Making sense of the Cratylus
RUDOLPH H. WEINGARTNER

Few, if any, of Plato's dialogues are correctly described as setting forth Plato's theory of some subject or other in the way in which the Essay Concerning Human Understanding may be said to set forth Locke's theory of knowledge. But neither are the Platonic dialogues merely slices of the philosophic life, showing how a series of more or less related problems are explored until fatigue, ill temper, pressing business, or a puzzlement still more profound than that with which the dialogue began brings it to its inconclusive end. Not many readers have been tempted to regard the Cratylus simply as constituting an exposition of Plato's theory of language or even just of naming, though within it Socrates certainly begins to sketch out an account of names. Too many readers, however, have acted as if the dialogue merely played with some problems about words in a series of ill-connected passages, to be mined for bits and pieces of information about subjects Plato takes up elsewhere. But this ignores the fact that the Cratylus is a unified work, held together by a single over-riding purpose which it eminently succeeds in accomplishing. This purpose, furthermore, is of considerable importance for a theme that is central to Plato's philosophizing throughout his life and it is of general philosophic interest. In this paper I wish to offer an interpretation of the Cratylus which will make manifest its unity and its philosophic aim. Needless to say, I shall be disagreeing – as well as agreeing – with other writers on this dialogue in the course of carrying out this goal; but for the sake of keeping the exposition and supporting arguments of my account reasonably uncluttered, polemics will be confined to an occasional footnote.

1 Cf. A. E. Taylor, for example: "The real purpose of the dialogue, so far as it has any purpose beyond the preservation of a picture of Socrates in one of his more whimsical moods, is to consider not the origin of language, but its use and functions." Plato: The Man and His Work. (New York: Meridian reprint of the sixth edition, 1956), p. 78; first set of italics added.

2 The Cratylus has served as a source of information not only about Plato's view of language, but also about the theory of forms and Plato's position on the Heraclitean flux – to give the most prominent examples.
Let me first state very briefly what I take Plato to be doing in the *Cratylus* and then begin at the beginning of the dialogue. Three theories of names are taken up in the *Cratylus* – that of Hermogenes, that of Cratylus, and one which Socrates himself begins to develop. The two by Socrates’ partners in discussion are refuted by him and the reason for his doing so is crucial: if either Hermogenes or Cratylus were correct, the method of dialectic as a road to the achievement of knowledge would be impossible. The very end of the dialogue makes it completely clear that truth is not to be sought in language itself. But Socrates’ firmness on this point should not trap us into forgetting that Plato believed that the search for knowledge required language as an indispensable means. The positions both of Hermogenes and Cratylus are threats to the very possibility of the utilization of this means. Accordingly, they are just as subversive of the task of the philosopher as is the doctrine which sees the object of knowledge to be language itself. On the other hand, Socrates’ view of naming is especially well suited for the purpose of engaging in dialectical analysis. The *Cratylus*, in short, takes up the problem of naming, not simply for its own sake, but in relation to the Platonic conception of the method of philosophy. Once this philosophic purpose of the *Cratylus* has become clear, there is no difficulty in seeing the dialogue as a unified composition.

1. **Hermogenes**

“I... cannot convince myself that there is any principle of correctness in names other than convention and agreement” *(384 c-d)*; this first statement by Hermogenes of his views is quite correctly labelled a “conventionalist” theory of naming, but it is not the one that Hermogenes comes to hold nor is it the position that is actually attacked by Socrates. Hermogenes goes on: “any name which you give, in my opinion, is the right one, and if you change that and give another, the new name is as good as the old” *(384 d)*. But just who does the name-giving here is not so clear. It could be the community, so that language would indeed be a matter of convention, of coming together, but it

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