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NATURALISM AND CONVENTIONALISM IN PLATO'S DIALOGUES AND NATIVISTIC THEORIES OF LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

For Plato, language was the way to cognize the universe. The philosophy of language, which was primarily initiated by Plato in the *Cratylus*, still has not received answers to the questions settled by this great Greek thinker. In fact, it just offered various solutions formed in different conceptions and approaches in the ancient, scholastic, modern and postmodern periods. The questions raised by Plato in his dialogue have been continued in various nativistic theories of language, especially in works of Noam Chomsky. Language—as it is seen by Plato, i.e., as uniting our inner world with the outer world, is a significant feature of humankind, is still underinvestigated.

Keywords: language, conventionalism, naturalism, interpretation, etymology, semiotics.

INTRODUCTION

The whole cosmos, according to Heraclitus, is a well-organized system which resembles language (Curd 2016). Many pre-Socratics, as well as their followers, opined in the same way, assuming the cosmos is a harmonious formation derived from Chaos, as its opposite. Four ages of investigations have passed, but the only thing that has really been changed is terminology: Chaos theory was replaced by “Big Bang” theory, which is a bit newer, but the question is still open, as well as any bang requires someone to pull the trigger. In this article the attention will be concentrated on the phenomenon of language, which, in fact, unites our private *Innenwelt* with the outer *Umwelt*.

As it appears from the *Cratylus*, Plato is convinced that language is a way to cognition. Several issues on the interpretation and reading of the dialogue, especially in the Ukrainian cultural environment, are to be addressed here. It is difficult to opine, but it seems that the dialogue cannot be trans-

lated literally; instead, it only can be interpreted. I would like to emphasize some difficulties in the understanding of the dialogue. Consequently, there are significant complications in its rendering into various languages due to numerous examples which resemble the etymology of Greek words quite precisely. So we cannot translate the dialogue, it is possible just to interpret it in our own way. This occurs due to the fact that Plato never expresses his exact position on the discussed issue, namely, the correlation between two opposite views on the nature of language, which are represented by contemporary notions of conventionalism and naturalism.

Several issues are to be addressed here. The most striking and obvious case of the so-called “untranslatability” is that with the Greek word “anthropos” explained in the terms of its etymology. According to Plato’s analysis, the word is compiled of the prefix “ana-” followed by the root “opos,” which means “the one who looks up.” For Plato, as well as for Socrates, the unique feature of the human being is stargazing, which is entirely missing in all the rest creatures. Unfortunately, the plain and smooth structure of the dialogue is necessarily disturbed in the process of its interpretation in any language, because there is no direct correspondence between the meaning of vocabulary and its components, e.g. prefixes. Neither Polish, nor English, nor Ukrainian languages possess anything similar to the example provided here by Plato.

Plato is famous for not providing direct answers in his dialogues. This is why the second, more obscure issue enlightened in the dialogue, is the controversy between conventionalism and naturalism, two opposite streams, which since have been represented during all four ages of understanding in the European thought and which are presented and developed in various fields. This is why St Augustine, being a true Platonist, developed his theory of sign on the basis of some thoughts expressed in the *Cratylus*. Finally but not lastly, the theory of language acquisition acquired its development in the so-called “20th-century debate” between nativism and empiricism represented by Noam Chomsky’s and Burrhus F. Skinner’s theories of language. This is why the truth promulgated by Socrates as well as questions settled by his great disciple still remain valid in the postmodern civilization.

TRANSLATING ISSUES

Plato, an exceptionally great thinker, made an attempt to summarize the achievements of his predecessors, uniting two opposite theories of constant flow (Heraclitus) and of complete absence of movement (Parmenides). Plato’s theory of forms was essentially an attempt to solve the dichotomy—by means of a metaphysical compromise—between the view claiming that there is no real change or multiplicity in the world and that reality is one,

and that of Heraclitus which claims that motion and multiplicity are real, and that permanence is only apparent. Plato, speaking in his dialogues on behalf of his teacher Socrates etymologically proves that the stargazing is the unique ability of humans. In fact, this is what can be seen even in the etymology of Latin verb “*considerare*,” which is also common in English language. The root of “*considerare*” (*sidera*) means “star.” Plato says that the Greek word is compiled of the prefix “ana-” followed by the root “opos,” which means “the one who looks up:” consequently, human beings stare at what is considered to be “beauty,” or “cosmos” which consists in harmony and is opposite to Chaos, from which the world was created by Demiurge.

In order to organize issues concerning translation, it has just been represented the first, or external, level of difficulties which arise in the process of translation of Plato's *Cratylus*, as well as in the process of reading the translated text. Plato provides the reader with a good set of words, primarily with names of gods, and strives to explain their etymology by the means of, naturally, Greek language. But the problem of interpretation of those, so to say, straightforward Greek names in various languages, arises due to rare coincidences on the level of their etymology. There are but few correspondences with these words that can be found in, for example, Ukrainian language.

This is why another or internal type of difficulties in translating Plato's *Cratylus* appears in interpreting key Greek terms. This problem can be called “aposterior,” because it does not appear directly in reading the text, but arises during its more precise interpreting: It deals with the usage of various target-language words for the single word of original language. One of the most striking examples of such difficult words is Greek “*onoma*.” But this problem requires a preliminary explanation, regardless of the first-glimpse simplicity. There is a need for interpreting the work itself to find out what it, or Plato as its author, tells us. Similarly, when we ask how a word that has several different senses is best understood, there is a need for asking what Plato wants to communicate to us through the speaker who uses that word.

The form of dialogue, used by Plato, is quite easy to read, but this cannot be said about comprehending. Despite the fact that the dialogues possess a relatively easy and reader-friendly form of explanation, the interpretation of dialogues requires a deep understanding of questions settled by their author. Plato never strives to establish his authoritative solution to this or that issue which arises in the process of discussion: this is why there are typically certain complications in grasping his precise point of view. Socrates, being the representative of Plato's positions in the dialogues, uses the well-known “Socratic method” of arriving at the proper solution. The most famous feature of the Socratic method consists in avoiding direct indications to the correct answer.

Plato, as a rule, starts from a very simple issue, and he passes to more complicated ones a bit later. This is why in order to understand properly the position of Socrates (or Plato) it is necessary to know what exactly he understands by this or that word. The task looks really simple, but only at the first glimpse, because by one and the same word Plato sometimes means various things. Here we have arrived again at the word “*onoma*” which is used by Plato in various meanings. Primarily, in the *Cratylus* this word can be used in the general meaning “word,” in other contexts it can be understood as “name;” this word sometimes is used in order to describe nouns in general or even adjectives in certain contexts. This four-fold meaning of one and the same word should be clearly distinguished in order to avoid difficulties in understanding the dialogue. For this purpose these meanings are to be clarified.

Sometimes, Plato seems to be too naive in his explanations, but this method should be taken properly. First of all, Plato is convinced that etymology is a proper way to cognition, which gives him right to judge and conclude about the meaning of the names of Greek gods. A quite large part of the *Cratylus* is dedicated to the explanation of functions and purposes of various gods on the basis of the analysis of their proper names, e.g., Dionysus: “Dionysus, the giver (*διδούς*) of wine (*οἶνος*), might be called Didoinysus, and wine, because it makes most drinkers think (*οἴεσθαι*) they have wit (*νοῦς*) when they have not, might very justly be called Oeonus (*οἰόνους*)” (406 c) etc.

Greek theology was the sole ground of the whole Ancient philosophy. But Plato was interested in god’s names not only due to just being religious person. Proclus in his *Commentary* explains the immense depth of Plato’s theology

“If the God himself is so called, it is clear that both his first and his median activities may be given the same name as his ultimate one. Now (406C) referring to that, Socrates calls the God ‘Didoinysos,’ deriving the name from wine (*oinos*), which, as we have stated, reveals all the powers of the God. For the *oionous* (406C5–6) is nothing else than the intellectual form which is separated off from the whole, and is already participated in (e.g., by soul), and has become single and ‘specific’ (*hoion*). The altogether perfect intellect is all things and operates in accordance with all things in the same way” (Proclus 2007).

Apparently, Proclus provides us with complete so-called “internal” meaning of Plato’s text, similarly to what Swedenborg says about internal meaning of the word.

APPROACHES AND THEIR VARIETY

Language, uniting our inner world with the outer, is a significant feature of the humankind. Being very close to us, and used on a daily basis, language is still underinvestigated phenomenon: according to Ludwig Wittgenstein, the only thing we have to study, is language. The complexity of the question on the nature of language, raised by Plato, prompts the variety of approaches to the interpretation of the dialogue and, consequently, variety of translations. The three English translations of the dialogue (Jowett 1892; Flower 1921; Reeve 1997) present different renderings of key words, starting from the very first paragraph. For example, “*synthemenoí*” is translated as “conventional” (Plato 1892), and in (Plato 1921)—“by agreement.” It would be improper to ask which one presents a better option: there is no direct 100% equivalent to Greek word neither in English, nor in Ukrainian. And one more thing which complicates the translation is that Plato preferred the spoken word to the written. Plato never became a writer of philosophical treatises, even though the writing of treatises (for example, on rhetoric, medicine, and geometry) was a common practice among his predecessors and contemporaries.

Plato, being a pagan philosopher, still had great Christian thinkers as his followers. St. Augustine, being a true Platonist, speaks of “*signum naturale et conventionale*,” and explains these terms in his *De Doctrina Christiana*. Signs for Augustine are genera for what words (Greek “*onoma*”) in the light of theory of signs (Greek “*semeion*”) are species, according to Umberto Eco (Eco 1986, 65). It is a mutual (and mute) convention that Latin words are being constantly used as equivalents for Greek terms, but this present situation is quite paradoxical; I discussed this subject in my another work (Sodomora 2010) on the basis of St. Thomas’ works.

Among the variety of ancient and modern thinkers, Plato has its own and unique style, never to be repeated. In comparison with any other philosopher Plato can be recognized to be far more exploratory, incompletely systematic, elusive, and playful. In some his works it is evident that one of Plato's aims is to create a sense of puzzlement among his readers, and that the dialogue form is being used for this purpose.

There are several approaches to the reading and interpreting of the *Cratylus*, and among newer, or non-classical ones, a comedy-based approach should be mentioned (Ewegen 2013). According to this approach, the whole dialogue looks like a comedy. S. Montgomery Ewegen claims that the deep philosophical intentions of Plato should be understood in the context of Greek comedy, since the philosophy of language for Plato may be treated as a sort of game. But Plato's dialogues do not try to create a fictional world for the purposes of telling a fictional story as many literary dramas do; nor do they invoke an earlier mythical realm like the creations of the

great Greek tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Nor are they all presented in the form of a drama: In many of them, a single speaker narrates events in which he participated. Plato's dialogues are philosophical discussions. This approach is valid in the light of Wittgenstein's "game theory" of language (McNally 2017). It is difficult to determine whether the comedy-approach is right or not, but the fact is that questions risen by Plato still require their solutions.

Many theories of language have been formed since Plato's times. But leaving the variety of those theories aside, it is necessary to claim that the idea of the dialogue *Cratylus*, namely the reconciliation of two distinct views on the nature of language, remains the same. The theory of language acquisition has its continuation in the 20-century debate concerning the nature of language; the main line of opposition lies here between nativism represented by Noam Chomsky and empiricism represented by Burrhus F. Skinner. So, the truth promulgated by Socrates as well as questions settled by his great disciple still remain valid in the postmodern era. Therefore many of Plato's works give their readers a strong sense of philosophy as a living and unfinished subject (perhaps one that can never be completed) to which they themselves may contribute.

THE IMPACT OF PLATO'S *CRATYLUS*

Taking into account the variety of explanations of Plato's dialogues, there is no single and united view on this or that particular question. Even the theory of forms is not given sufficient explanation in the dialogues. This is why the necessity for deeper understanding of Plato's dialogues, and especially *Cratylus* arises also today. The basis for considerations of two main characters in the dialogue, namely Cratylus and Hermogenes, is language. Socrates, being a moderator of the discussion, strives to reconcile the two opposite views. The philosophy of language which was initiated in this dialogue, still has not obtained answers to the questions settled by Plato. In fact, it just acquired various solutions among different approaches during all four ages of understanding, namely Ancient, Scholastic, Modern and Post-modern periods. Questions arisen by Plato in his *Cratylus* found their continuation in various nativistic theories of language, especially in works of Noam Chomsky (Chomsky 2002, 45–47).

The unification of two opposite views is what Plato is famous for. The two characters of the dialogue, Hermogenes and Cratylus, are on the opposite sides of the discussion, but at the end of the discussion they end up not that far one from another, as it looked initially: they accept the position of Socrates, which is in their midst. In fact, this is what Plato strives to show in the dialogue, namely, that there is no reason to choose between the opposites in

order to arrive at correct answer: the truth is in between the opposites. Plato, by reconciling two opposites, builds his system of language as a way to cognition of the universe.

The great thinker never provides his solution to this or that issue. After the reconciliation of theories on constant movement (Heraclitus) and its complete absence (Parmenides), Plato reconciles two positions, known in the modern terminology as “conventionalism” and “naturalism,” represented by Hermogenes and Cratylus, respectively. Socrates, being Plato’s representative in the dialogue, criticizes conventionalism and convinces Hermogenes in the necessity of accepting naturalistic views. But at the end of the dialogue, Socrates addresses Cratylus and convinces him about the impossibility of holding exceptionally naturalistic views, and also about that names of certain things cannot comprise their essence (Sedley 2018, 51). This fact rises the question of how the position of Plato, expressed by Socrates should be interpreted.

Universals, as well as they are everywhere, they are also in sounds we pronounce. Plato, with bringing up a question on universals, and introducing the aforementioned “Socratic” method into scientific investigation, never gives us direct answers to questions settled in his dialogues, but just gives us clues to the possible ways of solutions. This is why his dialogues, and especially *Cratylus*, provide us with certain ideas about nature of things in the world, and, especially, languages. Relying on Plato’s concept of idea, and his nativistic approach to the process of acquiring knowledge, it can be assumed that all languages have the same origin and nature, namely the reconciliation of conventional and nativistic theories. Certain explanations, e.g., on the nature of sound “r” in the word “*scleros*,” can be applied to various languages, even to Ukrainian, which supports the nativistic approach, but explanations deal exceptionally with the Greek language, like the aforementioned example of “*anthropos*.”

Cratylus rises various questions, which are still unanswered, and which served as a basis for various sciences, especially for linguistics and semiotics. St Augustine, being a true Platonist, developed his doctrine of illumination, which is entirely Platonistic doctrine, as well as his theory of Signum (Deely 2007). As a rule, Aristotle’s *Perihermeneias* is commonly believed to be at the roots of modern science of semiotics, but, apparently, Aristotle’s teacher had contributed to the development of this science even before Stagirite did. Language is represented in the *Cratylus* as a system of signs, by which various things can be expressed in various languages, even in barbaric. According to Plato, “everything has a right name of its own, which comes by nature, and that a name is not whatever people call a thing by agreement, just a piece of their own voice applied to the thing, but that there is a kind of inherent correctness in names, which is the same for all men, both Greeks and barbarians” (383 b).

It puzzles us why it is next to impossible to find a direct and clear answer to questions settled in the dialogues. But Plato strives to reconcile two opposite views not just because he wants to establish his own theory, but because he respects previous thinkers, and even more, he is convinced that we already know everything, just a proper recollection is required in order to arrive at a proper answer. It seems that his theory of recollection prompts him to the reconciliation of the opposites, namely, the conventional and nativistic approaches to the theory of language. Modern science presents a variety of researches in the conventional theories of meaning. For example, David Lewis suggested the first theory on relation between social conventions and linguistic meaning (Lewis 1969, 165–167). The author starts with the so-called “signaling” issues: in comparison with regular linguistic interaction, these so-called “signaling” issues provide no need for speakers to make an agreement on special actions in certain situations.

Still, the nature of language puzzles us. Consider a situation, when I ask for “blue” milk in the supermarket instead of “yellow” one, and I am given what I want without extra questions and without a preliminary agreement, as well as it is known that low-fat milk is sold in blue boxes. The conventionality of meaning was a subject of discussion in works of many authors, among others: (Lepore, Stone 2015). As a rule, today the majority of scholars support the point of view of Hermogenes, namely the conventionalism of linguistic meanings, but there is a disagreement about the role of social conventions (Rescorla 2008). Even in this article, as it seems, even more questions have been settled, instead of being solved. Plato’s strategy of settling questions which require answers, it seems, is still vivid. Had we known the answer, we would come up with perfect artificial intelligence, but access is still denied.

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