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Relativism and Revelation in Plato's *Cratylus*

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Introduction

Although they seem to be strange bedfellows, relativism and revelation sometimes go hand in hand. That is, a consistently and radically relativistic or "perspectival" position cannot affirm that a claim of divine inspiration is false without ceasing to be relativistic, and precisely because of this impotence, those who claim to have experienced revelation or to believe in someone else's inspiration find a strange and powerful ally in relativism or "perspectivism." This strange kinship between relativism and revelation and the rational response to it are, I suggest, incisively sketched in an unsuspected place: Plato's *Cratylus*.[1] This suggestion is bound to raise eyebrows. The overwhelming bulk of the scholarship on Plato's *Cratylus* is devoted, quite understandably, to the obvious subject of the dialogue: the natural correctness of names. Scholars therefore spend considerable time attempting to determine whether Socrates himself believes that names can be naturally correct[2] or not.[3] Relatedly, much scholarly debate concerns the central, "etymological" section of the dialogue. Some argue that the section (and the dialogue generally) is largely jocular,[4] others profoundly serious.[5] Although these debates merit scholarly consideration, inadequate attention, it seems to me, has been given to Hermogenes as a type. He is of the same type as Euthyphro: a believer in divine inspiration. Although some scholarship takes Hermogenes[6] or Euthyphro[7] in the *Cratylus* seriously, this is the first study focusing on their kinship, which lets us discern the

connection between Protagorean "perspectivism" or "relativism" and divine revelation or, more generally, "decisionism"—that is, the nonrational and willful imposition of one nonskeptical comprehensive view. My reading relies on an elevation of Hermogenes's importance and of the challenge of divine revelation in the *Cratylus*.[8] My conviction is partially supported by the dialogue's apparent dramatic date. Whereas most scholars are primarily concerned with the historical date of when the dialogue was written,[9] disputing whether the dialogue belongs to Plato's so-called middle or late periods, I, following Catherine Zuckert, am primarily concerned with its dramatic date, and I believe that the dialogue occurs shortly after Plato's *Euthyphro*.[10]

On the face of it, Plato's *Cratylus* seems to be useful for coming to grips with sophistry, and rightly so.[11] I approach the dialogue, however, from a somewhat different perspective. The *Cratylus*, I submit, is just as profitably read, especially for political scientists, when studied with a view to Socrates's investigations of pious individuals (e.g., Ion, Euthyphro, or Hermogenes) as with a view to his investigations of the sophists (e.g., Hippias, Euthydemus, or Protagoras).[12] Or, to be more precise, we are bound to misunderstand the challenge of relativistic or "skeptical" sophistry (see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094b15–16, 1133a30–31, and *On Sophistical Refutations* 173a7–16) to Socratic political philosophizing if we fail to grasp its kinship with "decisionistic" divine revelation, to which the *Cratylus* subtly, though clearly, draws our attention. For if each is the measure of all things, then the individual who thinks he has experienced divine revelation is as much the measure as anyone else. We have no (rational) leg to stand on to say why one revelation is better or worse than another revelation or than an altogether different "worldview." The contention that we cannot bridge the gap between our diverse "perspectives" by means of human reason may well lead one to seek refuge in the apparent solidity of divine revelation, which, qua revelation, need not appeal to (common) reason but may still make common demands (commandments). The irrationality or suprarationality of divine revelation finds an easy defense if (common) reason is

wholly impotent: "All ways are equally rationally groundless; hence, *mine* is right because of some (ir- or non-rational) *X*."[13] All this to say, belief in divine revelation is, in some forms at least, profoundly related to "relativism," or "will to power," or "decisionism," or "conventionalism"—all of which declare the impotence of (common) reason as a guide for how to live well or justly. If reason is of no help for such adjudication, if we cannot rationally discriminate between competing "perspectives," then our only option—apart from a debilitated and debilitating suspension of judgment—is blindly to decide, to "commit," to "take a leap of faith," after which the only options available to us for leading others to our way or "perspective" are rhetoric and force. In short, speech becomes noise and violence.

In a nutshell, this study contends that the *Cratylus* shows us (1) the kinship between Protagorean relativism and "Hermogenean" belief in divine revelation; (2) the significant (and surprising) ground that Socrates concedes to those twin positions; and (3) a view of Socrates's response in light of that ground he is forced to concede—that is, of his turn to dialectics. I support these claims via a close reading of the dialogue. I proceed first with a discussion of the dialogue's dramatic setting. I then take up in turn the two parts of Socrates's conversation with Hermogenes. I conclude with a few remarks on the conversation with Cratylus.

The Setting

Plato's *Cratylus* is a dialogue that evidently takes place shortly after Socrates's famous conversation with Euthyphro about piety (396d6–397a1).[14] It thereby finds itself dramatically situated in the company of the trilogy *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman*, on one hand, and the dialogues of Socrates's trial and death, *Meno*, *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*, on the other. Socrates has two interlocutors in the *Cratylus*: his associate Hermogenes (see Xenophon *Apology* 2, *Symposium* 1.3, *Memorabilia* 1.2.48; and Plato, *Phaedo* 59b7–8) and Cratylus, who was purportedly, apart from Socrates, Plato's teacher (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 987a32–b1; and Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* 3.6).

The bulk of the dialogue (383a1–427e4) is Socrates's conversation with Hermogenes while the eponymous Cratylus merely looks on. Socrates enters a conversation about the allegedly natural correctness of names (*onomata*) that was well underway before his arrival and participation. The final segment is a briefer dialogue between Socrates and Cratylus while Hermogenes merely looks on (427e5–439d7). The conversation with Hermogenes itself has two main parts. First, Socrates and Hermogenes discuss the latter's conventionalism concerning names (381a1–390e4). Second, Socrates, with some direction from Hermogenes, offers various etymologies in an effort to show the naturalness of names (390e5–427e4).

Hermogenes is the interlocutor of greatest concern to us here. We almost immediately learn of his suspicion of Cratylus's thesis about names. Hermogenes begins by catching Socrates up. According to Cratylus, a name correct by nature naturally belongs to each of the beings (*tōn ontōn*; 383a4–5). Hermogenes is not wholly closed to this possibility: prior to Socrates's arrival, Hermogenes asked Cratylus questions and was eager to know what in the world the latter was saying but was met with unclarity and irony (383b8–384a1). He would pleasantly listen if Socrates were at all able to understand Cratylus's prophecy (*manteian*; 384a4–5) and be still more pleased to learn how the matter seems to Socrates (384a6–7). Despite often discoursing about this subject with many other people, Hermogenes is unable to be persuaded that there is a certain correctness of names apart from convention (*sunthēkē*) and agreement (384c9–d1; cf. 385d7–e3). And yet, he is still prepared to learn from and listen to Cratylus or anyone else if it is otherwise (384d8–e2). We might thereby conclude that Hermogenes knows his ignorance or is a "potential" philosopher.

That conclusion faces difficulties. Hermogenes, as the dialogue proceeds, does not obviously appear to be a promising nature. In the opening, we learn that Cratylus made a joke, denying that "Hermogenes" is Hermogenes's name (383b6–7), to the effect that Hermogenes is not wealthy and therefore a poor offspring of Hermes, the god of commerce (384c3–6). As poverty

distinguishes Hermogenes from his wealthy brother Callias (391b9–c4), who spends much money on sophists, and Socrates himself lived in ten-thousandfold poverty (Plato, *Apology* 23b9–c1; cf. *Republic* 485e3–5), we could think that this is one sign of Hermogenes's philosophic potential. But such evidence is, at most, inconclusive. In fact, that joke acquires a new meaning later in the dialogue. In the midst of the etymological section, Hermogenes swears, "By Zeus! It seems to me that Cratylus speaks well that I am not Hermogenes: I am certainly not a good contriver of speech" (408b6–7). Being a good contriver of speech (*logos*) is surely an important aspect of the philosophic nature (consider *Republic* 485a10–b3, c3–4, d3–4, 486c3–d2, 9–11, 494b1–3, 534e2–535a1 with context; and Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.2.14). Besides, Hermogenes, after Socrates asks him if he is able to say anything about why humans are called humans (398e5), asks whence or from what source (*pothen*) he would be able to do so and confesses that even if he were able to find something, he would not exert himself because he considers Socrates to be able to find more than he could himself (398e6–8; cf. *Crito* 46b4–6). He would, that is, prefer to rely on others' thoughts than to think for himself. (This perhaps explains why Hermogenes is so eager to hear Socrates speak at 384a6–7.) In response, Socrates avers, "As is likely, you believe in the inspiration [*pisteueis epipnoiai*] of Euthyphro" (399a1). Hermogenes affirms this (399a2). (Hermogenes probably believed in Socrates's *daimonion*.[15]) These exchanges disclose an unreflective credulity unbecoming a (potential) philosopher.[16] In fact, Hermogenes's affirmed belief in the inspiration of Euthyphro here tallies with Xenophon's portrait of Hermogenes as an individual with an unconventional piety (like Euthyphro) and, apparently, partially aping Socrates with his alleged *daimonion* (Xenophon, *Symposium* 4.47–49 and cf. 399e4–400a3).[17] Socrates's allusion to his prior conversation with Euthyphro in this dialogue (396d6–397a1), I suggest, is an indication that his investigation of piety is continuing, if less directly, through his conversation with the decidedly nonphilosophic, pious Hermogenes. To be sure, this indirect investigation is not

examining what piety is so much as what it presupposes, the possibility of divine inspiration, and its strange compatibility with "Protagorean" skepticism or conventionalism.

As noted already, in the opening of the dialogue, Hermogenes speaks of Cratylus's "prophecy" (384a4–5). In attributing this suprarational knowledge to Cratylus because of his refusal to explain himself through speech, Hermogenes points to the privileged or special character of prophecy. That is, inspired knowledge is a claim to some experience radically *uncommon*, even idiosyncratic. It is a momentous elevation of individuality, much like Protagoras's infamous thesis if radically interpreted (but cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1053a35–b3), at the expense of what is common or universal—for instance, of "forms" or "ideas" (i.e., the thesis for which Plato's Socrates is most famous). Further indications of a Socratic investigation of piety or divine inspiration in the *Cratylus* are not lacking. Cratylus is not the only individual purported to be prophetic or divinely inspired. Hermogenes, for instance, later exclaims to Socrates, "You seem to me simply to be like those inspired [*enthousiōntes*] suddenly delivering oracles [*chrēsmōidein*]" (396d2–3). At this juncture, Socrates blames Euthyphro on the grounds that he was discoursing with him earlier that morning (396d4–6) and asseverates, "It's liable, then, that, being inspired, [Euthyphro] not only filled my ears with daimonic wisdom but also seized my soul" (396d6–8). Socrates then proposes that he and Hermogenes use that daimonic wisdom to investigate names today and then "purify" themselves tomorrow (396d8–397a1). Socrates, in other words, after conceding that he is inspired, casts some doubt on the reliability of this superhuman wisdom. And he later tells Cratylus that he "disbelieves" in or does not trust (*apistō*) that superhuman wisdom (428c6–d2). All this to say, the *Cratylus* repeatedly depicts a contestation between merely human wisdom, on one hand, and superhuman or divine wisdom, on the other (cf. 438c1–4 and e2–3). The cynosure of this confrontation, we will see, is the origin of names: is their origin "natural," "barbaric," or "divine" (consider 425d7–e3), and how do we adjudicate between these alternatives?

The Challenge of Conventionalism (381a1–390e4)

Socrates's conversation with Hermogenes opens with the latter articulating the meaning of nature, the apparent failure of names to meet the criteria of nature, and Cratylus's puzzling insistence that certain names are naturally correct. Nature, as distinguished from convention, Hermogenes suggests, is what is the same everywhere, among all peoples, both Greeks and barbarians (383b1–2; cf. 385d9–e3). Nature is, by this account, *universal*. The individual or idiosyncratic, by contrast, is not natural. Names, Hermogenes is well aware, manifestly differ among different peoples, and he therefore concludes that names are not natural but conventional (384c9–d1 and 385d7–e3). They are what they are, not by some natural necessity, but by human agreement. "Cat," on this assumption, is the correct word for felines only by agreement and habit. Another word could work just as well. Cratylus, to Hermogenes's chagrin, proves to be unforthcoming in explaining the grounds of his contention that names are somehow by nature (384a1–4). Seth Benardete plausibly suggests that Cratylus's claim is or becomes that "the only correct name for each and every being is a proper name, and nothing is by nature a member of any class," which, he adds, is obviously connected to "the thesis of Herclitean flux," the thesis Cratylus eventually espouses (440d7–e2 and Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 987a32–b1).[18] By this account, if Cratylus's thesis is a defense of "natural" correctness, "nature" is unquestionably unintelligible, a chaotic swirl of we cannot say what, and it terminates in the thought, which Aristotle attributes to Cratylus, that one "must say nothing but only move one's finger" (*Metaphysics* 1010a12–13). But such a skeptical account of nature, if such it be, is curiously indistinguishable from the account that nature *is not* but rather all things are possible. Protagoreanism, Heracliteanism, and, indeed, divine revelation, taken to the extreme, are of a piece. All reduce apparently stable forms or kinds, nature, to some arbitrary act or imposition, to convention or divine fiat.

This problem, the naturalness and stability of the forms or universals, underlies Hermogenes's somewhat frivolous concern about the natural correctness of names.[19] Although names and

forms are different things, that distinction may well be unclear to someone (cf. 435e3–5), and the conventional or nonnatural character of names could lead one to wonder if forms are equally arbitrary. The sequel confirms the presence of this problem. Socrates soon begins to examine Hermogenes's conventionalist thesis (385a1–2), and he thereafter dubiously[20] gets Hermogenes to assent to the contention that it is possible to say a false or a true name (385c16–d1 with context). Suddenly, after Hermogenes unsurprisingly reaffirms his unshaken attachment to conventionalism (385d8–e3), Socrates changes course:

> Come now, let us see, Hermogenes, whether the beings (*ta onta*) also appear to hold to you in this way, their substance (*ousia*) peculiar to each, as Protagoras used to say, saying that a human being is "measure of all things [*chrēmatōn*]"—so that as the things (*pragmata*) appear to me, such they are to me, and as to you, such to you. Or does it seem to you that things themselves (*auta*) have a certain firmness (*bebaiotēta*) of their substance? (385e4–386a4)

Socrates moves from names or language to being. Are the beings and their substance, what they are, their "form" let us say, no less arbitrary than names? Are names referring to beings and to their substance referring to equally arbitrary or idiosyncratic phenomena? Or are the beings and their kinds natural, not merely a human imposition and, more or less, fixed? Hermogenes admits that he has already once been "perplexed" and carried away to what Protagoras says. Nevertheless, the position does not seem so to him now (386a5–7).

In typical Socratic fashion, Socrates turns to the moral or human things: was Hermogenes ever carried away with the result that there did not seem to him that there is some wicked (*ponēron*) human being (386a8–b1)? "By Zeus, no!" Hermogenes replies. Often some human beings seemed to him to be wicked, "even very many" (386b2–4). Hermogenes similarly concedes that some, if few, human beings are "decent" or "useful" (*chrēstoi*; 386b5–9).

His granting of Protagoreanism was, then, ever only partial. He granted it inconsistently or confusedly. He has never been willing to concede its application to the decent and the wicked. He has been unflinchingly confident or insistent in the existence of some firm, *universal* standard of right and wrong. Hermogenes would presumably reject Heraclitus's statement that "[t]o god all things are beautiful, good, and just, but human beings have supposed that some things are unjust and others just" (Diels–Kranz B102). Heraclitean flux or Protagoreanism is a problem not only for morality. It also undermines knowledge or, as Socrates next presents it, prudence.

In typical Socratic fashion, Socrates attempts to reduce or assimilate the moral things to knowledge: "The altogether decent/useful are altogether prudent [*phronimous*], and the altogether wicked are altogether imprudent?" he asks (386b10–12). Unlike other interlocutors (e.g., *Hipparchus* 225a6–b3 and *Euthyphro* 14e6–8), Hermogenes, perhaps because of his regularly associating with Socrates, unreservedly grants this identification, which is tantamount to granting the Socratic thesis that virtue is knowledge (386c1; cf. 398b3–4). Prudence or knowledge, no less than the strictly moral virtues, is impossible if one grants Protagoras's thesis (386c2–d2).

After Socrates confirms Hermogenes's rejection not only of Protagoras's thesis that each thing is peculiar to each person but also of Euthydemus's contention, nearly amounting to a denial of the principle of noncontradiction, that all things simultaneously belong to all things (386d3–9), he states what follows: "the things [*pragmata*] themselves have a certain firm substance of themselves, not in relation to us nor from us, dragged up and down through our imagination [*phantasmati*], but in respect of themselves in relation to their substance, holding in their natural way" (386e1–4). This agreement alone hardly suffices to dispose of Protagoreanism.[21] It confirms only Hermogenes's opposition to it. Hermogenes's confidence in the distinction between the useful or decent and the wicked gives him confidence in the forms or "substance" necessary for rational knowledge. It is perhaps all the more surprising, then, that in the second part of his conversation

with Socrates he accepts the prospect of divine inspiration with complete equanimity (390e5–427e4). For divinely revealed knowledge, assuming that such an act is supernatural or the act of an omnipotent deity, would undermine our confidence not only in the firmness of "natural" kinds, which an omnipotent god could undo, but also in the firmness of "moral" distinctions (consider, e.g., *Republic* 377d4ff., *Euthyphro* 6b7–c4 and 4b7–5a2, Genesis 22:2, and Isaiah 45:7).[22] Perhaps Hermogenes continues to be an inconsistent "Protagorean," despite his allegedly "wholly" rejecting Protagoras's teaching (391c5–7).

In the sequel, Socrates turns from the beings themselves and their substance to actions (*praxeis*). Actions provide a stepping-stone to the arts. Hermogenes tacitly concedes not only that speaking and naming are actions but also that they are actions of a certain sort: artful actions. Arts (*technai*) are well known and have well-known parts. For instance, arts use tools (*organa*). Hermogenes grants that names are such tools (388a8–9). When one uses an artful tool, one is carrying out an action that is a part of an art. These actions are for the sake of something, and we are typically able to say why an artisan is doing a certain action (e.g., why a weaver is using a shuttle; 388a10–12). Hermogenes, for his part, cannot say what one does when one is naming (388b9). But he readily accepts Socrates's suggestion on this score, which takes as its paradigm not the arts as such but only one specific action of one specific art: plying the shuttle.[23] Naming is teaching one another and distinguishing *ta pragmata* (the things that we handle and that are of concern to us). Names are tools that are "instructive" and "distinguishing" (*diakritikon*) of substance (388b13–c1). Some arts are subordinate to other arts or are for the sake of what is merely instrumental to another art (e.g., carpentry fashions the tools of weavers; 388c9–11). Hermogenes cannot say through what art one uses names correctly or "beautifully" (388d8). Socrates does not offer a suggestion here, but it does not take a soothsayer to figure that the Socratic answer is philosophy or dialectic.[24] At any rate, Socrates passes over this unknown, more architectonic art to what is more subordinate. He asks about who gives us the names that we

use, or who gives us our names (388d9–10). Law or custom (*nomos*), Socrates gets Hermogenes to grant, is the origin of (our) names (388d12–14; cf. *Minos* 313a1). They further agree that the teacher, when using names, uses the work of a lawgiver (388e1–3). The interlocutors thereby all but conclude that lawgiving is an art subordinate to the art of dialectic. Law provides only the tools for finding out being or what is (cf. *Minos* 315a2–3).[25] In this view, names themselves are tools proper to dialectic (cf. *Memorabilia* 4.5.12). Speaking without philosophizing (or employing dialectic) is like wearing a life jacket at the grocery store: it bespeaks an ignorance of the correct use of a tool. That is the unstated conclusion, at least, but where is the complete, genuinely compelling argument vindicating it? Why should one grant, in the first place, the "bizarre-sounding"[26] claim that law is the product of an art (i.e., of human wisdom)? The first part of Socrates's conversation with Hermogenes abstracts from the prospect of superhuman or divine wisdom: it begs the question.

That abstraction continues. In the last stretch of this examination of Hermogenes's conventionalism, Socrates and Hermogenes agree that the lawgiver looks to some form (*eidos*), idea (*idea*), or nature (*phusis*) that governs his making of names (389a5–390e4; e.g., 389a8, b3, b10–c1, c4–7, d1–2, d4, e3, and 390a6, b1, d9–e4). Names are correctly or "beautifully" made if they conform to that standard. This discussion, however, abstracts from particular lawgivers and particular names or particular acts of "legislation." The argument does not establish that all lawgivers, in all times and places, would "legislate," so to speak, the same names for all things. A builder also looks to some standard when he builds a building. But the building he builds at one place and time is not necessarily the building that he always builds everywhere (cf. 389d8–390a2). The builder might take his bearings from the local geography and local materials fit for construction. This failure or restriction of the argument would hold good in the case of everything, and not merely names, that lawgivers "legislate." (Socrates's introduction of the lawgiver encourages us to think about the bearing the argument has not only on names but on law.) It could be natural that

humans live with language and laws and that language and laws must meet certain criteria in order to be natural, but those criteria could be ambivalent about many particulars. For instance, perhaps natural language must only be conducive to understanding: one can understand what a cat is just as well if one consistently refers to it as *un chat*. And perhaps "natural" laws must only be conducive to political harmony or stability: a political order can have relatively safe and easily navigable highways whether the speed limit is fifty-five or sixty-five miles per hour, to say nothing of other possible variations in law. Form, on one hand, and matter, on the other, are different things. The former identifies what is natural and the latter what is, let us say, "accidental" or conventional, a species of accident. That is, the "naturalness" of names (and laws) may be compatible with considerable "material" variation.[27] This possibility surely escapes Hermogenes's notice.

The *Cratylus* hints here at a kinship between "matter" and (mere) convention. Both want the intelligibility of the so-called final cause. They are "brute facts" and "explained" by recourse to chance, which professes ignorance of some intelligible necessity. No function or purpose explains why chance things are the way they are. *Chat* happens to be the French word for cat, but another word (e.g., cat) could just as easily suffice. By the same token, Socrates happens to have a snub nose for smelling, but a different nose, formed out of different matter, could also suffice (if not quite as well: see Xenophon, *Symposium* 5.6). One could perhaps trace the origin of such variations back to a prior cause, but either that prior cause will itself be a "brute fact" or its origin will be traceable to an even prior cause. This difficulty becomes clearer in the sequel, the strange, central part of the work, to which we will turn momentarily.

This final stretch of the examination of Hermogenes terminates in the incredible, even preposterous, conclusion, foreshadowed earlier (388e1–3 with context), that the user of the art of lawgiving, the one who "scientifically knows" how to "supervise" it, both "here" and among the barbarians, is the dialectician (390b5–d5). Socratic philosophy, it seems, has won a tremendous victory.

That victory, however, can be only hollow or limited.[28] For its success is merely *ad hominem*—that is, on the basis of premises granted by Hermogenes. The argument rests on, first, a hasty dismissal of two foreboding theses of sophists (Protagoras and Euthydemus); second, the untested assumption that lawgiving is an art (*technē*); and third and relatedly, the abstraction from the possibility of divinely revealed knowledge. At the same time, however, Socrates's investigation of Hermogenes has brought to light, on one hand, certain requirements of knowledge (e.g., the stability of beings and their substance as well as, we infer, the principle of noncontradiction) and, on the other, the Protagorean alternative, which would make knowledge impossible. Although Socrates has uncovered important opinions that Hermogenes holds, we cannot help but be disappointed at the weakness of his explicit defense of philosophy or "dialectic"—notwithstanding how successful that defense is before the tribunal of Hermogenes—given the grave, undisposed-of threat posed to knowledge by the Protagorean thesis. We will attend to Socrates's implicit defense, present even here, after completing our discussion of his dialogue with Hermogenes.

The Problem of Genetic Accounts (390e5–427e4)

On the face of it, the next part of Socrates's conversation with Hermogenes, the longest and central part of the work, the infamous etymological section, is utterly baffling. It is long-winded, obviously playful, sometimes deadly serious, and, perhaps most importantly, a colossal failure: Socrates's protracted attempt to show the "naturalness" of particular names by recourse to etymology does not ultimately work.[29] That failure and its significance will be our focus here.

If Socrates's defense of philosophy or (rational) human knowledge in the previous part left us disappointed, this section, if we abstract from its jocosity, turns our disappointment into despondency. This section both introduces what the prior part abstracted from, the prospect of divinely revealed knowledge, and offers oblique yet devastating criticisms of natural science or

"meteorological" thinking. Socrates begins this investigation of names by observing the distinction between the names humans use and the names gods use in Homer's poetry (391d4–392b1). But Socrates quickly drops this line of inquiry on the grounds that such things "are perhaps greater than what you and I can find out" (392b2). He proposes instead that Hermogenes and he turn to a subject that is "more human to examine" (392b3–4). Still, that the gods purportedly use different names than humans raises the grave question of whether their knowledge also differs, and so too does Hermogenes's uncertainty about whether the gods name things at all (391e2–3). And if knowing is, as Protagoras claims, always "perspectival," then the gods' perspective would evidently be more authoritative than that of humans (cf. *Laws* 716c4–6). Besides that indirect intimation of superhuman knowledge, which is immediately buried, Socrates, as already noted, will be accused of being, and will himself claim to be, inspired by a superhuman "daimonic" wisdom (396d2–397a1; but cf. 396d1: "*ouk oid'hopothen*"). Moreover, on a few occasions, Socrates raises troubling questions about the desirability or permissibility of seeking knowledge of the gods. After Hermogenes affirms his belief in Euthyphro's inspiration, Socrates replies, "You believe correctly, as even now I appear to myself elegantly to have reflected, and I run the risk, if I don't beware, of yet coming to be wiser today than one must [*deontos*]" (399a3–5). We do not immediately get a clear sense of what Socrates means. Shortly thereafter, however, he says, "Let us examine, as it were notifying the gods beforehand that we will examine nothing about them, for we don't deem ourselves worthy [*axioumen*] to be such a sort as to examine them" (401a1–4; cf. 425b9–c3). He then claims that they will merely discuss human beings, "for this is blameless [*anemestēton*]" (401a5). A bit later he retorts, "Let us depart from the gods, by the gods, as I fear [*dedoika*] discoursing [*dialegesthai*] about them" (407d6–7; cf. 408d4–5). On the surface, Socrates evidently fears incurring divine wrath for seeking knowledge that the gods forbid to man. Such, at any rate, is the concern the poets foster. As Aristotle says, "According to Simonides, a god alone should have this

honor"—that is, the wisdom philosophy seeks (*Metaphysics* 982b30; cf. Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 29–30, 82–83, 107–8, 229–32). For the poets say that "the divine is naturally jealous" (*Metaphysics* 982b32–983a1). Surely the goodness of philosophy hinges on the nature of the gods. For if the gods are of such a sort as to bring beings into being out of nothing (cf. Hesiod, *Theogony* 116; *Cratylus* 396c3–5; and Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1485–86), then the beings lack the firmness or stability that human knowledge requires, unless the "gods" themselves are somehow subject to some necessity more powerful than they.[30]

This problem, the questionable ground of attributing stability to the beings required for knowledge or science, manifests itself in two other indirect ways in the etymological section. First, Socrates alleges that those who first set down names were not paltry but certain "meteorologists" (*meteōrologoi*) and "talkers" (*adoleschai*). The latter term sometimes has the sense of "babblers" or "idle talkers," and it is therefore unclear to what extent this is a compliment (see, e.g., Aristophanes, *Clouds* 1485; Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* 11.3; Plato, *Lovers* 132b8–10; and Aristotle, *Topics* 158a28). Socrates seems to have in mind natural scientists, and he explicitly likens their doctrine to that of Heraclitus (401d4). He confirms this identification a bit later when he says, "Perhaps the lawgiver, 'meteorologizing,' named air, with concealment [*epikruptomenos*], 'Hera'" (404c2; cf. 396b8–c3).[31] The general tendency of the pre-Socratic natural scientists was to trace the changes in beings to some fundamental, unchanging, material necessity (e.g., "air") that was at odds with the city's understanding of the gods (cf. Aristophanes, *Clouds* 366–80; Plato, *Apology* 18c2–3 and *Laws* 888e4–890b2).[32] The etymological section shows us two fundamental alternatives: one theistic, one atheistic. Yet, in calling these individuals "talkers," Socrates casts some doubt on the success of the atheistic, pre-Socratic project, and, as we will see, he discloses the serious grounds of that doubt via his jocular etymologies. Although the pre-Socratic approach could seem to be the means to confirm the requirements of science, the *Cratylus*, on close inspection, discloses its failure.

The second other indirect way that Socrates indicates his awareness of the problem of the stability of the beings occurs near the beginning of the etymological section. There, Socrates brings up the strange prospect of a horse giving birth to a calf or a human being giving birth to some nonhuman being (393c2–5). Socrates shakes our trust in the relationship between form and the so-called efficient cause (cf. Aristotle, *Physics* 191b20–21).[33] What is it, if anything, that guarantees that these "forms" or "species" signify limits on what can come to be? In a stunning reversal, Socrates shortly thereafter claims that "a king will be from a king, and a good person from a good person, and a noble person from a noble person, and all the others in this way, another such offspring [*ekgonon*] from each kind [*genous*]" (394a1–4). In both cases, Socrates makes a passing reference to the possibility that a "monstrosity" (*teras*) can be born (393b9 and 394a4). Socrates, of course, elsewhere radically calls into question the necessity of a good or noble person being born from a good or noble person (cf. *Meno* 93e11–94e2 and *Protagoras* 319d7–320b5). Here, however, he assimilates these human things to natural kinds, alleging that when an impious person (*asebēs*) is born from a good and god-fearing man, it is just as if a horse were to birth a cow as an offspring: both are monstrosities (394d5–9). Is Socrates suggesting that the natural kinds of "horse" and "cow" are as reliable predictors of what will come to be as the presence of piety in human parents? If so, then how stable is the substance of beings? If, though, there is a distinction to draw between these two kinds, on what (sufficiently grounded) basis can we draw that distinction? And what are we to make of this radical distinction between "efficient cause" and "form" or "kind"? If a horse did birth a calf, wouldn't that be not merely "contrary to nature" (393c2) but supernatural?

Above all, however, Socrates emphatically and unmistakably draws our attention to the philosophically unavoidable question of the fundamental cause of the cosmos and the character of that cause via his two etymological discussions of Zeus. Socrates's first

discussion opens by gingerly questioning the reliability of tradition: "And it appears that to the one *said to be* his [Tantalus's] father the name Zeus [*Dii*] is applied all-nobly" (395e5–396a1; emphasis added). It is as if Zeus's name is "simply a rational account" (*atechnōs logos*; 396a2). Socrates proceeds to explain that the name is divided into two, some calling Zeus "*Zēna*," others "*Dia*" (396a2–4). The two names together "disclose the nature of the god" (396a5). "For there's no one," Socrates continues, "more a cause [*aitios*] of living for us and all other things than the ruler [*archon*] and king of all things. It occurs, then, that this god is named correctly, on account of whom [*di'on*] living always belongs to all living things" (396a6–b2). Socrates is suggesting that Zeus's name *Dia* signifies "cause" (*aitia*) because the Greek preposition *dia* similarly signifies a cause. This is not so strange: Aristotle also uses the term *dia* to mean "cause" (e.g., *Topics* 104b16). One can name the cause of all things "Zeus," but what is (the character of) Zeus? In this context, Socrates first mentions Hesiod and explicitly abstains from following the poet's genealogy back to "higher progenitors" on the grounds that he does not remember (396c3–4).[34] According to Hesiod, "First of all, Chaos came to be" (*Theogony* 116; cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 984b23ff.). Did Socrates forget that? If Chaos was first and came to be, then Chaos came to be out of nothing, and, ipso facto, scientific knowledge is impossible (cf. Aristotle, *Physics* 187a26–28 and *On Generation and Corruption* 317b29–31). Socrates suppresses the distinction between the positions of the "meteorologists" and the poets concerning the character of the cause of all things. It is in response to this first discussion of Zeus and cause that Hermogenes alleges that Socrates seems to be inspired (396d2–3). It is as if Plato wishes to compensate for Socrates's suppression.

Socrates's second discussion of Zeus's name is still more remarkable. He approaches Zeus through justice. In Socrates's telling, it is easy to gather that "justice" (*dikaiosunē*) has its name because it is a "comprehension of the just" (*tou dikaiou sunesei*; 412c6–7). The "just" itself, however, is "difficult" (412c7–8).

Socrates first explains an alleged agreement on the meaning of the just:

> For in fact, it's likely agreed on by many up to a point, but then disputed. For as many people as consider the whole (*to pan*) to be in a march suppose that much of it is some such thing as to do nothing other than to make room and that through (*dia*) all this something goes through (*diexion*), through which (*di'ou*) all things coming to be come to be. And this is swiftest and thinnest. For otherwise it would not be able to pass through all being, unless it were thinnest, so that nothing keeps it out, and swiftest, so that it treats the other things as though they stand still. Since, then, it governs all the other things by going through (*diaion*), it's correctly called this name, "just" (*dikaion*). . . . Up to these things then, as we were just saying, this is agreed to be the just by many. (412c8–413a1)

This is a strange agreement for "many" to have about the just. It sounds much more like a recapitulation of certain pre-Socratic theses about the nature of the whole than an earnest attempt to articulate what the just is. It certainly does not resemble at all any of the opinions we find about justice in Book I of the *Republic* (though Socrates may obliquely allude to a connection between the dialectical examination of justice and of the first cause). In the sequel, Socrates emphatically calls attention to himself: "But I, Hermogenes, since I am persistent about it, inquired about all these things in secret [*aporrētois*], [learning] that this is the just and the cause—for that on account of which [*di'on*] a thing comes to be, this is the cause—and someone said that, on account of [*dia*] these things, to call this 'Zeus' [*Dia*] holds correctly" (413a1–5). The alleged cause of things, the smallest particles that pass through all things easily, is named "the just" or "Zeus." This is certainly not what most people mean by Zeus either. This is Zeus in name only, which likely explains why Socrates inquired "in secret." Socrates then narrates how he asked those advancing these claims a "what

is" question: "What in the world, best one, is just?" (413a6–7). (He naturally does not pronounce the question: What is Zeus?) Socrates received diverse answers from diverse interlocutors: the sun, fire, heat, and mind (413b4–c5). These past and anonymous interlocutors must have been or had been influenced by pre-Socratic natural scientists (cf. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 9.50),[35] though only one, Anaxagoras (consider 399e4–400a11), is mentioned by name by one of these unknown interlocutors (413b5). Hermogenes replies that Socrates appears to have heard these things from someone and not to be "extemporizing" (413d3–4). Hermogenes's response captures the well-known fact that Socrates founded political philosophy and seemed to be wholly concerned with the human or ethical things rather than nature or the whole (cf. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 2.20–21 with 2.45 as well as Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.1.11). And yet, as we just saw, and as is confirmed in the *Phaedo*, Socrates was at one time or another, if "in secret," investigating opinions about whole and the fundamental cause.

If Socrates did ever cease such investigations or did evidently devote all or much of his attention to the human or ethical things, why was he moved to do so? We do not find a clear answer here. On one hand, Socrates's explicit explanation is to be found in the *Phaedo* (96a6ff.). On the other hand, the etymological section of the *Cratylus* taken as a whole bears a striking resemblance to what we find in the *Phaedo*, which we will discuss presently. In the etymological section, Socrates and Hermogenes converse about many names, and Socrates gives "inspired" accounts about their natural origins. The bulk of the etymological section consists in an attempt to show that a name can be explained by showing how it emerged from another, more elemental name or names that are similar in form to the name being analyzed. The original or prior names are, so to speak, material parts or atoms of the posterior names. Socrates occasionally calls them "elements" (*stoicheia*; 422a3, b2, and b6),[36] and he suggests that "the first" names (*ta prota*) "no longer have others underlying [*hupokeitai*] them" (422d11). Until the end of that section (426a6–427d2), Socrates and Hermogenes fail to note that this "explanation" admits of an

infinite regress problem. Namely, once you have shown that a name is "natural" because it is evidently derived from one or two other, more "elemental" names, you have merely kicked the can down the road. You need, in turn, to show that those prior, "elemental" names are themselves "natural." A different method is needed to show the naturalness of the first names. This "atomistic" account, in other words, fails to do the very thing it was meant to do.

This infinite regress problem, quite intriguingly, resembles or mirrors a difficulty with natural science that Socrates describes in the *Phaedo* that led him to turn away from "pre-Socratic" science and toward the dialectical investigation of moral opinions and the so-called formal cause. To cut a short story still shorter: Socrates came to think that to call material parts or elements, such as "bones and sinews," "causes" (*aitiai*) was "absurd," since they are more properly called conditions (*Phaedo* 99a4–b6). Matter's lack of explanatory power led prior thinkers, in search of some "Atlas," to make contradictory and insufficiently justified claims about the ultimate cause of things—for instance, someone saying that a "whirlpool" (*dinēn*) makes earth abide under the heavens, another that it is "air" (*aera*) that does so (99b6–c6). By the same token, in the *Cratylus*, Socrates confesses that his attempt to give an account of the first names is "hubristic" and "laughable" (426b6).[37] These first "elements" also fail to show that the later or posterior things (names), which are first for us, are natural, as opposed to conventional or arbitrary. And yet, in order to know what is first for us, we need to know the character of what is first simply (consider 426a1–b3). Atomistic reduction is not fit for that task.[38]

The elusiveness of first things, whether those be the ancient past or first principles, is a recurring motif in the *Cratylus* and, in large part, the motivation for Socrates's turn away from pre-Socratic natural science to dialectic. The elusiveness of the ancient past and first principles ineluctably compels us to confront the prospect of divine revelation. For instance, if "the ancients" (425a6) were they who first set down the first principles of our language, how did they do so? Could it have been through some divine

inspiration or sanction (cf. Genesis 2:19)? Or was it through some natural or quasi-rational process? How exactly are we to judge whether the "first names and the posterior ones are fitly applied" (425b1–2)? Astonishingly, Socrates explicitly mentions the possibility of appealing to the gods as the source of these first names only immediately to dismiss it on the grounds that it is akin to the tragedians' *deus ex machina* (425d3–8). But on what grounds does Socrates so confidently rule that prospect out? It apparently cannot be through the "hubristic" and "laughable" attempt to account for the first names he gives.

Socrates, we must note, offers the possibility of a natural (i.e., nondivine) explanation of some of the first names other than a knowing lawgiver. After likening appeals to a divine source of the first names to the tragedians fleeing their perplexity by cranking up gods (425d5–8), Socrates asks, "Is this one of the accounts strongest for us? Or that [other] one: that we received them from certain barbarians, and barbarians more ancient than we?" (425d8–e3). On a few occasions, when Socrates had difficulty explaining the origin of some word in some prior or first words, he had recourse to the hypothesis that certain words do not admit of such explanation on the grounds that they are the remnants of a barbaric language, parts of which have crept into Greek (409d1–410b1, 416a6, and 421c12–d5). Now, at one point after retreating to this "barbarian" hypothesis, Socrates confesses that he is saying merely "likely things" (*eikota*) (421d7). Besides that, after asking which account is best, Socrates raises another possibility: "or [is it the case] that it's impossible to examine these things because of antiquity [*hupo palaiotētos*], as with the barbaric [names] also?" (425e3–426a1). At this juncture, Socrates insists that what is needed is some "demonstration" about the first names, showing their natural correctness (426a7–b1). And yet, not only is his account admittedly hubristic and laughable but also he later tells Cratylus, "I myself would not rely [*ischurisaimēn*] on any of the things I have said" (428a6–7). Socrates's rationalist attempt to explain how names are either natural or barbaric, as opposed to divinely granted, is, by his own admission, a failure or inconclusive.

Any satisfactory account of this problem must reckon with this puzzle: Socrates claims to be divinely inspired or to have a "daimonic" (divine) wisdom in this stretch of the *Cratylus* (396d6–8), but that "divinely" revealed "wisdom," we have seen, supports a highly naturalistic or rationalist account,[39] diminishing the role of the gods and insisting on merely human causes, either a human lawgiver exercising artful knowledge or "accidental" fossils of some barbaric language. What are we to make of this? Socrates evidently judges that these naturalistic or rationalistic accounts have an "epistemological status" comparable to that of "supernatural" accounts. That is, he seems to judge that we cannot truly know whether these probable rationalistic accounts are more than probable, that is, true. We do not have direct access to ancient things, which can be, as Socrates puts it, "undiscoverable" (421d3). In other words, Socrates *concedes that reason is inescapably impotent*, at least in this respect. Namely, reason cannot fully and confidently fathom the truth about the long-forgotten past, which is largely inaccessible, for we certainly have no direct experience of what life was like, say, six or twenty thousand years ago. As the Good Book says, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" (Job 38:4). Socrates, in effect, replies, "Nowhere. And, therefore, I can offer only a plausible, conjectural, or hypothetical and consequently questionable rational account, one that is likely to be accepted only by someone who is already doubtful of a suprarational source of such knowledge." In Socrates's view, we can offer plausible, conjectural accounts or "theories" about the ancient past, but those accounts cannot themselves be taken to supply a decisive ground for their veracity—no matter how well they seem to "fit" the "data" (cf. Thucydides 1.1.2 and Plato, *Laws* 695c1–2). Those plausible rationalist accounts alone do not obviously establish that they are preferable or surer than irrational or suprarational accounts. Rather, they beg the question. This specific impotence of reason, I suggest, leads Socrates to playfully refer to his rationalist or naturalist account as one of divine inspiration. Without grounds beyond or beside such merely plausible rationalist accounts, they

effectually amount to reveries or to the product of "inspiration." Cratylus, then, has some reason to allege that the "the truest account" about names is that their source is "some power greater than human" (438c1–4; cf. 397c1–2). How is it, then, that Socrates immediately insists on our human capacity to understand the beings (438e2–3)?

The Socratic Solution

On the basis of the *Cratylus*, we can only sketch how Socrates attempts to extricate himself from this predicament, and in this study, we cannot attend to the final section of the dialogue in any adequate manner, though we will note a few points. Before sketching Socrates's solution, however, let us restate the problem and connect a few dots. Reason, in the face of its inability to give a complete account of the "first things," is confronted with the grave challenge of divine revelation, on one hand, and Protagorean "perspectivism," on the other. Both claims undermine the stability of the intelligible character of things. In other words, both make being unintelligible. "Perspectivism," for its part, if we take it to mean that each person is the measure of all things, no more or less authoritatively the measure than any other person, and if we grant that sense of perspectivism to be true, then any eccentric professing some belief in divine inspiration, such as Euthyphro or Hermogenes, cannot be refuted. And, in that case, there may well be one "perspective" that *is* most authoritative. The underlying assumption of both claims is tantamount to Heracliteanism, or the position that everything is flux, or that things have no fixed natures (cf. 402a4–10).[40] Divine revelation and Protagoreanism, radically interpreted, are, in a way, metaphysically the same: being is a chaotic swirling of we know not what, and any order exists only on account of some will, human or divine. Socrates, we saw, quietly concedes considerable ground to the claim that a divine source underlies all things. Natural science, at least, is unable to rule it out, and neither can etymological or, by extension, "historical" speculation. It is not clear how *directly* to sort out the character of the first things and the first cause. In fact, it seems that Socrates's

conviction that that was impossible led him to seek refuge in "the accounts" (*Phaedo* 99e4–6 with context).[41]

Socrates's concession to "perspectivism" is somewhat less clear. It is clear enough, however, in the passage pointing us to his solution or to his ground for resisting this metaphysical position that wholly undermines reason. In the midst of his etymologies, Socrates makes the following remarkable pronouncement:

> And verily, by the dog! I seem to myself to prophesy (*manteuesthai*) not badly, on which I'm even now reflecting: that the very ancient humans setting down names, above all, are just like many of the wise now who, constantly spinning round [while] seeking in which way the beings hold, get dizzy. And then, it appears to them that the things (*pragmata*) are swept around and swept in every way. What's more, they blame (*aitiōntai*) not the affection within themselves as the cause (*aition*) of this opinion, but the things (*pragmata*) themselves as naturally being in this way, none of them being stable (*monimon*) nor firm (*bebaion*), but always flowing and being swept and being full of every movement and generation. (411b3–c5; cf. 439b10–c8)

The significance of this passage is twofold. In the first place, it shows us an important, if oblique, concession to the Protagorean position: our inner affection or "pathos" has a bearing on what we hold to be knowledge of the beings. Dizzy souls lead individuals to think that the beings themselves are dizzying.[42] Such an admission need not lead to wholesale "perspectivism," that is, to a complete rejection of some natural, intelligible order, for there can be an ingredient of arbitrariness in forms—"perspective," in other words—without necessitating completely rejecting their naturalness. Some perspectives can be more authoritative than others, and some forms more natural than others. In the second place, it points us to a potential solution. Socrates, in accordance with our earlier suggestions, can only "prophesy" about the souls of

ancient human beings. We may infer, however, that he has done more than prophesy about "wise" men today, for he has famously cross-examined many of them—for instance, Cratylus in this very dialogue. Socrates's dialectical investigations of such individuals, we are here told, have disclosed some inner psychic disorder or pathology. The sign of such disorder, I submit, is holding contradictory opinions (cf. *Republic* 519b3–c6 and *Theaetetus* 175d2–7), which dialectic—the activity Socrates is engaged in before and after the etymological section—brings to light, thereby offering an admittedly precarious solution to this impasse concerning relativism and revelation, since dialectic is a mode of arguing on the basis of another's (mere) opinions.

Let us consider much too briefly the case of Cratylus. In the final section of the dialogue, Socrates swiftly discloses an incoherence in Cratylus's position. On one hand, Cratylus holds that names are "imitations" of things (*pragmata*; 430a10–b1). On the other, he does not want to allow one name to be a better or worse imitation than another name (431e9–432a4),[43] even though imitations, being other than what they are of, admit of being better or worse approximations of the thing they imitate (see 432b8–c5). Socrates points out, "If you will say both these things, it's not possible that you will be in harmony with yourself" (433b4–5). This is one indication that Cratylus is confused or has a disordered soul. Another, more fundamental, confirmation is his admission at the end of the dialogue that things (*pragmata*) appear to hold as Heraclitus says (440d7–e2). Such an assertion is incompatible with the counterclaim that there are names, and not merely sounds, that are correct imitations of things (see 439d8–440a4). Imitating Heraclitean flux through "names" would be making unintelligible noise (cf. 430a4–5). Cratylus both does and does not want to say that everything is in flux, which likely explains his retreat to a divine source of correct names (438c1–4). The divine, he thinks, can let him have his cake and eat it too.

This confusion is not so different from that of Hermogenes. As shown, he too found himself drawn to Heracliteanism (386a5–7). However, he came to a halt before the moral things, which he

would not concede to be in flux (386a8–b4), and which therefore admit of rational scrutiny. Not altogether unexpectedly, he unhesitatingly accepted Socrates's "daimonic" wisdom in the etymological section.

Although it is necessary, it does not suffice merely to observe such incoherences. It is necessary also to explain them (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1154a22–23). The beginning of an explanation is found in Socrates's and Hermogenes's discussion of Hades, whom Socrates calls a "perfect sophist" (403e4; cf. *Republic* 492a5–e6). Socrates's proof that humans seem to him to err about the power of Hades rests on Hermogenes granting a premise that is the presupposition of sophistry in all its forms: that desire is stronger than necessity (403c2–4; cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1180a4–5 with 1181a12–17).[44] As Benardete notes, "Necessity cannot, strictly speaking, be weaker than anything."[45] Hermogenes's wish to believe that Hades keeps people in Hades through the strongest desire, which is when someone thinks he will be better by being with another (403d4–6), reminds us of his earlier admission that the decent are the prudent and the wicked the imprudent (386b10–c1; cf. 398b3–4). His expectation that people desire, above all, to become good is entirely consistent with that prior admission, but unwaveringly to grant that the decent are the prudent—that is, to affirm the Socratic thesis that virtue is knowledge alongside its infamous denial of moral responsibility—is to deny that Hades exists.[46] But Hermogenes, of course, does not grant that unwaveringly. His adherence to the Socratic thesis, in other words, is merely verbal. And yet, his granting it even merely verbally confirms that necessity is, in fact, stronger than desire. Hermogenes does not wish to grant that the good are imprudent or foolishly harming themselves, but to say that desire is stronger than necessity is to say that one can desire imprudence or "self-denial."[47] And why would one wish to affirm that possibility unless the decent were not merely prudent? Hermogenes's contradictory opinions bespeak a weakness of soul: a blindness to necessity on account of a compelling desire, or pleasant wish, for something stronger than necessity.

Despite their confusions, Socrates is relatively gentle toward both Hermogenes and Cratylus. They leave on good terms and as friends (cf. 440d7–e6 with 430d1–2). Socrates's gentleness toward them, his abstaining from humiliating them, shows that one can "tolerate" madness without being mad oneself or that tolerance is not necessarily pathological or that knowing is not necessarily "intolerant."

Socrates, we note in conclusion, concedes that harmony, or an absence of contradictions, is not enough to fully defend a position (436c7–d7). If Hermogenes and Cratylus each hold contradictory opinions—in the first place, that everything is in flux and, in the second, that everything is not in flux—then there are two and only two consistent positions. We yet need to adjudicate between them. If we may infer something from Aristotle's report of Cratylus's later refusal to speak, Cratylus learns this much from Socrates: he is in fact confused, and he therefore needs to become consistent. Consistency, in Cratylus's case, terminates in silence. If everything is not in flux, then some things are stable and, perhaps, knowable. Cratylus does not opt for that consistent option. Two positions at issue here emphatically challenge reason and knowledge. Either one incoherently both does and does not say that everything is in flux, in which case reason has a road for vindicating itself, or one consistently holds that everything is in flux and therefore ceases to speak. That latter position, however, can be of no concern, for it can make no demands of us. The Heraclitean position, which is held not only by those in Heraclitus's orbit but also by "many others" (440c2–3), is either contradictory or silent. And, when posing questions to a silent interlocutor, we may follow Socrates's lead in taking silence to mean consent (434b4). Knowledge might as well be possible.

Notes

1. For related discussion of this kinship outside of Plato's *Cratylus*, see Dustin Sebell, *Xenophon's Socratic Education* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 1–5; J. Judd Owen, "The Tolerant Leviathan: Hobbes and the Paradox of Liberalism," *Polity* 37, no. 1

(2005): 130–48; Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 5–6; and Strauss, "Relativism," in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 13–26. For an illuminating discussion of the related question of the epistemological and political significance of forms, see Arlene W. Saxonhouse, "Freedom, Form, and Formlessness: Euripides' *Bacchae* and Plato's *Republic*," *American Political Science Review* 108, no. 1 (2014): 88–89.

2. E.g., David Meißner, "Reappraising Plato's *Cratylus*," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 106, no. 1 (March 24, 2022).
3. E.g., Imogen Smith, "False Names, Demonstratives and the Refutation of Linguistic Naturalism in Plato's *Cratylus* 427d1–431c3," *Phronesis* 53, no. 2 (May 2008): 125–51; Simon Keller, "An Interpretation of Plato's *Cratylus*," *Phronesis* 45, no. 4 (August 2000): 284–305.
4. E.g., S. Montgomery Ewegen, *Plato's "Cratylus": The Comedy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).
5. E.g., David Sedley, *Plato's "Cratylus"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 39–41; Michael W. Riley, *Plato's "Cratylus": Argument, Form, and Structure* (New York: Rodopi, 2005).
6. Attention, for instance, has been given to the question of the extent of Hermogenes's "conventionalism." For an overview, see C. G. Healow, "Extreme and Modest Conventionalism in Plato's *Cratylus*," *Apeiron* 54, no. 1 (January 2021): 1–28. For the argument that Hermogenes is not an extremist, see Rachel Barney, *Names and Nature in Plato's "Cratylus"* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 23–48.
7. A recent, very helpful comparison of the *Cratylus* and *Euthyphro* is T. Baker, "The Euthyphro Problem in Plato's *Cratylus*," *Southwest Philosophy Review* 39, no. 1 (April 21, 2023): 79–86.
8. The study that comes closest to this one in taking seriously divine wisdom *as a challenge* to reason in the *Cratylus* is Christina Hoenig, "Notes on the Etymologies in Plato's *Cratylus*," *Classical Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (December 2019): 557–65. A hint to that effect can be found in Harold Tarrant, "Socrates' Other Voices: 'Euthyphro' in the *Cratylus*," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, no. 4 (2013): 522. It is no novelty to see divine revelation in the background of this dialogue. See Baker, "The Euthyphro Problem," 79: "All dramatic readings concerning the mention of Euthyphro in the *Cratylus* agree on one point: Plato is mentioning Euthyphro to remind the reader of divine inspiration."
9. E.g., Sedley, *Plato's "Cratylus*," 6–14.

10. See Catherine H. Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers: The Coherence of the Dialogues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 650–52. Zuckert admits that this contention is not universal but advances a compelling argument for accepting this dramatic dating. A more recent (and more thorough) defense of this thesis is Colin C. Smith, "The Case for the 399 BCE Dramatic Date of Plato's *Cratylus*," *Classical Philology* 117, no. 4 (October 2022): 645–61. For the general consensus, see Sedley, *Plato's "Cratylus,"* 3; and J. V. Luce, "The Date of the *Cratylus*," *American Journal of Philology* 85, no. 2 (1964): 136–54.
11. Joe Sachs, "Introduction," in *Socrates and the Sophists: Plato's Protagoras, Euthydemus, Hippias Major and Cratylus* (Indianapolis: Focus, 2011), 1–39.
12. This study is following in the steps of similar studies focusing on Socrates and divine revelation; above all, see Lewis Fallis, *Socrates and Divine Revelation* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2018). Fallis's study, however, limits itself to careful studies of the *Euthyphro* and *Ion*. Related efforts include Robert C. Bartlett, *Sophistry and Political Philosophy: Protagoras' Challenge to Socrates* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); David Leibowitz, *The Ironic Defense of Socrates: Plato's Apology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Dustin Sebell, *The Socratic Turn: Knowledge of Good and Evil in an Age of Science* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Sebell, *Xenophon's Socratic Education*.
13. Cf. Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, III §25: "There is no knowledge: *consequently*—there is a god."
14. References to Plato are to John Burnet, ed., *Platonis Opera*, 5 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957).
15. Cf. Matthew Wells, "On Strauss on Xenophon's *Symposium*," *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 50, no. 1 (2023): 126.
16. According to Barney, the talk about divine inspiration is intended to "*distance* the contents presented from the figure of Socrates" (*Names and Nature*, 58).
17. Thomas L. Pangle, *Socrates Founding Political Philosophy in Xenophon's "Economist," "Symposium," and "Apology"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 132–33 and 149–57.
18. "Physics and Tragedy: On Plato's *Cratylus*," in *The Argument of the Action: Essays on Greek Poetry and Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 147. Cf. Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers*, 653: "Cratylus claims to possess some private knowledge."

19. Cf. Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers*, 653: "Socrates gives us two reasons to suspect at the very beginning of the dialogue that he does not think . . . that this [there being correct names by nature] is a profitable subject of inquiry."
20. Francesco Ademollo, *The "Cratylus" of Plato: A Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 54.
21. Socrates does, to be sure, attempt to show at 386c2–d1 that Protagoras's thesis is incoherent or self-defeating. Although that display is powerful, rebuttals are conceivable. Consider, e.g., Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §22.
22. The notion of divine omnipotence was not unknown to the Greeks. Consider, e.g., Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 918, where Zeus is said to be "all-powerful" (*pagkratēs*). Relatedly, Aristophanes lampoons the radical difference between a Socrates who seems to be a devotee of naturalistic, pre-Socratic philosophy and conventional views about the gods in his *Clouds* (esp. 367–411). The philosophic position, as depicted in the *Clouds*, is that "Zeus is not." In his place are said to be "necessities," which would limit divine power. This position amounts to a denial of divine omnipotence: Zeus does not and cannot make it rain whenever he wishes. (Plato's Socrates, of course, draws attention to this play in the *Apology* 19c2–4.) A similar remark is found near the end of Plato's *Laws* 967a1–5. The Athenian Stranger explains that people think that those who busy themselves with astronomy and similar concerns become "atheists" after seeing that things come to be through "necessities" rather than (divine) thought. Socrates, of course, admits to taking natural philosophy or science seriously in his youth prior to his turn to dialectic (*Phaedo* 97b8ff. with context). Socrates explicitly refers in that context to the teachings of Anaxagoras. Aristotle helpfully informs us that the pre-Socratic natural scientists universally held the opinion that nothing comes to be out of nothing (e.g., *Physics* 187a26–28 and *On Generation and Corruption* 317b29–31), a premise at odds with divine omnipotence. For excellent, precise treatment of this underlying issue in Socrates's autobiographical account in the *Phaedo*, see Sebell, *The Socratic Turn*. Cf. the remarks of Hegel in E. S. Haldane, trans., *Hegel's Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (London: Humanities Press, 1955), 1:326–27: "A more important matter is that Anaxagoras (as happened later with Socrates and many other philosophers) was accused of despising those whom the people accepted as gods. . . . The general remark might be made of Thales, Anaximander, etc., that the sun, moon, earth and stars were counted as mere things. . . . All the ideas

of those philosophers have this in common, that nature is through them undeified."

23. For an account of the limits of the translation "shuttle," see Sean Donovan Driscoll, "Plato's Tool Analogy in *Cratylus* 386e–390e," *Ancient Philosophy* 42, no. 2 (July 25, 2022): 377.
24. Cf. 390c6–12. There, Socrates abstains from asking Hermogenes to supply the name of the *user* of the work of the art of the lawgiver. The user in the strict sense, again, is probably the philosopher. Cf. 398c1–4, which must be taken with 398b3–4. On the admittedly strange use of "art" in the context of philosophy, consider that the Greek word for dialectic—*dialektikē*—contains an ending implying that it is the "art" or *technē* of dialectic. See Evert van Emde Boas et al., *The Cambridge Grammar of Classical Greek* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 264 (23.17). Hence, Robert C. Bartlett has recently argued that the proper translation of Aristotle's *Rhetorikē* is *Art of Rhetoric*. See his *Aristotle's Art of Rhetoric: Translated with an Interpretive Essay* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019). Rhetoric, Aristotle famously claims, is a counterpart of dialectic at *Rhetoric* 1354a1. See also the discussion in John Edwin Sandys, ed., *The Rhetoric of Aristotle with a Commentary by the Late Edward Meredith Cope, M.A.*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1877), ad loc. *Technē* can also simply be a term to refer to a knower of something, which is why it is frequently employed in dialectical conversations (consider Aristotle, *Topics* 104a33–37). Socrates, of course, is always (paradoxically) treating things like justice and virtue as if they are arts or sciences; see, e.g., *Republic* 334b3ff. (At 334b4, Socrates uses the term *kleptikē*, which implies the word *technē*. The arts are treated more overtly in Socrates's refutations of Thrasymachus.) For illuminating discussion, see Thomas L. Pangle and Timothy W. Burns, *The Key Texts of Political Philosophy: An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 36–66; and Devin Stauffer, *Plato's Introduction to the Question of Justice* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001). Philosophy and dialectic are closely associated with each other by the Platonic Socrates at *Republic* 539b9–c3, among other places.
25. Edoardo Benati also observes that conventionalism plays a similar role in both the *Minos* and *Cratylus*, "Law as a 'Discovery of Being': The *Minos* in the Light of the *Cratylus*," *Études Platoniciennes*, no. 16 (May 12, 2021).
26. Sedley, *Plato's "Cratylus,"* 68.

27. Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers*, 658. Benardete may also indicate this; see his "Physics and Tragedy," 150.
28. Cf. Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers*, 657–58.
29. Baker intriguingly discerns in this section a version of the "Euthyphro problem"; see his "The Euthyphro Problem."
30. If the gods are conventionally or typically taken to be omnipotent or not bound by natural necessities but instead "supernatural" and able miraculously to intervene in human affairs by overturning apparent necessities, then gods subject to necessities are strange gods indeed, being at odds with conventional beliefs about divine power. See the discussion of *Cratylus* 413a1–5 below. Somewhat helpful on this score are the remarks of America's most Socratic founder, Benjamin Franklin: "If you say [God] has decreed some things and left others to the Events of Nature and Free Agency, Which he never alters or interrupts; . . . you unGod him." Qtd. in "On the Providence of God in the Government of the World," in J. A. Leo Lemay, ed., *Benjamin Franklin: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1987), 167.
31. See Aristophanes, *Clouds* 225–34; and Aristotle, *De Anima* 405a21–22. Cf. Thomas L. Pangle, *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003), 213n10.
32. See George Grote, *Greece* (New York: Peter Fenelon Collier & Son, 1899), 1:340–461, esp. 357–74.
33. See David Bolotin, *An Approach to Aristotle's Physics: With Particular Attention to the Role of His Manner of Writing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 17.
34. For an extended look at Hesiod in relation to the *Cratylus*, see Athanassios Vergados, *Hesiod's Verbal Craft: Studies in Hesiod's Conception of Language and Its Ancient Reception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 253–88.
35. Sedley, *Plato's "Cratylus,"* 114–19.
36. Barney argues that there is only "apparently" a play on this term, which also means letters. See her *Names and Nature*, 92–94.
37. Hoenig finds an allusion to Marsyas in the *Cratlyus*, which she relates to Socrates's hubris. See her "Notes on the Etymologies in Plato's *Cratylus*," 560–63.
38. For more discussion of this, see, above all, Sebell, *The Socratic Turn*, 45–60. For discussion of the connection between materialism and sophistry, see Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 117 and 172; Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 43; Strauss,

The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis, trans. Elsa M. Sinclair (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 142–43; and Timothy W. Burns, "Leo Strauss on the Origins of Hobbes's Natural Science," *Review of Metaphysics* 64, no. 4 (2011): 823–55.

39. Consider also 397c8–d6, 409d1–4, and 416c4–5.
40. I am not so concerned with the "true" Heraclitus as opposed to Plato's. For helpful discussion of the difference, see Matthew Colvin, "Heraclitean Flux and Unity of Opposites in Plato's *Theaetetus* and *Cratylus*," *Classical Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2007): 759–69.
41. This suggestion, however, should not be taken as a complete rejection of some learning without names. See Christine J. Thomas, "Inquiry without Names in Plato's *Cratylus*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 46, no. 3 (July 1, 2008): 341–64. In "An Interpretation of Plato's *Cratylus*," Keller argues that the defense of this possibility is *the* primary purpose of this dialogue. Cf. Sebell, *The Socratic Turn*, 107–8.
42. Cf. 400a8–10.
43. Cratylus is not unreasonably tempted to say this, since the change of just one letter in a word can result in another (different) word. This is just one indication that names are obviously not imitations in the manner that Cratylus wishes to maintain.
44. Consider also *Cratylus* 391b9–d1.
45. Benardete, "Physics and Tragedy," 159.
46. Hence, people err about Hades in more than one way (403b2–4). The strict, Socratic sense of prudence is discussed at 411d4–6. Cf. 437b8–c1.
47. Benardete, "Physics and Tragedy," 162.