

Language and Knowledge in Plato's *Cratylus*

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Abstract

The argument of Plato's *Cratylus* is conducted along the lines of examination of two conflicting theories of correctness of names, namely conventionalism and naturalism; in the course of the dialogue Socrates demonstrates that none of the theories provides truly accurate account of the names-objects relation. His own standpoint is that language is unreliable and that things should be investigated and learned about through themselves, rather than through their images, the names. This conclusion pushes the phonetic and semantic investigations aside, and establishes the supremacy of eidetic epistemology over its onomastic counterpart. The main objectives of this paper will be: a) to follow the interplay of Socrates' arguments by which he challenges both theories of correctness of names, and b) to briefly investigate the implications and the impact of the eidetic epistemology thesis on Plato's general attitude toward language. In order to accomplish the second objective, I shall turn to the Seventh Letter and point out some affinity between its philosophic digression and the conclusions of the *Cratylus*. Thus it will be shown that Plato's attitude toward language was not very favorable, and that his method of dialectic was devised in such a way as to ultimately avoid and overcome the pitfalls of language.

Keywords: Plato, language, The *Cratylus*, Seventh Letter, naturalism, conventionalism, dialectic

I

Cratylus is Plato's only dialogue where language-related subjects are quite extensively discussed. The issue in the forefront of this work is the question of "correctness of names"¹ (*orthotes tōn onomatōn*), as it is shown by its opening statement (383a3-4).² But

¹ By names, Plato in *Cratylus* implies "a loose linguistic category, understood as including common nouns and adjectives as well as proper names." (Sedley, *Plato's Cratylus* 4). More precisely, "'onoma' is used in the *Cratylus* to refer to nonsyncategorematic words, words which can be said to be true of something." (Ketchum 133)

² This view is endorsed both by Sedley (2003) and Barney (2001). But it hasn't always been the case. A.E. Taylor, for example, used to hold that the ostensive subject of the dialogue was the origin of language, while its main concern was to consider the function and use of language (see Taylor, *Plato* 77f).

the scope of its interest is much broader: throughout this dialogue the reader follows an inquiry into the nature of language, starting with its most primitive and minimal units, the phonemes, and extending to nouns and verbs (*onomata and rhēmata*), as the basic constituents of a meaningful sentence. Thus, what Plato's Socrates actually discusses in the *Cratylus* is the question of the relation between names and their referents: are the former really capable of properly reflecting the objects they represent? The argument is conducted along the lines of examination of two conflicting theories of correctness of names, namely conventionalism and naturalism; in the course of the dialogue Socrates demonstrates that none of the theories provides truly accurate account of the names-objects relation, although in the language which he and his contemporaries were using, some elements of both of them were preserved. As for the epistemological implications of the discussion, were the naturalist theory true, things could have been knowable through their names alone, but since it is not so, Socrates' own standpoint is that the things should be investigated and learned about through themselves, rather than through their images, the names (*Crat.* 439a-b). This conclusion pushes the phonetic and semantic investigations aside, and establishes the supremacy of eidetic epistemology (understanding things through their essences, or Forms) over its onomastic counterpart. The main objectives of this paper will be: a) to follow the interplay of Socrates' arguments by which he challenges both theories of correctness of names, and b) to briefly investigate the implications and the impact of the eidetic epistemology thesis on Plato's general attitude toward language as a philosophical tool.

In order to be able to establish his own views on language, theory of knowledge and ultimately ontology, Socrates is bound to refute the theories of conventionalism³ and naturalism.⁴ His strategy in accomplishing this task is rather peculiar: he straightforwardly refutes the extreme version of conventionalism and the quasi-ontological conception it presupposes,⁵ but seemingly endorses and even strongly advocates the theory of linguistic naturalism. Furthermore, the entire enterprise of the elaborate etymological analysis is meant to reveal that the name-givers of old espoused the allegedly Heraclitean theory of flux.⁶ The etymology of the elements is explained on the

³ Briefly stated, the claim of the extreme conventionalists is that any name set down by any person for any object is the correct one, at least for that particular person.

⁴ The naturalists' claim is "that there is a correctness of name for each thing, one that belongs to it by nature" (*Crat.* 383a3). The extreme consequence of this viewpoint is that names which do not belong naturally to objects in question (those mistakenly assigned to them) are not names at all.

⁵ It is deducible from the Protagorean absolute epistemological relativism. His *homo mensura* thesis allows only for an extremely relativist ontology, making the being and essence of the things private for each person (see *Crat.* 385e4-5). Such ontology produces, in turn, strong relativism in the field of values as well, and that is certainly not what Plato wants.

⁶ The doctrine of constant flux does not allow for any fixed subject of epistemological investigations, which implies that no knowledge is actually possible. This conviction allegedly made the historical *Cratylus* refrain from discussions and move his finger instead of answering the questions posed to him.

basis of the presumption that the nature of things is unsteady and always moving. The same holds for the most important ethical (*aretē, sōphrosynē, dikaiosynē, andreia* etc.) and epistemological terms (*epistēmē, gnōmē, doxa* etc.), and this seemingly aligns Socrates with the upholders of the flux doctrine. The truth is, of course, exactly the opposite, and that becomes very clear during his conversation with Cratylus. One very interesting thing to note is that Socrates also attributes the doctrine of constant change to the primeval name-givers, and that may have devastating consequences for the naturalist theory which is so much dependent on the authority of those wise men of old:

And by the dog, it seems to me that I haven't divined badly this thing which right at this moment appeared in my mind, that those men of very ancient times who used to give the names were almost exactly like most of the wise men nowadays, who get dizzy by frequently whirling around while they investigate the nature of the things that are, and thereupon it appears to them that the things themselves go round and are moving in every respect. However, they do not allege that their own internal experience is the cause of this opinion, but claim that the very things are of such nature, and that none of them is stable nor constant, but flowing and moving and full of every sort of motion and constant coming into being. (411b3-c4)⁷

The fact that Socrates does not even attempt to veil the irony so obvious in the above lines, as well as the fact that this conception so detrimentally collides with his own opinion,⁸ namely that things possess stable essences (which will be once again presented by the very end of the dialogue),⁹ seems to show that what he does here is exercising his eristic powers over Cratylus (who is at this point still only an auditor), with the aim to reduce Cratylus' philosophical standpoint to absurd.

It is really not certain that Heraclitus himself was an extreme Heraclitean of Cratylus' type, or even a flux theorist at all (as reported by Plato and further promoted by Aristotle). Against this view, among some other scholars, argues Marković (1983). The famous "river fragment" (DK B12 = 40 Marković) in his rendition reads: "Upon those who are stepping in the same rivers different and again different waters flow". If correct, this rendition would make the statement that nobody can step into the same river twice a misreading forced upon Heraclitus by his interpreters. Marković concludes that the "river picture" is just another Heraclitus' device to support the notion of *coincidentia oppositorum* within the frame of his general theory of Logos.

⁷ The translations are mine, except for the sentences and passages from the Seventh Letter, which are given in Morrow's rendition. I have consulted the Reeve's and Tomovska-Mitrovskaja's translations of the *Cratylus*.

⁸ Advanced much earlier, at 386aff.

⁹ *Crat.* 439c, together with the conclusion that the name-givers, if they ascribed names to things in the belief that everything is always moving, were mistaken and consequently deceived their successors.

II

Now let us return to the starting point of the dialogue, where Hermogenes complains to Socrates that Cratylus confuses him with his sarcastic and unclear exposition of the doctrine of naturalism, and furthermore offends him by claiming that his name cannot be Hermogenes. He, in opposition to his interlocutor, advocates the view that the correctness of names in their application to objects or notions is determined by nothing more than an agreement among the users of language.¹⁰ Hence, the main clash that we witness in the dialogue is between the two opposing views on the relation of words (more broadly – language) with reality: Cratylus,¹¹ the propounder of the first one, maintains that they are connected *physei*, while Hermogenes,¹² who represents the second view (in the order of appearance in the dialogue) holds that the connection is *nomō*. Still not discouraged enough to start seriously questioning his outlook, the latter provokes Socrates' exposition on the correctness of names with the following utterance: *ou gar physei hekastō pephykenai onoma ouden ouden, alla nomō kai ethei tōn ethisantōn te kai kalountōn* – “not a single name belongs to each of the things by nature, but by custom and habit of those who give it and use it.” (384d6-8).¹³ Socrates, in reply to his position, advances the idea that the consequence of Hermogenes' theory of naming, if the same principle were applied to things that are, or beings, instead of to names, would result in a doctrine of extreme ontological relativism. This doctrine was originally held by

¹⁰ “I am unable to persuade myself that there is some other correctness of names besides convention and agreement (*synthēkē kai homologia*).” (384c10-d1).

¹¹ (Stewart 35) and (Demand 107), relying on other scholars (Raeder and Derbolav, and von Fritz respectively), present the opinion that it was actually Antisthenes who upheld this view, and that Plato is thus arguing with his fellow student and forerunner of an influential school of thought, disguised in the robes of Cratylus. If this were true, it would, of course, add weight to the argument that Plato's initial endorsement of the theory of naturalism was purposeful, namely with the aim to reduce it to absurd. After all, Antisthenes was, in some respect, known as an opponent of Plato.

¹² Whom Stewart (*ibid.*) takes to be a mouthpiece of Protagoras.

¹³ This view bears the extreme consequence of absolute linguistic relativism, namely that any individual at any time may name any object with any name, and that such naming would be proper and accurate. It is in fact imposed by Socrates' interjection in the question-and-answer session with Hermogenes: is each name given, either by an individual or the state (*kai ean idiōtēs kalē kai ean polis*), given well?, to which the latter agrees (385a). This prompts (Weingartner 6f) to claim that *this* is the view that Socrates actually battles, and that calling it conventionalism is “misleading to the extreme.” It is, however, quite plausible to assume that the extreme relativist view with which Hermogenes gets implicated is just a further eristic twist introduced by Socrates on purpose, so that his interlocutor's position may appear to be really absurd. This move makes his rebuttal of conventionalism proper, whether undertaken seriously or with some ulterior motive, much easier. That Socrates has the broader conception of conventionalism on mind is confirmed by his restatement of Hermogenes position close to the end of the dialogue (433e), where he says that the correctness of names is a matter of agreement among members of a community (to *synthēmata einai ta onomata kai dēloun tois synthemenois proseidosi de ta pragmata* (433e3-5)).

Protagoras, who famously stated that of all things the measure is man, of the things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not. Hermogenes, who is the advocate of the conventionalist's theory in the dialogue, reluctantly admits that there were times when he, due to intense internal turmoil, took refuge in Protagoras' doctrine, although without due consideration. Socrates deals a hard blow both to Hermogenes' conventionalism and Protagoras' teachings (refuting in passing yet another sophist's doctrine, the one of Euthydemus, who apparently believed that all the contrary properties are simultaneously present in every object, and consequently all statements whatsoever are true) in a rather interesting and elaborate line of reasoning (385d-391b). Let us try to reconstruct the structure of this argument, which starts off with transposition from names to beings, only to finally return back to names and disprove conventionalism, which was after all Socrates' original intention.

Hermogenes claims: whatever one decides to call a certain thing, that will be its name, and further supports his claim by the fact that different communities have different names for the same things, a truth that holds both among Hellenes and foreigners. Socrates, on the other hand, turns the argument to ontological grounds, and asks whether things have essences of their own, or whether they, in the matter of their being, depend on the opinions of individual men. If they do not have fixed being of their own, then:

- a) We would not be able to distinguish one thing from the other,¹⁴ and also we would not have the means to attribute fixed properties to numerically different things if our opinions of them do not coincide.¹⁵
- b) But we do distinguish one individual from another, and we do attribute them properties of, say, goodness and badness, and to a different degree.
- c) Therefore, the things of this world have essences or being of their own.

This is Socrates' first interim conclusion in the argument. The things' essences do not stand in relation to our cognitive faculties, do not picture the transient mental states of the humans, but have fixed ontological status of their own.

Next, Socrates assumes that the same holds of actions, and therefore it is both legitimate and important for the later part of the argument to ask whether this assumption of his is well grounded, or presents a case of unjustified extrapolation. The status of events (and for that matter, actions) is a subject of huge debate among contemporary philosophers. Still, there seem to be some peculiarities that are shared by both things and events, one of them being that they are "equally spatiotemporal in as

¹⁴ According to Euthydemus' version.

¹⁵ If man is the measure of all things and Peter's opinion differs from John's, then it would not be possible to definitely say that, for example, the water is either warm or cold.

much as both are non-repeatable, dated particulars" (MacDonald 110). And if events are particulars, that would make them susceptible to having certain other features in common with the things or objects, as for example Socrates' ascribing them fixed nature, or essence, would be. That move can be accomplished when both types of particular entities (objects and events) are subsumed under a sortal term, or, in the case of the events, an event or action type, which would have essence and whose instances the various particular events would be. Davidson, on the other hand, although disclaiming that events have essences (being particulars identified by the causal nexus), still offers good reasons why events should be taken seriously as entities (Davidson 164ff).¹⁶ He also holds that actions can be subsumed under events; of course, not every event is an action, but that fact does not seem to be relevant to the case explicated here by Socrates. Therefore, it is probably safe enough to conclude that Socrates is justified to attribute essentiality to actions, and that they can be described (at least those presented in the *Cratylus*) as "species" of events that are necessarily causally connected with a conscious agent. Let us now resume our argument.

- d) As for the actions (weaving, cutting), they also possess nature or essence, and are performed according to it, and not our liking. In order to perform them properly, we must use the appropriate tools that are naturally attached to them.
- e) Speaking or saying something is one sort of action.
- f) Therefore, correct speech is the speech performed according to nature, and includes saying words in the way natural for their usage. Words are the proper tools employed in the speech act.

This is the second interim conclusion drawn by Socrates. He makes it clear that any enterprise undertaken has to be accomplished according to strict rules dictated by the essential nature of the activity itself. Nobody can perform a surgical operation without separating the tissue of the patient with a sharp metal tool. Similarly, nobody can speak properly without following the rules of the speech-action and using the appropriate tools, which are the names.

Socrates next proceeds briefly to discuss true and false speech, with an intention to point out to Hermogenes that there is a possibility of false, incorrect speech. It is a matter of very basic knowledge of logic that truth-value is to be attributed to propositions, or more precisely utterances, specific uses of sentences. Plato's Socrates acknowledges that, but he, somewhat surprisingly, ascribes truth-value to the constituents, or parts of the statements as well, on the assumption that whatever is true of the unit, has to be true of its parts as well. This seems to be an example of flagrant error in

¹⁶ Any description of an event implies that there is an entity to be described; the logical form of the sentences we use in our ordinary talk presupposes that there are things our sentences are about.

reasoning, known as the fallacy of division.¹⁷ Why would Plato's Socrates commit such a fallacy in the course of what seems to be a valid and stable argument?¹⁸ One obvious answer would be that the very theory he is about to expound presupposes the notion of names as independent bearers of meaning and truth, linguistic microcosms encapsulating within themselves both truth-value and reference. In other words, the theory of true and false names has to presuppose that names do not only refer or designate, or even do not only refer and sometimes suggest descriptions, but that they always necessarily represent descriptions of some kind (Cf. Robinson 334f). The other possible answer would be that this inconsistency is yet another eristic move of Socrates, who is determined to establish the theory of naturalism upon a host of absurdities, just in order to deconstruct it later on.

Be that as it may, since true and false speech is possible, some statements are true, some false; the same, according to Socrates, holds for the smallest parts of sentences – the names. But using names is part of the action of speaking, therefore, using names is also a sort of speech-action. Consequently, if using names is a speech-action, it follows from the interim conclusions II and I that we cannot name things according to our liking or even on the basis of agreement among citizens, but rather have to name them in a natural way, in accordance with their essences and using appropriate tools. Eschewing this procedure of naming would imply failure in the attempt to name things. In this way it is proven that the conventionalist theory of naming and the underlying Protagorean theory of knowledge stand no chance against Socrates' assault.

After Socrates established that speaking or saying was an activity which should be performed in accordance with its own nature and that names were natural tools

¹⁷ Elsewhere (*Soph.* 263 d) Plato clearly asserts that truth-value arises from the combination of names and verbs.

¹⁸ Not all scholars agree that this is a case of fallacy. Taylor (*Plato* 79) flatly denies that, arguing that the attribution of truth-value to names is confined to limited cases of superimposition of private nomenclature on common or public usage of language. With Schofield's transposition (Schofield, "A displacement") of the relevant passage on truth and falsity of names (385b2-d1) after 387c, followed in the standard English translation of Plato's works edited by Cooper, Taylor's argument is not valid anymore, since the passage does not follow the discussion on "private" versus "public" names. Sedley (*Plato's Cratylus* 11ff) considers the above mentioned passage to be an unintentionally left residue from a previous edition of the dialogue which was later on amended to suit the conclusion of the *Sophist*, with the passage in question deleted. This assumption, even if pretty bold, is possible, since the flow of the argument is not interrupted by the omission the disputed passage. On the other hand, the passage cannot be unequivocally pronounced to be completely redundant, since the attribution of falsity to some names may be used for fostering the idea of names' capacity to convey fixed meaning (which is a supporting pillar of the theory of naturalism), by pointing out their inability to do so if not proper (false); after all, the discussion that immediately follows the transposed passage focuses on the usage of proper or natural tools for performing actions. In the light of the above understanding, the proper names would be true, the improper false. Furthermore, even if Plato did edit 385b2-d1 out, that would in no way strengthen the case for the existence of name-forms (which is the present issue), but would mean only one inconsistency less.

for performing that activity (in the same way as surgical knife is the natural tool for the activity of cutting, which has separating of tissue as its purpose), a question may spontaneously present itself to the inquisitive mind: what is the purpose which is to be accomplished by the usage of names as tools for the activity of saying? Socrates gives straightforward and precise answer to this question – the main functions of names are to help us teach (*didaskō*) one another something and separate (*diacrinō*) things. He gives this answer after Hermogenes admits that he does not know what precisely we do when we name things. Isn't it, says Socrates, that by naming we instruct each other, and also separate things according to their nature?, and Hermogenes readily expresses his consent.¹⁹ Now, by the end of the dialogue (439d9), Socrates points out to Cratylus that a well fashioned speech should say of a thing firstly that it is *this* and further on that it is *such and such* - *proton men hoti ekeino estin, epeita hoti toiouton*.²⁰ And in order for the later account of function of speech (determining what a thing is (*ekeino*) and then enumerating its properties (*toiouto*)) to be in a similar way reconciled with the earlier account of function of names (*didaskō* and *diacrinō*), we would have to understand *didaskō* (teaching or instructing) as pointing out the thing's essential nature, while *diacrinō* (separating) as the usual way of defining a thing, or grasping its essence by marking it off from the other things (not belonging to the same kind), through pointing out its *genus proximum* and *differentia specifica*. As it was mentioned, Sedley holds that both functions of instructing and separating being are primarily of philosophical nature; they are not meant to simply label things or describe them superficially, but to encapsulate their essence, although most of the names are at a low level of approximation to their ultimate aim. At the face of it, this conclusion sounds reasonable enough, but if it were true, then Plato would be very serious about the naturalist theory of naming. However, his commitment to such a theory is dubious even at this early point, exactly because of the above inconsistency surrounding the attribution of truth-value to names, and, more importantly, because of the assumption underlying the whole truth-value issue

¹⁹ *Crat.* 388b9-10: *ar' ou didaskomen ti allēlous kai ta pragmata diakrinomen ē echei*; Socrates does not elaborate much on these functions of names, but I think that, although closely related, they should be kept separate. 'Instructing' and 'dividing things' (at 388c1 a name is said to be *organon diakritikon tēs ousias* – a tool for separating *being*) here probably mean on the one hand imparting positive information about a particular object, and on the other marking it off from other objects or, better, beings (Cf. Thomas 344). According to Sedley ("Plato on Language" 217 f) both functions are eminently in the service of philosophy; 'instructing' means teaching philosophical truth, while 'separating being' refers to a range of meanings: from pointing out what a thing is by distinguishing it from other things to encapsulating the thing's essence in definition. This seems to be possible only if we accept as true the premise that names are bearers of both meaning and reference, or independently capable of expressing the essence of things. But that is hardly possible; both the truth-value and the capability of forming definitions belong to propositions or statements. Socrates' words here are remindful of Heraclitus' statement (DK B1) that he is teaching by dividing each thing according to its nature.

²⁰ Sedley ("Plato on Language" 215) interprets this statement as follows: "To utter a complete statement (*logos*), you must first *name* your subject, then go on to *describe* it."

– that is that names have the power to encapsulate and convey essences, which is actually what was to be proven, if possible at all.

III

As an unassailable master of disputes, Socrates next launches a formidable attack on the theory he was seemingly trying to prove and defend – naturalism. He does that by trying to explain to Hermogenes (who is at this point still his interlocutor) how the names succeed in expressing the nature of a thing.²¹ In order to do that, Socrates draws the analogy of a painting. We can easily imagine a picture of a man, and notice that it is composed of many parts, with further components and subcomponents, till we reach the level of individual colors. Similarly, the names may be analyzed and their components discovered, starting with derivative names (*hystera onomata*) – like *agathos*, then the primary names (*prōta onomata*) which constitute them – in this case *agastos* and *thoon* ('admirable' and 'fast'), down to the most elementary parts (*ta stoikheia*), which are the individual phonemes. Now, names are correct when they express the nature of their referent, and the derivatives manage to do that by the means of the primaries, which are composed of elements, not of names. But how do the elements manage to build up a correct primary name? On the strength of their power to imitate the essence or being both of things and qualities (423e1-4). So, in the same way as a picture is a pictorial imitation of reality, so names are vocal imitation which establish a kind of portrait-like resemblance with the things, down to the lowest level of word-analysis, the level of elements represented by sounds, which still carry some semantic value: they express properties, like motion, hardness, softness, largeness, which also have essences. This is, presented in the briefest possible manner, the mimetic theory of names.²² "If someone were able to imitate the essence of each thing in letters and syllables, wouldn't he be able to reveal what each thing itself is, or not?" (423e6-8). And the one who does that is the original legislator or name-giver, the *nomothetēs*, who, in the prolonged etymological section of the dialogue, was proven to be a flux-theorist.²³

Socrates, unlike Cratylus, who approximately at his juncture joins the conversations, claims that even names which imperfectly imitate or resemble things, may still

²¹ *Crat.* 422d1-2: "But, the correctness of those names we have just examined in detail was meant to be such as to disclose of what sort is each of the things that are."

²² This is what (Deretić 41) calls a phonemo-analytic model, the last move in the attempt to check the foundation of the theory of naturalism, before undertaking the project of its rebuttal.

²³ As also confirmed at the already quoted 411b3-c4 passage, and at 439b10-c6. For a commentary on these two passages see (Ademollo 449ff).

properly represent them. Even an imperfect image is an image.²⁴ This claim may lead to the conclusion that not all names are perfect imitation of things, and consequently, not all *nomothetes* are on the same level. But Cratylus strongly objects to this idea, holding that a badly given name is not a name at all, and that a bad name-giver is not a name-giver at all. His stubborn attitude leads him to number of *aporiai*, and allows Socrates to deconstruct the theory of naturalism he was seemingly upholding, and proclaim the ineffectiveness of names in the matter of acquiring true knowledge. He does that by using at least three strong arguments. First, Socrates offers contradictory etymologies which refute the ones previously given, themselves expressing or confirming the theory of flux (437a-d). The alternative rendition establishes rest as a principle, instead of motion, Eleatic ontology instead of Heraclitean.²⁵ Next, he calls Cratylus' attention to the names of numbers, which do not reflect the nature of what they are applied to (435 b) – a name properly expressing the nature of 'hundred' should consist of hundred units.²⁶ Finally, since Cratylus claimed that knowing the name meant knowing the thing, Socrates challenges him by saying that if the only way to know a thing is to know its name, then the legislators must have not known the things prior to naming them: "How can we say that are versed in naming and that they are lawgivers, before any name was established and before they came to know them, if the things cannot be known except through names?" (438b5-7). But if they did have some knowledge of them, a premise which Cratylus has to accept as true, then there must be another way to know the things except through their names. That way is to know them directly, through steadfast inquiry in the first principles, which are the Forms. Finally, Socrates once again addresses the inadequacy of the flux theory, and strongly postulates Plato's theory of Forms, arguing that the picture of an-always-changing-universe would certainly make all attempts to know anything futile. It may properly represent the state of affairs in the world we inhabit, but Platonic philosophy directs our gaze higher, beyond the realm of always-changing particulars, where we can identify the Beautiful itself as always beautiful, the Good itself as always good (439c-d).

²⁴ Even if we take the names to picture reality, they can at most be imperfect and incomplete pictures. Socrates gives the example of the word *sklerotes* (hardness), where lambda is contained, which is supposed to express the opposite quality, namely softness and smoothness (434c-e) That is why, even if we accept that names picture reality, they can at most be imperfect and incomplete pictures.

²⁵ This is, however, not a detrimental objection. Sedley ("The Etymologies" 142), using examples of etymologizing both in the *Phaedrus* and the *Cratylus* points out that the ancients prided themselves on discovering the 'real' hidden meaning of words and not dwelling on superficialities, as well as that they believed that multiple etymologies were not considered as inconsistencies, but rather as reinforcing each other. The goal of the ancient etymologists was not linguistic pedantry, but discovering the hidden meaning carefully encoded in words (See Barney 47), especially if those were divine names. Finding out that a name combines two or more meanings was not considered as a fault but as an advantage.

²⁶ This is what (Keller 301) calls "a devastating argument against the naturalistic theory of language."

IV

What is it, then, that Socrates accomplishes with his rather complex line of reasoning and argumentation in the *Cratylus*? One thing is certain: as shown above, he decidedly rejects Cratylus' version of naturalism, according to which humans are powerless to change the relation between names and objects, which is established by nature. Besides that, Socrates seems to be giving some concession to the conventionalist theory of language: he would prefer the view that names are as much like things as possible, but the reality of our everyday usage of language is that, in both baptizing and using the names of things, we are forced to resort to convention (435c). This, however, does not mean that Socrates embraces thoroughgoing conventionalism and believes in the accuracy of etymologizing (Cf. Thomas 343, fn. 7). He would personally be pleased (*emoi men oun kai autōi areskei*) were the names resembling things perfectly; unfortunately, it is not so, although there are some phonemes which accurately mimic certain properties (426c-427d), and there are some words that properly resemble their *nominata* (e.g. the words *psychē* and *sōma* (399d-400c)).²⁷ Still, since the natural accurateness of most of the names remains in the realm of wishful thinking, (Cf. Weingartner 24) Socrates' observations on the correctness of names and their power to properly represent the things they stand for, conclude as follows: "But surely, not a single man endowed with reason will entrust himself or the cultivation of his soul to names (*oude pany noun echontos anthrōpou epitrepanta onomasin auton kai tēn autou psychēn therapeuein*), trusting them and their givers so much as to affirm confidently that he knows something" (440c2-5). So what will a person endowed with *nous* do instead? The well known answer to this question is that he will investigate and learn about things through themselves, rather than through names (*poly mallon auta ex autōn kai mathēteon kai zētēteon ē ek tōn onomatōn* (439b5-6)).

These two statements taken together are the main conclusion of the dialogue, and not only that we should not do philosophy through etymology, as (Keller 285,303) claims. Etymologizing had undoubtedly been an established practice by the times when Plato lived (see Barney 50ff); however, aside from the assumption that Cratylus himself, or the group of intellectuals he represented, was embracing epistemological speculation as a way of doing philosophy, we do not have much textual evidence that it used to be a prominent way of philosophizing,²⁸ indeed so prominent that Plato dedicated an entire dialogue to its rebuttal. Besides, the model etymologist in the dialogue is Euthyphro, who is far from being a model philosopher as well. Finally, the names' correspondence to things is not established only through etymological analysis, but also through the mimetic power of the phonemes. Therefore, I believe that Plato's purpose in the *Craty-*

²⁷ For a view that there might have been a slight possibility that Plato held the nature-theory of names, see (Robinson 325).

²⁸ Although it was practiced by some of the Sophists, and used widely in some other areas, as for example in theology, as a means of analyzing and explaining divine names.

lus is to emphasize, when it comes to philosophical investigation, the insufficiency and inadequacy of language in general – and not only of the etymological enterprise²⁹ – and, more importantly, to give a hint of the true way of acquiring knowledge. This true way is represented by what was previously in this paper called eidetic epistemology, or knowing things not through their names, but directly; and knowing a thing directly or through itself means knowing it as it is, discarding all images derived from sense-experience, i.e. knowing its Form (*eidos*) – which is the only object of real knowledge, or *epistēmē*.³⁰ Plato makes this clear in the closing section of the dialogue (439c-440d), where he uses the Beautiful itself (*auto to kalon*) as an example of a stable object of knowing, and contrasts it with the things that are in constant flux (*panta rhein*), and none of which can, due to their always changing nature, be known by anybody (*oud' an gnōstheîē he hyp' oudenos*) (439d-e). Knowing is thus “logically prior to naming,” (Levinson 38) and attaches itself to the unchanging nature of the real being, while the activity of naming is limited to human *doxa*, which cannot reach beyond the realm of sensible particulars (401a).

These conclusions granted, it still remains rather obscure how the lauded unmediated investigation is supposed to be conducted, what is its method, or, simply, what direct learning, i.e. eidetic epistemology, actually amounts to. No straightforward answer to this question is offered in the *Cratylus*, but Plato there has to be hinting at his favorite, indeed exclusive method of inquiry into the highest objects of knowledge, i.e. dialectic.³¹ Now, dialectic, understood in any sense of the term, does not refer to inquiry which

²⁹ This is in contrast with Ademollo, who gives much narrower scope to Plato's claim that learning about things should be conducted without names: “All [Plato] needs to say here, and all he does say, is that the investigation of reality is independent of the (etymological) *investigation* of names – not of their use” (Ademollo 445).

³⁰ Plato posited the Forms as the only suitable objects of knowledge (see *Rep.* 477a-b), since, unlike the sensible particulars that partake in them, they are ever-existing, stable and pure. In this way he had established what became famous as the Two-Worlds Theory, according to which the two distinct sets of objects, namely those of the Forms and the particulars, are accessible through the powers of knowledge (*epistēmē*) and opinion (*doxa*). This theory is advanced elaborately in the divided line section of the *Republic* VI (509d-513e), and more succinctly at *Rep.* 477a-b and *Tim.* 51d-52a. Consequently, I believe that when Keller states concerning Plato's method of direct investigation that “to look to a thing itself is to think about or observe the thing, rather than thinking about or observing the name of the thing” (Keller 303, fn. 29), his interpretation is not as “plausible and straightforward” as it may seem at first glance.

³¹ For two alternatives to this view and some objections to them, see (Thomas 351ff). The author designates these alternative views as the *acquaintance model*, upheld by Reeve and Silverman, and the *field-work model*, proposed by Irwin. The former stands for some way of acquiring direct knowledge of the Forms, which, according to Thomas, presupposes either “cognitive contact ... with forms in a previous life; or ... cognitive contact with the forms earned by the end of a long life of linguistic instruction” (Thomas 353). According to the latter, inquiry without names is not necessarily directed at the Forms. It takes as its starting points certain commonly held beliefs concerning an object or phenomenon, which, upon practical examination of the given object or phenomenon, are being revised in such a way as to produce new, more accurate beliefs.

disposes of language altogether, but still it is supposed to *culminate* in cognition fully independent of any knowledge that could be conveyed through names.³² We shall touch upon the subject of this form of dialectic inquiry in the concluding section of the paper.

The failure to identify the interconnected statements that the world is not fully cognizable through words, and that the way to know things is to investigate them directly as the main theses of the dialogue, lands some commentators in difficulties and robs them of the opportunity to see the positive contribution of the *Cratylus* to Plato's views on language and knowledge. Thus Modrak holds that in the *Cratylus* (as well as in the *Theaetetus*) Plato attempts to explain how we grasp the reality, which is not too controversial a claim; but then she goes on to assert that "this is best accomplished by identifying the elemental cognitions that are the foundations of meaning and knowledge" (Modrak 167), which turn out to be the roots, or the elemental constituents of words. In order to accomplish this goal of his, "Plato rejects any philosophical theory that has the consequence that meanings become unstable. In the *Cratylus*, the rejected theory is a version of conventionalism ..." (ibid.), and consequently aligns himself with the naturalists. The upshot of this understanding is that Plato's attempt to explain how we know things hits impasse and the dialogue ends aporetically. However, I believe that both in this paper and earlier it has been established that in the *Cratylus* naturalism was rejected as well, even possibly shown to be the prime object of Socrates' criticism. I also believe that Plato's aim in the *Cratylus* is not precisely to explain how we cognize the world, but how we cognize the world *through names*, or language. His conclusion is that we actually do not and cannot, at least when it comes to the higher order realities, but he nevertheless has a positive alternative to offer. The whole purpose of the dialogue form which Plato adopted in order to present his thoughts is to give the audience a chance to reflect upon what has been said and draw independent conclusions, hopefully in the right direction.³³ Thus, the *aporia* in the *Cratylus* is only apparent; it is Plato's "lit-

³² Thomas also claims that Plato's 'inquiry without names' "takes the form of a dialectical inquiry into metaphysical first principles" (Thomas 356), i.e. signifies investigation of the Forms, which she calls 'transcendental metaphysics.' As exemplified in the *Cratylus*, its method is application of transcendental arguments (see Thomas 360f), which are structurally quite similar to Kant's transcendental argument. The main problem with hers, otherwise very subtle and penetrating, analysis of the *Cratylus*' last section is that the transcendental arguments only provide *conditions* for acquiring stable knowledge, and not direct apprehension of the Forms, which is *epistēmē* in the real sense of the word. Furthermore, as Thomas ascribes the practice of transcendental metaphysics to the original *nomothetes*, the method proves to be highly fallible, since these, as I believe, mythical wise men of old were dragged to very wrong conclusion concerning the nature of reality. That is certainly not how Plato wants his dialectical method to be.

³³ For an argument that Plato's Socrates rather often lets the reader know what position he holds, although the same is not to be found in the dialogue's conclusion, see (Penner 131ff). Now, in this article of his Penner tries to isolate and confirm the philosophical views of the historical Socrates, which were being stealthily introduced in the above way, but the same strategy of presenting ideas can uncontroversially be transposed to Plato, who is, after all, the one who devised it.

erary device for reinterpreting the Socratic elenchus as the preparation for constructive philosophy. The reader is to accompany the interlocutor in the recognition of a problem. But the more astute reader will also recognize some hints of a solution" (Kahn 100).³⁴

V

The preceding paragraphs make it rather clear that Plato in the *Cratylus* does offer an answer to the question of correctness of names and, subsequently, utility of language. What remains to be seen, however, is whether the thesis of the priority of the direct access to the realities, over its linguistic counterpart, has any parallel in the rest of Plato's writings. At first, one feels compelled, together with many critics, to acknowledge that "This is not a happy outcome nor is it one that at the end of the day Plato embraces, as is evident in his lifelong interest in dialectic and definition" (Modrak 169). However, after a more careful consideration and thorough rethinking of the notion of dialectic, the seemingly 'unhappy outcome' may turn out to be not that un-Platonic or absurd.

In fact, the conclusions of the *Cratylus* are closely connected and in a kind of doctrinal affinity with the Seventh Letter's digression on language and true, i.e. Platonic, philosophy (*Ep. VII* 341b-345c). It is impossible here to enter the vexing debate on the Letter's authenticity;³⁵ deciding on the issue is, however, not necessary at all. It is enough to somehow confirm that the author, whoever he could be, wrote the philosophical digression with genuinely Platonic attitude, as well as that he in it expressed genuinely Platonic ideas. And I believe that Taylor (1912), Morrow (1929) and Stenzel (1953) have already argued quite convincingly in favor of the validity of that supposition. Now, the philosophical digression in our letter is induced by the need to offer an evaluation of the book, or handbook (*technē*) on philosophy that Dionysius wrote, upon hearing a single introductory lecture by Plato. The author of the Letter deems that impossible: philosophy is not about presenting view-points and arguing for or against them; it is a way of life and presupposes strict daily discipline, unwavering dedication to the cause and purity of mind and conduct. "Those who are really not philosophers but have only a coating of opinions" (*Ep. VII* 340d6) become easily discouraged and give up the pursuit as soon as they learn how much labor and sacrifice it demands. But even more importantly, the very enterprise of expressing deep philosophical truths in

³⁴ The most eminent representative of the viewpoint that the same conclusion applies also to the other dialogue Modrak is discussing, namely the *Theaetetus*, is Cornford (1935).

³⁵ While not that long ago many distinguished scholars, including G. R. Morrow and A. E. Taylor, were in favor of the view that our Letter is either Plato's work, or otherwise genuinely Platonic (having, however, opponents in Edelstein, Cherniss, etc.), more recently it seems that the opposite understanding is becoming predominant among the historians of Platonism: Irwin, Schofield, Burnyeat and many others consider it pseudo-Platonic.

written or even spoken language, for the purpose of instructing others in the matter is futile.

So much at least I can affirm with confidence about any who have written or propose to write on these questions, pretending to a knowledge of the problems with which I am concerned (*peri ōn spoudazō*)³⁶... : it is impossible, in my opinion, that they have learned anything about the subject. There is no writing of mine about these matters, nor will there ever be. For this knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences. (341b-c)

This emphatic statement of the author of the Seventh Letter does not stand in such a stark contrast with Plato of the dialogues, as many have assumed. It is in perfect accord with the outcome of the discussions in the *Cratylus*, which directs the reader's attention to the weakness, even impotency of language when it comes to grasping and depicting true being. It is also not very far from the depreciative outlook on writing offered in the *Phaedrus* (277d-279a); the *aporiai* of the second part of the *Parmenides*, which to a significant degree stem from the inadequacy of language; the unsuccessful attempts in the *Theaetetus* to define knowledge; the *Timaeus* statements that the ultimate principles are known only to god and those dear to him (549d) and that the father and maker of the universe is difficult to find and impossible to speak about to everyone (28c).³⁷ For all that, neither Plato in the dialogues, nor Plato or the Platonic author in the Seventh Letter is, by no means, putting forward the agnostic thesis of impossibility of knowledge. From the very beginning of his attempts to establish authentic methodology of philosophical investigations (first discernible probably in the *Meno*),³⁸ he holds that knowledge is attainable and that the method to attain it is dialectic. Dialectic, however, is a multi-layered concept which develops together with the maturing of Plato's philosophy, and thus eschews easy description. The term basically refers to philosophical inquiry conducted through conversation: "It consists of the methodic organization of questions and answers, of the proposing of hypotheses and of their examination, of a sorting out of types of objects by means of concepts, using what is later called the method of collection and division" (Weingartner 9). However, there is more to it; the ultimate goal of philosophy is to become as godlike as possible,

³⁶ These are, as (Morrow 330) points out, the first and highest principles of nature.

³⁷ The format of this text allows only for a brief mention of a few places in the Platonic corpus that are possibly in affinity with *Ep. VII*. For tracing back to the dialogues of many of the ideas presented in the Letter's digression, see (Morrow 335ff).

³⁸ Although *Cratylus* is the first dialogue where the name of the practitioner of the art is mentioned – "the *Cratylus* passage might have been designed to introduce the term *dialektikos* for the first time, since its appearance is prepared by careful *epagōgē*" (Kahn 306) – together with some hints of the method itself (see *Crat.* 436d, and cf. *Rep.* 511b; *Crat.* 438e and *Rep.* 534b-c).

(see Sedley 1999) or to approach the Good. This goal cannot be attained without the intellectual grasp (*noēsis*) of fundamental realities, which in turn requires arduous training. “The training and the method of approach is what Plato calls dialectic” (Kahn 292). So, the method of dialectic is specifically contrived to ultimately reach the highest subsection of the divided line, to grasp the *archai*. That is the verdict of the *Republic*, where the method is most fully described. The lower segment of the *epistēmē* section, the one concerned with mathematical, uses hypotheses and sense-data, while “the dialectic method proceeds only thus as to make away with hypotheses and move to the first principle itself, so as to be secure” (*Rep.* 533c7-d1).³⁹ The art of dialectic has a very complex structure and in the broader sense it includes the method of hypotheses (as taught and practiced in the *Meno* and *Phaedo*), the method of collection and division (*Phaedrus*, *Sophist* etc.) and dialectic proper, as presented in the *Republic* VI and VII. They are all linked together by the unifying purpose of discovering the ultimate realities behind the fleeting phenomena. Discursive reasoning and language are indispensable in this pursuit, but they are far from being sufficient. In fact, in order to realize any real being, three intermediaries are necessary: the name (*onoma*), the definition (*logos*), the image (*eidōlon*), while knowledge (*epistēmē*) is the fourth thing. On the fifth place stands the object itself, which is the knowable and truly real being – *ho gnōston te kai alēthōs estin on* (*Ep.VII* 342a-b).⁴⁰ To use an example from the *Cratylus*, in order to comprehend what a shuttle is, we will have to know its name (*kerkis*), its definition (e.g. an instrument for separating the web and weaving), and its material shape. Next we have to possess an understanding of all these features in our minds, which is “distinct both from the thing itself and the three things previously mentioned” (*Ep.VII* 342c). Finally, there is the form of the shuttle itself, which should properly be called the real shuttle – *auto ho estī kerkis* (*Crat.* 389b). Now, the author of the Letter continues, due to the innate weakness of language (*dia to tōn logōn asthenes*), the four means for reaching the real thing are as prone to make clear its appearance, or some quality (*to poion ti*), as its being (*to on*). The soul, however, is endeavoring to know the essence, not the particular quality of a thing (*ou to poion ti, to de ti, zetousēs eidenai tēs psychēs*), and therefore no sensible man would venture to express his deepest thoughts in accounts and rely on them exclusively. For, every image is just an imperfect approximation, the names are arbitrary and by no means fixed (*onoma te ouden oudenī bebaion einai*), and the same is true for the definitions

³⁹ (Benson 478) further explains that dialectic also uses hypotheses, but, unlike the dianoetic method, seeks for their confirmation. Thus the difference between the two methods amounts to a difference between the use of sense-experience and the *a priori* method, and between treating hypotheses as though they were confirmed and as mere unconfirmed stepping stones in need of justification, respectively for the dianoetic (applicable to mathematical) and the dialectic method (applicable to first principles).

⁴⁰ As we learn from the *Republic* 532a, the essence of each thing is to be sought through the exercise of the method of dialectic, which implies leaving aside everything perceptible (*aneu pasōn tōn aisthetōn*).

and accounts, because they are comprised of names (*Ep.VII* 342e-343c). And this was exactly the conclusion of the *Cratylus*: the words by themselves, although indispensable – since we have no other means of communicating our thoughts and insights – are insufficient, fallible instruments when it comes to grasping reality. Therefore, the inquisitive soul should busy itself with the ‘fifth thing,’ which is the object as it is, the real essence. However, unlike Socrates in the *Cratylus*, the author of our *Letter* gives a clearer idea about how this task is to be accomplished. We are once again urged to embrace the practice of dialectic, but having in mind that dialectic is much more than an intellectual exercise: it means submitting oneself to the philosophic way of life, which involves training in virtue and perfect conduct, and employing the four instruments of knowledge by listening to and conversing with the teacher in good faith and without envy (*Ep.VII* 344b). After such “long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, [knowledge] is born in the soul and straightaway nourishes itself (*en tē psychē genomenon auto heauto ēdē trephei*).” (*Ep.VII* 341c-d)

I believe that the points presented in this paper allow us to conclude that Plato’s general attitude toward language, at least starting with the transitional period between the writing of the so-called early and middle group of dialogues – where the *Cratylus* most probably belongs – was generally unfavorable. Regardless of whether he upheld the naturalist theory of language before the *Cratylus* or not, starting with this dialogue, and especially with the development of his Theory of the Forms, he believed that both words and *logoi* were possibly deceptive, and had to be dealt with most carefully. In his striving for knowledge, however, Plato could not dispense with language altogether, and that is why he devised the dialectic method as a powerful fence against the imperfections of language. As far as dialectic itself is concerned, in the light of the obvious affinity between the teachings of the *Cratylus* and the Seventh Letter presented here, the following two theses may be postulated: a) for Plato, philosophical inquiry, or dialectic, culminates in the awakening of the reason’s natural ability to illuminate its objects (*eklampse ... peri hekaston ... nous*); b) consequently, the concepts of illumination (*eklampsis*) and direct seeing (*theōrein*) play a crucial role in Plato’s epistemology, and is therefore nothing a modern student of Plato should shy away from, as being too ‘mystical’ or ‘Neoplatonic’.⁴¹ It is the only tool appropriate and available to the eidetic epis-

⁴¹ This would imply that Plotinus’ understanding of dialectic (see *Enn.* I.3), and some other aspects of Platonism, was much closer to the original intent of the master than we nowadays are willing to acknowledge. After all, we learn from a canonical text that the method of dialectic allows the philosopher, who has spent long years cultivating his soul, “to grasp the Good itself by intellection alone:” *auto ho esti agathon autē(i) noēsei labē(i)* (*Rep.* 532b1). It thus has the power “to lead up the best part of the soul to direct vision of the best among the things that really are:” *epanagōgēn tou beltistou en psychē(i) pros tēn tou aristou en tousi ousi thean* (*Rep.* 532c6). The seeing here is unmediated, much as the vision of the sun is not brought about by any intermediary, but is a matter of interaction between the efflux of the inner light of the eye and the external light of the sun. Plato reiterates the same

temology, put forward already as early as the times of the *Cratylus*. The full explication and defense of these theses must be postponed for some other occasion.

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point even more explicitly at 540a: those who have passed all the tests on the path of dialectical anabasis must finally be lead to the completion of their efforts and full realization of the truth. That is to be accomplished by "directing the beam of the soul upwards and fixing it on that which gives light to everything" (*anaklinantas tēn tēs psychēs augēn eis auto apoblepsai to pasi phōs parechon*). Thus the metaphor of light and the notion of direct cognition are very much present in Plato's most mature and penetrating passages on dialectic.

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