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Francesco Aronadio, *I fondamenti della riflessione di Platone sul linguaggio: il Cratilo. Pleiadi, 14*. Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2011. Pp. xiii, 264. ISBN 9788863723250. €38.00 (pb).

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This book is not Francesco Aronadio's first attempt at Plato's *Cratylus*, but his third extensive contribution to this text, following a translation and a larger essay on Plato's theory of knowledge during his middle period.¹ In other words, he finds here an opportunity to return, more systematically, to some topics already discussed elsewhere.

Aronadio takes the *Cratylus* seriously, to some extent; i.e., he considers that Plato exposes his own positive thought about names or, more exactly, about naming. According to Aronadio, the *Cratylus* contains a genuine Platonic reflexion on language, which will be developed in later dialogues. It goes like this: considering the deficiency affecting the techniques traditionally worked out to reduce words to their components (i.e. the different ways of etymologizing), naming must *by contrast* result from a technique accompanied by real knowledge, in order to preserve the epistemic function performed by language, as it constitutes an essential tool for the dialectician in his search for truth. Therefore, Aronadio aims to elucidate this philosophical program.

Unlike the commentary by Francesco Ademollo released at the same time,² Aronadio's book consists of an interpretive essay rather than a running commentary. Indeed, he reads the text with a greater distance and concentrates on some topics, without pretending to be exhaustive – which would require scrutinizing philological issues or examining closely each episode one after the other. On the contrary, he surveys the bases of Plato's philosophy of language, without excluding a careful treatment of literary issues and of dramatic elements he finds relevant for the philosophical purpose.

The book is divided into four sections, largely unequal in length. Chapter 1, *Lo sviluppo drammatico del Cratilo*, examines the layout of the dialogue and underlines that its dramatic structure as a whole is oriented towards its end, where Plato's thesis about language will appear. According to Aronadio, the respective (and meaningful) silences of Socrates' interlocutors (Cratylus and Hermogenes), as well as the several theses scattered by Socrates, drive the dialogue forward and only find a resolution in the final scene. Indeed, if both interlocutors illustrate, by their background and behaviour, two contradictory theses (respectively *estrinsecità* and *intrinsecità* of names), but also two opposing cultural models (Hermogenes is associated with *subjectivism* of sophistic inspiration, Cratylus with *naturalism* of Heraclitean provenance), Aronadio will explore,

in the following chapters, their respective contribution to the general purpose of the dialogue.

Chapter 2, *I nomi e la verità degli enti*, is mainly devoted to analysing δῆλωσις, the significant and indicative function assigned to names. On this account, Plato's intention seems to reside in reconciling the deictic purpose of a name and the nature of its composing, while subordinating the second function to the first one. To an understanding of names as ruled by μίμησις, Plato opposes the relevance of διανοεῖσθαι, because it constitutes a way of imposing names – not only correct names, but true ones.³ Indeed, according to Aronadio, the *Cratylus* shows how names make possible a “synergic relationship” between immediate and (what he calls) procedural knowledge. Also, with respect to the dialectic power, names should divide reality according to its natural joints, because they help to exhibit the thing that is named and to which procedural knowledge could give access (this idea is also illuminated by Chapter 4). In this way, in Plato's point of view, language does not only assume a communicational and instrumental, but also a cognitive function – if and only if its representational (or mimetic) value is given up for the right way of producing names, i.e. one based on a real knowledge of things.

Chapter 3, *Lo sciame di etimologie*, almost half of the essay, returns to some authorial topics, trying to propose a general reading of the etymological part of the *Cratylus*. The analysis is mainly based on two elements: on the one hand a progress in the conceptual difficulty regarding the etymologies – which is revealed through the alternation between etymological parts and *intermezzi* –, on the other hand a use of what Aronadio calls “serious irony”. The first topic (cleverly summed up by a valuable table on p. 115-117) shows that, without following a precise order, etymologies contribute to expose the ins and outs, but also the insufficiencies of the naturalist hypothesis (held by Cratylus). The second one helps to take a side in the debate between opposite interpretations about the aim of the etymological part as a whole. By taking account of the distance assumed by Socrates towards his own “performances”, Aronadio renders to this whole episode a certain efficiency. As a matter of fact, according to Aronadio, Plato would show that etymologizing ends in manipulating language without producing any reliable results. In this sense, he would not so much dispute any conception of reality (behind the things under examination) as to criticize the practice of etymology itself. Therefore, his etymologies are *ironic* in connection with the method that is used, which is diametrically opposed to Plato's regular practice of argumentation. Nevertheless, this critical section of the *Cratylus* appears to be in some way *serious*, in that it does not exclude, at least according to Aronadio, the fact that Plato maintains for his own doctrine about language two fundamental corollaries of etymology: the technical origin of names and their capacity to convey a δόξα.⁴

Finally, chapter 4, *La discussione della tesi di Ermogene e l'iniziale posizione del problema*, aims at supporting, on the one hand, the procedural character of naming, and on the other hand, the gap between correctness and truth. The opening scene between Socrates and Hermogenes would thus be written to separate technical and epistemic dimensions of names, while showing their continuity. As for the thesis about correctness, it appears as an inadequate way of considering language because, for Plato, knowledge possesses a fundamentally extra-linguistic origin, while correctness is only a matter of opinion. In other words, if words allow knowledge (as it relies on an internal *logos*), the dialectician cannot however depend on them for knowing, and must remember their limits and mistakes. At most, names have a functional usefulness and, if rightly instituted, can be true. To this regard, this final chapter, as for the second one, appears to be a kind of

completion of Aronadio's previous book, particularly on the topic of ἀρθότης and its relation to truth.⁵

Alongside the traditional index, the reader will find a valuable appendix providing a list of etymologies under different classificatory criteria (reference, basis of the etymology and technique in use). While this typology, along with the table of ironical episodes (p. 148), may risk being arbitrary in some respects, it also constitutes a useful tool to navigate across the longer part of the dialogue.

This book is truly demanding of its reader. Its composition is nonlinear, which requires a real mastery of the narrative and argumentative structure of the dialogue. It also does not have a conclusion, since it ends with an analysis of the opening episode. One could also regret the absence of parallels with other dialogues (e.g. the critique of ordinary language in relation to division in *Statesman*, 261e-262a; the etymology of pleasure in *Philebus*, 12b-d), with other philosophers such as Prodicus, or with the etymology of Plato's own surname. However, because this internal reading focuses on this particular dialogue, elusive as it is, it provides the reader with a real survey of Plato's philosophy of language. To this extent, it should certainly deserve the attention of specialists.

Notes:

[1.](#) Respectively *Platone. Cratilo*, traduzione, introduzione e note di F. Aronadio, Roma; Bari: Laterza, 1996; e *Procedure e verità in Platone (Menone, Cratilo, Repubblica)*. Napoli: Bibliopolis, 2002.

[2.](#) *The Cratylus of Plato: A Commentary*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. This book has been reviewed here by Noriega-Olmos (BMCR [2011.12.60](#)). The reader will find further bibliography in his first note.

[3.](#) This question was already raised in Chapter 3 of *Procedure e verità in Platone*. Here Aronadio refers to it twice (p. 35n and p. 51n).

[4.](#) This way of seriously reading the dialogue differs from David Sedley's, who rather reads the *Cratylus* as a philosophical biography regarding the evolution of Plato's theory of language (*Plato's Cratylus*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[5.](#) Aronadio dealt with this relation in the second chapter of *Procedure e verità in Platone*.

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