Plato's Socratic Solution in *Cratylus*: A Vague Eclecticism or a Perspective Leap?

WANG Tao

Abstract: *Cratylus, one of Plato's famous Dialogues, is generally considered as a Socratic agenda of linguistics on the correctness of names (ὀρθότης ὀνομάτων).*[1] *In the dialogue, both interlocutors Hermogenes' conventionalist and Cratylus' naturalist standpoints are challenged by Plato in the name of Socrates. In the paper, we concentrate on the Socratic solution confronting the apparent antithesis in the conversation so as to take sides with whether it is a vague eclecticism of both parties or a perspective leap towards a much higher theoretical plane. By identifying both conventional and*

---

1 Robinson argues that ὄνομα (*pl.* ὀνόματα) is not entirely equivalent to English word "name". In English, "name" particularly refers to the species rather than genus one, while ὄνομα can't realize the distinction. Due to the fact that name is but one kind of word, ὄνομα is much closer to "word" than "name" is (there's no equivalent for "word" in Greek) which may include proper name, the name, the word, the noun and the subject of predication. Cf. Richard Robinson, "The Theory of Names in Plato's *Cratylus*", *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, Vol. 9 (1955): 221-222.

Theology Annual 35 (2014)

WANG Tao / Plato's Socratic Solution in *Cratylus*: A Vague Eclecticism or a Perspective Leap?

natural correctness of names through dialectics, Plato uplifts the linguistic issue to an ontological and epistemological one: on the impotence of names accessible to noumenal reality.

1. Socratic naturalistic argument against Hermogenes

In *Cratylus*, three interlocutors centre on the problem of the correctness of names, that is, whether name is correct by nature (φύσει) of the thing named or simply by convention (νόμῳ) of the namer(s). Socrates acts as a go-between for Hermogenes and Cratylus, while both the conventionalist and the naturalist are respectively busy arguing with Socrates without having a chance to cross swords with each other. Thus *Cratylus* is easily divided into two parts from 427E where Cratylus presents himself with a rhetorical question to Hermogenes. The first half could be seen as a Socratic naturalistic argumentation against Hermogenes' conventionalism, and the second half is the rectification of Cratylus' naturalism by Socrates.

Hermogenes points out that the correctness of names is determined by nothing besides convention and agreement, so he continues, "I believe that any name you give a thing is its correct name. If you change its name and give it another, the new one is as correct as the old." (384C-D) The opinion is opposed to the naturalist one, for it believes that "no name belongs to a particular thing by nature, but only because of the rules and usage of those who establish the usage and call it by that name." (384D) Son of messenger,[2] seemingly an Eleatic or specifically

Parmenidean philosopher,[3] doesn't fully endorse Protagoras' maxim "man is the measure of all things" although he almost prefers to take refuge in it. (386A) Therefore, Hermogenes swings between the opinion that "things are to me as they appear to me" and that "things have some fixed being or essence of their own". (386A) Furthermore, he objects to subjective "truth" and rejects Euthydemus' relativist doctrine "everything always has every attribute simultaneously". (386D)

From his basic philosophical standpoints, Hermogenes doesn't present himself as a convinced disciple of some specific philosophical school. Socrates begins to lead him by the nose through his sophisticated *dialektikos* (διαλεκτικός). In this part, Socrates sticks to naturalism, he says, "things have some fixed being or essence of their own. They are not in relation to us and are not made to fluctuate by how they appear to us. They are by themselves, in relation to their own being or essence, which is theirs by nature." (386D-E) For him, name is a tool for dividing things according to their respective nature by describing it. Hereby, Socrates employs controversial etymological inquiries to prove his theory.

Socratic etymological inquiries in *Cratylus* should be the most impressive part of the dialogue, which almost becomes Socrates' narcissistic monologue. This part seems quite lengthy and far from scientific. Is it a hodgepodge full of eisegesis or rather an effective

---

2 Name "Hermogenes" means "son of Hermes the Messenger of gods" (Cf. 408A-B). That's quite interesting and worthy thinking over if Hermogenes were more a *dramatis personae* than a historical figure. Could he be the messenger who transfers the natural truth of gods bestowing of namer or reveals the gods the arbitrary conventional power on names? Hermes is the patron saint of modern Hermeneutics.

---

3 In Diogenes Laertius' narration, after the death of Socrates, Plato has once followed Heraclitean philosopher Cratylus and Parmenidean philosopher Hermogenes. Cf. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, III-6, translation by R. D. Hicks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965). For Cratylus' philosophical affiliation, see: Geoffrey S. Kirk, "The Problem of Cratylus", *American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 72 No. 3 (1951): 225-253; D. J. Allan, "The Problem of Cratylus", *American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 75 No. 3 (1954): 271-287.

Theology Annual 35 (2014)

WANG Tao / Plato's Socratic Solution in *Cratylus*: A Vague Eclecticism or a Perspective Leap?

exegesis of his naturalist argumentation on the correctness of names? It begins with Homer's naming of ancient gods, heroes and famous men by rejecting sophist Protagoras' "truth" on the correctness of names. The main purpose of these inquiries is nothing but to testify to the correspondence between name and the named (person or thing) based on its nature by abundant examples. Therefore the correctness of name depends on whether it presents the true nature of the thing named. How do letters, syllabus, and word reflect a thing's nature directly, by its pronunciation or writing (permutation and combination)? Socrates answers these questions at two levels: derivative name and primary name.

For the derivative name, we can find its original meaning through etymological decoding because the name signifying the attributes of a thing has been shadowed in such way that the theta letter (θ) is added, transposed, or subtracted, or in different letters. (394B) So the significance of etymology is that we cannot distinguish the nature of things from their names firsthand because "…the first names given to things have long since been covered over by those who wanted to dress them up, and that letters were added or subtracted to make them sound good in the mouth, resulting in distortions and ornamentation of every kind." (414C) Name has got minor modifications subject to euphony or language habits on occasion. Undoubtedly, this aspect could be regarded as the conventional part of names.

Etymological probe is for the derivative name to find its etyma(s) and its (their) sense (or the combination of senses) by removing the conventional artificial elements within the name, which the natural relation between name and thing could be made known. The whole process could be seen as the reoccurrence of word-building (along

with some conventional accumulation) in reverse order. Etyma, the basic element in etymology, could be considered as the primary name. How does a primary name firsthand express the nature of a thing by a combination of letters and syllables? What is the direct connection between word and thing? The Socratic solution of that Gordian knot becomes a little bit mysterious and far-fetched, for instance, ϱ has the significance of motion by activating the tongue in pronunciation, and φ, ψ, σ, ζ which are pronounced with an expulsion of breath to express the notion. The characteristics of a letter's pronunciation corresponds to the similar significance that load those attributes to a signified object. (426C-427D) In the sense, names have a spelling power which shows some mysterious inner connection with reality concerning their nature.[4]

Naturalism on the correctness of names proposed by Socrates in the conversation with conventionalist Hermogenes can be summarized as that proper name has a descriptive content (derivative name), and has sound-correctness (primary name) which can reveal being (by onomatopoeia or as sound-symbol) and is not devoid of senses. We have to accept the fact that Socrates' natural correspondence of name

---

4   Here shows some mysticism that characterizes Platonic philosophy. Platonic emphasis on the natural connection between primary names and the things named is rather based on the intrinsic nature of things by sounds of an analogous nature, say, sound-symbol, than on an onomatopoetic principle. Cf. Alfons Nehring, "Plato and the Theory of Language", *Traditio*, Vol. 3 (1945): 18. In some Shamanisms, even high-level faiths, such as Tibetan Buddhism, uttering specific names (which give prominence to verbal sound-effect much more than their actual referent) is considered as the expression of cosmic ultimate mystery which has the power of salvation: "*Om Mani Padme Hum*" the Tantric Six-Word mantra. Interestingly enough, as we will see, Plato hasn't made his perspective leap along this direction; on the contrary, he denies the possible access to noumenal reality through name.

Theology Annual 35 (2014)

WANG Tao / Plato's Socratic Solution in *Cratylus*: A Vague Eclecticism or a Perspective Leap?

and thing is quite a weak and loose one.[5] He even has to appeal to the pronunciation to justify the imitation of name to the nature of the thing. As we know, what for Plato is a Gordian knot is probably readily resolved by the Chinese language.

The Chinese language should be the only current hieroglyphic language in the world. For hieroglyphic naming, there is a direct linkage between name and thing by portrait.[6] Socrates' almost awkward onomatopoeic accordance between signifier and signified is not necessarily appealed to in Chinese language at all. The name-building in Chinese language can also be divided into two levels: primary name and derivative name. As for the classic formation methods of naming, we have to mention the Six Writings (六書), out of which four kinds should be more typical and worth presenting here. First, the oldest kind of pictograms (象形, literally means "form imitation") are stylized drawings of the objects they represent. For instance, "羊" is obviously the image of a goat and "山" the portrait of mountain. Second, every ideogram (指事, literally means "indication") expresses an abstract idea through an iconic form, including iconic modification of pictographic characters, such as "刃" (blade) which uses a mark "丶" to highlight the specific part of the pictogram "刀" (knife), a "-" at the bottom of "木" (tree) signifying "本" (root, foundation). Third,

---

5   Nehring thinks Plato's etymologies in *Cratylus* are absolutely sound in the sense that they find out that the sense of words does give a picture, a characterization of the denoted thing no matter how far they are serious or joking, right or wrong. Alfons Nehring, "Plato and the Theory of Language": 17.

6   However, in the Chinese language, pure hieroglyphic words (in classical Chinese, a single character usually functions as a word. In modern Chinese, however, it can also combine with another character(s) to build other new words) count for nearly one tenth of the total. The majority of Chinese words are combined by their respective part of form and part of sound as shown in detail as below.

ideogrammatic compounds (會意, literally means "joined meaning") are the words within which two or more pictographic or ideographic characters are combined to suggest a third meaning, which are much more than the former two kinds in quantity, for example, "森" (forest) is composed of three "木" (tree); and "休" (to rest) is combined by the pictogram "亻" (man) and another pictogram "木" (tree) to illustrate a man leaning on a tree for a rest, etc. We may say, the ideogrammatic compounds are the most charming section that characterizes Chinese hieroglyphic name building. However, this section doesn't occupy the greatest amount of Chinese words while the pictophonetic characters (形聲, literally means "form and sound") do. The latter can be regarded as the derivative names which are coined by combining a Chinese radical which approximately indicates the correct pronunciation of this character as the phonetic part, with another radical which shows the correlative meaning of it as the meaning part. "媽" (mom / [mā:]) could be well exemplified which has the left part "女" (woman) presenting the meaning and the right part "馬" ([mǎ:]) being a clue to pronunciation. This section, the majority being Chinese characters, could be identified as the derivative name group, while the former three sections as the primary name assemblies. It's not hard to find out that Chinese naming is quite easy to connect to the thing named by nature, although the conventional element can still be dug out in the style of imitation and combination, even with some minor distortion and mutation in shape as well.

2. Socratic "*Deus ex Machina*": νομοθέτης

Facing that embarrassment in the inconvincible argumentation of downright natural connection between name and thing, Socrates has to postulate an ultimate guarantee and foundation for his weak

Theology Annual 35 (2014)

WANG Tao / Plato's Socratic Solution in *Cratylus*: A Vague Eclecticism or a Perspective Leap?

natural correlation. Personified foundation of names (the idea of the correctness of names) according to the nature of thing is called lawmaker (νομοθέτης) or name-giver. Socrates puts forward, not every man knows how to name things in that natural way except "someone who looks to the natural name of each thing and is able to put its form into letters and syllables". Thus names do possess some sort of natural correctness. (390E-391A) Socrates never admits his νομοθέτηςto be *Deus ex Machina*,

> …for we have nothing better on which to base the truth of primary names. Unless you want us to behave like tragic poets, who introduce a *deus ex machina* whenever they're perplexed. For we, too, could escape our difficulties by saying that the primary names are correct because they were given by the gods. But is that the best account we can give? …Clearly, then, anyone who claims to have a scientific understanding of derivative names must first and foremost be able to explain the primary ones with perfect clarity. (425D-426B)

As for the primary names, the lawmaker as the authentic giver of names must know how to embody in sounds and syllables the name naturally suited to each thing and look to what a name itself is in making and giving each name. (389D) It's absolutely unavoidable to "think that things become clear by being imitated in letters and syllables", or we have to appeal to the futile deus ex machina. (425D)

In *Cratylus*, Plato sometimes uses plural form of this lawmaker or name-giver. For him, the foundation may not be the sole arbitrary authority; it could be an assembly who still needs to decide the assignment of names to things through enacting convention by unanimous agreement or it may be a different lawmaker under a

different naming system in the sense of comparative philology. As he says, different lawmakers don't make each name out of the same syllables, just like different blacksmiths making the same tool for the same type of work by different iron. As long as they give it the same form—even if that form is embodied in a different matter, the tool will be correct, whether it is made in Greece or abroad. (389D-E)

Scholars believe that the Socratic postulation of the name-giver is not a historical one for the explanation of the actual origin of language, even, nor is it identified with a particular figure or group, but a mythical device as metaphorically idealized as a linguistic authority that captures essence-revealing contents in names. This *deus ex machina* is someone who ought to exist as the personification of law (νομός) by whom the essence-revealing contents are intruded into public circulation in conventions over the establishment and usage of names.[7] With the sacred name-giver, Hermogenes' conventionalism of the arbitrary assignment of name to a thing is overcome to the extent that agreement or convention among users of names turns into a covenant between the supreme authority and users, by which the natural connection of name/thing is maintained and conventional factors are adapted as well.

Here, Socrates' naturalistic standpoint becomes flexible, as Nehring points out, the interrelation between word and thing has a more or less metaphysical character in the Platonic postulation of name-giver who depicts a thing by his subjective idea about it. In that way, φύσει

---

7 Richard Robinson, "The Theory of Names in Plato's *Cratylus*": 225-226; Christine Richard Robinson, "The Theory of Names in Plato's *Cratylus*": 225-226; Christine J. Thomas, "Inquiry without Names in Plato's *Cratylus*", *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 46 No. 3 (2008): 344, footnote 10.

is no longer a necessary characteristic of words but remains an ideal.[8] In the second half of his postulation, he will use this to challenge Cratylus' naturalism on the correctness of names.

3. Socratic rectification of cratylus' naturalism

At the very beginning of the dialogue, Hermogenes retells Cratylus' opinion before presenting his own, "Cratylus says…that there is a correctness of name for each thing, one that belongs to it by nature. A thing's name isn't whatever people agree to call it—some bit of their native language that applies to it—but there is a natural correctness of names, which is the same for everyone, Greek or foreigner." (383A-B) Hermogenes faithfully reiterates Cratylus' point of view. For Cratylus, in the dialogue under his name, the correctness of names is firmly based on the natural correlation between name and thing. Thereby he agrees that all names have been correctly given without better or worse,(429B) and speaking falsely consists in saying things that do not exist so that "one can neither speak nor say anything falsely". (429D-E) Following Cratylus' tough standpoint, Socrates begins to argue the falsity of names. He induces Cratylus to admit that name and thing are different matters; and name is merely the imitation of thing. (430A-B) Then he compares naming to painting both as imitation of thing to the extent that both name and portrait assigned to each thing is appropriate to it

or like it.[9] (430C) Nevertheless, Cratylus believes that the assignment or application of a name to a thing, unlike a portrait, is not possible to be false, which must be always correct. (430D-E) Socrates insists, however, that painting and naming are both the imitation of thing, painting by colors and shapes, while naming by syllables and letters. (431)

As a sign, name can't present all the details of the thing named, otherwise it will be the copy of that thing, Socrates says, "…names would have an absurd effect on the things they name, if they resembled them in every respect, since all of them would then be duplicated, and no one would be able to say which was the thing and which was the name." (432D) In that case, name and thing must have something mismatched without taking effect on its signifying that thing. Socrates continues to rectify Cratylus' opinion,

> Take courage then and admit that one name may be well-given while another isn't. Don't insist that it have all the letters and exactly resemble the thing it names, but allow that an inappropriate letter may be included. But if an inappropriate letter may be included in a name, an inappropriate name may be included in a phrase. And if an inappropriate name may be included in a phrase, a phrase which is inappropriate to the things may be employed in a statement. Things are still named and described when this happens, provided the phrases include the pattern of the things they're about. (432D-E)

---

8 Alfons Nehring, "Plato and the Theory of Language": 19. We may refer to the biblical narration of the origin of names: "And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them; and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof." (Gen 2:19) In this account, evidently, it is not God Himself but the first man who acts as the νομοθέτης. As for the way of naming, we may not clearly claim whether the naming is nomological or naturalistic.

9 That naming concerns no pictographic imitation as painting does, is only applicable That naming concerns no pictographic imitation as painting does, is only applicable for agglutinative language and fusional language or inflectional language, which are what Plato is talking about. As we have seen, in Chinese, a kind of isolating language, or hieroglyph, that should be another matter.

Theology Annual 35 (2014)

WANG Tao / Plato's Socratic Solution in *Cratylus*: A Vague Eclecticism or a Perspective Leap?

The mismatching part of name to thing, semantically and semiotically could be the conventional elements deviating from the pure correlation of the nature of thing; however, much more significantly, it should be the epistemological and ontological nonidentity and inaccessibility between both parts. Socrates prepares for the later perspective leap by criticizing and rectifying Cratylus' clinging to naturalism.

As we have mentioned above, Socrates divides the names into two kinds: a derivative name and a primary one. He would like to admit that, as it were, the derivative name has some evident conventional components while the primary one would better express the thing more clearly by being like it in nature as much as possible. Socrates believes that if a primary name is indeed to be like a thing, its letters or elements should be naturally like the thing named. By the same token, name should be nothing but composed out of some kind of likeness to the thing it imitates. (434A-B)

Anyway, Socrates underlines the conventional aspect at the interlocutory part with Cratylus. He concludes that

> …the correctness of names has become a matter of convention for you, for isn't it the chance of usage and convention that makes both like and unlike letters that express things? And even if usage is completely different from convention, still you must say that expressing something isn't a matter of likeness but of usage, since usage, it seems, enables both like and unlike names to express things….both convention and usage must contribute something to expressing what we mean when we speak. (435A-B)

Here we have to recognize that Socrates' standpoint seems quite vague as if he intends to take sides with neither Hermogenes nor Cratylus and swings between conventionalist and naturalist correctness of names as his positionless position,

> I myself prefer the view that names should be as much like things as possible, but I fear that defending this view is like hauling a ship up a sticky ramp, as Hermogenes suggested, and that we have to make use of this worthless thing, convention, in the correctness of names. For probably the best possible way to speak consists in using names all (or most) of which are like the things they name (that is, are appropriate to them), while the worst is to use the opposite kind of names. (435C)

4. A vague eclecticism of the correctness of names φύσει and νόμῳ?

Thomas rightly concludes the Socratic standpoint in *Cratylus*, he believes the Socratic view towards the correctness of names is a mix of his own brands of conventionalism and naturalism in the way that "the heart of Socrates' account of names and their correctness is naturalistic; but the account is substantively supplemented with naming by convention."[10] In detail, the content of names is determined by the nature of things through imitation or resemblances to the extent that at least some of the contents associated with the essentially true nature of the things named. However, the collections of letters and syllables used in names, and corresponding contents and referents associated with things are by convention. And Socrates' more naturalist than conventionalist viewpoint is different with Cratylus' in that he suggests

---

10   Christine J. Thomas, "Inquiry without Names in Plato's *Cratylus*": 346.

that "the letters and syllables composing a name are related only conventionally to the nature named",[11] which no doubt distinguishes it from Hermogenes' radical one. Put briefly, name is fabricated by Socratic supreme postulation νομοθέτης based on the nature of the thing named.[12] Is the Socratic standpoint a vague eclecticism?

"Eclecticism" comes from the Greek word ἐκλεκτικός (literally meaning "choosing the best" and ἐκλεκτός (literally means "picked out, select"), which is often labeled to some mechanically mixed standpoint trying to compromise at least two conflicting ideas superficially rather than to critically synthesize them in a higher plane. We believe Socratic elaboration on conventionalism and naturalism on the correctness of names is not eclecticism because of his unique style of philosophical argumentation, not antithetic but a complementary relationship between both sides, and most important, the perspective leaps away from the dualistic claims on that issue.

As we know, it is the very methodological style of Plato's *Dialogues* that he corners the rest of interlocutors to their logical deadend through dialectics without drawing a clear-cut conclusion, which remains the *Dialogues* as a whole an open-ended universe filled

with meaning between the lines and leaves the truth unfolded by itself in the process of conversation and arguments. That's why the collection of *Dialogues* remains for over two thousand years an inexhaustible thesaurus of philosophical wisdom and an active arena for diverse discourses besides philosophical reflection. In *Cratylus*, Socrates objects to Hermogenes' conventionalism in the first place while he refutes Cratylus on his naturalism. He attempts to persuade each one of them by the standpoint of the other without definitely addressing his own verdict as a commanding judge. Neither is he a peacemaker who always does something vague and uncritical to please both sides as an eclectic. Instead of releasing the doctrinal preaching, Plato employs the method of reduction to absurdity through dialectics all the time, which makes all the rest of the partakers turn from being convincers with theoretical prejudice to skeptics with reflexivity. "Solution" for Plato is never a real solution ultima but an implicit suggestion or leap to another higher or broader theoretical horizon. Through this, the inter-textuality among Platonic *Dialogues* comes into being, by which the Platonic philosophical system, the famous Platonism established as a result.

It seems that in *Cratylus* naturalism φύσει and conventionalism νόμῳ are opposed to each other, tit for tat, so that Socrates is forced to do nothing but make a compromise between them. However, scholars such as Robinson posit that nature and law are on the same side in the way that "the law is what gives us the natural names of things; and the lawmaker is the artist who knows what the natural name of a thing is." Name-giver is far from being opposed to nature, who always seeks to follow nature anyway in the dialogue.[13] Robinson further points out

---

11　Christine J. Thomas, "Inquiry without Names in Plato's *Cratylus*": 345-346.

12　Demand understands the Socratic postulation of νομοθέτης in a reverse way. She believes that νομοθέτης in *Cratylus*, sometimes in plural form, does not serve for the eclectic blurring of the difference between νόμος and φύσις but is for emphasizing it in order to show that what can be learnt from a name is that we cannot learn anything from names because name-givers who give names φύσει are nothing but a contradiction. We can only find out the solution to the problem of knowledge at the coming of the theory of Platonic ideas. Cf. Nancy Demand, "The Nomothetes of the *Cratylus*", *Phronesis*, Vol. 20 No. 2 (1975): 108-109. Demand's method not only confirms the non-eclectic characteristic of νομοθέτης but also directs it to the Socratic perspective leap.

13　Richard Robinson, "The Theory of Names in Plato's *Cratylus*": 231.

that νόμος-φύσις antithesis getting its radical shape in Hermogenes' conventionalism and Cratylus' naturalism, is not really in antithetic tension. Word νόμος in *Cratylus* either expresses the nature-theory or is irrelevant to the question on the anti-nature theory of names. In most of Greek literature and even in Plato's other works, νόμος and φύσις is commonly used to distinguish the conflict of ideas between what men think is real and what is real. Robinson emphasizes, some ancient Greeks even suggest that νόμος is as legal and moral rules, and is set up for the sake of overshadowing their falsehood contrary to the way things really are.[14] In other words, νόμος is artificial φύσις or something imposed on φύσις mistakenly. For Robinson, the occasion in *Cratylus* as indeed an exception, presents that the correctness of names is something that exists by φύσις, independently of what man may think or do, or it exists only in dependence on man's thought and perceptions as νόμος. Generally speaking, in a sense, the νόμος-φύσις is relationship simply equal to an objective-subjective one. As Robinson says,

> The Cratylus does not use the words 'νόμος-φύσις' to make the distinction they were most commonly used to make, namely that between reality and what people mistakenly think reality to be; nor does it use either of these words or this distinction in the way they were most commonly used, namely to throw doubt on reigning legal and moral rules; but it does make the distinction between existing independently of man and existing in dependence on him, and once by exception it expresses this distinction by means of the word 'νόμῳ'.[15]

That viewpoint can also be proved in Socrates' wording in *Cratylus*. Plato uses at least three Greek words to signify convention: νόμος (νόμῳ), ἔθος, ξυνθήκη. The former two words can be identified as something conventional in the sense of arbitrary or fortuitous order, which does not involve the factor of an agreement or pact as the last word indicates. However, it is ξυνθήκη that Plato uses as a substitution for much more popular usage of νόμος when he discusses the νόμῳ-theory with Cratylus in the second part of *Cratylus* (in the first half of the dialogue, conventionalist Hermogenes also uses the expression ξυνθήκη). In a word, Plato breaks through the common understanding of νόμος as "convention, tradition, custom, traditional usage" and then cites its antithetic relationship with φύσις. He considers that the name as a sign is not a one man's job but an agreement or pact between the name-giver and the users.[16] νόμος in Socratic usage or even its substitution ξυνθήκη doesn't contradict φύσις. In the sense, they both fulfill the natural correctness of names through the enacting and handing over of names to users.

Nehring recognizes the double characters of the Platonic standpoint on the correctness of names as both νόμος and φύσις. He believes that in communication via language, we get double levels of signification as meaning and sense. The communicative function of language is achieved through meaning, the νόμῳ-character of the name, which is also mentioned in the Platonic interpretation on derivative names, and the intentionally modified on primary names. Meanwhile, the representative function is done by sense, the etymologically original "meaning", which reveals the φύσει-character of name. Nehring

---

14   Richard Robinson, "The Theory of Names in Plato's *Cratylus*": 232-234.

15   Richard Robinson, "The Theory of Names in Plato's *Cratylus*": 234.

16   Alfons Nehring, "Plato and the Theory of Language": 23.

Theology Annual 35 (2014)

WANG Tao / Plato's Socratic Solution in *Cratylus*: A Vague Eclecticism or a Perspective Leap?

summarizes, "the necessary consequence of the coexistence of φύσει and νόμῳ character, that is, of sense and meaning, is a double kind of δήλωμα (communication), which in turn forces Plato to acknowledge also two different kinds of ὀρθότης (correctness). There is no break nor wavering in the whole line." [17]

5. The perspective leap: from linguistic argument to epistemological assertion, and ontological preparation

We may notice, in the method of dialectics, Socrates makes a great leap from the argument on the dual criterion of the correctness of names to the perspective comprehension of the truth of reality over the name itself rather than rendering a simple and vague compromise between both sides. Thomas pertinently remarks this leap by saying that,

> Hermogenes fails to allow the nature and function of names to guide his accounts. An overzealous commitment to the authority of speakers' practices keeps him from recognizing that a successful theory of names must somehow respect features of the things named and reveal truths about them. Cratylus, on the other hand, focuses exclusively on the task of imitating the natures named and utterly ignores the importance of linguistic practices in effecting communication between speakers. Socrates adopts a position which recognizes both the ultimate priority of reality and also the conventional mechanisms active in language establishment and linguistic communication. [18]

In 435D, Socrates and Cratylus' controversy suddenly turns to the function of name. Cratylus believes that the function of a name is to give instruction so that once someone knows the name then he knows the thing named.(435D-E) We could call this function the epistemological function. Well then, can we discover a thing by discovering its name or is it simply a means to get know the named thing as a guide or medium? Socrates stresses the mismatch between name and thing by his etymological method to refute Heraclitean idea of "everything's in flow": the thing named is flowing (according to Heraclitean philosophy) while the signification of the name is something motionless;(436E-437C)[19] and the name-giver as a divine power should not make a mistake.(437E-438C) For Socrates, between double available ways of learning things—through things themselves for truth or their names for likeness, he proposes to "learn about things independently of names".(438E) He suggests that it is far better and clearer to investigate things and learn about them through themselves than to do so through their names.(439A-B) Here, as Allan suggests, in the second half of *Cratylus*, the conversation between Socrates and Cratylus indicates that "an exact correspondence between 'names' and things is not necessary for precision of thought".[20] A great perspective leap occurs thereby.

In the final analysis, the correctness of names is not a linguistic issue on the origin of language but an assessment of the epistemological

---

17 Alfons Nehring, "Plato and the Theory of Language": 28.

18 Christine J. Thomas, "Inquiry without Names in Plato's *Cratylus*": 343.

19 In 411B-C, Socrates has already revealed that many abstract names are composed of syllabus and letters that reflect flowing and moving so that Heraclitean philosophy is apparently justified through those names. At least, Socrates never pins his hope on names as the steadfast reflection of the true nature of things.

20 D. J. Allan, "The Problem of Cratylus": 287.

Theology Annual 35 (2014)

WANG Tao / Plato's Socratic Solution in *Cratylus*: A Vague Eclecticism or a Perspective Leap?

value of language, that is to say, whether or not it is the reflection of truth.[21] For Plato, although the names show their natural attachment to things named and have an epistemological value based on the naturalistic standpoint, they cannot reach truth itself after all.

As a result, Plato makes a remarkable ontological turn by the objection that Heraclitean philosophy is agnosticism: if everything is always in flow, then no knowledge is possible at all. Plato makes sure that something must exist as noumenon, as ultimate reality entirely without changing and flowing.

> …The name-givers really did give them the belief that everything is always moving and flowing, and as it happens things aren't really that way at all, but the name-givers themselves have fallen into a kind of vortex and are whirled around in it, dragging us with them….Are we or aren't we to say that there is a beautiful itself, and a good itself, and the same for each one of the things that are? (439C)

Demand notes the Socratic ontological leap in *Cratylus* to the Platonic theory of ideas. He believes, after discovering the double correctness of names by νόμος and φύσις, Socrates takes a further step in epistemology, and then implies his ontological ambition. "Faced with the conclusion that both sides of the νόμος/φύσις antithesis are in some sense true, Socrates 'retreats' to a higher level in his search for knowledge: he suggests that we must look for knowledge to things

themselves, not to the name of things. This is an allusion to the theory of Ideas." [22]

The Platonic vision of double worlds, namely, the phenomenal world as the world of senses, and noumenal world as the world of ideas, is also foreshadowed in criticizing Heraclitean ontological insight. In Plato's eyes, the epistemological function of names becomes a category belonging to the phenomenal world, which is in constant flow, as Heraclitus describes, although the correctness of names reflects something natural in the thing-in-itself. Compared to truth on the plane of the noumenal world, name is merely a sign, an imitation of the thing, which is subject to transient phenomena Socrates goes on, "…surely no one with any understanding will commit himself or the cultivation of his soul to names, or trust them and their givers to the point of firmly stating that he knows something"—condemning both himself and the things that are to be totally unsound…".(440C) Although the name itself is correct in the sense that it reflects the nature of the thing named despite its conventional elements, it still cannot reach the noumenal world, through which the real knowledge of reality could not be obtained. It is not name but idea that shows even decides the nature of a thing. Name, as the shadow of the shadow, only has some descriptive fragments of the thing itself and is at a considerable distance from truth itself. Definitely, Plato takes a perspective leap forward to the Platonic ontology of idea from the apparent the linguistic controversy on the correctness of names between conventionalism and naturalism in *Cratylus*.

---

21 Scholars also have discovered that Plato has as little interest in the origin of names as in other kind of genesis. Richard Robinson, "The Theory of Names in Plato's *Cratylus*": 224. Thus in *Cratylus*, Plato's actual purpose is not a linguistic one but something else.

---

22 Nancy Demand, "The Nomothetes of the Cratylus": 107.

Theology Annual 35 (2014)

WANG Tao / Plato's Socratic Solution in *Cratylus*: A Vague Eclecticism or a Perspective Leap?

Conclusion: power and powerlessness of names accessible to reality

In Cratylus, Plato evidently assigns at least two important functions of names: dividing things (388B) and giving instruction about things to express the meaning while not investigating and discovering them (435A ff.), which could be identified as crucial to establish correct relations to the referential reality, both epistemologically and ontologically.

The first function should be considered as a positive power of names over epistemology and ontology. Just as Plato says that names are for dividing things according to their nature in 388B, naming is an effective tool for dividing up reality. In Nehring's words, naming is "drawing separating borderlines in the indistinct and unorganized mass of the οὐσία".[23] By the way, we would like to mention that *divisio* is a very important philosophical concept for the pre-medieval philosophers such as Eriugena. For him, division, along with analysis, is one of the double basic means for human reason to develop epistemology by dialectics.

Diverse language systems locate different names of basic colors in the spectrum according to their own way of spectral division. For example, in English, we have six basic colors: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet, while in Chinese, another one indigo is added （赤橙黃綠靛藍紫）, etc. Another example also shows the different style of naming, reflecting the specific method of cognition, in Arabic, there are around 400 names of Camel, the same situation can be found in the

great amount of Chinese names on different kinds of horses. All the above highlight the different methods of the cognizing of things via naming. Therefore, naming is a division of reality instead of the one-to-one simple correspondence of name and given thing, which informs and shapes the particular epistemological framework as a whole. While mass reality is given, names are assigned to articulate it by dividing it orderly and systematically into a specific epistemological pattern, which affects and even determines the way by which truth is discovered subsequently. In a sense, naming plays indeed the initial part of the cognitive process. Socrates doesn't clearly mention this point explicitly as the scholarship of modern comparative philology does.

As for the second function of names mentioned above, we'd better divide it into both positive and negative aspects, namely, name as a sign or symbol for the sake of communication and its descriptive function as the positive side, and as the starting point for the Socratic perspective leap, and name's impotence to access noumenal reality as the negative one.

Scholars such as Fine reminds us to take notice of Plato's implicit emphasis on the descriptive function of the name by his endorsement of naturalistic correctness of names. He believes that Plato's justification for a φύσει-character of names through lengthy etymological inquiries underpins their descriptive adequacy. Every name has descriptive content which could guarantee the right assignment of names to correlative things. In that way, a name is not simply a tag for things but to some extent the revealing of them.[24] By modern etymology, more

---

23   Alfons Nehring, "Plato and the Theory of Language": 41.

24   Gail Fine, "Plato on Naming", *Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 27 No. 109 (1977): 290-297.

Theology Annual 35 (2014)

WANG Tao / Plato's Socratic Solution in *Cratylus*: A Vague Eclecticism or a Perspective Leap?

systematic and scientific one, some deep and profound significance assigned to the referent is of great help to approach the essence of it.

Besides, Nehring suggests, one of the chief aims of *Cratylus* is to show the fact that the function of words as signs or symbols (σημεῖον/ σύμβολον) created and used for communication (δήλωμα / δήλοσις) is the true nature and value of words, while the controversy between conventionalism and naturalism on the correctness of names is just a secondary issue.[25] He considers *Cratylus* as "the first attempt at a real philosophy of language" in acknowledging communication as the primary function of words and recognizing language as an instrument

---

25 Alfons Nehring, "Plato and the Theory of Language": 13, 15. Augustine reflects on the experience of naming in his great autobiography *Confessions*. We can find the highlighted function as a sign in his account. Here, name is not clear-cut conventional or natural outcome with the thing named but a habitual connection between both sides; and then name becomes an indication and substitution for the sake of communication. "For now I was not an infant, without speech, but a boy, speaking. This I remember; and I have since discovered by observation how I learned to speak. I did not learn by elders teaching me words in any systematic way, as I was soon after taught to read and write. But of my own motion, using the mind which You, my God, gave me, I strove with cries and various sounds and much moving of my limbs to utter the feelings of my heart—all this in order to get my own way. Now I did not always manage to express the right meanings to the right people. So I began to reflect. [I observed that] my elders would make some particular sound, and as they made it it would point at or move towards some particular thing: and from this I came to realize that the thing was called by the sound they made when they wished to draw my attention to it. That they intended this was clear from the motions of their body, by a kind of natural language common to all races which consists in facial expressions, glances of the eye, gestures, and the tones by which the voice expresses the mind's state—for example whether things are to be sought, kept, thrown away, or avoided. So, as I heard the same words again and again properly used in different phrases, I came gradually to grasp what things they signified; and forcing my mouth to make the same sounds, I began to use them to express my own wishes. Thus I learnt to convey what I meant to those about me." Augustine, *Confessions*, I-8. Augustine's ostensive definition, well-known as the Augustinian Picture, dominated the western view of language for ages until Ludwig Wittgenstein overthrew it as being a primitive one in his masterpiece *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (1953).

to communicate and even establish truth although it can't act as the resource of truth itself. Furthermore, language is handled as an independent phenomenon instead of being as philosopher's slave. Thus *Cratylus* is, for Nehring, "a critique of language in the sense of Kant's *Critique of Reason*."[26]

This "Critique of Language", by which Plato accomplishes his perspective leap, is based on his stress on the powerlessness of name's accessibility to reality, namely, οὐσία in the noumenal world, which is undoubtedly a great metaphysical insight resonant with oriental philosophical wisdom.

Chuang Tzu, China's most famous Taoist philosopher, indicates the weakness of language accessible to noumenal reality in a similar way, he says in his classic *Nan-Hua Scripture* (《南華真經》),

> Fishing-stakes are employed to catch fish; but when the fish get caught, the men forget the stakes. Snares are employed to catch hares, but when the hares get caught, men forget the snares. Words are employed to convey ideas; but when the ideas are apprehended, men forget the words. Fain would I talk with such a man who has forgotten the words! [27]

Evidently, Chuang Tzu by no means denies the function of language as the indispensible tool to communicate and signify. Instead, he strongly underscores that it is unnecessary to stick to it where the true meaning or real nature of a thing lies, or even as the thing itself points

---

26 Alfons Nehring, "Plato and the Theory of Language": 33.

27 "筌者所以在魚，得魚而忘筌，蹄者所以在兔，得兔而忘蹄，言者所以在意，得意而忘言。吾安得夫忘言之人而與之言哉！" Chuang Tzu, *Nan-Hua Scripture*, XXVI, "What Comes from Without", translated by James Legge.

to. On the contrary, language should retire after fulfilling its function as denoting. Chuang Tzu uses the extremely impressive wording as "being forgotten", thereby the thing signified is comprehended in a higher vision where the noumenal world unfolded in absolute silence; meaning is completely grasped in an almost poetic and aesthetic atmosphere (actually a very high ontological and spiritual plane) without the involvement of a single word, which underlines that the true nature of reality, which is virtually unspeakable and indescribable by names. Truth lies in the noumenal world filled with ultimate significance far beyond the language-weaving phenomenal world. We may illustrate this idea by a parable. Name is required like a bateau to cross the foggy river in the phenomenal world for the purpose of reaching the shore and goes forward to the ultimate destination in the noumenal world. When we arrive at the shore, the bateau should be abandoned because as it has already fulfilled its task as a tool for indicating the right way over there. These people cannot be daggled to disembark unless they are willing to make their way to the destination with such excess baggage.

Another remarkable example can be found among oriental philosophies from both Indian Buddhism and its best inheritor Chinese Buddhism. One of most famous Buddhist propositions "the meaning of a finger pointing to the moon" （指月論） appropriately reflects Plato's deliberation of the impotence of names in grasping reality per se. In poetic style, the Buddhist Sanskrit Classic *Lankavatara Sutra* briefly claims, "as the ignorant grasp the finger-tip and not the moon, so those who cling to the letter, know not my truth." [28] We could find a more

detailed statement in another Buddhist Sutra, namely, *Shurangama Sutra*,[29] which goes,

> The Buddha told Ananda, 'You still listen to the Dharma with a conditioned mind, and so the Dharma becomes conditioned as well, and you do not obtain the Dharma-nature. It is like when someone points his finger at the moon to show it to someone else. Guided by the finger, that person should see the moon. If he looks at the finger instead and mistakes it for the moon, he loses not only the moon but the finger also. Why? He mistakes the pointing finger for the bright moon. Not only does he lose the finger, but he also fails to recognize light and darkness. Why? He mistakes the substance of the finger for the bright nature of the moon, and so he does not understand the two natures of light and darkness. The same is true of you.' [30]

Obviously, the pointing finger is an analogy for name (language) and the moon is that of the thing signified by the name. If one wants to comprehend the noumenal reality, Dharma in Buddhism, he must not concentrate on the finger pointing towards the moon but the nature of the moon itself. Both the nature of finger itself and the moon will be confused epistemologically once the finger indicator is regarded as the truth itself.

---

28 *Lankavatara Sutra*, XI-82.《楞伽經》："如愚見指月，觀指不觀月；計著名字者，不見我真實。"

29 In fact, *Shurangama Sutra* is one of the controversial Buddhist Sutras, which is considered by some scholars as one of classics of Chinese Buddhism, in other words, the Chinese indigenization of Indian Buddhism in which some Chinese philosophical elements are involved and syncretized.

30 *Shurangama Sutra*, II-1.《楞嚴經》："如人以手指月示人，彼人因指當應看月。若復觀指以為月體，此人豈唯亡失月輪，亦亡其指。何以故？以所標指為明月故。"

By the way, the problem of universals, whether name as the thinking medium, as well as the abstract genus or species, can epistemologically reach specific and individual reality, also evolved from the issue of the correct names. This was vehemently debated by medieval philosophy, and was totally turned into an epistemological and ontological issue. May we assume that the leap made by Plato in *Cratylus* was the name thing in advance?