Ancient debates over the character of names had their origins in the contrast between nature (φύσις) and convention (νόµος) that was promoted by the Sophists in the fifth century BCE. While the Sophists exploited this antithesis principally in the realm of morality within society, it was extended to other areas of life, including language.¹ Others took up the issue. For example, the pre-Socratic Democritus of Abdera, according to Proclus, formulated four arguments for the conventionality of names.² But the locus classicus of this debate is Plato’s Cratylus, where the merits of naturalist and conventionalist theories of names are compared and dissected while trying to account for the correctness of names. While conventionalism always had its advocates (particularly among Aristotelians), the naturalist theory came to be the accepted view in antiquity, advocated in a variety of forms by Platonists, Epicureans, Stoics, and Christians alike.³ While Platonists ascribed to a naturalist theory of names to undergird the correctness of names (to be discussed in more detail below), Epicurean and Stoic naturalist theories are based on different theories of the


origin of names, whether they are the product of imposition (θέσει) or of nature (φύσει). Epicureans, rejecting a strict conventionalist, Aristotelian view of language, held that language arose naturally when spontaneous sounds were uttered by humans upon receiving impressions of sense-objects, similarly to animals. Stoics also believed that names were natural, but that they were imposed upon objects by wise namegivers who had the requisite knowledge to coin names such that they would correspond to their objects, utilizing “primary sounds” (πρωταὶ φωναί) that naturally imitated things, often by way of onomatopoeia. Unlike Epicureans, Stoics also conceived of etymology as a methodology for breaking down names in order to discover true facts (etuma) about the objects to which they referred. As we shall

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4 See Detlev Fehling, “Zwei Untersuchungen zur griechischen Sprachphilosophie,” Rheinisches Museum für Philologie n.s. 108 (1965): 212–229. See my remarks on the difference between a theory of names and a theory of the origin of names in Chapter 1, p. 44.

5 See LS 19B3–4, 19C. The Epicurean theory of the origin of language has three stages that actually combine naturalist and conventionalist viewpoints, though language for them remains fundamentally natural. First, when experiencing particular feelings or presented with various impressions, primitive humans uttered sounds in reaction to each of them by a kind of natural instinct, similarly to animals. These sounds constituted primitive words and were used to denote sense-objects and feelings. Next, new coinages were adopted by convention within particular languages to reduce ambiguity and improve concision. Finally, terms for abstract ideas derived from the previous two stages were introduced by intellectuals (see LS 19A2–5 [=PC III 7c3], 19B1–2 [=PC III 7c4] and 19B6–7). Hence words are fundamentally natural for the Epicureans, though refined by convention. This refinement was aimed at producing a one-to-one correspondence between words and their meaning. Accordingly, there is a single natural meaning for each word. See A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, The Hellenistic Philosophers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 1.100–1; Dirk A. Schenkeveld and Jonathan Barnes, “Language,” in Keimpe Algra et al., The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 179–80; and Alexander Verlinsky, “Epicurus and his predecessors on the origin of language,” in Dorothea Frede and Brad Inwood, eds., Language and Learning: Philosophy of Language in the Hellenistic Age (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 56–100. Verlinsky challenges the three-stage view of Epicurean language development, reducing it to two stages.

6 A fascinating non-onomatopoetic example of the Stoic viewpoint is attributed to Chrysippus, who explained the naturalness of the first-person pronoun, egō, by saying that when uttering the first syllable of the word, it made the lower lip and chin point to the chest, where the Stoics located the center of consciousness. For discussion, see Long, Hellenistic Philosophy, 134; and Dillon, The Middle Platonists, 181.

7 On the Stoic theories of names and the origin of names, see Long, Hellenistic Philosophy, 133–4; Schenkeveld and Barnes, “Language,” 181–2; and James Allen, “The Stoics on the Origin of Language and the Foundations of Etymology,” in Frede and Inwood, Language and Learning, 14–35.