

Laughable Etymologies: The Use of γελοῖον in Plato's *Cratylus*

In *Cratylus*, Plato's dialogue on the correctness of names, the large middle section consists of Socrates delivering a litany of etymologies analyzing words. Particularly because these etymologies are so contrary to modern sensibilities, this section of the work has been subject to widely varied interpretations, from those who argue that Plato uses the etymologies simply to demonstrate that names are in some sense correct (Sedley 1998) to those who claim that they are an extended satire (Baxter 1992).

In the course of these etymologies, Socrates twice refers to his proposed reconstruction as γελοῖον, "laughable" (400b, 402a). Although the term is used throughout Plato's dialogues, its use here is peculiar. Typically, it is used by interlocutors to agree with Socrates (or another primary speaker) that an idea ought to be dismissed, as in *Theaetetus* (178c) and *Phaedrus* (260b), or else to make their own (usually faulty) claim, as in *Euthyphro* (4b). Socrates himself uses the term more rarely.

The *Symposium*, *Republic*, and *Philebus* present instances of the term which are more informative with regards to the sense of γελοῖον. The *Symposium* uses it to describe the expected content of Aristophanes' famous account of love (*Symposium* 189b), which does lend itself readily to laughter but is also important in the development of the whole dialogue. In the *Republic*, it is repeatedly used (among other places) to describe a likely reaction to the idea of giving women the same education as men, but here Socrates specifically argues that what seems laughable may ultimately prove wise (452c). Of particular significance, however, is the discussion of the term in *Philebus* (48c-49b). In this discussion, Socrates actually explains that γελοῖον describes the sort of person who falsely believes that he is wiser than he really is.

This paper will therefore argue that the use of the term γελοῖον in *Cratylus* is not incidental but rather helps us to understand the role of the etymologies in the dialogue. By using this particular term to mark off the kind of reasoning that dominates the construction of etymologies, Plato indicates that this reasoning ought to be handled carefully. That which is γελοῖον can be seen as wise by those who are themselves unwise, and while it may ultimately provide a useful stepping stone towards the truth, caution and careful reasoning are demanded in working with it.

Bibliography

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