The Nomothetes of the Cratylus

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The Cratylus of Plato, like the bow of Heraclitus, displays in its very structure a παλιντροπος ἁφιμονή (backward-turning construction, DK B51). The bow bears witness to its double nature in its very name: βιός, the bow, the bringer of death, is also βίος, life itself (DK B 48). The man who shoots the bow in his one action brings both death and life: death to his victim, an animal sought for food or an enemy himself intent upon inflicting death, and life to himself, in the form of life-sustaining food or the defeat of a mortal enemy. In the same way, in the Cratylus, the position at first upheld by Socrates, that names signify by nature (φύσει), both is and is not true (for though some words signify by nature, others signify only by convention, νόμω). This double, conflicting nature is found not only in the discussion itself, but also in a name which is central to this dialogue about names, the name “Nomothetes” (ὁ νομοθέτης).

In the opening passage of the Cratylus, Hermogenes defines the question at issue, locating it in the context of the great debate over νόμος and φύσις:1

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1 384 d. Thus, for instance, A. E. Taylor, Plato (New York, 1952), 77; L. Méridier, Cratyle (Paris, 1950), 8, 14; and R. Pfeiffer, History of Classical Scholarship (Oxford, 1968), 63. It has been questioned by D. Fehling, RhM N.F. 108 (1965) 218-230, whose argument seems to have been accepted by Guthrie, A History of Greek Philosophy (Cambridge, 1969) III, 206, n. 2. However, Fehling has confused the issue by expressing the antithesis in the terms φύσις and θέσις. While θέσις is a near synonym of νόμος they are not interchangeable in this context, for θέσις is a later term, see Heinimann, Nomos und Physis (Basel, 1945) 163, and it is true, as Guthrie points out, that a φύσις/θέσις antithesis is not appropriate at this date.

However, the antithesis in the Cratylus is not between φύσις and θέσις but between φύσις and νόμος (384 d; Heinimann, op. cit. 162, n. 39: “Hier [Epicurus op. 1, 75] ist zum erstenmal von der Entstehung der ὄνομα durch θέσις als Gegensatz zu derjenigen φύσις die Rede. Denn wo Platon in ‘Krhatylus’ von θέσις τῶν ὄνομάτων spricht (390 d, 397 b, 401 b), ist der Ausdruck in Analogie zu νόμους τιθέναι gewählt.”) The νόμος/φύσις antithesis dates from the time of Socrates (Guthrie, op. cit., 55 ff), while the dramatic date of the dialogue, so far as it can be determined, was around 431 B.C. (date of the Archidamian war, see Taylor, loc. cit.). Thus there is no need to reject it as inappropriate from the point of view of date.
As his statement shows, Hermogenes upholds the position that names signify νόμος: his own name offers evidence for this view, as Socrates is careful to point out (383 b). On the other hand, Cratylus, the follower of Heraclitus, holds the position that names signify φύσις. Socrates, throughout much of the dialogue, devotes his efforts to showing that names are φύσις. However, he eventually admits that some words do function only νόμος. Faced with the conclusion that both sides of the νόμος/φύσις antithesis are in some sense true, Socrates “retreats” to a higher level in his search for knowledge: he suggests that we must look for knowledge to things themselves (αὐτὰ ἐξ ἄυτῶν, 439 b), not to the names of things. This is an allusion to the theory of Ideas, and thus a καλλιτέχνη ἡμοία which has arisen from τὰ διαφέροντα of the dialogue, as in Heraclitus’ fragment B 8.

Early in the course of the discussion, a crucial figure appears: the Nomothetes. Appropriately for this dialogue, his appearance comes about as a result of a play on words. Socrates elicits from Hermogenes agreement that there is an activity, name-giving (τὸ ὄνομάζειν, 388 b), and that the one who ὄνομα θέσθαι is ὁ νομοθέτης, the Namegiver or Nomothetes (388 e-389 a). The etymological pun is reinforced at 427 a-c: ὁ τὰ ὄνοματα πιθέμενος is ὁ νομοθέτης. When Cratylus succeeds Hermogenes as a participant in the dialogue, Socrates immediately leads (or misleads) Cratylus into an explicit agreement that the one who ὄνομα θέσθαι is ὁ νομοθέτης (429 a, and again at 431 e). The Nomothetes makes frequent appearances throughout the discussion.

1 That Cratylus was the historical Cratylus, Plato’s first teacher and a Heraclitean, is the traditional view (Arist. Meta. 987 a 32, 1010 a 7). That Plato meant him to be taken as a follower of Heraclitus seems indicated by 440 d e. However, Kirk has recently argued that Cratylus was not a Heraclitean (or at least not a convinced Heraclitean) AJP 72 (1951) 225-253; in reply, see Mondolfo, Rivista Critica di Stor. d. Filosofia 9 (1954) 221-231 and Allan, AJP 75 (1954) 271-287. Others have identified the views of Cratylus with Antisthenes, for instance, Derbolav, Der Dialog Kratylus (Saarbrücken, 1953) 24-26, and von Fritz, Hermes 62 (1927) 455 ff. For discussion, see Méridier (op. cit., note 1), 40-45.

2 It is fairly well agreed that some form of the Ideas is alluded to here, but there is disagreement as to exactly what stage of development Plato’s thought on this subject has reached at this point. See Walther Freymann, Platons Suchen nach einer Grundlegung aller Philosophie (Leipzig, 1930), 119-145; J. A. Stewart, Plato’s Doctrine of Ideas (Oxford, 1909), 34-39; Paul Shorey, What Plato Said (Chicago, 1933), 13 f.