

## PLATO CRATYLUS

In the Cratylus, Plato offers some insight into both his philosophy of language and epistemology. Here, Socrates engages in an argument with someone named Hermogenes who is of the view that the naming of things is as arbitrary as the naming of persons. Hermogenes argues, firstly, that the meaning of a word is entirely up to the whim of the individual. Hermogenes then proceeds to argue that even if meaning is not a solipsistic affair, surely it is determined by the consensus of a particular community. In other words, historically, it was purely accidental that certain words (signs) came to be attached to certain things (referents) by certain groups. What is crucial, from this point of view, in seeking to grasp the current meaning of a word is etymology: an understanding of the preceding history of meanings from which the current meaning is derived. Socrates is worried about the epistemological implications of both such views, arguing that a whimsical or volitional theory of naming leads to confusion. If anyone can arbitrarily call a horse, for example, a man and vice versa, then there is no basis for consensus as to the truth. A claim such as a horse has four legs cannot be proved or disproved if each person uses the same words differently. Socrates point is that this is a nonsensical model of language that would lead to a total breakdown in communication.

If the relationship between name and thing, sign and referent, is not *arbitrary*, that is, the product neither of the pure whim of individuals nor the consensus of a community, what relationship does in fact exist? Socrates's argument is that the relationship linking sign to referent is *necessary* in nature. There is, in other words, an immutable bond linking an object to the name by which it is denoted. To this end, he points out, firstly, that human will must conform to the nature of a particular action and not actions to human will. For example, in order to cut something, one must proceed in accordance with the nature of cutting as a result of which one cannot cut something without a blade. By the same token, speaking is also an action and signs are the instrument of speech. Two questions accordingly arise: what is the function of speech, and how do signs function when properly used in the activity of speaking? Plato contends that the function of speech is to communicate one person's ideas to another. Signs, accordingly, have a two-fold function: partly to reflect reality (signs denote things about the world) and partly to communicate truth-claims about reality to other people. Signs, firstly, name or label reality by dividing it up, distinguishing things from other things they are an instrument of teaching and separating reality (388), as he puts it, and, secondly, convey the ideas which we have about things in our minds to other people, affecting them in so doing. Socrates model of language is partly what linguists describe as a referential (or mimetic) one and partly an instrumentalist (or pragmatic) one. If words are the building block of literature, it is easy to see why Socrates is quick to try and grasp literature both mimetically (i.e. in terms of what it reflects) and pragmatically (i.e. in terms of its impact on the audience).

Socrates pays less attention to the instrumental side of language (the communicative function it performs) in order to focus on its epistemological side (i.e. the question of its ability to convey the truth about things). This is why he takes exception to the view that it does not matter what name is given to a person or thing. To prove his point that such things do matter, Socrates imagines that the history of language-use by humans started with a mythical inventor of language the name-maker. He contends that he no more merely chose names at random than did the inventor of the loom assemble a random collection of objects which then without plan or foresight became the loom. Socrates's point is that because language is functional, it is an entirely rational, rather than merely fortuitous, and thus comprehensible phenomenon. If we wish to understand the correctness of names, therefore, we must discover to what end the name-maker designed them. Socrates's point is that the name-maker knew how to embody in the sounds and syllables that name which is fitted by nature for each object (7). The question is, however, what, at least initially, made the form of one name more suitable to particular ends than another form. The answer: because words represent or depict or mirror reality, a name is well designed to the extent that it correctly re-presents or depicts or mirrors in verbal form that which it designates. What is important, therefore, is not the etymology of a given word, that is, the history of a given word's meaning and from which the present meaning is derived. It is, rather, the relationship between the word and the referent which is crucial. To put the foregoing another way, what is the principle of connection which ought to link a given word to the object it designates? The answer: the suitability or resemblance of the word to the object in question: a name is a vocal imitation of that which is imitated (422). A name, Socrates points out, is an imitation, just as a picture is (431). In the same way that a

painter attempts to capture an object on canvas combining the right colours and shapes in order to imitate an object, the name ought, through a combination of appropriate sounds, to be a just representation of the object in question. However, as is the case with the arts, Socrates laments the fact that while words and other media of representation (in the case of paintings, for example, colours and shapes) may capture the physical appearance of an object, it cannot do justice to its essential nature or ideal form which belongs not to the physical world but the world of ideal forms. Perhaps initially, he argues, there was something entirely appropriate about the Greek term for horse, for example, which captured in sound the essential nature of the animal. However, over time, language has become corrupted and distorted as a result of which they have diverged further and further away from the ideal form of which physical objects are an imitation. Signs, in short, ideally imitate objects when they most closely approximate in sound not just their physical appearance but, more importantly, their essence or ideal form, linking in this way the physical world to the world of ideal forms.

This discussion of the mimetic principle upon which language is based is crucial to Plato's and his teacher's never ending battle with the Sophists. The latter contended that truth is relative and speech functions not to establish the truth but to persuade others of the validity of one's point of view. This is why Plato needs to show that language is the medium by which one can have access to the truth. He opposes to Hermogenes's individualism and consensualism, a realist view of language: names are answerable to reality, not the individual nor the community. A mimetic model of language, especially spoken as opposed to written uses of language, guarantees access to the truth. Otherwise, we would merely be attempting to convince others of our own point of views.