ancient philosophy and modern science since they are so distant and presumably so very different from each other. But my comparative reading counters that historical presumption of contrast with strong evidence from the dialogue. All those who argue that Plato could not



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have known or possibly anticipated *then* what we know *now*, obviously have their own idea of what Plato did know, and that idea they derive mostly from a reading of the dialogues. Their historicism gives just another reading, not some other kind of reading and certainly not any radically different kind of reading. The genuinely significant difference is a declaration of concern for meaning rather than truth. Strict historians only want to know what Plato actually meant or thought on a given subject like language, and usually care much less about current thinking as to the real truth of the matter.<sup>3</sup> That is left to the philosophers. But such a division of labor begs the entire question of language and interpretation by separating or at least trying to separate meaning from truth. And it is the one move in philosophy that proves to be especially misleading for this particular interpretation of history. Reading the *Cratylus* for historical meaning rather than for philosophical truth makes the worst kind of history as well as bad philosophy, since it happens to be the one rule of interpretation that most notably fails to respect the specificity of the text. The result is not only anachronistic but historically ironic, in that the argument of the dialogue insists upon the opposite procedure, and also shows why every other reading or interpretation should as well. The whole point of the discussion is that meaning goes together with truth, just like reference and description, fact and theory, nature and convention, or history and philosophy.

It is in that very same spirit of inquiry that the *Cratylus* finally encourages its readers to continue the work of discussion and urges them to give the matter more serious thought. It also warns us to move beyond the apparent dilemma and all the false dichotomies that kept Hermogenes and Cratylus from reaching a satisfactory conclusion. The dialogue thus would have us learn a lesson that seems lost on them so that it might be more effective for us. With care we should be able to benefit from their mistakes.<sup>4</sup>

**What Cratylus means**

The *Cratylus* begins with a confrontation over a contrast between two different ideas about language. Both Hermogenes



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and Cratylus occupy positions which come to be identified with simple slogans. Hermogenes: all names are conventional; Cratylus: all names are natural. Socrates takes the two theses quite literally as given in their initial statement (383). He first examines the content of each in turn by considering some logical consequences; he thus prepares the way for more empirical concerns (385–390). And having asked what should follow from each of the propositions under analysis, he looks to what indeed would serve to verify the one and falsify the other. The concepts of nature and convention are then tested against the facts of language through a long and rather elaborate exercise in Greek onomastics (390–427). The results are surprising if only because they refute both of the original theses and thereby confound both of the protagonists. Socrates concludes that some names are conventional while others are natural. But he also changes the very complexion of the issue in a way which Hermogenes may not have noticed and which Cratylus will probably never admit or accept.

Hermogenes and Cratylus were locked fast in conflict but did not really know where they stood in relation to each other. They were no less definitely opposed in and by conviction, for being that confused about the exact configuration of their difference. Rather, their confusion could only reinforce their opposition, since it was the very kind that makes all such differences seem irreconcilable. Theirs was the standard confusion of contraries and contradictories.

Cratylus and Hermogenes each argue as if the other had to be wrong, which is true in that both cannot be right; but they also act as if one had to be right, which is false since both could be wrong. Their basic mistake lies in the common presumption that such fierce opponents completely divide the field by sheer force of occupying impregnable positions, in which case Socrates would have to choose between them, siding with one against the other, and thus deciding in favor of one or the other. With the very solidarity of their opposition, they share a world of extremes, one split into allies and enemies, without room for any one else. And they remain caught in the false dilemma of their own making – having excluded the very possibility of any further alternative – until Socrates opens the way to another position, different from each and yet opposed

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to both because opposed differently, with a difference in the nature of its opposition. By providing a whole other alternative, he brings to their debate the full force of contradiction, without which there could be no decision of right or wrong, no real attribution of true or false, and as a direct result – however anachronistic it may first appear – no empirical science of language.

The significance for science may seem more properly logical than psychological. It involves the difference between two forms of negation or opposition, what appears in traditional logic as the difference between quantity and quality. On that analysis, propositions may differ in quality (being either affirmative or negative) in quantity (being either universal or particular) or even in both. And every categorical proposition belongs to one of the four canonical types that correspond to those differences. When formulated expressly for such comparison, the outstanding difference between Hermogenes and Cratylus reduces to that of a simple negation, the specific form of opposition that involves quality rather than quantity. Hermogenes defends a proposition that is universal and negative, NO NAMES ARE NATURAL, against Cratylus and the universal affirmative, ALL NAMES ARE NATURAL. These two are contraries, universals of opposite quality, and their logical relations are such that they cannot be jointly true but can be jointly false. They are not strict contradictories or complete opposites. Such a relation obtains only between those propositions that stand opposed to each other in both quantity and quality. Strictly contradictory opposition or contradiction is a logical relation such that the truth of either proposition entails the falsehood of the other while falsehood for either one entails truth for the other. It is the only form of opposition or negation to constitute full denial for categorical propositions.

Cratylus and Hermogenes do not contradict each other, and thus will never refute each other. They cannot prove anything in fact by arguing from their original positions. They cannot prove each other wrong and they cannot prove themselves right because they are mistaken about the logic of proof. The mistake they make in logic is to ignore quantification, especially under the effect of negation, which yields the crucial difference between ALL and SOME. That difference alone would allow