THE ETYMOLOGIES IN PLATO'S *CRATYLUS*

The seriousness of the etymologies

Socrates is asked to arbitrate a dispute about the 'correctness of names' between Cratylus and Hermogenes. While Hermogenes regards the assignment of names as merely arbitrary, Cratylus holds that they belong to their nominata either naturally or not at all. He has annoyed Hermogenes by informing him that Hermogenes is not his real name. But he is too laconic to offer any explanation, thus leaving it to Socrates himself to work out the etymological principles which his theory implies.

This delicious exchange opens Plato's sole dialogue devoted to that fundamental philosophical issue, the relation of language to reality. If the *Cratylus* remains today among the most enigmatic and frustrating in his entire corpus, the chief blame attaches to its long central part, where Socrates develops a massive series of far-fetched etymologies. Modern studies of the dialogue not unnaturally tend to find these etymologies an embarrassment. They are, it may be felt, awfully bad etymologies, and they go on for an awfully long time. What is their point? If they are a joke, why keep the joke going for over thirty Stephanus pages, more than half the dialogue? There is therefore a tendency on the part of interpreters, especially those in the analytic tradition of Platonic scholarship, to ignore the etymologies as far as they decently can. Of course, we all know that we should not read Platonic dialogues so selectively, but readers of Plato since antiquity have concentrated their attentions unevenly, and there would be little point in dwelling at length on the parts we judge dull, silly or unintelligible if we could not find much that was worth while to say about them. Those few scholars who do pay full attention to the *Cratylus* etymologies are usually forced to treat them as a satire on somebody or something. Space does not permit me to dwell here on the various positive arguments that have been used in developing this line of interpretation. Instead, my aim is to go back a step, and challenge a fundamental but unargued assumption which underlies it.[1]

That assumption is that Plato must think the etymologies as ridiculous as we do. Virtually no modern interpreter since Grote, 130 years ago, has suspected that Plato could possibly have believed them.[2] My starting point is the conviction that Plato does believe them. By this I mean that he thinks the names really were constructed so as to say about their nominata the things which the etymologies claim they say about them. I shall call that the thesis that the etymologies are 'exegetically correct'—that is, that they correctly analyse the hidden *meanings* of the words. This must be kept quite distinct from the thesis that the etymologies are 'philosophically correct', which would be the view that the meanings which they attribute to words convey the *truth* about their nominata. My contention will be that his speaker Socrates regards virtually all

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[1] This assumption still underlies the most recent and in many ways the best study of the kind, T.M.S. Baxter, *The Cratylus. Plato's Critique of Naming* (Leiden 1992), where the etymological section is interpreted as a sustained satire on attitudes, throughout the entire Greek cultural tradition down to Plato's day, to the relation between reality and language. Probably Baxter's most important forerunner in this tradition of interpretation is V. Goldschmidt, *Essai sur le "Cratyle"* (Paris 1940), which detects in the etymological section an 'encyclopédie' of flux-based theories in cosmology, theology and ethics.

[2] G. Grote, *Plato and the Other Companions of Sokrates* (1st ed., London 1865; 3rd ed., 1875) 2, ch. 29. Grote's admirable arguments deserve to be read by everyone interested in the interpretation of this dialogue. Rachel Barney, 'Socrates agonistes: the case of the *Cratylus* etymologies', *OSAP* 16 (1998, forthcoming) also regards the etymologies as exegetically serious; her conclusions, if very different from mine, are complementary rather than antithetical. The serious philosophical content of certain etymologies is recognised by K. Gaiser, *Name und Sache in Platons Kratylos* (Heidelberg 1974); F. Montrasio, 'Le etimologie del nome di Apollo nel "Cratilo"', *Rivista di storia della filosofia* 43 (1988) 227-59; and P. Wohlfahrt, 'L'etimologia del nome Hades nel "Cratilo". Contributo allo studio della religione in Platone', *Rivista di storia della filosofia* 45 (1990) 5-35.

the etymologies as exegetically correct, but only some of them as (at least up to a point) philosophically correct—although a great deal will turn on which ones are, and which ones are not, philosophically correct. And Socrates' faith in the etymologies' exegetical soundness must be assumed to be shared by Plato himself, because, as I shall argue, the dialogue as a whole never calls that soundness into question, thus leaving us no exploitable gap on the matter between speaker and author.

One consideration in particular creates a strong presumption in favour of their seriousness. The etymologies are based on a meticulously argued theory of naming, according to which a name is an expertly crafted tool for objective ontological analysis (385e-390e). This was already recognised by Aristotle as a philosophically serious position,[3] and modern interpreters have agreed. It would be odd if so solid a philosophical substructure had been put in place merely to prop up an over-length joke.

There seems to me to be, in fact, at least one piece of evidence which conclusively establishes that Socrates does not regard the etymologies as exegetically unfounded. Right at the end of the dialogue, at a crucial point where no reader could suspect irony, Socrates includes the following in his remarks to Cratylus (439c 1-4): '...if the people who assigned names did so with the thought that everything is always moving and flowing—*for I do believe that this is the thought that they themselves had...*'.[4] Although Socrates is going on here to argue that the flux thesis cannot be the whole truth, the words which I have italicised put it beyond doubt that he also believes that the flux thesis can, on the evidence of etymology, be attributed to the original name-makers. Hence he must believe that at least a great part of the preceding etymologies are exegetically sound.

This conclusion should not provoke surprise. While the classical Greeks had made little headway in formally analysing the morphology and grammar of their own language, etymology was already very widely practised, especially with regard to divine names. We have the evidence of the *Cratylus* itself that such prominent figures as Prodicus and Euthyphro were known exponents of it, and there is independent evidence for attributing its use to many other contemporaries, such as Philolaus. Its echoes are ubiquitous in tragedy. It is so widespread in ancient writing, especially philosophical writing, as to constitute common ground.[5]

Plato himself is relatively restrained in its use, but outside the confines of the *Cratylus* his recognition of its attractions is nevertheless unmistakable. He is happy to assign etymological ploys not just to Socrates, who is of course capable of playfulness, but also to other, more august main speakers. Timaeus appeals to an etymology of *eudaimonia*—having one's resident *daimōn*, i.e. the intellect, well ordered—in support of his association of happiness with intellectual virtue.[6] And the Athenian Stranger in the *Laws* exploits a proposed etymology of *nomos* as *nou dianomē*, 'dispensation of intelligence'.[7] As for Socrates, in the *Republic* he implies a derivation of *polis* from *polloi*,[8] and in the *Phaedrus* he employs etymology for persuasive purposes in both his speeches. In the first speech, he emphasises the power of love by deriving *erōs* from *rōmē*, 'strength' (238c). In his second, he derives *mantikē*, 'prophecy', from *mania*, 'madness' (244b-c):

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[3] *De int.* 4.17a 1-2, where ὄργανον is a clear reference to *Crat.* 388b-c.

[4] Translating the reading of the new OCT, edited by W.S.M. Nicoll and E.A. Duke, in *Platonis Opera* vol. 1, ed. (Oxford 1995), φαίνονται γὰρ ἔμοιγε αὐτοὶ οὕτω διανοηθῆναι (αὐτοί W: καὶ αὐτοί BTQ: καὶ αὐτῷ Heindorf, Burnet).

[5] Baxter (n.1) ch. 5 is a very useful guide to this background.

[6] *Tim.* 90c; see further, D.N. Sedley, '"Becoming like god" in the *Timaeus* and Aristotle', in T. Calvo and L. Brisson (eds.), *Interpreting the Timaeus-Critias* (Sankt Augustin 1997) 327-39.

[7] See n.17 below.

[8] *Rep.* 369b-c.

It is worth citing the fact that those among the ancients who assigned names did not consider madness disgraceful or blameworthy. Otherwise they would not have attached this very name, *manikē*, to the finest of skills, the one by which the future is judged. They assigned it this name in the belief that it is a fine thing when it comes about by divine apportionment. It is the moderns who have boorishly inserted the 't' and called it *mantikē*.

He goes on to offer a comparable etymology for *oiōnistikē*, 'augury', in order to contrast it, as a rational discipline, with irrational *mantikē*: it is the skill which provides human 'thought' (*oiēsis*) with 'intellect' (*nous*) and 'information' (*historia*): all three words are contracted into the single term *oiōnistikē* (244c-d). Later, at 251c, *himeros*, 'desire', is analysed as a contraction of 'travelling (*epionta*) particles (*merē*) flowing (*reonta*)', to capture its origin in vision.[9]

The inventive complexity of this latter group of etymologies is entirely in the style and spirit of the *Cratylus*. Socrates undoubtedly considers them, like virtually everything in his second speech (264e-266b), unserious from the point of view of philosophical method, but it seems equally clear that he does regard them, like the speech as a whole, as inherently plausible. To appreciate *how* he can think them plausible, we must set aside, for example, the objection that Plato could not possibly have failed to realise that *oiōnistikē* was in fact simply derived from *oiōnos*, 'bird of augury'.[10] Ancient etymological theory welcomes the idea that the same word may combine two or more meanings, and the etymologist prides himself above all on decoding the subtle meaning or meanings that lie below the surface. Socrates' decoding of *oiōnistikē* might be compared to the rediscovery, in some future century, of the full meaning of 'Basic', the name of a twentieth-century computer-programming language, which, in addition to its surface meaning, encodes the acronymic description 'Beginners' All-purpose Symbolic Instruction Code'. Since the name can be assumed to have been devised in the light of privileged information—about computer science in the one case, about the science of augury in the other—rediscovery of its hidden meaning is an important source of *prima facie* enlightenment about the nominatum. This is the theory which we will see fully worked out, and placed under scrutiny, in the *Cratylus*.

I do not know of any ancient writer who considered etymology to be, as a form of linguistic analysis, manifestly mistaken, or who suggested that the *Cratylus* etymologies might themselves be less than entirely serious.[11] In particular Proclus, the greatest of the ancient commentators on Plato, although he has as good an ear as any for Socratic irony, does not hint at any such

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[9] The etymology proposed for *himeros* at *Crat.* 420a is partly different (although the ensuing etymology of *erōs* at 420a-b is very close to the *Phaedrus* analysis of *himeros*). There is no reason why consistency between the two dialogues should be demanded on this point, but in any case it is possible for two or more etymologies of the same word to be exegetically correct at the same time: see further p. 148 and n.32 below.

[10] Thus R. Hackforth, *Plato's Phaedrus* (Cambridge 1952) 59. I resist any suggestion that Socrates, departing for once from his project of rhetorical persuasiveness, is here for reasons of his own resorting to an intentionally ridiculous and therefore *un*persuasive device. *Cf.* especially C.J. Rowe, *Plato's Phaedrus* (Warminster 1986) 170-2, where the second group of etymologies is 'deliberately fanciful' (170) and 'a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*' of the *Cratylus* thesis that names are a guide to the truth (172).

[11] For acceptance of the *Cratylus* etymologies as at least exegetically serious, see e.g. Plut. *De Iside et Osiride* 375C-D; Dionysius Hal. *De comp. verborum* 62.18-63.3 Usener-Radermacher; Proclus *Schol. In Crat.* passim; *cf.* Alcinous, *Did.* 159.44-160.30. Perhaps the most revealing acceptance of etymology is that of Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus grammaticos* (= *Adversus mathematicos* 1) 241-7. Sextus sets out to doubt everything he can about the grammarians' 'art', including their use of etymology to establish that a word is authentically Greek. But the soundness of etymological analysis as such goes unquestioned. Indeed, to Sextus' ear there is no difference between what we would consider sound etymologies and those we would think wildly fanciful: thus he accepts without evident discrimination both that προσκεφάλαιον ('pillow') = something put close to (πρός) the head (κεφαλή), and that λύχνος ('lamp') = something which dissolves (λύει) night (νύχος). The most severe ancient critic of etymology is Galen (*PHP* 2.2), who refers to a (lost) work of his, *On Correctness of Names* (1.104.20-1 De Lacy). However, even *his* objection is to the supposition that *truth* can be found through etymology. He never denies, but on the contrary seems to presuppose (1.116.25-31), that etymology offers access to the *beliefs* of the name-maker, provided that it is properly done (*cf.* 1.104.22).

possibility in his surviving notes on the *Cratylus*. If Plato was joking, the joke flopped. Neither Socrates' pupil Hermogenes[12] within the dialogue nor Plato's pupil Aristotle outside it shows the least awareness that it is all a gigantic leg-pull. This ancient consensus should be enough in itself to shift the burden of proof firmly onto any modern reader who wishes to downplay Plato's seriousness in the matter.

Especially significant is the attitude to etymology displayed by no less sober a thinker than Aristotle. He frequently appeals to the evidence of etymologies, which he seems to regard as *endoxa* lending broad confirmation to his own philosophical claims. (If he, like Plato, had been using them in dialogues, I am quite sure that most interpreters would have taken the opportunity to dismiss these etymologies too as merely playful.) Thus he derives αὐτόματον from αὐτό and μάτην, ἦθος from ἔθος, δίκαιον from δίχα, μακάριον from χαίρειν, and φαντασία from φάος.[13] But far more significantly, at *De caelo* 1.3 (270b 16-25) and *Meteorologica* 1.3 (339b 16-30) he exploits the etymology of 'aether' (αἰθήρ) as that which 'always runs', ἀεὶ θεῖ, an etymology borrowed directly from *Cratylus* 410b. Here is the *De caelo* version:

> It seems that the name [aether] has been passed down from the ancients, right down to the present time, and that they held the same belief as we too are now propounding. For we must suppose that the same opinion s come down to us not once or twice but infinitely many times. Hence, holding that the first body was a distinct one over and above earth, fire, air and water, they called the highest region αἰθήρ, assigning it this name because it runs always (θεῖν ἀεὶ) for an everlasting time. Anaxagoras misapplies this name: he uses the name 'aether' for fire.

Very significantly, Aristotle here implicitly rejects an alternative etymology, the one which philologists now tell us is the correct one: the derivation of αἰθήρ from αἴθειν, 'to burn'. And he rejects it not on linguistic but on philosophical grounds, namely that it is less successful in capturing the essential nature of aether: Anaxagoras was *cosmologically* mistaken in associating the upper region with fire. Aristotle is evidently operating with a specific version of the principle of charity: provided only that the linguistic or exegetical data permit us to do so, we should give the ancients the benefit of the doubt and assume above all that they were *philosophically* astute in their choice of nomenclature.

Aristotle's attitude conveys a crucial aspect of the etymological enterprise as practised in the classical era—it is an exercise, not in linguistic science, but in the recovery of ancient thought. Aristotle himself elsewhere uses etymology for exactly that purpose, as when he derives the name Aphrodite from ἀφρώδης, 'foamy', observing that the choice of name reveals the ancients' recognition that sperm is foamy in nature, and again αἰών ('aeon' or 'lifetime') from αἰεὶ ὄν, 'always being', which he offers as evidence of the divine inspiration lying behind the nomenclature applied by the ancients.[14] It was virtually common ground that ancientness in itself is enough to confer *prima facie* respectability on a belief, with the presumption that it may reasonably be expected to offer some genuine insight. Aristotle is, no doubt, more prone than Plato to this reverence for ancient beliefs, because of his doctrine of periodic cataclysms following which a handful of survivors carry forward remnants of the

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[12] Hermogenes was an intimate enough member of the Socratic circle to be present at Socrates' death, *Phd.* 59b. Note too that he is familiar with the theory of Forms (*Crat.* 389-90).

[13] Respectively *Phys.* 197b 29-30, *EN* 1103a 17-18, 1132a 30-2, 1152b 7, *DA* 429a 2-4.

[14] *GA* 736a 18-21; *DC* 1.9, 279a 18-b 1. In the former he follows the (fairly obvious) derivation from ἀφρός at *Crat.* 406c, but differs from the explanation offered there that the name reflects the goddess's birth from the sea.

previous civilisation's wisdom.[15] But Plato knows its allure too.[16] A good example is *Philebus*
16c, where Socrates speaks of an ancient methodology bequeathed to us by the gods, adding
that 'the ancients, being superior to us and dwelling closer to the gods, have passed this
tradition down to us...' No doubt little more than the germ of the methodology in question could
be credibly attributed, via Pythagoreanism, to the 'ancients'; but equally, given that Socrates is
here unveiling one of the key philosophical ideas of the dialogue, I doubt if any reader has ever
detected much irony in these words. In the *Cratylus* what is essentially the same thought appears
to motivate both Socrates (397c) and Cratylus (438c): both suggest that the original namegivers
may have been somehow superhuman.[17] Plato's Socrates will ultimately deny the authority of
these ancient namegivers. But it is important to bear in mind the presumption of superior status
with which they started out, placing the burden of proof on anyone who, like Plato, wished to
diminish their authority.

One difficulty, perhaps above all others, has made it hard for modern interpreters to take
the *Cratylus* etymologies with a straight face. When it comes to the actual analysis of words,
there may seem to be no rules to the game. Anything goes. As far as the reader can tell, with
enough ingenuity any word could be shown to mean anything you cared to make it mean. I do
not want to deny the force of this criticism, but I do doubt whether it would impress Plato
much. In fact, at 414d-e Socrates mentions the danger only to deny that he is succumbing to
it: 'If one is going to be allowed to add and remove anything one wants in words, it will be
easy, and you could fit... any name to any thing... It is up to you, my wise overseer, to preserve
moderation and plausibility.' The main constraint that he has in mind is stated at 393d: 'If a
letter has been added or subtracted, that too does not matter, so long as the essence of the thing,
revealed in the name, remains dominant.' Such changes as adding or subtracting a letter are
usually a matter of euphony (e.g. 399a, 402e, 414c-d), although in some cases, such as divine
names, they may have been made in order to keep the real meaning suitably arcane.

Plato's Socrates, let it be remembered, shows no hostility to divination, and Plato assumes
the presence of its practitioners in his ideal city.[18] There is no evidence to suggest that
divination, as practised in the ancient world, was significantly more rule-bound or precise than
the *Cratylus* etymologies are. That certainly applies to what we know about the interpretation
of prophetic dreams, including Socrates' own confident pronouncement in the *Crito* that his

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[15] *Metaphysics* 12.1074a 38-b 14. Plato himself has a similar cataclysm theory in his late dialogues—at *Timaeus* 22b-23c, *Critias* 109d-110c, and *Laws* 677a-679e—but the latter two passages explicitly deny that any knowledge is preserved from one civilisation to the next beyond a bare record of some names of great dynasts.

[16] Against the temptation to deny that Plato's Socrates has reverence for anybody's authority, but only for the unmediated truth itself, it is worth citing passages like *Apology* 29b and *Crito* 47a-48a, where, while denouncing the ignorant views of the many, he advocates paying the utmost respect to anyone, human or divine, who in terms of wisdom or expertise is one's own superior. This is not, of course, to deny that ultimately Socrates must make his own independent check on the information received, at least from any human authority, cf. *Phdr.* 274c 1-4, where Socrates clearly says that the ancients themselves *know* the truth, but that it is better for us, if we can, to find it out for ourselves and thereafter to remove our attention from these human authorities. (Thus L. Brisson, *Platon, Phèdre* (Paris 1989), contrary to the more favoured but linguistically strained interpretation that the ancients alone know *whether* it is true or not; at *Tim.* 40d-e, in a case where the ancients' word cannot be checked, Timaeus insists that it must simply be accepted as true.) In fact Socrates even set out to check the word of a divine authority, the Delphic oracle, despite an extreme reluctance to believe that it could be wrong (*Apol.* 21b-c).

[17] *Cf.* also *Laws* 714a, 957c, where the association of νόμος with νοῦ διανομή, the 'dispensation of (or 'by') intelligence', is meant to invoke law's mythical origin in the age of Cronos as a divine benefaction to mankind, and therefore implicitly the original meaning of the word. Similarly, at *Laws* 654a the suggested derivation of the word χορός from χαρά is attributed to the gods who first instituted dance.

[18] *Charm.* 173e-174a, *Ion* 531b, *Lach.* 196d, 199a, cf. *Tht.* 179a; *Rep.* 389d, *Laws* 828b.

dream the previous night foretells his death in three days' time.[19] In at least some such cases the apparently impressionistic nature of the diviner's pronouncements is justified by insisting that they rely on inspiration.[20] And here it is crucial to remember that in the *Cratylus* too Socrates repeatedly quips that in producing this flood of etymologies he must be inspired, perhaps by Euthyphro, to whom he was listening earlier the same day (e.g. 396d, 399a, cf. 407d). Recall too that in the *Phaedrus*, where Socrates laces his speeches with etymologies, he claims to be in a state of inspiration (234d, 235c-d). In both dialogues, importantly, the inspiration is not necessarily of divine origin. It explicitly includes the possibility of being inspired by listening to human practitioners of the same art. At least part of what Socrates means by inspiration, then, is the development, by emulating successful practitioners, of a method which is intuitive rather than rule-bound.

It was only towards the begnning of the nineteenth century, when scholars began to realise what a linguistic science should really look like, that it dawned on them that Plato must have been joking all along. In Plato and Aristotle's own day there was no science remotely resembling modern etymology or comparative philology. The discipline they are practising finds a much closer analogy in literary criticism, at least as practised by the majority of its exponents since antiquity. The success of an interpretation is measured more by the profundity of the meaning it discovers than by the analytic rigour with which it demonstrates it.

A further reason for taking the etymologies seriously can be uncovered by raising an important question of Platonic scholarship which, to the best of my knowledge, has never even been asked, let alone answered. *Why did Plato change his name?*

Plato's given name was Aristocles, the name of his paternal grandfather, and it was his own decision to change it to Plato. This is well attested both in and outside the biographical tradition.[21] Various stories circulated in later antiquity as to what the new name was supposed to mean - something to do with 'breadth' (*platos*), of course, although it was disputed whether this was the breadth of his body, his forehead or his style. In a 1939 article,[22] John Notopoulos correctly pointed out that the name Plato actually needed no special explanation, being quite common in Attica at the time. In fact, the new *Lexicon of Greek Personal Names* now lists no fewer than 27 Platos from Attic inscriptions and other sources in the fifth and fourth centuries BC (Notopoulos had already counted 16).[23] But Notopoulos incorrectly went on to infer that the story of Plato's name-change was itself a fiction arising *from* the later attempts to etymologise the name. This seems to me to get things the wrong way round. Finding explanations for philosophers' names is by no means a normal part of the ancient tradition of philosophical biography.[24] Only a tiny handful of philosophers were reported to have chosen pseudonyms, and for relatively mundane reasons—Theophrastus because his given name Tyrtamos was ungainly,[25] and Clitomachus and Porphyry because their given names were non-Greek. The best way to explain the biographical tradition about Plato's name change is to accept that he really was known to have changed his name from Aristocles to Plato. We can then

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[19] Pl. *Crito* 44a-b. Many scholars, following the lead of Lambinus, have thought that Socrates' interpretation of the dream was itself based, if not on an etymology, at any rate on a linguistic decoding—that of φθ ίνειν from Φθία.

[20] Cf. *Apol.* 22b-c, *Ion* 534c-d, *Meno* 99c.

[21] For a full list of occurrences, see A.S. Riginos, *Platonica* (Leiden 1976) 35-8.

[22] J. Notopoulos, 'The name of Plato', *CP* 34 (1939) 135-45.

[23] P.M. Fraser and E. Matthews, *A Lexicon of Greek Personal Names*, 2, 'Attica', ed. M.J. Osborne and S.G. Byrne (Oxford 1994).

[24] E.g. no one ascribes Aristotle's name—'Αριστοτέλης = 'best goal'?—to his pioneering work in teleology. Nor, when (exceptionally) Pythagoras' name *was* etymologized (Diog. Laert. 8.21), did any name-change story result.

[25] Fr. 5A FHS&G.

regard the somewhat banal competing guesses as to what the name Plato was supposed to mean as having been prompted by the hope of finding some significance in this biographical detail.

I have no suggestion of my own as to what the adopted name Plato was meant to mean, and little idea what might have been wrong with the name Aristocles.[26] But I find irresistible the conjecture that the name-change is to be linked to Plato's early association with Cratylus. The name-change apparently occurred relatively early in Plato's life, because at the age of twenty eight he is referred to as Plato by Socrates in his own *Apology*. In a well-known passage of *Metaphysics* A 6, Aristotle reports that as a young man—and presumably in the phase before he joined Socrates' entourage—Plato became an associate, or pupil, of Cratylus, and learned from him the Heraclitean thesis that the sensible world is in flux—a thesis which he maintained even in later years.[27] Surely this must be when he changed his name, because we know from the opening of the *Cratylus* (383b) that Cratylus *was someone who was liable to tell you that your given name was not your real name*. In view of Cratylus' studied mysteriousness about his own doctrine in the dialogue, it seems unlikely that we will ever rediscover the precise ground on which he might have told our philosopher that he was a Plato, not an Aristocles. But if, as I am suggesting, it was on Cratylus' instigation that Plato changed his name,[28] Plato must at this early date have taken very seriously not just Cratylus' flux doctrine, as we hear from Aristotle that he did, but also his teachings about the 'correctness of names'. Indeed, given Cratylus' commitment to both theses, the flux doctrine and the value of etymology, there is every reason to guess that the numerous flux etymologies in the dialogue directly reflect Cratylus' own work.

If I am right that the etymological theory is one which Plato had once earnestly believed and adopted as his own, something important will follow about his attitude to it. He may of course now disown it. But he cannot very well think, as modern readers are tempted to assume he thinks, that the silliness of the etymologies is so self-evident as not even to need demonstrating.

The frequent expressions of amazement on Socrates' part at his new-found prowess in etymology have themselves helped to confirm the feeling that the etymologies are a send-up. My suggested explanation would be different. Certainly there is a good deal of fun in the etymological section, but this is above all the fun that Socrates gets out of putting on a virtuoso performance in a discipline very far removed from his usual one,[29] and in the process achieving uncharacteristically positive results. His confessed amazement, and likewise his promise to 'exorcise' this alien wisdom the next day (396d-397a), are Plato's acknowledgement that etymology is not the kind of enterprise that his teacher Socrates actually went in for. In reality, it represents a methodology which Plato had learnt from his own earlier teacher or associate, Cratylus. In the dialogue, Cratylus is from the start portrayed as either unable or unwilling to expound his own theory, so that Socrates is compelled to do so for him. We might

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[26] At *Crat.* 397a-b, the mechanical naming of a child after an ancestor is judged liable to be incorrect. This may have been one ground for rejecting 'Aristocles'. Another may have been that any name with the '-cles' termination, signifying a kind of 'fame', must fail to convey the subject's essence. Contrast the 'crat-' element in two names of which Cratylus does approve, Socrates and Cratylus, 'power' being an intrinsic property (I owe this last point to C.D.C. Reeve's draft introduction to his forthcoming translation of the *Cratylus*).

[27] Even if one shares the scepticism some have expressed about the accuracy of this report as concerns Plato's philosophical development, and sees it as an inference based largely on the *Cratylus* itself, there is no way that Aristotle could have inferred Plato's early association with Cratylus from the dialogue, and the overwhelmingly most probable explanation is that it is a simple biographical fact which he learnt directly from Plato.

[28] The only ancient suggestion as to who instigated the change is the one at Diog. Laert. 3.4, derived from Alexander Polyhistor (first century BC), that it was due to his gymnastics trainer Ariston of Argos; but this suggestion is an inference from the already dubious conjecture that the name reflected Plato's breadth of body.

[29] See esp. R. Barney (n.2) for a convincing interpretation of Socrates' etymological performance as an 'agonistic display'. *Cf.* also C. Dalimier, *Platon, Cratyle* (Paris 1998) 16-17.

interpret this as meaning that Plato, in moving his allegiance from Cratylus to Socrates, has in effect decided to bring the etymological baggage with him as a gift. Socrates will exploit the method for what value it has, but will also show exactly why that value is strictly limited and cannot compete with Socratic dialectic as a route to the truth.

The role of Euthyphro is more mysterious. That his self-proclaimed expertise in arcane religious matters (*Euthyphro* 4e-5a) relied on etymology in particular is something we learn only from the *Cratylus* itself, although it is anything but surprising that it should have done so.[30] Given Euthyphro's negative portrayal in Plato's *Euthyphro*, it is easy to jump to the conclusion that associating etymology with him is itself a way of discrediting it. Against this, Plato is quite happy with the idea that people who prove to be morally confused under Socratic cross-examination may nevertheless be genuinely accomplished in their own specialist disciplines—for example, the craftsmen whom Socrates describes himself questioning at *Apology* 22c-e, and the two generals in the *Laches*. Euthyphro's reputation in the discipline of etymology may well have been unimpeachable. As it happens, our own information about him comes mainly from the negative portrayal in the dialogue named after him. We should not forget that the references to him in the *Cratylus* draw not on that portrayal but on contemporary knowledge about him and his work which we cannot hope to recover.

Let me add a general argument in favour of Plato's attitude to etymology. One central conclusion of the *Cratylus* is, I would take it, that names are indeed concealed descriptions, and that the more accurately a name describes its nominatum the better a name it is, although inevitably the description will always be less than perfect (esp. 433a, 435c). This seems to me to be broadly true. Or rather, it is true as regards manufactured names. In our age names are constantly being created, and with very few exceptions they function as names by being descriptive of their nominata. Most carry their meaning on the surface: 'washing-machine', 'passport', 'potato-peeler', 'birdbath', 'chewing-gum', 'hatstand'... Others require some decoding, such as the acronym 'AIDS', the contracted 'modem' (= 'modulator-demodulator'), and foreign-derived words like 'biopsy' and 'spaghetti'. But virtually all, one way or the other, are descriptive. And Plato is right that a language in which 'potato-peeler' means something used for peeling potatoes is, to that extent, a better language than one in which it designates a bookshop, a daydream or a species of tulip. New words were coined in the fifth and fourth centuries BC too—the direct ancestors of our 'atom' and 'ostracism' are just two among numerous examples. When Socrates speaks of the name-maker in the present tense, and calls him 'the rarest of craftsman' (389a),[31] he means exactly what he says. There must (even today) be *somebody* who makes up the new names that come into circulation; but who has ever met him? (We might compare the problem of where jokes come from.) And this person does indeed build into each name a description of the nominatum. Of course, he may sometimes misdescribe the nominatum—our continued use of the word 'atom' is a good example—but his practice is clear evidence that names describe their nominata, well or badly. Now all that Plato need add is the assumption—which he certainly makes, and which was universal until the time of Epicurus—that even the earliest human words were deliberately manufactured. It will then follow directly that *all* the names in the language must be, successfully or unsuccessfully, descriptive of their nominata.

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[30] The Derveni commentator, like Euthyphro, combines being a *mantis* with being a purveyor of etymologies. *Cf.* C.H. Kahn, 'Was Euthyphro the author of the Derveni Papyrus?', in A. Laks and G.W. Most (eds.), *Studies on the Derveni Papyrus* (Oxford 1997) 55-63.

[31] The 'name-maker' (ὀνοματουργός) is quickly identified with a 'rule-maker' (νομοθέτης) at 388e-389a. I suspect that this latter designation picks up the idea found at Hipp. *De arte* 2 that names are mere νομοθετήματα, while εἴδεα are βλαστήματα φύσιος, a contrast close to the views of Socrates' current interlocutor Hermogenes. At all events, the casual and unexplained reference to the original name-maker as ὁ νομοθέτης at *Charm.* 175b 4 suggests that the designation was readily understood.

That the older words cannot have their meaning as transparently read off from them as recent coinages can is hardly surprising in Plato's eyes, for at least four reasons. First, as Socrates constantly emphasises, they must have undergone morphological changes over the centuries. Second, some are primary names, not composed out of simpler names in the way that 'potato-peeler' is, and their descriptive power must come from the individual letters of which they are composed, analogously to the colours making up the individual objects depicted in a painting. Third, some may be portmanteau words, deliberately combining two or more different meanings in a single string of sound.[32] Fourth, some may have been foreign imports.[33] To find out how they acquired their descriptive power would require access to the sound-system of their native language, which may well be beyond any existing expertise. These are all reasons why etymology, the discipline of decoding words, is a fiendishly difficult one to acquire and practise (e.g. 395b), much like divination.

Incidentally, Socrates' recognition that foreign languages use different sound systems for onomatopoeic effect should not be thought to devalue the theory that language is 'natural'. On Socrates' account of primary sounds at 421c-427d, the 'r' sound naturally conveys motion, the 'l' sound sliding, the 'i' sound lightness and fineness, the 'g' sound stickiness, and so on. One might feel like objecting that, if this is their *natural* meaning, these sounds should convey the same meaning in all other languages too, whereas Socrates has in fact insisted earlier on (389e-390a) that the same meaning can be conveyed with different sounds, just as the same tool can be made in different metals. The objection, however, assumes that foreign languages all work with the same sounds as Greek but use them to different effect. The reality is surely—if our own experience is anything to go by—that foreign languages appear to use an altogether *different* set of sounds. To a Greek ear, Persian will not have sounded like gibberish delivered in a Greek accent, but like the application of an entirely different sound system. It perhaps would be unfortunate for Socrates if the very same 'r' sound as was used in Greek to convey motion conveyed rest in Persian. But there is no reason why a quite different 'r' sound should not naturally convey something other than motion, for those capable of pronouncing it. Socrates never claims, and has no need to claim, that only one possible set of primary sounds is naturally meaningful.

The arrangement of topics

There is an unexpected further gain to be made by taking the etymologies seriously. The long etymological survey is anything but casually arranged. In it, Socrates and Hermogenes work systematically, not through the Greek vocabulary in general (no words like 'dog', 'house', 'ship' or 'army'), but through what appears to be a comprehensive spectrum of *philosophically* central concepts. By looking at the overall sequence of topics,[34] divided up into the separate sections which Socrates and Hermogenes clearly demarcate, we can recover some precious nuggets.

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[32] On the acceptability of multiple etymologies, cf. Dalimier (n. 29) 43-4. See 406b 5-6 for the principle applied to Artemis, and the multiple etymology of Apollo at 404e-406a. The same principle will explain why Cronos is allowed two etymologies (396b, 402b). Sometimes one decoding may commend itself as superior to another (399d-400b, 404b), but it is only when the two decodings of a word contradict each other that one must necessarily be rejected, as in the case of *epistēmē*, p. 151 below). Myles Burnyeat (in conversation) has illuminatingly compared the double meanings of many modern acronyms (cf. p. 142 above on 'Basic').

[33] 409d-410a.

[34] In the table which follows, square brackets indicate subordinate or digressive etymologies, round brackets indicate words which are listed but not etymologised (at least here). I have found no comparably full analysis in the modern literature, although R. Brumbaugh, 'Plato's *Cratylus*: the order of the etymologies', *Review of Metaphysics* 11 (1957-8) 502-10 does discern some natural philosophical sequences amounting to a 'double dialectical progression from complex to simple, from thing to thought to name'.

390e-397b: **a *prima facie* case for etymology: Homeric names**
392c-394e: Astyanax, Hector
394e-395e: Orestes, Agamemnon, Atreus, Pelops, Tantalus
395e-396c: Zeus, Cronus, Ouranos
[396c-397b: interlude—Socrates must be inspired by Euthyphro]

397b-410e: **cosmology (τὰ ἀεὶ ὄντα καὶ πεφυκότα, 397b8)**
397c-399c: θεοί, δαίμονες, ἥρωες, ἄνθρωποι
399c-400c: ψυχή, σῶμα
400d-408d: Hestia, Rhea, (Cronus), Tethys, (Zeus), Poseidon, Pluto, Hades, Demeter, Hera,
                    Persephone/Pherrephatta, Apollo, Muses, Leto, Artemis, Dionysus [οἶνος],
                    Aphrodite, Pallas/Athene, Hephaestus, Ares, Hermes, Pan
408d-409c: ἥλιος, σελήνη, μείς, ἄστρα, ἀστραπή
409c-410c: πῦρ, ὕδωρ, ἀήρ, αἰθήρ, γῆ
410c-e: ὧραι, ἐνιαυτός/ἔτος

411a-421c: **knowledge, value, truth**
411a-412b: φρόνησις, γνώμη, νόησις, σωφροσύνη, ἐπιστήμη, σύνεσις, σοφία
412c-414b: ἀγαθόν, δικαιοσύνη, ἀνδρεία [ἄρρεν, ἀνήρ, γυνή, θῆλυ, θηλή, θάλλειν]
414b-415a: τέχνη, μηχανή
415a-419b: κακία, δειλία, ἀρετή, κακόν, αἰσχρόν, καλόν, συμφέρον, κερδαλέον,
                    λυσιτελοῦν, ὠφέλιμον, (ἀσύμφορον, ἀνωφελές, ἀλυσιτελές,) βλαβερόν,
                    ζημιῶδες, δέον
419b-420b: ἡδονή, λύπη, ἀνία, ἀλγηδών, ὀδύνη, ἀχθηδών, χαρά, τέρψις, τερπνόν,
                    εὐφροσύνη, ἐπιθυμία, θυμός, ἵμερος, πόθος, ἔρως
420b-420d: δόξα, οἴησις, βουλή, ἀβουλία
420d-e: ἀνάγκη, ἑκούσιον
421a-c: ὄνομα, ἀλήθεια, ψεῦδος, ὄν

Since this sequence is determined by an apparently casual mixture of Hermogenes' questions and Socrates' own choices, there is a strong impression that in reality it is controlled, not by either speaker in the dialogue, but by the dramatist, Plato himself. What does it teach us? First, although Plato did not operate with the later tripartition of philosophy into logic, physics and ethics, it turns out that he did anticipate it to some extent. After Socrates' opening demonstration of the powers of etymology, based on Homeric names, the first group of etymologies works its way systematically through cosmology or physics. They then, with a fanfare to indicate a major shift of topic (411a-c), turn to ethics. Logic is not given a separate heading, but the closing set of etymologies in this section clearly corresponds to logic: the group *onoma*, *alētheia*, *pseudos* and *on* (421a-c) recognisably represents the subject matter of the *Sophist* at the point where it turns to the analysis of propositional truth and falsity (261c-263d). It appears, then, that for Plato philosophy is bipartite: cosmology on the one hand, ethics and logic on the other. Logic is a subdivision of ethics, presumably because it represents the content of wisdom, an intellectual virtue which is treated along with the moral virtues. In short, Plato has an embryonic tripartition of philosophy into physics, ethics and logic, but it is contained within a more basic bipartition corresponding to the familiar distinction in the *Timaeus* (29b-c) between two kinds of *logos*, the one about the sensible world and yielding *doxa*, the other about intelligibles and yielding *epistēmē*. Reflection on this schema in the *Cratylus* might help us to understand the origins of the eventual tripartition of philosophy within Plato's own school and

beyond. Sextus Empiricus[35] may, it seems, be entirely correct when he informs us that the tripartition of philosophy into physics, ethics and logic (note the order) first became implicit (δυνάμει) in Plato, but first explicit (ῥητότατα) only with Xenocrates, the Peripatetics and the Stoics.

This recognition of the philosophical seriousness of the schema leads on to at least one further remarkable consequence. Looking back to the cosmological section, at 409c-410c we find what we can easily recognise as a list of the elements, not the expected four, but five: fire, water, air, aether and earth. Aether's inclusion as an implicit fifth element is quite a surprise. It is usually held that this is a post-Platonic development, first found in the pseudo-Platonic *Epinomis* and developed in earnest by Aristotle in the *De caelo*. We can now see that the initial idea was known to Plato, and may even have been his own, despite the fact that he never developed it in his published works. His long-time associate Xenocrates in fact reported in his *Life of Plato* that Plato had posited all five elements, including aether.[36] In modern times this has been almost universally dismissed as a faulty inference from the *Timaeus*, motivated by the hope of stealing Aristotle's thunder. It now seems that Xenocrates may have been right after all.

The purpose of the etymologies

So far I have offered a case for attaching a serious philosophical purpose to the etymological section. But what is that purpose? Let me first sketch my answer, then develop it in detail.

The survey of etymologies is intended as a systematic survey of early Greek beliefs on matters of philosophical interest. It turns out that the ancients did rather well in cosmology: again and again it transpires that they have anticipated doctrines which Plato considers both true and important. But when it comes to the other half of philosophy—the part which deals with Plato's own most characteristic concerns, namely value, truth and being—they got things hopelessly wrong. Specifically, and as the Heraclitean Cratylus had no doubt himself come to believe and approvingly taught to Plato, these early Greeks had created a language which gave maximum recognition to the instability of things. That was fine so far as cosmology is concerned[37]—the cosmos really is in some fundamental respects ontologically fluid, Plato believes. But it was a disaster when it came to the real subject matter of knowledge in its strict Platonic sense, especially knowledge of values. And that is why the finale of the dialogue (439b-440d) proceeds by first acknowledging that the etymologies do point this way—that they do, that is, emphasise instability—then arguing that knowledge will be impossible if we do not go beyond these primitive beliefs and add stable Forms of value concepts to our ontology.

This distinction between the relative success of early Greek cosmological speculation and the total inadequacy of early Greek views about value is not specifically focused on the views of Plato's and Socrates' philosophical forerunners, but it is easy to take its lessons as extending to them too, in so far as their work was seen as giving formal precision to beliefs already endemic in the culture. The Presocratics and Sophists—of whom Cratylus is no doubt a representative—had made great headway in cosmology, but had been ruinously relativistic when it came to the understanding of value and being. The need to rectify this misunderstanding of value and being, we may take it, is what heralds the entrance of Socrates and Plato onto the philosophical stage.

The second half of this contrast between success in cosmology on the one hand and failure in matters of the most central philosophical importance on the other is made very explicit at

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[35] *M* 7.16.

[36] Xenocrates frr. 264-6 Isnardi Parente = fr. 53 Heinze: a verbatim quotation from Xenocrates' *Life of Plato* preserved by Simpl. *In Ar. Phys.* 1165.33 ff., *In Ar. De caelo* 12.22 ff., 87.23 ff. For a survey of modern dismissals, see Isnardi Parente (*Senocrate-Ermodoro, frammenti*, Naples 1981) 433-5.

[37] E.g. 402b, 404d.

411b-c, where Socrates first turns to ethics. Here he also incidentally makes it clear that the criticism can be extended to the philosophers too:

> And yet, by the dog, I don't think I was wrong in divining the thought I had just now: that the really ancient people who assigned names were just like the majority of the wise nowadays, who in constantly turning round to investigate how things are, get dizzy, and then think that it is the things which are turning round and moving in every way. Instead of blaming their own internal feeling for causing their belief, they blame the things themselves for being that way in their own nature, holding that none of them is fixed or stable, but that they flow and move and are always filled with every kind of motion and becoming. I say this as a result of thinking about all the names we are now considering.

And he proceeds to run through the entire series of value/knowledge etymologies, which without exception turn out to make change something positive, stability something negative.[38] The first is *phronēsis*, which is analysed as *phoras kai rhou noēsis*, 'the thought of motion and flux'. The remainder continue in the same vein.

One possible objection to my confidence that Socrates considers the etymologies exegetically sound would be based on the passage at 436b-437d. Here Cratylus has just, with some exaggeration, glorified the wonderful consistency that etymology reveals: *all* these words turn out to tell the same story, that things are in flux. Socrates replies that this consistency is illusory: actually, you can find numerous 'knowledge' words which, on the same etymological principles, indicate stability and not motion. A little later he presents this as an irresoluble contradiction (438d): 'Since names are in conflict, with one set claiming that *it* resembles the truth and the other set claiming that *it* does, what further criterion have we got to settle it?'

This has regularly been read as a refutation of the entire etymological procedure: it can just as easily establish 'not-p' as 'p'. But the inference needs more carefully stating. As I have already pointed out, Socrates goes on explicitly at the end of the dialogue to reaffirm his conviction that the flux etymologies are exegetically (although not philosophically) correct. Moreover, it is highly significant that, with one exception, the new set of 'stability' etymologies are of words which have *not* in the earlier account been etymologised as implying flux.[39] That one exception is *epistēmē*, which was originally analysed as implying something about 'following': one should aspirate the initial 'e', to make it *hep-istēmē*, derived from *hepesthai*, 'to follow' (412a 3-4). Now, however (437a 5-8), he explicitly rejects that earlier analysis, and argues that it is 'more correct' to put the aspiration in the middle,[40] yielding *ep-histēmē*, which he links to *histēmi*, 'stand': knowledge is now that which presumably is *epi* (i.e. has as its object, cf. *Rep.* 5.477-8) that which 'stands' or is stable. All the other etymologies in this section are of terms not covered

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[38] There is an obvious parallel at *Tht.* 152e-153d, where the universality and creativeness of flux are argued with frequent appeal to early philosophers and, especially, poets. There is no doubt much irony in the suggestion that these people must have hit on the truth, but I see no reason to think Plato is being ironic in interpreting them as holding such a view. Thus in establishing his predecessors' emphasis on flux Plato finds an encouraging harmony between the findings of etymology and those of textual exegesis and allegoresis.

[39] The new list, at 437a-c, is: ἐπιστήμη, βέβαιον, ἱστορία, πιστόν, μνήμη, ἁμαρτία, συμφορά, ἀμαθία, ἀκολασία.

[40] Despite the apparent lack of parallels, ἐμβάλλειν here gives the impression of meaning, not simply 'insert' (as elsewhere), but 'insert an aspiration'. Thus 412a 3-4, διὸ δὴ ἐμβάλλοντας δεῖ τὸ εἰ <u>ε</u>πιστήμην αὐτὴν καλεῖν, should mean 'So one should aspirate the e and call it "hepisteme".' And 437a 5-8, καὶ ὀρθότερόν ἐστιν ὥσπερ νῦν αὐτοῦ τὴν ἀρχὴν λέγειν μᾶλλον ἢ ἐμβάλλοντας τὸ εἰ <u>ε</u>πιστήμην, ἀλλὰ τὴν ἐμβολὴν ποιήσασθαι, ἀντὶ τῆς ἐν τῶι εἰ, ἐν τῶι ἰῶτα, should mean 'And it is more correct to say the beginning of it as we now do, rather than to aspirate the e and say '<u>h</u>episteme', and to make the aspiration in the i instead of the e [i.e. to say 'ep-histeme'].' If however this is thought unacceptable, see the revised OCT (n.4) for H. Schmidt's simple emendation (represented there by an *ad hoc* typographical device), which yields much the same sense. (I am grateful to Malcolm Schofield, Reviel Netz and David Robinson for help in understanding these two passages.)

by the earlier one. So the new set of 'stability' etymologies is not presented as challenging the *exegetical* correctness of the earlier picture, but as improving and supplementing it. It reveals that the early namegivers did after all, on closer examination, manage at least to glimpse the truth that knowledge should have something to do with stability. But that acknowledgement is not enough to overturn their overwhelming concentration on instability.

The most important outcome is this: the contradiction which Socrates claims to have revealed is not an exegetical but a *philosophical* one: the ancients were not as single-mindedly and consistently convinced of the instability of cognition as at first appeared.[41] At no point does he suggest that the exegetical principles of etymology are compromised by the contradiction. The ancients really did mean what the etymological decoding of names says they meant: but they were not as wholeheartedly Heraclitean in their views as Cratylus hoped.

Some significant etymologies

We can now turn to the first series of etymologies, the ones developed before the ethical section where the rot first sets in. Whereas Socrates unambiguously states his belief that the ethical etymologies reveal a mistake—people's projection of their own dizziness onto the world—he makes no such comment about the theological and cosmological ones. In fact the very first group of etymologies, those of Homeric proper names, are in the main eminently sensible and clearly chosen to lend maximum credibility to the etymological enterprise.

It would be tedious to dwell on every one of the cosmological etymologies. Most of them are unremarkable, and their impact is meant to be cumulative, showing how etymology really does work right across the board. What matters most is that their decoding should yield consistently *credible* results. But from time to time they do better than that, and come up with insights which any seasoned reader of Plato must be meant to recognise as anticipations of important Platonic truths. Here are a few prominent examples.

At 395e-396c we find in sequence etymologies of the names Zeus, Cronos and Ouranos—son, father and grandfather. Zeus, thanks to his variant accusative forms Ζῆνα and Δία, which point to 'life' and 'because of' respectively, signifies the 'cause of life always to all things'. Next, Zeus is himself the son of Cronos, Κρόνου ὑόν, and in this genitive form Κρόνου suggests Κοροῦ νοῦ,[42] with the explanation that this is not 'son' (κόρος) of intellect, but a use of the rare adjective κορός, 'pure'. Hence Cronos is 'pure intellect'. This leads on to the etymology of his own father, Ouranos. The derived adjective οὐρανία, 'heavenly', which properly describes astronomy, is decoded as ὁρῶσα τὰ ἄνω, 'looking at things above'. And, Socrates remarks, the 'sky-watchers' (*meteōrologoi*) tell us that astronomy is the source of a pure intellect.

It takes a moment's thought to see what all this means. Cronos is 'pure intellect', and he is the son of Ouranos, whose name symbolises astronomy. Thus etymology reveals that *pure intellect comes from astronomy*. This is unmistakably meant as the anticipation of a genuine Platonic insight. It is a key theme of both *Republic* 7 (527d-528a, 528e-530c) and the *Timaeus* (47b-c, 90c-d) that astronomy, properly practised as a branch of mathematics and not reduced as it often is to a merely empirical discipline, is a privileged route to the perfection of a pure intellect. As for Zeus, he now combines being the offspring of 'pure intellect' with being himself the cause of all life. This closely prefigures another central theme of the *Timaeus*. The teleological structure of the world is there the handiwork of a cosmic intellect (*nous*), the creator

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[41] That the earlier impression of consistency, now being overturned, was itself one of philosophical consistency is confirmed by 418e-419a.

[42] This is well argued by David Robinson, 'Κρόνος, Κορόνους and Κρουνός in Plato's *Cratylus*', in L. Ayres (ed.), *The Passionate Intellect* (New Brunswick and London 1995) 57-66. For the association of Cronos with *nous*, see also n.17 above on *Laws* 714a, 957c.

of the astral divinities which in turn create all mortal life forms.

It is worth pausing to note Plato's restraint. Socrates is not portrayed as strongly concerned to emphasise the etymologies' Platonic import, but as simply relying on a flood of inspirations to decode the words as they come up. The important Platonic insight that astronomy is the route to pure *nous* is not presented as distinctively Platonic, but is, with a touch of generosity bordering on irony, attributed to the 'sky-watchers'. Likewise with the role of *nous* as the source of living things: where the *Phaedo* (96-9) had castigated Anaxagoras for not living up to his promise to show how *nous* is the cause of everything, here the ancients are given maximum credit for their cryptic anticipation of this same thesis. Socrates is simply demonstrating the power of etymology to recover ancient thought. Plato leaves it largely to us, the readers, to decipher the doctrinal message.

Next, take the etymology of another divine name, Hestia (401b-c). Her theological primacy is evident in her being the first deity to whom you sacrifice. It will therefore be of great significance if her name signifies that most basic of philosophical concepts, οὐσία, Being itself. Socrates observes that, in one Greek dialect variant, this association is strongly favoured, since the word for οὐσία is ἐσσία, which closely resembles Hestia. In another variant, however, the form is ὡσία, which sounds like 'pushing', from ὠθεῖν. This latter variant, he points out, would be likely to be favoured by the Heracliteans as evidence of universal motion. The message appears to be that Hestia is definitely to be associated with Being and symbolises the primacy of Being, but that at least one dialect form associates Being itself with motion and change. Thus this piece of religious nomenclature embodies a recognition of an important philosophical insight, the primacy of being, although in one degenerate form the word for 'being' itself imports a further association which true Platonists would dispute—the equation of being with motion and change.

Another divine name of great interest is Hades, Ἀίδης (403a-404b). Rejecting the familiar decoding of this name as 'Invisible' which he himself is seen invoking in the *Phaedo* (80d), Socrates associates its root not with ἰδεῖν 'to see' but with εἰδέναι 'to know'. Ἀίδης is the one who 'knows all fine things'.[43] This, Socrates maintains, is because death is a philosopher:

> The fact that he is unwilling to associate with people who have bodies, but begins his association with them when the soul is pure of all the evils and desires related to the body - doesn't this seem to you to be the mark of a philosopher...?[44]

To readers of the *Phaedo*, this etymology, however far-fetched it may seem from a philological point of view, captures a central philosophical tenet—that only in death is the soul restored to full knowledge and virtue.

Take now two common nouns from the cosmological section, ἄνθρωπος and ψυχή (399c-400b). ἄνθρωπος is decoded as ἀναθρῶν ἃ ὄπωπε 'reviewing what he has seen'. Since ἀναθρῶν, 'reviewing', is itself explained as a doublet for ἀναλογιζόμενος, a human being turns out to be one who, unlike other creatures, 'calculates about what he has seen'. There is an extraordinarily strong reminiscence here of *Theaetetus* 186b-c. There, in order to show that mere sense-perception cannot be knowledge, Socrates contrasts the way in which all creatures effortlessly perceive from birth with the difficult and protracted path which human beings must follow in order to achieve ἀναλογίσματα, rational 'calculations', about the things they

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[43] I take it that, as at 404c-d, the alpha prefix is meant to be the one which signifies '(all) together', rather than the privative.

[44] 403e-404a. At 403e 4-5, Hades is 'a τέλεος σοφιστής and a great benefactor of those who are with him'. The context makes it clear that σοφιστής here is used in a primarily positive sense, 'sage', as at *Rep.* 10.596d 1, *Smp.* 203d 8, 208c 1; this is well noted by Dalimier (n.29) 234, and fully argued by Wohlfahrt (n.2).

perceive. Thus the etymology of ἄνθρωπος, however bizarre as a contribution to linguistics, once again captures a profound Platonic truth. Likewise ψυχή. Socrates rejects the familiar etymology of this word, already found in Philolaus,[45] as implying the 'cooling' (ψυχοῦν) exerted on the body by the breathing on which soul depends. In its place, he proposes a linguistically much more strained decoding, which does, however, have the compensating merit of hinting at another Platonic truth. (Note how, as in Aristotle's etymological treatment of *aithēr*, philosophical profundity is assumed to outweigh philological obviousness.) Socrates and Hermogenes agree that this new etymology is τεχνικώτερον, 'more expert'. ψυχή is a contraction of 'that which φύσιν ὀχεῖ καὶ ἔχει'—*carries* our bodily nature along and *keeps* it alive. In particular, we are surely meant to notice that the revised etymology identifies the soul as the *mover* of the body. That points to Plato's highly influential identification of soul with the ultimate source of motion, first developed in his argument for immortality at *Phaedrus* 245.

The same pattern could be further illustrated,[46] but I shall content myself here with just one more cosmological example. At 409a-c the moon, σελήνη, signifies σέλας νέον, 'new light', in recognition of the fact that the moon gets her light from the sun. Socrates presents this as proof that the ancients had anticipated those philosophers like Anaxagoras who claimed credit for this discovery. Not a profoundly philosophical point this time, but further confirmation that the cosmological etymologies are being squeezed hard for real insights, and that Socrates is keen to stress the relative success of early mankind in understanding the gods and the physical world.

A huge amount of care and ingenuity goes into the decoding of these cosmological names, and above all the divine ones. By contrast, when Socrates turns to the misguided ethical names, he rattles them off at breakneck speed. This difference may be read as reflecting the relative amounts of care that went into their original encoding. The decipherment of divine names offers the best demonstration of the rich content that can be wrung out of words. The ethical names, on the other hand, were dashed off with little thought by people who discerned no stability in human values, their headlong rush itself perhaps reflecting their own heedless Heracliteanism.[47]

Post script

The views I have defended are, I know, going to be and remain controversial. The desire to make Plato a philosophical hero exerts a powerful hold on those of us who devote their time to studying him, and understandably so. But Plato is *not* one of us. We should not, without compelling evidence, help ourselves to the assumption that he rose effortlessly above presuppositions endemic to his own culture. Besides, as I have tried to argue, if you allow yourself to borrow one or two of Plato's own assumptions, the etymological theory favoured by his own culture is not nearly as naive as we tend to think it is.

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