What Do They Talk About in the Cave?

2963 words, excluding footnotes and bibliography

The tone of the allegory of the cave is ambivalent. Those in the cave are described as ‘prisoners’ (desmôtês) and their predicament as ‘strange’ (atopon), but the allegory offers a way to overcome circumstances and reach understanding. It is key to this story that the cave, while it may complicate efforts at understanding, does not undermine it entirely. Indeed, the rest of Book VII discusses the kind of education necessary to achieve understanding, so the allegory’s function is (relatively) practical. Moreover, there is some reality to the shadows projected on the wall: they are caused by the puppets modeled on the Forms. So while the perceptible world has a very great potential to mislead, it also contains kernels of the truth, which can be used to encourage philosophical development and dialectic.¹ This ambivalence about our situation and the possibility of enlightenment is manifest in a passing remark Socrates makes early on about the names used by the prisoners:²

And if they could engage in discussion with one another, don’t you think they would assume that the names they used applied to the things they see passing in front of them? (515b4-5)³

¹ Plato makes similar claims elsewhere. Later in Rep. VII, Socrates argues that some perceptions, due to their ambiguity, summon understanding to engage in investigation (523b-525a). See also Phaedo 74b for a discussion of how we are made to think of equality itself when facing two unequal sticks, and Symposium 210a-211d for a discussion of how love of beautiful bodies can lead us to love of the Form of beauty.
² The word for ‘word’ or ‘name’ (onomá) covers proper names but also adjectives, common nouns, and infinitives, so it is rather natural in Greek to think of nouns, adjectives, etc. as getting their meanings in the same way proper names do.
³ The text here varies among manuscripts; see Harte [2007], pp. 197-200 for a defense of the text I use.
This is one of several rhetorical questions Plato has Socrates raise: the implication is that the prisoners would be wrong to think their words referred to the shadows. Their words instead refer to the Forms, even though they assume a false theory of reality according to which there are no Forms but only the perceptible particulars represented by the shadows (Rep. 476bd). We cannot understand the world merely through reflection on how we use language, a conclusion which Plato explicitly draws in Cratylus at 439b. However, we do have some access to reality through thought, since thought as private speech turns out to be about the Forms.

In her paper on this passage, Verity Harte argues that in order for the prisoners to refer to the Forms, they must have some ‘implicit conception’ of the Forms, something that can be provided by the doctrine of recollection, though she acknowledges that the doctrine is not explicitly cited here. Alternatively, one might ignore the evidence of this passage and argue instead that, since the perceptible world is all they know, the words of the average user must refer to sensible particulars: this is the position that Allan Silverman takes in his paper on Cratylus’s theory of names. In what follows, I argue that applying the semantic theory of Cratylus to the metaphysics of Republic instead supports a third view: our words refer to Forms rather than sensible particulars in virtue of the knowledge exhibited by the name-

---

4 It might be thought that the prisoners’ words refer both to the shadows and to the Forms. I will later argue that this cannot be right because things in flux (which the perceptible world is in Republic) cannot be named, but for our purposes at this stage it is mysterious enough that the prisoners’ words can refer to the Forms at all, given that they are apparently unknown to them.
5 Harte [2007], pp. 211-2.
6 Silverman [1992], p. 69, passim.
maker discussed in *Cratylus.* As name-users rather than makers, the people in the cave need not have even a rudimentary grasp of the Forms in order for their words to name them.

In *Cratylus,* Plato has Socrates forward a theory of naming according to which naming is a craft that involves looking to the form or being of the thing and crafting a name that suits it. As a craft, naming requires a corresponding craftsperson, whom he calls a “rule-setter” (*nomothetês*), and it is to the form she looks in crafting a name. Though he says a correct name imitates the being or essence of the thing, he does allow for successful naming in cases where the namer does not have an entirely accurate or thorough understanding of the nature of the thing named. Indeed, Plato argues that many names in Greek are grounded in a flux theory that leads to a proliferation of rhos, lambdas, and similarly fluid-sounding letters (439b10-c6).

What is crucial for Plato is that in the process of naming, the name-maker manages to pick the thing out and distinguish it from other items in its environment. Plato carefully distinguishes between the name-maker and the name-user: the name-user, I will argue, need

---

7 The two dialogues were likely composed around the same time, which I will be taking for granted in what follows, though not much of my argument would change if it were later, even much later.

8 I do not claim here that the prisoners have no prior grasp of the Forms of the type implied by the doctrine of recollection, but only that such a grasp is not necessary to motivate the view that the prisoners’ words refer to the Forms.

9 389a5-b10. Plato does use *eidos* here, but he doesn’t address whether forms are separable from the thing they are forms of, so he is not assuming the full theory of Forms developed in *Republic.* He does, however, show a preoccupation with flux throughout. Moreover, as Sedley [2003], p. 61 notes, Socrates’s repeated claim that names are meant to instruct us as to the *ousia* of each thing (388b13-c1; 393d2-4; 423e1-9; 431d2-8) points in the direction of essences. In what follows, I look at what happens when you pair the view on naming from *Cratylus* with the metaphysics of *Republic,* where Forms have separate existence. I will use the upper-case ‘Forms’ when I am assuming the full Platonic metaphysics of the *Republic;* otherwise I will use the lower-case ‘forms’.

10 At 432-3, Socrates claims that a name need not be perfectly correct to name. Referring to cases where names have inappropriate letters or phrases in them, he says: “Things are still named and described when this happens, provided the phrases include the pattern (*tupos*) of the things they’re about.” (432e5-7) Citing this passage, Fine [1977] claims that a name names iff it appropriately resembles the outline of the thing. However, while resemblance is necessary, it is not sufficient: the name-maker, as rule-setter, uses thought in naming (416c-d)

11 I leave aside the thorny question here of whether dividing nature at its joints is sufficient for correct naming or only necessary, cf. Sedley [2003], pp. 142-6; Ackrill [1999], pp. 133-4.
not even have that limited grasp in order to refer to the object named. Names refer to stable forms because of the thought of the name-maker. When Socrates reintroduces convention or habit at the end of *Cratylus*, he is giving an account of how it is that name-users manage to refer to the forms in spite of their general ignorance.

*Cratylus* opens in the middle of a conversation. Hermogenes and Cratylus are debating the correctness of names: could any old series of sounds be an apt name, so long as it is the convention, as Hermogenes alleges? Or is Cratylus right that a correct name ought to suit its object? Socrates shows an interest from the beginning of the dialogue with how the issue of naming interacts with a metaphysical doctrine of flux.\(^{12}\) He gets Hermogenes to agree that “things have some fixed being or essence of their own” (386a3-7), and next argues that actions performed on things with a fixed being will be done correctly or incorrectly depending on the nature of those beings (387a1-2). For example, he says, if we are to cut correctly, we have to use the right tool for the thing we are cutting, as determined by the nature of that thing (387a2-8). Naming—that is the art of *making* names, not of *using* them—is itself an action. Names are the products of the art, and they are themselves tools for use, which perform their task well or poorly depending on whether they are instructive and whether they divide things according to their natures (388b10-11).

Socrates carefully distinguishes the name-maker from the name-user. He compares the name-user to the weaver who uses a shuttle, and the name-maker to the carpenter who makes the shuttle: just as it is clear that weaving and carpentry are different crafts, so too

---

\(^{12}\) *Cratylus* is said by Aristotle to have been a Heraclitean (*Metaphysics* 1010a11-14), which may be thought to be the reason for this attention to flux. However, the flux theory is a common bugbear of Plato’s, irrespective of *Cratylus’s* interests. It is more likely that *Cratylus* was chosen as a dramatic interlocutor because of his commitment to Heracliteanism than that Heracliteanism is brought up because *Cratylus* is an interlocutor.
name-making and name-using will be substantially different. He specifically claims that the
name-maker ought to be a craftsman, and in particular that he will be a “rule-setter”. This
task is not only different from the one performed by the user, it is also much harder. As he
puts it:

It isn’t every man that can give names, Hermogenes, but only a name-maker,
and he, it seems, is a rule-setter—the kind of craftsman most rarely found
among human beings. (388e7-389a3)

How should the name-maker perform his craft? Socrates says he should look to the form of
names:

Soc: Come now, consider where a rule-setter looks in giving names. Use the
previous discussion as your guide. Where does a carpenter look in making a
shuttle? Isn’t it to that sort of thing whose nature is to weave?
H: Certainly.
Soc: Suppose the shuttle breaks while he is making it. Will he make another
looking to the broken one? Or will he look to the very form to which he
looked in making the one he broke?
H: In my view, he will look to the form.
Soc: Then it would be absolutely right to call that what a shuttle itself is.
(389a5-b6)

Here the shuttle is being compared to a name, so the claim is that in coming up with a
particular name in a particular language, one ought to look first at the form of name

13 Barney claims that Socrates’s interlocutor Hermogenes is not committed to an implausible type of
conventionalism according to which any name you choose to use for something will be correct. She
points out that he seems to distinguish between the stage of setting down (tithenai) a name and calling
(kalein) something by its name (Barney [2001] 26-8, passim; Barney [1997] 148-151; see also Ackrill
[1999], 128), and argues that for Hermogenes while there are no natural constraints on which names
can be set down, error can creep in at the level of use, in calling things by the appropriate name.
Socrates’s own distinction between name-making and name-using seems to track this distinction,
though he doesn’t share Hermogenes’s view about the infallibility of the name-making stage.
14 Notice that this pushes strongly against any effort to deflate the importance of the distinction
between the name-maker and the name-user. Silverman [1992], for instance, claims that we are all
name-makers (39), something flatly denied in this passage. See also Sedley [2003], p. 59; Robinson
[1969], p. 105 and Williams [1982], pp. 89ff. Smith [2014] argues forcefully that the tool analogy is
not even an analogy—words really are tools—and so just as the distinction between the maker of
a tool and the user of a tool is a robust one, so too is the distinction between a name-maker/rule-setter
and a name-user.
— the common meaning shared by all the specific names. However, Socrates does also observe that the shuttle form can be embodied in different materials depending on what is being woven, so ultimately the name-maker must choose a name appropriate to the essence of the object:

Soc: Because it seems there is a type of shuttle that's naturally suited to each type of weaving. And the same holds of tools in general.
H: Yes.
Soc: So mustn't our rule-setter also know how to embody in sounds and syllables the name naturally suited to each thing? And if he is to be an authentic maker of names, mustn't he, in making and giving each name, look to what the name itself is? (389d1-8)

The rule-setter looks to the form in crafting the name if she is to do it correctly: a correct name will be one that instructs and separates that form off from other things. Just as the quality of a shuttle will be judged by the expert weaver, the quality of the rule-setter’s work is ultimately to be supervised by an expert language-user—a dialectician—whom Socrates describes as “the person who knows how to ask questions” (390c).

At this point it is clear why the names name the forms: these are the paradigms that are considered in setting the rules by crafting the name. But how do the users of the language manage to inherit the reference set by the maker? This problem is exacerbated by the full theory of Forms and particulars as found in Republic: the prisoners do not by-and-large even accept the ontological category of the Forms, so how could their words refer to them?

15 For more on the form of name as the same across languages, see Ackrill [1999], p. 134-6; Sedley [2003], pp. 81-6.
16 Sedley [2003] argues that only Cratylus is committed to thinking that the name-maker consults the form or essence of the thing named, while for Socrates only the dialectician who supervises the namer needs to know the object named (9, passim). However, his interpretation requires adopting a non-standard text for 437-8 and he is dismissive of the apparent evidence found in this passage (9n18).
17 Plato puts this supervision of the name-maker into effect at the end of Cratylus. As an expert dialectician himself, Socrates announces that most words are poorly crafted in that they assume a flux doctrine (439bc). Moreover, he argues, the things to be named must have definite, fixed natures, so he concludes that the names are therefore misleading (439-440).
It is here where Socrates’s description of name-makers as ‘rule-setters’ becomes especially apt. Later in *Cratylus*, Socrates tries to establish that names can be incorrect, and here he returns to the rules set down by the namer. He asks Cratylus whether some rules can be better than others, which Cratylus at first denies (429b). Since he is a strong naturalist, Cratylus thinks that if a name does not describe its bearer, it is not the person’s name. This includes Hermogenes, who is twice described by Cratylus as not being named Hermogenes (383b; 429c). Socrates claims to the contrary that a name can be incorrect while still being a name. He compares it to a case where a painting of a man is said to be a likeness of a woman: while the painting is still *assigned* to the woman, it is incorrect and false (430c2-d7).\(^\text{18}\) Moreover, likeness admits of degrees, so some names will be better than others, even while both remain correct names (431c-d). For names to be correct they need not be perfect in all respects: instead they need only “include the pattern of the things they’re about” (432e).

As an illustration of such an imperfect name, Socrates cites *sklêrotês* (hardness). It contains a lambda, which, he says, “expresses the opposite of hardness” (434d7-8). Still, it is able to name hardness, partly because other parts of the name are suited to the thing, and also, he gets Cratylus to concede, because of usage (*ethos*). This usage Socrates likens to convention (*sunthêkê*) (434e5-8). So, he concludes, “you must say that expressing something isn’t a matter of likeness but of usage, since usage, it seems, enables both like and unlike names to express things” (435a10-13).\(^\text{19}\)

Interpretations divide on how to understand the point that Socrates is trying to push, but they agree that this is a surprising result. Socrates began the dialogue a committed

---

\(^{18}\) For more on this argument, see Williams [1982], pp. 87-88.

\(^{19}\) Sedley [2003] suggests that making the name-maker a *nomothêtê*—one who lays down *nomoi*—is grounded on an apparent etymological connection between the words for rule (*ho nomos*) and names (*onomata*) (70-71). Given that Plato seems to take at least some of these etymologies seriously (cf. Sedley [2003], Ch. 2), this observation, if true, strengthens my overall argument for the importance of the law-setting role for the name-maker.
naturalist: he points out that names are only suited to things that have fixed being, which therefore sets the correctness conditions for actions performed on them. But there he was talking about the limitations set by the object in the act of name-making, not name-using. At this later stage of the dialogue, he is discussing the ordinary usage practices of speakers. The name-maker, in setting down the name, also sets down the rules for its use. The name-user refers when she follows those rules (assuming the rules were set down coherently) and doesn’t if she doesn’t.

Plato makes this clear when he introduces the rule-setter. He says that the rules the name-maker sets down “provide us with the names we use” (388d12-13)—it is the rules that establish the correct usage, and the rules, in turn, are determined, as we have seen, by attention to the object of the name. While we do not have the fully worked-out metaphysics of Republic in Cratylus, we can see how this picture would apply. Since sensible particulars participate in Forms in Republic, the rules of usage, if properly laid down, would license the usage of the names in the presence of those perceptibles. When the appropriate rules are followed and the name is used in the presence of the sensible particular, the name is aptly used but names its natural referent, the Form. That the prisoner need not grasp the nature of the referents of her names can be seen if we emphasize the tool analogy. Though the producer of a tool needs to know about the nature of the thing the tool will be used on, the user of a tool does not need to know this in advance. In fact, many craftspeople come to

---

20 This explains how the prisoners can be later said to successfully compete in “identifying the things passing [i.e. the shadows]” (kathoríonti ta parionta) [516e8-d2]. It is natural to think that such competition would involve verbally identifying the objects, which might be thought problematic on my picture. However, the rules set down by the name-maker license the utterance of the names in the presence of the passing shadows: people can be better or worse at following those rules and thereby be said to be better or worse at identifying the shadows. Moreover, the very fact that Plato describes the prisoners as identifying the objects rather than naming them might be thought to support my reading.
learn about the qualities of their materials as they work with them, just as name-users may come to learn more about the realities behind their words as they use them.

Verity Harte finds it puzzling that the prisoners manage to refer to Forms, given that they do not know about them. She says:

There is no obvious story to explain this apparent success of their reference. *Ex hypothesi*, the prisoners have had no direct contact with the real things to which they refer and seem entirely unaware of their existence. Nor is there any provision within the analogy for them to have been introduced to the terms they use by an authoritative or knowledgeable user, such that we might use this introduction as the basis for the success of their reference. (202)

The failure to introduce an authoritative figure leads Harte to argue that the prisoners must have an ‘implicit conception’ of the Forms.21 However, while it is true that there is no mention of an authoritative user in *Republic*, there is in *Cratylus*. Since she acknowledges that introducing such a user could provide a way for the prisoners to refer to Forms without knowing them, I conclude that, if we impute the *Cratylean* picture of naming to *Republic*, we get a simpler and more economical explanation of how the prisoners manage to refer to the Forms than the one Harte offers.

So it is in virtue of the name-maker that the name-user can refer to the Forms, but do they also refer to the sensible particulars when they use the word? The passage from *Republic* suggests that the name-user only refers to the Forms, since if names also refer to particulars the prisoners will not have been mistaken in thinking that they do. Moreover, Plato closes *Cratylus* by having Socrates claim that objects in constant flux cannot be named (439c-440d). In an argument reminiscent of one in *Theaetetus* (152d2-e1), Socrates tells Cratylus that things in constant flux cannot be known since their attributes are unstable (439e-440a). Since the purpose of naming is instruction, it follows that things that cannot be known cannot be named either.

---

However, it must be acknowledged that in *Cratylus* it seems as though spoken words at least sometimes refer to perceptible things. This may be chalked up to the fact that Plato hasn’t yet worked out the details of his theory of Forms (or, if it was written later, because he has come to be unsure about it). In *Cratylus*, Socrates applies the flux argument explicitly to the Forms, but he also begs off deciding about the nature of perceptible objects:

Soc: Are we or aren’t we to say that there is a beautiful itself, and a good itself, and the same for each of the things that are?
C: I think we are, Socrates.
Soc: Let’s not investigate whether a particular face or something of that sort is beautiful, then, or whether all such things seem to be flowing, but let’s ask this instead: are we to say that the beautiful itself is always such as it is? (439c6-d6)

Whatever his views when he wrote *Cratylus*, its closing argument suggests that the semantics of *Cratylus* applied to the metaphysics of *Republic* entails that our names do not refer to sensible particulars. Our names could *indicate* sensible particulars *via* regular usage patterns set in place by the name-maker, but they don’t name them.

So what are the upshots for the story in *Rep*. VII? Since their words refer to the Forms, the prisoners will be in a position to reach some philosophical understanding. Socrates is clear in *Cratylus* that reflection on one’s language is not the best guide to reality (436a9-b3), and Greek will be particularly misleading because the rule-setter(s) adopted a flux theory (439c). Still, the prisoners have a means of talking about the Forms, even if they do not yet know about them. The expert dialectician, who is the judge of the rule-setter’s words, can guide the prisoner through conversation, perhaps leading her to realize the necessity of

---

22 Here I am in agreement with Harte [2007], pp. 213-4, but without having to make appeal to an implicit conception of the Forms that is already possessed by the prisoners prior to acquiring a language.

23 Barney stresses the Cratylean argument for the inadequacy of the study of names as a means to learning about the nature of things. My argument is not that the prisoners can get to know the Forms by studying the names themselves, but, rather, that the use of the names, if the rules are put down correctly, will facilitate a grasp of the Forms, when guided by a dialectician.
the Forms. Full knowledge of the Forms can only come from education and recollection, but can be brought on by dialectic.


---

24 See Sedley [2003] 62-64. We see this methodology repeatedly invoked in the early dialogues: using common beliefs and ordinary language, Socrates demonstrates that there must be some stable nature underlying our central notions.

25 This is so both because the language is not ideal and also because names cannot exactly resemble the things they are names of (432b12-c5).

26 Recall that words are crucially linked to instruction at 388b.