

Naming the Art, or the Art of Naming: *Techne* in Plato's *Cratylus*

1) *Crat.* 414b2-d5¹

ἀλλ' οὐ γὰρ ἐπισκοπεῖς με ὥσπερ ἐκτὸς δρόμου φερόμενον ἐπειδὰν λείου ἐπιλάβωμαι· ἐπίλοιπα δὲ ἡμῖν ἔτι συχνὰ τῶν δοκούντων σπουδαίων εἶναι.

ΕΡΜ. Ἀληθῆ λέγεις.

ΣΩ. Ὦν γ' ἔστιν ἐν καὶ "τέχνην" ἰδεῖν ὅτι ποτὲ βούλεται εἶναι.

ΕΡΜ. Πάνυ μὲν οὖν.

ΣΩ. Οὐκοῦν τοῦτό γε ἔξιν νοῦ σημαίνει, τὸ μὲν ταῦ ἀφελόντι, ἐμβalόντι δὲ οὐ μεταξὺ τοῦ χεῖ καὶ τοῦ νῦ καὶ <τοῦ νῦ καὶ> τοῦ ἦτα;

ΕΡΜ. Καὶ μάλα γε γλίσχωρως, ὧ Σώκρατες.

ΣΩ. ὦ μακάριε, οὐκ οἶσθ' ὅτι τὰ πρῶτα ὀνόματα τεθέντα κατακέχωσται ἤδη ὑπὸ τῶν βουλομένων τραγωδεῖν αὐτὰ περιτιθέντων γράμματα καὶ ἐξαιρούντων εὐστομίας ἔνεκα καὶ πανταχῆ στρεφόντων, καὶ ὑπὸ καλλωπισμοῦ καὶ ὑπὸ χρόνου. ἐπεὶ ἐν τῷ "κατόπτρω" οὐ δοκεῖ [σοι] ἄτοπον εἶναι τὸ ἐμβεβλήσθαι τὸ ῥῶ; ἀλλὰ τοιαῦτα οἶμαι ποιοῦσιν οἱ τῆς μὲν ἀληθείας οὐδὲν φροντίζοντες, τὸ δὲ στόμα πλάττοντες, ὥστ' ἐπεμβάλλοντες πολλὰ ἐπὶ τὰ πρῶτα ὀνόματα τελευτώντες ποιοῦσιν μηδ' ἂν ἓνα ἀνθρώπων συνεῖναι ὅτι ποτὲ βούλεται τὸ ὄνομα· ὥσπερ καὶ τὴν Σφίγγα ἀντὶ "φικὸς" "σφίγγα" καλοῦσιν, καὶ ἄλλα πολλά.

2) *Crat.* 411d4-8

ΣΩ. Ἡ "φρόνησις"· φορᾶς γὰρ ἐστὶ καὶ ῥοῦ νόησις. εἴη δ' ἂν καὶ ὄνησιν ὑπολαβεῖν φορᾶς· ἀλλ' οὖν περὶ γε τὸ φέρεσθαι ἐστίν. εἰ δὲ βούλει, ἢ "γνώμη" παντάπασιν δηλοῖ γονῆς σκέψιν καὶ νόμησιν· τὸ γὰρ "νωμᾶν" καὶ τὸ "σκοπεῖν" ταῦτόν.

[SOCR.] But don't you perceive how I am, so to speak, driven off the race-course as soon as I reach smooth ground? Yet many things, of the sort that seem serious, still remain to be examined.

HERM. It is true.

SOCR. One of these is to see what "craft" (*techne*) might mean.

HERM. Yes, indeed.

SOCR. Now, doesn't this signify "holding on to intelligence" (*héxis nou*), once you take out the *taû* and insert an *oû* between the *chei* and the *ny* and between the *ny* and the *êta*?

HERM. Yes, Socrates, but with great difficulty.

SOCR. My dear friend, don't you know that, by now, the first given names have been altogether buried by those who wanted to theatricalize them by adding and removing letters for the sake of euphony and by turning them around in all sorts of ways, and also by embellishment and time? As for the "mirror" (*kátoptron*), doesn't it seem strange to insert a *rhô*? But such things, I believe, are the work of those who care nothing for the truth, but shape the mouth in such a way that, inserting many new elements into the first names, they end up preventing any human being from understanding what the name means in the first place: so, for instance, they call the Sphinx "*sphínx*" rather than "*phínx*", and so on and so forth.

SOCR. In fact, "prudence" (*phrónesis*) is the "thought of motion and flux" (*phorâs kai rhoû noesis*); but one could also understand it as the "advantage of motion" (*ónesis phorâs*). At any rate, it is about movement. If you want, then, "judgment" (*gnóme*) shows, all in all, inquiry and "observation of generation" (*nómesis gonês*). For "observing" and "inquiring" are the same.

¹ All translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

3) *Crat.* 416a10-b5

ΣΩ. Τὸ μὲν τοίνυν “αἰσχροὺν” καὶ δὴ κατάδηλόν μοι φαίνεται ὃ νοεῖ καὶ τοῦτο γὰρ τοῖς ἔμπροσθεν ὁμολογεῖται. τὸ γὰρ ἐμποδίζον καὶ ἴσχον τῆς ῥοῆς τὰ ὄντα λαιδορεῖν μοι φαίνεται διὰ παντὸς ὃ τὰ ὀνόματα τιθεῖς, καὶ νῦν τῷ ἀεὶ ἴσχοντι τὸν ῥοῦν τοῦτο τὸ ὄνομα ἔθετο <τὸ> “ἀεισχοροῦν”. νῦν δὲ συγκροτήσαντες “αἰσχροὺν” καλοῦσιν.

SOCR. Now, what “base” (*aischrón*) means appears very clear to me: for this too is in accordance with what we said before. It seems to me, in fact, that the one who posited the names altogether loathed what impedes and restrains the flux of things, and thus assigned this name, “*aeischoroûn*”, to “what always stops the flow”. But now, using a contracted form, they call it “*aischrón*”.

4) *Crat.* 437c3-8

καὶ οὕτως, ἃ νομίζομεν ἐπὶ τοῖς κακίστοις ὀνόματα εἶναι, ὁμοίωτατ’ ἂν φαίνοιτο τοῖς ἐπὶ τοῖς καλλίστοις. οἶμαι δὲ καὶ ἄλλα πόλλ’ ἂν τις εὔροι εἰ πραγματεύοιτο, ἐξ ὧν οἰηθείη ἂν αὐτὸς πάλιν τὸν τὰ ὀνόματα τιθέμενον οὐχὶ ἰόντα οὐδὲ φερόμενα ἀλλὰ μένοντα τὰ πράγματα σημαίνειν.

[SOCR.] And thus, the names we consider to be assigned to the worst things would seem very similar to those assigned to the best things. And I believe that, by doing some more work on this, one would find many other words, based on which one could think that the name-giver did not mean that the referent goes and moves but, rather, that it persists.

5) *Crat.* 439b10-c7

ΣΩ. Ἔτι τοίνυν τόδε σκεψώμεθα, ὅπως μὴ ἡμᾶς τὰ πολλὰ ταῦτα ὀνόματα ἐς ταῦτόν τείνοντα ἐξαπατᾶ, εἰ τῷ ὄντι μὲν οἱ θέμενοι αὐτὰ διανοηθέντες γε ἔθεντο ὡς ἰόντων ἀπάντων ἀεὶ καὶ ῥεόντων — φαίνονται γὰρ ἔμοιγε καὶ αὐτῷ οὕτω διανοηθῆναι — τὸ δ’, εἰ ἔτυχεν, οὐχ οὕτως ἔχει, ἀλλ’ οὗτοι αὐτοὶ τε ὥσπερ εἰς τινα δίνην ἐμπεσόντες κυκλῶνται καὶ ἡμᾶς ἐφελκόμενοι προσημβάλλουσιν. σκέψαι γὰρ, ὦ θαυμάσιε Κρατύλε, ὃ ἔγωγε πολλάκις ὀνειρώττω.

SOCR. Let us now consider this, so that we may not be deceived by all these names pointing in the same direction: whether the name-givers really posited them thinking that everything is in perpetual motion and flux — for it seems to me that they did think so — or, by any chance, this is not the case, but they themselves, as though fallen into some whirlpool, are stirred into confusion and, dragging us together with them, might throw us too into the vortex. Examine now, wonderful Cratylus, what I often dream of.

6) *Crat.* 389c2-390a2

ΣΩ. Καὶ περὶ τῶν ἄλλων δὴ ὀργάνων ὁ αὐτὸς τρόπος· τὸ φύσει ἐκάστω πεφυκὸς ὄργανον ἐξευρόντα δεῖ ἀποδοῦναι εἰς ἐκεῖνο ἐξ οὗ ἂν ποιῆ, οὐχ οἷον ἂν αὐτὸς βουλευθῆ, ἀλλ’ οἷον ἐπεφύκει. τὸ φύσει γὰρ ἐκάστω, ὡς εἶοικε, τρύπανον πεφυκὸς εἰς τὸν σίδηρον δεῖ ἐπίστασθαι τιθέναι.

SOCR. And the same applies to all other tools: whoever finds the tool predisposed by nature to do a certain work ought to assign it to the material out of which it is built, not the one he wishes, but the one already predisposed by nature. Thus, concerning the auger naturally predisposed to each task, as it appears, one ought to know how to assign it to iron.

ΕΡΜ. Πάνυ γε.

HERM. Indeed.

ΣΩ. Καὶ τὴν φύσει κερκίδα ἐκάστω πεφυκυῖαν εἰς ξύλον.

SOCR. And for what concerns the shuttle, fitted by nature to each use, the material will be wood.

ΕΡΜ. Ἔστι ταῦτα.

HERM. So it is.

ΣΩ. Φύσει γὰρ ἦν ἐκάστω εἶδει ὑφάσματος, ὡς ἔοικεν, ἐκάστη κερκίς, καὶ τὰλλα οὕτως.

ΕΡΜ. Ναί.

ΣΩ. Ἄρ' οὖν, ὦ βέλτιστε, καὶ τὸ ἐκάστω φύσει πεφυκὸς ὄνομα τὸν νομοθέτην ἐκείνον εἰς τοὺς φθόγγους καὶ τὰς συλλαβὰς δεῖ ἐπίστασθαι τιθέναι, καὶ βλέποντα πρὸς αὐτὸ ἐκείνο ὃ ἔστιν ὄνομα, πάντα τὰ ὀνόματα ποιεῖν τε καὶ τίθεσθαι, εἰ μέλλει κύριος εἶναι ὀνομάτων θέτης; εἰ δὲ μὴ εἰς τὰς αὐτὰς συλλαβὰς ἕκαστος ὁ νομοθέτης τίθησιν, οὐδὲν δεῖ τοῦτο ἀ<μφι>γνοεῖν· οὐδὲ γὰρ εἰς τὸν αὐτὸν σίδηρον ἅπας χαλκεὺς τίθησιν, τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἔνεκα ποιῶν τὸ αὐτὸ ὄργανον· ἀλλ' ὅμως, ἕως ἂν τὴν αὐτὴν ιδέαν ἀποδιδῶ, ἐάντε ἐν ἄλλῳ σιδήρῳ, ὅμως ὀρθῶς ἔχει τὸ ὄργανον, ἐάντε ἐνθάδε ἐάντε ἐν βαρβάρους τις ποιῇ· ἢ γάρ;

SOCR. In fact, as it appears, each shuttle is by nature suitable to its own type of tissue, and the same applies to the other tools.

HERM. Yes.

SOCR. But then, excellent friend, even concerning the name already predisposed by nature to each task, must not that lawgiver know how to build it out of sounds and syllables and, looking at 'the thing itself which is name', make and posit all the names, if he is to be an authoritative name-giver? If, on the other hand, each lawgiver does not operate with the same syllables as the others, one should by no means misunderstand this. For not all blacksmiths use the same iron, even though they build the same tool for the same purpose: and yet, as long as they apply the same idea, albeit to a different piece of iron, the tool is still correctly fashioned in the same way, whether one builds it here or among the barbarians. Isn't it so?

7) *Crat.* 425a1-b3

καὶ πάλιν ἐκ τῶν ὀνομάτων καὶ ῥημάτων μέγα ἤδη τι καὶ καλὸν καὶ ὄλον συστήσομεν, ὥσπερ ἐκεῖ τὸ ζῶον τῇ γραφικῇ, ἐνταῦθα τὸν λόγον τῇ ὀνομαστικῇ ἢ ῥητορικῇ ἢ ἥτις ἐστὶν ἡ τέχνη. μᾶλλον δὲ οὐχ ἡμεῖς, ἀλλὰ λέγων ἐξηρέχθη. συνέθεσαν μὲν γὰρ οὕτως ἦπερ σύγκειται οἱ παλαιοί· ἡμᾶς δὲ δεῖ, εἴπερ τεχνικῶς ἐπιστησόμεθα σκοπεῖσθαι αὐτὰ πάντα, οὕτω διελομένους, εἴτε κατὰ τρόπον τὰ τε πρῶτα ὀνόματα κείται καὶ τὰ ὕστερα εἴτε μὴ, οὕτω θεᾶσθαι· ἄλλως δὲ συνείρειν μὴ φαῦλον ἢ καὶ οὐ καθ' ὁδόν, ὦ φίλε Ἑρμόγενης.

[SOCR.] And again, starting from names and phrases, we shall compose something great, fair, and complete: just as there we made the picture through the art of painting, so here we shall fashion speech through the art of naming (*onomastiké*), or rhetoric, or whatever the craft is. Or, rather, not we; I was carried away while talking. In fact, the ancients fashioned the names as they stand composed now; as for us, if indeed we are to know how to examine them all in a skilful way, making divisions in this manner, we ought thus to observe whether the words, both the first and the later ones, are assigned correctly or not. Be careful, dear Hermogenes, that a haphazard way of stringing them together may turn out to be thoughtless and misguided.

8) *Crat.* 428e4-429a1

ΣΩ. Διδασκαλίας ἄρα ἔνεκα τὰ ὀνόματα λέγεται;

ΚΡ. Πάνυ γε.

ΣΩ. Οὐκοῦν φῶμεν καὶ ταύτην τέχνην εἶναι καὶ δημιουργοὺς αὐτῆς;

ΚΡ. Πάνυ γε.

ΣΩ. Τίνας;

ΚΡ. Οὓσπερ σὺ κατ' ἀρχὰς ἔλεγες, τοὺς νομοθέτας.

SOCR. So, are names said for the sake of teaching?

CR. Yes, indeed.

SOCR. Shall we, then, say that this, too, is a craft (*techné*) and that there are craftsmen of it?

CR. Certainly.

SOCR. Who are they?

CR. The ones you mentioned at the beginning, the lawgivers.

9) *Crat.* 440c3-8

οὐδὲ πάνυ νοῦν ἔχοντος ἀνθρώπου ἐπιτρέψαντα ὀνόμασιν αὐτὸν καὶ τὴν αὐτοῦ ψυχὴν θεραπεύειν, πεπιστευκότα ἐκείνοις καὶ τοῖς θεμένοις αὐτά, δυσχυρίζεσθαι ὡς τι εἰδόμενα, καὶ αὐτοῦ τε καὶ τῶν ὄντων καταγιγνώσκειν ὡς οὐδὲν ὑγιᾶς οὐδενός, ἀλλὰ πάντα ὥσπερ κεράμια ῥεῖ [...]

[SOCR.] Nor is it worthy of a person of sense, having entrusted the care of oneself and one's soul to names, full of confidence in them and those who posited them, to rest assured of knowing something and to condemn oneself and reality for the fact that nothing at all is sound, but everything flows like ceramic vases [...]

10) *Gorg.* 466e13-467a5

ΣΩ. Οὐκοῦν ἀποδείξεις τοὺς ῥήτορας νοῦν ἔχοντας καὶ τέχνην τὴν ῥητορικὴν ἀλλὰ μὴ κολακείαν, ἐμὲ ἐξελέγξας; εἰ δέ με ἑάσεις ἀνέλεγκτον, οἱ ῥήτορες οἱ ποιοῦντες ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν ἃ δοκεῖ αὐτοῖς καὶ οἱ τύραννοι οὐδὲν ἀγαθὸν τοῦτο κεκτήσονται, ἢ δὲ δύναμις ἐστίν, ὡς σὺ φῆς, ἀγαθόν, τὸ δὲ ποιεῖν ἄνευ νοῦ ἃ δοκεῖ καὶ σὺ ὁμολογεῖς κακὸν εἶναι.

SOCR. Will you then prove that the orators possess intelligence, and that rhetoric is a craft, not a form of adulation, and thus refute me? Otherwise, if you will leave me unrefuted, the orators who do what they deem fit in their cities, and the tyrants, will acquire no good in doing this, given that power is indeed, as you claim, a good, but doing what one deems fit without intelligence is, as you yourself admit, an evil.

11) *Resp.* 6.508d4-9

Οὕτω τοίνυν καὶ τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς ὧδε νόει ὅταν μὲν οὐ καταλάμπει ἀλήθειά τε καὶ τὸ ὄν, εἰς τοῦτο ἀπερείσηται, ἐνόησέν τε καὶ ἔγνω αὐτὸ καὶ νοῦν ἔχει φαίνεται. ὅταν δὲ εἰς τὸ τῷ σκότῳ κεκραμένον, τὸ γιγνόμενον τε καὶ ἀπολλύμενον, δοξάζει τε καὶ ἀμβλυώττει ἄνω καὶ κάτω τὰς δόξας μεταβάλλον, καὶ ἔοικεν αὐτὸν νοῦν οὐκ ἔχοντι.

In this way, conceive now of what concerns the soul: whenever it is fixed upon what is illuminated by truth and reality, it apprehends and knows it, and appears to possess intelligence. But when it focuses upon what is mixed with darkness, what comes to be and passes away, it forms opinions, its sight is weakened, and it changes opinions back and forth, appearing not to possess intelligence.

12) Procl., *In Crat.* 16

“Both Pythagoras and Epicurus were of Cratylus’ opinion. Democritus and Aristotle were of Hermogenes’. Pythagoras, for instance, when asked what is the wisest being of all, said, ‘Number’. What is second in wisdom? ‘He that puts the names to things’. [...] By ‘He that puts the names’ Pythagoras hinted at the Soul [psyché] which was instituted from Intellect [apò toû noû]. [...] The being of all things comes from Intellect that knows itself and is wise, but naming from Soul that imitates Intellect. The activity of naming, then, according to Pythagoras, belongs not to any random individual but to one who sees the Intellect and the nature of the real entities. Names are therefore natural [*physei*]” (trans. Duvick 2007)

Select Bibliography

- Ademollo, F. (2011), *The ‘Cratylus’ of Plato. A Commentary*, Cambridge
Aronadio, F. (2011), *I fondamenti della riflessione di Platone sul linguaggio: il ‘Cratilo’*, Rome
Barney, R. (2001), *Names and Nature in Plato’s ‘Cratylus’*, London
Baxter, T.M.S. (1992), *The ‘Cratylus’. Plato’s Critique of Naming*, Leiden
Cambiano, G. (1991²), *Platone e le tecniche*, Rome - Bari (first publ. 1971)
Dixsaut, M. (2000), *Platon et la question de la pensée*, Paris
Duvick, B. (2007), *Proclus On Plato’s ‘Cratylus’*, Ithaca
Ewigen, S.M. (2014), *Plato’s ‘Cratylus’. The Comedy of Language*, Bloomington
Rijlaarsdam, J.C. (1978), *Platon über die Sprache: ein Kommentar zum ‘Kratylos’*, Utrecht
Sedley, D. (2003), *Plato’s ‘Cratylus’*, Cambridge