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# EXPLICATION: THE CRATYLUS

Joseph Stephen Gray

Plato's *Cratylus* is a dialogue on language involving Cratylus, Hermogenes, and Socrates. It is an argument between *nomos* (law, convention) and *phusis* (nature), two concepts which explain the process by which things are named. Socrates, in this dialogue, seeks to discover whether names originate out of convention and agreement, or whether these names evolved out of some similarity to the object they represent. He supports and rejects both points to some degree. He finds that names can be altered and taken apart to find their literal meaning from other names. He also notices that certain sounds tend to be characteristic of qualities found in the object being named. Socrates defines the naming process as agreed information given to distinguish things, and uses the word legislation, a word used mainly to describe lawmaking, to describe it. In establishing this, he defines the name as a law which must be followed in order to convey intended meaning. This becomes more clear when one compares the original Greek words *onoma* (name), and *nomos* (law), taking care to notice the similarity between the two words and how Socrates plays on this to illustrate his point.

The dialogue opens with a discussion on the correctness and truth in names, briefly involving Cratylus, who drops out after the first few lines, stating that Hermogenes is “no true son of Hermes” as his name implies. Socrates agrees, under the assumption that truth has a definite, fixed reality, and is not simply relative to the individual. He says that a legislator, or name-giver, is to be skilled in the art of making names to teach people, just as a smith must be skilled in making an awl with which to pierce, or a carpenter must be skilled in the manufacture of a shuttle with which to weave. He continues, saying that there are good and bad legislators, under the assumption that Euthedemus is wrong in stating that virtue and vice are equally attributed to all men. Truth and virtue are topics which are recognized as themes from one of his better-known dialogues, the *Republic*. After disproving the philosophy of Protagoras and Euthedemus, Socrates speaks on things which are referred differently by gods than with men, using examples from the *Iliad* (Xanthus/Scamander, from book XX, line 74; Chalcis/Cymindis, from book XIV, line 291; and Astyanax/Scamandrius, from book XXII, line 507) which depict scenes of human-like dissension and argument among the gods, and scenes of one man, Achilles, who has nearly become a god, and declared himself so. Next, he goes on to Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, mentioning daemons, a golden race of divinities who were powers of good on Earth. Socrates declares that men who are rightfully good and wise should be called daemons. In the *Republic*, he compares the golden race with leaders of men, because they must be good and wise. When one correlates the act of naming with legislation, which implies leadership, which implies divinity, it is easy to see Socrates’ intentions in fitting himself, as usual, into this scheme. Then, he explains the body and soul, that the soul is the “source of life” and reigns king over the body. The body, in turn, is a prison which incarcerates the soul until it has paid the penalty of its sins. The body and soul are themes also present in the *Phaedo*. Socrates proceeds to give a thorough explanation of the names of the gods, nature and its elements, and virtues, such as wisdom, judgment, knowledge, understanding, goodness, justice, and courage. He concludes his lengthy explanations, telling Hermogenes that one must practice moderation

in altering names to find new meaning. Finally, Cratylus re-enters the discussion. He and Socrates discuss how certain sounds characterize and describe sets of similar words, this being the more natural process in naming. In concluding, they speak about the correctness of names as compared to their literal meaning.

In the *Cratylus*, Plato writes in a manner similar in form and structure to the epic poem. Like the epic, it is assumed that you know where, when, and the circumstances under which this has taken place, what has happened leading up to this, and what has happened between the time this dialogue occurred and the time that it was actually taken down in writing. We are not given any information, except that which is involved in the main topic of discussion. Secondly, this dialogue is like the epic in that its structure is perfectly symmetrical in form. Just as in the *Iliad*, where each book mirrors the one directly opposite to it, the *Cratylus* begins and ends the same, in a discussion about the correctness of names. Proceeding towards the center, Socrates speaks on virtues. The next topics relate to nature, be they the natural means of performing a task, or nature itself. Then comes different names for one thing, paired with different characteristics for one, single-powered god. At the center, Socrates mentions leadership; a man over a country and a soul over a body. One of Plato's main motives in the relation of this work to the *Iliad*, I believe, is to make Socrates into a new Achilles, and thus establish himself as the new Homer and the greatest writer that ever lived.

The manner in which Socrates deals with myth in this dialogue is not accidental. Language, like myth, is a structure of explanation based on agreed information, and it is suggested in the work that those who create this myth we call language should be looked upon as gods. Even in his references to other works, Socrates subtly points out the human-like qualities of gods, and the godlike qualities of man, particularly, himself.