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THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE IN PLATO'S *CRATYLUS*

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As one commences to read Plato's *Cratylus*, he or she is instantaneously thrust into a conversation almost as if actually walking with Socrates and extended an invitation to observe as Socrates participates in this debate. This immediately makes the reader feel somehow on his "side." What follows is a somewhat complex debate on the analysis of names, whether they are natural or if they are found by convention; in other words, is language taught or grown? It is immediately evident, however, that it is an essentially agreed upon point that language is a semblance of nature and the discussion thereby turns to trying to investigate what that is. Yet through this inquiry it appears that Socrates does not stumble any closer to finding an answer. As he proceeds through the dialogue arguing for both points of view in order to find the "truth," it is established several times that he has not unlocked any doors. In fact at one point he concedes, "indeed I believe that I myself did not know what I meant" (393b, 401e), and finally as the debate reaches its culmination he instructs Cratylus, "And when you have found the truth, come and tell me" (474d).

While it is obviously a Platonic dialogue in subject matter, it is also a demonstration of another typical practice of Plato, ring composition. This is where, reciprocating on a

pivotal theme, one idea has a mirrored partner on the other "side" of the core, expanding from the middle to each cover. There were two different patterns which I found the Cratylus seems to follow, both having similar "ends" and "centers" but different ideas in the middle portion. The first seems to have the outer topic of the correctness of names, then moving inward, that of different names for the same object or words which imitate each other. This leads into the breaking down of names, particularly those of gods, which developed into the next subject of virtues, followed by the nature of things and the entirety revolving around the central theme of the soul or self. The other pattern which seems to emerge begins similarly with the outer topics of the correctness of names, then the different names for the same object, but at this point they part ways. Next comes the definition and characteristics of particular words, then moving inward comes the examination of specific letters and then the similar central theme of the soul. At first these ideas appear to be fairly diverse yet as demonstrated throughout the dialogue, they are also connected a great deal.

Socrates enters into the picture to find Hermogenes and Cratylus debating the subject of names but the latter quickly retires into the background. He has just stated that he believes that names are natural and that there is a "truth" to them, and going on this assumption, he feels that Hermogenes has been named inappropriately. Socrates picks up the argument on the correctness of names as Hermogenes takes a minimally interactive part and Cratylus does not reappear until the waning moments of the dialogue.

Socrates furthers this argument by agreeing with Cratylus' opening statement that names are natural and he illustrates this with examples from *The Iliad* where the name for an object differed between the gods and men (20, 74; 14, 291). These references were from circumstances showing the almost human qualities of the gods in love and war, however on his

third example there are some things to note of importance. Socrates is using the text where Hector's son appears to have been given two names, Astynax and Scamandrius. His argument is that according to Chapter 22, lines 506-7, the Trojans (referring to the men only of course) called him Astynax, and therefore the women must have called him Scamandrius and this meant Scamandrius would be an inferior name. However by going back to Chapter 6, line 402, we find that the only one who refers to him by the name of Scamandrius is Hector, not the inferior women. This seems to then void his argument, and indeed he admits he is babbling, but it provides an excellent opportunity to witness the manipulation of material by Socrates, a tactic familiar to him.

Moving on to the third point of his argument, Socrates begins breaking down specific names and words to find their original meanings. He introduces this topic by deriving the original meanings of the daemons and the gods starting with Hestia and working through several others including Zeus and Poseidon. At one point he lectures on the natural meaning of Hermes, the god which Hermogenes is named after. Socrates claims that Hermes was extraordinarily proficient at giving speeches and well reputed in general for his abilities with language. Socrates declares that this is definitely not a strong point for Hermogenes, who is quick to acknowledge this, and therefore he has been named inappropriately. When we also consider that Socrates has already equated the skillful use of language with wisdom, we see that in essence he is putting Hermogenes down quite harshly. Then he moves on to the virtues, for instance wisdom and judgment. He ends this process by taking it one step further and looking at the individual letters that make up the words and the addition and subtraction of a couple of letters over the years do not necessarily make that much difference.

While Socrates is in the midst of all his derivations Cratylus finally returns to the conversation in a more active role. They

discuss the idea that words are merely imitations of the objects and actions they represent. Even the individual sounds represent some idea or thought. There is a substantial difference in the manner and tone of dialogue between that of Socrates and Hermogenes and that of Socrates and Cratylus. The interaction which takes place between Hermogenes and Socrates is more a lecture from Socrates to the student because Socrates asks many rhetorical questions, and if they are not rhetorical, then the answers Hermogenes gives are of basic thought with no ideas of his own. The discussion taking place with Socrates and Cratylus is much more of a debate format with one stating something and the other following up on that or presenting a new twist. And in fact, at the conclusion it is Cratylus Socrates instructs to come tell him the truth.

Socrates begins his argument by naming the "giver of names" the legislator, "who of all skilled artisans in the world is the rarest" (389a). This immediately demonstrates another structure common to the Platonic dialogues which is the establishment of Socrates as a hero almost to the point of divinity. The first thing Socrates does is give a name to something while declaring in the same breath that this is one of the rarest skills. A few moments later we find him comparing himself to daemons, a group of abundantly good and wise men who were placed just below the gods. Soon after this he quotes Hector, one of the Homeric epic heroes (414,e), again placing himself among the elite. Finally Plato has Cratylus distinguish Socrates somewhat sarcastically but nevertheless, by referring to him as one of the Muses, essentially calling him a divinity. By the consistent repetition and emphasis of this point, we can observe as Plato attempts to establish Socrates as the new and improved epic hero and thereby reflecting the predominance of his writing.

It can be seen that while the two structures are different, they are inseparably intertwined. After having the similar foremost two subjects, we can see how the remaining built

upon each other, involving both structures simultaneously. For instance, if we observe the discussion of names in the initial format, Socrates derives these by breaking the name down and finding its original meaning from its definition and characteristics, a stage of the second format. He then uses this process in breaking down virtues, which swings us back to the first. After discussing virtues, he ventures into the nature of things and while undertaking this, he advances the dissecting a step further and again we find ourselves in the latter format. Therefore it can be observed that while both are independent structures, one cannot survive without the other. If we then notice that both revolve around the subject of the soul, we can see what I think is one of Plato's major points here, that the development of language is essential to the growth and maintenance of the soul.

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