CHAPTER THREE

PORPHYRY’S ARISTOTELIAN SEMANTIC THEORY
AND PROCLUS’ PLATONIC CRITICISM OF IT

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter we have seen that many Middle Platonists such as Antiochus and Alcinous assumed, either implicitly or explicitly, that Plato, Aristotle and even the Stoics, agreed on many issues. This general assumption, it appeared, influenced their ideas about names and language as well as their interpretation of the \textit{Cratylus}. From this, it should not be concluded, however, that all Platonists assumed that all of Aristotle was compatible with Plato. One’s degree of appreciation of Aristotle depended largely on what one believed Plato’s actual doctrine to be.\footnote{As remarks Karamanolis 2006: 21.} Some Platonists, such as Nicostratus and Atticus, even maintained that Plato and Aristotle were incompatible. Plato, after all, postulates the existence of intelligible Forms, whereas Aristotle denies the very existence of these. The discussion about the relation between Plato and Aristotle was continued by the Neoplatonists. In this chapter we shall see that the views on names and language of the various Neoplatonists, the way in which they read the \textit{Cratylus}, and even whether they read it at all, depends on the more general question how they understand the relation between Plato and Aristotle. We shall see that Plotinus, who is critical of Aristotle, adopts a Platonic semantic theory such as we find it in the \textit{Cratylus}, whereas Porphyry, who believes in the harmony between Plato and Aristotle, develops a highly influential semantic theory based on his study of Aristotle’s \textit{Categories}. Porphyry does not seem to have lost much time on reading the \textit{Cratylus} and he may have failed to notice that it sits ill with his Aristotelian semantic theory. Yet, when his former pupil and in many respects most formidable opponent Iamblichus included the \textit{Cratylus} into a list of dialogues that every aspiring Platonist was supposed to have studied, this was bound to come out.
We know unfortunately little of how Iamblichus understood the *Cratylus*, but he appears to have tried to combine Porphyry’s semantic theory with Plato’s, as we shall see.

Iamblichus, by his inclusion of the *Cratylus* in the curriculum, stimulated further systematic study of the *Cratylus* and the Platonic semantic theory it contains then had hitherto been the case, eventually culminating in Proclus’ commentary. That the latter had a keen eye for the problems with Porphyry’s semantic theory from a Platonist point of view appears not just from that particular commentary, the subject of the three subsequent chapters, but also from his other writings. In this chapter, I shall focus on an important passage from the *Commentary on the Parmenides* that seems especially designed to refute Porphyry as well as one from the *Commentary on the Alcibiades* that claims an even greater authority for the Platonic theory than Plato, no one less than the divine Pythagoras himself.

### 2. Plotinus: naming Being

Plotinus nowhere offers a systematic discussion of his views on the relation between language and reality and doing philosophy. Yet when one puts his relevant remarks together, it emerges that he holds a typically Platonic semantic theory, inspired by the *Cratylus*, that fits well with his way of doing philosophy. In this paragraph I shall especially concentrate on what he has to say about naming (intelligible) Being, especially in his treatise about the *Categories*, Aristotle’s discussion of classes of names. Since Porphyry’s *Commentary on the Categories* is our most important source for his ideas about language, the present discussion will thus facilitate comparison between the two positions.

Before turning to Plotinus’ discussion of the *Categories*, however, let us first take a look at his discussion of the etymology of ἐνεὼμ (i.e. intelligible Being) in *Enn. V 5* [32]. Plotinus brings up this etymology in corroboration of his claim that intelligible Being proceeds from the One:

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2 For a systematic discussion of Plotinus’ *obiter dicta* on language, see Heiser 1991, who has little to say about Plotinus’ views on the *Cratylus* or on names and naming, but concentrates on *logos* instead.

3 For the *Categories* as Aristotle’s discussion of classes of names, see De Rijk 2002: 133–134.