Conventionalism(s) in Plato’s *Cratylus*

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Abstract

Traditionally, Hermogenes of Plato’s *Cratylus* has been thought to hold an extreme form of linguistic conventionalism that recognizes no distinction between the establishment and employment of names. Recently some scholars have denied that this reading is appropriate, arguing instead that Hermogenes holds a more moderate position and does recognize such a distinction. This latter reading has a drawback not held by the traditional account; it has special difficulty accounting for the notorious passage, *Cratylus* 385b2-d1. Thus, interpreters of the *Cratylus* face a dilemma: (i) accept the traditional interpretation that explains the presence of the problematic passage, or (ii) accept an alternative, which doesn’t. In this paper I argue that the dilemma is illusory. If we view Hermogenes’ position as evolving, and accept that two different conventionalist views are present, then we can recover an interpretation where Hermogenes recognizes the distinction between baptism and use, but which also explains the role of 385b2-d1.

**Keywords:** Ancient Greek Philosophy, Plato, Cratylus, Philosophy of Language

Introduction

Plato’s *Cratylus* is a dialogue in which Socrates inquires into the correctness of names. There is no consensus on what position Plato or Socrates (his ap-

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1Although ‘name’ generally means ‘proper name’ in English, this is clearly not true of ancient Greek, since ‘ὄνομα’ can mean ‘proper noun’ (e.g. ‘Aristotle’), ‘common noun’ (e.g. ‘man’), ‘adjective’ (e.g. ‘tall’), ‘participle’ (e.g. ‘running’), or a verb in the infinitive mood (e.g. ‘to see’) (cf. Richard Robinson (1969) “The Theory of Names in Plato’s *Cratylus*”

parent dialectical *locum tenens*) ultimately hold with respect to this topic[4].

But there is also controversy surrounding the positions of Socrates’ interlocutors. Hermogenes is a conventionalist who believes that the semantic properties of words are determined by language-users and a thing’s correct name is whichever word a speaker uses, or a hearer understands, to signify that thing (384d2-5). Conventionalism—the position that linguistic norms are dependent upon the attitudes and practices of the people who use language—is appealing precisely because it explains an obvious fact about human languages: they display substantial variation and mutability[4]. Of course, there must be linguistic norms that people follow so as to communicate with one another about the world. But conventionalism denies there is anything to preserve word/object


3Since the vast majority of passages cited in this paper are drawn from the *Cratylus*, I’ve adopted the practice of listing only the line/page numbers when referring to them, omitting their dialogue’s title. All references to passages found outside the *Cratylus* include dialogue title as well as line/page numbers.

4Unlike the Cratylean naturalist position that the dialogue also treats, conventionalism is entirely consistent with the possibility of (i) a thing’s being picked out by more than one word, (ii) many things’ being picked out by one word, (iii) words shifting their meanings, and even (iv) words ceasing to mean anything at all, all of which Hermogenes suggests might happen.
relations beyond the beliefs and practices of language-users. That Hermogenes suggests as much is fairly uncontroversial. But deciding precisely how he thinks the norms of language arise is more contentious.

What I’ll call the Traditional View (T) understands Hermogenes to recognize no distinction between the baptism and use of names. On this understanding of his position, Hermogenes’ conventionalism has been thought to reduce to a linguistic relativism that denies the possibility of a speaker uttering a false statement. Since the successful employment of a name is normally thought to depend upon its being established as the name of some specific thing (or group of things), one might think that without allowing for the baptism/use distinction, every speech-act involving a name serves both to baptize a thing with that name and counts as a use of that name. Consequently, every speech-act would be correct by fiat. The position Hermogenes adopts in this

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5. Since conventionalism supposes that language is rather fluid, communication by means of language is hardly a matter of course. It occurs only when words, which happen to be assigned the same meanings by two or more people, are used by them to convey that which they wish to express. Conventionalism suggests that communication requires coordination, an assumption that stands in stark contrast to the naturalistic thesis of Cratylus, which suggests that the sounds composing our language are primitively significant.

case, which I’ll call Extreme Conventionalism (EC), suggests that each person is an autonomous language-user, and by necessity forms her very own idiolect.7

On the other hand, some scholars have argued that the conventionalist position Hermogenes presents has been widely misunderstood.8 They point to passages which suggest that Hermogenes did distinguish between the establishment and employment of names. Hermogenes’ position in this case, which I’ll term Modest Conventionalism (MC), still holds that the word/object relation is rooted in the practices of language-users and that our languages are far from being static; people come to agreements about which words apply to which

7EC can be roughly characterized by the thesis that linguistic norms are dependent upon the attitudes and practices of the people who use language because any word can be used as a name for anything under any circumstances.

A word, w, is a name for a thing (or group of things), x, if and only if there is at least one person, p, who both (i) assigns w to x, and simultaneously (ii) uses w as a name for x with the same name-act, a.

More detailed discussion of how Hermogenes is revealed to be committed to EC appears in §1 below.

If each person legitimately has the power to adopt names as she sees fit, surely she also has the freedom to conform her practices to those around her in such a way that she can be understood. There is nothing to prevent someone with autonomy from collaborating and coordinating with another autonomous agent if it seems beneficial to do so. But the point of this view is that there is nothing which forces any language-user to collaborate with others. Each of us is free to do with language as we please.

things and these assignments are preserved by the collective attitudes of entire communities. But since there is a distinction between baptism and use on this account, Hermogenes is able to explain the manner in which language can be misused. If there are shared linguistic norms, which are established, adopted, and followed by groups of speakers, then it’s easy to explain both the use and misuse of language. But these norms are still merely conventional (even if they are broadly shared) and can be modified or abandoned by speakers if they so desire. I’ll call the interpretation which supposes that Hermogenes adheres to MC the Dynamic View (D).

While assigning MC to Hermogenes appears to have a strong textual basis, one of D’s drawbacks is that it has difficulty making sense of a famous passage, 385b2-d1, which presents an argument meant to show that names have truth-values. Indeed, accepting D all but forces the reader to see this passage as

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9MC can be roughly characterized by the thesis that linguistic norms are dependent upon the attitudes and practices of the who use language because any word can be used as a name for anything under the right circumstances (i.e. so long as each word is established as a name for each thing prior to its being used).

A word, \( w \), is a name for a thing (or group of things), \( x \), if and only if, there is at least one person, \( p \), who both (i) assigns \( w \) to \( x \) with a name-act, \( a_1 \), and subsequently (ii) uses \( w \) as a name for \( x \) with a name-act, \( a_2 \).

More detailed analysis of why Hermogenes might be thought to be committed to MC is reviewed in §2 below.

10Consequently, Hermogenes’ picture of our linguistic practices needn’t be seen as the thinly-veiled linguistic anarchy of a so-called ‘Humpty-Dumpty’ theory of language with which EC is often identified (cf. Rachel Barney (2001) op.cit., pp. 30-2.).

11The aforementioned passage has caused considerable controversy. From a dialectical standpoint, some have found 385b2-d1 wanting, since it appears to contain both fallacious inferences (e.g. a fallacy of division, equivocation, etc.) and patently false conclusions (e.g. there are true and false names) (cf. Richard Robinson (1956) “A Criticism of Plato’s Cratylus,” The Philosophical Review, Vol. 65, No. 3, pp. 324-41; Gail Fine (1977) “Plato
being either misdirected or pointless. On the other hand, flawed though EC might be as a thesis about actual linguistic phenomena and practices, one of T’s benefits is that it can easily explain the dialectical import of 385b2-d1. So interpreters of the *Cratylus* seem to face a dilemma: either (i) accept T, which takes Hermogenes to be committed to the wildly implausible EC but explains the presence of 385b2-d1; or (ii) accept D, which takes Hermogenes to be committed to MC but forces one to admit that some passages of the *Cratylus* are inexplicable. My aim is to suggest that there is a third option and to argue for it. Specifically, if we see Hermogenes’ position as evolving, and admit that there are two different conventionalist positions under consideration, then we

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12If Hermogenes accepts EC as T supposes, he holds a relativistic theory of names whereby every name a person takes to be correct is correct. In 385b2-d1 we find Socrates crafting an argument meant to show that names can be either true or false (i.e. correct or incorrect) and, if names can be false, then they are not relativistic as EC supposes.
can recover an interpretation that allows Hermogenes to accept a distinction between the establishment and employment of names, but which also explains the role of 385b2-d1. In §1 and §2, I outline the cases in favor of interpretations T and D, respectively. §3 then turns to my own interpretation of 383a1-385e3, which escapes the interpretive dilemma just outlined.

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Why should one think T the correct interpretation? Hermogenes begins at 384c10 by offering evidence in support of the claim that “it’s not the case that any name has arisen for any thing by nature (φύσι πεφυκέναι), but by custom and habit (νόμω καὶ ἔθει) of those who are accustomed and use the names” (384d5-7).\(^{13}\) Nothing in his initial characterization of his view is inconsistent with EC or MC, but by answering Socrates’ probing questions, EC coalesces as the Hermogenes’ position. Socrates’ first question is whether, “whatever someone calls (καλεῖ) each thing, this is the name for it” (385a2), to which Hermogenes gives an affirmative answer\(^{14}\). Hermogenes then affirms that both private and public names are possible (385a4) and accepts that someone might change the name of a thing by merely using (προσαγορεύει) a different term.

\(^{13}\)All English translations of the Greek in this paper are my own.

\(^{14}\)The verb Socrates uses here—καλεῖ—is somewhat ambiguous, insofar as it can be used in a variety of philosophically-distinct ways (cf. uses of the verb at *Meno* 75a7, *Phaedo* 103c1, d1, *Republic* 340d2 and how they differ from *Phaedo* 68e7, *Meno* 75e1, e3). However, at 384d4-7, Hermogenes appears to use this term to characterize employment of a name, and I think it’s safe to assume that this is the sense in which Socrates means to use it at 385a2. On this reading of the verb, when I say ‘that thing is a cow’ or ‘the cow is friendly’, in both cases I am *calling* something ‘cow’. What Socrates is asking, therefore, is just whether any sound can potentially be given as a name to anything under different circumstances, and Hermogenes gives a qualified ‘yes’ that Socrates has no clear reason to doubt until 385d8.
to refer to it (385a6-10). That is to say, Hermogenes seems to think that an individual has the freedom and ability to set her own names, and she only needs to start using a term as a name in order for the name/nominate link to be established. These are increasingly radical claims and all of them are consistent with EC, but not with MC.

According to T, once Socrates sufficiently grasps Hermogenes’ position, he attacks it. 385b2-d6—the passage in which Socrates argues that names have truth-values—constitutes Socrates’ attempt to refute it:

**Extreme Conventionalism Reductio (ECR)**

1. Whatever someone claims is the name for something, that is the name for that thing (= EC). (385a1-2; 385d2-3)
2. \(<implicit>\) All names are true. from (1)
3. There are true assertions and false assertions. (385b2-3)
4. True assertions are composed of true names; false assertions of at least one false name. (385c4-c17)
5. \(<implicit>\) Some names are false. from (3, 4)
6. \(<implicit>\) It can’t be the case that (i) some names are false, and that (ii) all names are true.

\[\therefore\] 7. \(<implicit>\) It’s not the case that whatever someone claims is the name for something is the name for that thing (= \(\sim\)EC).

\(^{15}\)A bit later, he even goes on to affirm that there are as many names for a thing as one claims there are for it at 385d5-6: \(\hat{\eta} \, \kappaαi \, \omegaπόσα \, \alphaν \, \varphi\eta \, \tauις \, \varepsilonκάσιος \, \omegaπόσα \, \varepsilon\varepsilonνα, \, \tauοσχύτα \, \varepsilon\varepsilon\tauα \, \kαi \, \tauοτε \, \omegaπόταν \, \varphi\eta;\) This passage is open to interpretation, of course, but Socrates seems to be suggesting Hermogenes’ stated position may have a surprising implication:

\(n\) is a name for an object \(x\) *when and only when* there is a person who uses \(n\) to signify \(x\).
After refuting EC, Socrates goes on to argue that there are *some* natural constraints on language (*pace* Cratylus) and he shows that this follows from Hermogenes' own assumptions about language and reality.

Despite the alleged appearance of ECR, however, there are reasons to find T inadequate. For starters, it is difficult to reconcile the presence of ECR with everything that is said, and remains unsaid, by Socrates and Hermogenes. T would have us believe that Socrates raises a serious difficulty for Hermogenes' position between 385a1-385d6. His argument is not entirely explicated (most notably, the conclusion is never stated explicitly), but the point he's driving at is fairly obvious: the existence of false names rests uneasily alongside the suggestion that everyone has complete autonomy and can select their own names. Yet if this is indeed what Socrates is up to, we're forced to view Hermogenes as being completely oblivious. Despite having had his position nearly refuted, Hermogenes remains unmoved and shows no signs of discomfort when he restates his position at 385d7-e3. What's more, Socrates himself must be seen as complacent: having just formulated a crippling objection to his interlocutor's position, Socrates not only fails to point out that his argument is being overlooked, but also shifts the discussion away from the argument without concluding it.\(^{16}\)

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\(^{16}\)This general point about the argument being truncated is noted by Ademollo (2013), pp. 62-3. However, I disagree with his characterization of the argument found in 385b2-d1, which I have called ECR. Ademollo believes that the absurd conclusion to which Socrates' alleged *Reductio* aims is that true and false statements cannot both be possible on Hermogenes' view. But, as he himself notes, if this is the conclusion toward which Socrates is driving, the route is far more circuitous than it needs to be. On my view, however, Socrates is trying to demonstrate a different absurd implication of Hermogenes' views: that all names are true and that some names are false. This conclusion requires the premise that some names are false, and (*contra* Ademollo) it's not clear whether there is a more direct route to revealing Hermogenes' commitment to this claim that we see between 385b2-d1. So whereas
Another drawback of T is that it renders the discussion immediately following the passages that present ECR rather perplexing. Recall that on this interpretation we are forced to assume that Socrates has completed ECR—his definitive argument against Hermogenes’ conventionalism—at 385d6, as that line of reasoning is not mentioned again throughout the remainder of the dialogue. However, rather than concluding the argument and informing his interlocutor that the conventionalist account of the correctness of names is inadequate, we instead find Socrates adopting a drastically different approach to refuting conventionalism from 385e4 onward. This new line of argumentation culminates in the suggestion that, since names are tools with a proper function, it must be the case that naming is an action which is governed by natural normative constraints. This conclusion, of course, is inconsistent with EC because it suggests some aspects of onomastic correctness are not up to the speaker. But it is quite peculiar and utterly superfluous for Socrates to craft the argument made between 385e-390e, if T is correct. Why set aside ECR—a perfectly good argument against EC—prematurely for the sake of this another? This delayed refutation defies easy explanation for those who adopt T.

A final strike against T is that the overall shape of the Cratylus becomes difficult to explain if EC is Hermogenes’ view. Since the remainder of the Cratylus is devoted to developing and ultimately rejecting the naturalistic theory of onomastic correctness held by Cratylus, it might be thought that the

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17Ademollo believes that we have good reason to doubt that this passage is meant to be an negative argument against Hermogenes’ position because it is both clumsy and conclusionless, I grant that we are missing the conclusion, but I think the argument in this passage is (nearly) as succinct as possible. Consequently, I’m not as inclined to dismiss ECR as a possible explanation for the presence of 385b2-d1.

17This point is due to Barney (1997), op.cit., pp. 145-6.
dialogue as a whole is making an elliptical case in favor of conventionalism. This possibility is lent support by some of the comments Socrates makes near the end of the dialogue (434e-435c) where he confesses that convention seems as though it must play some role in the naturalistic account of names. However, according to T the only conventionalist position to be found in the Cratylus is EC, and this is a position that Socrates has amply refuted by dialogue’s end. For this reason, though readers may be tempted to conclude that the Platonic theory of names is conventionalistic, especially given the Cratylus’ denouement, T all but forces us to conclude that the dialogue is aporetic, as there are simply no viable views of onomastic correctness remaining to which Plato could be assigned.\(^{18}\)

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Unlike T, D suggests that Hermogenes has a well-defined thesis before encountering Socrates. According to its adherents, evidence that Hermogenes holds MC is spread throughout the opening passages of the Cratylus. One might argue, for example, that since different verbs appear to be distinguishing between different kinds of name-acts, and these verbs (and their morphological cousins) are employed distinctively within the first few lines of the dialogue, there is good reason to think Hermogenes has a well-established theory about

\(^{18}\)There is no reason why this reading needs to be ruled out, of course. Indeed, some of those who have accepted T appear to accept this aporetic result gladly because they think it had an ulterior aim. For instance, some have argued that the aim of the Cratylus is not to develop a positive account of language but rather to draw attention to how faulty language is as a means of acquiring knowledge about truth and reality (cf. Kahn (1973), p. 157) On the other hand, someone could also embrace a thoroughly aporetic result, whereby the dialogue is meant to reveal the paradoxical nature of the conventionalist/naturalist, relativist/realist dualities themselves (cf. Mackenzie (1986), p. 149-50.
the correctness of names that involves recognition of the difference between baptizing things with names and employing preexisting names.\footnote{cf. Rachel Barney (2001) op.cit., pp. 28-30, Francisco Ademollo (2011) op.cit., p. 39.}

But what exactly is the evidence in favor of Hermogenes’ holding MC rather than EC? The crucial consideration in D’s favor is Hermogenes’ use of the terms for ‘call’ (κάλεσαι) and ‘set’ (τίθεσθαι) when he discusses what we do with names. These verbs are used early and often by Hermogenes.\footnote{e.g. 383a6, 383b5, 383b7, 384d1-7, 385a2, 385a4, 385a6-10, 385d7-e3.} But more importantly, he seems to use ‘call’ solely to refer to those actions that we perform with existing names and ‘set’ to refer to those actions that forge the link between name and nominate. This distinction between employment and establishment is on full display throughout 384c10-385e3 (with its most clear expression appearing at 385d7-e3), but Hermogenes reveals that he thinks the use of a name must be preceded by an agreement between speakers as early as 383a5.\footnote{οὐ τούτο εἶναι ὄνομα ὃ ἂν τινες συνδέμενοι καλέσθω καλῶσι. (Cratylus 383a5-6)} At 384d2-5, Hermogenes says that whatever has been set down (ὁρθῶσα) as the name for a thing is its name. If a name is changed (μεταθῆσαι), then the old name is no longer used (κάλεσαι) and new name is just as correct as the old one.\footnote{The tenses of the verbs used here, and at 385d7-e3, suggest that acts of setting or changing names precede acts of employing names.} Although calling something by a name is surely more common than setting a name, the example of the domestic slave makes it clear that shifting name assignments are by no means unheard of, as they occur not only when a thing is initially dubbed with a name, but also when we decide to change a thing’s name.

Once Hermogenes concludes his rough sketch of the position, Socrates’ subsequent questioning draws attention to further implications which might not be immediately apparent. When Socrates asks whether, “whatever someone calls (καλῇ) each thing, this is the name for it” (385a2), he’s not asking whether...
Hermogenes is committed to EC, he’s rather making sure that Hermogenes is comfortable admitting that the names we currently adopt are wholly arbitrary. Likewise, at 385a4-10 when he queries whether populations or individuals have the ability to set names, he’s checking to see whether Hermogenes is amenable to the fact that linguistic authority is not centralized, but relative to each speaker. Finally, after a sizable digression, Hermogenes reaffirms MC and its (potential) relativistic consequences stating, “I am able to use \((\chi\lambda\varepsilon\nu)\) a name for each thing, which I have established \((\varepsilon\delta\varepsilon\mu\nu)\), but you are able to use a different name for each thing, which you have established” (385d8-9). Rather than supposing that Socrates is formulating arguments against Hermogenes’ position from 384c10 onward, D explains Socrates’ meandering questions as being a reflection of his genuine interest in trying to understand Hermogenes’ thesis. The fact that Socrates has committed himself to settling a dispute between Hermogenes and Cratylus (384a8-c9) supports this supposition, but an additional benefit is that this allows D to avoid some of the interpretive difficulties that T faces.\(^{23}\)

But there are reasons to be wary of D as well. First, it’s not clear why Hermogenes is willing to affirm Socrates’ suggestions at 385d2-6 without reluctance. Although Hermogenes grants that whatever someone \textit{calls} \((\chi\lambda\varepsilon\nu)\) a thing is that thing’s name at 385a2, Socrates suggestion at 385d2-3—that whatever someone \textit{claims} \((\varphi\nu\nu\nu)\) a thing’s name to be \textit{is} that thing’s name—is plausibly a very different commitment. On the assumption that Hermogenes has already introduced baptism as a necessary prerequisite for someone’s \textit{call-}

\(^{23}\)Specifically, if all the questions between 385a1-385d6 are merely for Socrates’ edification, and ECR is not actually intended, then it’s neither surprising that Hermogenes displays no uneasiness when he restates his position at 385d7-e3, nor is it particularly odd that Socrates moves on to a discussion of Protagorean relativism after this: Socrates is, as ever, just trying to understand what his interlocutors think.
ing something by a name, claiming might be thought to place a weaker requirement on something’s becoming a name, and this in turn threatens to obscure the distinction between names and non-names. Indeed, that claiming is more permissive than calling is confirmed by Socrates’ question at 385d5-6: does the number of names depend on how many names people claim (φη) there to be at a given time? If Hermogenes truly understands the question and accepts MC, there’s simply no reason for him to affirm this suggestion. But affirm it he does. This all but forces us to conclude either that Hermogenes doesn’t accept MC, or that he is not entirely clear on his own position.

Of course, Hermogenes isn’t the only one who must be confused according to D. As detailed above, there’s decent evidence that Hermogenes clearly distinguishes between baptism and employment, at least at some point. However, the same cannot be said for Socrates. Nowhere between 383a1-385e3 does Socrates use the term for baptism. This might seem to be a minor detail, but since on this interpretation Socrates is supposed to be probing Hermogenes’ position at this point in the dialogue, it seems odd that he would not adopt the crucially important terminology of his opponent’s position, especially given the significance of the distinction that is being made. Furthermore, if this is a distinction of which Hermogenes is well aware but to which Socrates is oblivious, it’s odd that Hermogenes never makes a point of forcing Socrates to acknowledge the difference between baptism and usage. D seemingly forces us to suppose that Socrates is unaware of a vital (yet apparently subtle) component of Hermogenes’ position, while also leading us to think that Hermogenes, though skilled enough to have developed a nuanced theory of language, is not able to identify when a discussant is failing to grasp it. All this strikes me as

\footnote{If names remain names once established so long as they are not changed, the number of names won’t vary drastically from moment to moment.}
A final problem for D appears to be passage 385b2-d1. Following Schofield (1972), many have found the gap between 385a1-b1 and 385d2-6 highly irregular, given that the latter appears to be a natural conclusion to the former. But since D denies that Socrates is formulating ECR in 385b2-d1, another explanation for the apparent interruption is called for. Here there seem to be two options. On the one hand, a proponent of D might suggest that Socrates’ questions in this passage help to clarify Hermogenes’ position in a useful way, rather than present an argument for or against any of the positions at issue in the dialogue. This is the approach that Ademollo (2013) favors. He goes into great detail explaining the reasons why 385b2-d1 should not be seen as an anti-conventionalist or a pro-naturalist argument, and this leads him to conclude that Socrates is merely trying to understand the doctrines to which Hermogenes is committed. Specifically, the passage is important because it indicates that Hermogenes believes in the possibility of making false statements. This insight both serves to show that Hermogenes is not committed to EC, and provides a further level of contrast between Hermogenes’ and Cratylus’ views, as the latter will flatly rule out the possibility of false speech in his discussion with Socrates much later on (429d-431c).

\[25\] The explanation I favor is to suggest that perhaps both Socrates and Hermogenes are unclear about that latter’s position in the early going. If Hermogenes’ is not completely clear on all the aspects of his own position, it’s hardly surprising that Socrates would have difficulty grasping it. Likewise, if Hermogenes doesn’t have all the details in mind, it makes sense that he would allow Socrates to overlook the crucial distinction between baptism and usage to which he does seem to commit himself firmly at 385d7. At that point we see Hermogenes state MC explicitly, but thereafter we also find Socrates adopt an unmistakably critical posture, which would seem to suggest that he (finally) has Hermogenes’ position in focus. More on this to come in §3 below.

On the other hand, a D-adherent might just bite the bullet and admit the uncertain purpose of 385b2-d1 along with certain striking textual features, point to the passage being an interpolation. This is the proposal advocated by Schofield, in any case, which has gained purchase among a fair number of modern interpreters. A number of considerations motivate Schofield’s suggestion, but the main case against 385b2-d1 standing in its current position can be put quite simply. Whatever the dialectical purpose of 385b2-d1 is, the discussion about the truth and falsity of statements and names deviates thematically from that which immediately precedes and succeeds it. Additionally, if one observes the relation between what is said at 385a1 and 385d2-6—the passages that surround these controversial lines—a case can be made that 385b2-d1 is interrupting and obscuring the link between them, which may signal a corruption in the MSS. One of the most telling indications of this link is the fact that 385d2 begins with ‘ὥστε’, a particle normally used to indicate conclusions of inferences, and asserts that “whatever each person claims is the name for something, this is the name for it”. If, on the one hand, we search for an argument which might be concluded by this claim between 385b2-d1, we come up empty-handed. On the other hand, if we look to the lines which precede this passage—385a1-b1—a sensible inference is revealed: first it’s claimed that whatever an individual calls a thing, this is it’s name. Then it’s asserted that things can be called names privately and publicly (and Socrates offers the ‘man’/‘horse’ example to illustrate an instance of private/public name disagreement). Then after the hiatus caused by 385b2-d1, we find the conclusion that an individual person’s claim that something is a name is enough to make it so. The fact that this argument is interrupted, in Schofield’s estimation, provides good reason to think that 385b2-d1 is an interpolation which doesn’t

27 cf. Schofield (1973), op.cit.; footnote 11 above.
belong at the location where it has long been thought to reside.\footnote{Between \textit{Cratylus} 387c5 and 387d6 is the location to which Schofield thinks this interpolation should be properly moved. Since my contention is that 385b2-d1 makes sense where it is, I omit the details as to why Schofield has selected this location as an alternative.}

Unfortunately, neither of these approaches to dealing with 385b2-d1 work perfectly for those who accept D. Ademollo is certainly right to point out that Hermogenes accepting the possibility of false speech will ultimately distinguish his view from that of Cratylus. Likewise, I find it eminently plausible that Socrates may be asking about false speech, at least in part, because he wishes to discern how amenable Hermogenes is to the doctrines of various sophists.\footnote{After all, the correctness of names itself is the pet topic of the prominent sophist, Prodicus, and Socrates will also ask Hermogenes how he feels about the doctrines of Protagoras and Euthydemus in the immediate aftermath of this discussion (385e4-386d10).} The degree to which he identifies with such views will no doubt determine how radical and/or implausible Hermogenes’ ultimate position is. But Ademollo’s interpretation still faces at least two significant problems. First, it leaves open the question of the apparently divided argument and the ‘ascii’ at 385d2 of which Schofield makes so much. Cognizant of this difficulty and his lack of a solution, Ademollo concedes the point, admitting that “... ‘ascii’ is problematic and is probably the symptom that the text requires some sort of emendation.”\footnote{Ademollo (2013), p. 69.} Second, Ademollo would have us believe that 385b2-d1 is important because it contains Hermogenes’ admission that there is such a thing as false speech. However, if this is all that Socrates was after, then only the first few lines of the passage can be explained. Hermogenes actual admission that there is such a thing as false speech comes at 385b4. If, more charitably, we suppose that Socrates seeks not only this admission but clarification as to whether Hermogenes conceives of false speech in the same way he does, then we have an explanation for the conversation between 385b2-b11. However, this
leaves 385b12-d1 and the whole discussion of names as parts of statements unexplained.

The second option offered by Schofield is to some extent cleaner from an interpretive standpoint because one needn’t justify or explain the current location of a passage that’s been misplaced. But, methodologically, omitting a passage because it doesn’t fit with one’s own interpretation seems a highly suspect interpretive strategy. There is, after all, a significant difference between identifying irregularities in a passage and concluding that it must indicate a substantial textual corruption, such as the interpolation of 30 or so lines of text. If intelligible interpretations of the dialogue can be given which utilize the passage in its current location, surely these are to be preferred to other revisionary options. In this regard I find myself in agreement with Ademollo in method if not in detail.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{31}As Sedley (2003) notes, there are reasons to doubt that this interpolation, if that’s what it is, was accidental: “It [385b2-d1] is far from being a mechanically transposed stretch of text, comparable for example to what happens when a single leaf of a codex gets displaced. Atypically of mere accidents in textual transmission, the floating passage is a complete argument with a beginning, middle and an end” (p. 11). Although I’m disinclined to follow Sedley in thinking that this passage serves as evidence of different editions of the \textit{Cratylius}, the fact that this passage is not a random but constitutes a clear argumentative structure tells against its being placed where it was accidentally.

\textsuperscript{32}The view that the passage [385b2-d1] . . . cannot stand where all MSS have it, and must be transposed or excised, is becoming a near orthodox one in contemporary scholarship. Nevertheless, texts should not be judged guilty until they are proved to be such. Therefore a sound method requires that we first try to see what sense can be made of the passage on the assumption that it is genuine and is reported by the MSS in its right place. Then, and only then, shall we be in a position to settle the textual issue” (Ademollo (2013), p. 49).
As I’ve already hinted, the solution I favor to these textual difficulties is to suggest that Hermogenes’ stance subtly shifts from EC to MC during the course of the discussion. My chief contention is that T and D are both found wanting because they strive to isolate and ascribe Hermogenes a single, static position throughout his early discussion with Socrates. Because of this, both interpretations are forced to overlook signs that Socrates’ questions are helping Hermogenes to clarify and settle his own view. When we proceed on the assumption that both characters are trying to discover the particularities of Hermogenes’ theory, rather than supposing that his loose commitment to conventionalism is a fully formed theory of language, some of the difficulties T and D encountered are avoided quite easily. I call this alternative interpretation the Conciliatory View (C), as it holds that Hermogenes affirms different theses at different times. Thus, C agrees with both T and D that their favored positions (EC and MC, respectively) are attributable to Hermogenes at different points in the dialogue, but neither is the definitive Hermogenean position, as I will now show.

As noted above, Hermogenes gives an initial characterization of his theory at 384c10-d7, but the primary aim of this passage is to show why Cratylus is mistaken with the slave-name argument. Hermogenes may or may not be familiar with the particulars of his own position at this point, but Socrates clearly isn’t as he begins the questioning at 385a1-b1 with a call for greater clarification. As I’ve already detailed above in §1 and §2, the radical claims Hermogenes makes between 385a1-b1 and 385d2-d7, make a good deal of sense if he accepts EC, but are difficult to reconcile with MC.

Indeed, I would argue that the only way Hermogenes could affirm all that he does before 385d7 would be if he didn’t yet see the importance of baptism
as a distinct name-act. Between 385a1-b1, not only does Hermogenes admit that whatever word is used (χάλεψατ) for a thing is its name, and that names can be public or private, we also see Hermogenes consent to the claim that merely addressing (προσαγορεύεται) a thing x currently named n₁ with a different name n₂ makes n₂ a correct name for x, at least privately. If Hermogenes accepted MC, we might expect him to convey some reluctance—or to take one of these opportunities to indicate his belief that a name becomes correct only by virtue of its being used to refer to a thing which has already been baptized (θέσθαι) with the name in question—but we simply don’t see him doing this. If on top of this it can be agreed that 385b2-d1 makes most sense when taken to constitute an argument against EC, then regardless of what position Hermogenes actually holds, the evidence between 384c10-385d7 strongly suggests that Socrates thinks Hermogenes holds EC.

Of course, as we saw in §1, the suggestion that Hermogenes holds EC falls apart at 385d7-e3 because here Hermogenes propounds a view that is unmistakably MC. Then, rather than remarking on this apparent change, Socrates shifts focus to ontological questions. He never concludes ECR nor does he remark on the apparent uneasiness that MC stands in to some of Hermogenes’ earlier claims, which seemed to be indicative of someone who held EC. Whereas D appeared to be the unlikely position up until 385d7, now T is problematized and looks to be a similarly dubious interpretation. Assuming that all this is correct and neither T nor D is up to the task of explaining the flow of the conversation from 385a1-e3, how does C explain the developments? Answer: by insisting that this apparent shift at 385d7 is significant. C holds that 385d7 is the moment at which Hermogenes feels compelled to revise (or more charitably to clarify) his position, moving away from EC and adopting MC. In order to see precisely how and why this transpires, let’s briefly rehearse
the course of the Socrates’ and Hermogenes’ discussion between 384c10-385e7 once more.

384c10-c2 constitutes Hermogenes’ initial attempt to describe his own view, noting data in favor of it and considerations against its chief competitor: the view of Cratylus. The position outlined is clearly a form of conventionalism, as he admits that onomastic correctness is rooted in convention (συνθήκη) and agreement (ὁμολογία), but it is not clear whether Hermogenes is an advocate of EC or MC. At 385a1-b1, Socrates then begins his questioning with an eye towards clarifying Hermogenes’ position. His initial question—whatever someone calls (καλέω) each thing, this is the name for it?—could presumably be affirmed by someone who holds EC or MC (depending on how ‘calling’ gets cashed out). But Socrates’ question about whether this holds true of communities as a whole or individuals as well is the first sign Socrates gives that he himself is sensitive to the distinction between EC or MC. For, if Hermogenes opines that only cities determine how things are called, this suggests that there is a process of establishing names in which individuals participate and have some degree of freedom, but that none of them is a sovereign and ultimate arbiter of what each thing is named. However, once Hermogenes specifies that he thinks each speaker has the prerogative to label things as she will, he is (knowingly or not) committing himself to EC. Socrates then rehearses the ‘man’/‘horse’ example to see whether Hermogenes is indeed comfortable with the implications of this view, and indeed he is.

According to C, by 385b1 Socrates has determined that Hermogenes is committed to EC and Hermogenes has done nothing to disabuse him of this belief. Then, with his interlocutor’s position identified, Socrates begins to develop his argument against this view (ECR) between 385b2-d1. According to my depiction of the ECR, in order for Socrates to generate the necessary
contradiction, he must convince Hermogenes to accept that false names can be asserted, as Hermogenes’ commitment to EC suggests that every use of a word will constitute the employment of a true name. Thus, if Hermogenes admits that false names can also be employed, his position will be shown to be self-contradictory. The final claim affirmed in the allegedly problematic 385b2-d1 is the conditional, “It is possible to assert true and false names, if indeed it is possible also to assert true and false statements.” This turns out to be as good as an outright admission that false names are assertable, as Hermogenes has already affirmed the antecedent at the outset of this passage (385b2-3). Socrates appears to have all he needs to complete ECR; he just needs to get to the conclusion.

The trouble is of course that Socrates doesn’t get that far, as the passage following 385b2-d1 reveals:

**Socrates:** So (ἀφα) whatever each person claims (φη) is the name for something, this is the name for it?

**Hermogenes:** Yes.

**Socrates:** And however many names someone claims (φη) there are for each thing, so many there will be and at whatever time he claims it?

**Hermogenes:** Yes, for I don’t believe there is another correctness of a name, Socrates, save this. On the one hand, I am able to use (καλεῖν) a name for each thing, which I have established (ἐθέμην). On the other hand, you are able to use a different name for each thing, which you have established.

385d1 leaves off with a conditional which will allow Socrates to show that Hermogenes is committed in the existence of false names. But after this, Socrates reiterates something that was agreed to previously between 385a1-b1: that
any individual can call anything whatever name they please. It might be thought that it is odd for Socrates to move backward to mention a claim already established, but this is hardly inexplicable; it may be that Socrates, ever the charitable dialectician, is trying to make sure nothing just established has caused Hermogenes to abandon what he held to previously. For, if Hermogenes sees the same problem on the horizon that Socrates does, he might well wish to admit that there are false names, rather than holding that all names are true as he seems to have been inclined to do before. As it happens, Socrates asks whether Hermogenes (still) thinks that whatever someone believes is the name of something actually is its name. He does. Consequently, Socrates’ reiteration serves to shore up Hermogenes’ commitment to the contradictory claim needed for ECR to work.

Then, as a final step before drawing his conclusion, Socrates expresses his previous point in the starkest possible terms by asking whether Hermogenes thinks that the number of names there are, and the times at which names are names, is relative to the occurrent practices and beliefs of individual speakers. If affirmed, this would seem to reaffirm that all names are categorically true and would also serve as a final repudiation of MC. At first, Hermogenes provides the affirmative answer Socrates sought and which would enable him to conclude ECR. But after his affirmation Hermogenes goes on to clarify that people’s uses of names are correct relative to the standards which they themselves have established (individually or collectively). By holding this view, Hermogenes is able to assert that names remain names even when they’re not being employed, and this also crucially leaves room for the possibility of false names as it now becomes clear that any use of a name for an object which deviates from extant standards of use will be counterfeit. Most importantly,

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33This is sentence contains the ‘ζηξα’ about which Schofield (1972) makes so much.
by qualifying the circumstances under which names are true and committing himself to this view, he insulates himself against the ECR Socrates was developing against his supposed view. One might justifiably wonder whether Hermogenes is here amending his stated views or clarifying a position which he has kept somewhat vague to this point. Although it’s not entirely clear that the text provides a determinate answer, the case can certainly be made that Hermogenes’ comments at 385d7-e3 are more clarificatory than revisory.

Note that there are three Socratic suggestions Hermogenes accepts which might initially be thought to suggest that EC is his position. The first two suggestions appear between 385a1-b1, starting with the question of whether “whatever someone calls (καλεῖ) each thing, this is the name for it (385a2), and concluding in the question of whether individuals can, in addressing (προσαγορεύειν) things in non-standard ways (i.e. by calling a human horse), generate private names. Although these two suggestions might be thought to imply that Hermogenes accepts EC, neither is decisive. Socrates questions utilize the term call (καλεῖν) in a way that seems to favor EC because no mention is made of establishing (θέσθαι) names. But one who accepts EC can argue that this absence of evidence is not evidence of absence; Hermogenes (and even Socrates) may understand implicitly that names are used only once they are established. On the issue of generating private names, although EC, in its most plausible form, likely rules out the possibility of individual speakers generating their own intricate and distinctive idiolects, there is nothing in the theory itself which makes this an impossibility. Finally, we have the Socratic suggestion at 385d2-3—whatever each person claims (φάναι) is the name for something, this is the name for it—which is probably the best evidence of Hermogenes holding EC at some point prior to 385d7 given the apparent strength of this extreme suggestion. But claim (φάναι) is such a general and vague term that I would be reluctant to base my entire case for Hermogenes holding EC on what it might mean in this context. Socrates may be suggesting that claiming a word is a name is sufficient for it to become a name. Hermogenes may also understand him to be saying that when one makes such a claim, this constitutes a form of baptism (at least there is nothing to rule that possibility out). All this would seem to suggest that Socrates could be forgiven for thinking that Hermogenes is committed to EC, as all of these claims, without some appropriate qualification, would certainly suggest as much. But at the same time,
But if Hermogenes is revising or clarifying his position, how can the fact that Socrates moves on from ECR silently to be explained? Before offering an answer to this question, it’s worth noting that, if C is correct and Hermogenes reveals himself to be committed to MC at 385d7-e3, then there really is no reason for ECR to be concluded, as MC is not susceptible to it. By the same token, if Hermogenes moves on to a new position (or if Socrates realizes that he has been misconceiving of it), we should expect to find Socrates developing an argument against it rather than finalizing an argument against a position which nobody in the dialogue actually holds. We find both of these expectations being fulfilled with Socrates aborting ECR at 385e4 and beginning to lay the groundwork for his proper function argument that will ultimately problematize aspects of MC. On the other hand, the only reason we should expect to find Socrates protesting Hermogenes’ statements at 385d7-e3 is if an illicit dialectical move is being committed. Lacking evidence of protest, the most appropriate course of action is to ask why Socrates finds nothing wrong with Hermogenes’ clarification.

One explanation, of course, would be to accept a possibility I have thus far demurred, allowing that textual anomalies may indicate that there is some textual corruption which, if rectified appropriately, would alleviate the issue. However, this seems like an unsatisfying ad hoc suggestion. A better alternative is to posit that the conventionalist position developed prior to 385d7-e3 is somewhat underdetermined. It just so happens that the position under discussion is underdetermined in a way that leads to the two interlocutors talking past each other for a time. As evidence of this, one might note that although since Hermogenes ultimately insists on the distinction between baptism and usage with respect to names, there are no grounds for denying that this may be the position he always sought to support. There are merely grounds for objecting to the manner and timeliness of Hermogenes declaration of such a commitment.
on an initial reading some of Hermogenes’ suggestions seemed to imply EC, with a little charity Hermogenes need not be seen as reneging on any of his prior commitments when he finally commits himself to MC definitively. Indeed, this very well may be the realization that Socrates himself comes to; it would certainly explain his response to Hermogenes going forward. He seems to have been working on the hypothesis that EC was the position under consideration from 385b1 onward. But once Hermogenes reveals at 385d7-e3 that MC is the position to which he is committed, Socrates immediately adjusts his critical strategy. Rather than following through with ECR, we find him moving to an extended argument in favor of natural onomastic correctness on the basis of the fact that naming, as a variety of action, is subject to natural constraints. If Socrates judged Hermogenes to be unambiguously abandoning his position, it’s rather likely that we would find some reluctance or protest on Socrates’ part. On the other hand, if Socrates sees Hermogenes stated position as a natural successor to what he’s held before, or if he sees a way to interpret Hermogenes’ prior claims in such a way that they are consistent with MC, he may just take the slight dialectical missteps in stride. After all, if Socrates comes to the realization that he has been mistakenly assuming that Hermogenes was committed to EC when this isn’t actually the position he favors, there would be little reason for him to object to a late clarification, since the fault lies with Socrates’ hasty assignment, not Hermogenes’ gradual revelation. Furthermore, if Socrates’ questioning has helped Hermogenes to gradually modify his view such that he sees reasons for setting aside EC without Socrates completing ECR, the latter may, in the spirit of joint inquiry, effortlessly shift along with his compatriot to the consideration of the position the avowed conventionalist now favors.

35cf. footnote 34.
36Neither of these explanations of Socrates’ behavior is definitive, of course. But the fact
Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the resolution to two longstanding interpretive controversies in the beginning stages of the *Cratylus* may be more closely related than many interpreters have thought. If I am correct, then there are actually two different conventionalist positions under consideration in the early exchanges between Hermogenes and Socrates and confusion among the dialogue’s interlocutors about which one the former wishes to accept causes a dialectical mishap of sorts. This explains why we find an oddly aborted argument in the notorious passage 385b2-d1 and also provides some insight into why different scholars have been tempted to assign different positions—EC and MC—to Hermogenes in the past. The conciliatory nature of my position basically suggests that there is a kernel of truth in much of the previous scholarship on this dialogue, inasmuch as most interpreters have correctly identified a position which Plato meant for his readers to appreciate. What has been missing is simply an appreciation of the fact that both EC and MC are present. The fact that the discussants struggle to delineate and identify that position Hermogenes holds, on occasion, leads to awkward transitions in the discussion. But whereas such awkwardness has caused some to conclude that the text is corrupted, my reading suggests that the apparent disjointedness is a natural symptom of two speakers trying to come to grips with the views of someone with whom they are not already familiar.

That C offers a plausible alternative understanding of the opening of the *Cratylus* that differs in important ways from the existing interpretive strategies, T and D, suggests that the early exchanges between Socrates and Hermogenes are worthy of further consideration.
References


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