PLATO, WITTGENSTEIN AND THE ORIGINS OF LANGUAGE

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Abstract: In this paper my intention is to analyse the theory of language in Plato's Cratylus and compare it to the second Wittgenstein's philosophy of language. First, I pay attention to Plato's conception of meaning and his solution to the problem of the origins of language. These questions are put in relation to Plato's ontological and epistemological views: i.e., essentialism, the theory of reminiscence and the sophistic thesis of the impossibility of speaking with falsehood. Afterwards, I display, as a rival view to it, the anti-intellectualist and anti-essentialist approach of Wittgenstein, which allows us to see language as a social creation that arises from the natural reactions of human beings, a solution that does not generate the difficulties in Plato's position.

The question of the origins of language seems to be a problem that sooner or later our scientific knowledge will be able to solve. However, it might be that this is not the case because, unlike other similar issues, perhaps the question of the origins of language has no solution: in fact, whatever hypothesis we construct may never be verified. Now, we do not need to worry about this, and we need not follow the example of the Société Linguistique de Paris, which in 1866 decided to remove this question from its meetings because it was obscurely metaphysical and insoluble given the state of empirical research. No, there is no reason for it. First, philosophy largely feeds on problems without solutions. And secondly, if we take this drastic step we would miss what is really important from a philosophical standpoint.

It is true that this decision was influenced by the fact that during the two previous centuries many speculative hypotheses on this subject had followed one another –let us think, for example, of the theories of E. Condillac, J.J. Rousseau or J.G. Herder[1]. Yet, this prohibition was insensitive to the fact that, beyond the problem of its empirical solution, what is really important in a matter like this is just the speculative stuff, that is, the conceptual and philosophical assumptions that inevitably come into play when we deal with it. For instance: the way we understand what kind of things human beings are, what language and linguistic meaning are, how learning of words happens, what the connection between linguistic behaviour and non-linguistic behaviour is, or what the relationship between language and thought is, and so on.

Well then, driven by speculative interests such as these, in this paper we will analyse what Plato and the mature Wittgenstein thought about the origins of language. We will not try to show that Wittgenstein was right and Plato was wrong. It would be out of place and would certainly be anachronistic and unfair. We shall simply show that Wittgenstein's approach, at least for some of us, is a way of looking at the question of the origins of language that is much more fruitful than Plato's strategy, which however has been the most widely accepted throughout the history of Western thought both in philosophy and in the field of linguistics.

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[1] For a treatment of the hypotheses of these authors, see Defez, A., "Llenguatge i Pensament in Rousseau" in *Comprendre. Revista catalana de filosofia*, nº. V, 2003 / 2, Universitat Ramon Llull, Barcelona, 2003, pp. 181-195. You can consult this work in *www.defezweb.net*

As is known, Plato paid attention to language in the *Cratylus,* a dialogue that he wrote when he was about forty years old, and once the Academy had been created[2]. This is a work in which, discussing the problem of correctness of words, the theory of Ideas is announced: Socrates does not yet assert its separate existence and archetypal character, but only says that he dreams sometimes of the existence of essences (439c and ff). Moreover, he also sets the ontological, epistemological and logical-semantic requirements that prepare the subsequent appearance of the Ideas in *Symposium, Phaedo* and *The Republic.* In particular: the immutability of essences is established as a necessary condition for knowledge and language; the thesis of linguistic immanence and the subjectivism and relativism of the Sophists are rejected. Lastly, Plato asserts that language is not a secure means of knowledge and that knowledge should not be the task of the linguist, who is lost in fanciful etymologies, but of the philosopher as long as he possesses the art of asking and answering. In short, we can see the *Cratylus* as Plato's reflections on the language that his posterior -for the moment, imagined- theory of Ideas demands[3].

The focus of this work -the dialogue between Socrates, Hermogenes and Cratylus- is the correctness of words, or rather names, because Plato thinks about words as if they were names. And the main question is whether there is an accurate and right description of things depending on their nature, or whether we have to consider the names as a result of the use and conventions, that is, of human

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[2] For instance, see Plato, *Cratylus, Parmenides, Greater Hippias, Lesser Hippias*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1996.

[3] For a more comprehensive analysis of the *Cratylus* and a discussion of the relevant literature, see Defez, A., "Llenguatge i Coneixement en el Cràtil de Plato, " in *Enrahonar. Quaderns de filosofia* nº. 28, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Barcelona, 1997, pp. 123-143. Also in *www.defezweb.net*

agreement. Put in another way: do things require a particular type of names or would all names be casual and arbitrary. The problem, as we see, is not only semantic, but ontological as well, since what is at stake is whether there is also a permanent and stable nature of things. And here we have four possibilities:

(i) Essences do not exist, and names are entirely arbitrary and conventional.

(ii) Essences do not exist, but names are right and accurate.

(iii) Essences exist, but names are entirely arbitrary and conventional.

(iv) Essences exist and names are right and accurate.

At first Hermogenes seems to defend (i) because he proposes the conventional nature of names and an ontological relativism in the way of Protagoras. In turn, (iii) might have been argued by Democritus –a character who does not appear in the dialogue- in saying that the objects were random combinations of atoms, and to defend a linguistic conventionalism. On the other hand, Cratylus proposes (ii): in ontology he is a disciple of Heraclitus and, however, advocates for the natural correctness of names -in his opinion, there would be a right and accurate way of naming common to all men. Finally, who defends (iv)? It's hard to say. This option seems to be in line with an onomatopoeic interpretation of language: words express with sounds the essence of things. Obviously, it is not Plato's position: he does not defend it in *The Seventh Letter,* where he accepts the linguistic conventionalism; moreover in the *Cratylus* he openly criticises the method of etymologies.

As we see, a name can be accurate and right either by nature or convention. Thus, for Cratylus, there is an exact description of objects that is identical both for

Greeks and Barbarians because, despite the disparity in conventions, the nature of objects would be the same for all: Heraclitus's permanent movement. By contrast, according to Hermogenes, the names would be accurate in a conventional or arbitrary way because there is nothing in names or in objects that force both of them to go together: simply, when a word is the name of something, it is its name. Now, whether by nature or convention, what lies behind the opinions of Hermogenes and Cratylus is the logical-semantic theory of the impossibility of speaking falsely: because conventions are the ultimate criterion for correctness; or because by natural correctness all names would be true and there are not false names -names that are not names- nor false combinations of names. And this is no an accident: the thesis of the impossibility of speaking falsely, and the subsequent linguistic immanence, is what accompanies both Hermogenes's relativism and the defence of Heraclitus's ontology and the method of the etymologies made by Cratylus.

In turn, Plato's strategy is not to deny the idea of correctness because it would destroy the true-false nature of language, but to criticize the naive interpretations of correctness and their harmful consequences. Moreover, it is possible to discover in the *Cratylus* an interpretation of the correctness of words that seems to try a synthesis between conventionalism and naturalism. In fact, Socrates appeals to the mental representations of things we have, and so words, even whether they are a result of social conventions, would designate things through what we think of them, and these affections of the soul would have the natural correctness sought (434e-435b). Therefore, anticipating what Aristotle wrote later in the *Peri Hermeneias* (16a 3-8), Plato seems to have in mind the idea that words designate things in an immediate and conventional way, while mental affections do it instantly with a natural correctness.

But let us turn now to the criticism of the naive interpretations of correctness, and begin by the answer of Socrates to Hermogenes. As we have said above, the issue is not only logical-semantic, it is not enough to show that arbitrary conventionalism contradicts the existence of a true-false speech (385a-387d), but also an ontological and epistemological one. It is necessary to show that relativism and subjectivism do not work either: if we can speak truly or falsely is because things have a permanent essence that is independent of our language (386d-e and 439b-440c). Moreover, men are neither the measure of things, nor is it certain that anything we say is always true. On the contrary, far from the linguistic immanence, things exist in themselves and in accordance with their essence, and we can tell truths or falsehoods about them. But what explains this true-false nature of language? To answer this question, Plato analyses the act of naming and the figure of a legislator in the origins of language (387d-391a).

Naming, as whatever activity in general, would have its own essence: things have to be designated according to their nature, so we cannot make words mean what we want. Names designate objects according to their essences -that is, names serve to highlight and describe things that exist by themselves and according to their nature. Language, therefore, does not create these distinctions, but these distinctions exist before language, and language only records prior ontological divisions. But how might names do it? In fact, we have only the names that social use has given us. Now, names might have another origin, though we possess them as social heritance. In this sense, Socrates calls on the work of a legislator, an architect of names that in the beginning would have established them starting from sounds and syllables in order that they conform to the essence of objects (388e-390b).

This resort to this ideal and mythical theory of language seems to obey a double purpose: to subordinate philology (linguistics) to dialectic and, in the second place, to subordinate language and knowledge to ontology. The idea is the following: whatever the origins of names are, names have some natural correctness because they are tools of ontological training. Now, this original correctness would not be strong enough and we cannot leave ontological research in the hands of etymologists; this research corresponds to dialectics, the philosophers (390c). In fact, if we interpreted the hypothesis of the legislator literally, the task of the etymologist could be in order: maybe the reconstruction of origins carried out by the study of etymologies might exhibit the correctness of names that the evolution of language had disguised. So, it is not a surprise to see that Socrates recognizes that there is some truth in the theory of natural correctness, and yet afterwards, when he debates with Cratylus, tries to demonstrate the useless role of the hypothesis of the legislator understood as a rational explanation of the origins and correctness of names.

For its part, the criticism to Cratylus is already implicit in the rejection of the etymologies as a means of access to the essences of things: this is a useless approach and, besides, is open to the risk of talking for the sake of talking, typical of sophists, young people and poets. Moreover, we have to take into account that, for Cratylus, etymologies were not the same thing as for us -historical reconstruction of words from their previous significance. No, in that time etymologies surely had a transcendent value: to uncover the meaning that words would have had originally when *ex hypothesi* language and reality fit each other, that is to say, to reveal the true meanings that had been disguised in their use by spurious elements. In this way, Cratylus, from

his linguistic immanence, thought that etymologies would confirm Heraclitus's *panta rei* (402a and ss, 411b-c, 436e and 437d).

On the contrary, Socrates uses the method of etymologies ironically: he cannot recognize the huge and wonderful display of wisdom that apparently this procedure involves on its own, and he considers it necessary to ask the help of some god to explain it (386c-e, 401e and 428c-d). But not only that: Socrates also tries to show the implausibility of this practice and the theory of the legislator that sometimes accompanies it (421c-427d). For this purpose, he distinguishes between primitive and derived names, being the explanation of the correctness of the first, which is necessary because the primitive names would be the perfect candidates for imitating the essence of things through the onomatopoeic value of sounds. Socrates, sometimes comically, discusses the imitative value of 14 letters of the 24 that made up the Greek language.

Now, the true criticism of the naive conception of the natural correctness consists of two stages. First, Socrates discusses the concept of likeness, which would be the ideal candidate to explain the imitation, and his conclusion is that likeness is always incomplete and imperfect because if it were not so, the imitation -words in this case- should only be a duplicate of the thing imitated. And this need for a difference in the representation, according to Socrates, destroyed the supposed natural correctness of words based on likeness or imitation (432d). In this sense the response of Cratylus is significant: the legislator is infallible -if you want, that the necessary difference in the representation only affects the accidental features of things

8

represented. In fact, Cratylus concludes, for this reason there are not incorrect names and it is impossible to speak falsely.

But this answer, and we are already in the second moment of the critique, is precisely the loophole that Socrates will not leave to Cratylus: granting that imitation happens through a complete and perfect likeness, yet it might be that the legislator had acted incorrectly making an improper use of names, that is, attributing mistaken names to objects. In other words: Socrates does not accept the infallible divine nature of the legislator, but he humanizes him: why might the legislator not have committed systematic errors? Thus, the hypothesis of a legislator, which could have some value as a myth that goes where our rational capacities are not able to arrive, becomes useless when it is used philosophically as an explanation of the origins and correctness of the names.

And this is not the worst difficulty. The action of a legislator -infallible if you want- might not explain the correctness of names because he should already know in advance the nature of things, and this knowledge is only possible, according to Cratylus, throughout the very names (438a-e). Put in another way: to create an onomatopoeic language, it would be necessary to understand this very language previously, since to decide whether a name has a specific meaning it is necessary to know what kind of things this word might designate. In other words: to know if a name reflects the essence of a particular type of object with natural correctness, we should previously know what this essence is. And it is illuminating that this argument, which certainly brings to mind Wittgenstein's critique of the ostensive definition, is

precisely the only one that Cratylus accepts as reasonable, an argument that Cratylus can only answer with his *ad hoc* resort to an infallible divine force (431e and 436c).

To sum up, Cratylus was not right to say that to know how to use words is the same as knowing the essence of objects (435d). No, to know things we have to go to things themselves, to their essences (439b). And this is precisely what Plato tries to do in interpreting the natural correctness and conventionalism in a non naive way. If something in the word does not represent anything in the thing and, nevertheless, contributes in some sense to the meaning, then it corresponds to the social use of language, the conventions of the polis -not subjective and arbitrary decisions as Hermogenes thinks (434e-435c). As we saw above, according to Plato, words would be linked conventionally to what we think, so that conventions make us recall the thought -the affection of the soul- that directly represents the essence of things. Put in another way: the name-object relationship is mediated by the affections of the soul of the speakers, that is, the mental states we have when we use words. Now, how should we interpret the concept of affections of the soul and correctness that Plato seems to give them?

In the case of Aristotle the semiotic triangle is made up of words, affections of the soul (the sensible and intelligible forms of the objects captured by the soul) and the objects themselves or any of their qualities. In particular, the relationship "word-affection of the soul" would be conventional, and the relationship "affection of the soul-object" a causal one. The ontology and epistemology of Aristotle permits the conception of the affections of the soul as effects of the action of objects upon the soul, and words as effects of the affections of the soul, although physically built in a

conventional manner. To sum up: the sensitive forms and the intelligible forms are both present in the objects and they would be the formal cause of the affections of the soul; in turn, these affections would be the formal causes of words, and the linguistic conventions the material causes of words. Now, what can we find in the *Cratylus?*

Well, it is obvious that we cannot find in the *Cratylus* a philosophy of language such as we understand it in the present, but simply, as we have noted before, the reflections on the language that the Ideas -for the moment only dreamed- demand. However, without forcing Plato's thought too much, it is possible to say the following. For the case of individuals, names would designate objects through mental representation of the speaker and the appropriate social conventions. In turn, the case of universal and abstract words should not have to be different. For Plato -the Plato of the theory of Ideas- the affections of the soul would be caused not by the sensible and intelligible forms present in the objects, as Aristotle would say, but by the Ideas that the soul knew before its current life in the body: the traces that the Ideas would have left upon it.

Now if this might be the solution of Plato's late philosophy, it is not entirely clear what his position in the *Cratylus* is. As we said in the beginning, in this dialogue Plato still does not recognize a separate existence to the essences, and besides the theory of reminiscence and the immortality of the soul do not play any role. In fact, the *Cratylus* would be a tentative work: Plato would still be developing his theory of Ideas and the epistemology and the metaphysics that this theory needs. In this sense, it is not surprising that Plato does not make it clear in this dialogue how to understand the relationship of natural exactness -non naive, non onomatopoeic- between words

and essences: essences are only a requirement and they have an existence only dreamed of.

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We have said before that Plato's criticism of the hypothesis of a legislator of language brings to mind Wittgenstein's criticism of the ostensive definition. However, the affinities have to be properly understood. First, we should have in mind that Plato's approach to linguistic meaning is precisely what is behind the view that the origins of language, both individually and in the human species, have to be understood according to the ostensive definition. In the second place, we should not forget that Plato's rebuttal of the hypothesis of a legislator is not the rejection of the myth itself, but the dismantling of the use of this myth with an explanatory intention. For Plato, there are issues beyond human capabilities, and this would be the place for myths. Now, myths cannot claim to be rational explanations –in this case, reason would destroy them as easily as Socrates does-, but they must remain as myths, and as a reminder of our limitations. In fact, is the theory of reminiscence less mythical than the hypothesis of a legislator of names?

What is more, it would be possible to rise to the theory of reminiscence the same criticism that Plato uses against the hypothesis of a legislator of names. In effect, why would the soul not make systematic errors in the contemplation of Ideas? And how could the soul distinguish, identify and understand the Ideas -their meanings- without the help of language and the activities carried out by the souls from her embodied existence? Let us, for the moment, leave aside this problem and see how Plato's criticism of the hypothesis of the legislator belongs to a philosophical

scenario very different to the scenario of Wittgenstein's criticism of the ostensive definition.

First, we have the paradigm of names and so the assimilation of all semantic function to the *nomen-nominatum* relationship in which the meaning of a name is its reference, the designated object. Two: an incipient ideacionism to the extent that words would refer to things through a mental intermediary, which fits things with natural correctness, but conventionally attached to words. Moreover, we have metaphysical realism that is what semantic realism needs. Indeed, to assert that the basic function of language is to describe reality and that the basic function of words is to name its components we need to assume that reality is already segmented and structured in entities -Ideas, in the case of Plato- and that they exist by themselves and are what they are regardless of language. Only in this way can we say that words become names of these entities and that the language describes reality.

Lastly, these theses also presuppose the idea that exists or makes sense to think about the existence of one knowledge of reality that is prior and independent (previous in time and in a logical sense) to the language –for instance, the soul contemplating the essences or Ideas-, because only in this way would it be possible to distinguish, identify and understand the components of reality and then give them a name according to the uses and conventions of the polis. This epistemological thesis is clearly an intellectualism and it is an inseparable companion of metaphysical realism.

Well, once these assumptions are accepted –semantic realism, ideacionism, metaphysical realism and intellectualism-, what one would expect to happen in fact, in

13

the *Cratylus,* does not happen: a defence of the ostensive definition, and an initial baptism of components of reality. However, in this context we should remember that Plato seems to mean that there is not a rational explanation of the origins of language, and that we cannot say anything about it other than through myths. Obviously, we might also ask whether it is necessary to speak about the origins of language in the way of platonic presuppositions. Why should we imagine the origins as an initial baptism or a set of ostensive definitions, although we later say that it is only possible to construct myths: in fact, would it not be possible to imagine the origins of language in another way.

Wittgenstein does not accept Plato's assumptions, nor does he defend any linguistic idealism, despite what has sometimes been said[4]. In his opinion, reality exists and is structured in entities and facts, but it only makes sense to say so from our natural ways of acting (sometimes mere reactions, but often spontaneous, symbolic, intentional, creative actions) and, of course, from the ways of speaking that have grown, and still grow, from this natural behaviour; interwoven with it, continuing it, replacing it, enriching it, etc. Therefore, it would be meaningless to go, as metaphysical realism proposes, beyond this *"in such a way human beings act and speak"*, because only these ways of acting and speaking -not any intellectual contemplation- is what makes it possible to distinguish, point up, identify, and make meaningful the entities that we say constitute reality. So, it would be meaningless both to speak about reality itself –the concept of reality itself is a senseless- and to

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[4] See Wittgenstein, L., *Philosophical Investigations*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1958; *The Blue and Brown Books*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1964; and *On Certainty*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1969.

claim that there is a non-human way of knowing reality itself. There is nothing to say or think about[5].

As Wittgenstein's criticism of private languages shows, only inside our ways of acting and speaking are we able to distinguish, point up, identify, and make meaningful the entities that we say constitute reality. And so, only inside this reality, that is always a human reality, and it does not make sense to think of another, the words come at times, but not always or primarily, have a reference value. In short, what Wittgenstein seems to mean -and to say this is a bit risky because it has the appearance of a theory and Wittgenstein denied that philosophy had the role of building hypotheses, theories or explanations- is that language is part of our natural and social history –the natural and social history of the animals we are-, and that in this process nothing resembles an initial baptism, as the platonic view suggests, in which things are in front of us waiting to be labelled with words.

Rather, what we find is the oldest geological strata: deeper, more primitive language games, in which words above all have primarily an expressive function. In fact, in our languages such expressive uses still survive in a fossilized way; and not so fossilized, because they are still in use. Moreover, the learning of language -as it is known, Wittgenstein thought that the description of how people learn to use a word

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[5] I have dealt these aspects of Wittgenstein's philosophy in: "Realism without empiricism", in *Anales del Seminario de Metafísica*, Universidad Complutense, Madrid, 1994, pp. 13-26; "Racionalitat, llenguatges privats i ontologia" in *Taula* n º 29-30, Universitat de les Illes Balears, 1998, pp. 65-74; "Realismo esencialista y nominalismo realista. Acerca del conocimiento del mundo", in *Pensamiento* Vol. 54, nº. 210, Universidad Pontificia de Comillas, Madrid, 1998, pp. 417-442, and "¿De qué sujeto habla el segundo Wittgenstein?" in Ariso, J.M. (ed.), *El yo amenazado. Ensayos sobre Wittgenstein y el sinsentido*, Biblioteca Nueva, Madrid, 2010, pp. 111-128. Also in *www.defezweb.net*

was of vital importance to understand their actual uses- shows how the referential and descriptive functions of language in many cases develop from its expressive features.

Now, the expressive function of words would not be the end of story because language creates fields of meaning -worlds- within which human existence takes place. And not only how culture performs this function, but in the most basic and primary sense that humans beings do things with words (situations, relationships, intensional realities), because the primary function of language would not be to name and describe reality -we have seen that naming and describing only happen inside language and through language. In this sense, we have to notice that to speak of language in the case of Wittgenstein might be misleading: it would be better to speak of linguistic action and symbolic activities.

And this detail is of paramount importance to understand the philosophical distance between Plato –Platonism, if you wish- and the later Wittgenstein. Language is action, a self-constitutive activity that generates its own rules -it takes care of itself and does not require anything external to justify its regulations-, and whose origins should not be understood throughout intellectual acts of recognition of entities or rules –the entities of a mythical initial baptism, the rules that speakers should understand if they are to be able to use words. As we have seen, language is a self-contained activity developed from the common natural and spontaneous way that human beings act.

In the beginning we said that our intention was not to demonstrate that one of the two authors about which we were going to speak –Wittgenstein- was right about the other –Plato-, but simply to show that Wittgenstein's approach was much more

fruitful. Likewise we can now add that this approach also frees us of philosophical responsibilities in relation to the origins of language since, from Wittgenstein's position, this question seems to fade or dissolve. First, because we can leave off seeing this problem as something needed for a philosophical explanation. And in the second place, because we can remove from our philosophical agenda questions such as the following: how did an intellectual being –man- begin to talk in a referential and true-false way of a reality, a reality that exists in front of him and apart from him and is ontologically organized by itself?

Wittgenstein thinks about the matter otherwise, and seems to give us these two pieces of advice. On the one hand, that we should contemplate language as an evolution and development of the natural and spontaneous action of human beings; and on the other, that philosophy should only make a very general description –not hypotheses, not explanations- of this evolution and development. Better yet: descriptive observations of the uses and the learning of words that permit us to imagine transitions between linguistic and non-linguistic actions, and also between linguistic and non-linguistic primitive actions. And in this way we arrive at a very well-known place: before the current eggs and chickens, there existed even more primitive chickens and eggs.