

Plato. "Cratylus." Trans. Benjamin Jowett.  
 Critical Theory Since Plato. Ed. Hazard  
 Adams. London: Thomson, 1992.

is unable to make good her defense, this argument of ours shall be a charm to us, which we will repeat to ourselves while we listen to her strains; that we may not fall away into the childish love of her which captivates the many. At all events we are well aware<sup>69</sup> that poetry, such as we have described, is not to be regarded seriously as attaining to the truth; and he who listens to her, fearing for the safety of the city which is within him, should be on his guard against her seductions and make our words his law.

Yes, he said, I quite agree with you.

Yes, I said, my dear Glaucon, for great is the issue at stake, greater than appears, whether a man is to be good or bad. And what will anyone be profited if under the influence of honor or money or power, aye, or under the excitement of poetry, he neglect justice and virtue?

Yes, he said; I have been convinced by the argument, as I believe that anyone else would have been.

From  
 Cratylus

Persons of the Dialogue

Hermogenes  
 Socrates  
 Cratylus

[Hermogenes has been querying Socrates about the meanings and derivations of words.]

*Hermogenes* Well, then, let me ask about the greatest and noblest, such as ἀλήθεια (truth) and ψεῦδος (falsehood) and ὄν (being), not forgetting to inquire why the word ὄνομα (name), which is the theme of our discussion, has this name of ὄνομα.

*Socrates* You know the word μαίεσθαι (to seek)?

*Hermogenes* Yes—meaning the same as ζητεῖν (to inquire).

*Socrates* The word ὄνομα seems to be a compressed sentence, signifying ὄν οὐ κτήμα (being for which

there is a search), as is still more obvious in ὀνομαστόν (notable), which states in so many words that real existence is that for which there is a seeking (ὄν οὐ μάσμα); ἀλήθεια is also an agglomeration of θεία ἄλη (divine wandering), implying the divine motion of existence. ψεῦδος (falsehood) is the opposite of motion; here is another ill name given by the legislator to stagnation and forced inaction, which he compares to sleep (εὔδειν), but the original meaning of the word is disguised by the addition of ψ. ὄν and οὐσία are λόν with an ι broken off; this agrees with the true principle, for being (ὄν) is also moving (λόν), and the same may be said of not-being, which is likewise called not-going (οὐκίον or οὐκί ὄν = οὐκί λόν).

*Hermogenes* You have hammered away at them manfully, but suppose that some were to say to you, What is the word λόν, and what are ῥέον and δοῖν? Show me their fitness.

*Socrates* You mean to say, how should I answer him?

*Hermogenes* Yes.

*Socrates* One way of giving the appearance of an answer has been already suggested.

*Hermogenes* What way?

*Socrates* To say that names which we do not understand are of foreign origin, and this is very likely the right answer, and something of this kind may be true of them, but also the original forms of words may have been lost in the lapse of ages; names have been so twisted in all manner of ways that I should not be surprised if the old language when compared with that now in use would appear to us to be a barbarous tongue.

*Hermogenes* Very likely.

*Socrates* Yes, very likely. But still the inquiry demands our earnest attention and we must not flinch. For we should remember that if a person goes on analyzing names into words,<sup>1</sup> and inquiring also into the elements out of which the words are formed, and keeps on always repeating this process, he who has to answer him must at last give up the inquiry in despair.

*Hermogenes* Very true.

*Socrates* And at what point ought he to lose heart and give up the inquiry? Must he not stop when he comes to the names which are the elements of all other names and sentences? For these cannot be supposed to be made up of other names. The word ἀγαθόν (good), for example, is, as we were saying, a compound of ἀγαστός (admirable) and θεός (swift). And probably θεός is made up of other ele-

ments, and these again is incapable of further saying that we have need not be resolved.

*Hermogenes*  
*Socrates*

are now asking should not their truth or law method?

*Hermogenes*  
*Socrates*

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assist you.  
*Socrates* I me that one principle well as secondary-names, there is no di-

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names which preceded far as they can be shown be real names? And that we had no voice with one another. Should make signs with the

*Hermogenes*  
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W thing; the elevation lightness and upward would be expressed by were describing the names we should make our could to them.

*Hermogenes*  
*Socrates*

W thing else.  
*Socrates* W only can the body eye

<sup>69</sup>[Jowett] Or, if we accept Madvig's ingenious but unnecessary emendation ῥοσμεθα, "At all events we will sing, that," etc.

CRATYLUS. Plato's *Cratylus* is thought to have been composed shortly before *Republic*, which is usually dated circa 373 B.C. The text is from Benjamin Jowett, tr., *The Dialogues of Plato*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892; 1st edition, 1871).

<sup>1</sup>By this Socrates means the original words.

ous in ὀνομαστόν (names that real existence is ὄν μᾶσμα); ἀλήθεια is divine wandering), ἰμπεύδος (falsehood) is the ill name given by the action, which he cannot mean of the word and οὐσία are λόγος with the principle, for being may be said of nothing (οὐκίον or οὐκὶ ὄν

removed away at them: to say to you, What is ἰδοῦν? Show me their

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it ought he to lose heart: stop when he comes to of all other names and proposed to be made up of (odd), for example, is, as αἰσθητός (admirable) and made up of other ele-

ments, and these again of others. But if we take a word which is incapable of further resolution, then we shall be right in saying that we have at last reached a primary element, which need not be resolved any further.

*Hermogenes* I believe you to be in the right.

*Socrates* And suppose the names about which you are now asking should turn out to be primary elements. Must not their truth or law be examined according to some new method?

*Hermogenes* Very likely.

*Socrates* Quite so, Hermogenes. All that has preceded would lead to this conclusion. And if, as I think, the conclusion is true, then I shall again say to you, come and help me, that I may not fall into some absurdity in stating the principle of primary names.

*Hermogenes* Let me hear, and I will do my best to assist you.

*Socrates* I think that you will acknowledge with me that one principle is applicable to all names, primary as well as secondary—when they are regarded simply as names, there is no difference in them.

*Hermogenes* Certainly not.

*Socrates* All the names that we have been explaining were intended to indicate the nature of things.

*Hermogenes* Of course.

*Socrates* And that this is true of the primary quite as much as of the secondary names is implied in their being names.

*Hermogenes* Surely.

*Socrates* But the secondary, as I conceive, derive their significance from the primary.

*Hermogenes* That is evident.

*Socrates* Very good, but then how do the primary names which precede analysis show the natures of things, as far as they can be shown, which they must do, if they are to be real names? And here I will ask you a question. Suppose that we had no voice or tongue, and wanted to communicate with one another. Should we not, like the deaf and dumb, make signs with the hands and head and the rest of the body?

*Hermogenes* There would be no choice, Socrates.

*Socrates* We should imitate the nature of the thing; the elevation of our hands to heaven would mean lightness and upwardness; heaviness and downwardness would be expressed by letting them drop to the ground; if we were describing the running of a horse, or any other animal, we should make our bodies and their gestures as like as we could to them.

*Hermogenes* I do not see that we could do anything else.

*Socrates* We could not, for by bodily imitation only can the body ever express anything.

*Hermogenes* Very true.

*Socrates* And when we want to express ourselves, either with the voice, or tongue, or mouth, the expression is simply their imitation of that which we want to express?

*Hermogenes* It must be so, I think.

*Socrates* Then a name is a vocal imitation of that which the vocal imitator names or imitates?

*Hermogenes* I think so.

*Socrates* Nay, my friend, I am disposed to think that we have not reached the truth as yet.

*Hermogenes* Why not?

*Socrates* Because if we have we shall be obliged to admit that the people who imitate sheep, or cocks, or other animals, name that which they imitate.

*Hermogenes* Quite true.

*Socrates* Then could I have been right in what I was saying?

*Hermogenes* In my opinion, no. But I wish that you would tell me, Socrates, what sort of an imitation is a name?

*Socrates* In the first place, I should reply, not a musical imitation, although that is also vocal, nor, again, an imitation of what music imitates; these, in my judgment, would not be naming. Let me put the matter as follows. All objects have sound and figure, and many have color?

*Hermogenes* Certainly.

*Socrates* But the art of naming appears not to be concerned with imitations of this kind. The arts which have to do with them are music and drawing?

*Hermogenes* True.

*Socrates* Again, is there not an essence of each thing, just as there is a color, or sound? And is there not an essence of color and sound as well as of anything else which may be said to have an essence?

*Hermogenes* I should think so.

*Socrates* Well, and if anyone could express the essence of each thing in letters and syllables, would he not express the nature of each thing?

*Hermogenes* Quite so.

*Socrates* The musician and the painter were the two names which you gave to the two other imitators. What will this imitator be called?

*Hermogenes* I imagine, Socrates, that he must be the namer, or name giver, of whom we are in search.

*Socrates* If this is true, then I think that we are in a condition to consider the names ῥοή (stream), ἕλκειν (to go), σχέσις (retention), about which you were asking, and we may see whether the namer has grasped the nature of them in letters and syllables in such a manner as to imitate the essence or not.

*Hermogenes* Very good.

*Socrates* But are these the only primary names, or are there others?

*Hermogenes* There must be others.

*Socrates* So I should expect. But how shall we further analyze them, and where does the imitator begin? Imitation of the essence is made by syllables and letters. Ought we not, therefore, first to separate the letters, just as those who are beginning rhythm first distinguish the powers of elementary and then of compound sounds, and when they have done so, but not before, proceed to the consideration of rhythms?

*Hermogenes* Yes.

*Socrates* Must we not begin in the same way with letters—first separating the vowels, and then the consonants and mutes, into classes, according to the received distinctions of the learned, also the semivowels, which are neither vowels nor yet mutes, and distinguishing into classes the vowels themselves? And when we have perfected the classification of things, we shall give their names, and see whether, as in the case of letters, there are any classes to which they may be all referred, and hence we shall see their natures, and see, too, whether they have in them classes as there are in the letters. And when we have well considered all this, we shall know how to apply them to what they resemble, whether one letter is used to denote one thing, or whether there is to be an admixture of several of them, just as, in painting, the painter who wants to depict anything sometimes uses purple only, or any other color, and sometimes mixes up several colors, as his method is when he has to paint flesh color or anything of that kind—he uses his colors as his figures appear to require them. And so, too, we shall apply letters to the expression of objects, either single letters when required, or several letters, and so we shall form syllables, as they are called, and from syllables make nouns and verbs, and thus, at last, from the combinations of nouns and verbs arrive at language, large and fair and whole. And as the painter made a figure, even so shall we make speech by the art of the namer or the rhetorician, or by some other art. Not that I am literally speaking of ourselves, but I was carried away—meaning to say that this was the way in which not we, but the ancients formed language, and what they put together we must take to pieces in like manner, if we are to attain a scientific view of the whole subject. And we must see whether the primary, and also whether the secondary elements are rightly given or not, for if they are not, the composition of them, my dear Hermogenes, will be a sorry piece of work, and in the wrong direction.

*Hermogenes* That, Socrates, I can quite believe.

*Socrates* Well, but do you suppose that you will be able to analyse them in this way? for I am certain that I should not.

*Hermogenes* Much less am I likely to be able.

*Socrates* Shall we leave them, then? or shall we seek to discover, if we can, something about them, according to the measure of our ability, saying by way of preface, as I said before of the Gods, that of the truth about them we know nothing, and do but entertain human notions of them. And in this present inquiry, let us say to ourselves, before we proceed, that the higher method is the one which we or others who would analyse language to any good purpose must follow; but under the circumstances, as men say, we must do as well as we can. What do you think?

*Hermogenes* I very much approve.

*Socrates* That objects should be imitated in letters and syllables, and so find expression, may appear ridiculous, Hermogenes, but it cannot be avoided—there is no better principle to which we can look for the truth of first names. Deprived of this, we must have recourse to divine help, like the tragic poets, who in any perplexity have their Gods waiting in the air; and must get out of our difficulty in like fashion, by saying that 'the Gods gave the first names, and therefore they are right.' This will be the best contrivance, or perhaps that other notion may be even better still, of deriving them from some barbarous people, for the barbarians are older than we are; or we may say that antiquity has cast a veil over them, which is the same sort of excuse as the last; for all these are not reasons but only ingenious excuses for having no reasons concerning the truth of words. And yet any sort of ignorance of first or primitive names involves an ignorance of secondary words; for they can only be explained by the primary. Clearly then the professor of languages should be able to give a very lucid explanation of first names, or let him be assured he will only talk nonsense about the rest. Do you not suppose this to be true?

*Hermogenes* Certainly, Socrates.

*Socrates* My first notions of original names are truly wild and ridiculous, though I have no objection to impart them to you if you desire, and I hope that you will communicate to me in return anything better which you may have.

*Hermogenes* Fear not; I will do my best.

*Socrates* In the first place, the letter  $\rho$  appears to me to be the general instrument expressing all motion ( $\chi$ ί-νησις). But I have not yet explained the meaning of this latter word, which is just  $\lambda$ έσις (going); for the letter  $\eta$  was not in use among the ancients, who only employed  $\epsilon$ ; and the root is  $\kappa$ ίειν, which is a foreign form, the same as  $\lambda$ έναι. And the old word  $\kappa$ ίνησις will be correctly given as  $\lambda$ έσις in corresponding modern letters. Assuming this foreign root  $\kappa$ ίειν, and allowing for the change of the  $\eta$  and the insertion of the  $\nu$ , we have  $\kappa$ ίνησις, which should have been  $\kappa$ ιείνησις or  $\epsilon$ ίσις; and  $\sigma$ τᾶσις is the negative of  $\lambda$ έναι (or  $\epsilon$ ίσις), and has

been improved into  $\lambda$ έναι, appeared to them for the expression of the letter for this purpose  $\rho$ είν and  $\rho$ οῆ he  $\rho$ είν  $\rho$ όμος (trembling) such as  $\kappa$ ρούειν (str  $\theta$ ρύπτειν (break),  $\kappa$  of all these sorts of  $\rho$  in the letter  $\rho$ , that the tongue was  $\rho$ unciation of this  $\rho$  to express motion, subtle elements which he uses the letter  $\rho$  as there is another class of pronunciation is a breath; these are us  $\psi$ υχρὸν (shivering) shaken),  $\sigma$ εισμός (sive giver of names when (windy). He seems to use of the tongue in of binding and rest in movement of  $\lambda$ , in  $\lambda$ ίσις slips, and in this he  $\lambda$ ίσις (level), and  $\lambda$ ιπαρὸν (sleek), in the heavier sound of union of the two gave  $\lambda$ ίσις, as in  $\gamma$ λίσις, to be sounded from  $\nu$  inwardness; hence he  $\rho$ οῆ: a he assigned to  $\rho$  because they are  $\rho$ ness, and therefore the  $\rho$ οῆ  $\rho$ οῆ (round).  $\rho$  things into letters and names and signs, and other signs. That of names; but I should say.

*Hermogenes* before, Cratylus mysterious of names, but he nevertheless cannot tell whether his now, Cratylus, here in what Socrates has in something better of your view is, and therefore Socrates and I will learn

I likely to be able. am, then? or shall we about them, according y way of preface, as I e truth about them we uman notions of them. to ourselves, before we one which we or others ood purpose must fol- en say, we must do as

approve. ld be imitated in letters may appear ridiculous, ed—there is no better e truth of first names. rse to divine help, like y have their Gods wait- r difficulty in like fash- e first names, and there- e best contrivance, or a better still, of deriving for the barbarians are antiquity has cast a veil f excuse as the last; for enious excuses for hav- of words. And yet any e names involves an ig- y can only be explained professor of languages id explanation of first nly talk nonsense about e true?

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will do my best. e, the letter ρ appears to pressing all motion (χί- l the meaning of this lat- ); for the letter η was not ily employed ε; and the α, the same as ἰέναι. And tly given as ἰεσις in cor- ig this foreign root κίειν, η and the insertion of the have been κίεινσις or f ἰένα (or εἰσις), and has

been improved into στάσις. Now the letter ρ, as I was say- ing, appeared to the imposer of names an excellent instru- ment for the expression of motion; and he frequently uses the letter for this purpose: for example, in the actual words ῥεῖν and ῥοῆ he represents motion by ρ; also in the words τρόμος (trembling), τραχὺς (rugged); and again, in words such as κρούειν (strike), θραύειν (crush), ἐρείκειν (bruise), θρύπτειν (break), κερματίζειν (crumble), ῥυμβεῖν (whirl): of all these sorts of movements he generally finds an expres- sion in the letter R, because, as I imagine, he had observed that the tongue was most agitated and least at rest in the pro- nunciation of this letter, which he therefore used in order to express motion, just as by the letter ι he expresses the subtle elements which pass through all things. This is why he uses the letter ι as imitative of motion, ἰέναι, ἰεσθαί. And there is another class of letters, φ, ψ, σ and ξ, of which the pronunciation is accompanied by great expenditure of breath; these are used in the imitation of such notions as ψυχρὸν (shivering), ξέον (seething), σεῖσθαι (to be shaken), σεισμός (shock), and are always introduced by the giver of names when he wants to imitate what is φυσῶδες (windy). He seems to have thought that the closing and pres- sure of the tongue in the utterance of δ and τ was expressive of binding and rest in a place: he further observed the liquid movement of λ, in the pronunciation of which the tongue slips, and in this he found the expression of smoothness, as in λείος (level), and in the word ὀλτσκάνειν (to slip) itself, λιπαρὸν (sleek), in the word κολλῶδες (gluey), and the like: the heavier sound of γ detained the slipping tongue, and the union of the two gave the notion of a glutinous clammy na- ture, as in γλίσχος, γλυκὺς, γλοιῶδες. The ν he observed to be sounded from within, and therefore to have a notion of inwardness; hence he introduced the sound in ἐνδον and ἐντ- ός: α he assigned to the expression of size, and η of length, because they are great letters: ο was the sign of round- ness, and therefore there is plenty of ο mixed up in the word γογγύλον (round). Thus did the legislator, reducing all things into letters and syllables, and impressing on them names and signs, and out of them by imitation compound- ing other signs. That is my view, Hermogenes, of the truth of names; but I should like to hear what Cratylus has more to say.

*Hermogenes* But, Socrates, as I was telling you before, Cratylus mystifies me; he says that there is a fitness of names, but he never explains what is this fitness, so that I cannot tell whether his obscurity is intended or not. Tell me now, Cratylus, here in the presence of Socrates, do you agree in what Socrates has been saying about names, or have you something better of your own? and if you have, tell me what you view is, and then you will either learn of Socrates, or Socrates and I will learn of you.

*Cratylus* Well, but surely, Hermogenes, you do not suppose that you can learn, or I explain, any subject of importance all in a moment—at any rate, not such a subject as language, which is, perhaps, the very greatest of all.

*Hermogenes* No, indeed, but, as Hesiod says, and I agree with him, ‘to add little to little’<sup>2</sup> is worth while. And, therefore, if you think that you can add anything at all, how- ever small, to our knowledge, take a little trouble and oblige Socrates, and me too, who certainly have a claim upon you.

*Socrates* I am by no means positive, Cratylus, in the view which Hermogenes and myself have worked out, and therefore do not hesitate to say what you think, which if it be better than my own view I shall gladly accept. And I should not be at all surprised to find that you have found some better notion. For you have evidently reflected on these matters and have had teachers, and if you have really a better theory of the truth of names, you may count me in the number of disciples.

*Cratylus* You are right, Socrates, in saying that I have made a study of these matters, and I might possibly convert you into a disciple. But I fear that the opposite is more probable, and I already find myself moved to say to you what Achilles in the ‘Prayers’ says to Ajax,

Illustrious Ajax, son of Telamon, lord of the people,

You appear to have spoken in all things much to my mind.<sup>3</sup>

And you, Socrates, appear to me to be an oracle, and to give answers much to my mind, whether you are inspired by Euthyphro, or whether some Muse may have long been an inhabitant of your breast, unconsciously to yourself.

*Socrates* Excellent Cratylus, I have long been wondering at my own wisdom. I cannot trust myself. And I think that I ought to stop and ask myself, What am I saying? For there is nothing worse than self-deception—when the deceiver is always at home and always with you—it is quite terrible, and therefore I ought often to retrace my steps and endeavor to ‘look fore and aft,’<sup>4</sup> in the words of the aforesaid Homer. And now let me see, where are we? Have we not been saying that the correct name indicates the nature of the thing? Has this proposition been sufficiently proved?

*Cratylus* Yes, Socrates, what you say, as I am dis- posed to think, is quite true.

<sup>2</sup>[Jowett] *Works and Days*, 9.359.

<sup>3</sup>[Jowett] *Iliad*, 9.644 sq.

<sup>4</sup>[Jowett] *Iliad*, 1.343, 3.109.

*Socrates* Names, then, are given in order to instruct?

*Cratylus* Certainly.

*Socrates* And naming is an art, and has artificers?

*Cratylus* Yes.

*Socrates* And who are they?

*Cratylus* The legislators, of whom you spoke at first.<sup>5</sup>

*Socrates* And does this art grow up among men like other arts? Let me explain what I mean. Of painters, some are better and some worse?

*Cratylus* Yes.

*Socrates* The better painters execute their works, I mean their figures, better, and the worse execute them worse. And of builders also, the better sort build fairer houses, and the worse build them worse.

*Cratylus* True.

*Socrates* And among legislators, there are some who do their work better and some worse?

*Cratylus* No, there I do not agree with you.

*Socrates* Then you do not think that some laws are better and others worse?

*Cratylus* No, indeed.

*Socrates* Or that one name is better than another?

*Cratylus* Certainly not.

*Socrates* Then all names are rightly imposed?

*Cratylus* Yes, if they are names at all.

*Socrates* Well, what do you say to the name of our friend Hermogenes, which was mentioned before—assuming that he has nothing of the nature of Hermes in him, shall we say that this is a wrong name, or not his name at all?<sup>6</sup>

*Cratylus* I should reply that Hermogenes is not his name at all, but only appears to be his, and is really the name of somebody else, who has the nature which corresponds to it.

*Socrates* And if a man were to call him Hermogenes, would he not be even speaking falsely? For there may be a doubt whether you can call him Hermogenes, if he is not.

*Cratylus* What do you mean?

*Socrates* Are you maintaining that falsehood is impossible? For if this is your meaning I should answer that there have been plenty of liars in all ages.

*Cratylus* Why, Socrates, how can a man say that which is not—say something and yet say nothing? For is not falsehood saying the thing which is not?

*Socrates* Your argument, friend, is too subtle for a man of my age. But I should like to know whether you are one of those philosophers who think that falsehood may be spoken but not said?

*Cratylus* Neither spoken nor said.

*Socrates* Nor uttered nor addressed? For example, if a person, saluting you in a foreign country, were to take your hand and say, Hail, Athenian stranger, Hermogenes, son of Smicrion—these words, whether spoken, said, uttered, or addressed, would have no application to you but only to our friend Hermogenes, or perhaps to nobody at all?

*Cratylus* In my opinion, Socrates, the speaker would only be talking nonsense.

*Socrates* Well, but that will be quite enough for me, if you will tell me whether the nonsense would be true or false, or partly true and partly false, which is all that I want to know.

*Cratylus* I should say that he would be putting himself in motion to no purpose, and that his words would be an unmeaning sound like the noise of hammering at a brazen pot.

*Socrates* But let us see, Cratylus, whether we cannot find a meeting point, for you would admit that the name is not the same with the thing named?

*Cratylus* I should.

*Socrates* And would you further acknowledge that the name is an imitation of the thing?

*Cratylus* Certainly.

*Socrates* And you would say that pictures are also imitations of things, but in another way?

*Cratylus* Yes.

*Socrates* I believe you may be right, but I do not rightly understand you. Please to say, then, whether both sorts of imitation—I mean both pictures or words—are not equally attributable and applicable to the things of which they are the imitation.

*Cratylus* They are.

*Socrates* First look at the matter thus. You may attribute the likeness of the man to the man, and of the woman to the woman, and so on?

*Cratylus* Certainly.

*Socrates* And conversely you may attribute the likeness of the man to the woman, and of the woman to the man?

*Cratylus* Very true.

*Socrates* And are both modes of assigning them right, or only the first?

*Cratylus*  
*Socrates* which attributes to like it?

*Cratylus*  
*Socrates* friends should have ment, let me state ment, whether appli when applied to na other mode of givir like, I call wrong, a wrong.

*Cratylus* pictures; they may t of names—they mus

*Socrates* go to a man and say him his own likenes and when I say show

*Cratylus*  
*Socrates* A

This is your name? I tation. May I not say not then bring to his self, when I say, Thi species, when I say, not all that quite pos:

*Cratylus* I and therefore I say, g

*Socrates* T which need hardly be names as well as pic them we may call tr falsehood. Now if t names, there may al ment of verbs, and i tences, which are n Cratylus.

*Cratylus* I very true.

*Socrates* A compared to pictures, the appropriate colors all—some may be w too much of them—n

*Cratylus* V

*Socrates* A ture or figure, and he picture or figure, but

<sup>5</sup>Early in the dialogue Socrates and Hermogenes have agreed that the legislator is the giver of names. Shelley uses the term "legislator" in this sense in his *Defense of Poetry*. See pp. 517 and pp. 529.

<sup>6</sup>Early in the dialogue there has been a discussion of what we call proper names.

*Cratylus* Only the first.  
*Socrates* That is to say, the mode of assignment which attributes to each that which belongs to it and is like it?

*Cratylus* That is my view.

*Socrates* Now then, as I am desirous that we being friends should have a good understanding about the argument, let me state my view to you. The first mode of assignment, whether applied to figures or to names, I call right, and when applied to names only, true as well as right, and the other mode of giving and assigning the name which is unlike, I call wrong, and in the case of names, false as well as wrong.

*Cratylus* That may be true, *Socrates*, in the case of pictures; they may be wrongly assigned. But not in the case of names—they must be always right.

*Socrates* Why, what is the difference? May I not go to a man and say to him, This is your picture, showing him his own likeness, or perhaps the likeness of a woman, and when I say show, I mean bring before the sense of sight.

*Cratylus* Certainly.

*Socrates* And may I not go to him again, and say, This is your name? For the name, like the picture, is an imitation. May I not say to him, This is your name? And may I not then bring to his sense of hearing the imitation of himself, when I say, This is a man, or of a female of the human species, when I say, This is a woman, as the case may be? Is not all that quite possible?

*Cratylus* I would fain agree with you, *Socrates*, and therefore I say, granted.

*Socrates* That is very good of you, if I am right, which need hardly be disputed at present. But if I can assign names as well as pictures to objects, the right assignment of them we may call truth, and the wrong assignment of them falsehood. Now if there be such a wrong assignment of names, there may also be a wrong or inappropriate assignment of verbs, and if of names and verbs then of the sentences, which are made up of them. What do you say, *Cratylus*?

*Cratylus* I agree, and think that what you say is very true.

*Socrates* And further, primitive nouns may be compared to pictures, and in pictures you may either give all the appropriate colors and figures, or you may not give them all—some may be wanting—or there may be too many or too much of them—may there not?

*Cratylus* Very true.

*Socrates* And he who gives all gives a perfect picture or figure, and he who takes away or adds also gives a picture or figure, but not a good one.

*Cratylus* Yes.

*Socrates* In like manner, he who by syllables and letters imitates the nature of things, if he gives all that is appropriate will produce a good image, or in other words a name, but if he subtracts or perhaps adds a little, he will make an image but not a good one; whence I infer that some names are well and others ill made.

*Cratylus* That is true.

*Socrates* Then the artist of names may be sometimes good, or he may be bad?

*Cratylus* Yes.

*Socrates* And this artist of names is called the legislator?

*Cratylus* Yes.

*Socrates* Then like other artists the legislator may be good or he may be bad; it must surely be so if our former admissions hold good.

*Cratylus* Very true, *Socrates*, but the case of language, you see, is different. For when by the help of grammar we assign the letters  $\alpha$  or  $\beta$ , or any other letters, to a certain name, then, if we add, or subtract, or misplace a letter, the name which is written is not only written wrongly, but not written at all, and in any of these cases becomes other than a name.

*Socrates* But I doubt whether your view is altogether correct, *Cratylus*.

*Cratylus* How so?

*Socrates* I believe that what you say may be true about numbers, which must be just what they are, or not be at all. For example, the number ten at once becomes other than ten if a unit be added or subtracted, and so of any other number, but this does not apply to that which is qualitative or to anything which is represented under an image. I should say rather that the image, if expressing in every point the entire reality, would no longer be an image. Let us suppose the existence of two objects. One of them shall be *Cratylus*, and the other the image of *Cratylus*, and we will suppose, further, that some god makes not only a representation such as a painter would make of your outward form and color, but also creates an inward organization like yours, having the same warmth and softness, and into this infuses motion, and soul, and mind, such as you have, and in a word copies all your qualities, and places them by you in another form. Would you say that this was *Cratylus* and the image of *Cratylus*, or that there were two *Cratyluses*?

*Cratylus* I should say that there were two *Cratyluses*.

*Socrates* Then you see, my friend, that we must find some other principle of truth in images, and also in names, and not insist that an image is no longer an image

when something is added or subtracted. Do you not perceive that images are very far from having qualities which are the exact counterpart of the realities which they represent?

*Cratylus* Yes, I see.

*Socrates* But then how ridiculous would be the effect of names on things, if they were exactly the same with them! For they would be the doubles of them, and no one would be able to determine which were the names and which were the realities.

*Cratylus* Quite true.

*Socrates* Then fear not, but have the courage to admit that one name may be correctly and another incorrectly given, and do not insist that the name shall be exactly the same with the thing, but allow the occasional substitution of a wrong letter, and if of a letter also of a noun in a sentence, and if of a noun in a sentence also of a sentence which is not appropriate to the matter, and acknowledge that the thing may be named, and described, so long as the general character of the thing which you are describing is retained. And this, as you will remember, was remarked by Hermogenes and myself in the particular instance of the names of the letters.

*Cratylus* Yes, I remember.

*Socrates* Good, and when the general character is preserved, even if some of the proper letters are wanting, still the thing is signified—well, if all the letters are given, not well, when only a few of them are given. I think that we had better admit this, lest we be punished like travelers in Aegina who wander about the street late at night, and likewise told by truth herself that we have arrived too late. Or if not, you must find out some new notion of correctness of names, and no longer maintain that a name is the expression of a thing in letters or syllables, for if you say both, you will be inconsistent with yourself.

*Cratylus* I quite acknowledge, Socrates, what you say to be very reasonable.

*Socrates* Then as we are agreed thus far, let us ask ourselves whether a name rightly imposed ought not to have the proper letters.

*Cratylus* Yes.

*Socrates* And the proper letters are those which are like the things?

*Cratylus* Yes.

*Socrates* Enough then of names which are rightly given. And in names which are incorrectly given, the greater part may be supposed to be made up of proper and similar letters, or there would be no likeness, but there will be likewise a part which is improper and spoils the beauty and formation of the word. You would admit that?

*Cratylus* There would be no use, Socrates, in my quarreling with you, since I cannot be satisfied that a name which is incorrectly given is a name at all.

*Socrates* Do you admit a name to be the representation of a thing?

*Cratylus* Yes, I do.

*Socrates* But do you not allow that some nouns are primitive, and some derived?

*Cratylus* Yes, I do.

*Socrates* Then if you admit that primitive or first nouns are representations of things, is there any better way of framing representations than by assimilating them to the objects as much as you can? Or do you prefer the notion of Hermogenes and of many others, who say that names are conventional, and have a meaning to those who have agreed about them, and who have previous knowledge of the things intended by them, and that convention is the only principle? And whether you abide by our present convention, or make a new and opposite one, according to which you call small great and great small—that, they would say, makes no difference, if you are only agreed. Which of these two notions do you prefer?

*Cratylus* Representation by likeness, Socrates, is infinitely better than representation by any chance sign.

*Socrates* Very good, but if the name is to be like the thing, the letters out of which the first names are composed must also be like things. Returning to the image of the picture, I would ask how anyone could ever compose a picture which would be like anything at all, if there were not pigments in nature which resembled the things imitated, and out of which the picture is composed.

*Cratylus* Impossible.

*Socrates* No more could names ever resemble any actually existing thing, unless the original elements of which they are compounded bore some degree of resemblance to the objects of which the names are the imitation. And the original elements are letters?

*Cratylus* Yes.

*Socrates* Let me now invite you to consider what Hermogenes and I were saying about sounds. Do you agree with me that the letter  $\rho$  is expressive of rapidity, motion, and hardness? Were we right or wrong in saying so?

*Cratylus* I should say that you were right.

*Socrates* And that  $\lambda$  was expressive of smoothness, and softness, and the like?

*Cratylus* There again you were right.

*Socrates* And yet, as you are aware, that which is called by us  $\sigma\kappa\lambda\eta\rho\acute{o}\tau\eta\varsigma$ , is by the Eretrians called  $\sigma\kappa\lambda\eta\rho\acute{o}\tau\eta\rho$ .

*Cratylus* Very true.

*Socrates* and is there the same  $\rho$ , which there is to of us?

*Cratylus* of us.

*Socrates* they are unlike?

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*Cratylus* motion.

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sented, Socrates, an saying to Hermogenes spoke of adding and

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both of us. When I mean.

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ceed from unlike as of  $\sigma\kappa\lambda\eta\rho\acute{o}\tau\eta\varsigma$ . But if convention with yourself out to be conventional equally with the by custom and conventional distinguish custom from must say that the sign and not by likeness, as well as by the like. for I shall assume the custom and convention indication of our thought of number. How can you will find names unless you allow that ment to have authority names? I quite agree

*Socrates* But are the letters  $\rho$  and  $\sigma$  equivalents, and is there the same significance to them in the termination  $\rho$ , which there is to us in  $\sigma$ , or is there no significance to one of us?

*Cratylus* Nay, surely there is a significance to both of us.

*Socrates* In so far as they are like, or in so far as they are unlike?

*Cratylus* In so far as they are like.

*Socrates* Are they altogether alike?

*Cratylus* Yes, for the purpose of expressing motion.

*Socrates* And what do you say of the insertion of the  $\lambda$ ? For that is expressive not of hardness but of softness.

*Cratylus* Why, perhaps the letter  $\lambda$  is wrongly inserted, *Socrates*, and should be altered into  $\rho$ , as you were saying to *Hermogenes*, and in my opinion rightly, when you spoke of adding and subtracting letters upon occasion.

*Socrates* Good, but still the word is intelligible to both of us. When I say  $\sigma\kappa\lambda\eta\rho\acute{o}\varsigma$  (hard), you know what I mean.

*Cratylus* Yes, my dear friend, and the explanation of that is custom.

*Socrates* And what is custom but convention? When I utter a sound which I understand, and you know that I understand the meaning of the sound—this is what you are saying?

*Cratylus* Yes.

*Socrates* And if when I speak you know my meaning, there is an indication given by me to you?

*Cratylus* Yes.

*Socrates* This indication of my meaning may proceed from unlike as well as from like, for example, in the  $\lambda$  of  $\sigma\kappa\lambda\eta\rho\acute{o}\tau\eta\varsigma$ . But if this is true, then you have made a convention with yourself, and the correctness of a name turns out to be convention, since letters which are unlike are indicative equally with those which are like, if they are sanctioned by custom and convention. And even supposing that you distinguish custom from convention ever so much, still you must say that the signification of words is given by custom and not by likeness, for custom may indicate by the unlike as well as by the like. But as we are agreed thus far, *Cratylus*, for I shall assume that your silence gives consent, then custom and convention must be supposed to contribute to the indication of our thoughts. For suppose we take the instance of number. How can you ever imagine, my good friend, that you will find names resembling every individual number, unless you allow that which you term convention and agreement to have authority in determining the correctness of names? I quite agree with you that words should as far as

possible resemble things, but I fear that this dragging in of resemblance, as *Hermogenes* says, is a shabby thing, which has to be supplemented by the mechanical aid of convention with a view to correctness. For I believe that if we could always, or almost always, use likenesses, which are perfectly appropriate, this would be the most perfect state of language, as the opposite is the most imperfect. But let me ask you, what is the force of names, and what is the use of them?

*Cratylus* The use of names, *Socrates*, as I should imagine, is to inform. The simple truth is that he who knows names knows also the things which are expressed by them.

*Socrates* I suppose you mean to say, *Cratylus*, that as the name is, so also is the thing, and that he who knows the one will also know the other, because they are similar, and all similars fall under the same art or science, and therefore you would say that he who knows names will also know things.

*Cratylus* That is precisely what I mean.

*Socrates* But let us consider what is the nature of this information about things which, according to you, is given us by names. Is it the best sort of information? Or is there any other? What do you say?

*Cratylus* I believe that to be both the only and the best sort of information about them—there can be no other.

*Socrates* But do you believe that in the discovery of them he who discovers the names discovers also the things, or is this only the method of instruction, and is there some other method of inquiry and discovery?

*Cratylus* I certainly believe that the methods of inquiry and discovery are of the same nature as instruction.

*Socrates* Well, but do you not see, *Cratylus*, that he who follows names in the search after things, and analyzes their meaning, is in great danger of being deceived?

*Cratylus* How so?

*Socrates* Why clearly he who first gave names gave them according to his conception of the things which they signified—did he not?

*Cratylus* True.

*Socrates* And if his conception was erroneous, and he gave names according to his conception, in what position shall we who are his followers find ourselves? Shall we not be deceived by him?

*Cratylus* But, *Socrates*, am I not right in thinking that he must surely have known, or else, as I was saying, his names would not be names at all? And you have a clear proof that he has not missed the truth, and the proof is—that he is perfectly consistent. Did you ever observe in speaking that all the words which you utter have a common character and purpose?



*Socrates* But that, friend Cratylus, is no answer. For if he did begin in error, he may have forced the remainder into agreement with the original error and with himself; there would be nothing strange in this, any more than in geometric diagrams, which have often a slight and invisible flaw in the first part of the process, and are consistently mistaken in the long deductions which follow. And this is the reason why every man should expend his chief thought and attention on the consideration of his first principles—are they or are they not rightly laid down? And when he has duly sifted them, all the rest will follow. Now I should be astonished to find that names are really consistent. And here let us revert to our former discussion. Were we not saying that all things are in motion and progress and flux, and that this idea of motion is expressed by names? Do you not conceive that to be the meaning of them?

*Cratylus* Yes, that is assuredly their meaning, and the true meaning.

*Socrates* Let us revert to ἐπιστήμη (knowledge), and observe how ambiguous this word is, seeming rather to signify stopping the soul at things than going round with them, and therefore we should leave the beginning as at present, and not reject the ε, but make an insertion of an ι instead of an ε (not πιστήμη, but ἐπιστήμη). Take another example. Βέβαιον (sure) is clearly the expression of station and position, and not of motion. Again, the word ἱστορία (inquiry) bears upon the face of it the stopping (ἰσθάναι) of the stream, and the word πιστόν (faithful) certainly indicates cessation of motion; then, again, μνήμη (memory), as anyone may see, expresses rest in the soul, and not motion. Moreover, words such as ἀμαρτία and συμφορά, which have a bad sense, viewed in the light of their etymologies will be the same as σύνεσις and ἐπιστήμη and other words which have a good sense (cf. ὀμαρτεῖν, συνιέναι, ἐπεσθαι, συμφύρεσθαι). And much the same may be said of ἀμαθία and ἀκολασία, for ἀμαθία (ignorance) may be explained as ἡ ἀμα θεῶ ἰόντος πορεία (the progress of one who goes with God), and ἀκολασία (unrestraint) as ἡ ἀκολουθία τοῖς πράγμασιν (movement in company with things). Thus the names which in these instances we find to have the worst sense will turn out to be framed on the same principle as those which have the best. And anyone I believe who would take the trouble might find many other examples in which the giver of names indicates, not that things are in motion or progress, but that they are at rest, which is the opposite of motion.

*Cratylus* Yes, Socrates, but observe, the greater number express motion.

*Socrates* What of that, Cratylus? Are we to count them like votes? And is correctness of names the voice of the

majority? Are we to say of whichever sort there are most, those are the true ones?

*Cratylus* No, that is not reasonable.

*Socrates* Certainly not. But let us have done with this question and proceed to another, about which I should like to know whether you think with me. Were we not lately acknowledging that the first givers of names in states, both Hellenic and barbarous, were the legislators, and that the art which gave names was the art of the legislator?

*Cratylus* Quite true.

*Socrates* Tell me, then, did the first legislators, who were the givers of the first names, know or not know the things which they named?

*Cratylus* They must have known, Socrates.

*Socrates* Why, yes, friend Cratylus, they could hardly have been ignorant.

*Cratylus* I should say not.

*Socrates* Let us return to the point from which we digressed. You were saying, if you remember, that he who gave names must have known the things which he named. Are you still of that opinion?

*Cratylus* I am.

*Socrates* And would you say that the giver of the first names had also a knowledge of the things he named?

*Cratylus* I should.

*Socrates* But how could he have learned or discovered things from names if the primitive names were not yet given? For, if we are correct in our view, the only way of learning and discovering things is either to discover names for ourselves or to learn them from others.

*Cratylus* I think that there is a good deal in what you say, Socrates.

*Socrates* But if things are only to be known through names, how can we suppose that the givers of names had knowledge, or were legislators, before there were names at all, and therefore before they could have known them?

*Cratylus* I believe, Socrates, the true account of the matter to be that a power more than human gave things their first names, and that the names which are thus given are necessarily their true names.

*Socrates* Then how came the giver of the names, if he was an inspired being or god, to contradict himself? For were we not saying just now that he made some names expressive of rest and others of motion? Were we mistaken?

*Cratylus* But I suppose one of the two not to be names at all.

*Socrates* And which, then, did he make, my good friend—those which are expressive of rest, or those which are expressive of motion? This is a point which, as I said before, cannot be determined by counting them.

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us to be imposed upon of names, all tending deny that the givers of idea that all things we sincere but, I think, mi a kind of whirlpool th want to drag us in a Cratylus, about whicl ask your opinion. Tel

*Cratylus* No, not in that way, Socrates.  
*Socrates* But if this is a battle of names, some of them asserting that they are like the truth, others contending that *they* are, how or by what criterion are we to decide between them? For there are no other names to which appeal can be made, but obviously recourse must be had to another standard which, without employing names, will make clear which of the two are right, and this must be a standard which shows the truth of things.

*Cratylus* I agree.  
*Socrates* But if that is true, Cratylus, then I suppose that things may be known without names?

*Cratylus* Clearly.  
*Socrates* But how would you expect to know them? What other way can there be of knowing them, except the true and natural way, through their affinities, when they are akin to each other, and through themselves? For that which is other and different from them must signify something other and different from them.

*Cratylus* What you are saying is, I think, true.  
*Socrates* Well, but reflect. Have we not several times acknowledged that names rightly given are the likenesses and images of the things which they name?

*Cratylus* Yes.  
*Socrates* Let us suppose that to any extent you please you can learn things through the medium of names, and suppose also that you can learn them from the things themselves. Which is likely to be the nobler and clearer way—to learn of the image, whether the image and the truth of which the image is the expression have been rightly conceived, or to learn of the truth whether the truth and the image of it have been duly executed?

*Cratylus* I should say that we must learn of the truth.

*Socrates* How real existence is to be studied or discovered is, I suspect, beyond you and me. But we may admit so much, that the knowledge of things is not to be derived from names. No, they must be studied and investigated in themselves.

*Cratylus* Clearly, Socrates.  
*Socrates* There is another point. I should not like us to be imposed upon by the appearance of such a multitude of names, all tending in the same direction. I myself do not deny that the givers of names did really give them under the idea that all things were in motion and flux, which was their sincere but, I think, mistaken opinion. And having fallen into a kind of whirlpool themselves, they are carried round, and want to drag us in after them. There is a matter, master Cratylus, about which I often dream, and should like to ask your opinion. Tell me whether there is or is not any

absolute beauty or good, or any other absolute existence.

*Cratylus* Certainly, Socrates, I think so.

*Socrates* Then let us seek the true beauty, not asking whether a face is fair, or anything of that sort, for all such things appear to be in a flux, but let us ask whether the true beauty is not always beautiful.

*Cratylus* Certainly.

*Socrates* And can we rightly speak of a beauty which is always passing away, and is first this and then that? Must not the same thing be born and retire and vanish while the word is in our mouths?

*Cratylus* Undoubtedly.

*Socrates* Then how can that be a real thing which is never in the same state? For obviously things which are the same cannot change while they remain the same, and if they are always the same and in the same state, and never depart from their original form, they can never change or be moved.

*Cratylus* Certainly they cannot.

*Socrates* Nor yet can they be known by anyone, for at the moment that the observer approaches, then they become other and of another nature, so that you cannot get any further in knowing their nature or state, for you cannot know that which has no state.

*Cratylus* True.

*Socrates* Nor can we reasonably say, Cratylus, that there is knowledge at all, if everything is in a state of transition and there is nothing abiding. For knowledge too cannot continue to be knowledge unless continuing always to abide and exist. But if the very nature of knowledge changes, at the time when the change occurs there will be no knowledge, and if the transition is always going on, there will always be no knowledge, and, according to this view, there will be no one to know and nothing to be known. But if that which knows and that which is known exist ever, and the beautiful and the good and every other thing also exist, then I do not think that they can resemble a process or flux, as we were just now supposing. Whether there is this eternal nature in things, or whether the truth is what Heraclitus and his followers and many others say, is a question hard to determine, and no man of sense will like to put himself or the education of his mind in the power of names. Neither will he so far trust names or the givers of names as to be confident in any knowledge which condemns himself and other existences to an unhealthy state of unreality; he will not believe that all things leak like a pot, or imagine that the world is a man who has a running at the nose. This may be true, Cratylus, but is also very likely to be untrue, and therefore I would not have you be too easily persuaded of it. Reflect well and like a man,

and do not easily accept such a doctrine, for you are young and of an age to learn. And when you have found the truth, come and tell me.

*Cratylus* I will do as you say, though I can assure you, Socrates, that I have been considering the matter already, and the result of a great deal of trouble and consideration is that I incline to Heraclitus.

*Socrates* Then, another day, my friend, when you come back, you shall give me a lesson, but at present, go into the country, as you are intending, and Hermogenes shall set you on your way.

*Cratylus* Very good, Socrates. I hope, however, that you will continue to think about these things yourself.

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