CHAPTER ONE

THE HETEROOUSIANS ON NAMES AND NAMING

The Heterousians are frequently presented as formulating a general theory of language. This is inaccurate not least of all because they concerned themselves only with articulating a theory of names, not also of the other parts of speech which comprise language. By 'name' (ὄνομα) the ancients understood proper names, common nouns, and adjectives. A theory of names explains the relationship between names and the objects to which they refer. Two basic theories were debated in antiquity. In a "naturalist" view of names, there is a natural connection or correspondence between names and their objects such that names can disclose the natures of the their bearers. To use a modern example of the naturalist position, when the neologism 'telephone' was coined in the 19th century from Greek words to label the recent invention that allowed communication over vast distances, the word was intended to give a sense of what the device did, that it produced "sound from far away" (tēle phōnē). Thus 'telephone' tells us something about the object that bears that name. The naturalist view is contrasted with the "conventionalist" theory, in which names are used merely as references to objects and thus have no natural connection with them, making them useless for inquiry into the natures of their bearers. On the conventionalist view, names are tags for objects but do not provide

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any information about the object to which they are applied. For exam-
ple, everyone would agree that the English word ‘cow’ seems to be an
utterly arbitrary designation for the farm animal that bears that name.
The word gives us no insight into the nature of that farm animal, but
because all agree that ‘cow’ is the word for that animal, it allows us to
refer to the animal successfully. Because the Heteroousians believed
that certain divine names like ‘unbegotten’ revealed the divine sub-
stance—that is, that the names applied to God granted knowledge of
the divine essence, the highest form of knowledge conceivable in the
ancient world—it is widely assumed that the Heteroousians endorsed
a version of the naturalist theory of names.

The view that the Heteroousians had both a general and a naturalist
theory of names is based on the evidence of the Aetian fragments pre-
served in the Homoiousian defense from 359,2 Aetius’s Syntagmation
(ca. 359), and Eunomius’s Apologia (ca. 360–361) as well as his later
Apologia apologiae (378–381). I suggest, however, that interpreting
the theory of names elaborated in the earlier Heteroousian documents
through the lens of the much later Apologia apologiae, or at least in
concert with it, results in a distorted understanding of the theory in
its initial formulation. Reading a document like the Apologia in light
of the Apologia apologiae fails to highlight adequately both the central
concerns of the early Heteroousian theory of names and its limited
scope, as well as how Eunomius’s theory in the Apologia is marred
by inconsistencies. Such an ahistorical reading obscures the fact that
in these early texts there is scant evidence for a theory that accounted
for how all names operated when applied to objects; rather, the exclu-
sive concern of the Heteroousians in this era was to make sense of
certain divine names. Hence initially the Heteroousians did not have
a general theory of names, but only a theory of divine names. Further-
more, such an interpretation is insensitive to the fact that Eunomius
only expressed a general theory of names in the Apologia apolo-
giae in response to Basil’s attacks on his theory as presented in the
Apologia and thus represents a polemical recontextualization of the

2 Preserved in Epiphanius, Pan. 73.21.2–6. While Thomas Kopecek maintained that
these fragments were “presumably from Aetius” (A History of Neo-Arianism, 184),
and R. P. C. Hanson claimed that “there can be little doubt that these are the words
of Aetius himself” (The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God, 605), their Aetian
provenance has most systematically been argued by Xavier Morales, “Identification de
l’auteur des citations néo-ariennes dans le Traité de Basile d’Ancyre,” ZAC 11 (2008):
492–99.