Names and "Cutting Being at the Joints" in the *Cratylus*

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Plato's *Cratylus* is notoriously confusing. Two rival views concerning "the correctness of names" are under consideration. After dispatching Hermogenes' "conventionalist" view in the opening pages, Socrates develops equally devastating objections to Cratylus's "natural fittingness" view, and the dialogue ends, seemingly, without any positive answer to the original question in sight. To make matters worse, these positions are presented and refuted in relatively short sections at the beginning and end of the dialogue. Socrates spends the bulk of his time scrutinizing the etymologies of over one hundred Greek words, and it is very hard to say what he meant to accomplish by doing so. Reflecting these and other exegetical difficulties, no consensus has emerged in the vast secondary literature on the *Cratylus* as to what the dialogue conveys, or where it stands in relation to the rest of his corpus. My argument in this essay is that the *Cratylus* is best understood as a step in Plato's development of a method for learning about the essences of things, or for "cutting up each kind along its natural joints."[1] Socrates takes a possible method of learning about divisions in reality "for a test drive," so to speak, and ultimately concludes that taken by itself, it is an insufficient tool. The reason he tests this particular methodology is that it was a legitimate option, employed by many of his peers, but one that Plato had reasons for considering suspect. So while it has been a common tendency to consider the *Cratylus* a relatively unimportant or peripheral work within the Platonic corpus as a whole, I will argue that the dialogue is central to Plato's scientific and political projects alike.

A common tendency, however, has been to consider the *Cratylus* a relatively unimportant work. So, for example, H.N. Fowler writes that "it cannot be said to be of great importance in the development of the Platonic system, as it treats of a special subject somewhat apart from the general philosophic theory," A.E. Taylor calls it an "occasional work," and "a minor Socratic dialogue," and Gilbert Ryle notes that its bulk is "an unserious exercise" in

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1. *Phaedrus* 265E.

etymologies.[2] Even among those who assign it greater philosophical prominence it has sometimes been regarded as peripheral to Plato's main projects. As Timothy Baxter writes, "one cannot claim that it has been neglected, but its particular characteristics have denied it a place in the mainstream of Platonic dialogues."[3] It is certainly true that a central part of the *Cratylus*' discussion, which we might consider a forerunner of the linguistic or semantic sciences, is represented only piecemeal in the rest of Plato's works. So my contention that the *Cratylus* is of great importance to Plato's projects both of philosophically mapping out divisions of reality, and of reforming the Athenian polity, is not uncontroversial, and I will have to demonstrate it as I go along.

Nor is my description of the *Cratylus*' focus as primarily methodological shared by all commentators. Norman Kretzmann explains that the work "repeatedly declares itself to be an investigation of the 'correctness of names' and that is what it is. But generations of commentators have described it as something else—usually as a fantasy on the origins of language."[4] Fowler is certainly among this latter number, and Taylor too writes that "the ostensible subject of discussion" in the *Cratylus*, "is the origin of language."[5] Richard Robinson, Paul Friedhlander, and George Grote, on the other hand, share Kretzmann's assessment.[6] The different ways these commentators understand the dialogue's subject do not, however, appear to be exclusive. Taylor later admits that the *Cratylus* is "not so much concerned with the origin of language, as with the principles of philosophical and scientific nomenclature," and Friedhlander thinks Robinson errs in restricting the scope of the dialogue too narrowly to the correctness of names.[7] For this reason, I think I may at least proceed tentatively on the supposition that while Socrates is concerned with both the correctness of names and origin of language in this dialogue, the central reason for these concerns is to ascertain whether names

2. See H.N. Fowler's introduction to the Loeb Classical Library edition of *Cratylus* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Press, 1926) 4; A.E. Taylor's *Plato: the Man and his Work* (London: Methuen, 1926) 75; and Gilbert Ryle's *Plato's Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1966) 273.

3. Timothy Baxter, *The* Cratylus: *Plato's Critique of Naming* (Leiden: Brill, 1992) 7. David Sedley agrees, writing that "the dialogue plays extraordinarily little part in the global interpretations of Plato published over the last century and more. It is most frequently handled by Plato scholars on a need-to-know basis" (*Plato's* Cratylus [Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 2003] 23).

4. See Norman Kretzmann, "Plato on the Correctness of Names," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 8.2 (1971): 126.

5. Taylor, *Plato*, 75.

6. Richard Robinson, *Essays in Greek Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969) 103; Paul Friedhlander, *Plato*, trans. Hans Meyerhoff, vol. 2 (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1964) 196. George Grote, *Plato,* vol. 2 (London: John Murray, 1875) 501.

7. Taylor, *Plato*, 78; Friedhlander, *Plato*, 196 n. 1.

are suitable tools for instruction about being. Again, it is my hope that this will become clear as I proceed.

At any rate, that names are tools for instruction about being is the hypothesis Socrates is working under throughout most of the dialogue. Hermogenes has readily accepted that "things have some fixed being or essence of their own" that is not contingent on *nomos*, and just as readily that if things are of such a nature, the same holds "of actions performed in relation to them."[8] Socrates draws an analogy between cutting, one of the actions we perform on things, and the act of naming. Just as "if we make the cut in whatever way *we* choose, and with whatever tool *we* choose, we will not succeed in cutting," so likewise someone will only succeed in speaking "if he says things in the natural way to say them, in the natural way for them to be said, and with the natural tool for saying them."[9] This much we might all agree with. Socrates' next move involves several more questionable conclusions that together establish what I am calling the work's central hypothesis. Noting that shuttles "divide the warp and woof that are mixed together," he concludes that "a name is a tool for giving instruction, that is to say, for dividing being."[10] Names are employed by an instructor (*didaskalos*) or dialectician (*dialektikos*), who can rightly judge whether they are suitable to his task, but they are fashioned by a rule-setter (*nomothetes*) "who looks to the natural name of each thing and is able to put its form into letters and syllables."[11] The important point is that since the rule-setter's product is fashioned from some sort of ur-name, like a form, it is naturally suited to disclosing to us the nature of the thing it names. So the names "justice," "piety," or "love" are somehow naturally suited to answering the central questions of the *Republic*, *Euthyphro*, and *Symposium* etc. If this is true, it is of colossal import for Socrates' project of dividing being.

The long middle section of the dialogue sets out to determine its truth. Interestingly, however, Socrates is initially reluctant to investigate his hypothesis concerning the rule-setter. When asked "in what does the correctness of names consist?" Socrates replies that he doesn't "have a position on this," and encourages Hermogenes to investigate the matter himself.[12] If he cannot, he might beg his brother Callias, a famous patron of the Sophists, to share the wisdom he purchased from Protagoras.[13] Or barring this, he might try

8. *Cratylus* 386A, E. C. D. C. Reeve's translation in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997) 101–56.

9. Ibid. 387A–C.

10. Ibid. 388C.

11. Ibid. and 390E. As far as I can tell, instructor and dialectician are used interchangeably in the *Cratylus*.

12. Ibid. 391B.

13. Ibid. 391C. Earlier (384B) Socrates has remarked "to be sure, if I'd attended Prodicus's

to learn from Homer and the other poets. Only after these demurrals does Socrates acquiesce to Hermogenes' request for aid, and the lengthy string of etymologies is the result. But throughout this section Socrates continues to distance himself from his words, noting that the etymological "wisdom" which has suddenly come upon him appears superhumanly inspired, and later that what he is saying "sounds completely absurd."[14] These features, Socrates' initial refusal to investigate natural fittingness, and his reluctance to accept ownership of the etymologies, would seem to suggest that he did not really believe he could successfully establish a correspondence between name and thing by analyzing etymologies, and when coerced into the attempt, he found the endeavor a bit laughable.

This understanding is confirmed by the final section of the dialogue, in which Socrates finally engages Cratylus in conversation. The hypothesis throughout the etymological section has been the existence of a name-giving authority, and the etymologies are Socrates' attempt to corroborate the authority's choices.[15] The bulk of them trace complex terms down to simpler, primitive roots. *Asytanax*, composed of the words for "lord" and "city," is a fitting name for Hector's son since the boy is of noble lineage.[16] *Theoi* is a fitting name for the gods since the ancients worshipped the stars and planets which "run" (*thein*) across the night sky.[17] Eventually, however, Socrates decides that something must ground the correctness of these primitive terms as well.[18] The names themselves must somehow fit their proper objects, and since this cannot be by conventional imposition (Hermogenes' thesis) Socrates decides it must be by imitation. So he breaks terms into their component phonemes and letters, assigning a particular meaning to each sound. The "l" sound, for example, seems to him to imitate softness, the "r" sound to copy motion, etc.

It is to validate this last thesis concerning the name-giver's *modus operandi* that Socrates begins to question Cratylus. It proves easy, however, to find counterexamples. For example, *sklerotes*, meaning hardness, contains the "l" sound that Socrates had supposed to imitate softness.[19] Yet everyone under-

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fifty-drachma lecture course, which he himself advertises as an exhaustive treatment of the topic, there'd be nothing to prevent you from learning the precise truth about the correctness of names straightaway. But as I've only heard the one-drachma course, I don't know the truth about it."

14. Ibid. 396C, 401C.

15. This figure is variously referred to as if he were a Promethean figure or a god, but Robinson thinks we needn't grant him any sort of mythological existence: "he is like the point-particle we imagine in order to work out Newton's laws of motion … whenever he is inconvenient he retires or dissolves" (*Essays*, 105–6).

16. Ibid. 392B–E.

17. Ibid. 397C–D.

18. Ibid. 422B.

19. Ibid. 434D–E.

stands it, and even Cratylus admits that this is so because of usage. Forced thus toward Hermogenes' conventionalism, Cratylus's last-ditch attempt to salvage the natural correctness of names, along with their efficacy in instruction, is to point out their systematic consistency. They are "based on the same assumption and have the same purpose," namely to corroborate Cratylus' own Heracliteanism.[20] Socrates' attack on this final theory is twofold. First, he shows that etymologies can in fact contradict one another. The same word, *episteme*, can signal not only the motion of a soul toward things, the Heraclitean-sounding etymology Socrates gave earlier, but also the stoppage (*histesi*) of the motion of the soul towards (*epi*) things, which sounds Parmenidean. Second, and more importantly, he points out that if analysis of a word like knowledge could point to opposites, like motion and the stoppage of motion, words themselves cannot be the source of instruction about things. Instead, the correctness of the names given by the rule-setter must be established by looking to their objects "through themselves." Granted this possibility, even Cratylus agrees that it is "far better" to learn about things through themselves than to do so through their names.

In my estimation this is the most important conclusion Socrates reaches in the dialogue: as tools for instruction names are to be rejected. As he puts it, "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."[21] Or as Georgios Anagnostopoulos helpfully summarizes the argument, "if we must determine whether the name is correct prior to using it to discover the nature of what it names, and we can do this only if we already know what the nature of the thing is, names cannot be of any help in discovering the nature of things."[22] Socrates does not attempt here to prove his opinion that beauty and goodness are permanent against Cratylus' Heraclitean supposition that all things are in motion or flux.[23] Nor does he venture a positive account of how we learn about things "through themselves." But he does demonstrate that if we are going to investigate beauty or goodness, we had better not try to do so by looking at their names.

This conclusion, however, raises several further questions. For one thing, it might seem painfully obvious; indeed, the central question of the whole dialogue might appear to be a non-starter. Isn't it intuitively clear not only that names fit their objects by imposition, but also that only propositions are the bearers of truth and falsehood? Aristotle argues for both these opinions

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20. Ibid. 436C.

21. Ibid. 440C.

22. George Anagnostopoulos, "The Significance of Plato's *Cratylus*," *Review of Metaphysics* 27 (1973): 318–45, here 343.

23. *Cratylus* 440B.

in the *De Interpretatione*, as does Plato himself in the *Sophist* and *Statesman*.[24] In the *Statesman*, the Eleatic Stranger chides young Socrates for dividing humanity between Hellene and Barbarian, since these are not natural kinds, but only terms imposed by Greek-speakers.[25] And in the *Sophist* the Stranger distinguishes between nouns and verbs, and shows that at least one of each is needed for a statement to be a *logos* or speech.[26] Does this mean, however, that Socrates is thrust back into Hermogenes' conventionalism, the rejection of any and all connection between name and object, by rejecting Cratylus' natural fittingness? Furthermore, since Socrates was able to dispatch Cratylus' position relatively quickly at the end of the dialogue, why was the lengthy string of etymologies necessary? In what remains, I will consider why Socrates bothered testing out the natural fittingness of names as a method for investigating being at all, and why the etymologies were a necessary component of his experiment. I will begin by returning to the commentators.

The majority opinion is that the etymologies are a rather elaborate farce intended to ridicule some figure or group who employed them in a like manner in Plato's time. Grote regards Schleiermacher as the most important originator of this position.[27] Adhering to it, in varying degrees, are Friedhlander, Taylor, Baxter, Anagnostopoulos, and Hans Georg Gadamer.[28] Baxter writes, for example, that the etymologies "parody a whole range of Greek thinkers and poets and in so doing offer a schematic survey of the development of Greek thought, from Homer onwards to the Sophists. Plato is attacking a tendency in Greek thought to over-value words."[29] He devotes several chapters to deciphering who exactly might have been the target of Socrates' parody, and I will return to this question below.

Opposed to this view are Grote and David Sedley, who hold that Plato really did believe that etymologies could reveal the original intentions of the rule-setter. Sedley writes:

24. *De Interpretatione* chaps. 1–6, 16A–17A.

25. *Statesman* 262D–E.

26. *Sophist* 262C. Stranger: "when someone says 'man learns,' would you say that's the shortest and simplest kind of speech?" Theatetus: "yes."

27. Grote writes "it is called a 'valuable discovery of modern times' (so Schleiermacher terms it) that Plato meant all or most of [the etymologies] as mere parody and caricature. We are now told it was not Plato who misconceived the analogies, conditions, and limits of etymological transition, but others; whom Plato has here set himself to expose and ridicule, by mock etymologies intended to parody those which they had proposed as serious. If we ask who the persons thus ridiculed were, we learn that they were the Sophists, Protagoras or Prodikus, with others; according to Schleiermacher, Antisthenes among them" (*Plato*, 520).

28. Friedhlander, *Plato*, 213–14; Taylor, *Plato*, 88; Baxter, *Cratylus*, chap. 5; Anagnostopoulos, "Significance," 344; Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004) 406–17.

29. Baxter, *Cratylus*, 6.

> Plato fully shares the presupposition endemic to his culture that languages were con-
> sciously devised by early members of the human race, who can be assumed to have
> constructed each word as a brief description of its nominatum, just as present-day name-
> makers demonstrably continue to do. Words therefore are really coded descriptions, and
> there is no reason whatsoever why we should not set about decoding them.[30]

The assumption is that names disclose their proper objects by describing them somehow, and Sedley includes a lengthy treatment of the *techne*, "etymological expertise," that will allow us to "decode" these descriptions. The *Cratylus*, Sedley argues, is Plato's thorough examination of this exegetical tool. As evidence for his position, Sedley points out that Plato himself frequently employed etymologies. Among many other examples, Sedley educes various instances of etymological word-play from a passage in the *Philebus*.[31] Speaking on music, Socrates says:

> You will be competent, my friend, once you have learned how many intervals there
> are in high pitch and low pitch, what character they have, by what notes the intervals
> are defined, and the kinds of combinations they form—all of which our forebears have
> discovered and left to us, their successors, together with the names of these modes of
> harmony. And again the motions of the body display other similar characteristics of
> this kind, which they say should be measured by numbers and called rythyms and
> meters.[32]

According to Sedley, Plato is saying here that our "Promethean" forebears left us the terms rythyms and meters (*rythmous kai metra*) because these things are "measured by means of numbers" (*di' arithmon metrethenta*). As he explains, "the description of them as 'measured by means of numbers' is etymologically conveyed by the technical terminology of 'rythyms and measures' which our Promethean ancestor chose for dance." The upshot of his argument is that "Socrates is conveying to us that the vocabulary which we have inherited from our forebears can be expected to embody scientific insights, having in fact been devised by them precisely in order to encode and thus transmit those insights."[33] And these sorts of insights, Sedley thinks, are fairly widespread throughout the dialogues.

At first glance, it might appear that the "parody view" and the "etymological expertise view" are contradictory positions. If the etymologies are a farce, how can they simultaneously represent a systematic examination of

30. Sedley, 25.
31. Sedley, 25–28. To name one further example, Sedley draws attention (33) to the etymologies of *mantike* (prophecy) and *oionistike* (augury) in the *Phaedrus* (244B–D). Sedley also notes (31) that Aristotle employs etymologies in similar fashion.
32. *Philebus* 17C–D. Dorothea Frede's translation in Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works*, 398–456.
33. Sedley, *Plato's* Cratylus, 25.

a legitimate exegetical method? Furthermore, it might appear that the easy way to resolve this contradiction is to toss Sedley's and Grote's view. Did we not establish above that etymologies are a flop as a method for investigating divisions in being, names fit by imposition, and only sentences can be true or false? I will attempt, however, to explain the significance of the etymological section in a way such that Sedley's view and the majority opinion are not necessarily opposed. I begin with this statement of Gadamer's:

> If Greek philosophy does not want to admit this relationship between word and thing, speech and thought, the reason no doubt is that thought had to protect itself against the intimate relationship between word and thing in which the speaker lives. The dominion of this "most speakable of languages" (Nietzsche) over thought was so great that the chief concern of philosophy was to free itself from it. Thus from early on, the Greek philosophers fought against the "onoma" as the source of the seduction and confusion of thought, and instead embraced the ideality that is constantly created in language.[34]

I think Gadamer's assessment was correct: Plato rejected names as tools for instruction based largely on his need to distinguish philosophical inquiry from other modes of instruction so pervasive in his time as to necessitate the wide scope of the etymological section. This is the political dimension of the dialogue I mentioned above. As Baxter points out, it is difficult to pin down exactly which culprit used names or their etymologies to seduce and confuse thought.[35] I offer what I consider a plausible connection between the etymologies and some of the figures Socrates mentions directly before the etymological section, Homer and the poets on the one hand, and Protagoras, Prodicus, and the Sophists on the other.

I begin with the poets, an ancient and respected element in Athenian society. Education was based on memorization of poetry, and thorough knowledge of classic epics was *sine qua non* for conversation among the upper crust, as we see in the *Symposium*, in which the gathered Athenian elite frequently toss in a line of Homer or Hesiod to corroborate some remark. In Agathon's speech, for example, he quotes Homer's "hers are delicate feet: not on ground does she draw nigh; she walks instead on the heads of men," as "proof" that love is delicate.[36] Plato clearly held epic in high esteem: before banning Homer's poetry in the *Republic*, for example, Socrates laments that "the love and respect I've had for Homer since I was a child makes me hesitate to speak, for he seems to have been the first leader and teacher of all these

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34. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 417–18.

35. This is partly because we have only fragmentary examples of etymologies from many figures and partly because, as classical Greek is no one's native tongue, it is often difficult to recognize when etymological allusions are in fact being made.

36. *Symposium* 195D; *Iliad* 19.92–93.

fine tragedians."[37] Why then did Plato count the poets among those who think they are wise, but are not?[38] The heart of the problem appears to have been that poets, by definition, could use words beguilingly and persuasively on a wide range of topics, while not knowing whether they spoke truth or falsehood on these subjects. They speak not from acquaintance with things themselves, but by divine inspiration, which Plato variously refers to as an "inborn talent," a "madness," or a "gift."[39] While not knowing whether they speak truth or falsehood, good poets convince their audiences that the events or things they describe could be real. Or to put it another way, they convince us that their words successfully imitate things themselves, as Cratylus holds, but without first investigating being so as to ensure that their descriptions match up with reality.

To make matters worse, a professional class had developed to recite and interpret poetry at Greek religious festivals; we meet one such rhapsode in the *Ion*. We do not know how Ion himself interpreted Homer, but he mentions a competitor, Metrodorus of Lampsacus, known to have been a follower of the natural philosophers Anaxagoras and Empedocles, who allegorized Homer according to a "physical mode" of interpretation.[40] He interpreted the names of gods, for example, as standing for natural elements or human body parts. So Apollo stood for bile, since his arrows brought disease, and bile was held to be the source of human ailment. It seems possible that Socrates has this style of interpretation in mind as he explains Hera's name: "perhaps the lawgiver had natural phenomena in mind and called her Hera as a disguise for air, putting the beginning at the end. You would understand, if you were to repeat the name Hera over and over."[41] This might be taken to suggest that the "physical mode" of Metrodorus is the merely the product of babbling a name enough times. The *Ion* is relatively light-hearted, and Socrates lets the rhapsode off the hook with the rather unflattering explanation that his "knowledge" is merely the same *manteia* that inspires poets themselves, a degree removed. I bring up the rhapsode, however, to introduce a greater enemy of philosophy: the Sophist.

It is likely for several reasons that some Sophists got their start in a similar capacity. As W.K.C. Guthrie informs us, works of philosophers were occasionally introduced at such events, and poetic interpretation was well suited to the Sophists' competitive rhetorical style.[42] Once a Sophist had gained

37. *Republic* 595B.

38. *Apology* 22B–C.

39. In the *Apology*, *Ion*, and *Phaedrus* respectively.

40. *Ion* 530D. Robert Grant describes Metrodorus's allegorical methods in *The Letter and the Spirit* (New York: Macmillan, 1957) 4.

41. *Cratylus* 404C.

42. *History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1969) 42.

reknown at disputations of this sort, his services might be sought by those wishing to learn *orthopoeia* (rhetoric) as a political tool. Now it is well known that Sophist teachers of *orthopoeia* were among the first to concern themselves with the structures of language, calling this science *orthotes onomoton* (the correctness of names).[43] Protagoras, for example, distinguished between the five Greek verbal moods and divided nouns into masculine, feminine, and neuter genders, and used these divisions to offer "corrections" to the Greek language. [44] He argues that *pelex* (helmet) ought to be modified to reflect a masculine gender, and that the first line of the *Iliad*, "*menin aeide thea*," ought to employ the optative rather than the imperative mood. Socrates' explanation of Hephaestus's name, "To be sure Hephaestus is *phaistos*, with the eta added by attraction, I should think," might refer to Protagoras' work on morphology, and is belittled by Hermogenes' sarcastic response, "very likely, unless some other explanation occurs to you, as it probably will."[45] Prodicus, furthermore, appears to have involved a natural fittingness theory of names similar to Cratylus' in his study of synonyms. As Mario Unter-steiner explains, for Prodicus: "the synonym was founded on the etymology of words, that is, on the doctrine according to which each word expressed by nature a single thing, and did so by means of a similarity between the sound and the thing expressed, so that words were bound to be accurately distinguished from one another."[46] I cannot go into Plato's arguments against sophistry here, but it should suffice to say that if Prodicus and Protagoras were involved with etymologies as I have suggested, this alone would render them suspect in Plato's eyes.

Now Grote or Sedley would likely argue that none of the connections I have drawn between poets, their interpreters, certain Sophists, and the etymological section of the *Cratylus* prove that Plato meant the etymologies exclusively as parodical attack on the groups in question. Grote asks, to this effect, "what ground have we for presuming that Plato's views on the sub-ject were more correct? And that the etymologies which to them appeared admissible would be regarded by him as absurd and ridiculous?"[47] Well, I hope to have established that Plato argued against the analysis of names as a philosophical methodology for investigating the divisions of being with good reason, and part of his reason for doing so in the way he did was to allude to certain common practices among his contemporaries. Grote and

43. Ibid., 205.
44. Ibid., 220–21 and 221 n. 2.
45. *Cratylus* 407C.
46. Mario Untersteiner, *The Sophists*, trans. Kathleen Freeman (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1954) 213.
47. Grote, *Plato*, 521.

Sedley are not, however, mistaken in emphasizing the degree to which the hypothesis that names reveal something about the nature of their objects was a live option for Plato. To conclude, I want to explain briefly one way that Plato does indeed use names to investigate being.

To put it far too simply, Plato will use names and their etymologies, not as proof, but as an indication that something's nature is so. The most common way he does this is by using a name as a "nominal definition" on the basis of which to start out an inquiry. In the *Sophist*, for example, though the Stranger and Theatetus are resolved always to agree "about the thing itself," and not merely the name, they still take the name "sophist" as an indication that what they are investigating must possess a certain expertise or *sophos*.[48] Furthermore, in his trial investigation of the angler, the Stranger takes the etymological similarity between the word *asphalieutikes* (angling), as they have described it, and the action *anapasthai* (to strike upwards), as corroboration that they have defined angling correctly.[49] We might similarly analyze a word like "dentist" to indicate that we are concerned with an expert on teeth. As Sedley emphasizes, Plato shared the widely held belief of his time that the ancients who left the names we use were, generally speaking, wiser than we are, and that names can and sometimes do function as accurate descriptions of their objects if we employ them properly. Plato's beliefs concerning the ancients are indicated by the myth of the "time of Cronus" he tells in the *Statesman*, in which our present political and societal order is the result of gradual decay from a wiser, more innocent beginning.[50] And as Sedley takes pains to show, Plato will occasionally employ etymological analysis to access this wisdom of the ancients. It is important to recall, however, that Plato will also quote and interpret poetry, as in the *Protagoras*, and indulge in sophistical rhetoric, as in the *Euthydemus*, but did not think either of these practices adequate to reveal the natural divisions in being. I find no occasion on which Plato considers that a name proves any important fact about its object, and a good thing too; by paying too much attention to the name "astrologer," for example, we might conclude that we were concerned with an expert on stars. It is this refusal, against the prevailing practice in his time, to use the analysis of names as a method of "cutting being at its joints" without first investigating being in itself, that represents the most important teaching of the *Cratylus*.

48. *Sophist* 218C, 221D.
49. Ibid. 221B.
50. *Statesman* 268E–274E.