Notes on Plato’s CRATYLUS

M. Baumer 10/23/05

First dialogue of second tetralogy.

Cratylius and Hermogenes are debating whether the correctness of names is by nature or convention (social agreement). H: OK if we ask Socrates to join in? OK.

H: Cratylius says that the correctness of names is by nature, and that he and you are named correctly by the names “Cratylius” and “Socrates,” but not I by “Hermogenes,” and that he has a thought that he won’t share with me that would lead me to agree if he did share it.

S: Just a joke about your inability to make money. Let us investigate the question, since I don’t know the answer, since I couldn’t afford to take Prodicus’ 50 drachma course.

H: Whatever name you give something is its right name, and you can change it, just as we change the names of our slaves.

Socrates: If an individual decided to call horses “men” and men “horses,” would these names then be correct for that individual, although the reverse were correct for every one else?

H: Yes.

Socrates’ first argument / line of questioning, showing that there is a natural correctness of names:

There is true and false speech.
True speech says things as they are and false as they are not.
Names are parts of speech, and are in fact the smallest parts.
True speeches (logoi) have true parts and false speeches false parts.

H: I still cannot help thinking that whatever name anyone gives a thing is its right name, just as different cities have different names for things and also Greeks and barbarians.

Socrates’ second argument:

S: Just as names are different for different people, is the substance (ousia) of things different also, as Protagoras says, that man is the measure of all things, and that what seems to be for a person, is for that person?

H: Sometimes I have been carried away so that I thought so, but I don’t think so.

S: Are some men good and some bad?
H: Yes

S: Are the good wise? Yes.

S: Could there be wise or foolish men if Protagoras were right? No.

S: Is Euthydemus right to say that everything always and eternally has every attribute? (For here also there could not be good or bad men.) No, he is not right.

S: So since neither Euthydemus nor Protagoras is right, things have certain invariant substance by nature, and not relative to you or me or caused by you or me. Yes.

S: And so actions. So actions have a nature, and are not in accordance with opinion.

S: Thus actions have natural instruments, and will only be done correctly and come out right when employing those. Yes.

S: Cutting, burning, speaking, naming. The instrument of naming is the name. The one who names is the teacher, who discriminates substance. (Later in the dialogue the interlocutors seem to regard themselves as committed to the proposition that the function of names is to reveal the natures of the things they name—perhaps this is the place where this commitment is made.)

S: Instruments of weaving and boring are the shuttle and the borer, and these are made by the carpenter and the smith. The carpenter and the smith are experts, and there is a correctness to their work.

S: The name-maker is the lawgiver, and must likewise be skilled.

S: When a shuttle breaks, the carpenter does well to look to the original form, and not the broken shuttle. This form is the shuttle itself.

S: For weaving different materials, the carpenter makes shuttles out of different materials, but always in accordance with the same form.

S: Likewise, different lawgivers in different lands may use different sounds and syllables, but the must all look to the name itself.

S: The supervisor of the work of the toolmaker is the user (as with the lyre). The user of names is the questioner and answerer—i. e., the dialectician. Therefore, there is a correctness of names, and it is determined by the dialectician.

Note: This argumentation has taken the form: Protagorean relativism is wrong. Things have natures. Actions, too have natures. Proper instruments of action must be based on a form. The form is the instrument itself, which is the nature of the instrument. Correct
names must embody this form, even if they are embodied in different sounds. Therefore there is a correctness of names by nature.

H: What is this correctness of names?

S: I don’t know—let us inquire.

There is now the long central portion of the dialogue in which names of various things are explained as being derived from descriptions that reveal the natures of the things they describe. In many cases there are several alternative explanations of names, and Socrates frequently makes fun of his own explanations. As the explanations go on, they are more and more in line with the notion that the good is the flowing and the bad is that which is resistant to flow (the supposed Heraclitean philosophy that all things are flowing streams (although in reality Heraclitus makes the logos, the law of changes, constant). Several times Euthyphro is credited with the general run of thought being expressed, and Socrates says that he has been with Euthyphro discussing these matters just that morning.

S: What about the basic or first names? They cannot be explained in the same way, because they themselves are not composed of names?

S: We have been assuming that the intention in the correctness of names is showing the nature of the things named.

S: Perhaps names are vocal imitations of things named. (Like painting is a visual imitation.)

S: But no—then vocal imitations would be names (like making animal sounds).

S: In addition, the name must imitate the substance of the thing. How could this be done? This the name-maker (onomastikos) could presumably do.

S: in the names that we found to be basic, “flow,” “motion,” “restraint,” does this occur? We must systematically divide both things and names into their components until we reach the smallest (in the case of sounds the letters [phonemes]), and then determine what letters or syllables imitate the simplest of things.

S: The letter rho signifies motion, the letter iota signifies rarity, shivering, seething, shaking, and shock by the letters phi, psi, sigma, zeta, slipperiness by the latter lambda, interiorness by the letter nu, etc. Unless Cratylus has a better idea.

Here Cratylus enters the dialogue.

S: Review: Correctness of names reveals the nature of the thing named. Names are given with a view to instruction. Naming is an expertise. The experts are the lawgivers.

S: Are some painters better, some worse? And better produce better works. Yes.
S: The same with names?

C: No. There are no degrees with names—something is either a correct name or it is not a name.

C: The false cannot even be uttered—you cannot say that which is not.

C: He who uses an incorrect name is just making noise, like beating a bronze pot.

Cratylus now agrees that a name is an imitation of a thing, and that therefore names, like other imitations (paintings) can be more or less correct and true. Otherwise, the imitation would have to be perfect in every respect, and the imitation of Cratylus would be another Cratylus.

Thus a name may be deficient and still reveal the substance of what is named.

(The argument seems to be that a perfect name in Cratylus’ sense would be the thing itself.)

S: If names are imitations, there must be simple names that are like the things named. (And the elements of names are letters.)

S: What about sklerotes and skleroter (differences of dialect)? The letter rho expresses speed and hardness, but not sigma. Here an element of convention or custom must enter in.

At this point in the dialogue both of the original positions have been proved wrong, because naming involves both nature and convention.

S: Is teaching the nature of things the function of names? Does he who knows the name know the thing, since they are alike? Yes.

S: Is this the only means of instruction? Yes.

S: What if the conceptions of things held by the name-givers was incorrect?

C: The name-givers must have known the nature of things, because the names are all consistent.

S: That proves nothing—witness geometrical theories erected on false assumptions. We said that the names of things signify substance assuming that all things move, are carried, and flow. But alternative explanations can just as easily be constructed on the basis that things are at rest. (Examples.) If more names imply that all things flow, that means nothing because we do not listen to the majority.
S: Did the name-givers know the substance of things before they named them? Yes. How?

C: They were gods.

S: But the names are contradictory (names pointing to motion and names pointing to rest). In order to determine which set of names are correct, there must be a way of knowing the substance of things by means of the things themselves, not through names. But if this is true, then surely this latter way of learning is better than that through names. [Note that this language is similar to that describing the highest division of the Divided Line in the REPUBLIC.]

S: Is there goodness itself and beauty itself? Yes.

S: Are they in flux? Aren’t they always what they are? Yes.

S: Nothing that is always passing away could either be or be known.

They part.

This dialogue contains elements of arguments for the forms in both the Hermogenes part and the Cratylus part.

S: How did the original name makers