CHAPTER SIX

PROCLUS’ COMMENTARY ON THE CRATYLUS (III):
LEARNING FROM DIVINE NAMES

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter we have seen that Proclus assumes that the Cratylus instructs its reader not just about the basic elements of dialectic, i.e. correctly established names, but also about the basic elements of reality by means of etymology. In this chapter, we shall turn to Proclus’ treatment of the etymological section of the Cratylus. As we have seen in chapter four, Proclus distinguishes between two types of names: those of mortal individuals and those of eternal beings. Only names of the latter type are a source of knowledge, since knowledge is about eternal things only. As we have also seen, Proclus considers divine names as the prototypes of these names and he tends to narrow the discussion of this type of names down to these. In the etymological section his interest is almost exclusively in divine names.1 To Proclus these etymologies were clearly a very important aspect of the Cratylus and he spends half his commentary discussing Crat. 396a–407b, after which the commentary breaks off.2 In a way, this is only what one would expect, given the fact that Proclus tends to consider Platonic metaphysics, the study of these eternal entities, as a sort of theology. Therefore, this chapter will focus on Proclus’ ideas about divine names. In keeping with Proclus’ Commentary on the Cratylus, we shall first discuss the nature of divine names. It will turn out that Proclus distinguishes between different types of divine names. Next, we shall move to the etymologies of these divine names and examine what role they play in Proclus’ philosophy.

1 Admittedly, Proclus’ Commentary on the Cratylus has not been preserved intact. Therefore, we cannot exclude the possibility that Proclus discussed the entire etymological section. It is, however, significant that in his other works he refers almost exclusively to the etymologies of divine names.

2 To give a rough impression of the attention paid to this part of the dialogue: whereas it took Proclus some 46 pages in Pasquali’s edition to discuss about the 13 Stephanus pages (i.e. some 3.5 pages pro Stephanus page), he needs another 66 pages to deal with the next 11 Stephanus pages (i.e. 6 pages pro Stephanus page).
2. The nature of divine names (In Crat. LXXI)

At the end of his discussion with Socrates, Hermogenes’ position that the correctness of names depends on convention alone may have been refuted, yet he remains unconvinced of the opposite thesis, i.e. that there exists a natural correctness of names. So he asks Socrates to really convince him of this. Socrates tries to do so by an appeal to the authority of Homer. Doesn’t Homer distinguish between the names by which humans call things and those by which the gods call them? Examples are the names of the river Σκόμανδρος, called Ζάνθος by the gods, the bird κύμινδις the divine name of which is χαλκίς, and the hill Βαρτίεια which is known as Μυρίη to the gods. Surely, we have to assume that the gods call things by their naturally correct names (Crat. 391c–d).3 The modern reader might be tempted not to take this passage very seriously. Socrates’ remark that it is “no trifling matter” (Crat. 392a6 φασάλον τό μάθημα) to know to what extent the divine name χαλκίς for a small bird is better than its human equivalent κύμινδις, seems a clear instance of Socrates’ infamous irony.4 However, in stark contrast to Plato’s criticism on Homer in the Republic, the Athenian Neoplatonists considered Homer to be an inspired sage, and took his poems for divine revelations, which in turn might inspire others.5 It is for this reason that Proclus considers, as we have seen, this passage as the final argument for the natural correctness of names, the one that brings about perfect persuasion.6

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3 For a similar distinction between human and divine language, cf. Plato Phdr. 252b, where the Homeridae are mentioned as the authorities on divine language. Poets may mention these divine names in order to impress their audience with their privileged knowledge, or to explain the existence of two names for one and the same thing. For these and other explanations, see further Janko 1992: 197. For a discussion of Plato’s and Proclus’ views on divine language, see also Pinchard 2003.

4 Crat. 391 e–392 b.

5 Proclus shows himself aware that his attitude towards Homer sits ill with Plato. In Crat. LXX addresses this issue. Why does Plato ban Homer from his ideal state in the Republic, whereas here he welcomes him as an authority on names? Because in the Republic Plato is concerned with the education of the young, here, on the other hand, he is talking to those who are able to receive the inspiration from the poet. Proclus deals with the same aporia at length in his sixth essay on the Republic in which he offers the same solution. In corroboration of his point, he lists this passage from the Cratylus as evidence of Plato’s positive attitude towards Homer (In RP. II 169, 25–170, 26). On this issue, see further pp. 168–169 below.

6 Cf. p. 114.