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Cratylus

by

Plato

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# CRATYLUS

by

**Plato**

**Translated by Benjamin Jowett**

**PERSONS OF THE DIALOGUE:** Socrates, Hermogenes, Cratylus.

**HERMOGENES:** Suppose that we make Socrates a party to the argument?

**CRATYLUS:** If you please.

**HERMOGENES:** I should explain to you, Socrates, that our friend Cratylus has been arguing about names; he says that they are natural and not conventional; not a

portion of the human voice which men agree to use; but that there is a truth or correctness in them, which is the same for Hellenes as for barbarians. Whereupon I ask him, whether his own name of Cratylus is a true name or not, and he answers 'Yes.' And Socrates? 'Yes.' Then every man's name, as I tell him, is that which he is called. To this he replies—'If all the world were to call you Hermogenes, that would not be your name.' And when I am anxious to have a further explanation he is ironical and mysterious, and seems to imply that he has a notion of his own about the matter, if he would only tell, and could entirely convince me, if he chose to be intelligible. Tell me, Socrates, what this oracle means; or rather tell me, if you will be so good, what is your own view of the truth or correctness of names, which I would far sooner hear.

**SOCRATES:** Son of Hipponicus, there is an ancient saying, that 'hard is the knowledge of the good.' And the knowledge of names is a great part of knowledge. If I had not been poor, I might have heard the fifty-drachma

course of the great Prodicus, which is a complete education in grammar and language—these are his own words—and then I should have been at once able to answer your question about the correctness of names. But, indeed, I have only heard the single-drachma course, and therefore, I do not know the truth about such matters; I will, however, gladly assist you and Cratylus in the investigation of them. When he declares that your name is not really Hermogenes, I suspect that he is only making fun of you;—he means to say that you are no true son of Hermes, because you are always looking after a fortune and never in luck. But, as I was saying, there is a good deal of difficulty in this sort of knowledge, and therefore we had better leave the question open until we have heard both sides.

**HERMOGENES:** I have often talked over this matter, both with Cratylus and others, and cannot convince myself that there is any principle of correctness in names other than convention and agreement; any name which you give, in my opinion, is the right one, and if you change

that and give another, the new name is as correct as the old—we frequently change the names of our slaves, and the newly-imposed name is as good as the old: for there is no name given to anything by nature; all is convention and habit of the users;—such is my view. But if I am mistaken I shall be happy to hear and learn of Cratylus, or of any one else.

**SOCRATES:** I dare say that you may be right, Hermogenes: let us see;—Your meaning is, that the name of each thing is only that which anybody agrees to call it?

**HERMOGENES:** That is my notion.

**SOCRATES:** Whether the giver of the name be an individual or a city?

**HERMOGENES:** Yes.

**SOCRATES:** Well, now, let me take an instance;—suppose that I call a man a horse or a horse a man, you

mean to say that a man will be rightly called a horse by me individually, and rightly called a man by the rest of the world; and a horse again would be rightly called a man by me and a horse by the world:—that is your meaning?

HERMOGENES: He would, according to my view.

SOCRATES: But how about truth, then? you would acknowledge that there is in words a true and a false?

HERMOGENES: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And there are true and false propositions?

HERMOGENES: To be sure.

SOCRATES: And a true proposition says that which is, and a false proposition says that which is not?

HERMOGENES: Yes; what other answer is possible?

SOCRATES: Then in a proposition there is a true and false?

HERMOGENES: Certainly.

SOCRATES: But is a proposition true as a whole only, and are the parts untrue?

HERMOGENES: No; the parts are true as well as the whole.

SOCRATES: Would you say the large parts and not the smaller ones, or every part?

HERMOGENES: I should say that every part is true.

SOCRATES: Is a proposition resolvable into any part smaller than a name?

HERMOGENES: No; that is the smallest.

SOCRATES: Then the name is a part of the true proposition?

HERMOGENES: Yes.

SOCRATES: Yes, and a true part, as you say.

HERMOGENES: Yes.

SOCRATES: And is not the part of a falsehood also a falsehood?

HERMOGENES: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then, if propositions may be true and false, names may be true and false?

HERMOGENES: So we must infer.

SOCRATES: And the name of anything is that which any one affirms to be the name?

HERMOGENES: Yes.

SOCRATES: And will there be so many names of each

thing as everybody says that there are? and will they be true names at the time of uttering them?

HERMOGENES: Yes, Socrates, I can conceive no correctness of names other than this; you give one name, and I another; and in different cities and countries there are different names for the same things; Hellenes differ from barbarians in their use of names, and the several Hellenic tribes from one another.

SOCRATES: But would you say, Hermogenes, that the things differ as the names differ? and are they relative to individuals, as Protagoras tells us? For he says that man is the measure of all things, and that things are to me as they appear to me, and that they are to you as they appear to you. Do you agree with him, or would you say that things have a permanent essence of their own?

HERMOGENES: There have been times, Socrates, when I have been driven in my perplexity to take refuge with Protagoras; not that I agree with him at all.

**SOCRATES:** What! have you ever been driven to admit that there was no such thing as a bad man?

**HERMOGENES:** No, indeed; but I have often had reason to think that there are very bad men, and a good many of them.

**SOCRATES:** Well, and have you ever found any very good ones?

**HERMOGENES:** Not many.

**SOCRATES:** Still you have found them?

**HERMOGENES:** Yes.

**SOCRATES:** And would you hold that the very good were the very wise, and the very evil very foolish? Would that be your view?

**HERMOGENES:** It would.

**SOCRATES:** But if Protagoras is right, and the truth is that things are as they appear to any one, how can some of us be wise and some of us foolish?

**HERMOGENES:** Impossible.

**SOCRATES:** And if, on the other hand, wisdom and folly are really distinguishable, you will allow, I think, that the assertion of Protagoras can hardly be correct. For if what appears to each man is true to him, one man cannot in reality be wiser than another.

**HERMOGENES:** He cannot.

**SOCRATES:** Nor will you be disposed to say with Euthydemus, that all things equally belong to all men at the same moment and always; for neither on his view can there be some good and others bad, if virtue and vice are always equally to be attributed to all.

**HERMOGENES:** There cannot.

**SOCRATES:** But if neither is right, and things are not relative to individuals, and all things do not equally belong to all at the same moment and always, they must be supposed to have their own proper and permanent essence: they are not in relation to us, or influenced by us, fluctuating according to our fancy, but they are independent, and maintain to their own essence the relation prescribed by nature.

**HERMOGENES:** I think, Socrates, that you have said the truth.

**SOCRATES:** Does what I am saying apply only to the things themselves, or equally to the actions which proceed from them? Are not actions also a class of being?

**HERMOGENES:** Yes, the actions are real as well as the things.

**SOCRATES:** Then the actions also are done according to their proper nature, and not according to our opinion

of them? In cutting, for example, we do not cut as we please, and with any chance instrument; but we cut with the proper instrument only, and according to the natural process of cutting; and the natural process is right and will succeed, but any other will fail and be of no use at all.

**HERMOGENES:** I should say that the natural way is the right way.

**SOCRATES:** Again, in burning, not every way is the right way; but the right way is the natural way, and the right instrument the natural instrument.

**HERMOGENES:** True.

**SOCRATES:** And this holds good of all actions?

**HERMOGENES:** Yes.

**SOCRATES:** And speech is a kind of action?



HERMOGENES: True.

SOCRATES: And will a man speak correctly who speaks as he pleases? Will not the successful speaker rather be he who speaks in the natural way of speaking, and as things ought to be spoken, and with the natural instrument? Any other mode of speaking will result in error and failure.

HERMOGENES: I quite agree with you.

SOCRATES: And is not naming a part of speaking? for in giving names men speak.

HERMOGENES: That is true.

SOCRATES: And if speaking is a sort of action and has a relation to acts, is not naming also a sort of action?

HERMOGENES: True.

SOCRATES: And we saw that actions were not relative to ourselves, but had a special nature of their own?

HERMOGENES: Precisely.

SOCRATES: Then the argument would lead us to infer that names ought to be given according to a natural process, and with a proper instrument, and not at our pleasure: in this and no other way shall we name with success.

HERMOGENES: I agree.

SOCRATES: But again, that which has to be cut has to be cut with something?

HERMOGENES: Yes.

SOCRATES: And that which has to be woven or pierced has to be woven or pierced with something?

HERMOGENES: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And that which has to be named has to be named with something?

HERMOGENES: True.

SOCRATES: What is that with which we pierce?

HERMOGENES: An awl.

SOCRATES: And with which we weave?

HERMOGENES: A shuttle.

SOCRATES: And with which we name?

HERMOGENES: A name.

SOCRATES: Very good: then a name is an instrument?

HERMOGENES: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Suppose that I ask, 'What sort of instrument is a shuttle?' And you answer, 'A weaving instrument.'

HERMOGENES: Well.

SOCRATES: And I ask again, 'What do we do when we weave?'—The answer is, that we separate or disengage the warp from the woof.

HERMOGENES: Very true.

SOCRATES: And may not a similar description be given of an awl, and of instruments in general?

HERMOGENES: To be sure.

SOCRATES: And now suppose that I ask a similar question about names: will you answer me? Regarding the name as an instrument, what do we do when we name?

HERMOGENES: I cannot say.

HERMOGENES: Yes.

SOCRATES: Do we not give information to one another, and distinguish things according to their natures?

SOCRATES: And when the weaver uses the shuttle, whose work will he be using well?

HERMOGENES: Certainly we do.

HERMOGENES: That of the carpenter.

SOCRATES: Then a name is an instrument of teaching and of distinguishing natures, as the shuttle is of distinguishing the threads of the web.

SOCRATES: And is every man a carpenter, or the skilled only?

HERMOGENES: Yes.

HERMOGENES: Only the skilled.

SOCRATES: And the shuttle is the instrument of the weaver?

SOCRATES: And when the piercer uses the awl, whose work will he be using well?

HERMOGENES: Assuredly.

HERMOGENES: That of the smith.

SOCRATES: Then the weaver will use the shuttle well—and well means like a weaver? and the teacher will use the name well—and well means like a teacher?

SOCRATES: And is every man a smith, or only the skilled?

HERMOGENES: The skilled only.

**SOCRATES:** And when the teacher uses the name, whose work will he be using?

**HERMOGENES:** There again I am puzzled.

**SOCRATES:** Cannot you at least say who gives us the names which we use?

**HERMOGENES:** Indeed I cannot.

**SOCRATES:** Does not the law seem to you to give us them?

**HERMOGENES:** Yes, I suppose so.

**SOCRATES:** Then the teacher, when he gives us a name, uses the work of the legislator?

**HERMOGENES:** I agree.

**SOCRATES:** And is every man a legislator, or the skilled only?

**HERMOGENES:** The skilled only.

**SOCRATES:** Then, Hermogenes, not every man is able to give a name, but only a maker of names; and this is the legislator, who of all skilled artisans in the world is the rarest.

**HERMOGENES:** True.

**SOCRATES:** And how does the legislator make names? and to what does he look? Consider this in the light of the previous instances: to what does the carpenter look in making the shuttle? Does he not look to that which is naturally fitted to act as a shuttle?

**HERMOGENES:** Certainly.

**SOCRATES:** And suppose the shuttle to be broken in making, will he make another, looking to the broken one? or will he look to the form according to which he made the other?

**HERMOGENES:** To the latter, I should imagine.

**SOCRATES:** Might not that be justly called the true or ideal shuttle?

**HERMOGENES:** I think so.

**SOCRATES:** And whatever shuttles are wanted, for the manufacture of garments, thin or thick, of flaxen, woollen, or other material, ought all of them to have the true form of the shuttle; and whatever is the shuttle best adapted to each kind of work, that ought to be the form which the maker produces in each case.

**HERMOGENES:** Yes.

**SOCRATES:** And the same holds of other instruments: when a man has discovered the instrument which is naturally adapted to each work, he must express this natural form, and not others which he fancies, in the material, whatever it may be, which he employs; for

example, he ought to know how to put into iron the forms of awls adapted by nature to their several uses?

**HERMOGENES:** Certainly.

**SOCRATES:** And how to put into wood forms of shuttles adapted by nature to their uses?

**HERMOGENES:** True.

**SOCRATES:** For the several forms of shuttles naturally answer to the several kinds of webs; and this is true of instruments in general.

**HERMOGENES:** Yes.

**SOCRATES:** Then, as to names: ought not our legislator also to know how to put the true natural name of each thing into sounds and syllables, and to make and give all names with a view to the ideal name, if he is to be a namer in any true sense? And we must remember that

different legislators will not use the same syllables. For neither does every smith, although he may be making the same instrument for the same purpose, make them all of the same iron. The form must be the same, but the material may vary, and still the instrument may be equally good of whatever iron made, whether in Hellas or in a foreign country;—there is no difference.

**HERMOGENES:** Very true.

**SOCRATES:** And the legislator, whether he be Hellene or barbarian, is not therefore to be deemed by you a worse legislator, provided he gives the true and proper form of the name in whatever syllables; this or that country makes no matter.

**HERMOGENES:** Quite true.

**SOCRATES:** But who then is to determine whether the proper form is given to the shuttle, whatever sort of wood may be used? the carpenter who makes, or the

weaver who is to use them?

**HERMOGENES:** I should say, he who is to use them, Socrates.

**SOCRATES:** And who uses the work of the lyre-maker? Will not he be the man who knows how to direct what is being done, and who will know also whether the work is being well done or not?

**HERMOGENES:** Certainly.

**SOCRATES:** And who is he?

**HERMOGENES:** The player of the lyre.

**SOCRATES:** And who will direct the shipwright?

**HERMOGENES:** The pilot.

**SOCRATES:** And who will be best able to direct the leg-

islator in his work, and will know whether the work is well done, in this or any other country? Will not the user be the man?

HERMOGENES: Yes.

SOCRATES: And this is he who knows how to ask questions?

HERMOGENES: Yes.

SOCRATES: And how to answer them?

HERMOGENES: Yes.

SOCRATES: And him who knows how to ask and answer you would call a dialectician?

HERMOGENES: Yes; that would be his name.

SOCRATES: Then the work of the carpenter is to make a

rudder, and the pilot has to direct him, if the rudder is to be well made.

HERMOGENES: True.

SOCRATES: And the work of the legislator is to give names, and the dialectician must be his director if the names are to be rightly given?

HERMOGENES: That is true.

SOCRATES: Then, Hermogenes, I should say that this giving of names can be no such light matter as you fancy, or the work of light or chance persons; and Cratylus is right in saying that things have names by nature, and that not every man is an artificer of names, but he only who looks to the name which each thing by nature has, and is able to express the true forms of things in letters and syllables.

HERMOGENES: I cannot answer you, Socrates; but I find

a difficulty in changing my opinion all in a moment, and I think that I should be more readily persuaded, if you would show me what this is which you term the natural fitness of names.

**SOCRATES:** My good Hermogenes, I have none to show. Was I not telling you just now (but you have forgotten), that I knew nothing, and proposing to share the enquiry with you? But now that you and I have talked over the matter, a step has been gained; for we have discovered that names have by nature a truth, and that not every man knows how to give a thing a name.

**HERMOGENES:** Very good.

**SOCRATES:** And what is the nature of this truth or correctness of names? That, if you care to know, is the next question.

**HERMOGENES:** Certainly, I care to know.

**SOCRATES:** Then reflect.

**HERMOGENES:** How shall I reflect?

**SOCRATES:** The true way is to have the assistance of those who know, and you must pay them well both in money and in thanks; these are the Sophists, of whom your brother, Callias, has—rather dearly—bought the reputation of wisdom. But you have not yet come into your inheritance, and therefore you had better go to him, and beg and entreat him to tell you what he has learnt from Protagoras about the fitness of names.

**HERMOGENES:** But how inconsistent should I be, if, whilst repudiating Protagoras and his truth ('Truth' was the title of the book of Protagoras; compare Theaet.), I were to attach any value to what he and his book affirm!

**SOCRATES:** Then if you despise him, you must learn of Homer and the poets.



**HERMOGENES:** And where does Homer say anything about names, and what does he say?

**SOCRATES:** He often speaks of them; notably and nobly in the places where he distinguishes the different names which Gods and men give to the same things. Does he not in these passages make a remarkable statement about the correctness of names? For the Gods must clearly be supposed to call things by their right and natural names; do you not think so?

**HERMOGENES:** Why, of course they call them rightly, if they call them at all. But to what are you referring?

**SOCRATES:** Do you not know what he says about the river in Troy who had a single combat with Hephaestus?

‘Whom,’ as he says, ‘the Gods call Xanthus, and men call Scamander.’

**HERMOGENES:** I remember.

**SOCRATES:** Well, and about this river—to know that he ought to be called Xanthus and not Scamander—is not that a solemn lesson? Or about the bird which, as he says,

‘The Gods call Chalcis, and men Cymindis:’

to be taught how much more correct the name Chalcis is than the name Cymindis—do you deem that a light matter? Or about Batieia and Myrina? (Compare Il. ‘The hill which men call Batieia and the immortals the tomb of the sportive Myrina.’) And there are many other observations of the same kind in Homer and other poets. Now, I think that this is beyond the understanding of you and me; but the names of Scamandrius and Astyanax, which he affirms to have been the names of Hector’s son, are more within the range of human faculties, as I am disposed to think; and what the poet means by correctness may be more readily apprehended in that instance: you will remember I dare say the lines to which I refer? (Il.)

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