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The Opening Riddle of Plato's *Cratylus*

Abstract: This paper discusses the roles of the opening riddle in Plato's *Cratylus*. The riddle is that Cratylus and Socrates are 'truly' called 'Cratylus' and 'Socrates,' but that 'Hermogenes' is not Hermogenes' name. The riddle functions as an effective rhetorical opening move (*captatio benevolentiae*) and supports important characteristics of the dialogue genre, notably its tendency to 'make things personal'. It marks important junctures (opening, ending, transition to major new part) in the literary construction of the dialogue. It represents an example of Cratylus' Heraclitean literary style and its clash with Socratic dialectic. And, crucially, it invokes genealogy as a culturally relevant anchor for an investigation of the problematic practice of etymology. Genealogy can fulfill this role since it is the most 'natural' of anchoring discourses, a discursive form capable of forging a link between a (new or difficult) point of discussion and something familiar (a 'beginning' in the past, tracked through the succession of generations). Exploiting a 'genealogical principle,' well established in Greek cultural history, to think about etymology is a perfect illustration of the situatedness and cultural specificity and embeddedness of the Socratic dialogue.

1 Introduction

Plato's *Cratylus* famously opens with a riddle (383a ff.). Apparently, there has been an ongoing disagreement between Hermogenes and Cratylus over the natural correctness of names versus their purely conventional nature. Hermogenes reports to Socrates that Cratylus has agreed that his own name is truly Cratylus, and that Socrates is truly called Socrates. But to Hermogenes' dismay, he had then gone on to deny that this holds for everyone — adding specifically, as partial proof for this statement (γε), that 'Hermogenes' is not Hermogenes' name, not even if everyone

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calls him that.¹ It is this riddle, followed by Cratylus' annoyingly knowing silence when asked to explain himself, that makes Hermogenes turn to Socrates and draw him into the conversation.

What is the role of this riddle within the *Cratylus*? I will argue that it has multiple functions on the rhetorical, literary and philosophical levels of the dialogue. I will touch on all of these but will pay special attention to the cultural-historical context of the riddle, in particular the relevance of genealogy. The riddle recurs at several points in the dialogue and creates a link between the central issue of etymology and, precisely, genealogy. As argued elsewhere,² 'etymology' is one of the so-called 'anchoring discourses' available in ancient Greek culture and is in that sense comparable to 'mythology,' 'etiology,' and 'genealogy.' They are 'anchoring discourses' in that all four are discursive forms, suitable to connect whatever is under investigation to something familiar (often in the past), and thus capable of offering a form of cognitive stability. Mythology offers foundational stories underpinning social and cultural identities. Etiology offers a narrative explanation of the status quo. Genealogy appeals to the most natural link between the old and the new available in common human experience: the succession of generations. It allows an explanation of the current situation by creating an unbroken link to a significant point of departure.³ Etymology anchors an understanding of the world as it presents itself in language by explaining *why* things are called what they are.⁴ In a way, etymology is the most abstract of these four discursive practices. It presupposes a linguistic stability and epistemological independence (of language *vis-à-vis* reality) that will in the end prove untenable in the *Cratylus*. In Greek culture in general, etymology is an attractive and ubiquitous argumentative strategy that takes as its point of departure something that is always in the common ground (and hence part of the shared and mutual knowledge of all participants in the communicative situation): language itself. The riddle of Hermogenes' name is a first introduction of one easy way to understand etymology: the principle of genealogy. In a well-regulated

1 Οὐκοῦν καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ἀνθρώποις πᾶσιν, ὅπερ καλοῦμεν ὄνομα ἕκαστον, τοῦτό ἐστιν ἐκάστῳ ὄνομα; ὁ δέ, Οὐκοῦν σοί γε, ἦ δ' ὅς, ὄνομα Ἑρμογένης, οὐδὲ ἂν πάντες καλῶσιν ἄνθρωποι.

2 With an apology for self-reference in this note and the next ones, cf. Sluiter 2015 on etymology as "a tool for thinking," and Sluiter 2021, 248, on the four types of anchoring discourse. On the concept of anchoring, see Sluiter 2017. See further www.anchoringinnovation.nl (last accessed in August 2024).

3 Genealogy is a way of presenting each new generation as an instance of "anchored innovation," cf. Sluiter 2016 (also for the relation between parents and children being a model for that between teachers and students). Cf. Fowler 1998–1999; on the relationship between etymology and genealogy, see Rothstein 1990; Sluiter 2021.

4 Sluiter 2015.

universe, offspring should be connected to and resemble parents, in essence and in name. This is the *phusei* relationship *par excellence*. In its use of genealogy (in this case to anchor an understanding of etymology as revealing the natural connection between words and things), the *Cratylus* inserts itself into a long-standing Greek tradition, as I will show.

Analysis of this cultural embeddedness of the riddle (section 5) will be preceded by an overview of its other functions: it is here used in the service of the rhetoric of beginnings, as an effective opening strategy, and it supports characteristics of the dialogue genre (section 2). As a literary motif, it works as a structuring device (section 3). And it supports the philosophical progression of the dialogue (here touched upon only very briefly) and illustrates differences in philosophical style (section 4). In the final section, I will return to the first half of the riddle: the reason why the names of Socrates and Cratylus himself *are* supposed to be ‘correct’ and not simply conventions.

2 Rhetorical strategy, generic marker

Although the riddle does not constitute the opening words of the dialogue (on which see below, section 4), it does create a very effective rhetorical beginning. It is attention-grabbing, engages the reader, and is the perfect ‘shoe-in’ to the dialogue, which makes it a classical rhetorical *captatio*. As readers we are stimulated by an intriguing problem for which we do not have an immediate solution. We are entertained and ready to be illuminated.

This opening move also fits the *genre* of the dialogue. Instead of taking the form of a philosophical exposition, the opening is dramatic, and we are thrust into the middle of an on-going conversation (notice the use of οὖν in the very first line, spoken by Hermogenes: βούλει οὖν καὶ Σωκράτει τῷδε ἀνακοινώσωμεθα τὸν λόγον; “Then let’s share our conversation with Socrates here as well, shall we?”). The conversation is enacted. In fact, it is enacted philosophy.

This, of course, is true for many of the dialogues. But the riddle plays into another relevant characteristic of the genre: the fact that the topic of discussion, in this case the nature of language, is made intensely personal for Hermogenes. The issue is not just an abstract philosophical conundrum, but affects him personally. His own, individual name is at stake all of a sudden. This ‘making it personal’ is a feature of the Socratic dialogue that can be readily paralleled in other dialogues. A familiar example is the fact that the immortality of the soul is discussed on the very day on which Socrates will die (*Phaedo*) — technically, it should not make any difference to Socrates’ post-mortem fate whether or not the interlocutors can clinch

the matter, and yet, a great sadness overcomes them when it seems that fatal objections to the idea of immortality have been raised. It is as if Socrates' personal immortality is at stake.⁵ Similarly, in the typical 'what is x' dialogues, many interlocutors begin, when asked for a definition of a virtue, from their personal experience. Piety, says Euthyphro, is what I am doing right here: prosecuting someone who has committed a wrong, whether it is your father or mother or anyone else. Similarly, general Laches claims that it is not hard to define courage: if someone is prepared to stay at their assigned post in battle, fight off the enemy, and not flee, that person is courageous.⁶ In the *Cratylus*, the opening riddle makes Hermogenes realize that he has a personal stake in the topic of conversation. The riddle, then, has a clear rhetorical function and also amplifies the effect of the dialogue genre.

3 Literary motif and structuring device

We now turn to literary function. The riddle recurs at different points in the dialogue, either explicitly or implicitly, and thereby serves as a structuring device. In this very long dialogue, the motif marks important junctures, while different solutions are hinted at. Without claiming to be exhaustive, here are some illustrations of this principle.⁷

As soon as Socrates enters the dialogue, on his very first turn to speak, he responds to the riddle by addressing Hermogenes with his full patronymic: ὦ παῖ Ἱππονίκου Ἑρμογένες "Hermogenes, son of Hipponicus" (Pl. *Crat.* 284a). While the name 'Hermo-genes' suggests 'offspring of Hermes,' Socrates specifies, in what is obviously a successful address of Hermogenes, that he is the son of Hipponicus. In that very same speech turn, Socrates also offers as a first, superficial solution to the riddle the idea that Cratylus must have been joking. Hermogenes famously has no money, something clearly unbecoming a son of Hermes. Hermogenes then is no

⁵ Pl. *Phd.* 88c ff.; in the interlude on *misologia*, starting in 89c–d, Socrates himself makes it clear that his personal circumstances should be no reason not to follow the arguments through to the end (cf. 91a–c).

⁶ Pl. *Euthphr.* 5d–e; *La.* 190e.

⁷ See Mackenzie 1986, 125, who regards the riddle as one of three paradoxes ('Hermogenes' is not Hermogenes' name, 383b; falsehood (contradiction) is impossible, 385a–436e; coming to know is impossible, 437a–440e) that structure the dialogue. At 1986, 126 f. she further discusses its structural function.

Hermogenes.⁸ This type of joke has a literary precedent, for instance, in the *Prometheus Vincit*, where Kratos points out that Prometheus is wrongly named since he is clearly in need of a *Prometheus*, a ‘forethinker,’ himself to get out of the fix in which he finds himself.⁹

In the next section of the *Cratylus*, Hermogenes states his own position: names are conventions. When Socrates and Hermogenes investigate this thesis, they come to the conclusion that there are right and wrong ways to do things, including naming. The right way is connected to “naturalness” — which means that Cratylus has a point. However, Hermogenes is not prepared to give up his position so quickly and asks for further demonstration (391a). This is the transition to the next stage of the conversation, and at this juncture the riddle makes another appearance. What would be the best way to investigate then? Well, says Socrates, we could pay a lot of money and ask the sophists. That’s what your brother Callias did! But — and here he again refers to Hermogenes’ well-known poverty — this road is not open to Hermogenes, since he does not have control of his paternal inheritance (τὰ πατρῶα), i.e. he has no access to funds.¹⁰

This interlude forms the introduction to the long etymological section, which is a separate structural unit. But is this really a reference to the *riddle* or just to Hermogenes’ poverty? I think the riddle is being cued again here. Hermogenes is not in control of what belongs to his father whether this refers to his actual inheritance or to the connotation of his name. Whether his father is Hipponicus or Hermes, contrary to what either option might make us expect, he has no money. As a tentative and speculative suggestion, let me point to a potential echo of the first line of Aeschylus’ *Choephoroe*: Ἑρμῆ χθόνιε, πατρῷ ἐποπτεύων κράτη “Hermes of the earth, overseeing the fatherly reign.” This line has come down to us through Aristophanes’ *Frogs* (1127 ff.), and we know from this Aristophanic passage that the interpretation of this line was disputed: is the father in question Zeus, father of Hermes? Or Agamemnon, father of Orestes? This second instance in which Socrates alludes to Hermogenes’ poverty (and hence to an explanation of why his name may

8 Pl. *Crat.* 384c2 ff. (first solution): οἶεται γὰρ ἴσως σε χρημάτων ἐφιέμενον κτήσεως ἀποτυγχάνειν ἐκάστοτε “for maybe he thinks that you long to acquire money, but fail every time.” On the family situation of Hermogenes, see Nails 2002, 68–74.

9 Aesch. *Pr.* 85 ff. (Kratos to Prometheus): Ψευδωνύμως σε δαίμονες Προμηθέα / καλοῦσιν· αὐτὸν γὰρ σε δεῖ προμηθέως / ὅτωι τρόπῳ τῆσδ’ ἐκκυλισθήσῃ τέχνης “the gods are naming you wrongly in calling you Prometheus. For you need a Prometheus, forethinker, yourself, to see how you can extricate yourself from this artful contraption.”

10 Pl. *Crat.* 391b9 ff, esp. ἐπειδὴ δὲ οὐκ ἐγκρατὴς εἶ τῶν πατρῶων, λιπαρεῖν χρὴ τὸν ἀδελφόν “but since you are not in control of your inheritance, you should beg your brother.”

not be appropriate) has a structuring function in that it rounds off the part of the dialogue preceding the etymological section.

The etymological section itself begins with an investigation of Homeric views on naming and introduces a discovery relating to the names of fathers and sons, for which the reader has been primed by the Hermodotus issue. The names of Astyanax and Scamandrius are both used for the son of Hector, but Homer himself (says Socrates) claims that Astyanax is the *better* name. And Socrates quotes something Iliadic to support his claim (392e):¹¹ φησὶν γάρ· οἷός γάρ σφιν ἔρυτο πόλιν καὶ τείχεα μακρά. διὰ ταῦτα δὴ, ὡς ἔοικεν, ὀρθῶς ἔχει καλεῖν τὸν τοῦ σωτῆρος υἱὸν Ἀστυάνακτα τούτου ὃ ἔσωζεν ὁ πατὴρ αὐτοῦ, ὡς φησὶν Ὅμηρος “for he says: ‘for he alone protected their city and the long walls for them.’ So evidently, that is why it appears to be correct to call the son of the savior (an) Astyanax [Lord of the City] of that which his father had been saving, as Homer says.”

Socrates’ discovery is emphatically marked by διὰ ταῦτα δὴ: “so, evidently (δὴ), that is why it is correct,” and the discovery itself comes down to a *genealogical principle*: an explicit connection between etymology and genealogy. The name of the son is explained by the nature of the father. When Hermogenes confirms that he thinks Socrates is right, Socrates unexpectedly questions his understanding (since, he says, he doesn’t even understand what he is saying himself), and he uses Hermogenes’ name again. The address seems prompted by the fact that Hermogenes is the living example of the doubtfulness of the genealogical principle. And Hermogenes is quick to backtrack: in fact, he doesn’t really understand either.¹² This passage will occupy us at greater length in section 5, but let us first finish the overview of the riddle as a literary structuring device.

When in the passage about the etymologies of the names of the gods Socrates is about to discontinue that topic (407d), Hermogenes has one last request, with explicit reference to Cratylus’ riddle: could Socrates elucidate the name of Hermes? It turns out that this yields another way in which Hermogenes is far removed from Hermes: Hermes is “about logos,” whereas Hermogenes has to admit that he is not very good with logos, although Hermes, of course, is.¹³

A mirroring use of Hermogenes’ name occurs in Socrates’ argument with Cratylus. In 429b12, the question is raised whether the use of the name Hermogenes would mean that Hermogenes is not named correctly, or whether in fact no naming

¹¹ See Ademollo 2011, 152 ff., for the creative way in which Socrates handles and combines (and slightly distorts) the *Iliad* references (*Il.* 6.401–403; 22.505–507).

¹² 392e6 f: τί δὴ ποτε; οὐ γάρ πω οὐδ’ αὐτὸς ἔγωγε μανθάνω· ὧ Ἑρμόγενης, σὺ δὲ μανθάνεις; “how is that? for I don’t even understand it yet myself. Hermogenes! – but you understand it?”

¹³ On this passage, see Petterson 2022.

had taken place at all. The latter is the case according to Cratylus. A further point is how this relates to issues of “truth” and “falsehood.” But in 429e, Socrates creates a problem for Cratylus’ strict views on such matters, by imagining that someone would come up to him and address him with a number of apt qualifications, but would then insert the name ‘Hermogenes’: χαῖρε, ὦ ξένε Ἀθηναίε, υἱὲ Σμικριῶνος, Ἑρμογόενες “greetings, Athenian stranger, son of Smicrion, Hermogenes!” Hermogenes may not have been Hermogenes’ name, but it certainly isn’t Cratylus’. And yet, an appellation seems to have just taken place.¹⁴

Finally, there is the end of the dialogue, where Socrates takes leave of Cratylus and tells him that Hermogenes will accompany him (440e5): πορεύου εἰς ἀγρόν. προπέμψει δέ σε καὶ Ἑρμογένης ὁδε “continue on your way into the country. And Hermogenes here will accompany you.” The expression προπέμψει ... σε signals that for once Hermogenes is living up to his name as a descendant of Hermes, in his role of *pompaïos*, the *πομπός par excellence*.¹⁵ It is worth pointing out that this last reference to the opening riddle is apt in another way: Hermes accompanying someone is a recurring feature of the *endings* of literary works. At the end of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* Hermes performs this very task, for the living Priam on his way to Achilles and back, and for the dead suitors on their way to the underworld.¹⁶ At this point, it would look as if Cratylus is right and wrong at the same time: wrong in his riddle, right in the natural connection between name and thing: for his companion Hermogenes takes the role of a true son of Hermes at this point.

To sum up the use of the riddle as a literary motif and structuring device: references to Hermogenes’ name and the riddle of its inappropriateness occur at the very beginning of the dialogue and at several structurally relevant points in the rest of it. There is a *prima facie* solution relating to Hermogenes’ lack of money, which provides a hook for jokes about the expensive sophists at the transition point between the first dialectical passage and the etymological section. There may be a passing allusion to it when Socrates discovers a genealogical principle in name-giving, and Hermogenes himself reverts to it in asking for an explanation of the name of Hermes, at which point he embraces the inappropriateness of his own name. And it helps in getting Cratylus to clarify his point about false or ineffective names. Finally, there is an allusion at the very end of the dialogue, which illustrates the lack of reliability of any argument based solely on names: In spite of his own diffidence,

¹⁴ Cf. Mackenzie 1986, 126.

¹⁵ Rightly noted by Barney 2001, 160, cf. Ademollo 2011, 488.

¹⁶ Hom. *Il.* 24.430 (Priam to Hermes) πέμψον δέ με; 24.437 (Hermes) σοὶ δ’ ἂν ἐγὼ πομπός; 439 πομπόν; Hom. *Od.* 24.1–5: Hermes leading out (ἄγε) the souls of the dead suitors to the underworld, in his role of πομπάιος (without use of the πεμπ/πομπ-lexeme).

Hermogenes turns out to be a worthy descendant of Hermes in at least this one respect, and for Cratylus, too, the argument from Hermogenes' name is turned on its head.

4 Philosophical style

For reasons of space and competence, I will leave to the side the riddle's philosophical role in the discussion of truthfulness and falsehood of utterances and parts of utterances,¹⁷ but I do want to discuss very briefly its connection to the issue of philosophical style, before turning to the cultural-historical context of the genealogical model.

Myles Burnyeat has taught us to pay careful attention to the opening words of Platonic dialogues, since they will often contain a prefiguration of important themes of the dialogue.¹⁸ The *Cratylus* is no exception. It opens with Hermogenes' question to Cratylus (383a): βούλει οὖν καὶ Σωκράτει τῷδε ἀνακοινωσώμεθα τὸν λόγον; "Then let's share our conversation with Socrates here as well, shall we?" And, as Burnyeat points out, following Baxter 1992, this sentence is both an attempt to reestablish a broken down communication and it picks out Socrates effectively by means of a personal name — the personal name works with Socrates; it does not, according to Cratylus, work with Hermogenes.

However, there is more to be said about this sentence. The most pregnant term is no doubt ἀνακοινωσώμεθα "let us share (our logos, our argument)." Hermogenes is a good Socratic at heart, although on his view dialectic would in practice become impossible for lack of a validated shared language, if anything anyone wishes to call something could be its name by convention. However, the principle of jointly investigating is a good Socratic one.¹⁹ Cratylus is not a good communicator. But Hermogenes' report shows that Cratylus did not just produce the riddle spontaneously, to annoy Hermogenes. In fact, it is Hermogenes himself who is attempting to start a philosophical argument and investigation into Cratylus' thesis on natural ὁρθότης by asking Cratylus questions, Socrates-style. At the beginning of the dialogue, he is reporting this earlier part of the conversation to Socrates, 383a ff.:

¹⁷ Cf. Pl. *Crat.* 429b10 ff. (discussed above, section 3), and 430e9 ff.

¹⁸ Burnyeat 1997.

¹⁹ Note how ἀνακοινωσώμεθα is echoed in Socrates' words (384c2) συζητεῖν μέντοι ἐτοιμός εἰμι καὶ σοὶ καὶ Κρατύλῳ κοινῇ "however, I'm willing to investigate *together* with you and Cratylus *jointly*." See Adomenas 2006 on the importance of this terminology of sharing to signal the dialectical style of doing philosophy.

ἐρωτῶ οὖν αὐτὸν ἐγὼ εἰ αὐτῷ Κρατύλος τῇ ἀληθείᾳ ὄνομα· ὁ δὲ ὁμολογεῖ. Τί δὲ Σωκράτει; ἔφην. Σωκράτης, ἢ δ' ὅς. Οὐκοῦν καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ἀνθρώποις πᾶσιν, ὅπερ καλοῦμεν ὄνομα ἑκα-
στον, τοῦτό ἐστιν ἐκάστῳ ὄνομα; ὁ δέ, Οὐκ οὐν σοί γε, ἢ δ' ὅς, ὄνομα Ἑρμογένης, οὐδὲ ἂν πάντες
καλῶσιν ἄνθρωποι. καὶ ἐμοῦ ἐρωτῶντος καὶ προθυμουμένου εἰδέναι ὅτι ποτε λέγει, οὔτε ἀπο-
σαφεῖ οὐδὲν εἰρωνεύεται τε πρὸς με, προσποιούμενός τι αὐτὸς ἐν ἑαυτῷ διανοεῖσθαι ὡς εἰδῶς
περὶ αὐτοῦ, ὃ εἰ βούλοιτο σαφῶς εἰπεῖν, ποιήσειεν ἂν καὶ ἐμὲ ὁμολογεῖν καὶ λέγειν ἅπερ αὐτὸς
λέγει. εἰ οὖν πῃ ἔχεις συμβαλεῖν τὴν Κρατύλου μαντείαν, ἡδέως ἂν ἀκούσαιμι.

So I ask him whether his name is truly Cratylus, and he agrees that it is. “And what is Socrates’ name?”, I said. “Socrates”, said he. “Doesn’t this then apply to everyone else too, that whatever name we call each person, that is each person’s name?” And he said: “Well, no, at least your name is not Hermogenes, not even if everyone calls you that.” And although I keep asking and wanting to know what in the world he means, he refuses to explain anything and he is being ironical with me, pretending (as if really knowing about this) that he is having some private thought, which would, if he chose to speak it out clearly, make me agree entirely with him. So if you could somehow interpret Cratylus’ oracular speech, I would love to hear it.

Hermogenes is initiating a miniature Socratic dialogue here: is your name truly Cratylus? –Sure. And what is Socrates’ name? –Socrates. Well then, doesn’t that go for other people as well? In section 2, we discussed how the Socratic dialogue tends to make the topic of conversation personal. Here we see that it is in fact Hermogenes who begins to make things personal for Cratylus. But just as he attempts to generalize from the two instances ‘Cratylus’ and ‘Socrates,’ Cratylus makes the issue more personal than Hermogenes finds comfortable. Whatever is the case for Socrates and himself, Hermogenes’ name is not Hermogenes.

This is the *only* speech initiative we have from Cratylus. He delivers his *μαντεία*, his oracular riddle, and cannot be made to explain himself. This is a performance of anti-dialectic, and it is no less than a triumph for Socrates when he manages to draw Cratylus into the discussion later on. But Cratylus’ philosophical style is not his own invention: it marks him as the Heraclitean he is across the whole dialogue. Heraclitus was not just known for his flux theory, but also for his oracular and riddling style, a style parodied in the *Theaetetus*. There Theodorus says: it is impossible to have a discussion with Heracliteans. They are worse than madmen. No quiet conversations with questions and answers with them! They just pull out puzzling little phrases, like arrows from a quiver, and shoot them. And they will not explain themselves: riddles, but no examination.²⁰ This is in stark contrast to the Socratic emphasis on the joint nature of the whole philosophical enterprise.

20 Pl. *Tht.* 179e ff. (Theodorus speaking) αὐτοῖς ... οὐδὲν μᾶλλον οἶόν τε διαλεχθῆναι ἢ τοῖς οἰστρωσιν ... τὸ δ’ ἐπιμεῖναι ἐπὶ λόγῳ καὶ ἐρωτήματι καὶ ἡσυχίῳ ἐν μέρει ἀποκρίνασθαι καὶ ἐρέσθαι ἥττον αὐτοῖς ἐνὶ ἢ τὸ μηδέν ... ἀλλ’ ἂν τινά τι ἔρη, ὥσπερ ἐκ φαρέτρας ῥηματίσκια αἰνιγματώδη ἀνασπῶντες ἀποτοξεύουσι “(with those Heracliteans) it is no more possible to discuss ideas than

The riddle then is also a way to introduce and contrast two styles of doing philosophy right from the beginning of the dialogue.

5 The role of genealogy: anchoring etymology

When Plato produced his *Cratylus*, there had never been a treatise on etymology as powerful and prolonged as this dialogue, with its various attempts at providing theoretical background to what was a ubiquitous cultural practice. Etymologizing and thinking about the reason why things are called what they are called, the relationship between names and the entities they indicate, had been a staple of the poetic and intellectual tradition from its inception.²¹ Ancient etymology, not to be confused with its modern counterpart, is a discursive form that can be used to underpin a certain idea, interpretation, or argument in a show of the logical coherence of the world. As explained and announced in section 1, in that sense it is an “anchoring” discourse: it refers to shared information (language itself). Anchoring means connecting whatever is under investigation or needs explanation to something familiar, capable of offering a form of cognitive stability for the relevant social groups. In particular, whenever something is presented as “new,” or is perceived as such, “anchoring” will make it more acceptable or at least understandable.

The most “natural” of the anchoring discourses is genealogy, since the succession of generations is a common human experience with a strong intuitive appeal (this is a discernible strength of monarchies, for example, in comparison with other polities; it is no coincidence that Roman emperors adopted their prospective successors). Etymology is more abstract and theoretical, since it anchors an understanding of the world in its representation in language. In the first part of the *Cratylus*, then, the more familiar anchoring discourse (genealogy) is used to anchor the one that is problematized (etymology) until the genealogical model has exhausted its use and is discarded for the rest of the dialogue. The riddle of Hermogenes’ name introduces this genealogical principle: the parent-child relationship is the prototypical example of a φύσει relationship.

In section 3 we discussed the discovery of the genealogical principle, right after Socrates’ allusion to the opening riddle in 391b–c. Since Hermogenes lacks the money to study with the sophists, Socrates turns to Homer and the other poets and

with madmen ... as for keeping to an argument or a question and quietly answering and asking in turn, their power of doing that is less than nothing ... But if you ask any of them a question, he pulls out puzzling little phrases, like arrows from a quiver, and shoots them off.”

21 Sluiter 2015 with references.

discusses the explanation of the name Astyanax from 392b: Astyanax has his name because he is the son of a ruler of the city. The genealogical principle of naming, for which we had been primed by ‘Hermo-genes’, who may or may not have been a true son of Hermes, is further explained in 393a–e.²² There is a normative quality to the principle: fathers and offspring *should* have the same name. This normative nature is brought out clearly by the use of δίκαιον in 393b6:

Δίκαιόν γέ τοι ἐστίν, ὡς ἐμοὶ φαίνεται, τὸν λέοντος ἔκγονον λέοντα καλεῖν καὶ τὸν ἵππου ἔκγονον ἵππον. οὐ τι λέγω ἐάν ὥσπερ τέρας γένηται ἐξ ἵππου ἄλλο τι ἢ ἵππος ἀλλ’ οὐ ἂν ἢ τοῦ γένους ἔκγονον τὴν φύσιν, τοῦτο λέγω. ἐάν βοὸς ἔκγονον φύσει ἵππος παρὰ φύσιν τέκη μόσχον, οὐ πῶλον κλητέον, ἀλλὰ μόσχον.

It is surely right at least, as it appears to me, to call the offspring of a lion ‘lion,’ and the offspring of a horse ‘horse.’ I am not speaking of the case where from a horse something other than a horse is born, like a monster, but I’m referring to the natural offspring of the species to which it belongs. If a horse, contrary to nature, should bring forth a calf, the natural offspring of a cow, it should not be called a colt, but a calf.

There is a three-step argument in 393bc, which is recapitulated in 394a: 1. kings are born from kings, unless there is a τέρας (and note that ‘king’ is not a natural kind, unlike horses or cows); 2. they should thus be called ‘king’; 3. the concept ‘king’ may be expressed through different forms of linguistic material. The argument is rounded off in 394d2–3: τοῖς μὲν δὴ κατὰ φύσιν γιγνομένοις τὰ αὐτὰ ἀποδοτέον ὀνόματα “anything born κατὰ φύσιν, in accordance with this natural relationship, should be given the same names.” Unfortunately, Greek mythology, another anchoring discourse, is rife with examples of ‘monsters,’ in whose case this naming principle breaks down irreparably. So, immediately after this conclusion about how naming *should* work, Socrates transitions to τοῖς παρὰ φύσιν, οἳ ἂν ἐν τέρατος εἶδει γένωνται “the ones contrary to nature, who are born in the form of a monster,” each higher generation another abomination: Orestes, Agamemnon, Atreus, Pelops, Tantalos, Zeus. These names are too unstable and are in fact given for all kinds of non-essential reasons. Once this is established, the interlocutors try to find renewed stability in the names of ever-lasting entities (gods, heavenly bodies, etc.).

Let us return to the text quoted above to reflect a bit further on the use of the term δίκαιον and on the strong emphasis on natural and unnatural relationships. Generation παρὰ φύσιν will lead to τέρατα ‘monsters,’ *monstra*, prodigies. In a disastrous family like that of the Atreids, the δίκαιον model is quickly seen to break

²² Ademollo 2011 calls the genealogical principle “the Principle of Synonymous Generation,” comm. *ad loc.*

down: all behaviors are *παρὰ φύσιν* there, and every next generation takes the form of a *τέρατος*.

The combination of naturalness, offspring, and *δίκαιον*, with its strong ethical overtones, is highly suggestive: it makes the genealogical model an even more obvious place for Socrates to start, and a mismatch between name and behavior or essence even more jarring. It is important to note how culturally embedded this nexus is when Socrates applies it to the issue of names. Right from Hesiod we find the principle that in a *just* city, women will bear children *that resemble their fathers* (τίκτουσιν δὲ γυναῖκες ἐοικότα τέκνα γονεῦσιν).²³ In his commentary *ad loc.*, Martin West correctly points out that this means the children are legitimate and the wives have been faithful, both hallmarks of a just and well-organized society. Several oaths claiming to date back to the time of Solon stipulate that if the people taking the oath do not abide by it, the women will *not* bear children resembling their fathers, but *τέρατα* instead. If they do abide by it, to have the women bear children that *do* resemble their fathers is something to be prayed for as a reward:

καὶ εἰ μὲν ἐμπεδορκοῖν τὰ ἐν τῷ ὅρκῳ γεγραμμένα, ἢ πόλις ἡμῇ ἄνοσος εἴη· εἰ δὲ μὴ, νοσοίη.
... καὶ γυναῖκες τίκτοιεν ἐοικότα γονεῦσιν· εἰ δὲ μὴ, τέρατα.

and if I keep to what is written in the oath, may my city be without illness. But if not, may it be ill ... and may the women bear children that resemble their fathers; but if not, monsters.²⁴

In the *Cratylus* passage, then, a very familiar cultural pattern is evoked: ‘what is right’ (*δίκαιον*) goes hand in hand with natural children (*κατὰ φύσιν*, resembling their parents), and this is offset against what is unnatural (*παρὰ φύσιν*): *τέρατα*. Generations should represent a natural continuum with recognizable, stable traits from one generation to the next. Leslie Kurke (1991) has explained a number of ambiguous references in Pindar from this culturally embedded genealogical principle: in a couple of passages, it is not clear whether a certain achievement is to be attributed to the victor or his father. Kurke thinks this serves to emphasize that individual identity is culturally less important than family identity. Another example

²³ Hes. *Op.* 235 “the women bear children that resemble their fathers.” This is part of the passage about the superiority of Dike over Hybris (from 213).

²⁴ Tod, *Greek Hist. Inscr.* II, no 204.39 ff. (oath of the Athenians before Plataea). Cf. Aeschin. *Ctes.* 110f. καὶ ἐπεύχεται αὐτοῖς μήτε γῆν καρποὺς φέρειν, μήτε γυναῖκας τέκνα τίκτειν γονεῦσιν ἐοικότα, ἀλλὰ τέρατα, μήτε βόσκηματα κατὰ φύσιν γονὰς ποιεῖσθαι “and he put a curse on them, that neither would the earth bear fruit, nor would the women bear children resembling their fathers, but monsters, nor would the cattle have offspring according to nature.”

of the self-evident value attached to the resemblance of children to their parents comes from the 3rd-c. BCE female poet Nossis:²⁵

Αὐτομέλιννα τέτυκται ἴδ', ὥς ἀγανὸν τὸ πρόσωπον. / ἃ μὲ ποτοπτάζειν μελιχίως δοκέει / ὡς
ἐτύμως θυγάτηρ τῇ μητέρι πάντα ποτῶκει. / ἥ καλόν, ὅκκα πέλη τέκνα γονεῦσιν ἴσα.

Melinna herself is depicted here. Look how friendly her face. / she seems to look at me gently. / how truly the daughter resembles her mother in everything. / Really, it is beautiful when children are like their parents.

In this text, it is the resemblance with the mother that invites praise, but the praise is couched in the familiar generic form τέκνα γονεῦσιν ἴσα. It is a gnomic statement (“it is a beautiful thing when...”), part of the cultural common ground.

Let us return to 393b6 ff., quoted above p. 385, one final time. It is important to note that φύσις is used in two different ways: the natural offspring of a horse is a colt. If not, this is παρὰ φύσιν. But such offspring still has an individual φύσις, a natural disposition, of its own. For instance, it might be a calf. And in that case it should be called after its *own* φύσις, which obviously invalidates the genealogical principle.²⁶ Names of human beings in particular are unreliable, they often serve commemorative purposes, as when a grandson is called after his grandfather, or they are aspirational, serving to express the high hopes of the parents.²⁷ None of this invalidates the fact, though, that the genealogical principle was the perfect cultural anchor for a discussion of etymology: the situation in which offspring resemble their parents, in essence and name, would have been not only familiar, but also normatively appropriate.²⁸

²⁵ Cf. also Arist. *GA* 721b, e.g. 21 γίνονται γὰρ εὐκότες. I'd like to thank Glyn Muijtens for bringing this passage to my attention.

²⁶ So, e.g., Orestes is named after his own φύσις (394e10 τὸ θηριῶδες τῆς φύσεως), and we even find a phrase such as εὐοικεν δέ γε καὶ τῷ πατρὶ αὐτοῦ κατὰ φύσιν τὸ ὄνομα εἶναι, where κατὰ φύσιν does not indicate genealogical naturalness, but the individual nature of Agamemnon (“according to his nature”), 395a2f.

²⁷ Pl. *Crat.* 397b.

²⁸ When the discussion shifts to abstract entities, it will turn out that δικαιοσύνη / τὸ δίκαιον itself cannot be grasped etymologically without a dialectical investigation: even if one understands why it is called what is called, one still has no idea of its essence (412c6–413d2, Sluiter 1997, 184f.; Ademollo 2011, 215 ff., esp. 218f).

6 Why are Cratylus and Socrates named correctly?

There is one last aspect of the riddle that merits discussion. For the riddle, in fact, has two parts. Even if ‘Hermogenes’ is not Hermogenes’ name, why are Cratylus and Socrates named correctly, according to Cratylus? It has been noted, of course, that both names have the stem κρατ-, indicating strength, power or control.²⁹ It is also interesting that the two names are *related* in this way. Cratylus may have liked that anyway, since he also seems to be affecting some Socratic behavior (note εἰρωνεύεται, 384a1).³⁰ Κράτος, control, apparently is an important aspect of the answer. Remember that one explanation of why Hermogenes was not Hermogenes’ name had to do with the fact that he was not ἐγκρατής τῶν πατρώων, 391c2.³¹ Having control over your name means having control over who you are. The essence expressed in the name should be in full effect.

When Hermogenes finally adopts a function of Hermes (the πομπός, section 3) at the end of the dialogue, he may have been regaining some control of his name. On the other hand, Cratylus may not be Cratylus’ correct name by the end of the dialogue, since he has just lost control of the argument. In fact, the only one whose control is still entirely intact (σῶς), who is still ἐγκρατής, is, of course, Socrates.³²

7 Conclusion

In this essay, we studied the multifarious uses and effects of the opening riddle of Plato’s *Cratylus*. It functions as an effective rhetorical opening move (the *captatio*

²⁹ Sedley 2003, 22.

³⁰ For the issue of discipleship, with Socrates pretending to be Cratylus’ student, and Cratylus never detecting the problem in his own philosophical style and lack of “sharing”, see Adomenas 2006 (and section 4 above).

³¹ Note also the term κράτη in Ἑρμῇ χθόνιε, πατρῷ’ ἐποπτεύων **κράτη** in A. Cho. 1, discussed above section 3 (cf. Aristoph. *Ran.* 1127 ff.). The term ἐγκρατής occurs at two other points in the *Cratylus*. In one of four etymologies of the name of Apollo, his function as the god of archery is adduced. He is *Aei-ballōn*, always hitting the mark, which is explained as διὰ ... τὸ ἀεὶ βολῶν ἐγκρατής εἶναι “because he is always in full control of his shots” (405c5). Even more important is 393d, where it is stated that the offspring of a king is called ‘king’: οὐδ’ εἰ πρόσκειται τι γράμμα ἢ ἀφήρηται, οὐδὲν οὐδὲ τοῦτο, **ἕως ἂν ἐγκρατής ᾖ** ἢ οὐσία τοῦ πράγματος δηλουμένη ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι “nor does it make a difference if a letter is added or taken away, as long as the nature of the thing, which is being made clear in the name, is in full effect.”

³² On the name of Plato himself, not his real name ‘Aristocles,’ but a nickname, see Sedley 2003, 21f., who takes the name-change as historical, vs. Notopoulos 1939, who does not.

benevolentiae) and supports important characteristics of the dialogue genre, notably its tendency to “make things personal.” It worked at important junctures (opening, ending, transition to important new part) as a marker of the literary construction. It represented an example of Cratylus’ literary style and its clash with Socratic dialectic. And it invokes genealogy as a culturally relevant anchor for an investigation of the problematic practice of etymology. Thus it is a perfect illustration of the situatedness and cultural specificity and embeddedness of the Socratic dialogue.

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