

3 Cratylus' theory of names and its refutation

BERNARD WILLIAMS

At the very beginning of Plato's *Cratylus* Hermogenes explains Cratylus' view by saying that it supposes there to be a certain natural correctness (*orthotēs*) of names; that this correctness is the same for all linguistic groups; and (very strongly) that it has nothing to do with what name anyone actually applies to anything – so that, he is quoted as saying to Hermogenes, 'your name would not be Hermogenes, even if everyone called you that' (383b). This last point implies something which explicitly emerges later, that, for Cratylus, the question whether some word 'N' is the *correct* name of a given item is the same as the question whether 'N' is that item's name at all.

The assumption that the answers to those questions must be the same is not shared by everyone in the dialogue. It is shared by Hermogenes, for reasons which are (roughly) the opposite of Cratylus'. It is not shared by Socrates, whose final position requires us to distinguish the questions; or rather, to put it more precisely, it requires us to make a distinction which can be handily put by us in terms of a possible divergence between *the name of X* and *the correct name of X*, and is often so put in the dialogue, but which can also be expressed, as we shall see later, in terms of two kinds of correctness.

In trying to give some account of Cratylus' theory of names, I shall particularly emphasise that distinction and Cratylus' denial of it. Some of what I include in that theory is not advanced by Cratylus in the dialogue, but by Socrates in the course of his attempt, with Hermogenes, to elaborate a notion of 'the correctness of names' (see 391b for the start of their enquiry); but Cratylus fully adopts their theory (428c), and, whatever other status these conceptions may have, they are (at least in outline) consequences of the general views which are refuted in the argument against Cratylus at the end of the dialogue. Whether Plato displays any independent attachment to

According to Cratylus, then, if 'N' is not the name of a given item, it makes no difference if people call it 'N' – or, perhaps, try to call it so: the embarrassment at this point will grow into an objection. Equally, if it is the name of that item, it makes no difference if people do not so call it. The name-relation is purely binary, relating a word and an item. Names can, of course, be of different kinds, and while the first examples are proper names of people, this is not the basic case, and the theory applies to general terms; indeed, it applies to proper names because it applies to general terms. Exactly what kind of item is named by a general term is a question on which the dialogue gives us no help, and it need not concern the present discussion.

What could such a binary relation be? The first level of discussion which contributes to answering the question gives us the principle that if 'N' is the name of a given item, and 'N' can be resolved etymologically into other names, then the combination of those names must be appropriate to the item. But this, clearly, only raises another question; we eventually have to invoke a theory of elements, and these achieve their relation to what is named through imitation (*mimēsis*) (422 seq.), the basic idea, sketchily enough conveyed, being that the action of producing a certain vocal sound resembles some process in the domain of what is to be named. This theory, elaborated in detail through the labours of the etymological section, and presented with an immense degree of irony by Socrates to Cratylus, is agreed by him to represent his view (428c).

We originally saw that Cratylus holds

- (1) If 'N' is the name at all of an item, it is the correct name of that item.

We have now learned

- (2) If 'N' is the name of an item, 'N' bears a certain complex relation to that item.

Let us call that relation *the Φ-relation*. The relation is to be explained in terms of the procedures for resolving names into other names, and, ultimately

- (3) the *Φ*-relation is grounded in the idea of an element of a name being a *mimēma* (430a9) of a process or natural feature.

There is a difficulty lurking in this which Plato seems to mark without pursuing. (3) requires that there should be elements of names which are related to reality through *mimēsis*, but it does not require that they should themselves be names: indeed they are not, and an elementary name – the simplest thing which is itself a name – is, relative to these elements, itself a complex.¹

While the theory permits this, there seems no reason why it should actually require it. Socrates is obviously right in saying at 4.2.2b that the correctness of those names that are elementary will have to be tested 'by some other method' – i.e. not by etymological resolution; but it does not follow that they must be resolved into something other than names. They might be names whose correctness is to be tested by a method which does not involve resolving them at all.

It is unclear why the theory should not yield this outcome. There is indeed the point that the ultimate simples are sounds, which, except for the vowels, cannot be uttered by themselves: the nearest we can come to isolating them in speech is to add further and arbitrary elements to make them pronounceable. This point is, of course, made at 393e, merely in order to illustrate, early in the argument with Hermogenes, the general idea that the addition or subtraction of some elements need not destroy the effect of a name. But the status of the elements surely raises a question about the theory of the Φ -relation. Why is it that the ultimate elements, when made with a little assistance into isolable names, turn out to be the names of those sounds (or letters), and not names of the natural features to which they are linked by *mimēsis*? The problem for Cratylus should not just be that the word for hardness can be either *sklērotēs* or *sklērotēr* (4.3.4c), but that it is not *rh(ō)* itself.

When Cratylus enters the dialogue at 4.2.8, he asserts claim (1) of his position in the strongest possible terms, resisting at the same time Socrates' suggestion that 'legislators' (*nomothetai*), regarded as originally imposing names, might be expected to have done their work better or worse. 'So are all names correctly applied (*orthōs keitai*)?', Socrates asks, and Cratylus answers, 'Inasmuch as they are names' (4.2.9b10–11). In reply, Socrates makes explicit the distinction denied by (1), in the form of distinguishing between the view that the name 'Hermogenes' does not apply (*keisthai*) to the third person present, and the view that it does apply, but 'not rightly'; and Cratylus says that it does not apply to him at all, but is rather the name of someone who has the appropriate nature, i.e. to whom that name bears the Φ -relation.

Socrates' essential step in refuting these claims is to show that they leave Cratylus with nothing coherent to say when one introduces the dimension of what speakers actually do with names, a dimension necessarily left out by any view which finds the whole account of naming in the Φ -relation, since that relation is simply a relation between words and things. Socrates' first example (4.2.9e) ingeniously introduces the act of addressing someone (*proseipein*) with the wrong name. The example is of one who, in foreign parts, greets Cratylus and says 'Welcome, Athenian visitor, Hermogenes,

son of Smikrion!'² The question is, does he not even address Cratylus, but rather Hermogenes? Or no one? When Cratylus replies that such a person would seem to him *phthegxasthai allōs*, 'to speak' – one could take it to mean – 'to no purpose', his answer leaves Socrates still with the room to ask (rather oddly) whether what he spoke was true or false; but this elicits the explanation that he would be making a noise, like someone banging a pot, and this retrospectively offers the possibility of a different reading for *allōs*: he would *merely* be producing speech.³

This conclusion can be related quite simply to Cratylus' position. It is important that Cratylus does not have to say (what would be simply false) that the speaker addresses Hermogenes rather than Cratylus. He can reasonably say that there is a speech-act, which may be called 'addressing someone by name', such that there are two separate necessary conditions of its being true that X addresses Y by name:

- (i) X addresses (speaks to, directs words to, etc.) Y;
- (ii) In the course of (i), X uses a name which is a name of Y.

It will follow that in the situation which Socrates puts to Cratylus, the speaker does not address anyone by name: not Cratylus, because of condition (ii), and not Hermogenes, because of condition (i). If the purpose of his speaking was to address someone by name, then indeed he spoke *allōs* – even if Cratylus' final gloss on that failure is a little exaggerated.

However, that does not get Cratylus very far, and once the speech-act aspect of the question is raised at all, Socrates is in a position to show that even to understand Cratylus' theory requires one to understand possibilities which Cratylus denies. He shows this, first, with regard to mistakes, and, ultimately, with regard to convention.

Cratylus denied that, in the imagined situation, the speaker addressed anyone by name, since he did not satisfy both the conditions of doing that with respect to any one person. But he cannot deny that the speaker satisfied condition (i) with respect to the man in front of him: he certainly, for

² Hermogenes' father's name was Hipponikos: 384a8, 406b8. It has been conjectured that Cratylus really was son of Smikrion: cf. Diels–Kranz (D–K), *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (6th edn), II.65.1 and note.

³ This sense of *allōs*, for instance in Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 947, 'a mere image', is admittedly well attested only where *allōs* occurs with a substantive (see Jebb, *ad loc.*). But the reading suggested, besides tying up with Cratylus' later remark, has the advantage that it gives him a reply which relates to, and undercuts, all the alternatives that Socrates presents in his question. *Phthegxasthai* is, of course, a standard term not only for human sounds, but for animal cries (see Aristotle, *Historia Animalium* 535a30) and for noises from inanimate things – for instance, a pot when struck, *Theaetetus* 179d. (I am grateful to Malcolm Schofield and Martha Nussbaum for comments on this matter.)

instance, spoke to him. Moreover, he used a particular name in relation to him; and Cratylus must know all that, or he could not diagnose the situation as he does. So Cratylus must accept that the speaker performed *some* speech-act in relation to the man in front of him, and indeed he must know what it is for *X* to call *Y* 'N'. But if so, then he must know what it is for *X* to call *Y* 'N' although 'N' is not *Y*'s name, and he is in a position to recognise mistake. Moreover, he must know what it is for almost everyone usually to call *Y* 'N', and he is in a position to recognise convention.

The argument about mistake is developed in terms of the allocation (*dianomē*) of names. One can identify *Y* and a particular name independently of one another, and one can bring that name to *Y*'s attention (431a1–2, cf. 430e6–7, very forceful expressions of perceptual confrontation), just as one can bring to his attention a certain picture; and one can claim that what is displayed is his name or picture. Whatever relation constitutes a particular name's being his name – if, for instance, as Cratylus believes, it is much the same relation as constitutes a picture's being his picture – that claim may be false. Even when it is, there has certainly been an allocation; hence there are mistaken allocations of names.

It is important to see what a *dianomē* is. It is an activity which can be performed on either names or pictures in relation to their objects, and, according to Socrates' introduction of it (430d), it has the properties that, in the case of a picture, if the picture is allocated to a person of which it is the picture, then the *dianomē* is correct (*orthē*), while in the case of a name, if it is allocated to the person of which it is the name, then the *dianomē* is both correct and true. This suggests that the *dianomē* does not simply involve the claim 'this is your picture (name)', for in any sense in which that is true or false, as well as right or wrong, with names, it is equally so with pictures. We should rather expect that *dianomē* is an activity which, when done with a name, yields a *logos*, something that can be true, and when done with a picture, does not. We can imagine a wordless *dianomē* of a picture – handing it to the subject, for instance; and we can imagine a partly worded one, in the form of someone's saying, for instance, 'You are . . .' and presenting a picture. The analogy to this in the case of names would be saying 'You are . . .' and presenting a name. But 'presenting a name' is itself a linguistic activity (cf. 387c6, 'naming is part of speaking'); and saying 'You are . . .', followed by presenting 'N', comes to saying 'You are N', which, unlike its picture analogue, can be true as well as correct.⁴ Of course, there is also a kind of statement that is available in both cases: that statement which

⁴ Cf. the formulation at 429c6 of the question to which the discussion of *dianomē* helps to give an answer: 'Is someone not mistaken who says that he is *Homologos*?'

Socrates gives, and which in the name case takes the form 'this is your name'.

Nothing here, any more than elsewhere, restricts the discussion to proper names. Indeed, in the picture case it seems that the pictures can be taken as ascribing the general properties of male and female (431a3–4). The model therefore has some potential to destroy those general arguments against the possibility of falsehood, naturally associated with Cratylus' position, which put in an appearance at 429d; and that is recognised, in a rather sketchy way, at 431b. Those arguments rest, in one way or another, on the idea that an expression 'E' cannot misfit reality, since it must be allocated either to nothing, or to whatever it is that it fits. But this critic must have some conception of what counts as 'fitting', as I have called it, and of what it is that a given 'E' would fit. But then he has an understanding of some (at least) statements of the form "'E" fits *that*', an understanding which allows also for the possibility of such a statement's being false; and that possibility is the same as that of 'E' misfitting reality.

This has the same structure as the *dianomē* argument in the *Cratylus*. Of course, the potential for destroying the argument against falsehood cannot be fully realised until a *general* way is found of locating independently the item which 'E' fits or misfits, and this is not achieved until the *Sophist*, if then. The point that the *Cratylus* does not achieve this has been made by John McDowell,⁵ who points out that 'the function of indicating what is being talked about is not credited to a constituent in the account' but has to be discharged by an act of confrontation. (A similar limitation, it may be said, can be found in the account given by the *Theaetetus*, in so far as that is even partly successful, of false identity statements.) The *Cratylus*, however, disclaims any attempt to give a general answer (429d7–8), and what it does say perhaps has a greater potential for being generalised than the criticism allows. McDowell also objects that the *Cratylus*' contribution is not merely limited but misguided, on the ground that it tries to assimilate falsehood to partial accuracy, as though an expression could be discovered to misfit reality only if its general shape were right but other features wrong. But this is to connect the discussion of *dianomē* too closely to what follows. That discussion lasts to 431c3, and indeed relates, though not in very general terms, to the puzzles of falsehood; from 431c4, Socrates takes off on a further discussion (*au*, c4), designed to deal with the Φ -relation itself.

This discussion reverts to issues of name-giving, and the activities of a *nomothetēs*. Plato might be thought to invite confusion by moving so easily between name-giving and the use of established words, since the possibili-

ties of mistake are evidently so different in the two. But – as Plato clearly sees – they are different only if certain assumptions are made, assumptions which are denied by Cratylus. According to Cratylus, there is no act which a *nomothetēs* or anyone else can perform to *make* 'N' the name of Y – 'N' either bears the required Φ -relation to Y or it does not. Hence what is called 'name-giving' will be merely a trivial variant on describing. The distinction between name-giving and using an established name will collapse also at the other end of the spectrum, with that radical Humpty-Dumpty view which Hermogenes offers early on (384d1–2, 385a) as one version of what he opposes to Cratylus. As Cratylus assimilates name-giving to describing, so this assimilates describing to name-giving. The view, opposed to both of these, that what is Y's name depends on 'agreement and custom',⁶ precisely leaves room for the distinction, since there is an important difference between following a practice and trying to initiate one.

In his attack on the Φ -relation itself, Socrates first shows that there is a conflict between Cratylus' faith in *mimēsis* (his thesis (3)) and the all-or-nothing view that he takes of the name-relation, since *mimēsis* depends on resemblance, and resemblance is a matter of degree. The very notion of one thing's being an *eikōn*, a representation, of another, involves this point; for the only *absolute* notion of resemblance that could be used is that of indistinguishability, but an item indistinguishable from Cratylus would not be a representation of Cratylus, but 'another Cratylus'. The very idea of a representation of X, such as Cratylus takes a name to be, already implies at least a selection among the properties of X. The following argument, including the examples at 434–5, works from this point to show that we can recognise that 'N' is the name of Y independently of the exactness of its representation, and this, like the argument about *dianomē*, undermines thesis (1). But it goes further, for the same considerations show that one can recognise 'N' as the name of Y independently of resemblance altogether. (3) is wrong, and, as Hermogenes said (414c2), getting resemblance to do this job is a sticky business,⁷ and we have to fall back on agreement. It is merely custom and agreement that makes a given name the name of a given item, and this excludes not merely this particular candidate for the Φ -relation but any kind of Φ -relation as constituting the name-relation itself.

The conclusion may be put in terms of the conditions for something's being a name; and that could leave it open whether there was some further question about the correctness of the names which, as things are, we use.

⁶ *Sunthēkē kai ethos*, the standard phrase in the dialogue: cf. *ethēi tōn ethisantōn*, 384d8. As Robinson pointed out, it is only in that passage and in conjunction with that phrase that *nomōi* in this dialogue expresses the contrast to *phusis*: see

Alternatively, the conclusion may itself be expressed in terms of correctness, as it is at 435c. In those terms, the conclusion will be that agreement and custom govern everyday correctness – they will be the determinants of whether someone has correctly used a name which we have in our language. In that case, the further question that might possibly arise would be about the correctness of our language. We may then distinguish two ways in which questions about correctness may be raised. There are certainly questions of internal correctness, to be settled by reference to our linguistic practices. There may or may not be a question of external correctness, a question about the correctness of our linguistic practices.

Socrates agrees with Hermogenes that custom and agreement are the sole determinants of internal correctness. Hermogenes, however, thinks that there is no further question of external correctness, while Socrates thinks that there is: there are requirements on what a language has to be, which follow from what it has to do. This is the point of the tool analogies at 387 seq. But this, as Kretzmann⁸ has made very clear, has nothing to do with any idea of the material properties of words resembling the world, as was claimed in the theory of the Φ -relation. The resources of the language can be better or worse adapted to the requirements of dialectic, and that will make it better or worse in an external sense, but it will be so only in virtue of its structural properties and the semantic relations of its terms to each other, and not in virtue of their shape or sound or any such feature.

Socrates, then, differs from both Hermogenes and Cratylus in thinking that there are two questions, of internal and external correctness; or, in the alternative formulation, that there is one question about what the name for a given item is, and another about whether the practices that undoubtedly assign it that name are correct. Hermogenes thinks that there is only one question, settled by the appeal to our practices. Cratylus thinks that there is one question, to be settled by the basically external device of the Φ -relation; but Socrates' own answer to the external question will be on totally different lines from that.

Socrates' conclusions are not formally inconsistent with claiming that names do as a matter of fact possess some mimetic features; nor do they strictly exclude the aim of remodelling the language so that names acquire such features. Many have thought that Plato does show some real attachment to the mimetic principle. But, so far as the actual language is concerned, the treatment of the etymological enterprise as a whole, and particularly the mimetic aspect, is loaded with irony and warnings (cf. 426b1, the reference to the expert; 428d, Socrates' doubts; and many other

passages); while it is a notable fact that Socrates is prepared to rerun the entire diagnosis of the language on lines opposite to the Heraclitean principles which he and Hermogenes have used. He indeed says at 435c2-3 'it pleases me that names should be as far as possible like things', a formulation neutral between explanation of the actual language and aspiration for a better one; but it is permissible to take this as referring to what Socrates indeed claimed long before, that the structure of language should represent the structure of things.

Certainly that is all we should expect Plato to find important. Here one must bear in mind not just the conclusions already discussed, but the powerfully demystifying arguments towards the end of the dialogue about what might be learned from language. Cratylan *mimēsis* is not what makes our names function as names, and, if they display such features at all, the question arises of how they came to do so. They will, at best, be a flickering record of observations made by the *nomothetēs* (as one might say, by human experience). As a recipe for linguistic improvement, again, the mimetic principle has nothing to offer. The functions of language, and the purposes for which it might be improved, are to teach, learn, inform, divide up reality. The knowledge required for that can appear in language only if someone possesses it already; and while there might be point in making that knowledge appear structurally, and thus improving language dialectically, there can be no such point to altering it in the direction of Cratylan *mimēsis*.

Even if it is not formally inconsistent with them, an attachment to Cratylan *mimēsis* is in fact banished by the conclusions of the *Cratylus*. This brilliant, tough-minded and still underestimated dialogue does not only show that the idea of language's having mimetic powers could not explain what language is; it leaves the belief in such powers looking like what it is, a belief in magic.

Language

Edited by Stephen Everson

Lincoln College, Oxford

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1994

First published 1994

Printed in Great Britain at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Language / edited by Stephen Everson.

p. cm. — (Companions to ancient thought; 3)

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

Contents: Plato on understanding language / David Bostock — Cratylus' theory of names and its refutation / Bernard Williams — Aristotle on names and their signification / David Charles — Epicurus on mind and language / Stephen Everson — The Stoic notion of a *lekton* / Michael Frede — Parrots, Pyrrhonists and native speakers / David K. Glidden — Analogy, anomaly and Apollonius Dyscolus / David Blank — Usage and abuse: Galen on language / R. J. Hankinson — Augustine on the nature of speech / Christopher Kirwan — The verb 'to be' in Greek philosophy / Lesley Brown.

ISBN 0 521 35538 9 (hardback) ISBN 0 521 35795 0 (paperback)

1. Language and languages — Philosophy — History. 2. Philosophy. Ancient. I. Everson, Stephen. II. Series.

PT06.L3127 1994

401-dc20 93-27234 CIP

ISBN 0 521 35538 9 hardback

ISBN 0 521 35795 0 paperback

