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Socrates' Embassy to Cratylus

Jason Lohr
Portland State University

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My first term with the Honors program at PSU was a constant battle between exhilaration and vertigo. Socrates made the search for meaning and truth seem so pleasurable. This was not my experience. I became a philosophy junkie and the Honors faculty provided my fix. Friends became increasingly alarmed at my bizarre behavior and language. And throughout the year I became increasingly dependent on a mysterious discipline called humanities. Anxious for every class to begin, I reeled back and forth between excitement and confusion. This chaotic interlude in my life seems now quite like a dream.

For a short period of time this last summer I kicked the habit. After a period of withdrawal I began to feel much healthier. Occasionally I would see a book that tempted me but fortunately, for a time, I proved stronger than the addiction. Not until I received a letter from Dr. Wheeler did I even consider indulging, again, in my former discipline. Dr. Wheeler inquired about the possibility of using my paper on the Cratylus for the Anthós. It was not until I reread my paper that I became fully aware of how sick I had been the previous year. Though I was repulsed by what I read, there remained inside me a burning desire to read and write and explore in the same way I had the year before. Addictions such as these are hard to kick. I am sorry to say I have not been successful in my rehabilitation.

So I must apologize for the following explication. I was in the deepest sickness when it was composed. Perhaps one day I will be able to look at my explication with a sober eye. If this is possible, I will rejoice in the stability and permanence of a motionless world, a world devoid of dizzy philosophers such as myself.
Reading the *Cratylus* is not unlike walking through a hall of mirrors; reflections of centuries of intellectual thought dance about in a seemingly chaotic manner. One finds it necessary to smash the more troubling images in order to find a comprehensible structure beneath. As the fragments fall, one searches for that particular combination of images that brings meaning. This writer’s vision is of an epic battle, a battle over the origin of language and more importantly its product: Philosophy. Socrates will try to demonstrate the difference between his philosophy, true philosophy, and its antithesis, what Socrates might think of as secular philosophy, or philosophy which denies the stability of truth. Socrates snubs the Sophists but seems pre-eminently concerned with the philosophy of Heraclitus: philosophy which to Socrates represents a world out of control. Indeed Socrates goes to great lengths to enlighten young Cratylus.

To find meaning in the *Cratylus*, one is particularly dependent on Plato’s imagery. Plato denies the reader any explicit frame of reference in the *Cratylus*. The reader is presented with a *fait en progrès*. Socrates is, in a sense, invoked like a muse to participate in the question of the origin of language. Indeed there are numerous references to a divine nature in Socrates. These allusions stretch from mere oracle reading (384) to a confession by Socrates of his possession by Euthyphro (396d) to the accusation by Cratylus that Socrates is himself an Oracle (428c). Plato also points out when Socrates is “at the top of [his] bent” (415), which nicely cues the reader to the consequential ascending and descending action of the dialogue. At this point even Hermogenes, who otherwise has remained pas-
sive, recognizes the "shabby etymology" (414c) and trickery of Socrates' intellectual *aristeia*.

As muse, Socrates weaves a story of the origin of language. His is a story laden with allusions to Homer and the *Iliad*. Plato braces the reader, by allusion to Homer, for the intellectual onslaught that is to come. And by means of the allusions to the *Iliad*, the reader may draw a parallel between Socrates and Achilles. Hermogenes will blindly follow Socrates to the river "men call Scamander" (391c) where Socrates, as Achilles, pushes to the very limit man's ability to reason. During this story Socrates' muse will "tell many lies that pass for the truth" (Hesiod, *Theogony*) but the reader should not be surprised. Socrates explicitly warns Hermogenes of the "tricks" he will play (393d). And to those familiar with Homer, Plato's allusion to Hera's treachery (392) (393b) should signal that Socrates as Achilles should not be trusted.

Socrates' debate with Hermogenes explicitly and implicitly presents an antithesis to what Socrates would consider true philosophy. Socrates, like the mathematician mentioned in the dialogue (436d), makes seemingly self-conscious erroneous assumptions about the origins of language. Often Socrates stops to refrain: "I dare say that I am talking great nonsense" (401e) or "I knew nothing" (391b). Socrates then follows with proofs based on these assumptions which in context seem reasonable, but which he later points out are fundamentally problematic: "I am by no means positive, Cratylus, in the view that [I] have worked out" (428b). As the dialogue continues, Socrates, who at times seems madly out of control, creates schemas of reasoning which ascend in both complexity and absurdity. A good example is Socrates' etymology of the gods. Socrates gives one concise etymology for Demeter (404c) and ascends to Apollo, who by Socrates' account has no less than
four etymological derivations (405, b-e). Though certainly proving that Socrates is an old hand at etymology, it fails to bring the reader any closer to the truth on the nature of language or otherwise.

Implicitly, during the dialogue with Hermogenes, Socrates plays the role of mad Achilles, out to conquer philosophy by any means necessary. Socrates, however, is feigning madness. Numerous allusions to races (410e) (414b) (420d) (423a) suggest to the reader that this discourse is simply an intellectual game. Like Patroclus, Socrates has put on "the lion's skin" (411).

During the course of the dialogue occasionally Socrates emerges from beneath the lion's skin to slight the Sophists (384b) (391c) (398e), and later Heraclitus (402) (411c). Socrates assumably is aware of Cratylus' inclination toward the philosophy of Heraclitus, and tries in a number of ways to show its failings. Socrates' debate with Hermogenes certainly seems to show the failings of the dialectic gone wild. But perhaps the best example of Socrates' belief is in the following mean-spirited thrust at Heraclitus:

"I believe that the primeval givers of names were undoubtedly like too many of our modern day philosophers, who, in their search after the nature of things, are always getting dizzy from constantly going round and round, and then they imagine that the world is going round and round and moving in all directions. And this appearance, which arises out of their own internal condition, they suppose to be the reality of nature; they think that there is nothing stable or permanent, but only flux and motion." (311c)

Plato, through Homer, illustrates the point of Socrates' musings: the embassy to Cratylus. Cratylus enters the dialogue late. Socrates has finished his intellectual aristeia and once
again the imagery shifts. Cratylus now assumes the role of Achilles to tell Socrates—who ironically assumes the role of Ajax, a pair with a similar grim fate—he has “spoken in all things to my mind” (428c). Socrates feigns appreciation knowing that the dialogue was ill conceived: “It is quite terrible, and therefore I ought often to retrace my steps and...to endeavor to look fore and aft” (428c). And Socrates does by formulating a concise argument on the nature of language and, more importantly, truth. Socrates hopes that an appeal to Cratylus’ reasoning, without trickery, will inspire Cratylus to a new philosophical paradigm. Cratylus follows Socrates’ argumentation to the end, where both agree that “we must learn the truth” (439b). But like Achilles, Cratylus cannot be fully swayed. The new philosophy of Heraclitus is too attractive.

Socrates’ embassy to Cratylus has failed. Although Cratylus accepts Socrates’ reasoning he will not accept his oracle. Socrates desperately wants Cratylus to understand that whether the river is called Xanthus or Scamander it is still a river. “[there cannot be knowledge] if everything is in a state of transition and there is nothing abiding. For knowledge too cannot continue to be knowledge unless continuing always to abide and exist” (440b). The river is truth. Philosophy as a tool may bring us closer to the truth but if we believe there is no truth to be found, the search will be fruitless.

Plato, in the Cratylus, promotes truth as the principle men should aspire to. Perhaps Plato, Socrates’ puppeteer, is concerned about the advancing freedom a society gains from philosophical discourse: Heraclitus’ world spinning wildly without the arm of god to steady it. Indeed in The Laws it appears that Plato is concerned about a society which does not have the divine leadership of an earlier era. But like the origin of words, we will never understand for certain Plato’s meaning.
Socrates beckons us to, by example, smash the dialogue in search for meaning. In doing so, one cannot be sure if one has exited through the same door one has entered or not. It is certain, however, that Socrates would have approved of the search for Plato's truth.

Bibliography