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Francesco Ademollo

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## Introduction

### I.1 SUBJECT AND STRUCTURE OF THE DIALOGUE

#### I.1.1 *The correctness of names*

Plato's *Cratylus*, the subtitle present in the MSS informs us, is 'about the correctness of names' (περὶ ὀνομάτων ὀρθότητος). More precisely, it is about the question whether the correctness of names is a natural or a conventional matter. But what do the terms 'name' and 'correctness' mean here? This is never spelt out explicitly in the dialogue; the characters just take it for granted from the outset.

As for 'names', the characters take a generous view: they count as ὀνόματα proper and common nouns, adjectives and verbs in infinitive (414ab, 426c) or participle (421c) mood. They do not explicitly include verbs in finite moods, but they seem to be including them implicitly when they say that the ὄνομα is the 'smallest' part of a sentence (385c, see §2.2.2). So it is standard, and doubtless right, to take it that in our dialogue (and elsewhere as well) the term ὄνομα generically applies to any word whose function is not primarily syntactic (hence not to conjunctions and prepositions).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the term ὄνομα is obviously connected with the verb ὀνομάζειν, 'to name'; and so an ὄνομα is essentially a word that *names* or refers to something.

As for the 'correctness' of such names, on the face of it this is a vague label. Authors like Protagoras and Prodicus appear to have used the same expression, or closely related ones, in connection with questions that have only something in common with what we find in *Cra.* (see §§I.1.2, 4.1). And modern scholars have distinguished several possible ways in which such phrases as 'correctness of names' and 'correct name' could be understood.

<sup>1</sup> See Crivelli, forthcoming, §6.1 for a more detailed list of uses of the term in Plato; he points out that the term is also applied to demonstrative pronouns (*Ti.* 50a). For the remark that it is not applied to words of syntactic function see Schofield 1982: 61.

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But in fact the label is not vague, and Plato is making his characters discuss a fairly definite issue. We can grasp what that issue is if we pay attention to a basic fact, seldom acknowledged by interpreters, about the way the terms ‘correctness’ and ‘correct’ are used. The fact is this: throughout the dialogue all characters express themselves as if there were no difference between being a *correct name* of something and being just a *name* of that thing. They continuously speak as if the phrases ‘correct name of *X*’ and ‘name of *X*’ were perfectly interchangeable and equivalent to each other.

This is already evident in the very first lines of the dialogue (383ab). Cratylus is there reported to have claimed that there is a certain natural *correctness of names* (ὀρθότητά τινα τῶν ὀνομάτων) and that a string of sounds which is applied to something only conventionally *is not a name* (οὐ ... εἶναι ὄνομα: he did not say ‘is not a correct name’). To clarify this obscure thesis Hermogenes has submitted to Cratylus a few examples, asking whether his *name* is really ‘Cratylus’ (not ‘whether his correct name ...’ etc.), whether Socrates’ name is really ‘Socrates’, and so on. When it comes to Hermogenes to set forth his own views (384cd), he wavers in the same way: he starts by claiming that the correctness of names consists in convention and agreement, and that whatever name you impose on something is the *correct* one (τὸ ὀρθόν); but then he goes on to claim, as if offering some sort of explanation, that a name does not *belong* to its object by nature, but rather by custom. Talk of correct names and talk of names *simpliciter* keep on interlacing, e.g., at 385de and at 390d–391a, where Socrates formulates the same interim conclusion in two different ways: first ‘names *belong* to the objects by nature’ (φύσει τὰ ὀνόματα εἶναι τοῖς πράγμασι), then ‘the name has some sort of natural *correctness*’ (φύσει ... τινα ὀρθότητα ἔχον εἶναι τὸ ὄνομα). Again, at 422cd we find Socrates claiming that ‘the *correctness* of every name ... is one and the same, and ... none of them is different *in respect of its being a name* [τῷ ὄνομα εἶναι]’, and that if the correctness of a certain kind of names consists in their indicating what their referent is like, this feature must belong to all kinds of names, ‘if they are to be names’ (εἴπερ ὀνόματα ἔσται). And the same interlacement is still operating at 433d–435a, where Socrates first assumes that ‘the name is a means to indicate the object’, then shows that a particular name indicates its object by convention, and hence draws without further ado the conclusion that the *correctness* of that particular name rests on convention.

The examples could be multiplied; but instead of doing so it will be better to venture a few reflections about this way of conceiving of the

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correctness of names. I shall dub it the ‘Redundancy Conception’ of correctness and formulate it thus:

(R) ‘*N*’ is a correct name of *X* =<sub>df</sub> ‘*N*’ is a name of *X*.

On this conception, a correct name of something is not a special name of that thing, distinct from, and superior to, other, incorrect names of the same thing. Rather, a correct name of something is a name which performs successfully the function of a name relative to that thing; it is, quite simply, a name which names that thing. One advantage of this conception is that it provides the speakers with an abstract noun, which they would otherwise lack, that refers to the property of being a name: in the absence of any such Greek term as ‘namehood’, ‘correctness’ does duty for it.<sup>2</sup>

The Redundancy Conception of names, as I am calling it, entails two relevant consequences. (i) There are, strictly speaking, *no degrees of correctness*: as one name cannot be more of a name than another, so one name cannot be more correct than another. (ii) There is, strictly speaking, *no such thing as an incorrect name of something*; the expression ‘incorrect name of *X*’ is, strictly speaking, self-contradictory. For it follows from (R) that, if ‘*N*’ is a name of *X*, then ‘*N*’ is a correct name of *X*, and that, if ‘*N*’ is not a correct name of *X*, then ‘*N*’ is not a name of *X*. That is to say, ‘incorrect’ here functions as an ‘alienating’ predicate, like ‘fake’ in such phrases as ‘fake diamond’: as a fake diamond is actually not a diamond, so an incorrect name of *X* is actually not a name of *X* at all.

These consequences will perhaps seem startling to some readers; they certainly go against the grain of most *Cra.* scholarship, according to which, while (i) and (ii) form a part of Cratylus’ radical views, Socrates rejects one or both of them.<sup>3</sup> But the consequences are there nonetheless; and they harmonize with the fact that only in few, rather marginal passages of the dialogue does someone say something inconsistent with them (e.g. 397ab on incorrect names and 392ad on degrees of correctness). To my mind, such passages are to be dismissed as instances of an innocuous and very understandable *façon de parler*, which is actually devoid of any serious theoretical significance.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> One author who comes close to recognizing the Redundancy Conception is Bestor (1980: 314), who claims that ‘correctness is the same as success’. Bestor, however, thinks it is the analogy between names and tools that allows Plato to conceive of correctness in this way. But that analogy is advanced no sooner than 387d ff., while the Redundancy Conception is in force from the very beginning of the dialogue.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Williams 1982: 83.

<sup>4</sup> Note, in particular, that it is almost unavoidable to run foul of (ii) if you hold that there are natural standards which a name must live up to in order to be correct. For then you will be confronted

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True, in the course of his discussion with Cratylus (431c–432c, cf. 435cd) Socrates will go out of his way to argue that a name may be made either ‘finely’ (καλῶς) or ‘badly’ (κακῶς). The importance of that contention cannot be minimized. But the contention itself is *not* that a name may be either correct or incorrect, or that a name may be more or less correct than another. In my view, the Redundancy Conception of correctness is still in force when Socrates advances his distinction between ‘fine’ and ‘bad’ names, as the text indeed confirms (see 432cd, 433ab). The distinction operates *within* the set of correct names, i.e. of names *simpliciter*.

So the issue debated in *Cra.* boils down to this: is the link between a name and the thing it names – its referent – *natural* or *conventional*? The former option, initially held by Cratylus but clarified and developed by Socrates, essentially consists (so we realize as the argument goes on) in the view that a name must somehow reveal, through its etymology, the nature of its referent. So, e.g., the name ‘Hermogenes’ will be correct only if its bearer really has the nature of an ‘offspring of Hermes’; etc. The latter option, initially held by Hermogenes, is fairly clear: it is the view that what something’s name is is a matter that depends only on agreement between speakers (and, as a limiting case, on the individual speaker’s arbitrary decision).

This issue must not be confused with a different, though not unrelated, one, which concerns the *origin* of names: how did it come about that human beings became equipped with names? How did names originate?<sup>5</sup> The first philosophers who concern themselves explicitly with the latter issue seem to be the Epicureans. They deny that the first names originated out of a deliberate imposition (θέσει), as all previous thinkers took for granted, and maintain instead that they originated from the nature (φύσις) of human beings: they sprang up spontaneously, according to the peculiar feelings and impressions experienced by each tribe (Epicurus, *Ep. Hdt.* 75–6; cf. Lucretius 5.1028–90 and Diogenes of Oenoanda, 12.2.11–5.14 Smith). This issue and the correctness one are obviously different and independent of each other. You may believe that names originated naturally and that, nevertheless, their link with their referents is conventional, in that names may be changed at will. Or you may believe that the first

with the question, what about those names – ordinary, conventional names – which do not live up to such standards? And you will have to choose between going against common sense, as Cratylus does by claiming that the names which do not comply with the natural criteria are in fact not names, and going against the Redundancy Conception by saying that they are names, albeit incorrect ones.

<sup>5</sup> On the difference between the two issues see Fehling 1965: 218–29, Barnes 1982: 466–7, Blank 1998: 176–7.

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names were the product of a deliberate human imposition and that, nevertheless, there are certain natural standards which any name must satisfy. Thus Epicurus claims that at a further stage each tribe set down some names ‘by consensus’ (κοινῶς), in order to indicate things less ambiguously and more concisely, and the wise men coined some other names to indicate certain invisible entities they had posited.<sup>6</sup>

There was once a time when scholars, failing to appreciate the difference between these two issues about names – the correctness one and the origin one – commonly claimed that *Cra.* is about the origin of names. This commonplace was false. All the speakers in the dialogue appear to assume that names were set down by someone (who is sometimes referred to as a ‘lawgiver’: see e.g. 388de, 436bc) and concentrate instead on the nature of the glue that thereafter links name and thing. As Robinson 1955: 110–11 puts it, ‘The speakers ... never oppose nature to *positing*, φύσις to θέσις ... The word “θέσις” [390d, 397c, 401b] ... means something compatible with φύσις, not opposed thereto ... You can posit a name either in accordance with nature, or in accordance with an agreement you have made with other men, or in accordance with nothing but your own choice. The assumption of the speakers is that words have to be posited in any case, whether they are natural or not.’

Ancient interpreters of the dialogue, Proclus in the first place, regularly use the expression θέσει, ‘by imposition’, to refer to the conventionalist thesis in the debate about correctness. On the other hand, θέσει was the very expression used since Epicurus to characterize the idea that names were originally imposed and did not originate naturally. Likewise, the expression φύσει is used to characterize the naturalist side of either debate. This, however, does not mean that the ancient interpreters confuse the two issues. Proclus seems to know that Cratylus and Socrates assign to nature a different role than Epicurus does, and that for Cratylus and Socrates, but not for Epicurus, names have been imposed (xvii, 7.18–8.14). The different senses in which names could be said to be φύσει or θέσει are meticulously distinguished by Ammonius, *in Int.* 34.20–35.23, 36.22–37.13;<sup>7</sup> and

<sup>6</sup> On the Epicurean theory of language see Long/Sedley, s. 19, and the commentary at 1.100–1; cf. Sedley 1973. Long/Sedley see in Epicurus some elements of a naturalist theory in Cratylus’ sense; according to Sedley 1973: 20, Epicurus’ naturalism lies ‘in the belief that within a language each name can only be correctly used to denote the one particular class of object with which it was associated in its natural origin’. But the evidence does not seem to license this conclusion, especially as regards a connection with Cratylus; and at least in relation to the *second* stage of language evolution Epicurus clearly acknowledges a role for convention.

<sup>7</sup> But Ammonius, *in Int.* 34.22–32, ascribes to Cratylus the thesis of the natural *origin* of names; and Proclus himself seems to be partially inconsistent on this point. See §1.1.3 n. 15.

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the distinction is already present in Alcinous, *Didaskalikos* 160.4–16 (see §8.1.7). The basic point to bear in mind is this. In the debate about correctness, as it is represented in *Cra.*, the conventionalist side and the naturalist side agree that names have been imposed or set down; but while the naturalist believes that a mere act of imposition as such is not sufficient to create a name, because the imposition must conform to a natural criterion if it is to have any value, the conventionalist believes that a name is a name *just in virtue* of its having been imposed. And to that extent he is not misdescribed by the  $\theta\acute{\epsilon}\sigma\epsilon\iota$  tag.

*I.1.2 A map*

Here follows an outline of the whole dialogue. You will see that what is here dubbed part I corresponds to the contents of my chapters 1–2; part II corresponds to the contents of chapters 3–6; part III to the contents of chapters 7–8; and part IV to the contents of chapter 9. Please bear in mind that the outline is, inevitably, opinionated.

*I Cratylus' naturalism and Hermogenes' conventionalism*

383a–384a Hermogenes involves Socrates in his discussion with Cratylus. *Cratylus' thesis*: there is a natural correctness of names.

384de *Hermogenes' theory*: the correctness of names is a matter of convention among speakers and individual decision.

385a–386a *Clarifications of Hermogenes' theory*.

385bd There are true and false names as well as true and false sentences.

385e–386a Hermogenes rejects Protagoras' relativism.

386ae *Refutation of Protagoras*. There are virtuous and wicked persons, hence wise and unwise persons; therefore it is not the case that everyone's beliefs are true; therefore the objects have a subject-independent being and a nature of their own. (Incidentally, the argument refutes also Euthydemus' view that 'Everything is in the same way for everyone, at the same time and always.')

*II Naturalism defended, developed and illustrated*

386e–387d *First argument for naturalism*. Actions too have a nature of their own. Therefore they must be performed in the way in

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which, and with the instrument with which, it is natural to perform them. Examples: cutting, burning, speaking and naming. ‘Hence one must also name the objects as it is natural to name them and for them to be named and with that with which it is natural, not as we want.’

387d–388c *Second argument for naturalism.* Every instrument has a function; and as the function of a pin-beater<sup>8</sup> is to separate the weft and the warp, so that of a name is to ‘teach and separate being’.

388c–389a *Third argument for naturalism.* Every instrument is made by a craftsman who ‘possesses the art’. Names, which are handed down by *nomos* (‘custom’ / ‘law’), are made by the *nomothetes* (‘lawgiver’); and not everyone is a lawgiver, but only the one who ‘possesses the art’. Thus imposing names is not a matter for everyone.

389a–390e *Fourth argument for naturalism.* Every craftsman who makes an instrument makes it by looking to, and embodying in the relevant material, both the generic form of that instrument (e.g. the form of pin-beater) and the specific form which is naturally appropriate to the specific purpose at hand (e.g. the form of pin-beater for weaving wool). Likewise, the lawgiver makes names by looking to, and embodying in letters and syllables, both the generic form of name and the specific form of name which is naturally appropriate to the object to be named. Furthermore, craftsmen working in different countries with different kinds of the same material can produce equally correct instruments, as long as they carry out the right embodiments; likewise with names from different languages. The work of each craftsman who makes an instrument is supervised and eventually assessed by the instrument’s user – in the case of a name, the dialectician. Conclusion: ‘Cratylus speaks the truth when he says that names belong to the objects by nature and that not everyone is a craftsman of names.’

390e–392b What does the natural correctness of names consist in? The suggestion that we might try to learn what Protagoras has to say about this is discarded. The suggestion that we might learn something from those cases where Homer

<sup>8</sup> See §3.2.1 on ‘pin-beater’ as a translation of κερκίς.

distinguishes between a human and a divine name for the same thing is also discarded, because the matter is too difficult for us.

392b–394e We shall rather try to investigate Homer’s distinction between the two names of Hector’s son, ‘Astyanax’ and ‘Scamandrius’. Which of the two did Homer regard as the more correct? The former, because, arguably, it was the one used by the Trojan men, whereas the latter was used by the women, and men are, generally speaking, wiser than women.

But why is ‘Astyanax’ more correct than ‘Scamandrius’? Homer says it is because Hector defended Troy. The point is that, generally speaking, father and offspring should be called by the same name, i.e. by names which signify the same: e.g. the lion’s offspring should be called ‘lion’ as well, unless it is a freak, and the king’s offspring should be called ‘king’ as well, unless it is a freak. Thus ‘Hector’ and ‘Astyanax’, which signify the same, i.e. that their bearer is a king, are fit for being respectively the name of a king and his son.

394e–396c An alleged example of Socrates’: etymologies of the names in the Atreidae’s genealogy.

396c–421c *Etymologies.*

Socrates, allegedly under Euthyphro’s inspiration, sets forth a flow of etymologies, whose purported function is to illustrate the natural correctness of names. He refrains from analysing proper names of humans and heroes and focuses instead on the ‘things that always exist by nature’:

397c–400c Preliminaries about the gods (gods, daimones, heroes, humans; soul and body)

400d–408d Homeric gods

408d–410e ‘Natural’ gods (objects of natural science)

411a–420e Names ‘concerning virtue’

421ac ‘The greatest and finest’: logic and ontology.

Many etymologies turn out to presuppose the Heraclitean theory of universal flux.

421c–424a There must be some names such that other names derive from them but they no longer derive from other names. These are the ‘first names’, i.e. elementary or simple names. Their correctness, like that of the ‘secondary’ names which we have been analysing hitherto, must consist in ‘indicating



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- what each of the beings is like'. A first name performs this function by being an imitation, by means of letters and syllables, of the referent's essence.
- 424a–425b Someone who sets about imposing names must first of all divide up the various kinds of letters, then divide up the various kinds of beings, and finally map the two divisions onto each other, associating letters (both individual letters and groups of letters) with beings according to their mutual resemblance, thus constructing syllables, words and whole speeches. We too must carry out these divisions in order to assess the existing language.
- 425b–426b In fact we are unable to carry out the divisions as we should, but we shall try to give an account of the first names as best we can. To the extent that we are ignorant about their correctness, we are also ignorant about that of the secondary ones, which are composed of them.
- 426b–427d Tentative account of the mimetic power of Greek letters (and hence of existing Greek first names): ρ imitates movement, ι fineness, λ smoothness, α largeness, etc.
- III Naturalism discussed and conventionalism vindicated*
- 427d–428d Socrates begins to discuss with Cratylus (who approves of all that Socrates has been saying so far) and voices his intention to re-examine the whole matter.
- 428d–429b Cratylus holds that (a) the correctness of names consists in 'showing what the object named is like'; that, therefore, (b) 'names are said for the sake of teaching'; and that (c) names, which are the products of the namegiving art, cannot, unlike the products of the other arts, be made well or badly and are all (naturally) correct.
- 429b–430a Cratylus holds that 'Hermogenes' does not really belong to Hermogenes as his name, but merely seems to. Socrates argues that he is committed to the sophistical view that it is impossible to speak falsely. Cratylus endorses the view.
- 430a–431c Socrates refutes the view and shows that in fact it is possible to speak falsely.
- 431c–433b As against Cratylus' thesis (c), Socrates shows that a name, like any other image, can be made well or badly.
- 433b–434b A new way of stating the contrast between naturalism and conventionalism: they agree that a name is a means

to indicate an object; but they disagree over the manner in which this is achieved. According to Cratylus, a name indicates an object by being similar to it—and is similar to it by being made up of letters similar to it. According to Hermogenes, instead, a name indicates an object by being a conventional token for it.

434b–435d On the grounds of some examples (the name σκληρότης, ‘hardness’; the names of numbers) Socrates shows that ‘agreement and convention have some authority over the correctness of names’, although ‘perhaps, as far as possible, one would speak most finely when one spoke with elements all of which, or as many as possible, were similar, i.e. appropriate, and one would speak most poorly in the opposite case’. This is presumably meant to refute primarily Cratylus’ thesis (a).

435d–436a Socrates returns to Cratylus’ thesis (b). Cratylus holds that the function of names is to teach: that is to say, knowing names (i.e. their etymology) is a way, indeed the only way, of knowing their referents.

436ac Socrates objects that the namegiver might have encapsulated mistaken views in the names. Cratylus replies that the namegiver had knowledge about the objects named and offers the following argument: the flux etymologies showed that names are concordant with each other.

436c–437d Socrates refutes Cratylus’ reply on two counts: (i) the fact that names are concordant with each other is no guarantee that the views they express are true; (ii) it is actually false that names are so concordant with each other; for other names appear to presuppose, not the view that everything is in flux, but the opposite view that everything is stable.

437d–438b Socrates points out that Cratylus’ thesis (b) that names are the sole source of knowledge about the objects, and his other view that the namegiver had knowledge about the objects named, contradict each other: where did those who imposed the first names get their knowledge from?

438bc Cratylus tries to find shelter in the claim that the first names were set down by the gods. Socrates, with regard to the conflict between the flux etymologies and the rest ones, responds that a god would not have contradicted himself.