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Chapter V. Naming And Being

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V. Naming and being

Under the shade of a plane tree, by the cooling waters of the Ilissus on a hot summer's day, Socrates and Phaedrus explore the issue of language. Socrates, passive and unfamiliar with the area, is led by Phaedrus to their shady spot, and Phaedrus exclaims over the manner in which Socrates allows himself to be led about, "like a stranger" (Phaedrus 230C). Similarly passive before Phaedrus' speech Socrates declares himself quite overwhelmed by it, but soon takes the initiative:

Then listen to me in silence: for truly the place seems divine. So do not be surprised if I often get in a frenzy as my discourse progresses: I am almost now bringing forth dithyrambics. (238D)

The sublime character of the discourse is thus announced with gentle irony, and its subject-matter glides from love, to rhetoric, poetic inspiration, madness, the flight of the soul, and finally language. At the end of the dialogue (274D) the invention of words is described, and these are referred to as the "elixir (pharmakon) of memory and wisdom". Theuth of Naucratis in Egypt is alleged to have made the discovery of letters (γράμματα), and he claimed that his invention would make Egyptians wiser, and enhance their memories. Thamus replies to him that his tool will in fact encourage forgetting rather than remembering, since people will cease to rely on their memories. They will use the written words as props, and their usefulness will spring from their ability to remind: they are not, however, an aid to memory, properly speaking. We may here assume that Socrates is referring to his doctrine of innate knowledge, brought out through recollection, in the case of the slave boy in the Meno. Written words do not awaken the memory in this sense; they rather dull it by offering aids which diminish its own power of recollecting. The potion which has been given mankind turns out to be "an elixir not of memory, but of reminding": Iris Murdoch (The Fire and the Sun) notes the ambiguity of pharmakon (elixir) which can mean a drug which cures, or poisons, and it is this ambiguity which allows the elixir to take on firstly a positive, and then a negative aspect. Socrates, who left no books, has this to say about the written word:

Writing, Phaedrus, has this strange quality and is very like painting. For the offspring of the painters stand like living creatures, but if one asks a question of them, they remain in august and total silence. It is the same with written words. You may think they speak as if possessing intelligence, but if you question them in the hope of learning something about what is being said, they always say one and the same thing. (275D)
Socrates is suspicious of the written word, which he sees as rigid and immobilised: the real word (logos) is written, not on parchment, but in the soul of the learner; it is able to defend itself. "It is the living and en-souled word of him who knows" (276A).

The extent of Socrates' concern stops with his complaint about the word in writing, and his objection is not to language so much as to books. The word itself is not questioned, and his is not the Wittgenstein complaint about being "held captive by language". Since Socrates' method is oral, and involves verbal interaction above all, it is predicated upon the value of words. Precise definition is the ultimate requirement, and the proper use of speech will follow (277B).

Is there a deeper questioning of language than this? In late antiquity there certainly is, but we are here dealing with the mere adumbration of late Greek and early Christian philosophy. Where do we find the first stirrings of the drive towards silence, and the suspicion of language itself which is the predominant characteristic of the classical thought of the second 500 years of the classical period? Socrates himself was not afflicted by such doubts, and he explains to Phaedrus that he is not familiar with the particular part of the Ilissus which they have found because he prefers cities, where he can learn things: the trees, he says, don't teach him anything (230D). Socrates is firmly committed to verbal interchange, and to the idea of intellectual progress through accurate definition of terms. Arguably, Plato lacked the same conviction: in the seventh letter (341C–D) he refers to a philosophical matter which is not appropriately treated in writing, and which is not verbal in the manner of other studies. Knowledge of it is born suddenly in the soul, "like a light fired by a leaping spark", and it results not from intense verbal activity, but from continued application and communion with the subject itself. This is of course not an unfamiliar theme coming from the author of the Symposium, but it is clearly more Platonic than Socratic: and it must not be forgotten that the description of the mystical ascent given by Socrates in that dialogue is reported as coming from "Diotima", rather than being advanced by Socrates himself. It has often been noted that the Renaissance saw a resurgence of confidence in the power of language to communicate reality, and one would expect that this early sector of the Greek achievement would exclude a similar confidence. Yet side by side with the belief in logos and its strength may be found, from the outset, doubt over the power of language.

Two thinkers whose views are poles apart, Heraclitus and Parmenides, generate identical problems. Does language actually name reality: if so what kind of realities does it name? Parmenides refers to naming in the major fragment, B8, in respect of Being and subsequently in respect of Doxa (the world of seeming, or mere opinion): in the first place (B8, 34–41), the identity of thought and being are claimed, and the claim is made that nothing exists apart from Being. How do names emerge? They are obviously included
for the things of the doxastic realm, which have in any case no authentic reality, but

For them men have established a name distinctive of each. (B19.3)

Appearances receive conventional names, and B38 claims in addition that all things are names established by men, who think that they are true. Great difficulties of interpretation and text attach to this line, but Parmenides seems to suggest that categories of thought, such as Being, Becoming and Change of Position are mere name. (We have not yet reached the doxastic section, where of course there would be no difficulty about reducing the seeming to a mere name.) Parmenides seems to want to establish that names have no being, and are therefore baseless and useless.

Yet he continues into the realm of Seeming and, notes that people have established two ways of naming things, which are apparently Light and Night (see also B9). Parmenides attacks other philosophers here, rather than ordinary common-sense, and the naming divides off into two separate principles, to which Parmenides objects. In short, naming is conventional, and it causes the beings which populate the illusory world of the Doxa.

Heraclitus refers to naming once, in the famous fragment B67 where the collocation of opposites is held to be God:

God is day-night, winter-summer, war-peace, satiety-famine. But he changes like (fire) which when it mingles with the smoke of incense, is named according to each man's pleasure.

Naming is again regarded as conventional, and it is implied that it is inaccurate, since what is differentiated as various perfumes is in fact fire in a variety of manifestations. The doctrine of flux is integral to Heraclitus' system, though its scope has been much discussed of late. The famous statement that one can never step into the same river twice (B91) highlights the notion that reality is constantly in a state of process. The question of how this process can be known is clearly crucial, though we are told little of Heraclitus' opinions on the matter, since if there is no such thing as a thing, the naming process must be somewhat irrelevant. The flux cannot be halted simply in order to be baptised.

The legacy of the problems generated by both these philosophies is to be found in the problematic of Plato's Timaeus: both produce the same problem. If Being is all that exists, then names are nothing and apply to nothing; if all is flux, then names are fraudulent attempts to demonstrate a piece of the process. Plato expresses his dilemma in The Sophist:

We really are, my dear friend, involved in an extremely difficult investigation; the business of appearing and seeming, but not being, and of saying things - but not true ones - all this is now and always has been very perplexing. It is extremely difficult,
Theaetetus, to see how you can say or think that falsehoods have a real existence, and not be caught in a contradiction as soon as you open your mouth. (236E)

The Timaeus asserts a view on the problem of naming the flux, and the shadows of both Parmenides and Heraclitus loom large in this dialogue. Having established that there are two types of reality, Being and Becoming, Plato moves to consider the Becoming process and the possibility of designating it. Taking the Heraclitean example, Plato affirms the impossibility of designating a changing object, like fire, by the term “this”. The demonstrative pronoun being ruled out, the word toioouton is proposed, meaning “of such a kind”: we identify phases in the flux as being similar when they recur, but we do not seek to imply their stability or identity by calling them “this”. The nuance, one assumes, lies in the use of the idea of mere likeness, since it is being conceded that there are similar phases recurring within the flux process, sufficiently close to warrant our sense of being surrounded by familiar objects which appear to have some sort of constancy. Plato has taken Being from Parmenides and flux from Heraclitus, attempting at the same time to place language on a reasonably secure footing.

The Cratylus is well-known for its discussion of naming, and it is in this dialogue the allusion is made to Heraclitus’ statement that you cannot step twice into the same stream (402A). Here however, the issue is not so much how to corral the flux, but whether names (onomata, or nouns) have a natural relationship with the things they designate, or whether they are merely conventional. Accordingly there is much attention to etymology and the analysis of words into their derivative parts, since, if language is thought to have grown out of reality in some way, then the resolution of words into their roots will reveal something about their meanings. The Cratylus piles these etymologies up at breakneck speed, and there are frequent allusions to the breathless profusion of etymologies thrown out by Socrates in the first part of the dialogue (420D). That the dilemma of the Parmenides/Heraclitus option is still upon him, is clear from Plato’s concluding discussion (440C) though he here sets aside the decision on the matter: it is nevertheless stated by Socrates that

No man of sense can put himself and his soul under the care of names, trusting in names and those who make them to the point of affirming that he knows anything. (440C)

Cratylus has the last word, and the dialogue closes with his endorsement of the views of Heraclitus. It is not however clear what view Plato finally wishes to convey, but in the opinion of this reader, he does think that the analysis of names leads to revelations about Reality. Hermogenes is the interlocutor chosen by Plato to defend the view that names are conventional in origin, whereas Cratylus affirms against him that names come from nature, and that
“there is a certain innate correctness in names, which is the same for Greeks as for all men” (383A). Socrates proceeds to an investigation of this view, and begins the etymological analysis of the dialogue by wondering whether Homer gave names to his characters in such a way as to match up with their characters. Was Astyanax (“Lord of the city”) called this because of his heroic efforts in defence (392D)? Do all words contain such information about reality? Do they match reality in some way? The etymological process we know to have been favoured from the outset in Greece, but also that it achieved enormous popularity in late antiquity, when word-analysis was much practised by those in search of truth and reality. Nevertheless in the Cratylus it is practised somewhat frenetically, only to be ridiculed by Socrates and Cratylus: what is no doubt a tour de force of contemporary pseudo-philology inexplicably founders (410A) when it comes to the words for fire and water, which are said to be foreign in origin and therefore incapable of such analysis. “Air” is obscure, but is hypothetically related to the flow of wind. There is more success with earth, but Plato has here failed to find etymological clarification for three of the four substances he adopts as the primary elements in the Timaeus, and which we know from Empedocles. His own philosophy of nature fails to emerge from word-analysis. The view that words are naturally elucidatory is being ridiculed here, and we may take it that it is put aside. Yet there is no commitment to the other view, namely that names are merely conventional, and the interpreters’ attempts to make Plato say something clear on either of these options are not thoroughly compelling.

Aristotle has frequent recourse to etymologies, as Bonitz (Index Aristotelicus, under Etymologica) shows, and they do not appear to be any more accurate than those satirized in the Cratylus: one well-known example is the derivation of the word for the heavens (aeon) from the words aei einai (“being everlastingly”: On the Heavens 279a28). Whilst he appears to derive information about the essence of the thing named from these philological explorations, he does not believe in the natural relationship between names (onomata) and things which would guarantee the etymologizing process some intellectual foundations. As it is, word-analysis is simply a tool for defining the meaning of a word: that names are conventional is quite explicitly stated by Aristotle, and he treats the matter as if it were beyond dispute.

A noun (onoma) is a sound having meaning established by convention alone and without temporal reference; no part of it has any meaning taken apart (from the whole). (On Interpretation 16a20)

The caveat contained in the last part of the definition rings oddly in view of the abovementioned etymological analysis, and Aristotle proceeds to give as an example the proper name Callippus (“Good-horse”) claiming that its parts
cannot be taken as significant: such a restriction is not consistent with his practice elsewhere, of allowing the component parts of a word to elucidate its meaning. Aristotle continues:

As we said, it is by convention and in no way by nature that nouns have their meanings, in that they become symbols. Illiterate noises also convey something, such as those of wild beasts, but they are not nouns. (op. cit. 16.29)

Names signify by convention and are symbols: verbs, Aristotle continues, have a time reference. Aristotle repeats his stricture against the natural origin of language in 17.1, this time in respect of sentences (*logoi*). A sentence is said to have meaning by convention, not as an *organon*: the latter term signifies that part of a physical body which enables the physical body to realise its function, being the instrument of its entelechy. Aristotle here denounces quite an interesting idea, which would have the sentence to be something like the hand or the eyes, the tools of human nature. He is however concerned to stress that language is not in a similar position to such physical attributes, and his account of language given in the *On Interpretation* is therefore an explication of the rules of the language game, rather than a description of a natural *datum*.

Names and definitions are distinguished (*Physics* 184b10), and the name (or noun) is said to refer to something in an unanalysed way whereas the definition (*horismos*) divides out the various aspects of a thing. In the *Posterior Analytics* (92b22) the same problem is raised in greater detail, and here the relation of names to definitions is the issue. In 93a4 knowledge of a thing is equated with knowledge of the cause of its existence, and a clear result of this is that not only names, but also definitions are excluded from the category of procedures which give essential information.

It is clear from the forms of definition (*horos*) now in use that definition does not show the existence of the thing defined. (92b19)

Definition does not show that a thing is; it shows what it is. Is the definition then simply a periphrastic type of name? This cannot be the case, since there are names of non-existents: nor can we admit that all names are definitions. Aristotle now leaves the question of the relationship of names to definitions, in order to conclude that definitions fail to show anything about the essence of objects. These are temporarily set aside in favour of syllogism and demonstration, but Aristotle continues to seek a better understanding of definition, which will allow definitions to explain the essence of an object. In 93b29 he moves to an understanding of definition which shows why a thing exists: one type of definition conveys a meaning, but another is "a sort of demonstration of the essence" (94a2). Such an account of the essence of a thing will show
how and why it occurs, and this is what is called the demonstration of a thing's essence. The principle that we only know a thing when we know its cause, is maintained throughout. The eventual result is given in 101b38, where a definition is said to show the essence of something. It is a phrase substituted for a name or another phrase, which gives a quasi-demonstrative account of a thing's actual nature. The power of the name, then, is strictly limited, and it is definition which bridges the intellectual gap between language and objects. It is again clear that the doctrine of the natural basis of names is not treated as a serious option in Aristotle, since without definition they convey nothing. Even definition is suspect, if it seeks only to communicate information on how a word is to be used, since such a manoeuvre does not manage to cross the gap between language and reality. A definition which does not provide knowledge of the essence of an object is somehow uncommunicative about reality: we may define a circle as a line equidistant from a central point, but this shows nothing about why the circle exists, and why it is a circle. The definition may equally well be of mountain-copper, for all it tells us about the essence of a circle (Post. An. 92b23). To get away from being a mere substitute for a name, a definition must take on the form of a demonstration of the essence of the definiendum: the name itself is impotent to do so.

Yet in the Rhetoric 1404a8, it is stated that words are imitations (μιμήματα), and in 1405b13 that some words are more appropriate than others for conveying meanings, since they are specially apt likenesses. In the latter case, however, the reference is to metaphors and so the comparability is between terms, or between natural phenomena. The former case seems to be a genuine case of claiming resemblance between words and reality, but is unfortunately not developed to any extent. The notion that names or nouns imitate reality could well be accommodated to Aristotle's views on naming and definition as developed in the Posterior Analytics and elsewhere, since mere imitation of an object could never be held to "demonstrate its essence". That names are imitations need not be held to imply that names are natural in origin, since their use can still be relegated to the conventional.

The On Sophistical Refutations contains some interesting references to the nature of names. It is pointed out that things are infinite in number, whereas names are finite. It therefore follows that names are ambiguous, since they have to do service for more than one object. This causes difficulty in argument, since we have no way of introducing real things into discussion: we must use mere names, which will result in the changing of ground, and misunderstanding. The sophist will make use of this factor, and so "those unskilled in the power of names will find themselves the victims of contradiction" (165a15). Further on in this work, which is concerned with illicit forms of argument, the distinction between verbal and intellectual arguments is introduced (170b12). Aristotle refuses to accept that there is a real difference
between the two, since any attempt to detect ambiguity would involve
thought. One cannot have an argument which depends only on the meanings
of words, nor can one have an argument which depends only on thought.

In conclusion then, Aristotle does admit the practice of etymology as eluci-
dating meanings. The Presocratics, we are told, gave the name *aither* to the
upper regions, since this name comes from and means “running eternally”,
thereby conveying satisfactorily the view of the heavens which was en-
visaged. (Anaxagoras, it is said, makes a mistake when he calls *aither* “fire”:
On the Heavens 270b25.) Despite this vestige of the old word-analysis, Aris-
totle severely limits the utility of the process, and such semantic information
is intended to elucidate the meaning of the name, rather than suggest any-
thing about its relation to reality. Aristotle is not suggesting that the deriva-
tion of the term *aither* casts light on the nature of the *aither* itself. Language
being purely conventional, other tools are needed if we are to obtain knowl-
edge of the essence of things: the mere study of names will lead us only to
the knowledge of the meaning of names. If we are to know what a thing is, a
syllogistic demonstration must be employed, which will tell us above all the
cause of thing. Unless we know its cause, we do not know it, and the task of
a satisfactory definition is to substitute a demonstration of the object’s es-

cence in causal terms, for the name of the object.

The Stoics are said to reverse this view, believing in the natural relation-
ship between names and things. A fragment given in von Arnim (SVF II.44.39),
and taken from Origen (Contra Celsum I.24) says that Aristotle believed
names to have arisen out of convention, whereas the Stoics considered that
they were “by nature”. Origen continues that the Stoics made deductions
from etymologies, since names were thought to be sounds which imitate
reality (μιμομένων ... τὰ πράγματα). As we have seen, Aristotle made
etymological deductions, but he does not do so on the basis of the natural
origin of names, and this despite the fact that he also believes that words are
imitations (*mimemata*). For Aristotle this fact will not yield any real advance,
since it is impossible to obtain knowledge of the essence of thing from merely
knowing how a word applies to it. The onomatopeic word will not elucidate
the nature of the thing it designates, since real knowledge embraces the cause
of a thing, through reasoning and demonstration. Thus the similarities be-
tween Aristotle and the Stoics on these matters should not cause us to over-
look the crucial differences between them.

Epicurus used words in a highly precise way, refusing to employ any meta-
phor, and the result was described by Aristophanes the grammarian as “high-
ly idiosyncratic” (Diogenes L. X.13), and this probably explains his refusal of
rhetoric. Diogenes also tells us that Epicurus advised Herodotus to use
words for their primary and clearest meaning (X.37–38), and it is clear that
any literary conceits or tropes were excluded form Epicurus’ speech. The
source of this view must lie in Epicurus’ endorsement of the notion that lan-
Language originates in nature, which itself contains no artifice or flourish like the opaque embellishment of the orator’s panegyric. The origin of language was the subject of Epicurus’ Little Epitome, in which he took the view that language grew out of nature. Men assigned names to things not “knowingly”, but under the impulse of natural instinct, just as dogs bark (Usener 335). This is confirmed by Diogenes, who also tells us that, for Epicurus, language was perfected little by little in various ways and in various places (X.76). If Lucretius may guide us here, it was argued that nature was prior to thought, always providing the pattern for what followed (V.1028; 186). It was thus that sounds originated, and the intelligence subsequently improved on the initial grunts, cries and so on. Nature has its characteristic clarity, which gives us the clarity of our sense-perception, which is the basis of knowledge. Language originally must have been clear and uncluttered, simply preserving the naming relationship between words and objects, and is now best kept clear of unnatural artifice.

Both Stoics and Epicureans, then, react against the heady Aristotelian claims of the need to develop a syllogistic in order to produce genuine knowledge out of the merely conventional instrument of language. For Epicurus language must be allowed to be itself, in its primal and clearest form: for Aristotle, language must be forced to transcend itself, since naming alone does not communicate knowledge. The Sceptics, however, are inclined to deny even the notion of the parts of speech, including the existence of the noun and the sentence. In Sextus (Against the Professors I.133) the argument is that either the sentence is different from its parts, or else it is simply the sum total of its parts: if it is different, then the disappearance of the parts ought not to affect it (which is not the case), but if it is the same as its parts then it cannot be more than them, and so does not exist. Language is conventional, as one might expect from the Sceptics, and they argued that if it were natural in origin, all men would understand the meanings of the terms used in each other’s languages (Outlines of Pyrrhonism II.214). There is a further interesting argument, namely that it is patently within our powers to change the names we give to things, without destroying the possibility of linguistic communication. The idea of the conventional origin of language is taken up again in the Against the Professors (I.141), against the view that some nouns are “naturally” masculine, or feminine. The two arguments above are used again, but with an additional argument about the alleged natural qualities of language. Fire, being natural, warms both barbarians and Greeks: it does not warm Greeks, and cool barbarians. Similarly one would expect masculinity and femininity to emerge most clearly, if language were in fact the product of reality. Some nouns even have two genders and some obviously neuter words have gender, such as “couch” (καμαν). Nature cannot be held to have determined these names, since she would have done it differently. Why is Athens a plural noun, when nature knows that she is one city? (I. 154)
Not surprisingly, Sextus takes up the question of etymology. The analysis here (Against the Professors I.241) is a little surprising, but it becomes clearer when one recognises that it is part of a Sceptical attack on the Grammarians, and is not regarded as a philosophical issue in the manner of the Cratylus discussion led by Socrates: rather etymology is attacked as a branch of grammatical study. Dionysius the Thracian claims that etymology is one of the six parts of grammar (Against the Professors I.250), and it is with this use in mind that Sextus gives his critique. (Elsewhere however, it is regarded as a branch of logic: Against the Logicians I.9.) Etymology was used as a test of Hellenism, in order to discern whether words were genuinely Greek or barbarian in origin. The basis of Sextus’ hostility seems to be his belief that in this procedure the grammarians are presupposing a natural origin for words:

The latter possibility indicates a Grammatical belief in the natural origin of language: in the former case, Sextus sees an infinite regress, and concludes that we will not find an original word, and so will be unable to conclude on whether the term in question is good Greek or not. This does not seem a strong argument, since there is the possibility of halting the process at some root word, but another argument is stronger, namely that in the case where the analysis leads us to a root-word, which is itself without roots, we will simply judge the word’s Greekness by common usage. This, however, could have been worked out without performing the analysis: there is simply no need for the etymology in this case. (Sextus gives the example of pillow, *proskephalaion*, which is clearly a Greek word, without any etymology being performed: I.245.) It is in this way that Sextus frames his argument against etymology, which in his day must have been being used more as a test of good Greek, than a source of knowledge about reality.

Elsewhere there is an attack on the idea that names are “in common” (Against the Logicians I.195): this is said to be misleading, since our sensations are private, and lack uniformity. If they were uniform, we could not know it without experiencing the sensations of our neighbour, which is impossible. In fact it is clear that we do not receive identical impressions, since some of us have impressions distorted by illnesses such as jaundice and ophthalmia. Names are therefore explicitly incorrect, since they designate as identical, sense-experiences which are in fact different. Names mislead us therefore, on the subject of external reality. Not only are they conventional; they are conventionally misleading.

Philo shows an interest in names and nouns which owes a great deal to the themes developed in classical Greek philosophy: he is aware of the issues of
the Cratylus, but offers his own development, and his own solution to traditional dilemmas. The issue of the relation between names and nature figures prominently:

Most men, not knowing the nature of things, necessarily make mistakes in the matter of giving names. (On Husbandry I)

Philo proceeds, however, to praise Moses for his anatomical precision, claiming that he uses words appropriately and carefully (and therefore that his use of the word husbandman of Noah in Genesis 9.20 was the result of careful consideration). Precision in naming will emerge in Philo as a spiritual virtue, and in fact the ability to name oneself belongs to God alone. This theme has already been developed in chapter II, where the relationship between thought and naming was noted. Naming must be preceded by thinking: our failure to enjoy self-thought implies our inability to name ourselves. God’s nature is known to God only, and he is in the unique position of knowing himself: he alone, therefore, can make any statement concerning himself. Man should not swear by God, since they do not know his nature. We must be content to swear by his name, which is the “expressive word” (τοῦ ἐρμηνεύως λόγου). What is meant here? The “expressive word” is said to be god for the imperfect, whereas for those who have attained perfection, the “primal being” is god. This seems to be a reference to the intermediary principle referred to in chapter one, and the suggestion is that the word is the expression of God (Alleg. Interp. III.207). Elsewhere we find the logos identified as the name (onomá) of God: the logos, also the first-born, ruler of the angels, has among his titles the “Beginning”, but also the “Name of God” (The Confusion of Tongues 146). How close this passage is to the prologue of John’s Gospel! The logos is identified with the Beginning.

However here we are concerned with the notion that the intermediary principle is called the name of God. We shall come later to the Gnostic claim that “The name of the Father is the Son”, and in both cases the secondary being is intended to fill a gap left by the fact that the primary being cannot be named. God alone knows his own nature, and therefore names himself: but in his case, the name is a being. Adam assigns names to things, but not to himself since he does not have this same capacity for self-knowledge: he can know other things, and so gives names to them (see page 88).

There is a concern for the precision of names in Philo, and much talk of whether things have been rightly given their labels. In an allegorical interpretation, for example, it is said that “woman” is the right name for sense-perception, since woman is passive, in contrast to the active nature of man (Alleg. Interp. II.38). He goes on to identify “man” with mind, since activity is the province of mind, and presumably has in view here Aristotle’s notion of the active intellect (see page 80). There are many examples of this analysis of
the significance of nouns, and predictably enough, the use of etymology is an
important means of casting light on their significance. A particularly interest-
ing case may be found in On the Creation (127): the number seven is thought
to be of great significance in both music and letters (given the seven-stringed
lyre, and the seven vowels), and so the Greek *hepta* is said to be derived from
*sebasmos* (reverence) and *semnotes* (holiness). Lest one should have noticed
that the words scarcely resemble each other, Philo completes the picture by
adding that the Romans add the sigma left out by the Greeks, giving the re-
sult *septem*. This brings us closer to the alleged derivation, morphologically
speaking, and the peculiarity of explaining one language by another does not
seem to strike Philo. A little later (op. cit. 133) the classic etymology of De-
meter, as combining *meter* with *ge* ("mother" and "earth") is endorsed.

Where do names come from? This is a perpetual intellectual problem, and
none were more exercised by it than Philo and the Gnostics. The idea that
names are natural in origin seems to solve some problems, since in this case
they are not generically different from cries, gasps or puffs: they are a pro-
duct of physical reality. Yet there are problems with such a view, since there
is discernably no causal connection between names and physical reality. A
cry, on the other hand, will have clear physical causes. Yet if names are con-
ventional, or part of an agreed system of signals, they are simply irrelevant to
reality. No matter how much we scrutinise or torture a word, it will tell us no
more than its meaning in the conventional system: it will not elucidate reality.
It is this dilemma which leads Aristotle to assert the importance of demon-
strating the essence of a thing in order to know it, and to deny the usefulness
of names in this process. Philo however, has a *deus ex machina* to solve the
problem: God gives the names. This task was included in this creative work,
as accounted for in Genesis (On the Creation 15). After creating days and
nights, God calls the first day "the one".

And there was evening and there was morning, one day. (Gen. 1:5)

Philo notes that the word is not "first", but "one", and takes it that much wis-
dom lies in this variation, clearly because of the nascent Middle-Platonic em-
phasis on the One, as against the many of material plurality. The naming ac-
tivity is referred to again in On the Creation 39, where we read that God be-
stowed the names "earth" and "sea". (In 102 Philo refers to those "who are
accustomed to using words to their fullest extent", and who use "seven" to
mean "perfection-bringing".)

There is something to be added however: after the initial stage, prior to the
existence of life and during which God distributes names, there is created
man.

Moses very rightly attributes the distribution of names to the first man. (On the Crea-
tion 148)
Just as a king bestows titles on his subjects, so does the first man give names to the entities which lie under his dominion. This man, the pre-first Adam, did his job well, and he understood the creatures he was describing so well that “their natures were conceived as soon as their names were spoken” (On the Creation 150). Philo here seems to be endorsing the natural origin of names, which it seems he apparently accepts as indicators of reality. Their natures are grasped as soon as their names are spoken, and the lucidity of Adam is explained by the fact his mind was still free of disease or infection of any sort. His mind registered the impressions (phantasiai) made by objects and things with absolute clarity, and so the naming process acquired an accuracy that it might not have had at a later stage of human culture.

Moses’ description of the origin of the world is thought by Philo to contain both symbolic and literal significance (Alleg. Interpretation II.14), and he singles out for particular praise that element in the literal aspect of the story which deals with naming:

Weadmireintheliteralaccountthewayinwhichthename-giverascribesthegiving of namestothefirstman.(loc.cit.)

Philo regards this as a direct answer to the problem of the “Greeks”, who are said to have believed that wise men were the first to give names. The advantage of a single name-giver is that there is unanimity about the use of nouns, and “the naming by one man was bound to harmonize the name with the thing” (Alleg. Interp. II.15). It is not clear that Philo has correctly grasped the views of the “Greeks” on the origins of naming, but as Whitaker and Colson point out (Loeb edition 479), the view that the first name-givers were persons of considerable standing is at least alluded to in Plato’s Cratylus (401B).

Clearly, however, Philo believes that there is a relationship between names and things which is other than conventional. Interrogating the verse “she brought forth Cain” (On the Cherubim 53), Philo wonders why the author seems to suggest that Cain was already named, pre-natally, whereas the usual wording is as found in Genesis 4.25: “she . . . brought forth a son and called his name Seth”. Philo’s explanation is that the usual practice of men is to give “names which differ from the things” (op. cit. 56). Moses however gives names which are clear images of things (or “absolutely clear expressions of things” if the manuscript ἐνεργεία is correct, as it must be to make sense of what follows): the name and the thing are identical from the outset, and they differ in no way. This is an extraordinary claim to make about language, and it gives an insight into the new intellectual environment, that of late Hellenistic culture. If words and objects are said to be identical, then the old practice of etymology and word-analysis takes on a new meaning. Far from being uncommunicative about reality, as Aristotle thought they were, names consti-
tute an avenue through the veil between the mind and things, and they con-duct the mind to their essences. Etymology becomes word-magic.

It is also clear that Philo feels that only some names have this status: God, Adam and Moses are all name-givers par excellence, and the language be-queathed by them enjoys a relationship with reality which is not shared by ordinary language.

Yet it is not only the identity of the name-giver which determines the value of nouns, since the things designated also vary in comprehensibility. God does not admit of adequate names:

He who is is unspeakable (arretos). (Who is the heir 170)

Language applies to his potencies (dunameis), but not to his essence, which is not descriptible. This is an important theme to which we shall return, and it has a long history in Neoplatonism, both Greek and Christian. The highest essence is beyond names, but it acts and effects at lower ontological levels can be designated: names do not apply to God himself, but to his manifesta-tions in our experience. There are several reasons, therefore, for a counter-balancing pessimism about the reliability of names in Philo's thought; even-tually, he says, parts of grammar, nouns and verbs, will return to the ele-ments from which they came. (Philo here plays on the meaning of stoicheia, meaning both letters and primary substances.) Words return to their ele-ments, just as our bodies return to the fire, air, earth, and water of which they were made.

The Gnostic Gospel of Truth could almost be said to be a reflection on names. It begins by portraying error as powerful cosmic force, which creates a being as a substitute for the truth: error and anguish is presented as a fog which prevents people from seeing the Father. Those who are "to receive teaching" are inscribed in the book of living: God calls their names, and in some way having a name is an assurance of existence (21–22). The Father only calls the names of those who know, and "he whose name has not been spoken is ignorant". The ignorant will vanish away, whereas knowledge guaran-tees being for those whose names have been called. The assignation of a name is the key to knowledge and ignorance, to life and death.

When truth comes (26–27), it is greeted with love. Truth is the mouth of the Father. By this instrument the Father gives both form and a name to the ignorant: the Father must beget them and name them. Receiving a name is crucial, and is associated with receiving both form and knowledge: name-giving is a form of salvation. In a passage (38–39) discussed earlier (page 89), we are told that "the name of the Father is the Son": in earlier discussion, the naming process was related to thought, and the ability to self-name connect-ed with the ability to self-think. It was noted earlier in this chapter that Philo
identifies the logos as the “name of God” (27), and the Gospel of Truth virtually reiterates this. God’s name is not a word, but a being, namely the Son. The author of the Gospel exclaims that “the name is a great thing” (38), and throughout the discussion seems to be groping towards the relationship between naming and being. Philo, we saw, believed that Moses gave names which in no way differed from the objects they designated: reality and its names were identical. Philo here provides a bridge between Plato and the Gnostics: extending the view that names arise out of nature, he claims that some are identical with it. The Valentinian Gnostics extend this to the idea that naming calls into being: being named is being known, and this endows existence. In the Tripartite Tractate 73, each of the aeons is said to be a name, each of which is a potency of the Father: it should be noted that aeons do not have names, they are names, and this is a variation on the Philonic theme that whilst the Father is unspeakable, his potencies may be enclosed in language. Although it is true that the idea of a name as a secondary and minor reflection of the reality designated is also present in the Tripartite Tractate (79, 134), the general understanding of names is merged with the philosophy of knowledge and being. To be known is to be, and to be named is to be known.

The Father, of course is beyond names, except for the case of the Son. Basilides is well-known for his insistence that God is unspeakable, and also non-existent (we shall return to the type of negation involved here in the next chapter). In the beginning, said Basilides (Hippolytus, Ref. VII.20), nothing existed: it was inexpressible, or by hypernegation, “not even inexpressible”. It was above all names, and Basilides advances the view discovered in Aristotle (see p. 100), that there are too few names for the multiplicity of entities in the world, with the result that discourse is confused and ambiguous, words doing service for a number of things, a means of grasping things without using names. This takes us into another theme, and leads us into the growing Hellenistic insistence that silence is a superior epistemological weapon to utterance. Negative theology will be seen to grow out of this, and to focus its attack not only on the spoken word, but on the machinery of thought itself.

The Greek view turns on the relationship between names and being. The suspicion was that names were part of nature, like trees, clouds or snow; if so, then they would yield to analysis, and provide information about reality. The same general theories could be applied to them. Though this view is subjected to intense examination, and though the theory of language as convention emerges and competes with it, the link between names and being never disappears in Greek philosophy. From Parmenides onwards the view that names are things, and not mere signs, is canvassed. With typical Gnostic flair, the Gospel of Truth singles out this nagging philosophical problem, and dramatizes it: to be named by God is to receive both form and knowledge. Names and being, having been cautiously but indecisively separated by
Plato and Aristotle, are now decisively merged. The Son is the name of the Father: that is, the being of the Son and his name are considered to be the same thing.