

Philosophy of language (PHIL UA-9085)

Signs: conventionalism vs. naturalism 2

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Plan for today

Conventionalism vs. naturalism

Plato's *Cratylus*

- Plato wrote dialogues.
- Socrates is a character in his dialogues, he is thought to voice the position and arguments that Plato himself favoured.
- In this dialogue, there are two other characters: Hermogenes and Cratylus.
- Interesting: Cratylus was in fact Plato's first major intellectual influence.
- This dialogue revolves around the correctness of **names**.
Thought to be part of Plato's "middle period", partly because one can see a defence of his classical theory of Forms.
- Aporetic argumentation. No happy ending.
- What is Socrates's position? Not so easy to say.

Discussion

- What is Cratylus's position? What is Hermogenes's position?
- Is conventionalism tenable if one holds that “whatever anyone decides to call a particular thing is its name” [385a]?
- Note that “different communities have different names for the same things” [385d].
- Underlying extreme conventionalism is a position like Protagoras's, saying that “the being or essence of each of them something private for each person” [385e].
- The “bad man argument” [386d-e] shows that Hermogenes in the end agrees with Socrates on the idea that “things have some fixed being or essence of their own”.

Discussion (cont.1)

- Actions also have some fixed being or essence of their own. [386e-387b]
- Speaking is a sort of action. To speak correctly is to reveal its essence. To speak correctly is to speak the truth. [387b]
- A statement is true if it says “of the things that are that they are”; false statements “say of the things that are that they are not” [385b2].
- Compositionality of truth and falsity, down to the level of names. [385b2b-d] Cf. with Frege!
- Speaking, saying, using names, are sorts of actions. [387c6]
- So, Socrates argues, conventionalism is untenable:

we cannot name things as we choose; rather, we must name them in the natural way for them to be named and with the natural tool for naming them. In that way we'll accomplish something and succeed in naming, otherwise we won't. [387c6d]

- This is the conclusion of the “truth & falsity” argument.

Discussion (cont.2)

- Names are tools that allow us to “instruct each other, that is to say, divide things according to their natures”. [388b]
- Who or what provides the names we use? Rules.
- So there must be a rule setter. [388d-e] He should “know how to embody in sounds and syllables the name naturally suited to each thing” [389d].
- Who should supervise their work?

[T]he person who knows how to ask questions... [the] dialectician. [390c]

- Upshot, against extreme conventionalism:

So Cratylus is right in saying that things have natural names, and that not everyone is a craftsman of names, but only someone who looks to the natural name of each thing and is able to put its form into letters and syllables. [390d-e]

- But then, how is the natural correctness of names established?
[cf. 391a]

Long section about etymology (394a-421d)

- Lots of examples...
- Upshot:

... if someone asks about the terms from which a name is formed, and then about the ones from which those terms are formed, and keeps on doing this indefinitely, the answerer must finally give up. Mustn't he? 421d-e

Discussion (cont.3)

- When is a name correct?

the correctness of every name we analyzed was intended to consist in its expressing the nature of one of the things that are. [422c-d]

- A name expresses the nature of what it names if it expresses its essence, via imitation.

So if someone were able to imitate in letters and syllables this being or essence that each thing has, wouldn't he express what each thing itself is? [423e]

So it seems that we should “divide off the letters or elements first” [424b] and investigate which essences each of these elements expresses. **But we'll see this breaks down...**

Discussion (cont.4)

- Point of contention between Cratylus and Socrates:

for Cratylus, all rule-setters are equally qualified, all names are correctly given.
[cf. 429a-c]

- But then Cratylus's position seems to imply that speaking falsely is impossible. [429c-e]
 - When you don't say of something what it is, you speak nonsense. [430a, "like banging a brass pot"]
 - A different version:

when we assign 'a', 'b', and each of the other letters to names by using the craft of grammar, if we add, subtract, or transpose a letter, we don't simply write the name incorrectly, we don't write it at all, for it immediately becomes a different name, if any of those things happens. [431e-432a]

- Socrates rebuts that this last version of Cratylus's story might apply to numbers, but not to names. [432a-b]

Discussion (cont.5)

- Names **don't** resemble what they represent in every respect. They resemble what they name if

“the letters or elements out of which primary names are composed be naturally like things” [434a].

- But then '*sklēron*' is a counterexample, for 'l' is supposed to express smoothness but '*sklēron*' means 'hard'. [434c-e].
Reintroduction of some form of conventionalism! The meaning of '*sklēron*' is established by **usage**.
- Relying on conventions is then necessary but

“the best possible way to speak consists in using names all (or most) of which are like the things they name” [435c].

Discussion (cont.6)

- Why? Because you can gain knowledge of things by learning their names:

when you know what a name is like, and it is like the thing it names, then you also know the thing, since it is like the name [435d]

- But the name-giver must have been able to know the things that are, their essence, independently of language! [436b-c]
- And this latter path to knowledge is direct, hence better than the one mediated by language. [439a-c]
- Knowledge is knowledge of what is without change. [440a]

Consequences for metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics

- Vindication of the theory of Forms? Only if you follow Socrates's down the line and you agree that the correctness of a name is given by whether it displays the nature of the things it names.
- Is knowledge possible? What role does language play here?
- And how important is etymology?
- Naturalism doesn't seem to give much room for cultural relativism.
- Against extreme conventionalism and against extreme naturalism: the community's role.

What's next?

Session 15: Thursday 14 March 2024

Topic: Aristotle's *De Interpretatione* 1-7

Reading: Aristotle [350 BCE], *De Interpretatione* (in Greek: *Peri hermeneias*), 1-7

Secondary sources: Crivelli (2009), Whitaker (1996)

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