

6-1992

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### Recommended Citation

Upham, Elizabeth (1992) "The Cratylus: An Explication," *Anthós Journal (1990-1996)*: Vol. 1: No. 3, Article 2.

Available at: [https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/anthos\\_archives/vol1/iss3/2](https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/anthos_archives/vol1/iss3/2)

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# THE CRATYLUS: AN EXPLICATION

*Elizabeth Upham*

Why do we say that when a cat “talks” it meows? Are the letters expressive of the true nature of a cat’s voice? For that matter, why do we call a cat a cat? Where do we get the letters to form the words that form sentences? These are the questions Socrates, Hermogenes, and Cratylus attempt to answer in Plato’s dialogue. They try to discover if things are named with consideration to *phusis* how the object or idea appears in nature, or *nomos*, law and convention. When the dialogue begins, Socrates is apparently pulled off the street to settle a rather complex argument between Cratylus and Hermogenes and he quickly confesses that he knows next to nothing about language and its origins—mainly because he couldn’t afford the 50 drachma course on grammar—but he will do his best. It does become clear that Socrates is a little more informed than he led the two to believe, especially when he dissects words and names so effortlessly.

At the beginning of the dialogue, Cratylus drops out after one line to, “preside” over the dialogue, almost like a judge presiding over a court, whose favor Socrates and Hermogenes are both trying to gain, since Hermogenes’ lines: “he has a notion of his own ... and could entirely convince me if he chose,” suggest that he holds

all the answers. Socrates lays a groundwork for discussion with the intention of getting to the truth. What follows is a very subtle ring composition with all three men ending up in exactly the same place they started, whereas a dialogue such as *The Symposium* is constructed in a way as to let the reader know exactly what is to take place.

Socrates begins by challenging Hermogenes' view that language is decided by convention and mutual agreement, seemingly rejecting it, but then he seems to agree with it later by pointing out that legislators, essentially men of law, are the ones who name things. He states that legislators are the only ones really skilled enough to name things, much like the weaver is the only one who can use a shuttle effectively. In Greek, lawgiver is *nomos* and the word for name-giver is *onoma*, so Socrates is punning on the words throughout. An interesting comparison can be drawn here, since Socrates can be compared to a lawyer in a court and then he says that legislators are the only competent namers. Then Socrates starts to talk about nature and Hermogenes eggs him on by saying that he might be persuaded to a different view if only Socrates would "show him what this is which you term the natural fitness of names." Socrates once again professes his ignorance (which becomes an integral part of the dialogue), but says that he might be able to help Hermogenes with the help of Homer. He quotes from several sections of *The Iliad*, (20.74, Xanthus and Scamander; 14.291, Chalcis and Cymindis; 22.507, Astyanax and Scamandrius), where the gods have different names for things than mortals. These passages depict not only a parallel war among the gods, in which the gods can be taken to symbolize Athens, Corinth, and Sparta in the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, but also a vivid image of Hera lying to and deceiving Zeus and using the god Sleep to drug him, much like the way Socrates is lying to and deceiving Hermogenes, using his own so-called ignorance as his drug. Socrates then goes on to discuss a little about Hesiod's golden

race of daemons and then the first names of common people, then the appropriateness of heroes' names (and he calls them demi-gods later), and then finally the names of the gods, creating a familiar pattern of ascension. When Hermogenes praises him for his new found wisdom, Socrates credits Euthyphro, and not the fact that he actually had some idea of what he was talking about all along.

Hermogenes asks him after his explication of the name of Zeus to discuss body and soul as he had just discussed the word man. Socrates says that not only is the body the grave of the soul, but it is the index of the soul and also the punishment of the soul. It is interesting to note here that the topic of body and soul marks a mid-way point for the ring composition that later becomes more apparent. The explication of gods' names is then taken up again, and Socrates says that maybe these are only the names that mortals know of and perhaps the gods call themselves differently, alluding to the quotes from Homer. Some names are easily derived with one meaning and some are not so easily derived and have more than one meaning, such as the name Apollo. Socrates says that the name of Apollo is, in his opinion, the most expressive of all the gods' names, meaning not only the usual music, prophecy, and archery, but also harmony and purity. When one keeps in mind that the gods in the allusion material can symbolize the city-states, one can assume that Socrates is using the god Apollo to personify Athens, suggesting that the city means everything, not only war and—in a sense—victory, but harmony. This harmony is thoroughly praised in Book I by an Athenian ambassador in Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*. Socrates concludes by saying that he is afraid of the gods and tries to turn to another subject, but is easily persuaded back by a pleading Hermogenes.

Instead of talking blatantly about the gods, as Hermogenes would like, Socrates discusses elements and discovers that primitive namers must have thought that everything was in

flux, much like the then modern philosophers, and that is why most all names have motion reflected in them. After the discussion on such principles as truth and justice, Hermogenes calls him on the "improvisation" that has gone on before and says that he is, in effect, claiming another's findings as his own. Socrates hopes to make Hermogenes believe the originality, as he puts it, of the rest of his discussion, and plunges back in by once again discussing man, forming a distinct ring composition.

Socrates starts to discuss the fact that really anybody can fit a word into any pattern of derivation simply by inserting and deleting letters, again comparing himself to the legislator he is so enamored of. Hermogenes doesn't really go for this, calls it shoddy, and Socrates tries to redeem himself by saying that no one will know because the original words have been long buried by added and missing letters. Socrates then concludes this lengthy discussion on virtue by saying that "if one person goes on analyzing names into words ... he who has to answer him must at last give up in despair."

He then segues into a "what if" sequence where he asks Hermogenes how people would communicate if they had no voice or tongue; he also points out that music and art is a representation of nature and virtue without words. Socrates uses this image to talk about how words and letters are there to express the true nature of an object without playing charades or Pictionary; and he also says that words have to be an accurate representation of an object in order to be deemed true.

After exploring the reflection of nature in the letters themselves (example: letters that have a hard sound are usually present in words signifying motion) and comparing them to the colors a painter might use, Cratylus rejoins the dialogue as Hermogenes drops out. Socrates drills Cratylus on names in relation to truth and falsehood, and promptly makes a fool out of him by making Cratylus contradict himself.

Socrates reviews the previous conversation he had with Hermogenes with Cratylus akin to final summations. Cratylus gives his opinion that language is and should be a reflection of nature, and Socrates appears to accept this ideal to a point before he rejects it somewhat, like the *nomos* belief. He admits that he really doesn't know one way or the other, and implores the men to "come and tell" him the truth when they find it, ending in ambiguity similar to the beginning and completing the ring.

My conclusion is that it is Plato's intent in this dialogue to compare Socrates to a legislator with the power to bestow appropriate names on things, even though he hides Socrates behind a veil of uncertainty about the true nature of names. He drugs Hermogenes and Cratylus, like Hera, not only with his ignorance but with his very presence, and tries to "suck" information out of them in order to complete his own lacking education. He is full of contradictions about his own knowledge on the subject, saying that if he had been able to afford the course on grammar and language he could answer the questions of Hermogenes and Cratylus easily, but he later suggests that Sophists such as Protagoras really don't know what they are talking about, leaving the reader to answer all the unanswered questions and make up his or her own mind.

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