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The Just as an Absent Ground in Plato's *Cratylus*

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ABSTRACT: Through a study of nature and paternal power, this paper sheds light on the neglected theme of the relation between language and justice in Plato's *Cratylus*. The dialogue inquires after the correctness of names, and it turns out that no lineage leads us back to a natural ground of names. Every lineage breaks; nature is always disrupted by the monstrous. It does not follow, however, that names are mere conventions without significance: on the contrary, naming is best understood as a prayer to and for the just. The *Cratylus* reveals the insufficiency of language not to lead us to despair but to call us to the humility and the hope in which we must pray for justice.

The *Cratylus* asks us to confront the relation between language and authority or power. If names are conventional, as Hermogenes maintains, those who invent names are legitimate authorities, whereas if there are correct names, as *Cratylus* insists, then the things themselves are the only legitimate authorities. Their argument, therefore, is about the source of the proper or natural authority to name.¹ Is that source the things in themselves, or is it the will of anyone who claims to be a name-giver? Via an examination of the themes of power and nature, I propose that the dialogue calls us to seek the deferred ground of all things that is the just. Language is not rooted in nature—but nor is it a mere convention. Rather, I conclude, it must be offered as a prayer for and to the other that haunts it and that we inadequately name “the just.”

Invited to participate in their discussion, Socrates deepens the problem by telling them that he does not know “the truth about the correctness of names”² because he only attended Prodicus's one-drachma lecture course, not the fifty-drachma course.³ Hence “[they will] have to conduct a joint investigation.”⁴ Yet before their investigation into correct or natural names even begins, this ironic claim to ignorance disrupts it by suggesting that Socrates and his interlocutors

may not have the purchasing power needed to obtain truth. Worse yet, if they try to produce truth from their poverty, they might end up as counterfeiters. Neither Hermogenes nor Cratylus seems to notice this danger, nor does Socrates make it explicit, but the threat of illegitimacy, of acting contrary to nature, hangs over their heads from the start.

Socrates's discussion of human names in Homer makes explicit the link between language and paternal power—and it is specifically *paternal* power, for men, claims Socrates, are “wiser” than women, and so “Astyanax,” the name the men gave to Hector's son, was truer than “Skamandrios,” the name by which the women called him.⁵ But when we consider paternity, we must ask what happens when the paternal lineage is threatened, when the father is unknown or unrecognized. Although the term “bastard” does not appear in the dialogue, we face the possibility of bastard sons and bastard names. Interestingly, Ewegen points out that Socrates is misquoting Homer—in fact, Hector himself calls his son Skamandrios—and argues that this misquotation serves a deliberate comic effect because “Astyanax” could mean, not “Lord of the City” as Socrates claims, but “Lord of Impotence.”⁶ Ewegen suggests, therefore, that “Homer's notion about the correctness of names would be seen to lead precisely to something basically opposed to correctness understood as uprightness—namely, flaccidity or impotence.”⁷ That paternal power is called into question, here and throughout the dialogue, supports Ewegen's view: even as Socrates seemingly endorses the rightness of paternal power, he subtly mocks it by implying that it is too weak to hold its supposed authority over things.⁸

Pursuing an inquiry into failures of paternity, Socrates asserts that names are right or wrong depending on whether the “offspring” is or is not “natural.”⁹ Names are supposed to refer to the qualities of the father, but if the son, or the supposed son, does not inherit these qualities, then the son is unnatural, even monstrous, and the name wrong. Can there be a right name for a monster, or does the possibility of monstrosity undercut the entire attempt to find right names by raising the specter of the **unnamable**, or at least of that which cannot have a natural name? The monster (τέρας), Socrates tells us, is “contrary to nature,”¹⁰ and as Ewegen reminds us, “monstrosity (τέρας) must also be understood in the sense of *wonder*, *marvel*, and *divinity* that the word carries with it. [. . .] [A] τέρας is to be understood as the appearance of something (i.e., the divine) *in* something else to which it does not properly or naturally belong (i.e., the human).”¹¹ In short, nature finds its power overcome by the τέρας, and the quest for a natural ground of right names indeed seems to be decisively undermined.

Nature, however, seeks to reestablish its legitimacy. Attempting to figure out how a monster could be rightly named, Socrates begins to consider names not in relation to the father but rather in terms of how well they reflect the bearer's own nature.¹² A monster therefore has a natural name if its name properly indicates

its unnaturalness. Language thus appears as a tool by which nature defeats its contrary, assimilating the unnatural by giving it a natural name, identifying the nature of that which is against nature. One could say, following the analogy that the notion of paternity suggests, that the father exercises his power by naming bastard children. The naming father is in this case a false father, not a true or natural one, for the monstrous child does not belong to him. Yet by claiming the power to give the child a name that indicates monstrosity, the father asserts the legitimacy of his authority even as he marks, with a monstrous name, the broken lineage. With his exercise of power, the father—who is false insofar as the monster breaks his lineage—proclaims himself to be the only true father, the only father with the authority to name. Nature claims to vanquish monstrosity by wielding language against it.¹³ To fully appreciate this supposed victory, it is illuminating to consider Derrida's remark that "Babel means not only confusion in the double sense of the word, but also the name of the father [*le nom du père*], more precisely and more commonly the name of God as name of the father. [. . .] In giving his name, in giving all names, the father would be at the origin of language, and that power would belong by right to God the father."¹⁴ I mix a Greek dialogue with Derrida's commentary on a Hebrew narrative in order to point out the name [*nom*] or no [*non*] of the father as it is revealed in the *Cratylus*: the lineage of his name is broken by the monster, and on that break the father places his *no*, a refusal of the break that insists on his right to name. The father who, by virtue of his right to name, stands "at the origin of language" both marks and covers over, with his broken name, a dissemination of sense.

Language, in short, does not protect nature from monstrosity, for as we will see when we consider the name of Hermes, in the *Cratylus* as in the Hebrew scriptures dissemination stands at the origin of language. What is more, the namers may be aware of the risk of a broken lineage: Socrates notes that names need not be given as a statement of some nature that supposedly *is* but rather can be "assigned even as a prayer."¹⁵ Thus nature and legitimacy can be hoped for rather than already present—in other words, paternity, in a reversal of the usual temporal order, may postdate generation. Though Socrates immediately states that "we must leave such names aside" because "[w]e are most likely to find correctly given names among those concerned with the things that by nature always are,"¹⁶ it will turn out that those names too are prayers. Naming, as we will see, means not combatting monstrosity but rather offering a prayer to that which does not belong to nature.

We return to the dissemination of sense when we consider the origin, not of nature, but of the knowledge of the naturalness of names. As Socrates begins presenting etymologies, Hermogenes says to him, "[Y]ou seem to me exactly like a prophet who has been inspired to deliver oracles."¹⁷ Socrates replies that this is because he was listening to Euthyphro that morning: "[Euthyphro] must have

been inspired [ἐνθουσιῶν], for it looks as though he has not only filled my ears with his daimonic wisdom but taken possession of my soul as well.”¹⁸ Again the natural is called into question, for Socrates seeks it—even inherits knowledge of it—through Euthyphro, who himself received it by inspiration, not through some natural lineage. Moreover, this inspired, daimonic wisdom will have to be “exorcise[d]”: they will “purify [them]selves” of it “*tomorrow*.”¹⁹ Socrates can invoke its authority but must then banish it, albeit in the future: its banishment is deferred, and no one mentions again the need for purification. The question of whether this unnaturalness can really be exorcised thus remains suspended. How, indeed, could one purify oneself of a power by which one learned? One would risk losing in the purification the knowledge acquired from that daimonic power. At the beginning of knowledge is a power whose legitimacy cannot be established and which cannot, therefore, serve to definitively anchor meaning—a power of dissemination that cannot be exorcised and that renders purity always already impossible.

Here it is necessary to note explicitly that this appeal to the authority of Euthyphro’s inspiration is ironic and that the resulting etymologies are infected with this irony.²⁰ That the invocation of Euthyphro is ironic does not, however, mean that there could be a different account of names that would be pure and natural; on the contrary, Socratic irony is that which undermines claims of paternity and power. It is the unnatural and irreducible crack in nature. By referring us to that which cannot possibly be the ground of knowledge it calls into question our ability to access knowledge’s ground. We see that the etymologies come from a questionable source and so are themselves questionable; what we do not see is the true ground of nature and of knowledge. The place of the ground turns out to be a no-place, unfindable from the start. Indeed, the etymologies do not reveal the nature of the cosmos; rather, they call nature into question.

Socrates begins the discussion of the gods’ names by admitting that “[t]he first and most beautiful correctness, which as intelligent people we must acknowledge, is this, that about the gods we know nothing, neither about them nor about the names they call themselves—although it is clear that they call themselves by true ones.”²¹ What is “first and most beautiful” is, crucially, not a silence that would try to stop the play of language and so reach truth by a *via negativa* but rather an admission that we are unable to stop the play of language and find some fixed point on which to anchor our investigation. Indeed, the conventional names are not forbidden: Socrates states that “[t]he second correctness is to say, as is the convention [νόμος] in our prayers, that we call the gods by the names that please them, since we know no others. I think this is a beautiful custom [νενομίσθαι].”²² Above we saw that human names can be assigned as prayers; now we find that in a sense the gods’ names are prayers as well. We enter into the play of language with our prayers, invoking the gods by the only names we know, and in so doing

we are not trying to cover over the dissemination of sense, for we are not asking to learn their true names. Moreover, “call[ing] the gods by the names that please them” is a prayer in itself, for we can but ask that they be pleased. And Socrates suggests that this play of language does not offend them: explaining the names of Dionysus and Aphrodite in the “playful” way, not the “serious” one, he claims that “even the gods love play [φιλοπαισμονες].”²³ Granted, he has already said that “about the gods we know nothing,” but as we cannot escape play, we may at least pray that they love it. Inadequate language that we recognize as such is better than silence that pretends to adequately express language’s inadequacy.

With regard to the play of language, the discussion of Hermes’s name is particularly instructive. Hermes, says Socrates, derives his name from his relation to language: “he is an interpreter, a messenger, a thief and a deceiver in words, a wheeler-dealer—and all these things involve the power of speech.”²⁴ He is also “the god who has contrived speech [εἴρειν ἐμήσατο].”²⁵ Interpretation and deceit thus accompany language, which calls into question the notion of correct or natural names. Indeed, language compels us to call nature itself into question: Socrates says that “it is reasonable for Pan to be Hermes’s double-natured [διφυῆ] son”²⁶ because “speech [λόγος] signifies all things (τὸ πᾶν) and keeps them circulating and always going about.”²⁷ One might argue that if nature is called into question, that is only because the first name-givers were Heracliteans, and others could find a genuinely natural account of things. The sheer profusion of etymologies forces us, however, to confront the inevitability of interpretation and the ever-present possibility of deception.²⁸ Language is not a straightforward thing; if it were—if we could altogether avoid interpretation—the etymologies would be impossible. Since they are possible, even if they are wrong, we see, dramatically, how much λόγος escapes our control.²⁹ Even if we suppose that the above account of Hermes’s character is an inaccurate one, we are thereby admitting that it is a deception or a misinterpretation and claiming that Hermes should be interpreted otherwise. We cannot escape interpretation, and when interpretation is necessary, error is possible—in other words, inheritance may go astray.³⁰

At this point, we can turn to the crucial question of justice [δικαιοσύνη]—an aspect of the *Cratylus* that has received too little attention.³¹ Socrates declares that “[i]t’s easy to figure out” the etymology of the word “justice,” “but the just itself is hard to understand.”³² He also readily determines the origin of the word “just”: “since it is the governor and penetrator (διαῖόν) of everything else, it is rightly called ‘just’ (δικαιον)—the *k* sound is added for the sake of euphony.”³³ Yet the very fact that justice governs all is something Socrates had to learn secretly. He explains that “[he] learned all about the matter in secret—that this [the governor and penetrator of everything else] is the just and the cause of everything that comes into being”³⁴—but even this secret knowledge does not say what the just is. There are many different accounts of the just, and everyone

objects to Socrates's continued questions.³⁵ At the origin of everything, then, we find deferral and displacement, a lost place or a no-place that every publicly available account fails to explain, a mystery sought in secret but still ultimately unknown. That an extra sound was added to "δικαιον" "for the sake of euphony" underscores the impossibility of making the just present: the just itself would in any case be absent from the word, but the extra letter is a surplus of non-sense that emphasizes this absence.³⁶

To put it another way, at the origin we find a broken lineage. Since all that is is a child of the just, whose nature we do not know, we can no longer distinguish the natural from the monstrous. Indeed, the very concept of nature fails us with regard to this absent father, itself unfathered, that is the just. As a deferral and a no-place, the just is a ground that no nature can justify, a ground that defies our expectation that the ground or father should be present and hence clearly legitimate. The initial investigation of monstrosity focused on monstrous, illegitimate offspring; now, having more fully explored the originary dissemination that we began to glimpse even in the earlier discussion, we realize what a mistake it was to take the father's legitimacy, his non-monstrous status, for granted.

Here, however, we must be careful: it does not follow that the just is illegitimate, for the very dichotomy between legitimacy and illegitimacy, between the natural and the unnatural or monstrous, fails us here. The just is an absent or retreating ground, but we should not despair, as though it simply *were* illegitimate or *were not*. Again, it is illuminating to turn to Derrida, who states that "[i]t is totally false to suggest that deconstruction is a suspension of reference. Deconstruction is always deeply concerned with the *other* of language. [. . .] The critique of logocentrism is above all else the search for the *other* and *the other of language*."³⁷ The *Cratylus* can be read as precisely such a search. It seeks neither to halt the play of language nor to abolish the just itself by subjecting it to that play.³⁸ Rather, it seeks that other that we name "the just," which is never present in our language but which haunts language. Λόγος is inseparable from interpretation and deceit, but the *Cratylus* reveals its inadequacy not to reduce us to silent despair but to remind us of its other.³⁹

Let us recall, in conclusion, that names can be prayer. Such names are not natural, but neither are they merely conventional: they are not the product of arbitrary whims that answer to nothing and no one beyond themselves.⁴⁰ Rather, they are rather a hope and a request. Cratylus dismisses wrong speech as nothing at all,⁴¹ and as all language is inadequate, it is hardly surprising that later in life he becomes silent, refusing ever to speak. The brief references to prayer, however, offer us another way to understand language: as a prayer that what we say might be true in some sense, or at least pleasing in some way that is not merely subjective. Here let us note John Sallis's observation that Socrates's claim to be inspired by Euthyphro emphasizes the question whether the names we give the gods

please them: "The question obviously raised by Socrates's proposal, especially if the example of Euthyphro is recalled, is how it is that man knows what names are pleasing to the gods."⁴² We must not presume, as Euthyphro did, to know more than we really do about what pleases the gods. Naming itself is a prayer, and our claims to knowledge must not run in advance of our prayers. Indeed, prayer entails humility: understanding language as prayer means recognizing that we cannot possess the world by naming it, that there is always a remainder that escapes us. It means embracing language's very inadequacy.

In contrast, Cratylus's insistence that language must be rooted in nature is a claim to power: he desires a sufficient and authoritative knowledge of the world. His drive for power is self-defeating, however, as it compels him to take the etymologies seriously and to maintain his belief in the wildly unstable Heraclitean cosmos.⁴³ For him language is a tool through which he hopes to demonstrate his knowledge and his authority; he has no interest in its other. Thus when he finally realizes, as he is said to have done sometime after the dialogue, that λόγος itself is unstable—and recall that if the Heracliteans are wrong, λόγος still cannot evade interpretation and instability—he abandons it. Only if he had had the humility to laugh at his own pretension and welcome language's inadequacy could he have continued to speak. Silence is not itself bad; nor is it opposed to language, as though it could not communicate. But Cratylus's future silence, like his speech within the dialogue, tells of his injustice.⁴⁴

It is because the just exceeds all our attempts to comprehend it or to judge it that the dichotomy between legitimacy and illegitimacy fails: those are categories we have established by which to judge things, but we can never sit in authority over the just. Prayer refuses the desire for the power of total comprehension; it admits its own insufficiency and proclaims that the self is not, cannot, and must not be a law unto itself. Thus while we can never give a full account of justice, we can admit that the search for justice involves a dispossession of the self, a surrender of the ego. If seeking justice means attempting to find a thing that could be circumscribed within language and made present, then such a search is misguided, but the *Cratylus* permits us to glimpse an alternative: praying to and for truth and justice, however poorly we may understand them. This search is always subject to dissemination and deferral, but this is no reason to abandon it, for what is deferred is what is most valuable. The name "the just" is inadequate, but we must never stop offering it as a prayer—and not only it but also all our words and our whole lives.

NOTES

1. As S. Montgomery Ewegen points out, “Hermogenes’s position implicitly involves a *doubling of nature* whereby he can simultaneously refuse names a ‘natural correctness’ while still maintaining that their *nature* is such as to be correct by convention” (*Plato’s Cratylus: The Comedy of Language* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014], 59). Hermogenes thus asserts that everyone, by nature, holds the authority to give names. Moreover, commenting on Cratylus’s refusal to recognize “Hermogenes” as Hermogenes’s name, Ewegen adds that “Hermogenes’s position in fact *legitimizes* Cratylus’s behavior. It should further be noted that Cratylus’s very name, which is related to κρατέω (*to be strong, powerful, to rule*), already suggests that his understanding of names too might involve a certain claim to mastery, one which will prove to be more akin to Hermogenes’s position than it first appears” (*Ibid.*, 61). Cratylus too is making a claim to authority: by judging Hermogenes’s name, he claims some degree of authoritative knowledge.
2. Plato, *Cratylus*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998), 384b5. I am using Reeve’s translation unless otherwise noted.
3. *Ibid.*, 384b2–c1.
4. *Ibid.*, 3846c.
5. *Ibid.*, 392c4–d3.
6. See S. Montgomery Ewegen, *Plato’s Cratylus: The Comedy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 102–104.
7. *Ibid.*, 104. David Sedley also notes the misquotation but “assume[s] rather that it is a simple error” (*Plato’s Cratylus*, [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press], 78). The context of the misquotation, as noted in the body of this article, renders Ewegen’s view more plausible.
8. Interestingly, Socrates will later state that “women [. . .] are the best preservers of ancient language” (418b10–c1). At least in the case of language, preservation thus comes about by a disruption of the paternal line.
9. Plato, *Cratylus*, 393c1.
10. *Ibid.*, 394d2.
11. Ewegen, *Plato’s Cratylus: The Comedy of Language*, 106.
12. Plato, *Cratylus*, 394d5 ff.
13. One might question whether this apparent victory of nature is in fact only apparent, arguing that the discussion of the τέραç points us to an order of nature that properly accounts for the τέραç and that our names are indeed correct if they correspond to this true order of nature. (I am grateful to Jesse Bailey for raising this point.) That the context is a discussion of failures of paternity, of sons who lack fine qualities that their fathers had, indicates, however, that nature does fail here. The father can give a name that reflects the son’s nature, but inheritance has still gone astray. The etymologies then serve to show that the break in the lineage is decisive—that nature has no way of recovering from it—and the discussion of the τέραç is already marked by the dissemination of sense that what follows will explore in more detail.

14. Jaques Derrida, "Des tours de Babel," in *Psyché: Invention de l'autre*, vol. 1, rev. ed. (Paris: Galilée, 1987), 204–205. "Des tours de Babel," trans. Joseph F. Graham, in *Psyche: Invention of the Other*, vol. 1, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 192–193.
15. Plato, *Cratylus*, 397b4, my translation.
16. *Ibid.*, 397b6–8.
17. *Ibid.*, 396c.
18. *Ibid.*, 396d5–7, translation modified.
19. *Ibid.*, 396e2–3, emphasis added.
20. Rachel Barney suggests that Socrates appeals to Euthyphro because "[the Cratylus etymologies] [. . .] are fated to be surpassed and undermined, and this by Socrates himself; such reversals are less jarring when the original account has not been offered *in propria persona*. Moreover, the etymological section, is, I have suggested, meant as a rational reconstruction of Cratylus's view, not to be attributed to Socrates himself" (*Names and Naming in Plato's Cratylus* [New York: Routledge, 2001], 55). Similarly, Sedley maintains that the etymologies allow Socrates to reveal the inadequacies in the name-makers' Heraclitean conception of the universe, arguing that "the early name-makers turn out to have had considerable insights into divine and cosmic nature, but to have done very poorly in analysing key terms for moral and intellectual virtues, betraying their mistaken impression that the items named are inherently fluid and unstable" (*Plato's Cratylus*, 28). While I agree with Barney and Sedley that the etymologies are not a literal statement of Socrates's or Plato's views, I differ from them in that on my reading, the irony of the etymologies infects the entire text. There is no stable point from which we can produce a definite, non-ironic account of language and of things.
21. Plato, *Cratylus*, 400d6–9, translation modified.
22. *Ibid.*, 400d9–401a1, translation modified.
23. *Ibid.*, 406b10–c3.
24. *Ibid.*, 407e5–408a2.
25. *Ibid.*, 408b1.
26. *Ibid.*, 408b5.
27. *Ibid.*, 408c2–3.
28. Cf. Ewegen's warning against trying to "make sense' out of" the etymologies: he writes that "it is precisely by attempting to limit this excess that scholars end up missing the very principle behind the etymologies—namely, the excess itself" (*Plato's Cratylus: The Comedy of Language*, 125). The wild, excessive play of language cannot be tamed, and though I will privilege certain etymologies in my analysis—a practice against which Ewegen warns even as he admits its necessity (see *ibid.*, 125)—I do so not to stop the play of language but rather to highlight it as concisely as I can.
29. Cf. Ewegen's observation that "All of which means that λόγος is a bastard, abandoned by the father. Though Hermes is the very source of λόγος, Hermes is such as *to be no source*, or, rather, to be a withdrawing source which can never be brought

- to presence, which can never *be there*" (*Plato's Cratylus: The Comedy of Language*, 117).
30. It is striking, in this connection, that one account of Hades's name suggests that he is a sophist, while another makes him out to be a philosopher (403a1–404b4). Socrates prefers the latter account (404a1–b4), but he cannot prove that it is indeed the true one—which suggests that philosophy and sophistry themselves may not be as readily distinguishable as we would like to suppose.
 31. Sedley notes that the analysis of the words for justice and the just is "strategically placed in the middle of [the value etymologies]" (*Plato's Cratylus*, 115), but he does not comment on the significance of Socrates's secret knowledge or of the knowledge he still claims to lack. See also Franco T. Trivigno, "Etymology and the Power of Names in Plato's *Cratylus*," *Ancient Philosophy* 32 (2012): 35–75. Trivigno is another recent author who notes the importance of the passage concerning justice (see *ibid.*, 49–51), but he does not discuss it in terms of dissemination and failures of inheritance. For an insightful study of the dialogue's political implications, see Jesse Bailey, "Socrates as Midwife and Mediator: On the Political Dimensions of the *Cratylus*," *Polis: The Journal for Ancient Greek Political Thought* 33 (2016): 356–378. Bailey recognizes justice as a central theme of the *Cratylus* but says little about the etymologies.
 32. Plato, *Cratylus*, 412c6–8.
 33. *Ibid.*, 412d8–e.
 34. *Ibid.*, 413a1–2.
 35. *Ibid.*, 413a4b3.
 36. Trivigno asserts that "the search for Socratic definition is not one that aims at the *meaning*, or *sense*, of the word 'just' but rather at its *reference*, the just itself. Etymology, by contrast, can only ever get at the meaning, because, on the grounds that the meaning of the word is all there is to know, it never broaches the question of the reference. It fails, at bottom, to ask the right sort of questions" ("Etymology and the Power of Names," 50–51). My contention, however, is that the etymology of "just" *does* teach us something: it reveals the gap between word and thing and thus forces us to confront the primordial absence of the origin. Etymology by itself does not ask about reference, but when one joins the question of reference to the etymological investigation, one discovers this absence. Moreover, Socrates has sought the just by means other than etymology, and yet it remains a mystery that cannot be had at any price.
 37. Jacques Derrida and Richard Kearney, "Deconstruction and the Other," in Richard Kearney, *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 154.
 38. Thus Socrates rejects the Heraclitean position that all is flux, saying, "But surely no one with any understanding will commit himself or the cultivation of his soul to names, or trust them and their givers to the point of firmly stating that he knows something—condemning both himself and the things that are to be totally unsound like leaky sinks—or believe that things are exactly like people with runny noses, or that all things are afflicted with colds and drip over everything" (440c2–d2).

39. It is true that Socrates's phrase "each one of the things that are [ἕστι δὲ ἐν ἑκάστοντων ὄντων]" (440b6–7) is problematic from a Derridean perspective, given its appeal to the notion of being. It is worth noting, however, that the full statement reads, "But if there is always that which knows and that which is known, if there are such things as the beautiful, the good, and each one of the things that are, it doesn't appear to me that these things can be at all like flowings or motions, as we were saying just now they were" (440b5–8, emphasis added). With this *if* Socrates approaches Derrida's assertion that "[j]ustice in itself, if such a thing exist [*si quelque chose de tel existe*], outside or beyond law, is not deconstructible" (*Force de loi: Le "Fondement mystique de l'autorité"* [Paris: Galilée, 1994], 35; "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority," trans. Mary Quaintance, in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Andijar [New York: Routledge, 2002], 243, translation modified.) Socrates, like Derrida, must say *if* because he is speaking of that which cannot be brought within language. Although his approach to the term "being" differs from Plato's, Derrida proves a valuable interlocutor in this investigation of the portrayal of language and justice in the *Cratylus*.
40. Early in the dialogue, Socrates rejects the Protagorean claim that man is the measure of all things (see Plato, *Cratylus*, 385e5–386d1), and in this he is right because, as noted above, that the just is an absent ground does not mean that the just *is not*.
41. He states, "In my view, one can neither speak nor say anything falsely" (*Ibid.*, 429e2) and clarifies that if someone seems to say something false, in fact "he's just making noise and acting pointlessly, as if he were banging a brass pot" (*Ibid.*, 430a2–3).
42. John Sallis, *Being and Logos: Reading the Platonic Dialogues*, 3rd ed. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 245–46.
43. Thus he is unwilling even to consider that the first name-givers might have erred, and when Socrates asks him to continue investigating whether Heraclitus's views are true, he replies, "I'll do that. But I assure you, Socrates, that I have already investigated them and have taken a lot of trouble over the matter, and things seem to me to be very much more as Heraclitus says [λέγει] they are." His promise to continue investigating is so cursory that it is clear he has already made up his mind.
44. Bailey aptly sums up *Cratylus*'s unjust conduct throughout the dialogue: "It is centrally important to our understanding of his character, and of the place of sincere discourse in the *Cratylus*, that while his *logos* hangs on the claim that there is a proper and improper way of speaking about anything, we can see from his *ergon* in the dialogue that he is not interested in reaching this truth; *Cratylus* is interested merely in defeating his opponent and *appearing* to have this truth, *even if he is unable to communicate his knowledge of the true way of speaking*" ("Socrates as Master and Midwife," 361).

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