

Cratylus

ΚΡΑΤΥΛΟΣ

Plato

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Well then, would you like to include Socrates here in our discussion?

If you wish.

Socrates, Cratylus here maintains that there is a correctness of names that belongs, by nature, to each of the things that are, and what people conventionally call something when uttering some part of their own language is not this name. There is, rather, a natural correctness of names, the same for everyone, Greeks and non-Greeks alike. When I ask him if his own name is, in truth, Cratylus, he agrees that it is. "And what is Socrates' name?" I ask. "Socrates," says he. "Is this also the case with everyone else; whatever particular name we call them is their name in each case?" "Well," says he, "your name is not Hermogenes, even if everyone calls you so." And although I pursue the question and am keen to know what exactly he means, he clarifies nothing and hides his intention from me by pretending to be in possession of some personal understanding of his own about this matter, which, if he deigned to express it fully, would force me to agree with him and say exactly what he says. Now, if you can somehow interpret the oracular utterance of Cratylus, I would be pleased to hear you. But I would be even more pleased to find out from you, if you please, what you yourself think about the correctness of names.

Hermogenes, son of Hipponicus, there is an ancient saying that whatever is noble is difficult to understand, and indeed the subject of names happens to be no small matter. Now, if I had already heard Prodicus¹ fifty-drachma course of lectures, which, according to the man himself, provides a comprehensive education in the subject, there would be nothing to stop you from learning the full truth about the correctness of names here and now. But as it happens, I have only heard his one-drachma course, so I don't really know

where the truth about such matters lies. I am, however, prepared to join in the search together with yourself and Cratylus. But when he denies that Hermogenes is, in truth, your name, I suspect that he is mocking you, for he believes perhaps that every time you set out to make some money, you fail. In any case, as I said just now, although such matters are difficult to understand, we should make them the subject of a joint enquiry as to whether yourself or Cratylus is right.

Well, Socrates, for my part, although I have often been involved in discussions with this man and with many others, I cannot be persuaded that there is any correctness of a name apart from convention and agreement. Indeed, it seems to me that whatever name you give to something is the correct name, and if you change the name for a different one and no longer use the original name, the new name is just as correct as the previous one. It is just like changing the names of your household slaves, for no name naturally belongs to any particular thing by nature, but by convention and custom on the part of those who create the custom and use the name. If this is not the case, I myself am quite prepared to listen and learn, not only from Cratylus, but from anyone else at all.

Perhaps you have a point, Hermogenes, but let's see. According to you, whatever someone calls something is the name of that thing.

That's what I think anyway.

Whether an individual or, indeed, a city calls it so?

Yes.

What about this? Suppose I call any of the things that are, for instance, what we currently call a man, suppose I refer to this as a horse, and what we now call a horse as a man, will the same thing have the name 'man' for the general public, and 'horse' for me personally? And in the other case, will the same

thing have the name 'man' for me, and 'horse' for the public?
Is that what you are saying?

That's what I think, anyway.

Come on then and tell me this. Is there something you call speaking the truth and something you call speaking falsehood?

There is.

So there can be a true statement and a false statement?

Certainly.

Is the statement that states things that are as they are, true, while the one that states them as they are not, is false?

Yes.

Now, is there any part of a spoken statement that is smaller than a name?

No, that is the smallest.

So, since it is possible to utter a true and false statement, is it also possible to utter a true and a false name?

Of course.

So, whatever a person says is the name of something, this name is its name for that person?

Yes.

Come on now, Hermogenes, let's see whether, in your view, this is also the case with things that are. Is it the case that their being is private to each person, and so, as Protagoras said, the measure of all things is man? Or do you think that things have some fixity of being of their own?

On occasion, Socrates, out of sheer perplexity, I have ended up saying just what Protagoras says, even though I don't entirely believe that this is the case.

What about this, then? Have you ever ended up not entirely believing that there is such a thing as a bad person?

No, by Zeus, I have often come to the conclusion that some people are entirely bad, a very large number actually.

Well, have you ever thought that some are very good?

Very few indeed.

Therefore, if everything is not always simultaneously so for everyone in like manner, nor does each thing belong to each individual person, it is obvious that things are possessed of some definite being of their own, not relative to us, nor dragged hither and thither by how they appear to us. Rather, they hold, of themselves, to their own being which is natural to them.

Yes, Socrates, I believe that this is so.

Now, speaking is one of these activities, is it not?

Yes.

And naming is part of speaking, for we speak what we speak, I presume, by making distinctions based upon names.

Certainly.

And activities, we saw, are not relative to us, but have a particular nature of their own?

Quite so.

Then, if we are not to contradict our previous conclusions, should things be named in the way that is natural to name them, and for them to be named with what is natural and not as we wish? And shall we meet with success in naming things in this way and no other?

Apparently so.

And when an instructor uses a name, whose work does he use?

I can't say.

Well, can you answer this question? Who has given us the names that we make use of?

I cannot.

Don't you think that convention has given these to us?

So it seems.

So a name is an instrument of instruction and it divides being, just as a shuttle does for woven fabric.

Yes.

So, Hermogenes, it is not for everyone to give names, but for some fashioner of names who is, it seems, the convention-setter, the rarest of artificers to arise among us humans.

So it seems.

Come on then, let's investigate where the convention-setter looks when giving names. Let us consider this based upon the previous examples. Where does the carpenter look when making a shuttle? Does he not look to the sort of thing whose nature is to weave?

Certainly.

So, best of men, does the convention-setter need to know how to impose that natural name for each thing upon the sounds and syllables, and make and impose all names by looking to what name itself is if he is to be an authoritative giver of names?

Certainly.

Now, who is the one who knows whether the appropriate form of shuttle is embodied in wood of any kind? Is it the carpenter who has made it, or the weaver who uses it?

The user, Socrates, is more likely to know this.

And who would best supervise the work of the convention-setter, and pass judgement when it is complete, in this country or abroad? Won't it be the person who uses his work?

Yes.

Do you call the person who knows how to ask questions and respond a dialectician?

Yes, a dialectician.

And the work of the convention-setter, it seems, is to make a name, with the dialectical person as supervisor, if names are to be properly given.

Indeed so.

It seems then, Hermogenes, that the giving of a name is not, as you imagine, an ordinary matter for ordinary random persons. And Cratylus is speaking the truth when he says that the names belong to the things by their nature, and not everyone is an artificer of names, but only the person who looks to the natural name for each and is able to impose its form upon the letters and syllables.

I don't know how to oppose your arguments, Socrates, and yet it is not easy for me to be persuaded so suddenly, and I think I would be better persuaded if you were to show me what, according to you, this natural correctness of names is.

Bless you, Hermogenes, I am not saying that there is any such thing. No, you have forgotten what I said a little earlier, that I don't know about this, but I could enquire along with you.

Well, if that does not please you, then you should learn from Homer and the other poets.

And what does Homer say about names, Socrates, and where?

There are many places where he makes significant, fine distinctions between the names that humans and the gods call the same things. Don't you agree that there are places where he says something wonderfully important about the correctness of names? For it is surely obvious that the gods call things by names that are correct by nature. Don't you think so?

I fully understand that if the gods call things by names, they do so correctly. But what passages are you referring to?

Don't you know that he says that the Trojan river that fought one on one with Hephaestus is called Xanthos by the gods, but Scamander by humans?

I do.

Well, which name do you think Homer believed to be the more correct name for the boy – Astyanax or Scamandrius?

I cannot say.

Think about this, then. Suppose someone were to ask you, "Do you think that the more intelligent person or the more unintelligent person calls things by the more correct names?" I would say that it is obviously the more intelligent person.

For this reason, then, it seems it is only right to call the son of the defender, Astyanax, the astu-anax, the lord of the city, which his father defended, as Homer says.

But, good man, did Homer himself not give Hector this name? Well, this name seems to me to be much the same as Astyanax. Indeed, both seem to be Greek, for anax (lord) and hector (possessor) seem to indicate the same thing since both are names for a king.

Doesn't the same argument hold in relation to a king? For a king will usually be born from a king, good from good, noble from noble, and the same holds for all other cases; from each kind, another one like that is born unless some aberration arises. So they should be called by the same names, but it is permissible to vary the syllables so that to those without the expertise, names seem different even though they are the same.

Yes, Hermogenes, just as the name 'Orestēs' (mountain-man) is likely to be correct, whether it was given to him by chance or by a poet to point out with this name the wildness, coarseness and ruggedness of his nature.

Indeed, it is quite likely that Agamemnon is the sort of person who would work hard at whatever he decided upon, and persevere, bringing his plans to completion through his excellence, and an indication of this is the length of his stay at Troy and his endurance. So, the name 'Agamemnon' indicates that this man was admirable (agastos) for standing his ground (epimonē).

For the name of Zeus is really like a phrase consisting of two parts, some people using one part, others using the other. For some call him Zēn, others Dia, and combining the two into one demonstrates the nature of the god. For there is no one who is more responsible for the life of us humans, and all other creatures, than the ruler and king of all. Consequently, this god through whom (di hon) all living creatures always have life (zēn) has been named correctly (di hon zēn).

Now, wouldn't it be right to begin with the gods and consider the way in which the 'gods' (theoi) are correctly called by this particular name? Well, my guess is as follows. As I see it, the first humans to settle in Greece believed only in those gods that many non-Greeks still believe in today – sun, moon, stars and sky. Now, since they saw that these are always following

a course, and running (theonta), they named them 'gods' (theous) because their nature is to run (thein).

Because the daimōnes were wise and knowledgeable (daimonēs), he called them daimōnes, and in our ancient language this very name is found. So, Hesiod and many other poets are right when they say that once a good person dies, a great and honourable destiny is theirs, and the person becomes a daimōn in accordance with the wisdom associated with that title.

Yes, Socrates, I think I am in complete agreement with you on this. But what about the word 'hero'? What would it be?

This is not particularly difficult to understand, for their name is little altered and it indicates their birth from love (erōs).

As follows. This name, 'human' (anthrōpos), indicates that the other creatures do not consider or reflect upon or scrutinise anything they see, while a human being sees (opōpe) and simultaneously scrutinises and reflects upon whatever has been seen. And so, of all creatures, a human being is rightly named 'human' (anthrōpos) for scrutinising (anathrōn) whatever is seen (opōpe).

They observed that when soul is present it is the cause of the body being alive, providing its ability to draw breath and be revived, and when the reviving (anapsuchon) power departs, the body is destroyed and dies. And that, I believe, is why they called it 'soul' (psuchē).

Do you think that there is anything besides soul that sustains the nature of every single body, so that it lives and moves? Don't you also believe, with Anaxagoras, that nous and soul are what order and hold the nature of everything else too? So, it would be only right to give to this power, which holds and sustains (orchēi, echei) nature (phusis), this particular name, 'phusechei' (nature-holder). And it is possible to pronounce

this more elegantly as 'psuchē' (soul).

And indeed, some maintain that the body (sōma) is a tomb (sēma) for the soul, as though it was, at present, entombed. But it seems to me for the most part that this name was given by the adherents of Orpheus as if the soul was paying a penalty for some offences, and the body was an enclosure like a prison to keep the soul safe.

Well, Socrates, I think that enough has been said on these names. But what about the names of the gods – Zeus for instance, whom you spoke of just now? Should we conduct an enquiry in the same way as to where precisely the correctness of their names lies?

Yes, by Zeus, Hermogenes, if we are possessed of any intelligence, the very best approach is to admit that we know nothing about the gods themselves, nor about the precise names they call themselves, which are of course true names. But, in terms of correctness, a second approach would be to call them by the names they love to be called by in our conventional prayers, since we know nothing else.

It is obvious to me that people of this sort gave the names, and if names in foreign languages are investigated, the meaning of each will be discovered just as well. For instance, in the case of what we call 'ousia' (being), there are some who call this 'essia' and others who call it 'ōsia'. Now, taking the first of these alternatives, essia, it is reasonable to call the being of things 'Hestia'.

Heraclitus says, I presume, that everything is in motion and nothing remains as it is, and he compares things that are to the flow of a river, saying that "you cannot step twice into the same river".

Then let's speak about his brothers, Poseidon and Pluto, and the other name he goes by. Well, it seems to me that Poseidon

is so named because the nature of the sea hindered him as he proceeded and would not allow him to advance, acting as a sort of bond for his feet. So, the god with dominion over the power of the sea was named Poseidon because he was foot-bound (posi-desmon).

Pluto is named as the giver of wealth (ploutos) because wealth comes up from beneath the earth.

So he binds them, it seems, by desire and not by necessity, since he binds them by the strongest bond. Now, when someone believes they will become a better person by being with someone else, is there any greater desire than this?

So, Hermogenes, the name Hades is not really derived from the unseen (aides), but it is much more likely that the convention-setter called him Hades because of the fact that he knows (eidenai) all that is good.

Very well. But what have we to say about Dēmēter, Hēra, Apollo, Athena, Hephaestus, Ares, and the other gods?

Dēmēter is apparently so called because, like a mother (mētēr), she gives (didousa) the gift of food. Hēra is the lovely one (eratē) because Zeus is said to have married her for love.

There is no single name better suited to the four powers of the god so that it somehow encompasses them all and shows his musical, prophetic and medical power, and his skill in archery too.

In that case, in respect of the deliverances and cleansings, he may correctly be called 'Aploun' (he who cleanses), being a physician of maladies of this sort. In respect of prophecy, and what's true and what's simple (aplous), which are indeed the same, it would be correct to call him by the name that the people of Thessaly use, for they all call this god 'Aploun'.

This, my friend, is a weightier matter. The ancients seem to have thought about Athena in much the same way as experts on Homer do nowadays. Indeed, most such commentators say that he represents Athena as 'nous' or thought (*dianoia*), while the person who devised her name seems to have thought about her in much the same way.

Well then, this name, 'Hermes'², seems to be concerned with speech, and he seems to be an interpreter (*hermēnea*), a messenger, a thief, deceptive in his arguments, and a dealer, and all such activity involves the power of speech.

You know that speech indicates all things and keeps them circulating and moving, and it is twofold, true and false. Now, the true speech is smooth and divine, dwelling on high among the gods, while the false speech dwells down here among the broad mass of humanity, and it is coarse and tragic.

Well, after this class of names I would gladly look at where precisely the correctness lies in the case of the noble names associated with excellence, such as 'wisdom' (*phronēsis*), 'comprehension' (*sunesis*) and 'justice' (*dikaioṣunē*), and any others of that sort.

Well, my friend you are stirring up a significant class of names. Nevertheless, since I have donned the lion's skin, I should not turn coward, but get on with the enquiry.

'Wisdom' (*phronēsis*) is intelligence (*noēsis*) of motion (*phoras*) and flow (*rou*). Or it may be interpreted as the advantage (*onēsis*) of motion (*phoras*), but in any case it is concerned with motion.

And indeed, 'knowledge' (*epistēmē*) implies that the worthy soul follows (*hepei*) the moving things, without falling behind or running ahead. Accordingly, comprehension (*sunesis*), for its part, seems to be a sort of working out, for whenever someone is said 'to comprehend', it is really the same as being

said 'to know', for 'to comprehend' means that the soul proceeds along with or goes along with (sun iēmi) things.

Now, it is easy to conclude that justice (dikaiosunē) is the comprehension (sunesis) of what's just (dikaios), but the actual word 'just' (dikaion) presents a difficulty.

Now, since it governs all the others by passing through (diaion) them, it is correct to call it by this name, 'dikaion' (just).

So it appears that this 'going badly' is obviously a hindered and impeded motion, and any soul that possesses it becomes filled with badness. Now, if the name 'badness' is applied to this sort of thing, then excellence (aretē) would be the opposite of this, indicating, in the first place, 'proceeding easily' (euporia), and secondly that the flow of the good soul is always free.

For pleasure (hēdonē) has this name because it is the activity that tends to our advantage (hē onēsis), but a 'd' is inserted so that it is called 'hēdonē' (pleasure) rather than 'hēonē'. Pain (lupē) seems to get its name from the breakdown (dialysis) which the body undergoes when experiencing pain.

I'll ask then about the most important and exalted words, 'truth', 'falsehood' and 'being', and 'name', the very word with which our present argument is concerned, and why it has this name.

Well, 'name' seems to be a combined word, coming from a phrase that says that "this is being which is the subject of enquiry". The word 'truth' is like the others, for the divine motion of being seems to be referred to by the word 'truth' (alētheia), which indicates 'divine wandering' (theia alē).

So a name, it seems, is an imitation, by voice, of that which is imitated, and whoever is imitating with the voice is naming whatever is being imitated.

Well then, if someone were able to imitate this very essence belonging to each thing by means of letters and syllables, wouldn't he be indicating what each thing is?

Well, in the first place, the letter 'r' appears to me like an instrument of all motion. Firstly, in the words flowing (rhein) and flow (rhoē), themselves, he imitates their movement by means of this letter. Then, in the word 'tromos' (trembling), 'trechein' (running) and in such verbs as 'krouein' (striking), 'thrauein' (breaking), 'ereikein' (tearing), 'thruptein' (crushing), he gives expression to all these, for the most part, by means of the letter 'r'.

Well, Socrates, as I said at the outset, Cratylus often bothers me quite a lot, maintaining that there is a correctness of names without clarifying what it is. So, Cratylus, tell me now, with Socrates present, if you accept what he says about names or do you have something better to offer?

What's this Hermogenes? Do you think it is easy to learn any subject so quickly, or to teach it either, especially a subject like this which seems to be one of the most important?

What is more, Cratylus, I myself would not be insistent upon anything I have said. I have only expressed what occurred to me in the enquiry with Hermogenes, and so you should take heart, and if you have something better to suggest then rest assured I shall accept it.

Well, Socrates, as you say, I certainly have studied these matters, and I might well make a student of you. Indeed, Socrates, you seem to be delivering prophetic utterances that are more or less after my own mind, whether you have been inspired by Euthyphro or some other Muse who has long dwelt unnoticed within you.

My dear Cratylus, I myself have long been amazed at my own wisdom, and doubtful of it too. So I think it is necessary to

reconsider anything I have said. The most grievous deception of all is self-deception. We maintain that the correctness of a name consists in the fact that it indicates the sort of thing it names. Should we declare that this is an adequate statement?

Very much so, Socrates, in my opinion.

Is it totally impossible to speak falsehood? Is this the point of your argument? For there are lots of people, nowadays and of old, who say this, my dear Cratylus.

Indeed so, Socrates. How could anyone, saying whatever is said, not speak what is? But to speak falsehood is not to speak what is. Is this not the case?

Well, let's see if we can somehow come to an agreement, Cratylus. Would you maintain that the name is one thing, while that of which it is the name is something else?

I would.

Would you agree that the name is an imitation of the thing?

Most emphatically.

So perhaps one artificer of names will be good, while another will be bad?

Yes.

Quite so. But you see, Socrates, whenever we assign these letters, 'a' or 'b', or any of the elements, to the names by means of the skill of grammar, and we omit or add in or transpose anything, we do not write the name incorrectly; rather, we do not even write it at all.

But this, I suspect, is not the actual correctness of something qualitative, or of image in general. Rather, on the contrary, if the image is to be an image, it absolutely must not assign all the qualities of whatever it is imitating.

Then be courageous enough, my noble friend, to accept that a name can be well given or not well given, and do not insist that it must include all the letters in order to be exactly like whatever it names.

Well, Socrates, what you are saying sounds reasonable to me and I accept it.

To instruct, Socrates, that's my opinion, and the simple fact is that whoever has knowledge of the names also has knowledge of the things they name.

Come on then, Cratylus, let's think about this. If someone who was enquiring into the things were to follow the names by considering what each name means, don't you think there is a significant danger of him being deceived?

How so?

Obviously, whoever first gave the names, gave names based on what he thought the things were like. Is this what we maintain?

Yes.

Now, if this person was thinking incorrectly and gave the names based upon incorrect thinking, what do you believe would happen to those of us who follow him? Could we avoid being deceived?

But, Socrates, this is not the case. Rather, whoever gave the names must necessarily have had knowledge; otherwise, as I said some time ago, they would not be names at all.

Let's examine our previous account once more where we maintained that the names indicated that the being of everything is moving, progressing and flowing. Don't you think that this is what they indicate?

Very much so, and their indications are correct.

Let's consider this by first selecting the word 'epistēmē' (knowledge). Note how ambiguous it is. Indeed, it seems to indicate that it impedes our soul's motion towards things rather than indicating that it is carried along with them. And indeed, 'amathia' (ignorance) and 'akolasia' (lack of restraint) also appear to be close to these in meaning, for 'amathia' (ignorance) appears to be 'the progression of one who proceeds with God' (tou hama theōi iontos poreia).

I believe, Socrates, that the surest account of these matters is that some power, more than human, gave the first names to things, and so they are necessarily correct.

Now, since there is a conflict among the names, with some claiming that they are like the truth while others claim that they are it, how are we to decide between them and on what basis? Not, I presume, on the basis of other names, different from these, since there are none. It is obvious, rather, that something else apart from names must be sought which will reveal to us which of the two kinds of name is true.

Yes, I think so.

So, Cratylus, if this is the case, it is possible without names to learn about things that are.

Apparently.

Come on then, by Zeus, have we not agreed many times that the names that are well given are like whatever they are names of, and are images of the things? Now, if the things really can be learned through the names and also through themselves, which of the two ways of learning would be better and more exact? Is it better to learn from the image, whether it is itself a good likeness, and also to learn the truth of that of which it is an image? Or is it better to learn from the truth, both the truth itself and whether the image of it has been properly fashioned?

From the truth, necessarily so.

Let's be content to agree that it is not from names that things should be learned or investigated. It is much better to do so from themselves rather than from the names.

Indeed, my dear Cratylus, please consider something which I myself have often dreamed. Should we, or should we not, maintain that there is such thing as beauty itself, and good itself, and so on for each of the things that are?

I think we should, Socrates.

Well, let us consider just that, not whether some particular face or something of this sort is beautiful, and whether all these seem to be in flux, but whether we should maintain, rather, that beauty itself is always the sort of thing that it is?

Necessarily.

How could that which never remains as it is, be anything? For if it ever did remain as it is, it is obvious that at least for that period of time it would not change. And if it always remains as it is and is the same, how could this ever change or be in motion without departing from its own form?

Indeed, if all things are changing and nothing remains the same, Cratylus, it is not even reasonable to say that there is knowledge. For if this thing itself, the knowledge, does not change from being knowledge, then knowledge would always remain and there would be knowledge. And if it is always changing, there would never be knowledge, and according to this argument there would be neither the knower nor the known. But if there is always the knower and there is always the known, and there is the beautiful and there is the good, and each one of the things that are, then it is not apparent to me that these things we are now speaking of bear any resemblance to flow or to motion.

Nor would someone, fully possessed of intelligence, entrust the well-being of himself and his soul to names, and place his trust in these and in those who instituted them to be confident that he knows something. Perhaps this is how things are, Cratylus, or perhaps not. So you should conduct a brave and thorough enquiry and don't accept anything too easily, for you are still young and of the right age.

I shall do as you say, but mark my words too, Socrates, I have not been neglectful of such enquiry. No, I have taken a lot of trouble to consider the matter, and things seem to me much more as Heraclitus⁵ says they are.

Yes, my friend, instruct me on some future occasion. Now, you should go into the countryside as you have arranged, and Hermogenes here will send you on your way.

So be it, Socrates, but you too should continue to think about these matters.

Notes

1. Prodicus, a contemporary of Socrates, was a distinguished sophist from Ceos who taught semantics and rhetoric.
2. The name Hermogenes means 'offspring of Hermes'. Due to his speed and mobility, Hermes was regarded as the god of commerce and wealth.
3. Protagoras of Abdera was a renowned sophist who taught rhetoric and virtue. The relativism captured here is considered at length in Plato's Theaetetus.
4. Euthydemus was a sophist from the island of Chios who delights in proving that the same propositions are both so and not so.
5. Fragment 91, Diels-Kranz (Heraclitus on the river).
6. The Greek word *nomos*, translated here as 'convention', can also be translated as 'law'. Hence 'convention-setter' (*nomothetēs*) is often translated as 'lawgiver'.
7. Euthyphro appears in the eponymous dialogue of Plato where he is described as an authority on matters divine.
8. Hesiod, Works and Days 121-123.
9. Hesiod, Theogony 195-197 (on Aphrodite).