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From Plato's *Kratylos* to Derrida: The Problem of Language for Philosophy

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Plato's understudied dialogue, Cratylus, often still thought of as an extended joke, should be seen as a centerpiece of his concern for arriving at the truth regarding the Good and all of the concepts—justice, piety, love and friendship, to name a few—that extend from it. The Cratylus, like the Good itself, is a center from which multiple issues radiate. One finds allusions throughout its narrative to virtually all significant thinkers—from poets to pre-Socratic philosophers—essential to the Hellenic intellectual world; and to every major issue that Socrates discusses across the Platonic corpus. Moreover, given Socrates' preferred means of seeking truth—through dialogue (although Plato's representation of the master in action may not always be accurate reportage of the specific details of these discussions)—language, which is the subject of the Cratylus, could hardly be more essential to the Socratic-Platonic enterprise. However, both Plato and Socrates are operating at a disadvantage in trying to answer the ostensive question posed by the dialogue: the key words found in the question and needed for an answer are imprecise and ambiguous, dooming the process to the aporia to which the dialogue arrives in the end. Thus the ostensive query regarding the "correctness of Hermogenes' name" and more broadly the "correctness of names" suffers from ambiguity concerning what "orthotes" ("correctness") means, and more fundamentally, regarding what "onoma" means—it corresponds to diverse grammatical concepts: "word," "name", "noun", "subject." Further, what does "rhema" mean—corresponding to the concepts "phrase", "verb", "predicate")—and what does "logos" mean (corresponding to a "rational argument" of indeterminate length, and also to "sentence")? Without clarity regarding these terms, how can Socrates hope to address the issue of "orthotes onomatos" or "orthotes onomaton"? The understanding of how words function in a sentence—grammar and syntax—exists in only a very primitive way by this time in Greek thought. That will change two generations after Plato, following Alexander the Great's conquests as far as India. The thinkers who travelled with his army returned to Hellas having encountered the system of grammar and syntax and the terminology that expresses it that had been invented in India before the time of Socrates and Plato by the Indian thinker, Panini. The terms we currently use to identify word-use—from "preposition" to "interrogative" to "adverb"—are all English-language renderings of Latin translations of Greek translations of Sanskrit turns of phrase coined by Panini to explain the role of different kinds of words in human speech. It is no accident that in two to three generations after Plato, the Hellenistic philosophers called Stoics begin to discuss language in a manner very different from that employed by Socrates in the Cratylus. Grammatically-focused treatises such as the de Syntaxi of Apollonios Dyskolos resonate from the new understanding and its terminology shaped by Panini, which entered Hellas and the West after Alexander and reconfigured the Western approach to language in a revolution the

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repercussions of which carry to the modern era and the thought of Wittgenstein, Barthes, and Derrida.

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Plato's understudied dialogue, *Kratylos*, often still thought of as an extended joke, should be seen as a centerpiece of his concern for arriving at the truth regarding the Good and all of the concepts—justice, piety, love and friendship, to name a few—that extend from it.[1] The *Kratylos*, like the Good itself, is a center from which multiple issues radiate. One finds allusions throughout its narrative to virtually all significant thinkers—from poets to pre-Socratic philosophers and sophists—essential to the Hellenic intellectual world; and to every major issue that Socrates discusses across the Platonic corpus.[2]

Thus in the course of his conversation with his two young friends, Kratylos and Hermogenes, particularly as he moves through the enormous collection of words that he subjects to "etymological analysis," Socrates makes directed or sometime less obvious allusions to Homer, Hesiod, the pre-Socrative philosophers, such as Herakleitos and Parmenides, the tragic playwrights, and many of the sophists with whom we elsewhere see him engaged in discussions by way of other platonic dialogues.

Indeed, given Socrates' preferred means of seeking truth—through *dialogue* (although Plato's representation of the master in action may not always be an accurate report of the specific details of these discussions)—language, which is

[1]This paper is largely extracted from a threefold progression my work. The first, my original, 1984, PhD dissertation at Princeton—my advisor lost his mind, and I didn't get the degree then and there (oh, it's a long story)—was entirely focused on the *Kratylos* and its unrecognized importance to the larger scope of Socrates'/Plato's work. By the time I went came back to it nearly two decades later, a number of works had begun to appear focusing on the *Kratylos*—which are noted in the bibliography—albeit none with my particular angles of emphasis; and I had meanwhile arrived at another discovery and focus: the ways in which, thanks to Panini, Hellenistic Greek thinkers began to understand grammar and syntax, and the implications of that over the following two millennia—and most importantly, the unacknowledged starting point of the *Kratylos* for the language thought of Wittgenstein, Barthes, and Derrida in particular. That yielded my expanded, re-shaped PhD dissertation at Union Institute and University, which was almost immediately published as *The Problem of Plato's Cratylus: the Relation of Language to Truth in the History of Philosophy* (Lewiston, YN: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2007). Two years ago I was inspired, for reasons beyond this discussion, to continue my discussion by coming back around to India by expanding my exploration and discussion of Panini and his associates, and by examining the work of three modern and contemporary Indian philosophers (Sri Aurobindo, Citta Ranjan Das, and Ananta Kumar Giri) whose work connects in various ways to all of this. The result was a 2025 volume, *From Plato to Panini to Levinas: The Problem of Language for Philosophy and Theology*, in an ongoing series on India and the West being published by Routledge Press. So there are many details that are not present in this brief article that may be found in the last of these three iterations of my incipient idea. I will point most of them out as the narrative moves along. One note on my orthography: I confess to a bit of snootiness in preferring to render Greek names with a closer approximation of the Greek spellings, albeit, obviously, with Latin letters—thus, Kratylos and Aikhaians, for instance. My one exception is the name of Socrates, since it is so familiar in that Latinate transliteration.

[2]See Soltes, *From Plato to Panini to Levinas*, chapter four

the subject of the *Kratylos*, could hardly be more essential to the Socratic-Platonic enterprise. How can we even have a discussion regarding, say, *hosiotes* ("piety/holiness")—which is the subject concerning which Socrates is represented by Plato as engaging with the sophist, Euthyphro, in the dialogue of that name, if the instrument of our engagement, language, proves to be unreliable. If the words we use to engage are not understood the same way by both of us, then our enterprise is doomed from the start.

In the case of Euthyphro, the sophist eventually arrives at a definition of *hosiotes*—that it is something that "is pleasing to the gods"—which evokes a question and an objection from Socrates. "Is an act pleasing to the gods because it is *hosios* or *hosios* because it is pleasing to the gods?" and, given how we see the gods, in the epic tradition, often radically disagreeing—so that some support the Trojans and others the Aikhaians in the war at Troy; and we observe that Poseidon has it in for Odysseus while Athena is his supreme protector and advisor—then is a given act "that pleases some gods and displeases others" *hosios*?[3] Even before we arrive at this linked pair of issues, however, we might wonder whether we all agree what "pleasing" means or even what "gods" means.

In the discussion within the *Kratylos*, both Plato and Socrates are operating at a disadvantage in trying to answer the ostensive question posed by the dialogue: the key words found in the question and needed for an answer are imprecise and ambiguous, dooming the process to the *aporia* to which the dialogue arrives in the end.

Thus the initial query regarding the "correctness of Hermogenes' name" and more broadly the "correctness of names" suffers from ambiguity concerning what "*orthotes*" ("correctness") means, and more fundamentally, regarding what "*onoma*" means. Does *orthotes* refer to the sounds of the letters that comprise the word or to its meaning? Both the apparent intention of the question that Hermogenes and Kratylos pose to Socrates and Socrates' initial response to the question suggests that the concern is semantic, not phonemic. Socrates parses Hermogenes' name to mean "born of Hermes" and observes that Hermogenes is not very good with money, whereas Hermes is a god associated with financial skill—and therefore, Socrates suggests, Kratylos most likely means that the "incorrectness" of Hermogenes' name pertains to its inappropriate meaning.[4]

This viewpoint would be consistent with a traditional Greek understanding—and the Greeks are not alone in this—that posits a relationship between a name and the essence of its bearer. Odysseus' name, for instance, is presented in *Odyssey* 19:361-475 as derived from "*oduein*"—meaning "to give or receive pain." It is connected to the hero's childhood act of being gored by a boar as he was in the act of slaying it. Given his epithet as "long-suffering"—and both the suffering he certainly endures to get home from Troy—and the fact that everyone who is in contact with him—from his son and wife to his own crew to the Trojans and the Phaiakians who ferry him safely home, to the Kyclops, Polyphemos, whose single eye he manages to gouge out, to the two goddesses,

[3]See *Euthyphro* 7a-10b.

[4]See *Kratylos* 383b-384c; later on, in 407e-408b Socrates connects Hermes to fluid speaking, and Hermogenes himself says that he is no speaker, and therefore inaccurately named.

Kirke and Kalypso, who want him as a mate for eternity—suffers through contact with him, and so we understand how that notion works.

The array of "etymologies" that dominate the dialogue further suggest this sort of sense of what constitutes "correctness" in the matter of names. However, those very etymologies are also overrun with phonemic analyses, which, if we apply that sort of thinking to the question of the *orthotes* of Hermogenes, we might then be caused to wonder whether the issue is, rather, that of my calling the same individual "Harpogenes" or "Hermotines" instead of "Hermogenes"—and this would be incorrect in a different way both from his name mis-expressing his essence or from my calling him, say, "Kratylos" instead of "Hermogenes"

As Socrates begins to fill his rhetorical sails with wind, he twists the inquiry in an allied but different direction: toward the matter of whether there is a natural (*phusei*) relationship between a given entity and the *onoma* used to refer to it, or simply an agreed-upon (*nomoi*/*thesei*) relationship: is there something inherently canine about "dog"? Although his primary context is Hellenic—he references almost entirely the Greek language alone—his reference to Phrygian as a linguistic point of origin for the Greek word (*pyr*) for "fire" (at 410a) suggests that at least he could be aware of the idea that different languages offer different phonemic combinations for the same entity (eg, Greek *pyr* = Hebrew *aysh* = French *feu*). But he rarely goes there, nor does he really have a knowledge of other languages from which to draw.

This in turn leads to the matter of whether the *orthotes* of a given word is a question pertaining to its original form—its original *creation* as a word, and thus to the question of who would have been the original contriver of that word and with what authority (human or divine)—or whether the form of words can evolve so that the question pertains to *usage* even if the phonemic shape is not obviously correct. It also leads to the problematic of whether all words fall into this same sort of question-basket. Is the question "fire" or "dog" the same question as that with which the dialogue began, the name, "Hermogenes"?

Otherwise asked: does the issue of "correctness" change if I am referring to a "dog" as a "horse" or a "horse" as a "dog" or if I refer to either of these as, say, a "man"[5]—how do these "incorrectnesses" differ from that of calling Hermogenes "Kratylos" or calling him "Harpogenes"? Indeed is there a distinction that we might consider between an *onoma* such as Hermogenes or Kratylos or Socrates, of which there may be multiple referents and, say, Zeus or Hera, for which terms there is in each case only a single referent: how might *orthotes* apply differently to them than to Hermogenes? The problem of whether and how these distinctions differently address *orthotes* derives, in part, from the syntactic ambiguity of the term *onoma*—which I have rendered in the previous paragraph, as "name."

Onoma, however, corresponds to diverse grammatical concepts: "word," "name", "noun", "subject." Further, other key words in the dialogue offer similar problems of ambiguity: "*rhema*" corresponds to the concepts "phrase", "verb", "predicate." And "*logos*" corresponds to a "sentence" and also to a "rational argument"—of of indeterminate length, from a few words to multiple pages. Without clarity regarding these terms, how can Socrates hope to address the issue

[5]See *Kratylos* 385a.

of "*orthotes onomatos*" or "*orthotes onomaton*"? (and we might wonder, further, whether there is an intended difference between "correctness of an *onoma*" and "correctness of (plural): *onomata*?")—and ultimately, we might wonder how any dialogue and cross-examination (*elengkhos*) can transpire successfully, given these issues?

All of this suggests both complications and a special role for the *Kratylos*: focused on the language building-blocks of Plato's philosophizing efforts, the *Kratylos* is a nexus for the range of his philosophical concerns. This quality is not, of course, limited to allusions to different figures; the *Kratylos* also—inevitably—intersects ideas discussed in other Platonic dialogues as well as issues raised outside the Platonic corpus.[6] The *Kratylos* connects both to issues that have been reviewed in earlier dialogues (e.g., *Euthyphro*) and to those that are still in the process of taking shape to appear in fuller form in later dialogues (e.g., the Forms and the *Republic*, et al).

Socrates could be and was condemned as impious by those who never stopped to ask what "piety" is. Against that biographical datum, we understand that the ultimate *telos* of inquiring into what the concept or Form "X" is, is not simply to know what it is, but to be able to make use both of that knowledge and the knowledge of one's ignorance as one participates in the *polis* and in the world as a citizen of the one and an inhabitant of the other. The double fallback position is a position of productive, as opposed to dismissive *aporia*: since absolute knowledge is almost invariably beyond reach, that position is both to acknowledge that one does not possess absolute knowledge (as Socrates acknowledges) and to continue asking the questions through *elengkhos* (cross-examination) that offers the only hope of someday attaining it (as Plato' Socrates and Plato himself would have us do).

The *Kratylos* is, then, the central mechanism for wrestling with the complications that this conviction makes inevitable, which is why it so richly allusive, both to other Platonic works and to such a range of other works by other thinkers important to Plato's thinking in either positive or negative ways. It is why the issues it raises and cannot solve make it a lynchpin in the revisiting of the same issues twenty-four centuries beyond Plato.

While Plato's Socrates is the first Greek to engage in some sort of systematic discussion of words and how they are created and used to communicate, the understanding of how words function in a sentence—grammar and syntax—exists in only a very primitive way by this time in Greek thought. It is the ambiguity of the term *onoma* itself, and its cousins, *rhema* and *logos*, that stand out as most fundamentally problematic for the purposes of this discussion.

In any case, the *Cratylus* ends, as do many of the Platonic dialogues, in *aporia*: there is no conclusion, no answer to the question, and part of the reason for this is the lack of clarity with regard to the usage of the terms being discussed: they began with "Hermogenes" and move on, by way of the extensive etymologies, to a range of word-types, from "fire" to "Zeus." To what kind of *onoma*, then, should the question of *orthotes* (and what sort of *orthotes*) be applied?[7]

[6]For details regarding all of these connections, see Soltes, *From Plato to Panini to Levinas*, chapter 4.
[7]For more extensive details about all of this, see Ibid, chapter 3.

The ambiguity will only change two generations after Plato, following Alexander the Great's conquests as far as India. The thinkers who travelled with his army returned to Hellas having encountered the system of grammar and syntax and the terminology that expresses it that had been invented in India before the time of Socrates and Plato by the Indian thinker, Panini. Together with a handful of other important Indian thinkers on language, Panini had provided a detailed analysis of how language works.[8]

His most renowned text is his *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, a treatise on Sanskrit grammar written in a *sutra* style—meaning that it presents itself as a tapestry of aphoristic threads: the term *su-tra* is cognate with the English word "sew." The *Astadhyayi*, (aka *Astaka*), provides an extensive series of definitions, based on function, of 1700 *elementa* within language. The work offers 3,996 verses providing rules on linguistics, syntax and semantics in eight section/chapters—in turn, each chapter is subdivided into four sections or *padas*—and it is the foundational text of the *Vyākaraṇa* branch of the *Vedanga*, the six auxiliary scholarly disciplines connected to the study of the Vedas.[9]

Written (based on the primary consensus regarding when he lived) presumably around 500 BCE, the Astadhyayi is in effect a description of the Sanskrit language as it was in use during his time—which is to say the language used by a theoretically elite stratum of model speakers, referred to in the work as *shista*. While it is not the first work to be inspired by the Vedas to analyze their grammatical and phonemic elements in order to help prevent those most important of early sacred hymns from degenerating into corrupt form—Pāṇini himself refers to older texts such as the *Unādisūtra*, *Dhātupāṭha*, and *Gaṇapātha*, but only some of these have survived and then only in part—the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* is the oldest *systematic* grammatically-focused linguistic text that we possess, and one of the oldest Sanskrit texts to have survived in its entirety.

Panini offers a stunningly innovative discussion of how language functions—including but carrying well beyond the functional differences, say, of what Plato's Socrates calls an *onoma* or a *rhema*. One might suppose, hypothetically, that the discussion and outcome of the *Kratylos* might have been different, had Socrates—or at least Plato—been aware of Panini or had either or both of these two brilliant Hellenic thinkers had the sophisticated sense of how language works in terms of grammar and syntax and/or the sort of detailed terminology that reflects on the nuances of grammar- and syntax-based language use.

The terms we currently use to identify word-use—from "noun" to "preposition" to "interrogative" to "adverb"—are all English-language renderings of Latin translations of Greek translations of Sanskrit turns of phrase coined by Panini to explain the role of different kinds of words in human speech. Thus there is some clarity

[8]Those other thinkers include a predecessor, Yaska (7th-5th c BCE), as well as Shakatayana, from a still earlier generation. See Ibid, 180-4.

[9]Arguably the most important English-language scholar of Panini's work (and related Indic matters) is George Cardona (b 1936). Among his more significant works, one might note his "Some Principles of Pāṇini's Grammar, in the *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 1:40-74, 1970; and his magisterial *Panini: His Work and Its Traditions* (Vol 1: Background and Introduction)

regarding "word," "name," "common noun," "proper noun," "verb," "phrase," and so on.

The carrying of some form of Panini's text back to Hellas would effect a revolution in Greek and Western thinking about how language works. Within two to three generations after Plato, the Hellenistic Stoic philosophers began to discuss language in a manner very different from that employed by Socrates in the *Kratylos*. They began to concern themselves with language usage and the parts of speech that do particular jobs in making inter-human communication possible. Grammatically-focused treatises such as the *de Syntaxi* of Apollonios Dyskolos resonate from the new understanding and its terminology first shaped by Panini and other Indian thinkers.

All of this said, one must note that there are those classicists who assert that the move toward grammatical sophistication for the Greeks by the time of the Stoics is a coincidence with regard to what had earlier been put forth by Panini and others in India: that it is a matter of parallel developments rather than causal influence. It is absolutely true that one cannot prove definitively that the results of Paninian scholarship—and its totality is far more extensive than I have explored in these paragraphs—were recognized, learned and carried back to Hellas through Alexander's expansion toward the Himalayas, but I would also suggest that the will to deny that influence may reflect the Hellenocentric perspective to which the Greeks themselves, more than 23 centuries ago, and Western classicists and colonialists in the 18th-20th centuries, in their varied intellectual encounters with India, have been subject.

In any case, while one can thereafter follow the ongoing evolution of an increasingly sophisticated understanding of language use and also its applicability to the specifics of Christian theology—beginning with Saint Augustine[10]—for the purpose of this discussion we shall fast-forward to the twentieth century and the thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Derrida. There are two points that I wish to offer regarding these three thinkers. The first is that they pick up where Plato's Socrates leaves off at the end of the *Kratylos*. The second is that none of the three evinces an awareness of this fact—nor do those who have written on them recognize their debt to Plato's Socrates.

In Wittgenstein's case, we might excuse his unawareness, because he himself asserted that, as someone trained not as a philosopher but as an engineer, he was not well versed in philosophy in general. But both Barthes and Derrida write specifically about the Greeks and language, and about the importance of reading Plato. [11] So, given their respective passions for the issue of

[10]For the interested reader, see the details in Soltes, *From Plato to Panini to Levinas*, chapter five.

[11] Particularly Derrida, as I shall repeat below, but Barthes makes many direct references to Plato—eg, in his 1977 *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* he directly references Plato's *Symposium*; in the 1977-8 lectures published as *The Neutral*, he explores the platonic issue of a distinction between *doxa* and *episteme*; less straightforwardly, in his 1967 essay, "The Death of the Author," he distinctly echoes Plato's Socrates' concern in the *Phaidros* regarding the written word.

communication and of language and its diverse problematic issues, one might have expected at least some slight nod in the direction of the *Kratylos*.[12]

For instance: Barthes' 1964 *Elements of Semiology* is ostensibly a commentary on Saussure's 1916 *Course on Linguistics*, and a take-off from it toward the work of linguists like Meillet, Hjelmslev, Martinet and Jacobsen as well as in the direction of the sort of expansion beyond spoken language that Saussure himself had anticipated, toward the structural anthropology of Levi-Strauss, for example, or toward economics, each with its own—not necessarily verbal—language and concomitant vocabulary and syntax. But what Barthes misses, in spite of his discussion of the origin of non-verbal semiotic systems and his specific reference to Greek substantives, is the original seed from which Saussure's tree grew: Plato's *Kratylos*.[13]

When Barthes writes that his investigation will be "both diffident and rash: diffident because semiological knowledge at present can be only a copy of linguistic knowledge; rash because this knowledge must be applied forthwith, at least as a project, to non-linguistic objects," it seems to me that even the model for the ramification he promises has also been provided by the *Kratylos* in its relationship to post-Kratylean linguistic inquiry. The diffident *Kratylos* is an exploration frustrated by the problem of *onomata* as copies (*mimemata*) of copies of reality—unless they can be proven to convey the *ousia* ("essence") of the *mimemata* of the various Forms (which is what their *nominata* [the things named] are), but that cannot be proven.

And if it could be, then only a superhuman *nomothetes/onomastikos* (lawgiver/name-maker) could create/impose *onomata*, which means that language either cannot evolve once the original name-giver is gone or it becomes corrupt. The rash application of whatever knowledge the *Kratylos* either yields to us or allows us to pursue in spite of the *aporia* at which it arrives regarding the instruments of our pursuit, pushes past Aristotle toward the Stoics, the Alexandrians, Apollonios and Herodian, in ramified linguistic—both grammatical and philosophical—directions. So: if Barthes is planning to plant a new tree before us he might want to understand more clearly both the tree and its roots (or seeds) that he is proposing to uproot next to him. To repeat: as someone who presents himself as very aware of Sokratic-Platonic thinking, I find it remarkable that he evinces no awareness at all of the *Kratylos* and where it goes, although given what short shrift had been given to the dialogue for so long by the time Barthes was writing, perhaps that is not *so* surprising.

His discussion of language as "a social institution and a system of values… a collective contract… made up of a certain number of elements…, a system of contractual values (in part arbitrary, or, more exactly, unmotivated) that it resists modifications coming from a single individual, and is consequently a social institution"[14] calls to mind not merely the general terms of the *Kratylos*' *physis(physei)-nomos(nomoi)/thesis(thesei)* issue, and Saussure's absolute

[12]I am making this point without going into exhaustive detail. The interested and/or disbelieving reader might consult Soltes, *From Plato to Panini to Levinas,* as noted in several previous footnotes.
[13]See especially 14, 22, 27, 31, and 65.
[14]Ibid, 14.

rejection of a *physis* perspective. It specifically and more interestingly evokes the image, early on in the dialogue, of Hermogenes attempting to assert the legitimacy of modifications coming from any single individual.

It is also therefore ironic—an irony to which Barthes might have called our attention were he thinking of the *Kratylos* as he perused Saussure—Hermogenes' autonomous idiolect (anyone can create or alter a name which may be valid, but only, perhaps, for him) view is being rejected here, but not in favor of a *physei* view such as Kratylos espouses (at least as Hermogenes reports regarding what Kratylos has asserted, at the beginning of the dialogue), but a *nomoi* view that Hermogenes espouses but then carries to an extreme where it becomes untenable and just as anti-*nomos* as it is anti-*physis*. This would have been an interesting issue for Barthes to have considered.

I am admittedly doing what academics don't ordinarily do here: putting myself in Barthes head and wondering what he might or could or should have written against an informed Kratylean background. For the reader uncomfortable with such speculation, please consider only this limited assertion: that an acknowledgedly brilliant writer on language and semiology who was clearly well aware of Plato at least to some extent should have at least acknowledged the *Kratylos somewhere*.

Given an awareness of the *Kratylos* in the discussion of language, Barthes might also have been in a position to assert that the discussion of individual speech (*parole*) that Saussure discusses and to which he, Barthes refers, as "an act of individual selection and actualization" represents one of the more important new branches growing out of the tree planted by Plato, for whom the issue of *parole* doesn't really come up except to the extent that it refers to what Hermogenes claims. But Hermogenes' claim has to do with the individual's decision to change the shape of the *onoma* that everyone else is using (calling a *hippos* [horse] an *anthropos* [human being] and vice versa) not the selection of agreed-upon *onomata* that every act of speaking necessitates.[15] This second issue is not one upon which Plato focuses.

The astonishing thing is that Barthes actually offers an entire section entitled "The idiolect… This is 'the language in as much as it is spoken by a single individual' ([quoting from] Martinet) or again 'the whole set of habits of a single individual at a given moment' ([quoting] Ebeling)."[16] While it is true that what Barthes and those he quotes are discussing is not exactly what Hermogenes was claiming in the *Kratylos*, yet to talk about three types of idiolect—the aphasic (who like Hermogenes, but for different reasons, speaks virtually his own language); the style of a writer; and a particular linguistic community—without mention of Hermogenes and the *Kratylos* suggests a boat that has been missed and gone far out to sea.

It might also be noted that, as Barthes moved beyond the discussion of language semiology to other systems, such as food and garments—the *language* of food and the *language* of fashion—this exemplification of his "rash" passage beyond Saussure could also be understood, (since these various language

[15]See *Kratylos* 385a.
[16]Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, 21.

systems, as he refers to them, are all analogues of each other), both as macro-examples of the pattern of analogy that Saussure describes with regard to word-formation within language, and also as descendants of the system of analogies that Plato's Socrates uses when exploring language in the *Kratylos* (as he does with other subjects in other dialogues).

And then there is Derrida, whose serious interest in the Greeks and Plato in particular is most obviously reflected in this 1972 essay, "Plato's Pharmacy," in his book, *Dissemination*."[17] For we might consider the manner in which the process of taking sentences, phrases and words apart in order to examine them and understand them from a new perspective—the deconstructive process for which Derrida is renowned—represents a continuation of, and finds its ultimate roots in, the extensive "etymological" action of Socrates in the *Kratylos*. That Derrida is emphatically Socratic—that his intentions draw from the same well of aporetic thinking that we find present in so many of Plato's depictions of his master—is nicely summarized (albeit without reference to Socrates) by John Caputo:

> The very meaning and mission of deconstruction is to show that things—texts, institutions, traditions, societies, beliefs, and practices of whatever size and sort you need—do not have definable meanings and determinable missions… every time you try to stabilize the meaning of a thing, to fix it in its missionary position, the thing itself, if there is anything at all to it, slips away… Whenever deconstruction finds a nut-shell—a secure axiom or a pithy maxim—the very idea is to crack it open and disturb this tranquility.[18]

This is precisely what Socrates is consistently about, whether the nutshell is Euthyphro's "missionary position" on piety or Meno's on virtue, and in the *Kratylos* he offers a deconstructive approach to a central discussional concern of his predecessors and contemporaries—*physis* and *nomos/thesis* ("nature" and "law/convention")—which they typically understand as a nutshell pair in opposition to each other.

Socrates' deconstruction of the two concepts is accomplished through harnessing the problem to the problem of language. The result is a tearing down of preconceptions that is not only relevant to the *Kratylos* but emblematic of the elengkhetic process throughout the Platonic dialogues, because language *as* an issue is the instrument with which the dialogue seeks a solution to the *physis-nomos/thesis* issue and all other issues. My argument is that the constant pulling apart and reconstruction of words in which Socrates engages—the enormous etymology section of the *Kratylos*—may be seen in part to lead rather directly to Derrida's methodology, particularly when we filter that methodology back through Barthes, Saussure and Wittgenstein. But neither Derrida himself nor any writer on Derrida whom I have read has evinced much recognition of the beginning point of this conceptual genealogy.[19]

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[17]See "From 'Plato's Pharmacy," in Peggy Kamuf, ed., *A Derrida Reader*, 112-39.

[18]John Caputo, ed., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 31-2.

[19]Most obviously among these writers are Caputo, Critchley, Garver, Lee, and Rinon. Staton, Wood, and also Zuckert—all of whom are found represented by works noted in the bibliography—and others, as well.

The focus of the *Kratylos* is on language; it is a focus on that instrument that is most essential to the articulation of memory, language and the words that comprise language. Wittgenstein worries about the relationship between thought and language, in part because of his acuteness at ramifying "thought" and recognizing how different those branches are from each other; among the aspects of thought to which Barthes calls attention is the category of *signifieds* and their relationship to language; Derrida adds most eloquently to this array, memory[20]—as an aspect of thought: by implication, as one of the reservoirs of signifieds. He cannot and does not ignore the issue of the role language must play in signifying the signifieds of memory (to use Saussure-Barthes terminology)—and yet he has forgotten the work of the one who first articulated the problem of language and its relationship to thought and all of its aspects.

Moreover, he and his commentators have also forgotten Plato within the context of the very innovation that Derrida brings to twentieth-century thinking. The irony is palpable: Derrida deconstructs. He takes Wittgenstein at his word that we must turn things upside down—to look piercingly within but to command a clear view from without, because the essence is hidden, but it is hidden because it is right before us and its familiarity causes us not to see it—and he innovates. He and his commentators recognize that there is a line to be drawn directly from Wittgenstein to Derrida, and that clustered on the line are others, such as Nietzsche and Husserl and Merleau-Ponty and above all, Heidegger.[21]

But the one who first deconstructed language, who took its *onomata* apart and turned them upside down and inside out, who turned *onomata* into *rhemata* and *logoi* and *logoi* and *rhemata* into *onomata*, and turned *onomata*, further, into more fragmentary *stoikheia* (elements, i.e., letter-sounds), in his own desperation to expose the essence that is hidden—in his conviction that part of its hiddenness is a reflection of its being out there before us, but too familiar to be recognized (we all *know* what piety and justice and shoemaking and carpentry are; they are with us all the time, no?—remains invisible to the process and to the discussers of the process shaped by Derrida, even though he (Socrates) is right there before them. And so the deconstructive process that Derrida offers us is not so entirely new. It is not as new as its champions claim. It is a return, like so many other aspects of Western thought, to Plato's Socrates.

We might recognize that Socrates ultimately believes that the essences of concrete and abstract things—from "tableness" and "chairness" to "holiness" and "the Good"—exist, although nearly impossible to locate, but that the closest to success at locating them we can come is through *elengkhos*. Derrida, by contrast, as a postmodernist, may be seen to believe that those essences don't exist at all. Nonetheless, given the at least parallel deconstructive processes and Derrida's insistence on the importance of Plato and the Greeks, it is surprising that this particular dialogue with all of its issues receives not even a passing mention. Nor, to repeat, do those who discuss Derrida acknowledge the existence, much less the importance of the *Kratylos*.

[20]For example, in "Speech and Phenomena" (1966); see *The Derrida Reader*, 14-15.

[21]See in particular Catherine H. Zuckert's *Postmodern Platos: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Strauss, Derrida.*

Caputo discusses what he entitles "*Khora*: Being Serious with Plato."[22] This is the essay in which he reiterates on a more elaborate scale the point summarized by Derrida himself. Caputo arrives, by way of several references, to the importance of both Plato and Aristotle, and to the fact that "to read Plato and Aristotle well, one must learn Greek, learn as much as possible about their predecessors, contemporaries, and successors, about their religious, social, political, and historical presuppositions, understand the complex history of subsequent interpretations of their works, etc."[23] Precisely. And it is my thesis that the *Kratylos* is at the heart of exactly those issues; that, to come full circle, it is a central work from which lines extend outward to Plato's predecessors, contemporaries and successors, and that its linguistic focus bears on the religious, social, political and historical concerns of Plato and therefore not only of his successors down to our own time but particularly to those successors, like Derrida, who recognize his importance to their work. Therefore my dismay at finding no reference to the *Kratylos* in the work of or works, like Caputo's, about Derrida.

So in the end we are confronted both with the need to further repair the failure of classicists to take the *Kratylos* as seriously as they should—although some of that repair has been accomplished since I first wrote about this in the mid-1980s—and also to repair the commentaries on Wittgenstein, Barthes, Derrida (and others) with regard to the debt that they owe in their thinking to that complicated and majestic dialogue and its importance for Socratic conversation and *elengkhos*—and, mediated by Panini and his colleagues, for our own.

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[22]"*Khora*" is the title of a 1993 Derrida essay; it appears in the collection of three essays entitled *On the Name* (Thomas Dutoit, ed.), 86-127. The word, meaning "place" in Plato's Greek is used significantly by him in the *Timaeus*.

[23]Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*,78.

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