True and False Names in the "Cratylus"

MARY RICHARDSON

Recent commentators on the Cratylus have typically passed one of the following (equally condemnatory) judgments on the passage 385 B-C, in which Plato asserts that words can be true or false: Plato has given us a patently bad argument, Plato is confused, or Plato does not mean what he says. I think that an examination of the text will vindicate Plato of all of these charges. In this paper I shall attempt to show that the charges are unfounded by arguing that only if one supposes that Plato means by 'logos' in the passage in question something like what contemporary philosophers mean by 'statement' can one advance the arguments used by the aforementioned commentators in support of their verdicts, and, further, that it is most unlikely that the text can support such an interpretation. The major burden of this paper will be to try to give a reasonable analysis of the passage in question without imposing on it the contemporary philosophical use of the word 'statement'.

Let us begin by examining the context in which the passage appears. Cratylus and Hermogenes have been arguing about the correctness of names. Both hold that there is such a thing as the correctness of names, but Cratylus has been defending the thesis that things have correct names by nature, while Hermogenes holds that the correctness of names is a matter of convention. One gets the impression, from Hermogenes' complaint that he has been asking Cratylus to explain his position and can extract from him no explanation or even discussion of the matter, that Cratylus and Hermogenes have been merely exchanging the slogans, 'Correct naming is a matter of convention', and 'Correct naming is a matter of nature', without attempting to spell out the positions or trying to construct arguments for or against

2 I shall translate 'onoma' as 'name', although Plato uses that term to cover what we call nouns, as well as proper names.
them. As the dialogue opens, Socrates is being brought into the discussion. Hermogenes briefly states Cratylus' and his own positions as follows: Cratylus' position is that everything has a correct name, which comes by nature and which is the same for all men; that is not a name which some people agree to call a thing. (383 A) Hermogenes thinks that no name belongs to any particular thing by nature, but only by law and custom of its users, so any name which someone imposes on a thing is the correct one, and that names can be changed at will. (384 C-D) Socrates agrees to help sort out the matter. It is commonly thought that Socrates immediately launches an attack on the convention thesis held by Hermogenes, and the passage we are considering is often called 'the first argument against the conventionalist position'. But what exactly is the conventionalist position which Hermogenes is holding? I think Socrates undertakes to find that out before he launches an attack against it. One of the great accomplishments of the dialogue is that it shows the nest of problems and distinctions which are overlooked by those who depend upon slogans rather than upon serious inquiry. Given Hermogenes' statement of his position, it is not clear which individuals or groups he thinks can determine word usage, and it is possible but not necessary for him to hold that there is no such thing as falsehood, and that things have no determinate nature of their own. Socrates first asks Hermogenes to be more specific about who may determine word usage, to which Hermogenes replies that a particular individual or state may do that. If this claim were true, it would make discussion difficult, if not impossible (and for that reason alone Socrates would be at pains to refute it). But this claim would not make it impossible to distinguish between true and false logoi, if a distinction were recognized between, on the one hand, coining a word and stipulating how that word is to be used (establishing a convention) and, on the other hand, using that word once the convention has been established. If such a distinction were recognized, it could be held that to use a word incorrectly is not to establish a new convention, but it may involve the

---


4 I shall translate 'logoi' as 'sentences' in what follows, but it should be made clear that this term is meant to be as neutral as possible with respect to philosophical associations.