Book Reviews


This commentary on the *Cratylus* is remarkable, not just for the length at which it treats a relatively short dialogue, but for its thoroughness and attention to scholarly and philosophical detail. In the preface, Ademollo gives an illuminating account of his method. He ‘tended’ to see himself as ‘reading the dialogue in an open-ended-seminar free from any sort of schedule, whose sole concern was to discuss anything that might be interesting about a given portion of the text before moving on to the next one.’ One might fear that a book written in this way would turn out to be meandering, ill constructed and prone to irrelevance, but that is certainly not so in this case. The commentary is consistently interesting, perceptive and to the point.

Ademollo divides the text into short passages, generally of around half a dozen lines. He provides a translation of each passage and then comments on it in detail before moving on to the next one. Where necessary he discusses philological matters but the commentary is primarily philosophical. One of his main concerns is to provide logical analyses of the arguments employed by Socrates and his interlocutors. In doing so he pays close attention to the precise wording of each passage. He explores its relations to other Platonic texts and to those of other ancient philosophers. He also engages closely with ancient commentators, notably Proclus, and with recent scholarship. Although I sometimes disagreed with Ademollo’s judgement, I always found his discussions valuable for the light they cast, not only on the *Cratylus*, but on Plato’s philosophy as a whole.

While the book is not overtly designed to argue for any particular interpretation of the dialogue, Ademollo does have distinctive views about the key questions which have troubled commentators. As most readers of this journal will know, the dialogue begins when Socrates is called to adjudicate between Hermogenes, who holds that the correctness of names is a matter of convention, and Cratylus, who holds that it depends on nature. Hermogenes interprets his view to imply that any name we choose to give an object is *ipso facto* correct. Cratylus, on the other hand, thinks that many so-called names do not fit the nature of the objects to which we apply them and so are incorrect in the sense that they do not
genuinely name those objects. In the opening sections of the dialogue Socrates argues, against Hermogenes, that the nature of things determines the correct way of naming them. There is then a very long etymological section in which Socrates examines a variety of Greek words and argues that they do, in fact resemble, the nature of objects for which they stand. This seems to amount to an endorsement of Cratylus’ view, but Socrates then goes on to point to serious difficulties in the resemblance view and to argue that convention must also have authority in determining the correctness of names.

Commentators have had difficulty in knowing what to make of this. Some have seen Plato as holding that, in an ideal language, ‘names’ would resemble their objects, while recognising that existing languages fall far short of the ideal. Others have seen the dialogue as genuinely aporetic in the sense that it displays the arguments on either side without reaching a definitive conclusion. Another line of interpretation emphasises Socrates’ suggestion that both convention and resemblance play some role. It argues, in effect, that correctness is a matter of degree. Most words in existing languages may satisfy the minimum conditions of correctness but few, if any, resemble their objects to the extent that they may be seen as fully ‘correct’.

Ademollo’s distinctive solution is based on his belief that Socrates throughout the dialogue adheres to what he calls ‘the redundancy principle’. This is the principle that ‘N is the correct name of X’ means no more than ‘N is the name of X’. Ademollo takes this to imply that there can be no incorrect names and that the correctness of names cannot be a matter of degree. He therefore takes the claim that both convention and nature play a part to mean that some names are correct by convention and others by nature. But Ademollo thinks the criticisms Socrates has just made of the resemblance theory are strong enough to show that no name can be correct purely by resemblance. Socrates’ position is thus untenable. In the dialogue he either fails to recognise this or does not fully disclose his views. However, Plato, the author, is fully aware of this point. In Ademollo’s view, there are a number of points in the dialogue where an observant reader might be expected to see the weakness of the resemblance theory. Moreover Plato makes his own position clear in the closing pages where it emerges that many names presuppose the view that everything is in a constant state of flux. Since that view is erroneous, names based on it cannot genuinely resemble the items to which they refer. Ademollo sees this as tantamount to saying that the correctness of names must depend on convention.

I find it difficult to believe that Plato would put into Socrates’ mouth a position which he knows to be confused without giving any direct indication that it is mistaken or of where the mistake lies. If we could not avoid attributing this position to Socrates it might be preferable to treat the dialogue as a statement of
genuine perplexity on Plato's part. But we may not need to understand Socrates' position in this way. One possibility would be to query whether Ademollo has correctly interpreted the passages which he sees as embodying the redundancy principle. They can, I believe, be read in ways which are consistent with the idea that that there can be degrees of correctness. If, for example, names were like tools, one could distinguish between those which were effective to some extent but were somewhat unreliable and those which could be relied on to fulfil their function well. It might then be possible to argue that all names must have some resemblance to their objects but only those where the resemblance is strong can perform their true function really effectively. But, even if Ademollo is wrong on this point, that does nothing to detract from the value of his work. Its strength lies in the detail of its discussions rather than in any overall conclusions that are drawn from them.

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