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978-0-521-76347-9 - The Cratylus of Plato: A Commentary

Francesco Ademollo

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The *Cratylus*, one of Plato's most difficult and intriguing dialogues, explores the relations between a name and the thing it names. The questions that arise lead the characters to face a number of major issues: truth and falsehood, relativism, the possibility of a perfect language, the relation between the investigation of names and that of reality, the Heraclitean flux theory and the Theory of Forms. This is the first full-scale commentary on the *Cratylus* and offers a definitive interpretation of the dialogue. It contains translations of the passages discussed and a line-by-line analysis which deals with textual matters and unravels Plato's dense and subtle arguments, reaching a novel interpretation of some of the dialogue's main themes as well as of many individual passages. The book is intended primarily for graduate students and scholars, both philosophers and classicists, but presupposes no previous acquaintance with the subject and is accessible to undergraduates.

FRANCESCO ADEMOLLO has held postdoctoral research positions at the University of Florence and at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa, and currently teaches Greek and Latin at the Liceo Classico Galileo in Florence. He has published articles on Plato, Aristotle and other topics in ancient philosophy.

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A Chiara

*Die Uhr mag stehn, der Zeiger fallen*

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## Preface

This is a commentary on Plato's *Cratylus*. It is a *running* commentary, because it is not organized by lemmata, but rather proceeds by quoting chunks of text (in my own translation) and then going on to explain them in detail. It is, alas, *not* a *complete* commentary, because there are some parts of the dialogue which I comment on only selectively, as I explain at the beginning of chapter 5. It is primarily a *philosophical* commentary, because what I am chiefly interested in is the purport of the theses advanced in the dialogue and the structure and worth of the arguments for and against them. But it is also a *philological* commentary, because along the way I discuss many matters of textual criticism and interpretation – some relevant to our philosophical understanding of the dialogue, some (usually confined to footnotes) perfectly irrelevant. Actually, I am afraid all I can say about my choice of focus is that as I was writing I tended, almost unwittingly, to imagine myself reading the dialogue in an open-ended seminar free from any sort of schedule, whose sole concern was to discuss anything that might seem interesting about a given portion of text before moving on to the next one. And so it is that, finally, this is a *very long* commentary – something for which I won't apologize.

As a consequence of the last feature, the book has been long (everyone around me says too long) in the writing. During this long span of time I have incurred many debts, both to institutions and to individuals; it is an immense pleasure and relief now to be able to acknowledge them all with heartfelt gratitude.

The Departments of Classics and Philosophy of the University of Florence and the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa granted me respectively, and successively, a doctoral fellowship, a four-year junior research fellowship and a two-year post-doctoral one. Each of these institutions allowed me to pursue my research with complete freedom and patiently put up with my seeming unproductivity.

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*Preface*

Among individuals it won't be invidious to start by singling out a few especially important names – two sadly before all others.

My first debt of gratitude dates back to almost twenty years ago, to a time when the idea of writing this book was very far from dawning on me. Still a secondary school student, I went to hear John Ackrill deliver two lectures which were to become one of the finest articles ever written on the *Cratylus*. That was my first encounter with the dialogue and my only personal encounter with that most distinguished scholar. I was baffled to see how seriously he took my inept questions and how warmly he encouraged me to keep on studying Plato. This I did in the ensuing years, until I eventually returned to the *Cratylus* as the subject of my degree and Ph.D. theses. I regret that it is now too late to show the finished book to the person who first introduced me to its subject.

Michael Frede read and discussed with me several chapters of an early draft when I spent some time in Oxford in 1999 and 2000. The news of his tragic and untimely death in August 2007, shortly after our last encounter, left me in a state of distraught incredulity. Others have been and will be in a better position than I am to commemorate his exceptional qualities as a scholar and a human being; but I will not refrain from recalling that what most struck me of him, and what perhaps influenced me most deeply, was the distinctive intensity with which he confronted his subject matter – which involved, among other things, a special capacity to communicate to his interlocutors that ancient philosophy was something well worth devoting one's life to.

Myles Burnyeat, whose writings have constituted a model of scholarship for me, sent me a long series of enlightening written comments on a number of issues both before I submitted the book to Cambridge University Press and after, as he volunteered to read it for the Press. I regard our correspondence as one of my happiest intellectual experiences and am profoundly grateful to him for his patient, friendly and stimulating support. Several of his suggestions are recorded in the text. Walter Leszl supervised much of the work I did on the dialogue while I was still a student, kindly enabled me to read his collection of texts concerning ancient atomism before it was published, and sent me wise comments on some bits of the book. Massimo Mugnai mentored, now a fairly long time ago, my first steps in serious philosophy and, in particular, in the interpretation of the *Cratylus*, also drawing my attention to the connections between this dialogue and Leibniz's writings. I have continued to learn from him and to benefit from his friendship over the years. David Sedley, with characteristic generosity, first suggested that I submit the book to

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Cambridge University Press, kindly allowed me to read much unpublished material (first and foremost a penultimate draft of his fine book on the *Cratylus*), and discussed some issues with me.

Many other people read and commented on parts of the book or gave advice on individual issues. Thanks are due especially to Fabio Acerbi, Jonathan Barnes, Rachel Barney (who was the other reader for Cambridge University Press), Sergio Bernini, Giuseppe Cambiano, Antonio Carlini, Albio Cassio, Paolo Crivelli, Paolo Fait, Andrea Falcon, Maria Teresa Ademollo Gagliano, Emiliano Gelli, Augusto Guida (who first put the idea of writing a commentary on the *Cratylus* into my head), Katerina Ierodiakonou, Walter Lapini, Alessandro Parenti, Enrico Rebuffat, Laura Venuti. I also thank audiences in Bergamo, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Florence, London, Oxford, Padua and Rome for helpful questions and criticism. In particular, in 2004–2005, when I was in Florence, I gave a seminar on the *Cratylus* which went on for the whole academic year and covered some two thirds of the dialogue; on that occasion I greatly profited from being able to submit my views to the keen scrutiny of Sergio Bernini, Paolo Fait and Walter Leszl.

I am also grateful to Cecilia Conti for allowing me to consult her unpublished thesis on ῥῆμα; to librarians in Florence, Oxford, Venice and Vienna; to Michael Sharp, who as Cambridge University Press's Classics editor first encouraged me to submit my typescript and then gently watched over its transformation into a book along with Elizabeth Hanlon and Jo Breeze; to Linda Woodward, who was an exceptionally meticulous and sympathetic copy-editor and improved the book in many respects; to C. for wholly unrequested help with typing; and to P. for just being there.

My parents, Marco and Maria Teresa, have been giving me all sorts of intellectual, moral and material support over the years. My debt towards them is incalculable.

Finally, my wife Chiara has been by my side through times good and bad, unfailingly believing in me and giving me strength and advice. She also made a substantial contribution to the book's final revision. It is for these reasons, for many others which I shall not recount here, and not least because she is the mother of Caterina and Federico, that the book could only be dedicated to her.

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## *Preliminary note*

All translations are my own except when indicated otherwise (although I have often been influenced by existing translations in cases in which it did not seem appropriate to acknowledge direct dependence).

In citing ancient texts I have always followed standard editions and practice; thus I have employed the standard abbreviations of LSJ and *OLD*, seldom replacing them with other, more perspicuous ones drawn from *OCD* (e.g. replacing 'A.' with 'Aesch.' for 'Aeschylus'). In some cases, in order to prevent ambiguities or unclarity, I have specified the edition according to whose numbers of page and line ('Phrynichus, *Praeparatio sophistica* 9.12–17 de Borries') or lemma ('Timaeus, *Lexicon Platonicum* 58 Bonelli') a text is being cited. All Proclus references are to the *in Platonis Cratylum commentaria* (*in Cra.*) unless otherwise noted.

## *Abbreviations*

### 1 EDITIONS AND TRANSLATIONS OF THE *CRATYLUS* (CITED BY ABBREVIATION)

- |                |   |
|----------------|---|
| Aronadio       | F. Aronadio (trans. and comm.), <i>Platone: Cratilo</i> . Rome and Bari 1996.   |
| Bekker         | I. Bekker (ed.), <i>Platonis Scripta Graece Omnia</i> , vol. iv. London 1826.   |
| Burnet         | J. Burnet (ed.), <i>Platonis Opera</i> (5 vols.). Oxford 1900–7.  |
| Cambiano       | G. Cambiano (trans.), <i>Platone: Dialoghi filosofici</i> , vol. ii. Turin 1981.  |
| Dalimier       | C. Dalimier (trans. and comm.), <i>Platon: Cratyle</i> . Paris 1998.  |
| Ficino         | M. Ficino (trans.), <i>Divus Plato</i> , 2nd edn. Venice 1491.  |
| Fowler         | H. N. Fowler (ed. and trans.), <i>Plato (vol. VI): Cratylus, Parmenides, Greater and Lesser Hippias</i> . Cambridge, MA, and London 1926. |
| Heindorf       | L. Fr. Heindorf (ed.), <i>Platonis Dialogi selecti</i> (4 vols.). Leipzig 1892–1910.  |
| Hermann        | C. F. Hermann (ed.), <i>Platonis dialogi secundum Thrasylli tetralogias dispositi</i> , vol. 1, Leipzig 1861.                             |
| Hirschig       | R. B. Hirschig (ed.), <i>Platonis Opera</i> , vol. 1. Paris 1873.   |
| Jowett         | B. Jowett (trans.), <i>The Dialogues of Plato</i> , 3rd edn, vol. 1. Oxford 1892.   |
| Mérider        | L. Méridier (ed. and trans.), <i>Platon, Oeuvres complètes</i> , vol. v.2: <i>Cratyle</i> . Paris 1931.                                   |
| Minio-Paluello | [Translation of <i>Cratylus</i> , in <i>Platone, Opere complete</i> , 2nd edn, vol. ii. Rome and Bari 1991.]                              |

xviii	<i>List of abbreviations</i>
OCT	E. A. Duke, W. F. Hicken, W. S. M. Nicoll, D. B. Robinson and J. C. G. Strachan (eds.), <i>Platonis Opera</i> , vol. 1. Oxford 1995.
Reeve	C. D. C. Reeve (trans.), <i>Plato: Cratylus</i> , Indianapolis, IN, and Cambridge 1998.
Stallbaum	G. Stallbaum (ed. and comm.), <i>Platonis Opera omnia</i> , vol. v.ii: <i>Cratylum</i> . Gotha and Erfurt 1835 (repr. New York and London 1980).

## 2 OTHER EDITIONS AND WORKS OF GENERAL REFERENCE (CITED BY ABBREVIATION)

APF	J. K. Davies, <i>Athenian Propertied Families, 600–300 BC</i> . Oxford 1971.
Bonelli	M. Bonelli (ed., trans. and comm.), <i>Timée le Sophiste: Lexique platonicien</i> . Leiden and Boston 2007.
Buck	C. D. Buck, <i>The Greek Dialects</i> . Chicago 1955.
Cooper	G. L. Cooper, III, after K. W. Krüger, <i>Attic Greek Prose Syntax</i> (2 vols.). Ann Arbor 1998.
Cufalo	D. Cufalo (ed.), <i>Scholia Graeca in Platonem, I: Scholia ad Dialogos Tetralogiarum I–VII continens</i> . Rome 2007.
Daremberg/Saglio	Ch. Daremberg and E. Saglio (eds.), <i>Dictionnaire des Antiquités grecques et romaines d'après les textes et les monuments</i> (6 vols.). Paris 1877–1919.
de Borries	J. de Borries (ed.), <i>Phrynichi sophistae Praeparatio Sophistica</i> . Leipzig 1911.
DELG	P. Chantraine, <i>Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque</i> (2 vols.). Paris 1968–80.
DGE	F. R. Adrados (ed.), <i>Diccionario Griego-Español</i> . Madrid 1980–.
DK	H. Diels and W. Kranz, <i>Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker</i> , 6th edn (3 vols.). Berlin 1951–2.
FDS	K. Hülser, <i>Die Fragmente zur Dialektik der Stoiker</i> (4 vols.). Stuttgart and Bad Cannstatt 1987.
GP	J. D. Denniston, <i>The Greek Particles</i> , 2nd edn. Oxford 1954.

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- IG *Inscriptiones Graecae* (1873–).
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- KG R. Kühner and B. Gerth, *Ausführliche Grammatik der Griechischen Sprache: Satzlehre*, 3rd edn (2 vols.). Hannover and Leipzig 1904.
- KRS G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 2nd edn. Cambridge 1983.
- Leszl See Leszl 2009.
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- LSAG L. H. Jeffery, *The Local Scripts of Archaic Greece*, revised edn with a supplement by A. W. Johnston. Oxford 1990.
- LSJ H. G. Liddell, R. Scott and H. Stuart Jones, *A Greek–English Lexicon*, 9th edn. Oxford 1940, with a revised supplement ed. by P. G. W. Glare, with the assistance of A. A. Thompson, 1996.
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- OCD S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth (eds.), *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd edn. Oxford and New York 1996.
- OLD *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. Oxford 1968.
- PCG R. Kassel and C. Austin (eds.), *Poetae Comici Graeci*. Berlin and New York 1983–.
- PEG A. Bernabé (ed.), *Poetae Epici Graeci* (2 vols.). Berlin and New York 1996 (2nd edn) 2007.
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- PMG D. L. Page (ed.), *Poetae Melici Graeci*. Oxford 1962.
- SEG *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*, 1923–.
- SSR G. Giannantoni (ed.), *Socratis et Socraticorum Reliquiae* (4 vols.). Naples 1990.
- SVF I. von Arnim (ed.), *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* (3 vols.). Leipzig 1903–5.



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- TrGF* B. Snell, R. Kannicht and S. Radt (eds.), *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* (5 vols.). Göttingen 1981–2004.
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