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PLATO'S *CRATYLUS*

Plato's *Cratylus* is a brilliant but enigmatic dialogue. It bears on a topic, the relation of language to knowledge, which has never ceased to be of central philosophical importance, but tackles it in ways which at times look alien to us. In this radical reappraisal of the dialogue, Professor Sedley argues that the etymologies which take up well over half of it are not an embarrassing lapse or semi-private joke on Plato's part. On the contrary, if taken seriously as they should be, they are the key to understanding both the dialogue itself and Plato's linguistic philosophy more broadly. The book's main argument is so formulated as to be intelligible to readers with no knowledge of Greek, and will have a significant impact both on the study of Plato and on the history of linguistic thought.

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

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*For the Classics Department of Cornell University,
with gratitude*

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Preface

This book has a triple origin.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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