

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

As the concept of *techne* continues to interest scholars of Greek intellectual history, and of Plato in particular (cf. Cambiano 1991²; Roochnik 1996; Balansard 2001; Brisson 2013), this paper addresses the issue of Plato's perspective on the *techne* of namegiving in the *Cratylus*, based on a study of the etymology of *techne* itself proposed in the dialogue. The notion of *techne* plays a major role throughout the *Cratylus*, where namegivers are defined as craftsmen who assign the correct names to things according to their essential nature (cf. *Crat.* 388d6-389a3 and 427d3-430a9; see Baxter 1992:41 and Aronadio 2011:180). As I shall argue, Socrates' etymology of the term *techne* sheds light on the subject of the origin of names, on which his own etymological analysis relies.

Introduced as 'one of the things that appear to be serious,' the noun *techne* is compositionally analyzed, based on phonetic affinity, as originating from the roots of *echein* and *nous*: hence the meaning 'possession of intelligence', or 'holding on to intelligence' (*Crat.* 414b6-c8). On Socrates' etymological account, *techne* is both a state of mind and a cognitive faculty, a form of intelligence inextricably connected with *nous* or *noesis*. Proceeding on the premise that Socrates' etymologies, which occupy nearly half of the dialogue, are not merely a humorous exercise (cf. Rijlaarsdam 1978:143; Barney 2001:71; Ademollo 2011:238), this paper asks the question: what does the etymology of *techne* imply for Plato's notion of namegiving as a craft? In what sense should the namegivers 'hold on to *nous*'? I intend to show that, besides being deeply intertwined with etymological inquiry, the namegivers' activity is regarded by Plato as dependent upon philosophical dialectic.

Socrates' etymology of *techne* in the *Cratylus* still awaits full scholarly treatment. Oddly enough, as observed by Sedley (2003:159), it appears in the context of Socrates' examination of names that the early namegivers regarded as positive, inasmuch as they denote flux, whereas names hinting at stability are interpreted as negative (cf. *Crat.* 411b ff.). Without further clarification, a positive and constructive value is attached to *techne*, even though it refers to stability (*hexis*) rather than motion. Sedley suggests that, despite their exaggerated belief in flux and transience, the early namegivers implicitly acknowledged the importance of methodological stability in order for their own procedures to enjoy the status of *techne*. That, however, still leaves open the question of the epistemic nature of the namegivers' craft.

The key to understanding the 'technical' status of namegiving lies, as I shall argue, in Socrates' re-definition of the 'philosophical correctness' of etymologies. At the end of the dialogue, in fact, Socrates makes clear that the namegivers' misguided Heracliteanism must be corrected by means of philosophical investigation, in order for names to acquire the heuristic power of attaining the truth. Without the noetic insight into the world of Forms, the structure of language cannot escape from a conventionalist impasse and perform its representational function. The need for philosophical guidance is confirmed by the requirements and limitations that Plato elsewhere associates with expert knowledge (cf. *Charm.* 164d; *Protаг.* 312b-319b; *Gorg.* 500e-501b; *Hipp. min.* 376a-b).

In particular, *techne* can hardly become the basis of an axiological or ethical system, due to its fundamental value-neutrality (cf. Roochnik 1996:92). Despite being recognized by Plato as a trustworthy, systematic mode of knowledge, *techne* cannot formulate autonomous value-judgments on its ultimate goals, but requires constant

reference to the intelligible first principles, apprehended by *nous* or *noesis* (cf. e.g. *Resp.* 6.509d-511e). Namegiving faces further challenges. In fact, by their proximity to a world of flux, names have an inherent tendency to mislead: this is why the art of correct namegiving entails a steady application of *nous*, whose content is necessarily to be supplied by knowledge of the Forms. This paper argues that, insofar as it is a *techne* in the etymological sense proposed by Socrates, the namegivers' activity not only has to abide by methodological standards of soundness and stability, but is also prevented from claiming epistemic and axiological autonomy, since it needs to be subordinate to the oversight of philosophy.

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